

# **WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP OF THE CHURCH TO THE NEW COVENANT?**

**by Andy Woods**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Exposition of the New Covenant and its relationship to the church has traditionally proven to be a “sore spot” for dispensational interpreters. Because dispensationalism has all too frequently emphasized Scripture’s discontinuity at the expense of its continuity, dispensationalists have often had difficulty explaining the New Testament verses that seemingly apply Israel’s New Covenant to the church age. This paper will attempt to demonstrate how the New Covenant relates to the church in a way that maintains the continuity as well as the discontinuity between God’s programs for Israel and the church. In pursuance of this end, the following three areas will be explored: the Old Testament’s presentation of the New Covenant, what the New Testament presents regarding the New Covenant’s ratification and relation to the church, and inadequate views some interpreters have offered concerning how the New Covenant relates to the church.

## **THE OLD TESTAMENT’S PRESENTATION OF THE NEW COVENANT**

### **HOW THE NEW COVENANT RELATES TO GOD’S COVENANT PROGRAM**

In order to understand the Old Testament presentation of the New Covenant, it is first necessary to understand how the New Covenant is related to God’s over all covenant program.<sup>1</sup> The origins of God’s covenant program can be traced back to the Abrahamic Covenant. The first reference to this contract is found in the Abrahamic promises of Genesis

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<sup>1</sup> Much of the material for this introductory summary was taken from Russell L. Penney, "The Relationship of the Church to the New Covenant," *Conservative Theological Journal* 4, no. 7 (1998): 458-61.

12:1-3. These promises were subsequently referred to and amplified throughout Genesis (Gen 13:14-17; 17:1-8). The Abrahamic promises were codified into covenant form in Genesis 15.

Essentially, God in the Abrahamic Covenant promised three items to Abraham's physical descendants. These items include land (Gen 12:7; 13:14-15, 17; 17:8), seed (Gen 12:2; 13:16; 15:4-5; 15:18; 17:4-6), and blessing (Gen 12:3; 17:2, 6; 18:18). In addition to its promises, dispensational interpreters have noticed the Abrahamic Covenant's general features. These features include the covenant's eternity (Gen 13:15; 17:7-8, 13, 19), unconditionality (Gen 15:9-12; 17-18), and literalness. Moreover, dispensationalists have observed that the specific promises of the Abrahamic Covenant are further developed throughout the Old Testament as God entered into further covenants with His people. For example, the land promise is further amplified through the land covenant of Deuteronomy 30:1-10. The seed promise is further amplified in the Davidic Covenant of 2 Samuel 7:14-16. The blessing promise is further amplified in the New Covenant of Jeremiah 31:31-34. Thus, the Abrahamic Covenant is the foundation of God's further covenant promises.

Therefore, the New Covenant should not be understood in isolation of God's other covenant activity. Rather, it should be viewed as the natural out working of the Abrahamic Covenant. C.E. Piepgrass explains:

The New Covenant expands the promise to Abraham of blessing to "all the families of the earth." Here is revealed the means by which man can have his sins forgiven in order to enjoy eternal fellowship with God.<sup>2</sup>

Because of the New Covenant's intimate relation with the Abrahamic Covenant, both covenants share several common features. Therefore, just as the Abrahamic Covenant is literal, unconditional, and eternal, the New Covenant also possesses these attributes because of the fact

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<sup>2</sup> C. E. Piepgrass, "A Study of the New Testament References to the Old Testament Covenants" (Ph.D. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1968), 174.

that it is an extension of God's covenant with Abraham. For example, its eternality can be seen in how other Old Testament contexts refer to it as an "everlasting covenant" (Isa 24:5; 55:3; 61:8-9; Jer 32:40; 50:5; Ezek 16:60; 37:26). Moreover, its unconditionality can be seen not only in the absence of any stated conditions, but also from Ezekiel 36:21-23. In this passage, God declared that He would bring the covenant to pass not because of any merit on the part of Israel but rather to vindicate His holy name.<sup>3</sup>

### **THE NEW COVENANT IN THE OLD TESTAMENT**

Jeremiah 31:31-34 is the only Old Testament passage that actually uses the designation "New Covenant." This passage says:

<sup>31</sup>"Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah— <sup>32</sup>not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the LORD. <sup>33</sup>"But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. <sup>34</sup>"No more shall every man teach his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more."<sup>4</sup>

In these verses, God announced the future New Covenant that He would make with Israel. It is important to realize that the New Covenant was only announced at this stage. Its ratification and inauguration still awaited a future day. Although this announcement allowed Israel to look forward to the New Covenant, Israel did not yet enjoy its provisions and thus still continued to live under the Mosaic Covenant.

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<sup>3</sup> Penney: 463.

<sup>4</sup> All Scripture quotations used throughout are taken from the New King James Version.

## ***Purpose***

Pentecost explains the divine purpose intended in the New Covenant:

...to the unconditional Abrahamic Covenant were added conditional blessings. Before the covenant nation could enjoy the covenanted blessings it must walk in obedience to the laws of God. The obedience was outlined for the nation in the Mosaic Law, which was given alongside the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen 17:19) to define what God expected as a prerequisite for blessing...the nation was unable to fulfill the obedience solely on the energy of the flesh (Rom 8:3). Further, the nation was characterized by God as being stiff-necked (Jer 17:23), and hardened and obstinate (Ezek 3:7). If the nation was to experience the blessings of the [Abrahamic] Covenant they would need forgiveness of sins, a new heart characterized by obedience, and empowerment from outside themselves.<sup>5</sup>

Dyer offers a similar explanation:

As part of the New Covenant God promised to “put my law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (Jer 31:33). The law would not exist on tablets of stone. It would be internalized. God’s New Covenant would give Israel the inner ability to obey His righteous standards and thus to enjoy His blessings. Ezekiel indicated that this change would result from God’s bestowal of the Holy Spirit on these believers (cf. Ezekiel 36:24-32). In Old Testament times the Holy Spirit did not universally indwell all believers. Thus one different aspect of the New Covenant is the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in all believers (cf. Joel 2:28-32).<sup>6</sup>

Because the New Covenant would internally empower Israel to experience a new level of spiritual life beyond what they were presently experiencing under the Mosaic Covenant, the implication of Jeremiah 31:31-34 is that the New Covenant was destined to replace the Mosaic Covenant. This implication, however, would not be made explicit until the writing of the New Testament (Hebrews 8:6-13).

## Parties

Jeremiah 31:31 explicitly identifies the parties to the New Covenant when it says, “Behold, the days are coming, *says the LORD*, when I will make a new covenant *with the house of Israel* and *with the house of Judah*.” Thus, the parties involved in the covenant are “the Lord” and “Israel.” Other important passages such as Ezekiel 36:22-38 (see v. 22) and 37:15-28 (see v. 21) also verify that these are the two

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<sup>5</sup> J. Dwight Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1990), 164.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Dyer, "Old Testament Prophets-Jeremiah," (unpublished class notes in 304C Old Testament Prophets, Dallas Theological Seminary, Spring Semester, 2000), 27.

parties involved.<sup>7</sup> This same theme is reiterated in Jeremiah 33 when it says, “they will be my people” (singular). The New Covenant is not promised to any other group or nation.<sup>8</sup> Peters explains:

It is given to “*the house of Israel and the house of Judah,*” which, as all commentators admit (however they may afterward spiritualize), in its literal aspect denotes the Jewish people. It is *the same* people, too, that were “scattered,” “plucked up,” “destroyed,” and “afflicted,” who shall be restored to their “land” and “cities.”<sup>9</sup>

The immediate context surrounding the announcement of the New Covenant also provides ample evidence that the covenant was given only to Israel. For example, the terms “Israel” and “Judah” clearly refer to the literal Northern and Southern kingdoms. Earlier in Jeremiah 31, God announced the restoration of Israel. The restored people would live “on the hills of Samaria” (31:5) and “on the hills of Ephraim” (31:6). God then declared that “Judah and all its cities will dwell together” (31:24). Having announced the restoration of both nations separately, God joined the two together by the phrase “the house of Israel and the house of Judah” (31:27). When this identical phrase is used in Jeremiah 31:31, this larger context indicates that it is referring to the literal, physical nations of Israel and Judah. Moreover, the New Covenant is said to be replacing the earlier covenant “which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt” (Jer 31:32). This is a clear reference to the Mosaic Covenant that was made with the nation of Israel. Thus, if the old covenant was made with Israel, then the clear implication is that the covenant that is replacing it was also made with Israel.<sup>10</sup> In sum, according to the Old Testament, the only parties to the New Covenant are God and Israel.

