

## ***The Church of the Servant King***

### **Survey of the Bible Series – Prophecy Series**

#### **Proph10C\_Reconciling The New Covenant of Jeremiah 31:31-34 With Joel 2:12-32 & Acts 2:17-21**

##### **Introduction**

The purpose of this third and final lesson in our study of the subject of the New Covenant as an eschatological covenant with Israel is threefold: 1) clarify certain issues surrounding the interpretative approach I have used in the first two lessons; 2) resolve questions regarding certain passages used in the first two lessons; and 3) to clarify the issues surrounding the Church Age believer's relationship to the New Covenant. In order to accomplish these lesson objectives, I will first need to address the concept of the interpretative paradigm.

##### *One's Interpretive Approach Must Resolve Apparent Inconsistencies*

Any given passage of Scripture can be interpreted in one or a number of ways. No matter who the Bible student happens to be, that student will of necessity interpret a passage of Scripture based upon his or her knowledge and understanding of other passages in Scripture. Any given interpretation of a particular passage may seem consistent and supportable if the right combination of logic and other passages are used. However, the validation of an interpretation of a particular passage does not stop there. The validation of the interpretation of a particular passage is many times not confirmed until much later in the Bible student's growth. This phenomenon is recognized by the adage used by many instructors to their students to "put it on the back burner and let it simmer for a while." It is a well-known fact to many students of the Word that inconsistencies and contradictions between one's interpretation of a given passage and one's interpretation of another passage (when a given interpretive approach has been used for both passages) are not always immediately obvious to the student of the Word. Only when one follows an interpretative path for a period of time do inconsistencies and contradictions become obvious.

A systematic and synthetic view of Scripture should produce a doctrinal and interpretive paradigm that allows for no contradictions between one's view of the "new covenant" and other truths in Scripture. Also, one's interpretation of the "new covenant" terminology found in the New Testament should not establish an interpretive precedent that when applied to other passages of Scripture leads to contradictions or irreconcilable differences.

With regard to our study of the subject of the eschatological New Covenant to Israel, I have pursued a particular interpretive path. That interpretive path has been and still is being subjected to critical scrutiny. I constantly look for opportunities to adjust my interpretive paradigm once any inconsistencies or contradictions in the results of that paradigm having been applied to other passages of Scripture become manifest. As a result, I am comfortable in the knowledge that the approach I have taken in regard to this subject leaves no inconsistencies or contradictions between relevant passages. In addition, when the interpretive approach I have applied to the subject of the eschatological New Covenant to Israel is extended to other topics such as its relationship to the Church Age believer based upon Paul's use of the phrase "new covenant" in 2 Corinthians 3:6, no inconsistencies result. Also, no interpretive precedents result that when applied to additional Scripture lead to inconsistencies or contradictions.

##### **Toward a Synthesis of Related Issues**

In our preceding lessons on the subject of the New Covenant and in our study of the subject of the *gospel of the kingdom* preached by Jesus and His disciples and recorded in the

Gospel accounts, we have studied the concept of a transition period between Jesus' resurrection and the beginning of the Church Age. An understanding of this concept is critical to one's understanding and grasp of the paradigm held by Paul when he penned 2 Corinthians 3:6.

Who also made us sufficient as ministers of the **new covenant**, not of the letter but of the Spirit [the Holy Spirit]; for the letter [*the distorted view of the Mosaic Law in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century*] kills [spiritual separation from God], but the Spirit [the Holy Spirit] gives life [spiritual relationship with God].

Paul's choice of terminology in this passage (not to mention other New Testament references) to include the phrase "new covenant" has caused no small degree of discussion in theological realms. The following quotes provide an example of the dilemma surrounding the use of this phrase in the New Testament:

The question of the New Covenant addresses the relationship between Israel and the church--a crucial issue in dispensational hermeneutics. Since the New Covenant is set forth in the Old Testament and is related there to the nation Israel, any involvement of the church raises significant questions for dispensationalists. For covenant and other nondispensational theologians the church's relationship to the New Covenant is hardly an issue because they view the church as the New Testament Israel. For them the New Covenant belongs to the church by intent and inheritance.<sup>1</sup> [Underlining is mine for additional emphasis.]

