

Lesson 10

THE NEW COVENANT

One of the major covenants of the Bible is the New Covenant and how one interprets this covenant will determine whether he is premil or amil. The issue is whether the New Covenant is being spiritually fulfilled by the church or whether it will ultimately be fulfilled by Israel in the millennium.

There is wide interpretation of this covenant by different expositors of scripture, especially among those of the dispensational camp.

THE DISPENSATIONAL INTERPRETATION OF THE NEW COVENANT

Different Viewpoints

All dispensationalists accept the premise that the New Covenant was made with Israel and Judah and will be ultimately fulfilled at the second advent. This leaves the problem of what relationship the church, which began on the Day of Pentecost sustains to the New Covenant.

J. N. Darby: The New Covenant in both the Old Testament and the New Testament belongs to Israel though the church participates in the benefits of the sacrifice of Christ, which is also the basis of the New Covenant.

C. I. Scofield: There is one New Covenant but there are two aspects to the covenant: one for Israel and one for the church. The church participates in the spiritual benefits of the New Covenant.

John F. Walvoord: There are two New Covenants spoken of in scripture: one for Israel, which will be fulfilled at the second advent, and the other for the church, which it is now fulfilling. This strict interpretation arises out of a theological presupposition that Israel and the church are two distinct entities.

These varying opinions result from the fact that the Old Testament states that the New Covenant is for Israel (Jer. 31:31-34) and the New Testament says it is for the church (Heb. 8:8-13; 2 Cor. 3:6-7). How can they be reconciled while still giving force to each?

The New Covenant in the Old Testament (Jer. 31:31-40; Isa. 59:20-21; 61:8-9; Ezk. 16:60-63; 34:25-26; 37:21-28; Jer. 32:27-40; 50:4-5; Ezk. 36:27).

Unconditional Covenant: This covenant is based on the sovereign grace of God, resting on His “I will.” (Jer. 31-34; Ezk. 16:60-62), and it is said to be an everlasting covenant (Isa. 61:8; Ezk. 37:26; Jer. 31:35-37).

A Jewish Covenant: God promised to make the “new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah” (Jer. 31:31). This obviously refers to physical Jews who believe the promise.

Provisions of the Covenant

1. The law of God shall be written on the heart (Jer. 31:33).
2. God shall be Israel’s God and they shall be His people (Jer. 31:33)
3. A universal knowledge of God among Jews (Jer. 31:34).
4. Forgiveness of sins (Jer. 31:34; Ezk. 16:60-63).
5. The perpetual existence of the seed of Abraham (Jer. 31:36-37).
6. Rebuilding of Jerusalem (Jer. 31:39-40).
7. Regathering of Israel and putting them in the land (Jer. 32-37-44).
8. Turning of the Jews to God. (Jer. 50:4-5).
9. Beasts will be trained (Ezk. 34:25-26).
10. A sanctuary will be established (Ezk. 37:26-27).
11. Christ will reign over them (Ezk. 37:24,25; Isa. 59:20,21).
12. Regeneration and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (Ezk. 36:26-27).

An Enlargement of the Abrahamic Covenant. The New Covenant is an expansion of the universal and national promises of the Abrahamic Covenant with special emphasis on the universal aspect. The people of Israel are guaranteed a time when it shall be in possession of the land, redeemed, and the center of worldwide blessings.

The New Covenant in the New Testament (Luke 22:20, Matt. 26:28, Mk. 14:24; Heb. 8:8-13; Heb. 9:15-18; 2 Cor. 3:6; 1 Cor. 11:25; Heb. 10:13; Heb. 12:24 and perhaps Rom. 11:27).

Issue: Dispensationalists are committed to the fact that Israel is the primary and final recipient of the New Covenant and therefore have difficulty as to how the church relates to the New Covenant. Only a handful of dispensationalists still believe that there are two new covenants: one for Israel and one for the church. However, most dispensationalists believe that the full provision of the New Covenant was made at the cross (Luke 22:20) because Christ is the mediator of the New Covenant (Heb. 12:24). Israel's acceptance of God's provision as a nation is still future and the provisions of the covenant to Israel cannot come about until the nation repents (Rom. 11). In the meantime, in accordance with God's plan, the spiritual blessings of the covenant are made available to the individuals of all nations in the church. Most dispensationalists see the church as partakers of the spiritual blessings of the New Covenant made to Israel. The blood of Christ was shed for "many" not just the Jews (Matt. 26:26; Mark 14:24).

