

## THE NEW COVENANT

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*Theologians of all kinds focus on Christ as the key to understanding the biblical covenants. Two significant characteristics of the New Covenant promised to Israel are its newness in replacing the Mosaic Covenant and its everlasting and irrevocable nature. For Israel the New Covenant promises her transformation through providing her a new heart, her final and permanent forgiveness, and the consummation of her relationship with the Lord. Through Israel God will also bless the Gentiles because of this covenant. As mediator of the New Covenant, the Messiah will be identified with Israel as God's Son, Servant, covenant, and Abraham's seed. Though the Messiah is not yet identified nationally with Israel, He is already identified with the church. Terminology and provisions spelled out in the NT indicate that Christ inaugurated the New Covenant at His first advent. Though the New Covenant will not be fulfilled with Israel until her future repentance, the church through Spirit baptism into Christ participates in that covenant.*

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Strange as it may seem at first, many covenant and dispensational theologians seem to agree that union with Christ solves the problem of how the church relates to the New Covenant. Of course, the theological underpinnings and implications are different for each system. When covenant theologian Vern Poythress argues that the covenants are fulfilled in Christ, he implies that Israel has no future as a covenant nation. Advising covenant theologians how they should explain that Israel's covenant promises are fulfilled in the church Poythress writes,

The argument is strongest if one does not bluntly and simplistically assert that the church is a straight-line continuation of Israel. Rather one proceeds by way of Christ himself as the center point of fulfillment of the promises. Christ is an Israelite in the fullest sense. In fact, though all Israel be rejected for unfaithfulness (Hos. 1:9), yet Christ would remain as the ultimate faithful Israelite, the ultimate 'remnant' (cf. Isa. 6:11-13; 11:1).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Vern S. Poythress, *Understanding Dispensationalists* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987) 126. See also Andrew Murray, *The Believer's New Covenant* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1984) 61-62, and O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980) 271-300.

Church saints united to Christ thus replace Israel as the recipient of the covenant blessings.

On the other side of the spectrum, some traditional dispensationalists teach that union with Christ solves the problem of how the church relates to a covenant not made with her. According to them, the church does not participate in the New Covenant at all. John Master concludes his discussion on the New Covenant by making this very point:

What then is a suggested relationship of the church to the new covenant of Jeremiah 31:31-34? The church is united to the mediator of the new covenant. The new covenant has been cut. The actualization of the new covenant in the lives of believers, however, is yet future, when Christ returns and the house of Israel and the house of Judah are transformed by God's grace to obey completely the commands of God.<sup>2</sup>

Similarly progressive dispensationalists speak of Christ as the recipient of the New Covenant. Therefore, the Gentiles' "share in the promise and covenants comes in Christ, through the Holy Spirit, not by some incorporation into Israel."<sup>3</sup>

Whatever the theological reason, these scholars have drawn attention to a vital truth. Christ is the key to understanding the biblical covenants. The purpose of this essay, therefore, is to analyze the New Covenant, (1) emphasizing that Israel will be the recipient of the blessings of the New Covenant in the future millennial kingdom, and (2) highlighting the relationship of the church saints to the New Covenant through Christ.

## **THE NEW COVENANT PROMISED TO ISRAEL**

### **The Characteristics of the New Covenant for Israel**

An enormous problem arises in approaching the New Covenant in the Old Testament. The promises of the New Covenant direct themselves to Israel, and that leaves non-Israelites on the outside looking in. In the one passage in the Old Testament using the expression "new covenant," the Lord tells Jeremiah,<sup>4</sup> "Behold,

<sup>2</sup>John R. Master, "The New Covenant," *Issues in Dispensationalism*, Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master, eds. (Chicago: Moody, 1994) 108.

<sup>3</sup>Carl B. Hoch, Jr., "The New Man of Ephesians 2," *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, eds. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 110; see also Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books/BridgePoint, 1993) 206.

<sup>4</sup>Old Testament textual critics, in the main, seem to have no problem with the Jeremiah authorship of this passage. For example, Bernhard W. Anderson writes that "there is no convincing reason for denying it to him. The conception of the covenant, the emphasis upon inwardness, and not least of all the view that only God's forgiveness can make a new historical beginning—all these are inherent in the life and message of the suffering prophet, as many scholars agree" (Bernhard W. Anderson, "The New Covenant and the Old," *The Old Testament and Christian Faith*, ed. by Bernhard W. Anderson [New

days are coming . . . when I will make a new covenant with the *house of Israel and with the house of Judah*” (Jer 31:31, emphasis added). In parallel passages, the parties involved are always the Lord and the nation of Israel.<sup>5</sup> Some blessings relate to the Gentile nations, but even these are “spill-over” blessings from Israel.

Why the concern that this covenant is to be made with Israel? Because, the covenant is amazing in what it offers. It presents the solutions to all of life’s deep problems, including cleansing from sin and an intimate relationship with the God of the universe. Any reasonable person would want to become a part of this covenant. Specifically, then, what is this covenant like?

## New

First of all, the New Covenant really is a new covenant, not a renewed old covenant. Jeremiah states that it will be “not like” the Mosaic Covenant (Jer 31:31). Gerhard von Rad writes,

What is important and towers right above any previous prediction, lies in *the prophecy of a new covenant* which Jahweh intends to make with Israel. This is clearly something quite different from Jahweh’s saying that days were coming when he would again remember his covenant which he made with Israel. No, the old covenant is broken, and in Jeremiah’s view Israel is altogether without one. What is all important is that there is no attempt here—as there was, for example, in Deuteronomy—to re-establish Israel on the old bases. The new covenant is entirely new, and in one essential feature it is to surpass the old [that is that Jahweh is to give his people a heart to know Him (Jer 24:7)].<sup>6</sup>

Bernhard Anderson adds, “But Jeremiah’s oracle cannot be understood as reactualization of the past sacred history. He speaks of a new covenant, not a covenant renewal, and thereby assumes a radical break with the Mosaic tradition.”<sup>7</sup> Even the word for “new” has some significance. Brevard S. Childs presents a study of Akkadian, Ugaritic, and Hebrew meanings of “new” and “renew,” and concludes that newness in the OT expresses both new in time and new in quality. “The new covenant . . . is not simply a renewal of the Sinai covenant as occurred in the yearly

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York: Harper Row, 1963] 229). As a typical critic, however, Anderson thinks that the phrase, “and the house of Judah,” is “undoubtedly an addition,” since these same words do not show up in verse 33 (*ibid.*).