The New Testament citations of Old Testament passages on the New Covenant are involved. Are they cited as fulfillment passages? Or do these quotations illustrate another use of the Old Testament? Is it permissible for the church to fulfill or otherwise receive the benefits of the New Covenant promised to Israel in the Old Testament?<sup>2</sup>

The standard of life for believers is another issue to be addressed. Should the New Covenant be viewed as the rule of life for believers in the body of Christ--a replacement for the Mosaic Covenant, which was the rule of life for believers in Israel?<sup>3</sup>

These quotes contain some very important questions, the answers to which affect even the unsuspecting layman's theology and possibly even his or her potential for properly executing the spiritual life.<sup>4</sup> In my opinion, there is only one approach to addressing the questions raised by

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<sup>1</sup> Rodney J. Decker, "The Church's Relationship to the New Covenant," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152:607 (July-September, 1995): 290.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Those who worship God must worship Him in Spirit and in Truth (Jn 4:24). If the believer's understanding of Scripture is shaped by a method of interpretation (i.e. hermeneutic) that is either non-dispensational or not consistent from a dispensational perspective, then the rules of the spiritual life that are designed for believers of one dispensation are improperly applied to believers of the Church Age. For example, in the Gospels, the focus of Jesus' teaching was the contrast between the distorted practice of the Mosaic Law governing the nation Israel during the Age of Israel and the principles of spiritual life characteristic of the kingdom age we know as the Millennium. The emphasis was upon works that evidenced one's acceptance of Jesus' teaching. Works were necessary due to the historical context of the message, i.e. the works were evidence of a separation from religious Israel that practiced a distorted Mosaic Law. When the Church Age believer improperly applies the works oriented principles associated with John

Paul's use of the "new covenant" terminology that is acceptable. A dispensational perspective that properly synthesizes the following issues is paramount to the believer's resolution of the questions surrounding this topic:

- The presentation of the "kingdom of God" or "kingdom of heaven" in the Synoptic Gospels<sup>5</sup>
- The significance of Pentecost<sup>6</sup>
- The offer of the kingdom by Peter recorded in Acts 3:19-21 (cf. Acts 5:31-32)<sup>7</sup>
- The concept of the "last days" as that phrase is used in an eschatological sense with regard to Israel<sup>8</sup>

The points listed above illustrate the fact that the proper resolution of the questions and issues surrounding the use of the phrase "new covenant" in the New Testament will not be satisfactorily

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the Baptist, Jesus and Jesus' disciples to his or her spiritual life in the Church Age, legalism will result to the extent of the improper application.

<sup>5</sup> Is the kingdom to which Jesus referred a literal, earthly reign (the pre-millennial dispensational perspective) or is it a spiritual reign in the hearts of believers (the amillennial perspective) or something else in between the two? One's understanding of this issue affects whether one attempts to apply the "new covenant" terminology found in the Synoptic accounts to the Messianic kingdom or to the Church Age believer.

<sup>6</sup> Did Pentecost represent the inauguration of the Church Age or does Pentecost represent the initial outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the "last days" as prophesied by the prophet Joel in Joel 2:28-32a which was quoted by Peter to explain the tongues phenomenon to Jews in Acts 2:17-21? The answer to this question relates to one's interpretation of Jesus' statement at the Last Supper to His disciples that "this is My blood of the new covenant" (Matt 26:28; Mk 14:24; Lk 22:20). If Jesus anticipated the Church Age during His public ministry, is there a connection between His statements in the Synoptic Gospels and Paul's use of the phrase in 2 Corinthians 3:6? One's answer to this question will set an interpretive precedent. When that interpretive precedent is applied to other passages, there should be no inconsistencies that result. One's interpretation of the Pentecost event should harmonize with one's interpretation of a number of other passages and issues such as Matthew 3:11 ("He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit"); Matthew 16:18 ("on this rock, I will build My church"); Matthew 18:17 ("but if he refuses to hear even the church"); Matthew 28:20 ("I am with you always, even to the end of the age"); Acts 1:3 ("being seen by them during forty days and speaking of the things pertaining to the kingdom of God"); Acts 1:6 ("Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?"); Acts 1:16 ("this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel"); Acts 3:19 ("repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord"); the meaning of the "kingdom" terminology in the Gospels; the significance of certain supernatural spiritual gifts during the years immediately following Pentecost; one's interpretation of Paul's statements in such passages as Romans 9:6-8, 23 and Galatians 3:26-29 and 4:28; as well as a host of other passages and issues.