Position: The church is participating in the spiritual aspects of the New Covenant but not the national aspects, which will be fulfilled to Israel at the second advent.

1. The New Covenant is "for the remission of sins" and so, all the New Testament references relating the New Covenant to this age speak only of this spiritual aspect of the New Covenant (2 Cor. 3:6-7; Heb. 8:8-13). Thus the members of the church enjoy only the spiritual aspects of the New Covenant, which are related to the individual.
2. Even the quotation of the Jeremiah passage in Hebrews 8:8-12 omits the national blessings to Israel as a nation because they do not directly apply to the church.

Theological Problems

The idea of two new covenants is totally untenable in light of the New Testament evidence. That distinction is made to bolster a dispensational approach to scripture and make Israel and the church distinct.

To say that the church is partaking of the New Covenant without somehow fulfilling it, deals in the area of semantics.

How would have the Twelve Apostles understood the New Covenant when Christ instituted it? They were Jews and undoubtedly thought of it as being fulfilled to them in some way.

THE AMILLENNIAL INTERPRETATION OF THE NEW COVENANT

The New Covenant in the Old Testament

Amils agree that the covenant was made with Israel and Judah but the interpretation of what Israel and Judah are remains for the New Testament to define. Israel and Judah are the spiritual Israel, which is the church. Furthermore, the national aspects of the New Covenant have been fulfilled to Israel and Israel rejected the Messiah and was cut off by God. Therefore, only the spiritual or soteriological blessings of the covenant are in force today and the church is fulfilling this covenant.

The New Covenant in the New Testament

The New Covenant was officially enacted at the death of Jesus Christ (Luke 22: 20) and Christ is the mediator of the New Covenant (Heb. 8:6; 9:15; 12:24). Christ's present priestly ministry for the church depends upon His being our mediator and His mediator ship depends upon the New Covenant (Heb. 9:24); therefore, the New Covenant must be in force now.

The New Covenant deals with the forgiveness of sins and it was for Jews (Luke 20:22 - “you”) and for Gentiles (Matt. 26:26 - “many”). Only the spiritual aspects of the covenant are quoted in the New Testament because that is the only part of the covenant that is now in force.

The New Covenant was made with Israel since the church is spiritual Israel. When Christ told his disciples about the enactment of the New Covenant in His death (Mark 14:24), they would have immediately connected this up with Jeremiah 31:31-34. The disciples were all believing Jews, and so they understood the covenant to be fulfilled to them because they and all the church are believing or spiritual Israel (Heb. 8:6-14; 9:15-18). The church, then, is fulfilling the New Covenant.

Furthermore, the church collectively is to be a minister of the New Covenant and preach the forgiveness of sins to those in the unsaved world who will relate themselves to the mediator of the covenant, even Christ Jesus (2 Cor. 3:6). Furthermore, the Lord’s Table is to memorialize the New Covenant, which is for the church.

Theological Problems

The many facets of the New Covenant, especially in relation to the seed and land are ignored and spiritualized away.

This view fails to see that the New Testament does teach a future for Israel (Rom. 11).

THE HISTORIC PREMILLENNIAL INTERPRETATION OF THE NEW COVENANT

The New Covenant in the Old Testament

Most historic premils believe that every aspect of the New Covenant promised to Israel must be fulfilled, even the seed and land aspects. Words mean nothing if Israel is not to have these promises and God deceived this nation.

Some historic premils feel that only the spiritual aspects of the covenant are fulfilled to the church and God has finished with Israel but believe in the millennium from Revelation 20.

