

THE NEW COVENANT AND THE CHURCH

PREPARATION FOR THIS STUDY

Read Jeremiah 31, Ezekiel 36, and Hebrews 8–10. Try to determine what the New Covenant is and then identify if it is in operation today. If you think it is, explain how it is. If not, explain how/when it will be fulfilled and how it relates to the church.

THE PROBLEM

Many people assume that Jesus made the New Covenant *with the church* on the basis of a superficial reading of New Testament passages. They read that Jesus said, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you” (Luke 22:20). They know that Hebrews emphatically declares that the New Covenant is superior to the Old Covenant (Heb 8-10). They recall that Paul claimed to be a minister of a New Covenant (2 Cor 3:6).

The problem with the simple conclusion that the church is now enjoying the New Covenant is that it doesn’t fit with what the OT predicts about the New Covenant. For a full treatment, see the previous handout, *The New Covenant in the OT*; in brief, Jeremiah predicts that God would make a New Covenant with the house of Israel and Judah in which he would write his law on their hearts and they would all know God (Jer 31:31-37). It includes a restoration of Israel to the promised land, an eternal preservation of the Jewish people, and the establishment of David’s son ruling in Jerusalem.

SOME SOLUTIONS

Careful readers have a few options. (1) Some believe that Israel forfeited its role in the plan of God, and the (mostly Gentile) church receives the blessings in Israel’s place. But this requires a redefinition of God’s promises, which some would consider an act of unfaithfulness on God’s part. The point of the New Covenant promise was that wicked Israel would be made righteous. Yet this view has God eternally rejecting Israel because of its wickedness and choosing a new Israel.

(2) Some believe that the church is a *partial* recipient of the promises of the New Covenant and that Israel will be restored in the future at which time the rest of the New Covenant will be fulfilled. The problem with this view is that there is no indication that a covenant can be split up into parts, some of which are fulfilled with one party (a Gentile church) and others with another party (Israel). This seems to be a pragmatic solution that requires a *loose* interpretation of the Old Testament passages.

(3) Some dispensationalists in the last century argued that there were *two* New Covenants—one promised to Israel in the OT that would be fulfilled in the future

now in operation just because the Old Covenant is obsolete. There can be a window of time between ratification and inauguration during which time it is damning to reject the new administration in favor of the old. The old system could save *as long as* it was a shadow of the new and the individual’s faith was in God’s *future* provision of a sufficient sacrifice. But *once the sufficient sacrifice has been made*, to return to the old system constitutes *rejection* of God’s provision. But the offer of the sufficient sacrifice does not necessarily entail the inauguration of the covenant. Of course, it could have, but I think that it was *so obvious* to the early church that they weren’t experiencing the New Covenant (or the kingdom) that the apostles did not feel the need to make the point explicitly.

WHAT IS THE CHURCH EXPERIENCING IF NOT THE NEW COVENANT?

Yet I still haven’t answered the question: if the New Covenant has not been inaugurated, what is the church experiencing today with the forgiveness of sins and regeneration of hearts? I think that God has graciously given to the church New Covenant-like blessings *in order to make Israel jealous*. As Paul explains in Romans 11, one of God’s purposes in establishing the (largely Gentile) church was to provoke Israel to jealousy so that they would return to God. Thus it makes good sense that God would give to the church gifts that the Jewish people would recognize as the work of God promised to them. In seeing God’s absence from their midst and yet his fingerprints on the church, they would seek God with the expectation that he would do as he promised and establish the New Covenant with them.

Someone has proposed an analogy that compares God’s promises to Israel to a great banquet. Right now the church is “setting the table” for that banquet and in the process is benefiting from those blessings (such as in enjoying the delicious smells, sampling some of the dishes, etc.). While imperfect, this analogy provides one way to understand how the church can enjoy blessings related to the New Covenant without denying the full, future fulfillment of that New Covenant.

It is important to understand that it is only because Jesus *died on the cross* that the church can now enjoy forgiveness of sins and new birth. In what way are we now “ministers of a New Covenant”? We live in light of the New Covenant and all that God has promised in it. The ratification of the New Covenant decidedly makes the Old Covenant *old* and we implore people (particularly Jewish people, and recall that Paul declared that the gospel was salvation *first* for the Jew, then for the Gentile) to reject the Old Covenant in favor of what God has promised in the New Covenant through the death and resurrection of the Messiah Jesus.

PREPARATION FOR THE NEXT STUDY

Think about how your view of the future, including the promised kingdom, affects your view of history, the church’s mission, and our involvement in governmental affairs.

and *another* that Jesus made with the church. The strength of this view is that it attempts to honor all biblical passages without resorting to redefinition. Its weakness is that there is no indication in the Bible that there are two distinct New Covenants. No one holds this view today.

