

The New Covenant

A couple of years ago, to assess the level of understanding of basic theology in evangelical churches, certain Bible college teachers asked in-coming, first-year students to take a multiple choice exam regarding their beliefs. The educators, Bible scholars and theologians, were horrified to see the answers given by these young people, all coming from a broad swath of conservative, evangelical churches. To the question, "What is a Christian?" the answer almost all chose was, "A person like everyone else except that the Christian has forgiveness of sins." Perhaps this also is your idea what a Christian is, because it seems to be prevalent in American churches today. We must discuss this.

The Mosaic Law was given in large part to assure that the Nation of Israel, in which a holy God physically dwelled, was itself holy. To that end, there were lots of laws that required Israelites to be distinct from the people in the surrounding Gentile nations. The dietary laws are an example of these but there were lots of others as well. Israelites were to be separate so that they did not adopt the worldviews, beliefs, values, ideas, and religions of their pagan neighbors. But that didn't mean they were not to interact with their neighbors. To the contrary, they were to take to them their knowledge of their Creator God, Jehovah. By doing that, they'd be God's faithful servants carrying out God's great mission of blessing all the people on earth; they'd bear fruit to the glory of God. So, to be holy means to be separate from that which is vulgar, profane, pagan, in other words, from all that is morally imperfect. And to be faithful means to be fruitful. The church is no different.

In the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew, Jesus repeatedly said to His followers, **"Do not be like the hypocrites. . . "** or **"Do not be like the Gentiles . . . "** A Christian, in other words, is to be separate, distinct from his unbelieving neighbors, holy. In fact, in that sermon, Jesus reprised the key Levitical command, **"Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy"** (Mttw 5:48). **"Blessed are the pure in heart"** can only refer to those who have a new heart, because in Matthew, indeed, in the Bible, the heart is wicked. So only those who have been transformed and have a new heart can be blessed. The Sermon on the Mount is not good advice for people. It's not how to become saved. It's Messianic Torah, given by Messiah Jesus, the new Moses. The entire Sermon is instruction how those who are in Christ are to live. The whole New Testament, in fact, is instruction how those who are in Christ are to live. They are to live holy lives.

It's difficult to fully understand the basis of salvation in the O.T. era. It's likely that Israelites were saved by trusting in something that God had said or promised. They were given the Law not to be saved, but because they were saved. The Law was to be obeyed for their sanctification, their holiness. Their problem was, they couldn't obey the Law, and they didn't. Many didn't even want to trust God's word, which is tantamount to saying that God isn't trustworthy. (By my understanding of O.T. soteriology, such people weren't saved.) The Israelites had a "heart" problem. Moses recognized this even as he was giving them the Law (see Deut. 29:4). The bulk of the O.T. narrates the failure of the Israelites to live and to serve as God intended. Yet . . . God loved His people. And He'd made great promises to them that in covenant faithfulness He was determined to keep. So God promised that eventually a new era would come when they'd be different people. They'd be transformed. They'd have a new heart, a heart that would enable them to be obedient, which means to be holy.

"The time is coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt . . . " (Jeremiah 31:31-34; read the full passage in your Bible). It will not be a renewed Sinai covenant but a totally new one. It promised that they'd be different, regenerated, transformed people, having a new mind and new heart. God intended to work a miracle in the lives of His beloved people, changing them internally. And it would include the forgiveness of sins. Ezekiel anticipates this new covenant also, but he adds that it will include God's Spirit placed in them to enable them to obey God (Ezekiel 36:24-32). In the next chapter, Ezekiel explains how God would do all this, symbolically by resurrection, that is, new life, Holy Spirit-filled new life. And both prophets say the Nation would, in that future day, be returned to the Land from Exile. And then, the Nation of Israel would faithfully serve God as He intended, taking the knowledge of God into the whole world. God would do all this because of His character and for His glory.

Other O.T. Scripture passages make two other great promises: that there'd be in the future a Messiah-King, someone from the line of David, who would establish and rule over a glorious kingdom; and that there'd be in the future an era in which *shalom* (ie, peace) and righteousness would fill the earth as the waters cover the seas. We need to understand that these three promises, a new covenant with a transformed people, a King and a kingdom, and a future glorious era, would occur together at some point in the future. In theology, that future era is called the eschaton.

At exactly the right moment in history, the promised Messiah-King came to His people, offering the promised Kingdom. It was a bona fide offer, and if they'd accepted it, the Kingdom could have come then. He taught and performed miracles attesting His Person and offer. But Jesus wasn't the One the nation's leaders wanted. They didn't believe Him; they didn't trust Him. Reprising the nation's long history of disobedience and failure, they rejected Him and, worse, they spitefully and cruelly tried to dispose of Him. (This explanation of why the Kingdom didn't come is one of the purposes of the 4 Gospel narratives.) After the resurrection, when Jesus' followers proclaimed the Gospel to the nation, they could have received Him then, in which case He would have returned and established the Kingdom and all that was promised. The eschaton could have been realized then. But the nation's leaders persisted in rejecting Him. So the Church Age was introduced – until a future day when all those promises will be fulfilled. So the eschaton has been delayed. And so, in the interim, we have now this Church Age. (This is one of the purposes of the Book of Acts.)