The New Covenant in the New Testament

It is clear that the New Covenant was made with Israel and Judah (Jer. 31). The New Covenant primarily deals with the forgiveness of sins for sinners based on the blood atonement of Christ’s sacrifice, so in the context of Jeremiah 31, it deals with the forgiveness of Israel. However, the Book of Hebrews, especially Hebrews 8, tells us that the New Covenant is not only for believing Israel but also for the church. There will be a future and total fulfillment of the New Covenant to national Israel in or around the second advent of Christ but right now the church is partaking of the spiritual blessings and power of the New Covenant.

Christ told His disciples that His shed blood was the official enactment of the New Covenant, and Christians are to remember the New Covenant by partaking of wine at the Lord’s Table (Luke 22:20; Matt. 26:26). The Lord’s disciples were all Jews and knew the Old Testament well and they would have immediately connected our Lord’s teaching with Jeremiah 31. They were told that the New Covenant was to provide the forgiveness of sins for “you” (the disciples - Luke 22:20) and for “many” (all who trust Christ - Matt. 26:28).

The blessings of the New Covenant are for all who believe in Christ and His death for them, even the Old Testament saints (Heb. 9:15). The New Covenant is definitely applied to the church and without it we would have no forgiveness of sins (Heb. 10:15-18).

The New Covenant is for both Israel and the church. Remember, the disciples were all Jews, Israelite members of the Old Covenant people of God. These disciples were believing Jews and were soon to become part of the church, which officially began on the Day of Pentecost. The disciples clearly understood that the New Covenant was for them.

The great majority of the Jewish nation had rejected the Messiah and they forfeited their citizenship in the commonwealth of Israel, but the disciples and all the Jews who accepted Messiah considered themselves to be the true Jewish, elect remnant, and all the privileges and promises of the Abrahamic

Covenant and now the New Covenant belonged to them. As the believing remnant in Israel, the disciples were the true spiritual seed of Abraham; they claimed the promises of the New Covenant for themselves, for they were convinced that they were true Israel and Judah (Eph. 2:12,13,15-22; Rom. 11:25-27).

All believers in the church age, whether Jew or Gentile, are the true spiritual seed of Abraham and heirs of the covenants as God's elect. Today, the church is spiritual Israel, partaking of the salvation blessings of the New Covenant.

Just because the church is spiritual Israel does not mean that God is finished with national Israel. The church as spiritual Israel does not preclude the fact that there will yet be a future application of the New Covenant to national Israel. In Romans 11, it seems that "all Israel shall be saved", and the context is about physical Israelites living at that time. The New Covenant will be applied to literal Israel and Judah at the second advent of Christ.

The New Covenant is for the church and this promise in Hebrews 8 is to be applied to the church. It is also clearly taught that Christians in the church are ministers or servants of the New Covenant (2 Cor. 3:6). Christians are to preach Christ and His death for sin and sinners, which is the basis of the New Covenant from which God forgives sin.

The spiritual aspects of the New Covenant are applied to the church. The church has regeneration (law on the heart), a new relationship (God is their God), a new priesthood (all know God) and the forgiveness of sins (God does not remember their sin) (Heb. 8:6-14).

This is true of the church and will be true of Israel at the second advent who will then become part of the church.

It is hard to know from the New Covenant just what part the church will sustain to the land, Jerusalem and the world in the earthly kingdom, but it may be that the church will be co-heir with converted Israel.

Conclusion: The church is fulfilling the New Covenant, at least the spiritual or soteriological aspects. The final fulfillment of the New Covenant will come when Israel as a nation converts and turns to Christ in or around the second advent of Christ.

"But the final crucial observation will be made that this line of argument finds the fulfillment of Israel's covenants in the church in this age and thus destroys premillennialism. Such is not the case. It is true that both the Abrahamic and New Covenants are operative today, and it is also true that Gentile Christians are enjoying the status of being heirs of these covenants, but it is important to note that neither of these covenants will be completely fulfilled in this age. Christians today - whether Jew or Gentile - are enjoying only those portions of the covenants, which God has ordained to be operative in this age. It is clear that these portions are largely soteriological. Complete fulfillment awaits the second advent of Christ." (William Bell, *The New Covenant*)