<sup>5</sup>Other names for the New Covenant include an “everlasting covenant” (Jer 32:40: “And I will make an everlasting covenant with them. . .”), “covenant of peace” (Ezek 37:26: “And I will make a covenant of peace with them. . .”), and “my covenant” or “a covenant” (Hos. 2:18-20). Cf. Bruce Ware, “The New Covenant and the People(s) of God,” *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, 69, and Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., “The Old Promise and the New Covenant: Jeremiah 31:31-34,” *JETS* 15 (Winter 1972):14.

<sup>6</sup>Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 2, trans. D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper Row, 1965) 212 [emphasis in the original]. For a further discussion of reasons why the New Covenant is not a renewed covenant, see Carl B. Hoch, *All Things New* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995) 105.

<sup>7</sup>Anderson, “The New Covenant and the Old” 231.

festivals.”<sup>8</sup> “The whole point of these verses,” writes H. D. Potter, “is that they are a deliberate contrast to Deuteronomy, not a complement to it, or a restatement of it.”<sup>9</sup>

### **Everlasting and Irrevocable**

The new covenant is also desirable because it is everlasting and irrevocable. The Mosaic Covenant depended on the ability of the people to keep their part of the contract. They had sworn, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient!” (Exod 24:7). As Kline points out, “On this occasion . . . the oath was sworn by the people of Israel, not by the Lord.”<sup>10</sup> But the New Covenant, like the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants made with Israel, was declared everlasting and irrevocable, based on the promise of the sovereign, faithful God of the universe.<sup>11</sup> Thus the nation would possess the promises of the covenants forever. Through Jeremiah, for example, the Lord insisted that His relationship with Israel was as firm as the existence of the universe:

Thus says the LORD, Who gives the sun for light by day, And the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night, Who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar; The LORD of hosts is His name: “If this fixed order departs from before Me,” declares the LORD, “Then the offspring of Israel also shall cease from being a nation before Me forever.” Thus says the LORD, “If the heavens above can be measured, and the foundations of the earth searched out below, then I will also cast off all the offspring of Israel for all that they have done,” declares the LORD (Jer 31:35-37).

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<sup>8</sup>Brevard S. Childs, *Myth and Reality in the Old Testament* (London: SCM, 1960) 79-80.

<sup>9</sup>H. D. Potter, “The New Covenant in Jeremiah XXXI 31-34,” *VT* 33 (1983):350. For the view that the New Covenant is a renewal of the Mosaic Covenant, see Meredith G. Kline, *By Oath Consigned* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968) 53-75.

<sup>10</sup>Kline, *By Oath Consigned* 17. Concerning such a treaty, Klaus Baltzer explains, “The parties to the treaties are the great king and his vassal. The latter can have the rank of a ‘king’ or merely of a ‘lord.’ . . . Under certain circumstances a collective entity like the ‘people of the land’ can be party to a treaty; the phrase probably refers to the important men. Finally one of the parties may be an entire nation” (Klaus Baltzer, *The Covenant Formula*, trans. David E. Green [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976] 17).

<sup>11</sup>According to the prophets, the New Covenant, once inaugurated, would be an everlasting covenant (Jer 32:40; cf. Isa 55:3; 61:8; Ezek 16:60; 37:26). As explained in the other essays in this issue, God began His marvelous covenant program with a series of promises to Abraham and his heirs. These promises as made by God are clearly irrevocable. Concerning the covenant rite described in graphic detail in Genesis 15, Delbert R. R. Hiller, professor of New Eastern Studies at the Johns Hopkins University, writes,

What makes this ancient account eerily impressive is the bold way in which it depicts Yahweh as swearing to Abraham. Abraham makes all the preparations for a covenant ceremony; he splits up animals and arranges the parts for the swearing of an oath. Then he falls asleep, and Yahweh, as a smoking oven and a flaming torch, passes between the parts. The author is discreet; he does not flatly say that Yahweh invokes a curse on himself. But the vision he has related makes the literal restatement unnecessary, and the imagination of the reader can supply: “Just as this heifer is cut up, so may I . . .” (Delbert R. R. Hiller, *Covenant: The History of a Biblical Idea* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1969] 103).

### The Provisions of the New Covenant for Israel

More than anything else, it is the provisions of the New Covenant that make it so welcome. The Lord promises to prosper Israel with an abundance of physical blessings, including the gathering of the people to the land (Jer 31:8-11, 15-17), productivity (Jer 31:12), expressions of joy (Jer 31:13-14), increase in herds and flocks (Jer 31:23-24), and rebuilding of cities (31:38-40). The spiritual provisions include a transformed heart of flesh, forgiveness of sins, and a consummated relationship with the Lord. Ezekiel adds that a permanent indwelling of the Holy Spirit will accompany the law within the heart: "I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will be careful to observe My ordinances" (Ezek 36:27).<sup>12</sup>

#### Transformation

The spiritual provisions of the New Covenant are thus transformation, forgiveness, and relationship.<sup>13</sup> For some OT scholars, the key provision of the New Covenant is the new heart (Jer 24:4-7; 31:31-34; 32:37-41; Ezek 11:17-21; 36:22-32). Yahweh promises, "I will give them a heart to know me, for I am the LORD; and they will be My people, and I will be their God, for they will return to me with their whole heart" (Jer 24:7). Gerhard von Rad insists that one who neglects this feature will "never grasp the characteristic feature of the salvation envisaged by Jeremiah, for here is his prophecy of the new covenant compressed into one sentence."<sup>14</sup> He continues, "[W]hat is here outlined is the picture of a new man, a man who is able to obey perfectly because of a miraculous change of his nature."<sup>15</sup> Raitt argues similarly,

*From creation until the end of the judgment preaching it was assumed that man is fully responsible for his own sin, and that natural man is wholly capable of the complete obedience which God requires. But in the era which deliverance inaugurates this is no longer assumed. The shift is subtle, but far-reaching in its significance. . . . Jeremiah*

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<sup>12</sup>The matter of the promised Holy Spirit coming to transform and indwell the New Covenant saint (Ezek 36:27) is too large to delve into here, though His ministry to the church saints will be a subject later in the essay. Geerhardus Vos comments, ". . . [T]he Spirit appears as the source of the future new life of Israel . . . , also as the pledge of divine favor for the new Israel, and as the author of a radical transformation of physical conditions in the eschatological era, and thus becomes characteristic of the eschatological state itself" (Geerhardus Vos, "The Eschatological Aspect of the Pauline Conception of the Spirit," *Biblical and Theological Studies* [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912] 219). For a discussion of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit as a New Covenant promise, see Larry D. Pettegrew, *The New Covenant Ministry of the Holy Spirit* (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1993) 7-14, 27-45.

