

The Church of the Servant King

Survey of the Bible Series – Prophecy Series

Proph10B_The “New Covenant” and the Church Age

Introduction

The New Covenant is referred to by name only once in the Old Testament (Jer 31:31), yet it is mentioned nine times in the New Testament: four times in reference to the blood of the New Covenant (Matt 26:28; Mk 14:24; Lk 22:20; 1 Co 11:25); once in connection with Paul's ministry (2 Co 3:6); and four times in Hebrews (8:8, 13; 9:15; 12:24).¹ It is also alluded to in one other New Testament passage, although it is not specifically mentioned by name (Ro 11:27). Amillenarians use these New Testament references to the new covenant to attempt to prove that the church is fulfilling the Old Testament promises to Israel through the Church, thus there is no need for a future earthly millennium since the church is God's kingdom. The Covenant has been taken away from the natural seed of Abraham (i.e. literal Israel) and has been given to the Church, spiritual Israel.² This position is based upon a spiritualized method of interpretation (verses the historical-grammatical method) applied to such passages as Romans 9:6-8, 23 and Galatians 3:26-29; 4:28. Therefore, according to this view, the Church, the Body of Christ is the one and only party to the New Covenant. “Since the New Covenant is fulfilled in and upon the Body of Christ, there remains no future place for its fulfillment, and hence the present dispensation must be the final one in the plan of God, leaving no place for a future dispensation of the Kingdom.”³

How do we reconcile the use of the term “New Covenant” in the Old Testament and in the New Testament? What is the relationship of the New Covenant first expressed to Israel in Jeremiah 31:31-34 and then mentioned later in New Testament passages? The purpose of this lesson is to address some of these questions from a dispensational perspective.

The Division Between the Old Testament and the New Testament is not Synonymous with a Distinction Between the Dispensation of Israel and the Church

This is a very important interpretive key to the New Testament, especially the Gospels. The Church Age did not begin with Matthew 1:1, therefore many passages in the New Testament have absolutely nothing to do with the Church Age believer and are set clearly within the context of the Age of Israel. Therefore, they should be interpreted that way.

New Testament References to the “New Covenant”

Of all the passages in the New Testament that reference the “New Covenant,” there is only one that clearly establishes a parallel between the provisions of Israel's New Covenant and the Church, i.e. 2 Corinthians 3:6. This passage does not specifically state that there is a separate new covenant with the church. If anything, it serves to establish an *indirect* linkage between the New Covenant of Jeremiah 31:31-34 and the ministry of the Holy Spirit to Church Age believers (i.e. the phrase “...new covenant not of the letter...” in 2 Corinthians 3:6 alludes to the replacement of the Mosaic Law Covenant with a “new covenant...of the Spirit...”). This is

¹ Charles F. Baker, *A Dispensational Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Grace Publications, 1994), 103.

² *Ibid.*, 104 and J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958), 119.

³ Baker, *A Dispensational Theology*, 104.

Paul's way of linking the spiritual blessings which will be experienced by redeemed Israel during Israel's "last days" to the spiritual blessings of the Church Age believer.

The remainder of the passages cited do not specifically relate the New Covenant to the Church. They either reference the fact that the New Covenant replaces the Mosaic Law Covenant or they indicate that Christ's work on the Cross is the basis for the provisions of the New Covenant without specifying who the recipients of the New Covenant were to be.

The death of Christ is the basis for the spiritual blessings that belong to the Body of Christ, the Church, as well as the basis for the spiritual blessings to redeemed Israel of the future. This is the reason that Paul makes the connection between the Church and the New Covenant to Israel. The spiritual death of Jesus Christ (i.e. the "blood" of Jesus) is the basis by which any believer of any dispensation is reconciled to God. Only Israel comes under the actual terms of the New Covenant of Jeremiah 31; however, God, Who is sovereign has the right, if He so wills, to do with His own as He determines is appropriate (Matt 20:15 cf. Ro 9:14-29.⁴ As such, God has purposed to bestow all of the merits of the death of Christ upon undeserving and uncovenanted Gentiles in this intercalated dispensation of extended grace.

Is the Church the New Israel?