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<sup>7</sup> Penney: 462.

<sup>8</sup> Rodney Decker, "The Church's Relationship to the New Covenant (Part 1)," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (July-September 1995): 294.

<sup>9</sup> George N. H. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom*, 3 vols. (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1884; reprint, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1952), 1:322.

<sup>10</sup> Dyer, 27.

### ***Provisions***

Not only are the parties expressly specified in the terms of the New Covenant, but the provisions of the New Covenant are enumerated as well. Jeremiah 31:31-34 delineates these provisions as the internalization of God's law (v. 33), sole devotion to God (v. 33), universal knowledge of God (v. 34), and forgiveness of sin and iniquity (v. 34). In addition, the context continues through the end of chapter 31 where two more provisions are added. These include Israel's perpetual national existence (vv. 35-37) and the provision that Jerusalem is to be permanently rebuilt (vv. 38-40).<sup>11</sup>

Although Jeremiah 31:31 represents the only instance where the title "New Covenant" is actually used, one should not get the mistaken notion that this is the only Old Testament passage that speaks of the New Covenant. Scholars have noted other portions of the Old Testament where similar titles and provisions are mentioned. For example, "everlasting covenant" is used in Isaiah 24:5; 61:8-9; Jeremiah 23:40; 50:5; Ezekiel 16:60; 27:26. The phrase "new heart" or a "new spirit" is used in Ezekiel 11:19; 18:31; 36:26. The term "covenant of peace" is mentioned in Isaiah 54:10; Ezekiel 34:25; 37:26. The expression "a covenant" or "my covenant" which is placed "in that day" is employed in Isaiah 42:6; 49:8; 59:21; Hosea 2:18-20.<sup>12</sup>

Taken as a whole, the two Old Testament passages that appear to devote the most attention to the New Covenant are Jeremiah 31:31-34 and Ezekiel 36:22-38. The Ezekiel passage delineates the following provisions of the New Covenant: national regathering to the land (vv. 24, 28), cleansing of sin (vv. 25, 29, 33), spiritual regeneration (v. 26), indwelling of the spirit (v. 27), fertility of the land (vv. 29-30, 24-25), national repentance (vv. 31-32), and physical fertility (vv. 37-38).<sup>13</sup> By utilizing Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36 as well as some of the surrounding context of these verses, Showers sums up the provisions of the New Covenant as follows:

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<sup>11</sup> Penney: 463.

<sup>12</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, "The Old Promise and the New Covenant: Jeremiah 31:31-34," in *The Bible in Its Literary Milieu*, ed. John Maier and Vincent Tollers (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 109, 117.

<sup>13</sup> Penney: 463.

First, He promised regeneration... (Jer. 31:33; 32:39-40; Ezek. 36:26)... Second, God promised forgiveness of sin (Jer. 31:34; Ezek. 36:25). Third, He pledged the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (Ezek. 36:27). Fourth, He guaranteed a universal knowledge of Jehovah among the people of Israel (Jer. 31:34). The context of this fourth promise indicated that God was referring to the personal experiential knowledge of Himself (this kind of knowledge which comes through a genuine salvation experience), not just a head knowledge of His existence. Fifth, God promises that Israel would obey Him and have a right attitude toward Him forever (Jer. 32:39-40; Ezek 36:27; 37:23-34). Sixth, God promised many national blessings to the people of Israel (i.e. Jer 31:35-37, 38-40; Ezek. 36:24, 28, 20-32, 34-35).<sup>14</sup>

Because these provisions have never been fulfilled in Israel's past and certainly are not being currently fulfilled within the nation, their fulfillment awaits the future kingdom age. After providing a similar enumeration of the provisions of the New Covenant, Toussaint notes, "It can be seen that these elements of the new covenant pertain to Israel in the kingdom age."<sup>15</sup>

### ***Ratification***

As mentioned earlier, Jeremiah 31:31-34 only announces the New Covenant but leaves open the question as to when the New Covenant will be ratified. In fact, the entire Old Testament is ambiguous and inconclusive concerning when the New Covenant would be ratified. According to Decker, six Old Testament verses refer to the ratification of the New Covenant (Isa 55:3; 61:8; Jer 31:31; 32:40; Ezek 34:25; 37:26). The verses all refer to "making" (בְּרִית, "to cut") a covenant. Yet, all of these verses are ambiguous concerning when the New Covenant would be ratified. For example, Isaiah 55:3, Jeremiah 31:31, and Ezekiel 37:26 make only general indefinite references to the future. Ezekiel 34:25 allows for the conclusion that the covenant must be ratified before the millennial reign of Christ. Although Isaiah 61:8 refers to the millennial era, the preceding context (Isa 61:1-2a) was cited by Jesus as having found a

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<sup>14</sup> Renald E. Showers, *There Really Is a Difference!: A Comparison of Covenant and Dispensational Theology* (Bellmawr, NJ: The Friends of Gospel Ministry, Inc., 1990), 100.

<sup>15</sup> Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold the King* (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1980), 300.

fulfillment in His day (Luke 4:16-21). Jeremiah 32:40 comes closest to fixing the ratification at the beginning of Christ's millennial reign. The context argues that the covenant will be made at the time of the future restoration of the nation. However, even this does not demand that interpretation.<sup>16</sup> Because of the Old Testament's ambiguity on the subject, it leaves its readers with the necessity of awaiting New Testament revelation in order to receive more clarity and specificity concerning when the New Covenant would be ratified.

### ***Relation to the Church***

The New Covenant's ratification is not the only subject left open and ambiguous in the Old Testament's presentation of the New Covenant. The New Covenant's relation to the church is also not specifically addressed in the Old Testament. In other words, just as readers must turn to the pages of the New Testament in order to receive clarification concerning the timing of the New Covenant's ratification, readers must also study the New Testament in order to understand how the New Covenant relates to the church. Although the Old Testament does depict blessing that would flow to the Gentiles upon the ratification of the New Covenant (Isa 55:5; Ezekiel 36:36; 37:28), the relation between the church and the New Covenant is not specifically addressed. The reason for this conspicuous absence is that the church was a mystery in the Old Testament era (Ephesians 3:1-13).<sup>17</sup>

After conducting an exhaustive word study on the word "mystery" (μυστήριον) as used in Ephesians 3, Hoehner concludes:

The mystery mentioned in Ephesians was hidden in God in ages past (3:9). It was something that could not be understood by human ingenuity or study. God revealed it to the apostles and the prophets by the spirit (3:4). Now that it is revealed, it is open to everyone and it is simple to understand and thus not relegated to an intellectual minority. Ephesians views God's sacred secret as believing Jews and Gentiles united into one body. In the OT Gentiles could be part of the company of God, but they had to become Jews in order to belong to it. In the NT Gentiles do not become Jews nor do Jews become Gentiles. Rather, both believing Jews and Gentiles become one new entity (Eph 2:15-16). That is the mystery.<sup>18</sup>

Therefore, Showers correctly concludes:

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<sup>16</sup> Decker: 300.