<sup>13</sup>This is Raitt's summary outline (Thomas F. Raitt, *A Theology of Exile* [Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977] 185).

<sup>14</sup>Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* 212.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 213-14.

and Ezekiel despaired that unaided or unimproved human nature could ever meet what God expected. And in neither case was this a momentary despondency. Rather, it was an ongoing, painfully sober realism about the possibilities and limits of the capacity for goodness within human nature.<sup>16</sup>

It is true that Old Testament saints were expected to keep the Old Covenant. Moses, after prophesying about a future time when the Lord would bring the nation back and circumcise their hearts (Deut 30:6), explains to the people that keeping the Mosaic covenant in the interim was not impossible: "For this commandment which I command you today is not too difficult for you, nor is it out of reach. . . . But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may observe it" (Deut 30:11, 14). But could a natural man be wholly capable of the complete obedience that God required? In theological terms, does this mean that the Old Covenant saint was not regenerated and the New Covenant saint is? Or, does Moses' statement in Deut 30:11-14 mean that the Old Covenant saint was regenerated, able to keep the law, but just chose not to? Homer Kent answers these questions well:

This does not mean that no Jew under the Mosaic Covenant had a transformed heart. What is being stated is that the New Covenant itself would provide this for every participant. Such was not the case with the Mosaic Covenant. Even though it was obviously possible to know God and have a transformed heart during OT times, the old covenant itself did not provide this. Many Jews lived under the provisions of the Mosaic Covenant and still died in unbelief. The New Covenant, however, guarantees regeneration to its beneficiaries.<sup>17</sup>

Thus von Rad and Raitt seem to miss an important distinction. Moses and the earlier writers were not teaching that a natural man was wholly capable of complete obedience to God. Instead, Moses taught that it was possible for an Old Testament saint with a new nature to keep successfully (though not perfectly) the provisions of the Old Covenant. Some saints such as Daniel did. Unfortunately, many Old Testament Israelites lived under the Old Covenant and were not regenerated, so they could not keep its requirements. Ronald Pierce writes,

In contrast to the old-covenant model in which entrance into the community was through physical birth, the new-covenant community will be formed by spiritual birth. To state it differently, in contrast to Old Testament Israel where the remnant is sometimes represented by only ten percent of the nation (e.g. Isa 6:13), the new-covenant community will include only believers because that will be the criterion for entrance.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Raitt, *Theology of Exile* 176 [emphasis in the original].

<sup>17</sup>Homer A. Kent, Jr., "The New Covenant and the Church," *Grace Theological Journal* 6 (1985):294.

<sup>18</sup>Ronald W. Pierce, "Covenant Conditionality and a Future for Israel," *JETS* 37/1 (March 1994):34.

## Forgiveness

For those in the New Covenant, God promises to forgive their iniquity and not to remember their sin (Jer 31:34). According to the Book of Hebrews, this is a better provision than was found under the Old Covenant. Under the Old Covenant, the ongoing sacrifices were “a reminder of sins year by year” (Heb 10:3). But the New Covenant even “provided an expiation for the guilt of those who lived under the Mosaic covenant” (Heb 12:22-24).<sup>19</sup> This in itself shows the inferiority of Old Covenant forgiveness.

In addition, Raitt suggests five ways that new covenant forgiveness was superior to Old Covenant forgiveness. First, in the OT the normal understanding was that punishment was “mitigated rather than swept away. For example, in Numbers 14:20, God says, ‘I have pardoned (*salah*), according to your word,’ but the verses following (14:21-23) describe the level of *punishment* which will be exacted.”<sup>20</sup> Especially, when it came to serious sins, there was an atoning “in the sense of postponing their punishment.”<sup>21</sup>

Second, though God regularly did forgive, “a heavy cloud of uncertainty always hung around whether or not God would respond favorably to a heartfelt petition for forgiveness” (Exod 32:30, 32; Jer 14:7-10). But “there is absolutely no uncertainty about whether God will forgive in the new era. . . . [H]e moves to forgive on his own initiative.”<sup>22</sup> Third, God’s forgiveness in the OT “is held in sharp tension with God’s readiness to punish.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, God is ready to forgive and ready to punish. The Lord proclaims,

The LORD, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet He will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations (Exod 34:6-7).

Fourth, Raitt argues that under the Old Covenant, forgiveness was “contingent upon repentance as a prerequisite” (1 Kgs 8:46-53), but repentance is

<sup>19</sup>Kent, “New Covenant and the Church” 295. Concerning Hebrews 12:22-24, Kent adds, “These were OT saints with whom Christians share a common salvation. They are called ‘spirits’ because they are not yet united with their bodies in resurrection, but their spirits have been made perfect because Christ’s sacrifice has provided expiation (11:40). Thus the New Covenant has relevance for OT believers as well as the NT ones” (296). In the soteriological provisions of the new covenant, therefore, there is one people of God.

<sup>20</sup>Raitt, *Theology of Exile* 185-86.

<sup>21</sup>Daniel P. Fuller, *The Unity of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 374. Fuller has a fine explanation of how the sacrificial system worked under the Old Covenant and how “second-level forgiveness” was provided by appealing to God’s  $\text{חֶסֶד}$  (*hesed*) (373 ff.).

<sup>22</sup>Raitt, *Theology of Exile* 186.

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, 187.

not mentioned in the OT passages describing the New Covenant.<sup>24</sup> Fifth, the hope for forgiveness under the Old Covenant is “more often denied the community Israel than it is granted.”<sup>25</sup> Raitt lists for evidence Exod 23:21, Deut 29:20, Josh 24:19, Hos 1:6; 8:13, et. al. Though Raitt may have exaggerated the contrasts in places, most of his points are well taken. Above all else, the shed blood of the Son of God provided the means of final and permanent forgiveness. New Covenant forgiveness of sins is of a different nature than forgiveness of sins under the Old Covenant.<sup>26</sup>

### **Consummation of Relationship**

The New Covenant formula is, “I will be your God and you will be my people” (Jer 24:7; 31:33; 32:38; Ezek 11:20; 34:30; 36:28; 37:23, 27). This formula, often called the *Bundesformel*, was expressed under the Mosaic Covenant as well (Deut 26:17; 29:13) and even in connection with the Davidic Covenant (2 Sam 7:24). In an overall review of the history of Israel in the OT, however, at least two problems kept this relationship from being consummated. First, the kings were generally less than enthusiastic about God, and second, the majority of the people were not spiritually qualified.<sup>27</sup> But the prophets predicted a future kingdom without the defects of the historical kingdom. In that future kingdom, a perfect mediatorial king, the Lord Jesus Christ, will rule (Isa 42:1-4), and the people will all have experienced the new birth (Ezek 11:17-20). The Lord thus promises that those in the New Covenant will be changed from the inside out, and thus “they will *really* be My people and I will *really* be their God.”<sup>28</sup>

