

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

A BETTER COVENANT

In this section we come to the heart of the new covenant.

But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry by as much as He is also the mediator of a *better covenant* which has been enacted on *better promises*. For if the first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion sought for a second. For finding fault with them [the sons of Israel]...I will effect a *new covenant* with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah; *not like* the covenant which I made with their fathers (Heb. 8:6–10).

Now comes the essence of what the new covenant is to be:

First,

I will put My laws into their minds. And I will write them upon their hearts (Heb. 8:10).

How is this done?

Written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts (2 Cor. 3:3).

Second,

And they shall not teach everyone his fellow citizen... For all shall know Me, from the least to the greatest of them (Heb. 8:11).

Here, in stark contrast to the old covenant where only the key leaders such as Moses, Joshua, David, etc., were in touch with the Holy Spirit and had a personal relationship with God, under the new and better covenant everyone is to have a personal knowledge of God, and thus be taught personally by Him. In the old covenant the people said to Moses,

...speak to us yourself and we will listen, but let not God speak to us, lest we die (Ex. 20:19).

In the new, better covenant everyone is to know the Lord personally.

Third,

For I will be merciful to their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more (Heb. 8:12).

Here we have one foundational truth expressed in two ways: God is going to be merciful regarding our sins. While we certainly see God's mercy in the old covenant, we also see him dealing justly with sinners. Note the threatened results if Israel disobeyed. Witness also what happened to Israel when they did disobey.

But it shall come about, if you will not obey the Lord your God, to observe to do all His commandments and His statutes which I charge you today, that all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you. Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the country. Cursed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. Cursed shall be the offspring of your body and the produce of your ground, the increase of your herd and the young of your flock. Cursed shall you be when you come in, and cursed shall you be when you go out. The Lord will send upon you curses, confusion, and rebuke, in all you undertake to do, until you are destroyed and until you perish quickly, on account of the evil of your deeds, because you have forsaken Me (Deut. 28:15–20).

The new covenant is much, much better than the old. While in the old covenant we see God's mercy time and again, nevertheless, complete forgiveness was only typified, as Christ had not yet died for the sins of the world. In the new covenant God deals with grace and mercy, and Christ, as our substitute and surety, fulfills the covenant stipulations for us. This will be discussed further in a later chapter.

Another way of saying the same truth is that God will not remember our sins. In Scripture when we read of God "remembering" it is often associated with impending action. When God "remembered" Rachel she conceived and bore a son (Gen. 30:22). When God "remembered" His covenant He took action to deliver Israel (Ex. 2:24; 3:8). So when we read in the new and better covenant that God is not going to "remember" our sins, the underlying concept is that He is not going to take action regarding our sins! Why?

He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him (2 Cor. 5:21).

The following chart contrasts the old and new covenants on these three items:

Old covenant:

Laws written on stone
 Only leaders knew God
 Sinners punished

New covenant:

Laws written on heart
 All personally know God
 Christ suffered on our behalf

General principles

The new covenant has general principles rather than detailed laws. Hebrews 8:9 says the new covenant is *not* like the old. In the old we saw that everything was spelled out in minute detail as if it were given to children. However, the new covenant is set forth as given to “sons” who know what their Father is doing.

Springing from this intimate friendship where all know the Lord, we find a completely different style in the new covenant. In the old covenant the laws regarding the showbread were set forth as follows.

You shall take fine flour and bake twelve cakes with it; two-tenths of an ephah shall be in each cake. And you shall set them in two rows, six to a row, on the pure gold table before the Lord (Lev. 24:5,6).

When we come to the new covenant all we have is,

...as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup you show the Lord’s death until He comes (1 Cor. 11:26).

There is no recipe telling us how to make communion bread, no instruction regarding what kind of plate to use. We are not even told how often to practice it. Rather, the new covenant deals with the heart and central issues in general principles giving us the freedom to be guided by the Holy Spirit to find an appropriate recipe, plate and time.

The following chart illustrates this principle:

OC = old covenant

NC = new covenant

OC Showbread: detailed recipe, how to arrange it, what kind of plate to use, when to put it out, etc. (Lev. 24:5,6).

- NC Communion bread: no recipe, no directions other than “When He had given thanks, He broke it and said, ‘This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me!’” (1 Cor. 11:24,25).
- OC When to worship: Sabbaths, new moons, fixed festivals, etc., (Lev. 23).
- NC When to worship: not forsaking the assembling of yourselves together (Heb. 10:25). Continually offer up a sacrifice of praise (Heb. 13:15).
- OC Where to worship: tabernacle (temple in Jerusalem) (Jn. 4:20).
- NC Where to worship: Where two or three are gathered together (Mt. 18:20).
- OC How to worship: bring offerings as prescribed by the law.
- NC How to worship: in Spirit and in truth (Jn. 4:24).
- OC What to bring: one male goat and two male lambs (Lev. 23:19).
- NC What to bring: present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice (Rom. 12:1).

This illustrates how the old covenant is characterized by great detail. In contrast the new covenant is presented in general principles.

A covenant of grace

While the old covenant made provision for forgiveness and grace was present, nevertheless its focus was law. In contrast, while the new covenant has law, its focus is on grace.

