

BACK TO BIBLE STUDY

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Objective: What is the New Covenant and why is it of vital importance to the believer?

Whose idea is it?

It is important to understand that the New Covenant is God's idea, and that it is not a concept concocted by human beings.

Christ explains to His disciples, as He instituted the Lord's Supper, "This is My blood of the new covenant" (Mark 14:24; Matthew 26:28). This is "the blood of the everlasting covenant" (Hebrews 13:20).

The Old Testament prophets prophesied of this covenant to come. Isaiah records the words of God "to Him whom man despises, to Him whom the nation abhors, to the Servant of rulers...I will preserve you and give you as a covenant to the people" (49:7-8; see also 42:6). This is a clear reference to the Messiah, Jesus Christ. Through Isaiah God also foretold, "I will direct their work in truth, and make with them an everlasting covenant."(61:8)

Jeremiah also spoke of this. "Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant", which would not be "according to the covenant I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand and led them out of the land of Egypt" (Jeremiah 31:31-32). This is again referred to as "an everlasting covenant" (32:40).

Ezekiel points to the reconciliatory nature of this covenant. He notes in the famous "dry bones" chapter of the Bible, "I will make a covenant of peace with them, and it shall be an everlasting covenant" (37:26).

Reflection

If this concept of a new everlasting covenant has originated with God, do you think it has relevance to faith?

If so, how would you describe that relevance to your personal faith?

Why a covenant?

In its basic form a biblical covenant implies a mutual relationship between God and humankind in the same way that a normal covenant or agreement implies a relationship between two or more people.

This is unique in religion because typically, in ancient cultures, gods do not entertain meaningful relationships with men and women.

Jeremiah 32:38 indicates the intimate nature of the divine covenant relationship, "They shall be My people, and I will be their God".

Covenants were used and are used in business and legal transactions. Often, in Old Testament times, both Israelite and pagan customs involved ratifying human covenants with a blood sacrifice or lesser ritual of some sort in order to stress the binding and serious status of the agreement. Today we see an enduring example of this idea when people exchange rings ritualistically in order to seal their commitment in the marriage covenant. Biblical characters, under the influence of their societies, would apply varied practices in order to solemnize physically their covenantal relationship with God.

"It is clear that the idea of a covenant relationship was not at all strange to the Israelites, and thus it is not surprising that

God used this form of relationship to give expression to His relationship with His people” (Golding 2004:75).

God’s covenant between Himself and humanity is comparable to such agreements made in society but it is not of the same standing. With the new covenant, the concept of bargaining or exchange is missing. In addition, God and man are not equal beings. “The divine covenant infinitely transcends its earthly analogy” (Golding 2004:74).

Most ancient covenants have a reciprocal quality. For example, desired behavior is rewarded by blessings, etc. There is an element of mutuality expressed in terms of agreed conditions.

One type of covenant is a covenant of grant. In this a higher power, such as a king, grants unmerited favor to his subjects. It is this type of covenant that is most comparable to the New Covenant. God gives His grace without preconditions for humanity. In fact, the reconciliation made possible through the shedding of the blood of this everlasting covenant occurred without God’s imputing mankind’s trespasses to them (1 Corinthians 5:19).

Without any action or thought of repentance on our part, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8). Grace preceded Christian behavior.

Reflection

What is the basis of your relationship with God?

What about the other biblical covenants?

Most biblical scholars identify at least four covenants in addition to the New Covenant. They are the Noahic, Abramic, Mosaic and Davidic covenants.

In his epistle to the non-Jewish Christians at Ephesus Paul explains that they are “strangers from the covenants of promise” but now in Christ Jesus they “who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (Ephesians 2:12-13), that is, the blood of the New Covenant that enables reconciliation for all.

The covenants with Noah, Abraham and David all contain unconditional promises that have their primary fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

“For this is like the waters of Noah to me; for as I have sworn that the waters of Noah would no longer cover the earth, so I have sworn that I would not be angry with you, nor rebuke you. For the mountains shall depart and the hills be removed, but My kindness shall not depart from you, nor shall my covenant of peace be removed” (Isaiah 54:9-10), says the Lord. Jesus is that covenant of peace.

Paul explains that Christ is the promised Seed of Abraham and thus all believers are inheritors of the promise of saving grace (Galatians 3:15-18). “If you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (3:29).

The covenant ideas concerning the line of David (Jeremiah 23:5; 33: 20-21) are realized in Jesus, “the Root and the Offspring of David” (Revelation 22:16), the King of Righteousness.

The Mosaic Covenant, also called the Old Covenant, is conditional. The condition was that, if the Israelites obeyed the codified law of Moses, blessings would ensue, especially inheritance of the promised land, the vision of which Christ fulfils spiritually. “For this reason He is the mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of eternal inheritance” (Hebrews 9:15).