KINGDOM NOW, NOT YET, OR BOTH?

It is helpful to take a step back and consider the views on how the church is experiencing the promises of the last days (eschaton). On one end of the spectrum, some believe in *realized eschatology*. This view sees most of the future kingdom blessings as in force today. Believers are right now experiencing God's kingdom on earth and the fulfillment of the New Covenant. (An extreme version known as preterism also believes that Jesus has already returned and the resurrection has already occurred.) This requires *spiritualizing* most of the promises of the Old Testament, such that promises of an abundant grain harvest (to give one example) is fulfilled now in something much greater: a harvest of righteousness and joy. On the other end of the spectrum, I believe that the kingdom is *entirely* future and the New Covenant is not yet in force. A popular position takes the middle ground of *inaugurated eschatology*, which sees certain parts of the kingdom and New Covenant as presently being fulfilled with a full fulfillment in the future. This view is sometimes referred to as the "already/not yet" view.

THE LEGITIMACY OF THE ALREADY/NOT YET VIEW

What everyone is wrestling with is how to understand what the church is experiencing today. Because there are some *similarities* with OT promises, the "already/not yet" view believes that there is some partial fulfillment. In my estimation, however, the *differences* are so great that our present situation does not constitute fulfillment. Furthermore, I have a *philosophical* problem with views that pull apart promises. I don't think it's legitimate to take a package of promises (e.g., the New Covenant in Jeremiah 31) and say that some are for now and some are for later. I don't think it's legitimate to see *fulfillment* of promises to a party other than the one to whom they were promised. I'm not denying the *blessings* that the church is experiencing (which are real and wonderful!), but I don't think that we have a *textual* basis for claiming that *part* of the New Covenant is now operative and *part* is not.

Of course, my "problem" is that the New Testament (the term of which by itself helps to create confusion, since "testament" is synonymous with "covenant") speaks about the New Covenant *in relation to the church*. This is why many conclude that the New Covenant is now operative, and that leads them to believe that the apostles saw God *changing* his promises. This then serves as grounds for seeing large-scale revision of the OT; the OT is read in light of the NT instead of the other way around.

Spiritualization of OT promises is viewed as legitimate and what the NT doesn't repeat from the OT is usually denied (e.g., Israel's restoration to its land).

MY VIEW: RATIFIED BUT NOT INAUGURATED

Is there another way that does not require a major reconfiguration of God's promises in the OT? I believe there is, but I think it is worth observing at this point that my view does not need to *solve every problem* in order to be accepted. It simply must be *more convincing* on the whole than the other view. I think that the other views start off with a major deficit by believing that the prophets who wrote the OT promises and the people who heard these same promises *could never have understood* what they actually meant. For example, if you told Jeremiah and his audience that the New Covenant would actually be fulfilled with Gentiles without any regard for Israel's post-exilic restoration, they would have considered you delusional since Jeremiah said the opposite.

My view is that Jesus *ratified* the New Covenant with his death on the cross and he will *inaugurate* it at his Second Coming when he establishes his kingdom on earth. By dying, Jesus paid all that was necessary for the forgiveness of sins, the granting of new hearts, and the restoration of Israel. But though the blood was shed for the New Covenant, it does not require that the covenant came into force. By way of analogy, the selection of a US president is *ratified* by the people on a Tuesday in November, but he is not *inaugurated* until January 20. Though Jesus *ratified* the New Covenant with his death, he did not *inaugurate* it because Israel did not accept him. After the resurrection, Peter appealed to Israel to repent of their rejection of Jesus so that "times of refreshing" would come and Jesus would restore everything "as he promised long ago through his holy prophets" (Acts 3:19-21). Because Israel rejected Jesus as their sacrifice and king, he did not fulfill his promises. (If you think of this in an OT context, this makes perfect sense: God sent many prophets to tell Israel to repent; when they did not turn to him, he did not bless them.) When Israel does repent, their sin will be forgiven and God's promised blessings will be fulfilled.

ISN'T THE CHURCH IN THE NEW COVENANT?

So what is going on with the church today? How are we to understand the passages in the NT that speak of the New Covenant? I think that these are to be understood in a way similar to some passages that speak of the kingdom. In Acts 28, Paul "preached the kingdom of God." He wasn't preaching that the church is the kingdom, but he was speaking of what Jew and Gentile must do in order to enter that (future) kingdom. In the book of Hebrews, the author warns his readers against returning to the Old (Mosaic) Covenant with its temple sacrifices for sin. If they do, they are turning their backs on Jesus whose perfect sacrifice truly atoned for sins. It is *not* necessary to conclude that the New Covenant is