A personal covenant

In the old covenant usually only the key leaders were filled with the Holy Spirit and had a personal knowledge of God. However, in the new covenant all are to know God personally and be taught by Him.

A covenant for all nations

The old covenant was limited to the “sons of Israel” and those who would “join themselves to the Lord” by being circumcised, keeping the Sabbath and thus coming under the Torah. By contrast

the new covenant is good news for all the nations. Whosoever will may come. All may join the new covenant community by believing in Jesus, demonstrating this belief by being baptized and observing the Lord's Supper.

The new covenant an extension of the Abrahamic or everlasting Covenant

Some have tried to make the new covenant a continuum of the old covenant with the only difference being that the law of the old covenant is now written on the heart and in the new covenant we trust Christ's righteousness rather than trying to establish our own. However, I do not believe this harmonizes with the whole of New Testament teaching. Rather, I believe the new covenant is a continuum of the everlasting covenant or the Abrahamic Covenant that has its foundation before the creation of the world. Notice the following similarities between the Abrahamic Covenant and the new covenant and the dissimilarities between the Abrahamic Covenant and the old covenant.

Abrahamic Covenant (AC)

New Covenant (NC)

Old Covenant (OC)

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|----|--|
| AC | All the families of the earth (Gen. 12:3). |
| NC | All nations (Mt. 28:19). |
| OC | Sons of Israel only (Ex. 20:22; 31:13; Deut. 5:1, 2). |
| AC | Not under the law (Gal. 3:17). |
| NC | Not under the Sinaitic Law (Rom. 7:6; 10:4; Gal. 3:25; 5:18). |
| OC | The old covenant is the law (Ex. 34:28; Deut. 4:13; Deut. 9:11,15). |
| AC | Belief (faith) counted as righteousness (Gen. 15:6). |
| NC | Belief (faith) counted as righteousness (Rom. 3:28; Eph. 2:8,9). |
| OC | Righteousness based upon personal obedience to law (Deut. 6:25; Rom. 10:5, Gal. 3:12). |

Abraham was the father of two groups of people that have symbolic religious significance. Isaac represents those who have a personal relationship with God *by faith* and can be truly called

“spiritual Israel” regardless of nationality.¹ Ishmael represents those who trust their good works or their physical connection to Abraham for righteousness.²

Those who can rightly be called “spiritual Israel” have gone through a personal experience where they have learned to distrust themselves and trust only in God. Jacob had his personal, life-changing experience at the brook Jabbok when his name was changed from Jacob to Israel.³

Those who continue to trust their Sinai-law keeping and/or their nationality for righteousness are, according to Paul, still in the slavery of bondage and are to be counted as spiritual descendants of Ishmael and are still under the old covenant.⁴

So we see that the new covenant is a continuum of the Abrahamic Covenant. However, it connects to Abraham *before* Abraham was circumcised so it could apply to all nations.⁵

The covenant that was ratified by the blood of Christ was, then, not the Sinaitic covenant, but the Abrahamic Covenant or the new covenant. Although it was presented before the old or first covenant, it was ratified after the Sinaitic Covenant and therefore is called “new”. In the following chart note the superiority of the new covenant over the old.

OC Based upon the promise of the Israelites (Ex. 19:8; 24:3).

NC Based upon the promise of God’s Son and the oath of God (Heb. 6:13–20, 8:6; Isa 42:6; Gen. 22:15–18).

OC Ratified by the blood of animals (Ex. 24:3–8).

NC Ratified by the blood of Christ (Heb. 9:14; 12:24).

OC A human (Moses) mediator (Ex. 19, 24).

NC Mediated by Jesus, God’s Son (Heb. 12:24).

OC A faulty covenant (Heb. 8:7,8).

NC A better covenant (Heb. 8:6).

¹ See Gal. 3:26–29; Gal. 4:21–31.

² See Gal. 4:21–31; Rom. 9:6–8.

³ See Gen. 32:24–30.

⁴ See Gal. 4:21–31.

⁵ Rom. 4:9–11.

OC An obsolete covenant (Heb. 8:13).

NC An everlasting or eternal covenant (Heb. 13:20).

Chapter Summary

1. According to Hebrews 8 the three main aspects of the new covenant are:
 - a. God's law is written on the heart by the Spirit.
 - b. All will know God personally.
 - c. God will not remember (take action regarding) our sins.
2. The general characteristics of the new covenant are:
 - a. General principles rather than specific details.
 - b. The emphasis is on grace (done) rather than on law (do).
 - c. It is a personal covenant.
 - d. It is a covenant for all nations.
3. The new covenant is an extension of the Abrahamic Covenant and has the following similarities:
 - a. Has application to all nations.
 - b. Righteousness is based solely upon faith.
 - c. Not under the Sinaitic law.
 - d. Based upon the promise and oath of God.
 - e. Mediated by Jesus, God's Son.
 - f. Is an everlasting or eternal covenant.
4. A true "Israelite" is one who has a personal relationship with God and distrusts himself and places all his trust in God regardless of his nationality.
5. Someone who trusts his nationality or law keeping for acceptance with God is considered to be a spiritual descendant of Ishmael and remains in the spiritual bondage of slavery.

The Law
made nothing
perfect, and on
the other hand
there is a
bringing in of
a better hope