Historically, the covenants also involved signs as indications of continued participation by either or both parties. These signs also point to the New Covenant.

For example, the sign of the covenant with Noah and creation was the rainbow (Genesis 9:11-17), a colorful dispersion of light. It is Christ who is the Light of the world (John 8:12; 1:4-9).

The sign for Abraham was male circumcision (Genesis 17:10-11). This links in with the consensus of scholarship concerning the root meaning of the Hebrew word translated as covenant, *berith*, a term to do with cutting. The phrase to cut a covenant is still sometimes used. Jesus, the Seed of Abraham, was circumcised according to this practice (Luke 2:21). Paul explained that, for the believer, circumcision is no longer physical but spiritual. Under the New Covenant “circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter” (Romans 2:29; see also Philippians 3:3).

Also, the Sabbath was the sign given for the Mosaic covenant (Exodus 31:12-18). Christ is the rest from all our works (Matthew 11:28-30; Hebrews 4:10). This rest is future as well as present. “For if Joshua had given them rest, then he would not afterward have spoken of another day. There remains therefore a rest for the people of God” (4:8-9).

The New Covenant also has a sign, and it is not a rainbow or circumcision or the Sabbath. “Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a Son, and shall call His name Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14). The first indication that we are God’s people of the New Covenant is that God has come to dwell among us in the form of His Son, Jesus Christ (Matthew 1:21; John 1:14).

There is also a promise involved in the New Covenant. “Behold” said Christ, “I send the Promise of My Father upon you” (Luke 24:49), and the promise was the gift of the

Holy Spirit (Acts 2:33; Galatians 3:14). Believers are sealed into the New Covenant “with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is the guarantee of our inheritance” (Ephesians 1:13-14). A true believer is identified neither by ritual circumcision nor by a set of obligations but by the indwelling of the Spirit of Christ (Romans 8:9).

The idea of covenant provides a range and depth of experience in which God’s grace can be understood literally, metaphorically, symbolically and by analogy.

Reflection

In what way is the Holy Spirit the guarantee of your inheritance?

How do you achieve circumcision of the heart?

Which covenants are still in force?

All previous covenants are subsumed in the glory of the everlasting New Covenant. Paul illustrates this when he compares the Mosaic covenant, also called the Old Testament, with the New Covenant.

Paul refers to the Mosaic covenant as the “ministry of death, written and engraved on stones” (2 Corinthians 3:7; see also Exodus 34:27-28), and says that, although it was once glorious, it now has “no glory in this respect, because of the glory that excels”, referring to the ministry of the Spirit, in other words, the New Covenant (2 Corinthians 3:10). Christ has been “counted worthy of more glory than Moses” (Hebrews 3:3).

The Greek word for covenant, *diatheke*, brings fresh meaning to this discussion. It adds the dimension of an agreement which is a last will or testament. In the Old Testament the Hebrew word *berith* was not used in this sense, the issue in question being addressed typically via inheritance

laws and customs.

The writer of the book of Hebrews uses this Greek distinction. Both the Mosaic and New covenants are like wills. The Mosaic Covenant is the first will which is put to one side when the second is written. “He takes away the first that He may establish the second” (10:9). “For if that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second” (8:7). The new covenant is “not according to the covenant I made with their fathers” (8:9).

Thus Christ is Mediator of “a better covenant, which was established on better promises” (8:6). When one writes a new will, all previous wills are of no effect and their terms, no matter how glorious, are neither binding on nor are they of benefit to the heirs. “In that He says, ‘A new covenant,’ He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away” (8:13). Thus “the forms of the old cannot be required as a condition for participation in the new” (Anderson 2007:33).

Of course, where there is a will or “a testament, there must of necessity be the death of the testator. For a testament is in force after men are dead” (9:16-17). It is to this end that Christ died and we receive sanctification through the Spirit. “By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (10:10).

The provision of the sacrificial system in the Mosaic covenant is of no effect because “it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins” (10:3), and, anyway, the first will was taken away that the second make be put into effect (10:9).

Whoever wrote Hebrews was very concerned that his or her readers understood the seriousness of New Covenant teaching. Remember how it used to be in the Old Covenant when it came to those who rejected Moses? “Anyone who has rejected

Moses’ law dies without mercy on the testimonies of two or three witnesses” (10:28).

“Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace?” (10:29)

Reflection

What does it mean when it says that Jesus is the Mediator of the new covenant (Hebrews 12:24)?

How does a believer trample the Son of God underfoot?

Conclusion

The New Covenant is in force because Jesus, the testator, has died. This is of vital importance for the believer to understand because the reconciliation we have received is only possible through “the blood of His cross (Colossians 1:20), the blood of the New Covenant, Jesus, our Lord.

Bibliography

See WCG literature on:
<http://www.wcg.org/lit/law/covenants.htm>

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