The Church Age is a unique period, not anticipated in the timeline of prophecy, that has overlapping aspects of O.T. and the eschaton. Believers in this Church Age are identified with the Nation of Israel ("grafted into a cultivated olive tree," Romans 11:13-24) and more ultimately to the promises made to Abraham. Thus believers in this interpolated age have been tasked with the mission that Israel failed to carry out, taking the knowledge of God to the ends of the earth so that the Gentile nations can respond to Him with faith and receive God's creation blessings. And believers have received some – *not all* – of the features of the promised future. Let's think deeper about this second aspect.

Moses wrote that in the future, someone like him would come from among the people of Israel, and God would require that everyone in the nation obey His laws and teachings (Deut. 18:15-19). Jesus was that Person. He came like Moses (see the infancy and transfiguration narratives, for example), and He gave Torah (the Sermon on the Mount, for example) as Moses did. But He did more. At the last supper, Jesus said, **"This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you"** (Luke 22:20). Matthew wrote it this way, **"This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins"** (26:28). Jesus is referring here to the New Covenant prophecies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Just as the Sinai Covenant had to be ratified with blood (Exodus 24:5-8, especially v. 8b), so the New Covenant must be ratified with blood – except that the sacrifice isn't of animals but the sacrifice of God Himself in the Person of Jesus. Thus, when Christ died on the cross, rose and ascended, He inaugurated the New Covenant.

But the New Covenant is for Israel! It's not for the Church. The eschaton and its promises are to be realized in all their glorious fulfillment some day yet future even for us. The Church Age is simply an interval age for the ingathering of elect Jews and Gentiles until the appointed time when Christ returns. But certain features of the New Covenant are in effect now, for the Church. These include the forgiveness of sins, and a gift of the Holy Spirit to enable believers in Christ to obey the Law of Christ and to serve Him as He intends. The gift of the Spirit is not the fulfillment of the New Covenant, but it anticipates what the future work of the Spirit will be in the coming Millennial Kingdom. Also, the blessings of the New Covenant are available now to Gentiles. And by the resurrection of Christ, the new life (regeneration) that the New Covenant promises for Israel is available now for all believers in the Church. And it all comes by grace. So aspects of the New Covenant are in effect now, proleptically, because it has already been inaugurated. In a partial and preliminary way, the church participates in the New Covenant. But it won't be fully realized until a future day when Christ returns to rescue His beloved Israel from their enemies, restore them to their land, and establish the promised Kingdom.

Why is all this important to us? Because the purpose and goal of the New Covenant is the transformation of the individual. In the coming era Israelites will have a new heart, one that enables them to obey God's Word and thus to be holy and to serve God. All the instruction in the New Testament, from the Sermon on the Mount to the Book of Revelation is for us believers to obey and thus to be holy, in anticipation of the yet to be realized eschaton. And the gift of the Holy Spirit enables us to do that, although the Spirit will be more fully active in the future age. This transformation of the inner person, the goal of the New Covenant, is what we who are in Christ are to experience now. It's why we are "born again." It's why God's will is our sanctification (1 Thess 4:3; 2 Thess 2:13; and Hebrews 12:14). It's why we've been saved from Satan's dominion and from eternal condemnation. It's why we're elect. Mere church attendance and being a passive spectator to all that Christ has done doesn't do it. Belief in Christ demands active obedience to His words.

Jesus concluded the Sermon on the Mount with two compelling arguments: (1) **"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven"** (Matt 7:21-23). And (2) **"Everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man"** (7:24-27). The Greek word here for the foolish man is "moron." Moron because of the dreadful consequences of ignoring Jesus' words. We're in a special and unique period that foreshadows the glorious eschaton. Let's live it as God expects us to.

Just as Jesus is the new Moses, and His teachings are a new Torah, and Jesus is also the embodiment of a new Israel, and Jesus gives us a New Covenant, the whole NT can be conceived as a new Exodus. The “old” Exodus story was, Israel was as if dead and in sheol (the role of Egypt). The Passover lamb redeemed them from death by the shedding of blood. Passing thru the Red Sea was like a resurrection/new creation/new life. And then they went on a journey into the presence of God (at Sinai). Then to the promised Land. The Egyptians remained as if dead. Pharaoh was defeated; he actually did die. Similarly, for our new Exodus, we’re dead (in bondage to Satan, the world, and sin), but Jesus by His blood redeemed us from death, and we begin a journey into the presence of God (sanctification). Then to heaven. Unbelievers remain dead. Satan is defeated; he dies in hell.

We might [??] even see an even prior Exodus: The first couple was thrown out of the Garden into the uncultivated world; there, they were as if dead and in sheol. In Abraham, an exodus from that wilderness occurred. The blood of Isaac (Mt. Moriah, the aqedah) ransomed them from death. The journey into God’s presence was supposed to be the story of the patriarchs, Isaac and Jacob and the sons of Jacob, but it didn’t happen. Not then, anyway. They got thrown into Egypt (dead, in sheol).