<sup>7</sup> How does the fact that Peter offered the kingdom to Israel in Acts 3:19-21 relate to the "new covenant" references made by Jesus (Matt 26:28; Mk 14:24; Lk 22:20) and to Paul (2 Co 3:6)? Again, one's answer needs to be consistent with an interpretive precedent that maintains synthesis and harmony.

<sup>8</sup> This is a relevant point to the subject of the "new covenant" phraseology in that Peter's quote of Joel 2:28-32a applies that prophecy to the "last days" (see Acts 2:17 cf. Joel 2:28). The phrase "last days" or "latter days" is sometimes an eschatological phrase that is used in reference to Israel. It can refer to either the Tribulation period (Dan 2:28; Ezek 38:16) or the Messianic kingdom period (Isa 2:2-4; Mic 4:1-7). If so, there is a connection between Peter's explanation of the Pentecost phenomenon and Israel's "last days." Therefore, this fact must be harmonized with Jesus' use of "new covenant" phraseology and Paul's use of the phrase "new covenant."

resolved using an isolated view of individual passages. Rather, a systematic and synthetic view of Scripture as a whole is vital.

My desire to present a synthetic and systematized Scriptural understanding of the subject of the “new covenant” is my motivation for this study. My understanding of each of the issues listed above affect my approach to understanding the subject of the “new covenant” as it relates to Israel and to the Church. Each of these issues will be discussed and related to the topic at issue in the paragraphs to follow.

### **Joel 2:12-32 – A Prophecy of the “Last Days” – Reconciled with Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Acts 2:17-21**

Probably before Jeremiah penned his prophecy of Israel’s new covenant (Jer 31:31-34) which details the spiritual blessings Israel will one day experience, Joel issued a call for Israel’s repentance to include a description of the Holy Spirit’s role during Israel’s last days (see Joel 2:12-32). It is best to understand these verses in Joel as follows:

- Call to repentance (verses 12-17)
- The effect of repentance and events associated with repentance (verses 18-32)

Verses 28-32a are of particular significance since this passage is quoted by Peter on the day of Pentecost (with a few minor editorial changes) in Acts 2:17-21 as he explained the Pentecost phenomenon to his Jewish listeners.<sup>9</sup> When this fact is combined with the fact that our resurrected Lord taught the disciples things pertaining to the kingdom (Acts 1:3-7) during His 40 day ministry between His resurrection and ascension and the fact that this teaching followed Jesus’ three to four year public ministry of proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, we gain helpful insight into God’s administrative timeline.<sup>10</sup> Jesus’ use of the phrase “new covenant” at the Last Supper was totally consistent with Joel and Jeremiah’s understanding, i.e. the Messiah’s death would be the basis for the eventual fulfillment of the provisions of the new covenant with a redeemed Israel.<sup>11</sup> Jesus’ use of the phrase was not in anticipation of the Church Age in spite of the fact that the Church Age believer benefits from some of the same spiritual (not temporal) blessings that will one day be experienced by redeemed Israel (Ro 11:1 cf. 11:26). Jesus’ teaching prior to and after His death (Acts 1:3-6) was oriented toward the kingdom and His use of the “new covenant” phraseology at His Last Supper was consistent on that point.