<sup>17</sup> Toussaint, 302.

<sup>18</sup> Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 433-34.

The Old Testament said nothing concerning a relationship of the Church to the New Covenant. This silence should not come as a surprise...the Apostle Paul indicated that no relation concerning the Church was given before the time of the apostles and the New Testament prophets (Eph 3:2-9). This means that the Old Testament contained no information concerning the church.<sup>19</sup>

It should be noted in passing that some progressive dispensationalists believe that the word “mystery” (μυστήριον) connotes a different definition. They see “mystery” as referring to something unrealized rather than unrevealed. The practical import of such an understanding allows for prophecy of the church in the Old Testament.<sup>20</sup> However, dispensationalists have not universally adopted this understanding.

### **THE NEW TESTAMENT’S PRESENTATION OF THE NEW COVENANT**

The New Testament refers to the New Covenant in several places. These references include Luke 22:20 (and parallel references in Matthew 26:17-35 and Mark 14:12-31), 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; 2 Corinthians 3:6-18, and Hebrews 7-10 and 12-13. Thus, one’s understanding of the New Covenant cannot stop with the Old Testament. These New Testament references must be considered as well. The contribution that each of these references makes towards further explaining the New Covenant will be the subject of this section.

### ***GOSPELS***

The gospels mention the New Covenant in the context of the Upper Room Discourse (Luke 22:20; Matt 26:17-35; Mark 14:12-31). Luke 22:20 says, “Likewise He also *took* the cup after supper, saying, “*This cup is the new covenant in My blood, which is shed for you.*” Two important questions face interpreters of this verse. First, is Christ referring to the same New Covenant spoken of in Jeremiah 31:31-34? Second, is this verse speaking of the New Covenant’s ratification?

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<sup>19</sup> Showers, 103.

<sup>20</sup> Robert L. Saucy, "The Church as the Mystery of God," in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for a Definition*, ed. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 127-75.

Regarding the first question, the evidence seems to favor viewing Christ's statement as a reference to the same New Covenant spoken of by Jeremiah. In commenting on the parallel New Covenant citation found in Matthew 26, Toussaint explains:

But this raises a question. To what covenant does Christ refer by these famous words? It seems that the King is looking back to the prophesied new covenant also known as the everlasting covenant and the covenant of peace (Jeremiah 31:34; 32:37-40; Ezekiel 34:25-31; 37:26-28). This is what would immediately flash into the mind of the average Jew. In fact, it could refer to no other covenant since no other covenant was still unconfirmed. The remission of sin pointed out here is one of the tenets of the new covenant which indicates that Jeremiah's prophesied covenant was the covenant under consideration in Matthew 26.<sup>21</sup>

Decker notes, "With no additional explanation, the disciples would naturally have assumed that this was the same New Covenant prophesied in Jeremiah 31."<sup>22</sup> Master observes, "With their Old Testament background the disciples would surely have viewed Jesus' mention of the 'new covenant' in light of the Jeremiah text."<sup>23</sup> Pentecost<sup>24</sup> and Kent<sup>25</sup> have reached similar conclusions.

In sum, because He was drawing upon the disciples' Jewish understanding of the Old Testament and offered no further clarification when He spoke of the New Covenant in the Upper Room Discourse, it is best to view Christ's New Covenant language as pertaining to the same New Covenant identified in the Old Testament. By way of comparison, it is on the basis of this same reasoning that many dispensational interpreters have identified the reference to the "kingdom" in the preaching of John the Baptist (Matt 3:2) and Christ (Matt 4:17) as the Davidic Kingdom spoken of in the Old Testament. In other words, because Christ and John the Baptist were both drawing upon the Old Testament knowledge of their audiences and because neither offered further explanation concerning which kingdom they were speaking of, both preachers must have had the Davidic kingdom in mind.<sup>26</sup> This same principle holds true with respect to Christ's references to the New Covenant in the Upper Room Discourse.

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<sup>21</sup> Toussaint, 299.

<sup>22</sup> Decker: 291.

<sup>23</sup> John R. Master, "The New Covenant," in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, ed. Wesley R. Willis (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), 98.

<sup>24</sup> Pentecost, 172-75.

<sup>25</sup> Homer A. Kent, "The New Covenant and the Church," *Grace Theological Journal* 6, no. 6 (1985): 292-93.

<sup>26</sup> Peters, 1:195.

Regarding the second question, these verses seem to indicate that the ratification of the New Covenant transpired when Christ died. Thus, while the New Covenant was announced in the Old Testament era, it was not officially inaugurated until Christ's death. The word "ratification" has to do with the official implementation of the covenant or the time when its provisions and stipulations become legally binding. The covenants were typically enacted with a formal, blood ceremony indicating that the blood relationship is a blood bond.<sup>27</sup> The technical term for such ratification in the Old Testament was **בְּרִית**, which means "to cut" a covenant. This terminology is derived from a carcass cutting ceremony similar to that depicted in Genesis 15.<sup>28</sup> Thus, Decker defines ratification as:

...the ceremony at which the provisions and stipulations of the covenant become legally binding. Covenants (both biblical and ancient Near Eastern) were enacted on the basis of a formal oath, often accompanied by a blood ceremony, indicating that the sworn relationship is a bond in blood.<sup>29</sup>

The notion that Christ's death ratified the New Covenant seems evident from several factors. First, in the upper room, Christ states that the cup of the Passover was the new covenant in His blood. In other words, the cup of the New Covenant was made on the basis of the blood of Jesus Christ.<sup>30</sup> This is particularly evident in Matthew's gospel where Matthew followed the statement about the New Covenant with the explanation that the "pouring out" was for the purpose of or "results in" (εἰς) the forgiveness of sins.<sup>31</sup> Second, there is a deliberate parallel between Christ's words in Matthew 26:28 ("this is the blood of the covenant") and Moses' words at Sinai in Exodus 24:8 ("this is the blood of the covenant").<sup>32</sup> This second reference is to the inauguration of God's covenant with Israel at Sinai.<sup>33</sup> This parallel is designed to show that just as blood ratified the Mosaic Covenant, Christ's blood ratified the New Covenant. Third, when Christ's statements in the upper room are combined with the other New Testament references to the

<sup>27</sup> O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 4.

<sup>28</sup> Elmer B. Smick, "Carat," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris and Gleason L. Archer and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 1:456-57.

<sup>29</sup> Rodney Decker, "Theology of the New Covenant," in *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology*, ed. Mal Couch (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996), 279.

<sup>30</sup> Master, 98-99.

<sup>31</sup> Rodney Decker, "The Church's Relationship to the New Covenant (Part Two)," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (October-December 1995): 449.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 452.

<sup>33</sup> Alan Hugh McNeile, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Macmillan and Co., 1915; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 382.

New Covenant, a convincing case is established for the ratification of the New Covenant through Christ's death. Decker explains:

If one only had these references, he might simply conclude that the basis had been established for a future New Covenant. However, when these texts are combined with the portrait of Hebrews, such an explanation is inadequate.<sup>34</sup>

These other New Testament references to the New Covenant will be discussed later in this section.

By way of comparison, a gap of time transpired in between the announcing of the Abrahamic Covenant in Genesis 12 and the official ratification of the covenant with the blood of animals as depicted in Genesis 15. Similarly, the New Covenant was announced in Jeremiah 31:31-34 but did not become operational until the shedding of Christ's blood. Thus, Old Testament Israel did not enjoy the provisions of the New Covenant because its ratification awaited the blood of Christ.

## ***EPISTLES***

The epistles mention the New Covenant in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; 2 Corinthians 3:6-18, and Hebrews 7-10 and 12-13. Observing how these references apply the New Covenant to church age believers makes it difficult to argue against the proposition that the church shares in at least some of the blessings of the New Covenant.