The Lord expresses His pleasure in the future consummation of His relationship with Israel in one of the most delightful passages in the OT. After telling Israel that He would pour out His Spirit on their descendants, the Lord expresses the pride they will have in having Yahweh as their God: “This one will say, ‘I am the LORD’s; And that one will call on the name of Jacob; And another will write on his hand, ‘Belonging to the LORD,’ and will name Israel’s name with honor”

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 188. Actually, Raitt seems to exaggerate this contrast of repentance. Repentance is not missing in new covenant passages. One of the passages that Raitt uses to prove his point about the Old Covenant emphasis on repentance, Deut 30:1-10, actually is pointing toward the New Covenant era. Moreover, when John the Baptist, the forerunner of the messenger of the New Covenant, appeared, he preached, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt 3:2), and that inquirers must “bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance” (Matt 3:8).

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 188-89.

<sup>26</sup>Raitt observes that the six New Covenant passages in Jeremiah and Ezekiel which contain explicit expressions of forgiveness “*never borrow the stylized language of the formula in Exod. 34:6-7 and never echo or anticipate the cultic formulation of Leviticus [as Lev. 4:20, 26, 31, 35]. In every case one has the impression that what one finds is an ad hoc formulation which is a distinctive saying for a unique moment in history*” (Ibid., 191, emphasis in the original).

<sup>27</sup>Herman A. Hoyt, *The End Times* (Chicago: Moody, 1969) 176; Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom* (Chicago: Moody, 1968) 104-19.

<sup>28</sup>Raitt, *Theology of Exile* 199-200 [emphasis in the original].



(Isa 44:5). With similar pride, the Lord says about Israel, “I will be their God, and they will be My people.” “In the fulfillment of this ancient longing, we approach the realization of the kingdom of God within history.”<sup>29</sup>

A lingering question remains. Why is God so concerned about His relationship with Israel? What is special about this nation that leads God to make such wonderful promises to its people? The basic answer is that the Lord has identified Himself with the nation to the extent that His reputation and honor are at stake. So He says,

It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for My holy name, which you have profaned among the nations where you went. And I will vindicate the holiness of My great name which has been profaned among the nations, which you have profaned in their midst. Then the nations will know that I am the LORD (Ezek 36:22-23).

From the very beginning of Israel’s election, Yahweh made clear that He “did not set His love” on Israel because it was inherently better or larger than other nations, for the Israelites “were the least of all peoples” (Deut 7:7; cf. Ezek 16:1-14). The Lord set His love on the Israelites because He sovereignly chose to love them (Deut 7:8). Through the Abrahamic Covenant, God identified Israel as “a people for Himself, a special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth” (Deut 7:6). To consummate His relationship with Israel, God promises to bring the nation into the salvation and blessings of the New Covenant.<sup>30</sup>

The NT reaffirms that Yahweh’s promise-covenants with Israel are irrevocable. Paul asks an important question in the early part of his letter to the Romans. Since the nation had rejected its Messiah, “[W]hat advantage has the Jew? . . . If some did not believe, their unbelief will not nullify the faithfulness of God, will it?” And he answers, “May it never be!” (Rom 3:1-4). Later in the letter he adds that a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; and thus all Israel will be saved (11:25). The bottom line is that “the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (11:29).

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<sup>29</sup>Ibid., 200.

<sup>30</sup>Though the New Covenant is most fully developed by the writing prophets, the concept is not new with them. Moses, even as he was explaining the “Old Covenant,” looked forward to a time when the Lord would bring the nation back from its scattering over the “ends of the earth” (Deut 30:4), “prosper” them (v. 5), and “circumcise” their hearts (v. 6). See John MacArthur’s note on Deuteronomy 30:6, *The MacArthur Study Bible* (Nashville: Word, 1997) 293. Also see Dennis T. Olsen, *Deuteronomy and the Death of Moses* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994) 127.

### **The Blessings for Gentiles through Israel**

Even the blessings promised to Gentiles were routed through the nation of Israel. From the beginning of the covenant program, God promised Abraham that in him and his seed, all the nations of the earth would be blessed” (Gen 12:3; 22:18). Additionally, when the New Covenant is fulfilled with Israel in the future kingdom, the prophets promise that Gentiles will receive “trickle down” blessings:

Also the foreigners who join themselves to the LORD, to minister to Him, and to love the name of the LORD to be His servants, everyone who keeps from profaning the sabbath, And holds fast My covenant; even those I will bring to My holy mountain and make them joyful in My house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be acceptable on My altar, for My house will be called a house of prayer for all the peoples (Isa 56:6-8).

So, in the Old Testament, there was hope for non-Jews.<sup>31</sup>

This hope dimmed, however, when Israel was led by its leaders to reject the Messiah. Jesus laments, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling. Behold, your house is being left to you desolate!” (Matt 23:37-38). Christ even pronounced a curse on the Jews who had rejected Him (Matt 12:30-31). Thus the nation was under a curse, and the Gentiles, without an intermediary nation, had no access to the blessings of the New Covenant. Paul writes, “Therefore, remember, that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh, . . . remember that you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph 2:11-12). The situation was indeed desperate.

### **THE MESSIAH IDENTIFIED WITH ISRAEL**

The only hope for Gentiles and cursed Jews, as it turns out, was for a mediator who could not only enter into the New Covenant Himself, but could also enable others to enter into it. This mediator would no doubt have to be a Jew, one who in some way epitomized the nation and represented it in faith and righteousness. At the same time, He would have to have a special relationship with Gentiles. Was there such a person?

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<sup>31</sup>The OT prophets, including John the Baptist, say nothing about the church—Jew and Gentile together in one body on equal footing (cf. Eph 3:1-7). The church was a mystery which had been “hidden in God.” When the New Covenant is fulfilled with Israel, God’s program will once again feature nations of faith, not an international organism, and Israel will be the civil and religious center of the world (Isa 2:2-4; Zech 14:16-19).