The Church was inserted or "intercalated"⁵ into human history to be the recipient of many of the **spiritual** realities of the coming Millennial age as "...a grand exception to all other ages both for Jews and Gentiles."⁶ If human history serves as a panoramic object lesson to fallen angelic creation as implied by such passages as Job 1:6-12; 2:1-5; Zechariah 3:1-2; Luke 15:7, 10; 1 Corinthians 4:9; 11:10; Ephesians 3:10; and 1 Timothy 3:16, then each dispensation of human history has a unique role to serve in the accomplishment of that purpose. Since God's offer of the kingdom of heaven (i.e. the Messianic kingdom) with Jesus as the Messiah King was rejected by the Jewish people (Acts 3:19 cf. Acts 13:46), God inserted a previously unknown dispensation into human history which is characterized by the impartation of many of the **spiritual** blessings of the New Covenant to God's new "chosen" people, i.e. anyone of any race who believes in the saving work of Jesus Christ on the Cross (Rom 10:12). "Since the church receives blessings of the Abrahamic covenant (Gal 3:14; 4:22-31) by faith without being under or fulfilling that covenant, so the church may receive blessings from the new covenant without being under or fulfilling that new covenant."⁷

Examples of the blessings of the New Covenant *common* to both Israel and the Church include the regeneration of believers (Jer 31:33; Isa 59:21; Jn 3:5) and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit with its attendant ministries, e.g. teaching (Jer 31:33; Ezek 36:27; Jer 31:34; 1 Cor 12:1-13). However, certain blessings remain distinct and will not be received by Israel until the second advent. "While the church, like Israel, is promised salvation, the forgiveness of sin, the ministry of the Holy Spirit, yet the church is never promised inheritance in a land, material blessings on the earth, and rest from oppression, which were parts of the promise to Israel."⁸

⁴ Ibid., 106.

⁵ Lewis S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas, Texas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948), Volume IV, 41.

⁶ Ibid., 321.

⁷ Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 127.

⁸ Ibid.

In the sense that this position distinguishes between the *extent* of the provisions of the New Covenant to Israel and the *extent* of the provisions of the new covenant to the Church, it *may* be considered a two covenant position. However, in reality, I believe that there is only one New Covenant, i.e. the New Covenant given to Israel to be fulfilled in the Millennium. The Church is simply the recipient of certain spiritual blessings which result from Christ's death on the Cross and are imparted to all who place their trust in Him for salvation. Some of these same spiritual blessings (e.g. the permanent indwelling of the Holy Spirit, expiation verses atonement, etc.) are shared by the redeemed of Israel as part of the fulfillment of the New Covenant to Israel in the Millennium.

Why did the Writer of Hebrews Quote Jeremiah 31:31-34?

I believe that the writer of Hebrews in chapters 8, 9, and 12 quoted Jeremiah 31 to point out the temporary nature of the Mosaic Law Covenant under which they had operated prior to the death of Christ.⁹ The writer of Hebrews is attempting to present all the evidence regarding Jesus' superiority over the Mosaic Law Covenant in order to encourage his Jewish readers to persevere in their faith in Christ rather than reverting to Judaism. By focusing upon Jesus' superiority, he is attempting to cause his Jewish readers to realize that Jesus' death did in fact provide the basis for all the provisions of the New Covenant to be experienced by Israel even though they were not the present recipients of all the blessings under the New Covenant to Israel.

Summary

In the way of summary, I believe that the blessings of the New Covenant began to be ministered to the nation of Israel on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2, and that after Israel's rejection of that ministry Israel was set aside temporarily while God brought into His program the previously unprophesied dispensation of the mystery, i.e. the body of Christ or the Church. This occurred during the middle of the book of Acts. The apostle Paul wrote letters to members of the Body of Christ during the latter half of the book of Acts in which he indicated that a spiritual transition was then taking place from the old to the new order in which some practices were passing away (1 Co 13). He also indicated that as a part of the special revelation given to him for the Body of Christ was the observance of the Lord's Supper (1 Co 11:23) and the fact that in this dispensation God was making the Gentiles to partake of Israel's spiritual things (Ro 15:27). Apparently, God in his sovereign grace (Ro 9-11) has granted the Gentiles who had no covenant ties to God (Eph 2:12), the privilege of being the recipients of the same spiritual blessings which will one day be experienced by Israel. This was done, not in fulfillment of any covenant promise, but in sovereign grace. Those spiritual blessings that are currently enjoyed by the Body of Christ in this dispensation are enjoyed on the basis of the redemptive and reconciliatory work of Christ on the Cross. Those same spiritual blessings and more will be enjoyed in the future by Israel on the same basis.¹⁰

⁹ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come* (Wheaton, Illinois: Victor Books, 1990), 212.

¹⁰ Baker, *A Dispensational Theology*, 105-106.