### ***1 Corinthians 11:23-26***

These verses say, "For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the *same* night in which He was betrayed took bread; <sup>24</sup>and when He had given thanks, He broke *it* and said, "Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me."<sup>25</sup>In the same manner *He* also *took* the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink *it*, in remembrance of Me."<sup>26</sup>For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till He comes."

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<sup>34</sup> Decker, "The Church's Relationship to the New Covenant (Part 1)," 302.

These verses damage the theory that since the words of Christ in the upper room regarding the New Covenant were spoken before the advent of the church, they need not be remembered or practiced in the church. Several factors found in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 make it difficult to argue that the New Covenant has no relation to the church.<sup>35</sup> First, in these verses, Paul addresses abuses of the Lord's Table taking place within the Corinthians congregation. Second, his words are obviously directed toward the church. Third, Paul is not just speaking to a Jewish audience but rather to a Jew and Gentile audience within the Corinthian congregation.

Fourth, Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 11:25 are nearly identical to Christ's words in the upper room regarding the New Covenant (Luke 22:20). Thus, in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 Paul instructs the church to regularly remember the New Covenant's ratification through its consistent practice of the Lord's Table.<sup>36</sup> In other words, the Lord's Table is to be a regular observance of the church in memory of the shedding of Christ's blood as the New Covenant "cutting" ceremony. As explained by Decker, "the blood ceremony of the cross instituted [or ratified] the covenant, and Jesus' words instituted the ceremony of the Lord's Supper, which commemorates the covenant."<sup>37</sup> Thus, each time the church observes the ordinance of the Lord's Table, it celebrates the New Covenant and the ratifying of it through Christ's blood. Fifth, it would be odd for the church to have an ordinance that celebrates and remembers the cutting of the New Covenant if the church were not in some way benefiting from the New Covenant.

## ***2 Corinthians 3:6-18***

These verses say:

...who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. <sup>7</sup>But if the ministry of death, written *and* engraved on stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of the glory of his countenance, which *glory* was passing away, <sup>8</sup>how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious? <sup>9</sup>For if the

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<sup>35</sup> Penney: 466-67.

<sup>36</sup> Decker, "The Church's Relationship to the New Covenant (Part Two)," 449.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

ministry of condemnation *had* glory, the ministry of righteousness exceeds much more in glory. <sup>10</sup> For even what was made glorious had no glory in this respect, because of the glory that excels. <sup>11</sup> For if what is passing away *was* glorious, what remains *is* much more glorious. <sup>12</sup> Therefore, since we have such hope, we use great boldness of speech—  
<sup>13</sup> unlike Moses, *who* put a veil over his face so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the end of what was passing away. <sup>14</sup> But their minds were blinded. For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the *veil* is taken away in Christ. <sup>15</sup> But even to this day, when Moses is read, a veil lies on their heart. <sup>16</sup> Nevertheless when one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. <sup>17</sup> Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord *is*, there *is* liberty. <sup>18</sup> But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.

In verse 6, Paul indicates that he and his colleagues are ministers of a new covenant. Because Paul was a Pharisee with a thorough understanding of the Old Testament, it is not difficult to see how Paul was using Jeremiah's contrast between the Old and New Covenants in these verses. For example, Jeremiah contrasted the external Mosaic Covenant with the internalization of God's law offered by the New Covenant (Jer 31:33-34). Paul seems to make a similar comparison in 2 Corinthians 3 when he contrasts the Old Covenant as engraved on stones with the Holy Spirit's work in the New Covenant era. This comparison becomes more apparent in 2 Corinthians 3:3 where Paul contrasts the tablets of stone with the tablets of the flesh that are of the heart. Thus, Paul must have had in mind Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36. Paul's contrast in 2 Corinthians 3 can be none other than the New Covenant in contrast to the Old Covenant.<sup>38</sup> As Kent explains, "Allowing Paul to define his own terms, the 'new covenant' (which his preaching of the gospel was promoting) was the same New Covenant which Jesus announced in the upper room and which his death secured for believers."<sup>39</sup>

Some commentators have postulated that Paul in 2 Corinthians 3:6 is perhaps referring to himself and the other apostles. Decker notes:

The context seems to contrast the readers ("you") with Paul. The plural "we" is typical of Pauline style and often refers to Paul himself. It should not unusually be viewed as an inclusive "we" (incorporating the readers), though it may at times refer to the apostles as a group.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Larry D. Pettegrew, *The New Covenant Ministry of the Holy Spirit: A Study in Continuity and Discontinuity* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1993), 18.

<sup>39</sup> Kent: 293.

<sup>40</sup> Decker, "The Church's Relationship to the New Covenant (Part 1)," 292 n. 7.

If Paul is referring to himself and the other apostles as ministers of a new covenant, then a stronger case can be made for the view that the church participates in some of the New Covenant's blessings. Elsewhere, Paul depicts the apostles as the foundation of the church (Eph 2:20). If those who are the foundation of the church are ministers of the New Covenant, then surely the church as a whole participates in some facet of the New Covenant's blessings.

### ***Hebrews 7***

The Book of Hebrews deals extensively with the church's participation in the New Covenant. For example, in Hebrews 7, the author argues that the legal (Mosaic Law) and religious (Levitical priesthood) components of the Old Covenant were inadequate and therefore had to be replaced by something better.<sup>41</sup> Thus, the author launches into a discussion of the Melchizedekian priesthood, which was superior to the Levitical priesthood. The author argues that since the Melchizedekian priesthood ushered in a superior priesthood, it follows that the whole legal system on which the Levitical institutions were predicated also had to be changed.<sup>42</sup>

Therefore, in place of the Mosaic system there would come a "better hope" (v. 19). Verse 22, identifies this "better hope" as a "better covenant." The surrounding context indicates that this "better covenant" can be none other than the New Covenant. The further explanation provided in chapter 8 strongly argues that the "better covenant" must be the New Covenant. This becomes particularly apparent with the citation of the New Covenant prophecy found in Jer 31:31-34 in Hebrews 8:8-12.<sup>43</sup>

### ***Hebrews 8***

In Hebrews 8:6-7, the author provides further explanation of the "better covenant." He notes that this "better covenant" is founded upon better promises (v. 6). He also observes that the first covenant was obviously flawed or else there would be no need for a second covenant to take its place. In verses 8-12, the author leaves no doubt as to which covenant he had in mind through his quotation of Jeremiah

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<sup>41</sup> Zane Hodges, "Hebrews," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton: Victor, 1983), 798.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Decker, "The Church's Relationship to the New Covenant (Part Two)," 451.

31:31-34. Such usage of the initial New Covenant announcement of Jeremiah 31:31-34 signals to the reader that the author has in mind the New Covenant when he refers to a “better covenant.” In verse 13, the author continues to contrast this “new covenant” with the previous obsolete covenant.<sup>44</sup>

The author’s use of the New Covenant in Hebrews 7 and 8 demonstrates the current operation of some of its blessings in the church. For example, Hebrews 8:6 seems to indicate that Christ’s mediatorship and priesthood are based on the New Covenant. Because both of these ministries are certainly in effect today, then it stands to reason that the New Covenant must also now be in effect in some sense.<sup>45</sup>

### ***Hebrews 9***

Hebrews 9 also provides ample evidence of the church’s participation in some of the blessings of the New Covenant.<sup>46</sup> Hebrews 9:11 speaks of the “good things.” These “good things” are no doubt the privileges that believers experience as a result of the Savior’s death (vs. 12-14). As will be shown below, chapter 9 connects these “good things” with the New Covenant. What is important to recognize at this point is that these “good things” are described as a present reality for believers. Some versions use the phrase “the good things to come.” Such phraseology comes from the μελλοντων, which is a present participle from the verb μελλω. However, other versions use the phrase “the good things which are.” This phraseology comes from γενομενων, which is an aorist participle derived from the verb γινομαι. The latter reading seems to be superior. It is the reading accepted by the UBS 4th edition. Moreover, Metzger favors the latter reading and assigns it a grade of a “B.”<sup>47</sup> If this latter reading is the correct one, then “the good things” in verse 11 refer to the present spiritual benefits that believers experience as a result of Christ’s blood.