### As God's Son

Interestingly, in the OT, the Messiah is identified with Israel, sometimes almost interchangeably.<sup>32</sup> This is apparent with the covenantal equivocation on the term "son" for both Israel and the king of Israel. For example, the Lord tells Moses to say to Pharaoh, "Thus says the LORD, 'Israel is My son, My first-born'" (Exod 4:22). Such language has covenant overtones. In McCarthy's words, "We have, then, an idea of father-son relationship which is essentially that of the covenant."<sup>33</sup> Fensham adds, "In Hosea, e.g., Israel is described as son. . . . [T]he tradition of Israel as "son" foreshadowed the special role of Israel among the nations of the world."<sup>34</sup>

But "son" also designates the king. In the Davidic Covenant, David, along with his descendants, is titled "son" (2 Sam 7:14). In the commentary on this covenant in Psalm 89, David calls God "my Father" (Ps 89:26). In another great kingdom Psalm, the Lord speaking to the Messiah, proclaims, "Thou art My Son, Today I have begotten Thee." "Son" is thus a covenant name for Israel and the Messiah/King. It is not surprising, therefore, when Matthew applies the term "son" to the Messiah and writes that at the time Joseph and Mary took Jesus to Egypt it fulfilled the saying, "Out of Egypt did I call my Son" (Matt 2:15).<sup>35</sup>

### As God's Servant

The term, "servant" also applies to both the Messiah/King and the nation.<sup>36</sup> This is apparent in the Servant songs of Isaiah.<sup>37</sup> Who is the servant? In some texts, the servant is Israel. The Lord says, "But you, Israel, My servant, Jacob whom I have chosen, Descendant of Abraham My friend, You whom I have taken from the ends of the earth, And called from its remotest parts, and said to you, 'You are my

<sup>32</sup>J. A. Allan, "The 'In Christ' Formula in Ephesians," *NTS* 5 (1958):55. Allan writes, The "idea of corporate personality . . . occupies a large place in the thinking of the Bible."

<sup>33</sup>Dennis J. McCarthy, *Old Testament Covenant: A Survey of Current Opinions* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1972) 33.

<sup>34</sup>F. Charles Fensham, "Father and Son as Terminology for Treaty and Covenant," *Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William Foxwell Albright*, Hans Goedicke, ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1971) 134.

<sup>35</sup>Fensham adds that "when we approach the New Testament, where 'Father-Son,' and 'God-Christ' often appear, a whole new world of interpretation becomes possible" (*ibid.*, 135).

<sup>36</sup>King Ahaz, in fact, calls himself both a servant and a son to Tiglath-pileser, showing that a covenant relationship had been established (2 Kgs 16:7). Among other things, this shows "that the Hebrews were well aware of the employment of a concept such as 'son' in a treaty sphere" (*ibid.*, 129).

<sup>37</sup>See the helpful five-part study on the Servant songs by F. Duane Lindsey in *BSac*, beginning in the January-March issue, 1982, 12. The term, "servant," can be used for high court officials and dignitaries, even for kings. Moses and David, for example, are called the "servants of the LORD" (Exod 14:31; 2 Sam 7:5).

servant, I have chosen you and not rejected you” (Isa 41:8-9).<sup>38</sup> In other songs, the servant is the Messiah, someone who will bring Israel back to the Lord. The prophet records, “Behold, My Servant, whom I uphold; My chosen one in whom My soul delights. I have put My Spirit upon Him; He will bring forth justice to the nations” (Isa 42:1; cf. 49:6 and 53:11). The Servant, therefore, is the Messiah. And it would seem that He represents and personifies the nation.

### As God’s Covenant

Even more interesting is the fact that the Servant/Messiah is designated as the personified covenant: “I will appoint you as a covenant to the people, As a light to the nations” (Isa 42:6).<sup>39</sup> And again, “I will keep You and give You for a covenant of the people” (Isa 49:8). We learn first, in these passages that the Servant would have an impact on both the Jews and the Gentiles. In both 42:6 and 49:8, “people” refers to Israel.<sup>40</sup> In 42:6, “nations” could as well be translated as “Gentiles.”<sup>41</sup> The “light” is expanded in various passages to mean justice (42:1-4), salvation (49:6), and righteousness (51:1-6). When the Messiah was born hundreds of years later, the old prophet Simeon applies this passage to Christ: “A light of revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Thy people Israel” (Luke 2:32). Paul later applies Isa 42:6 to his ministry to the Gentiles (Acts 13:47).<sup>42</sup> This blessing on the Gentiles is not a surprise because the Abrahamic Covenant included the provision that all the families of the earth would be blessed through Abraham.

The personification of the covenant by the Servant is also remarkable. Up to this point one might have thought that the Servant was only a mediator like Moses

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<sup>38</sup>See Robert A. Pyne’s discussion of the relationship between Messiah and Israel in “The ‘Seed,’ the Spirit, and the Blessing of Abraham,” *BSac* 152 (April-June 1995):211-22. Pyne points out that the “seed” (descendant) of Abraham in Isa 41:8 is physical Israel (215). On the other hand, it is the “unique relationship between the nation and the Messiah” that may allow for the identification of Christ as the seed in Galatians 3:16 (*ibid.*). Also see Robert Thomas’ helpful chapter, “The Mission of Israel and of the Messiah in the Plan of God,” *Israel, the Land and the People*, Wayne House, ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1998) 261-95. Thomas writes that “a unity binds the individual Servant to the corporate servant” (264).

<sup>39</sup>Knight proposes, “A *covenant for mankind* may be translated in more than one way: (1) ‘I have made thee into the people of the (new) covenant.’ . . . (2) ‘I have made thee to become the means of my making covenant with (all) mankind’” (George A. F. Knight, *Deutero-Isaiah* [New York: Abingdon, 1965] 75).

<sup>40</sup>For a thorough discussion of the interpretation of these passages, see Michael A. Grisanti, “The Relationship of Israel and the Nations in Isaiah 40-55,” (PhD diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1993) 222-76. Also see, Michael A. Grisanti, “Israel’s Mission to the Nations in Isaiah 40-55: An Update,” *TMSJ* 9/1 (Spring 1998):39-61.

<sup>41</sup>Lindsey, “The Call of the Servant in Isaiah 42:1-9,” *BSac* 139 (January-March 1982):25. See also, “The Commission of the Servant in Isaiah 49:1-13,” *BSac* 139 (April-June 1982):140-42.