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<sup>9</sup> The fact that Peter was the first to offer the kingdom after Jesus’ resurrection and ascension is consistent with Jesus’ statement to Peter after Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Christ in Matthew 16:16ff. In this passage, Jesus prophesies regarding Peter – “on this rock I will build my church [*ekklesia* – “assembly”] ...and I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” (Matt 16:18-19). Later, Jesus repeats this same prophecy in regard to His other disciples in Matthew 18:18. Peter was the first to explain the Pentecost phenomenon and present the offer of the kingdom after Jesus’ resurrection (Acts 2:14-47; 3:19-21).

<sup>10</sup> See the related PowerPoint slide entitled – “A Dispensational Perspective of Human History.”

<sup>11</sup> 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). As such, God has purposed to bestow all of the merits of the death of Christ upon underserving and uncovenanted Gentiles in this intercalated dispensation of extended grace. See Charles F. Baker, *A Dispensational Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Grace Publications, 1994), 104 for similar conclusions.

Peter's quotation of Joel 2:28-32a with the slight alteration to Joel 2:28 (Acts 2:17) to include the phrase "in the last days" is instructive. When this fact is combined with Peter's statements in Acts 3:19-21, the picture becomes more clear.

**Repent** therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that **times of refreshing** may come from the presence of the Lord, and that He may **send Jesus Christ**, who was preached to you before, whom heaven must receive **until the times of restoration of all things**, which God has spoken by the mouth of all His holy prophets since the world began. [Bold italics added for emphasis]

Pentecost was the beginning of the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy of events associated with Israel's "last days" and had Israel "repented" and accept Jesus as her Messiah Whom she crucified, the remainder of the prophetic events associated with Israel's "last days" would have been fulfilled.<sup>12</sup>

How is this relevant to our study of the eschatological New Covenant to Israel in Jeremiah 31:31-34? Both Joel and Jeremiah prophesied regarding the spiritual blessings that will be experienced by redeemed Israel. Some Jewish people were believers in Jesus as the Messiah at the time of the Pentecost phenomenon. Some of this group were gathered in Jerusalem and experienced the outpouring of the Holy Spirit which was the beginning of the fulfillment of Joel's prophecy and Jeremiah's "new covenant" provisions. Had Israel repented en masse, she would have continued to experience the spiritual blessings associated with these prophecies while awaiting their temporal provisions for the duration of Daniel's 70<sup>th</sup> Week leading to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Advent of Jesus (Dan 9:24-27).

This perspective is important because it explains the use of the "new covenant" phraseology in all of the New Testament passages except 2 Corinthians 3:6.<sup>13</sup> We shall examine that passage next.

### **Paul's Use of the "New Covenant" Phrase in 2 Corinthians 3:6**

This passage (2 Corinthians 3:6) 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...").

Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God, who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. (2 Co 3:5-6)

In 2 Corinthians 3:6, Paul is alluding to the fact that the death of Jesus is the basis for the spiritual blessings that belong to the Body of Christ, the Church Age group of believers, as well as the basis for the spiritual blessings to redeemed Israel of the future. Paul and the other

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<sup>12</sup> For instance Joel 2:28-32 and Daniel 9:24-27 – Daniel's 70<sup>th</sup> Week or the seven year Tribulation period – are examples of prophecies relating specifically to Israel's "last days." See earlier footnote for additional information regarding the phrase "last days."

<sup>13</sup> As we have previously seen, the phrase "new covenant" 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). Every one of the passages listed except 2 Corinthians 3:6 are from a retroactive perspective toward the work of Jesus as a basis for the new covenant blessings.

disciples (apostles) were ministers of that fact to Gentiles and Jews alike. Israel is the direct beneficiaries of the terms of the New Covenant of Jeremiah 31; however, the body of Christ has benefited from the spiritual death of Jesus as well. A central part of the message of Paul and the other apostles was to assist Jews and Gentiles understand the continuity (spiritual blessings) as well as the discontinuity (cessation of the Law and postponement of the fulfillment of the provisions of the eschatological covenants to Israel) to the old with the intercalation of the "mystery" age of the Church.