In verse 15, the author connects the present reality of “the good things” that came into existence with Christ’s death with Christ’s mediatorship of the New Covenant. The writer connects verses 11-14 with verse 15 with a δια τουτο clause. This clause establishes that verse 15 is the natural conclusion of

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Decker, "The Church's Relationship to the New Covenant (Part 1)," 301.

<sup>46</sup> Decker, "The Church's Relationship to the New Covenant (Part Two)," 451-52. Penney: 470-71.

<sup>47</sup> Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2d ed. (London: United Bible Societies, 1994), 598.

verses 11-14. Verse 15 goes on to speak of Christ's mediatorship of a new covenant. The new covenant language in verse 15 must be the same New Covenant spoken of in Jeremiah 31 because it is contrasted in the same sentence with the first covenant. Thus, verses 11-15 taken as a whole argue that "the good things" are a present reality in the lives of believers because Christ's death made Him the mediator of the New Covenant. Therefore, these verses taken together form a strong argument that the church is presently experiencing some of the blessings of the New Covenant.

Hebrews 9:15 furnishes further evidence that Christ's mediatorship of the New Covenant is an ongoing reality in the church age. For example, this verse uses the present tense of ἔστιν to indicate that Christ is mediator of a new covenant (διαθηκης καινης μεσττης ἔστιν). It is difficult to argue that ἔστιν can be a futuristic present because verse 15 also indicates that the New Covenant is also the basis of a present redemption.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, as in Hebrews 8:6, if Christ's mediatorship is a present reality, then it must be concluded that New Covenant upon which such mediatorship is predicated is also a present reality.<sup>49</sup>

Hebrews 9 also has much to say regarding the New Covenant's current ratification. For instance, according to Hebrews 9:17, the covenant takes effect upon the death of the testator. Because Christ as testator has died, then the New Covenant is obviously in effect. In addition, verses 18-22 indicate that the former covenant was ratified based on a blood ceremony. In fact, the words "this is the blood of the covenant" that are quoted in verse 20 are taken from Exodus 24:8 and refer to God's inauguration of the Mosaic Covenant with Israel at Sinai. These words parallel Christ's words in Matthew 26:28 ("this is the blood of the covenant"). The writer of Hebrews uses these express and implied references to the Mosaic Covenant and the Upper Room Discourse to show that just as blood ratified the Mosaic Covenant, Christ's blood ratified the New Covenant. Thus, Hebrews 9:18-22 indicates that at least some of the New Covenant's provisions are presently in operation.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Decker, "The Church's Relationship to the New Covenant (Part Two)," 452 n. 98.

<sup>49</sup> Toussaint, 302.

<sup>50</sup> Decker, "The Church's Relationship to the New Covenant (Part Two)," 452.

## *Hebrews 10*

The line of argumentation presented in Hebrews 10 also employs notions of the New Covenant's present ratification and effects.<sup>51</sup> Here, the author argues that in the place of the temporary and repetitive nature of the Old Testament sacrifices (v. 1) that can never take away sin (v. 11), there is now the once and for all offering of the body of Christ (v. 12). This line of reasoning is then abruptly concluded by the citation of Jeremiah 31:33-34 in Hebrews 10:15-17. In verse, 15, the author attributes this citation to the testimony of the Holy Spirit. The quotation emphasizes indwelling ("I will put my laws into their hearts, and in their minds I will write them") and forgiveness ("Their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more.")

The author employs these quotations in order to communicate that the Old Covenant, which could never bring perfection and permanent forgiveness, was predicted as coming to an end based on the promise of the New Covenant, which offered permanent forgiveness. This permanent forgiveness came through Christ's one offering. Hughes explains the impact of the New Covenant citation as having:

...the effect of clinching and bringing to its conclusion the long argument regarding the nature of Christ's high priesthood and the perfection and finality of his atoning sacrifice, whereby the New Covenant is brought to its fulfillment.<sup>52</sup>

It is difficult to imagine that the author would refer to the New Covenant and to the forgiveness it provides if its blessings did not have immediate relevance to his audience. Thus, the writer does not refer to the New Covenant merely because it is similar in nature but rather because his readers had already experienced participation in its blessings. According to Ramm, if this covenant spoken of in Jeremiah only finds fulfillment in the millennial age, then the author of Hebrews is mistaken in applying it to the church.<sup>53</sup> Compton similarly observes that, "The New Covenant is already described as enacted, and the readers of Hebrews are portrayed as participating in the forgiveness which it promises."<sup>54</sup> Toussaint adds, "This Jewish covenant is made the basis of the appeal which the writer of Hebrews makes to Christian

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.: 542-53. Penney: 471.

<sup>52</sup> Philip E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 403.

<sup>53</sup> Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: W.A. Wilde, 1956), 264.

<sup>54</sup> R. Bruce Compton, "An Examination of the New Covenant in the Old and New Testaments" (Th.D. diss., Grace Theological Seminary, 1986), 253.

experience in Hebrews 10:15-17.”<sup>55</sup> Thus, because of the forgiveness offered by the New Covenant, the writer exhorts believers to boldly enter the holy place (10:19).

### ***Hebrews 12***

In chapter 12, the writer to the Hebrews continues to speak of the current New Covenant blessings enjoyed by his readers. In verse 24, the author refers to “Jesus the mediator of the new covenant.” The big question here is whether Christ’s mediatorship is referring to a present or future function of the New Covenant. This question can only be answered by observing the over all context of the chapter. On the one hand, if the spiritual blessings depicted in chapter 12 are future realities for the believer, then it stands to reason that a future mediatorship of the New Covenant is in view. On the other hand, if these blessings are part of the believers’ present experience, then Christ is mediating a present function of the New Covenant. The general thrust of the passage depicts its enumerated spiritual realities as a present experience of believers.<sup>56</sup>

For example, verse 18, the author reminds his readers that “you have come” (προσεληλυθατε) to Sinai. In verses 18-21, he uses the historical experience of Israel at Sinai to depict Israel’s experience under the Old Covenant. The same verb “you have come” (προσεληλυθατε) is again used in verse 22 to indicate that his readers have now come to Mount Zion, which represents their coming to Jesus Christ. The blessings that believers have experienced as a result of their union with Christ are highlighted in verses 22-24. Thus, this paragraph depicting the believer’s present experience is juxtaposed against the previous paragraph depicting Israel’s Old Covenant experience.

The verb “you have come” (προσεληλυθατε) that is used in verse 22 to describe his audience’s present spiritual experience employs the stative aspect of the perfect tense, which describes an existing state of affairs. Therefore, according to Bruce, the term “may denote their conversion to Christianity... The particular form used in this particular context carries with it overtones of conversion.”<sup>57</sup> By using the perfect tense in verse 22, the author indicates that all of the spiritual realities that are enumerated in verses

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<sup>55</sup> Toussaint, 302.

<sup>56</sup> Decker, "The Church's Relationship to the New Covenant (Part Two)," 453-54. Penney: 471-72.

<sup>57</sup> F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 372.

22-24 are present realities for his audience. Though some have attempted to view these items as future realities, the perfect tense of *προσεληλυθατε* makes such a view difficult to sustain. Although the perfect tense can refer to future time, such as in James 5:2-3, the over all context of Hebrews 12 makes such a view implausible.