<sup>42</sup>Thomas, “Mission of Israel” 272.

was for the Old Covenant.<sup>43</sup> It is true that the Servant, as a mediator, was to deliver Israel from bondage (Isa 42:7; 49:8-12) and mediate the covenant which was to be established between the Lord and His people (Isa 54:1; 55:3; 59:21; 61:8). Moreover, Hebrews says that Christ was the mediator of the New Covenant, and superior to Moses (Heb 8:6)<sup>44</sup> or any of the kings of Israel.<sup>45</sup> But in the Servant songs one learns that the Messiah would be more than a mediator. As Odendaal points out, "He is the impersonated, incarnated covenant. We may regard him, in other words, to be the one who is able so fully to represent the 'ām in the covenant, that he himself can be considered to be the incorporated covenant."<sup>46</sup>

Like the Messiah/Son, the Messiah/Servant who is given as a "covenant to the people" must be in the royal Davidic line (Isa 55:3). Odendaal continues,

Such a one only, according to the history of revelation, could be described as the incarnated covenant, i.e., the mediator and the representative of the covenant. As the one chosen by Yahweh to be his vice-regent in his kingdom, the king as covenant-head has a relation both to Yahweh and to the people as defined by the covenant. . . . As covenant representative he can therefore also be called "Israel" (49:3), because in himself he comprehends all the hopes, privileges, and responsibilities of Israel, and as Messianic King he leads Israel to the consummation of its calling in the history of salvation.<sup>47</sup>

### As Abraham's Seed

The New Testament also provides evidence that Jesus represents Israel.

<sup>43</sup>VanGemeren notes that at Mount Sinai, "Israel reacted with terror to God's revelation and demanded that Moses be their mediator (Exod 20:18-20; Deut 5:4-5). Moses served in this capacity by giving Israel the law of God (Exod 20:22-23:19). . . . The acceptance of Moses in his mediatorial office is confirmed by God's response to Moses' request to see his glory (33:17-18)" (Willem VanGemeren, *The Progress of Redemption* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988] 138).

<sup>44</sup>According to the writer of Hebrews, the New Covenant is superior to the Old Covenant. In addition, while the author treats Moses as a covenant mediator, "he never calls him a μεσίτης and reserves this distinction for Jesus" (Susanne Lehne, "The New Covenant in Hebrews," *JSNT*, Supplement Series 44 [Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990] 22).

<sup>45</sup>Walton, following Gerald Gerbrandt, argues that the king of Israel was viewed as the mediator of the Mosaic covenant. The king's responsibility was to be sure that the Lord was being properly represented, including being sure that the covenant was being kept by the people and remaining "a subordinate instrument for the Lord's military leadership" (John H. Walton, *Covenant* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994] 68-69. See further McClain, *Greatness of the Kingdom* 91-119).

<sup>46</sup>Dirk H. Odendaal, *The Eschatological Expectation of Isaiah 40-66 with Special Reference to Israel and the Nations* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1970) 131. Lindsey suggests that there is a metonymy of effect here, that the Servant is "one who in some way is a cause, source, mediator, or dispenser of covenant realities or illuminating benefits" ("Call of the Servant" 25).

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 134. John Martin concurs, "The Messiah is called Israel because He fulfills what Israel should have done. In His Person and work He epitomizes the nation" (John A. Martin, "Isaiah," *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, Old Testament*, John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, eds. [Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1985] 1103).

Paul proclaims that Christ has replaced the Old Covenant with Himself: “Therefore, let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day—things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ” (Col 2:16-17; cf. Matt 5:17). Moreover, Paul describes Christ as the seed of Abraham, the personification of corporate Israel (Gal 3:16). Longenecker observes,

The apostle is not just forcing a generic singular into a specific mold. . . . Rather, he is invoking a corporate solidarity understanding of the promise to Abraham wherein the Messiah as the true descendant of Abraham and the true representative of his people, and the Messiah’s elect ones, as sharers in his experiences and his benefits, are seen as the legitimate inheritors of God’s promises.<sup>48</sup>

Both the Old and New Testament writers point to a faithful and righteous super-mediator representing and personifying the nation. He is the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

## THE MESSIAH IDENTIFIED WITH THE CHURCH

### Not Yet with Israel

In the opening pages of the NT, Israel is still the intended recipient of the provisions of the New Covenant. Jeremiah had prophesied that Yahweh would “forgive their iniquity, and their sin,” He would remember no more. In anticipated fulfillment of this promise, the angel announcing the birth of Christ tells Joseph to name his son Jesus, “for it is He who shall save His people from their sins” (Matt 1:21). In Zechariah’s prophecy at the birth of his son, John, Zechariah blessed “the Lord God of Israel,” not only because He would save them from their enemies (Luke 1:71), but also would “give His people the knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of their sins” (1:77).

John the Baptist, Himself the forerunner of the messenger of the New Covenant (Mal 3:1; 4:5-6; cf. Mark 9:11-13), taught that it was useless to have the Abrahamic Covenant if one did not have the New Covenant: “Do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our father’; for I say to you that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham” (Matt 3:9). John’s baptism also implied a renunciation of dependence only on circumcision. Fuller comments, “Since baptism was a requirement for a proselyte (a Gentile converting to Judaism), a Jew who submitted to John’s baptism was acknowledging that as far as salvation was concerned, he was in the same category; his connection with

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<sup>48</sup>Richard Longenecker, *Biblical Exegesis in the Apostolic Period* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975) 124. It is important to note that Christ replaced the Old Covenant with Himself, but He did not replace Israel. He represents Israel under certain circumstances.

Abraham as symbolized by circumcision was of no value whatsoever.”<sup>49</sup> In New Covenant language, John also preached “a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Luke 3:3). Moreover, John was the first to teach that Christ, in fulfillment of the Father’s promise, would be the one to pour out the Holy Spirit (John 1:33; cf. Acts 1:4-5; 11:16).

Jesus Christ, in His presentation of the kingdom to Israel, made the New Covenant the means of entrance. In order to enter the kingdom, one had to have the New Covenant transformation which Jesus called being “born again” (John 3:3). Jesus, in fact, upbraided Nicodemus for being a teacher of Israel and not understanding this important point (John 3:10).

Christ presented Himself as a covenant to the nation. But as mentioned above, that generation of Jews rejected its Messiah, and so the Servant has not yet consummated the covenant with the nation. These covenant prophecies will ultimately be fulfilled with a spiritually revived Israel (Zech 12:10-14) in the Day of the Lord events which culminate in the millennial kingdom.