Thus, the reference to the heavenly Jerusalem in verse 22 probably does not refer to the future arrival of believers in heaven or to the New Jerusalem described in Revelation 21-22 but rather to the Christian's present experience of salvation. According to Turner, the items in verses 22-25 describe realities of the spiritual realm to which believers have come.<sup>58</sup> Also, Zion is probably used figuratively. According to Kent, "...Mount Zion symbolizes the final grace and blessing in salvation, the accomplished realities in contrast to types and shadows."<sup>59</sup>

In addition, the author uses the perfect tense when referring to the spirits of the righteous men made perfect (v. 23). The verb "perfect" (*teteleiomenon*) is in the perfect tense. Kent explains the significance of this usage:

The spirits of the righteous men made perfect is a reference to Old Testament saints with whom we share salvation. They are called spirits because they have not yet been united with their bodies in resurrection. They are made perfect in their spirits, however, because Christ's sacrifice for sins has actually accomplished the removal of their sins.<sup>60</sup>

In sum, "the entire tone of the passage with it's contrast between the mountain that the Jews approached for the Mosaic Law, and the mountain we 'have come to' speaks of a *present reality*."<sup>61</sup> Thus, the over all context necessitates that Christ's mediatorship of the New Covenant (v. 24) must refer to a present mediatorship.

If these descriptions describe the present realities of the believer's position, then the context of the New Covenant mediatorship of Jesus in verse 24 would seem to be a present function of an inaugurated covenant rather than an eschatological role. "You have come," the author of Hebrews wrote, in essence, "to Jesus, who is now mediating the New Covenant."<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> David L. Turner, "The New Jerusalem in Revelation 21:1-22:5; Consummation of a Biblical Continuum," in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 273.

<sup>59</sup> Homer Kent, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), 272.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 273.

<sup>61</sup> Penney: 472.

<sup>62</sup> Decker, "The Church's Relationship to the New Covenant (Part Two)," 453-54.

### *Hebrews 13*

Hebrews 13:20-21 says, “Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant,<sup>21</sup> make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom *be* glory forever and ever. Amen.” In these verses, a benediction is provided that connects Christ’s death and the New Covenant (“the blood of the everlasting covenant”) with both His resurrection and present ministry to believers.<sup>63</sup> Thus, to the extent that Christ’s present ministries of making believers “complete in every good work to do His will” and working in believers what is “well pleasing in His sight” are present realities, the New Covenant must also be a present reality. In sum, even through the benediction in the very last chapter of the book, the author of Hebrews continues to maintain that believers experience some present benefit from the New Covenant.

### **SUMMATION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT’S PRESENTATION OF THE NEW COVENANT**

As the previous discussion indicates, the New Covenant that was first announced in Jeremiah 31:31-34 was ratified when Christ died. Moreover, the epistles make it clear that the church participates in at least some of the New Covenant’s blessings. However, just because the church shares in some of the New Covenant’s blessings, it should not be concluded that the church is a party to the New Covenant. Decker is correct when he notes:

The partners of the New Covenant are, in biblical terms, God and Israel. This is quite clear in the Old Testament. Although participation of Gentiles may well be implied in the Old Testament, they do not participate as covenant partners. Even if it could be argued that additional partners might be added, the New Testament never explicitly adds the church as a covenant partner. It seems best to avoid expressing the church’s relationship to the covenant in terms of covenant partnership—the church is not a party with whom the New Covenant was made.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Decker, "The Church's Relationship to the New Covenant (Part 1)," 301.

<sup>64</sup> Decker, "The Church's Relationship to the New Covenant (Part Two)," 447-48.

Furthermore, while participating in some of the New Covenant's blessings, the church does not take over all of the New Covenant's blessings. This becomes obvious by observing some of the provisions of the New Covenant as enumerated in Ezekiel 36:28-30. These include predictions that Israel will dwell in the Promised Land in peace and prosperity. Only through the adoption of an allegorical method of interpretation is it possible to argue that the church is currently fulfilling these provisions. Dispensationalists believe that Israel will fulfill these provisions during the millennial age.

The epistles only go so far as to include the church in the soteriological blessings of the New Covenant thus leaving the political and geographical provisions for millennial Israel. Recent evangelical writers have appropriately expressed such a categorization of the New Covenant's provisions. For example, according to Showers:

...although the church is partaking of the spiritual blessings of the New Covenant, the material and national provisions are not being fulfilled with the Church.<sup>65</sup>

Similarly, Ware explains:

Only the spiritual aspects of the new covenant promises are now inaugurated in this age; the territorial and political aspects, though part of God's new covenant promise, await future fulfillment.<sup>66</sup>

Fruchtenbaum also expresses the proper balance:

Now Gentiles as Gentiles can by faith enjoy the spiritual blessings of the four unconditional covenants. This is why Gentiles today are partakers of Jewish spiritual blessings; they are not taker-overs...the blessing aspect amplified by the New Covenant was to include Gentiles. The Church is enjoying the spiritual blessings of these covenants, not the material and physical benefits. The physical promises still belong to Israel and will be fulfilled exclusively with Israel, especially those involving the land. However, all spiritual benefits are now being shared by the church.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Showers, 107.

<sup>66</sup> Bruce A. Ware, "The New Covenant and the People(S) of God," in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, ed. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 94-95.

<sup>67</sup> Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology*, rev. ed. (Tustin: Ariel Ministries, 1994), 635-36.

Decker provides the following helpful chart that assists interpreters in understanding which of the New Covenant's blessings are being fulfilled within the church today.<sup>68</sup>

**TABLE 1**

<b>Provisions</b>	<b>Old Testament</b>	<b>New Testament</b>
Internalization	Jer 31:33	John 16:13
Relationship with God	Jer 31:33	John 14:23
Knowledge	Jer 31:34	1 John 5:20
Forgiveness	Jer 31:34	Eph 1:7
Responsiveness	Ezek 36:26	Rom 7:22
Obedience	Ezek 36:27	Rom 8

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<sup>68</sup> Decker, "The Church's Relationship to the New Covenant (Part 1)," 292.

## **RESOLVING THEOLOGICAL PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH THE NEW TESTAMENT'S PRESENTATION OF THE NEW COVENANT**

As previously discussed a strong New Testament exegetical case can be made concerning the ratification of the New Covenant with Christ's death and the church's participation in some of the blessings of the New Covenant. However, such an exegetical conclusion has raised theological problems. For example, if the church is not a party to the New Covenant and the New Covenant's provisions will ultimately be fulfilled with millennial Israel, how is it possible for the church to share in any of the New Covenant blessings? Moreover, if the dispensational understanding of separate programs for Israel and the church is correct, then how is it possible for the church to share in any of Israel's covenants?

### Christ Mediates Both Programs

Perhaps one solution to this theological dilemma is to understand that Jesus is the author of both the program for Israel and the program for the church. Thus, a slight intermingling of both programs is possible because it is Christ who is ultimately the author of both. Toussaint explains:

Since the King has provided the basis of establishing the new covenant with Israel, it is very possible for some of the spiritual benefits to be available in the church age. The church's relationship to the new covenant is parallel in certain respects to its connection with the kingdom promises of Israel. The church is constituted, blessed, and directed by the same Person who shall bring about the literal Jewish kingdom.<sup>69</sup>

### Christ as the True Israel

Another possibility for understanding how the church shares in Israel's New Covenants is the recognition of Jesus as the true Israel. In other words, the church's participation in Israel's covenant can be explained in terms of her intimate connection to Christ who is the true Israel. Scripture suggests that Christ is the true Israel. For example, Jesus refers to Himself as the vine in John 15:1. Perhaps He is borrowing this imagery from Isaiah 5:1-7, which describes Israel as the vineyard.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Toussaint, 302-3.

<sup>70</sup> Stanley D. Toussaint, *Class Notes of Andy Woods in Be2035 Seminar in Hebrews and the General Epistles* (Dallas Theological Seminary, Spring 2003).

The early chapters of Matthew also seem to argue that Christ is the true Israel. Matthew appears to use Old Testament prophecy to make this argument. For example, although Matthew 2:13-15 uses Hosea 11:1 as a prophecy of the baby Jesus' flight from Egypt, the context of Hosea 11:1 describes Israel's exodus experience. Similarly, although Matthew 2:16-18 uses Jeremiah 31:15 as a prediction of Herod putting to death the male children in Bethlehem, the context of Jeremiah 31:15 describes the death of Jewish children caused by the Babylonian persecution. Dyer believes that these Old Testament passages are used in this manner in the early chapters of Matthew's gospel because Matthew is attempting to draw a parallel between Israel and Jesus. God called Israel to be a light to the Gentiles (Isa 49:6), but Israel failed. Conversely, the Father called Christ to be a light to the world (John 8:12), and Christ succeeded where Israel failed. Thus, Christ became the true Israel.<sup>71</sup>

In fact, Matthews's gospel records numerous instances where Christ succeeded in the very area that Israel failed. For example, although both Israel and Christ were called from Egypt as children (Hos 11:1; Matt 2:15), only Christ was obedient. Moreover, although both Israel and Christ were baptized (1 Cor 10:1-2; Matt 3), only Christ obeyed God after this baptism experience (Exod 15:22-26; Matt 3:17). Furthermore, although both Israel and Christ went into the wilderness to be tempted (Exod-Num; Matt 4), only Christ successfully endured temptation.<sup>72</sup> Because Christ succeeded where Israel failed, Christ became the true Israel.

Isaiah's servant songs (Isa 42; 49-57) also argue for identifying Christ as the true Israel. In these passages, Israel's calling is portrayed as the true servant of God (Isa 42:1-7). Yet, these passages indicate that Israel failed in fulfilling this calling (Isa 42:18-22). Thus, God predicted that He would raise up a new servant to become all that Israel failed to be (Isa 49:1-7). This second servant is obviously Christ (Isa 52:13-53:12). This point is clarified through Christ's

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<sup>71</sup> Charles Dyer, "Biblical Meaning of "Fulfillment"," in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, ed. Wesley R. Willis (Chicago: Moody, 1994), 55.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

application of some of the servant song passages to Himself (Matt 12:17-21). Thus, Christ became a sort of new Israel in succeeding in the very calling that Israel had failed in.<sup>73</sup> In sum, the church's participation in Israel's covenant can be explained in terms of her intimate connection to Christ who is the true Israel.

### ***The Church Already Shares in Israel's Blessings***

Another way of reconciling how the church shares in Israel's New Covenant is by understanding the numerous blessings that the church already shares with Israel. In other words, if the church already participates in many of Israel's blessings, it should come as no surprise that the church also participates in some of the blessings of Israel's New Covenant. Toussaint specifies several ways that the church already participates in Israel's program.<sup>74</sup>

First, Christ promised the apostles, who would become the foundation of the church (Eph 2:20), that they would reign over Israel in the land during the millennium (Matt 19:28; Luke 22:28-30). Second, in Romans 11, believing Gentiles, who are symbolized as wild branches (Rom 11: 24), share in the root of the olive tree. This root of the olive tree represents the Jewish patriarchs (Rom 11:16). Third, Paul, in 1 Corinthians 6:2, promises the church it will judge the world and rule in the millennium. Fourth, Galatians 3:29 associates the church with Israel's land promises. Galatians 3:29 says, "And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise." The same chapter refers to the promises spoken to Abraham and to his seed (v. 16). The phrase "and to your seed" includes the land promises in Genesis (Gen 13:15; 15:18; 17:7-8; 24:7; 26:3; 28:4, 13; 48:4). Thus, the church must somehow be related to the land promises.

Fifth, Ephesians 2:19 associates the church with Israel's covenants. Ephesians 2:19 says that the church consists of those who "are no longer strangers and aliens [to the covenants of

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<sup>73</sup> Charles Dyer and Gene Merrill, *Old Testament Explorer*, ed. Charles R. Swindoll and Roy B. Zuck, Swindoll Leadership Library (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2001), 565-66.

<sup>74</sup> Stanley D. Toussaint, "Israel and the Church of a Traditional Dispensationalist," in *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism*, ed. Herbert W. Bateman (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999), 249-52.

promise, v. 12], but you are fellow citizens with the saints.” Both verses 12 and 19 are looking at the covenants of promise given to Israel. Thus, somehow the church participates in the Jewish covenants and hope. Sixth, Hebrews 11:39-40 associates the church with the heirs of the Old Testament promises when it says, “And all these having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised, because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they should not be made perfect.” The pronouns “us” and “they” join the church and Old Testament believers together as somehow participating in future blessings. Seventh, Luke 19:11-27 pictures Israel and the church as being rewarded together. This passage deals with the Lord returning to reign and giving his faithful servants varying degrees of authority to rule over cities in the kingdom age. This prediction seems equally applicable to both Israel and the church. In sum, given the fact that the church already participates in Israel’s blessings, it should come as no surprise that the church also participates in the blessing of Israel’s New Covenant.

### ***Gentiles as Contemplated Beneficiaries under Israel’s Covenants***

A final way of understanding how the church can participate in the blessings of Israel’s New Covenant is by recognizing that the Gentiles are already contemplated beneficiaries of Israel’s covenants. This is certainly true with the Abrahamic Covenant. According to Benware:

Provision for the Gentiles was made in the Abrahamic covenant (“in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed,” Gen. 12:3). The salvation and blessing of Gentiles was always part of God’s plan and concern.<sup>75</sup>

Moreover, although Israel and God are the only parties to the New Covenant, no where does the Old Testament say that the Gentiles are completely excluded from its provisions. The conclusion of Gentile exclusion could only be logically drawn if the text specified that Israel’s status under the covenant was exclusive. However, the Old Testament merely speaks of Israel’s inclusion.<sup>76</sup> In fact, a few Old Testament references to the New Covenant do anticipate Gentile involvement and blessing (Isa 55:5;

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<sup>75</sup> Paul N. Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 72.

<sup>76</sup> Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 114.

Ezek 36:36; 37:28).<sup>77</sup> In conclusion, if the Gentiles are already contemplated beneficiaries under Israel's covenants, then it should not be surprising to discover the New Testament's teaching that the church participates in some of the New Covenant blessings.

### **INADEQUATE NEW COVENANT VIEWS**

The preceding discussion has attempted to present an understanding of the New Covenant's relation to the church that maintains both the continuity and discontinuity between God's programs for Israel and the church. However, interpreters have proposed other options that seem to handle the subject of the New Covenant's relation to the church in a less satisfactory manner. In this third and final section, four such methods will be highlighted along with the flaws in each approach. These inadequate methods include the two-covenant view of classical dispensationalism, the replacement view typically associated with amillennialism and postmillennialism, the church's non-participation in the New Covenant as taught by John Master, and the complementary hermeneutical approach of progressive dispensationalism.