### **Already with the Church**

#### **Covenant Inauguration**

*The Terminology.* Though abandoned by His nation, Christ finished His New Covenant work. Before ascending to heaven, He cut the New Covenant by His death and initiated a beautiful ordinance (Luke 22:20). What occurred at the last Passover meal was quite amazing. S. Lewis Johnson, Jr. writes,

There is here that which might legitimately be called an act of arrogant audacity, if one bears in mind the situation. The celebration of the Passover was the celebration of the mighty deliverance of the children of Israel from the bondage of Egypt. . . . What presumptuous confidence and boastful audacity to call upon the members of the nation that possessed “the adoption as sons and the glory and the covenants and the giving of the Law and the temple service and the promises” (Rom 9:4) to transfer their worship, as they might have thought, from the God of their fathers to Jesus of Nazareth, and to lay aside their ancient covenants for a new covenant, to replace the annual celebration of the impressive ritual of the Passover for a simple feast of remembrance in bread and wine.<sup>50</sup>

After His ascension, Christ inaugurated the New Covenant by pouring out the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. The New Testament thus becomes a New

<sup>49</sup>Fuller, *Unity of the Bible* 369. Fuller adds, “It was also fitting that the church which was in a continuity inaugurated by John the Baptist should adopt as this sign the rite of baptism by which he had signified to disobedient Israel that it had no more favor before God than did Gentile sinners.”

<sup>50</sup>S. Lewis Johnson, Jr., “The Last Passover, the First Lord’s Supper, and the New Covenant,” *Reformation and Revival* 6 (Summer 1997):119-43. For a discussion of the relationship between the Passover and Lord’s Supper, see Mark A. Throntveit, “The Lord’s Supper as New Testament, Not New Passover,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 11/3 (Autumn 1997):271-89. Also see, Joachim Jeremias, *The Eucharistic Words of Jesus*, trans. Norman Perrin (London: SCM, 1966) 41-84.



Covenant document. The New Testament writers, in fact, use the expression “New Covenant” more often than the Old Testament prophets did. In the epistles, lest there be any question whether the New Covenant relates to the church, the Apostle Paul restates the Lord’s teaching about the blood of the New Covenant in his communion instructions to the local church at Corinth (1 Cor 11:25). Paul next identifies himself and his fellow ministers as “servants of a<sup>51</sup> new covenant” (2 Cor 3:6). Scott Hafemann argues that Paul’s contrast in 3:3 and 3:6, “when viewed against the background of Exodus and Ezekiel, is twofold.”

On the one hand, Paul affirms that the age characterized by the law as the locus of God’s revelatory activity is over. Thus, the Corinthians owe their relationship to Christ not to the revelation of God in the law, but to God’s work in changing their heart through his Spirit. Conversely, the conversion and new life of the Corinthians are evidence that the new age has arrived, i.e., the age of the ‘fleshy heart’ prophesied by Ezekiel.<sup>52</sup>

In the Book of Hebrews, Christ is called the “mediator of a better covenant” (Heb 8:6), which is identified as the New Covenant that has replaced the first (Mosaic) covenant (Heb 8:7-13). The writer of Hebrews also employs the parallel OT term, “the eternal covenant” (Heb 13:20).

*The Provisions.* The specific terms “New Covenant” and “everlasting covenant” do not exhaust NT references to the New Covenant. Clearly the provisions of the New Covenant are also operative, beginning with the inauguration of the New Covenant on the day of Pentecost.<sup>53</sup> Peter insists, that in initial fulfillment of the promised Holy Spirit, Christ, “having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, . . . poured forth this which you both see and hear” (Acts 2:33). Actually, all the teaching about the Holy Spirit in the New Testament (especially about the “promise of the Spirit” [Eph 1:13; Gal. 3:14])<sup>54</sup> is evidence that the New Covenant has been inaugurated.<sup>55</sup>

The new level of forgiveness of sins promised in OT prophecies of the New

<sup>51</sup>Interestingly, by leaving out the article, Paul follows Jeremiah’s prophecy precisely (“I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah” [Jer 31:31]).

<sup>52</sup>Scott J. Hafemann, *Suffering and Ministry in the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 222.

<sup>53</sup>See Rodney Decker’s chart of the New Testament’s initial fulfillment of the provisions of the New Covenant prophesied in the Old Testament, “The Church’s Relationship to the New Covenant, Part 1,” *BSac* 152 (July-September 1995):292.

<sup>54</sup>See the helpful essay by Paul R. Thorsell, “The Spirit in the Present Age: Preliminary Fulfillment of the Predicted New Covenant According to Paul,” *JETS* 41/3 (September 1998):397-413.

<sup>55</sup>Carl Hoch writes, “The new covenant comes with ‘batteries included.’ . . . The Spirit internalizes the New Covenant so that the people of God are motivated to do God’s will. By contrast, the old covenant stood over the people of Israel like a judge, demanding obedience, but providing no enablement” (*All Things New* 116).

Covenant also pervades the NT. "Above all things," writes Leon Morris, "the new system that Jesus had established meant the forgiveness of men's sins. . . . His blood avails to put them in right relationship to God."<sup>56</sup> Morris notes that the remedy for sins, in the Book of Hebrews alone, is prevalent: 1:3; 2:17; 8:12; 9:15, 26, 28; 10:12, 17, 18, 26. Morris concludes, "The effect of all this is to stress the completeness with which Christ has dealt with sin. Whatever needed to be done He has done, fully, finally. Sin no longer exists as a force. . . . Christ has made it null and void. He has broken its power."<sup>57</sup> The "entire New Testament teaching on forgiveness" in fact, is "an extended exposition of the blessing of the new covenant. . . ."<sup>58</sup>

The New Testament (covenant!) documents thus should be looked at as instruction on how to live out the New Covenant in the present age. Edward Malatesta, for example, presents a convincing case that John writes 1 John as a New Covenant document, explaining the existing provisions of the New Covenant. Malatesta writes, "The composition of Jer 31 (LXX 38), 31-34 highlights three elements of the New Covenant: an interiorization of the Law, knowledge of God, and forgiveness of sins. We shall see later that 1 Jn associates these same three elements in a Covenant context."<sup>59</sup> Other NT books plainly unfold the teachings of the New Covenant.

Thus, not only the terms for the New Covenant but also the provisions of the New Covenant are highly visible in the NT. NT Christians benefit in marvelous ways from this covenant that was promised to Israel.

### **Covenant Participation**

So here is the tension. In the first part of the essay we emphasized that the New Covenant was promised to Israel. In the second part of the essay we emphasized that the New Covenant is operative and that members of the church are benefiting from it. How does the church get to benefit from the New Covenant that was made with Israel? For non-dispensationalists, this is not much of a problem. They have some tensions with the Old Testament teaching about the New Covenant being made with Israel.<sup>60</sup> But the church in the New Covenant is not a problem since in their system, the church essentially replaces Israel.<sup>61</sup> Dispensationalists, who

<sup>56</sup>Leon Morris, *The Cross in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965) 297.

<sup>57</sup>Ibid., 301.

<sup>58</sup>Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism* 203.

<sup>59</sup>Edward Malatesta, *Interiority and Covenant* (Rome: Rome Biblical Institute, 1978) 317. See also his comments on how 1 John emphasizes the promised New Covenant ministry of the Holy Spirit and the forgiveness of sin (316).

<sup>60</sup>For a covenant theologian's discussion of the covenants, see Roger T. Beckwith, "The Unity and Diversity of God's Covenants," *Tyndale Bulletin* 38 (1987):93-118. Beckwith speaks of giving the covenant requirement "their Christian re-interpretation" (116).

<sup>61</sup>See Walter Kaiser's critique of replacement theology: Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "An Assessment of 'Replacement Theology,'" *Mishkan* 10:9-20.

believe that God has separate programs for Israel and the church, have suggested various solutions to this problem. These include two new covenants (one for Israel and one for the church), or one covenant for Israel with application of the blessings to the church, or that the church has only new-covenant-like blessings.<sup>62</sup> The best solution is that the church participates in the New Covenant, but the New Covenant will not be finally fulfilled until Israel comes into a right relationship with God at the end of the Tribulation. The church does not participate in the land blessings, and may not have full benefit of the spiritual blessings because the king is not yet here on earth ruling. But the church really does participate in the New Covenant provided by Jesus Christ.<sup>63</sup> Still, “participation,” though it explains the “what,” does not explain the “how.” How do church saints participate in the New Covenant?

*In Christ.* Though the Servant/Messiah was rejected by the covenant nation, and though the Old Testament promises will not be fulfilled until the *eschaton*, the Servant/Messiah has already begun to be the mediator of the New Covenant. Hope remains, therefore, for Gentiles outside of the covenants and promises and Jews related to a nation under the curse of the unpardonable sin to participate in the New Covenant. To do so, they would have to be able to establish an intimate relationship with this Servant/Messiah. Is this possible?

This is exactly what has happened to believers in this dispensation. Paul, after explaining the bad news that the Gentiles were “strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (Eph 2:12), proclaims the good news: “But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ” (Eph 2:13). The answer to the question as to how church saints participate in the New Covenant is thus found in being “in Christ,” the personified New Covenant. Believing Jews in this dispensation also

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<sup>62</sup>See Rodney Decker, “The Church’s Relationship to the New Covenant, Part 2,” *BSac* 152 (October-Dec. 1995):432-56, for an analysis of the various views. See also Russell Penney, “The Relationship of the Church to the New Covenant,” *The Conservative Theological Journal* (December 1998):464-77.

<sup>63</sup>The New Testament employs several graphic pictures to explain the relationship of the church to the New Covenant. For one, Paul explains that the Gentiles were grafted into Israel’s covenant program. Paul writes, “But if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive were grafted in among them and became partaker with them of the rich root of the olive tree, do not be arrogant toward the branches” (Rom 11:17). Thus “there may be an adding in to the promises of God, in this case, the Gentiles grafted in to the covenant program. On the other hand, God’s original promise cannot be changed, and in this passage, ‘a partial hardening has happened to Israel until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in; and thus all Israel will be saved’ (Rom. 11:25-26)” (Penney, “Relationship of the Church to the New Covenant” 475). Other concepts and figures that need to be explored in the context of the New Covenant include adoption, the vine and the branches, and the union between the shepherd and his sheep.

have been united with Christ. Jesus makes “the two into one new man” (Eph 2:15).<sup>64</sup>

With some qualification, one can say that the phrase, “in Christ” is a near-technical phrase describing church saints. The phrase occurs “83 times in the Paul corpus . . . not counting the equivalent phrases using a pronoun (‘in him/whom’) defined by the context. It usually has the form ‘in Christ’ or ‘in Christ Jesus.’”<sup>65</sup> The addition of the “in him/whom” phrases brings the total to more than 130. Outside Paul’s writings, the only occurrence is in Peter’s epistles (1 Pet 3:16; 5:10, 14).

To be a technical designation, the phrase must be ἐν Χριστῷ [Ἰησοῦ] (*en Christō* [Īsou], “in Christ [Jesus]”) without the article (or “in him/whom”). Even then, a few “in Christ” phrases describe something other than believers in Christ, as in Philippians 2:5 where Paul exhorts readers to have the same attitude that was “in Christ.” Nonetheless, at least 75 “in Christ” phrases plus many “in him/whom” phrases refer to the wonderful position church saints have. It is only through being “in Christ” that church saints participate in the New Covenant. They are elect “in Christ,” “and because of his unique relationship with the father, they are heirs together with Christ (1 Cor 3:22-23).”<sup>66</sup>

*Spirit Baptism.* But how does one get into Christ? Clearly it is through the baptism of the Spirit at the time of conversion. Even more intimately, Paul explains that all who were baptized into Christ have “clothed” themselves “with Christ” (Gal 3:27). Dunn writes, “To be baptized into Christ is complementary to or equivalent to assuming the persona of Christ. In both cases [Spirit baptism and putting on Christ] some sort of identification or sense of bound-up-with-ness is implicit.”<sup>67</sup> Through such intimacy, church saints, whether Gentiles or Jews, inherit what Christ inherits and are sons of Abraham because Christ is (Gal 3:29).

## CONCLUSION

This essay has emphasized that the relationship of Christ to the New Covenant and the church to Christ does not in any way negate the future fulfillment of the New Covenant with Israel. The Lord made the New Covenant with Israel and presented it to Israel as a foundation of the messianic kingdom program. But the nation rejected the Messiah and His kingdom. Thus the New Covenant will not be fulfilled with Israel until the Day of the Lord events when the nation in repentance

<sup>64</sup>Dunn identifies this participation in the New Covenant ahead of time as the “eschatological now.” “Paul’s conversion . . . was a breakthrough from one age to another, in some sense a ‘rescue from the present evil age’ (Gal. 1.4)” (James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998] 179-80).

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., 396.

<sup>66</sup>VanGemeren, *Progress of Redemption* 404.

<sup>67</sup>Dunn, *Theology of Paul* 405.

accepts the One whom it previously considered to be “stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted” (Isa 53:4; cf. Zech 12:10-14). Before that happens, Gentiles outside God’s covenant program and Jews under the shadow of a curse are blessed to be able to participate in the New Covenant. This they can do through Spirit baptism into Christ at the time of conversion. Though the Servant/Messiah came to His own people, “His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become the children of God, even to those who believe in His name . . .” (John 1:11-12).

The new covenant is not a mere possibility; it is a new creation. It is something not merely that God proposes, but something that he accomplishes. It is the creation of a people for God who will not forsake him.