#### **TWO COVENANT VIEW**

Proponents of the two-covenant view attempt to resolve the tension between Israel's New Covenant as revealed in the Old Testament and the church's participation in the New Covenant's blessings by proposing that there are actually two new covenants. One was made with Israel and the other was made with the church. Lewis Sperry Chafer was the individual most responsible for popularizing such an approach. According to Chafer:

The eighth covenant is with Israel and conditions their life kingdom (cf. Jer. 31:31-34)... There remains to be recognized a heavenly covenant for the heavenly people, which is also styled like the preceding one for Israel a "new covenant." It is made in the blood of Christ (cf. Mark 14:24) and continues in effect throughout this age, whereas the new covenant made with Israel happens to be future in its application. To suppose that these two covenants—one for Israel and one for the church—are the same is to assume that there is a latitude of common interest between God's purpose for Israel and His purpose for the church. Israel's covenant, however, is new only because it replaces the Mosaic, but the church's covenant is new because it introduces that which is God's mysterious and unrelated purpose. Israel's new covenant rests specifically on the sovereign "I will"

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 122-25.

of Jehovah, while the new covenant for the church is made in Christ's blood. Everything that Israel will yet have, to supply another contrast, is the present possession of the church—and infinitely more.<sup>78</sup>

Unfortunately, Chafer's view lacks a solid exegetical foundation. Decker explains:

The basis for this view is the presupposition that there can be no common interest between God's purposes for Israel and for the Church. The position suffers two fatal flaws: Scripture never explicitly says that there are two new covenants nor does it ever juxtapose them in the same context, and second, it is built on a theological presupposition rather than on an exegesis of the text. Chafer's determination to maintain a complete separation between Israel and the Church has forced him to an exegetically indefensible conclusion.<sup>79</sup>

The two-covenant view also suffers from other flaws. According to Toussaint:

Paul was clear in his delineation between the church and Israel in God's program (Romans 9-11). Why then would he not have been specific in pointing out the difference between two new covenants?<sup>80</sup>

Moreover, the two-covenant view suffers from a complete lack of contemporary scholarly support. Although the early writings of Ryrie and Walvoord sought to defend the two-covenant position,<sup>81</sup> their later writings demonstrate an abandonment of this position and instead teach that the church participates in some aspects of the one New Covenant.<sup>82</sup> Blaising observes that he "knows no dispensational scholar who holds it today."<sup>83</sup>

## REPLACEMENT VIEW

On the other end of the theological spectrum is the replacement view. Proponents of this view maintain that the New Testament citations of the New Covenant indicate that the promises given to Israel find their complete fulfillment in the church. In other words, the church does not merely partake of

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<sup>78</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948; reprint, [8 vols. in 4], Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1993), 7: 98-99.

<sup>79</sup> Rodney Decker, "Dispensational Views of the New Covenant," in *Dictionary of Pre Millennial Theology*, ed. Mal Couch (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996), 281.

<sup>80</sup> Toussaint, *Behold the King*, 302.

<sup>81</sup> John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959), 208-20. Charles Ryrie, *The Basis of the Pre Millennial Faith* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux, 1953), 105-25.

<sup>82</sup> Charles Ryrie, "Covenant, New," in *The Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. Charles F. Pfeiffer and Howard F. Vos and J. Rea (Chicago: Moody, 1975), 1:392. John F. Walvoord, "Does the Church Fulfill Israel's Program? (Part 3)," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 137 (July-September 1980): 220.

<sup>83</sup> Craig A. Blaising, "Development of Dispensationalism by Contemporary Dispensationalists (Part 2)," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145 (July-September 1988): 278.

Israel's New Covenant blessings but rather completely takes them over. Thus, Carr asserts, "The mediator of the New Covenant is ratifying it with the Princes of the New Israel."<sup>84</sup> Such a view is prominent within amillennial and postmillennial theological systems, which hold that the church has permanently replaced Israel in the plan and purposes of God.

However, this view, like the two-covenant view, is fraught with difficulties. First, it requires a leap in logic. The church's participation in some aspects of the New Covenant does not mean that the church takes over the New Covenant. Similar thinking would dictate that because Texas participates in some of the territory of the United States, Texas becomes the United States. Second, the church is obviously not fulfilling all of the provisions of the New Covenant. The church is not currently dwelling in prosperity in the Promised Land. Thus, the replacement view only becomes plausible to the extent that the interpreter allegorizes the New Covenant provisions.

Third, the replacement view fails to acknowledge God's unconditional covenant made with ethnic Israel (Gen 15:7-17; Jer 31:35-37). Fourth, the view requires allegorization of the numerous references that speak of future restoration and prominence for national Israel (Isa 2:1-4). Fifth, it attempts to change the church into Israel despite the fact that the term "Israel" is never used for the church anywhere in the New Testament.<sup>85</sup> Sixth, the theological view that the church has become the new Israel is not detectable in church history until A.D. 160.<sup>86</sup>

## **THE CHURCH'S NON-PARTICIPATION IN THE NEW COVENANT**

John Master is a modern proponent of this view.<sup>87</sup> According to Master, the church has no relationship with the New Covenant. The New Covenant is exclusively for Israel in the future millennial kingdom. Although the church enjoys similar spiritual blessings as those specified for Israel, they are not given to the church because of the New Covenant. The only relationship between the church and the New Covenant is that the church is united to Jesus Christ who is the mediator of the New Covenant. The

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<sup>84</sup> Arthur Carr, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (Cambridge: University Press, 1894), microfiche: 291.

<sup>85</sup> Fruchtenbaum, 684-99.

<sup>86</sup> C. Marvin Pate, "A Progressive Dispensationalist View of Revelation," in *Four Views on the Book of Revelation*, ed. C. Marvin Pate (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 164.

<sup>87</sup> Master, 93-110.

burden of proof shifts to Master to explain why 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 and 2 Corinthians 3:6-18 seemingly apply the New Covenant to the church.

Regarding 1 Corinthians 11:23-26, Master observes that the teaching regarding the New Covenant is drawn from Christ's statements in the Upper Room Discourse that were given in an eschatological context. Master sees a similar eschatological context regarding the New Covenant emphasis in 1 Corinthians 11:23-26. According to Master:

Paul's quotation of Jesus specifically identifies the breaking of the bread as a memorial of his death for the believers in Corinth. The expression "for you," however, is not found in Paul's mention of the cup of the New Covenant (v. 25; cf. Lk. 22:20). The absence of this expression with the mention of the cup might indicate that the bread is a memorial specifically for them but the cup does not relate directly to them but rather to God's covenant faithfulness to Israel's future.<sup>88</sup>

However, it seems unusual to view the table as a memorial commemorating something done for a third party. The notion of an ordinance as a memorial seems more appropriate as a direct reference rather than an indirect command regarding a third party.<sup>89</sup>

In addition, Master contends that the cutting of a covenant does not necessarily mean that the covenant is operational today. He notes:

The new covenant was ratified by Christ's death on the cross. Yet because a covenant has been "cut" does not mean that it is fully operational. God "cut" a covenant with Abraham regarding the land (Gen. 15), which has not been fulfilled. There may or may not be a period of time between the cutting of the covenant and its realization in human experience, when it becomes functional.<sup>90</sup>

Again, it is odd to for the church to have an ordinance that celebrates and remembers the "cutting" of the New Covenant if the church were not somehow sharing in some of the blessings of the covenant.<sup>91</sup>

Regarding 2 Corinthians 3:6-18, Master maintains that Paul calls himself a minister of a new covenant in order to emphasize the character of his ministry. In other words, rather than identifying himself as a minister of Jeremiah's New Covenant, Paul is speaking of "a new kind of ministry" in

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>89</sup> Decker, "The Church's Relationship to the New Covenant (Part Two)," 440.

<sup>90</sup> Master, 99.

<sup>91</sup> Penney: 467.

contrast to others who emphasize a ministry of works and self-effort. Master bases his argument on the anarthrous construction of “a new covenant” in 2 Corinthians 3:6. Master observes that 2 Corinthians 3:6 says “a new covenant” rather than “the New Covenant.” Furthermore, Master understands “the letter” (gramma) in Corinthians 3:6 to refer to the misuse of the Mosaic Law rather than to the Old Testament Law itself.<sup>92</sup>

However, both of these arguments are problematic. For example, an anarthrous construction does not necessarily communicate a qualitative emphasis.<sup>93</sup> Moreover, while it is true that 2 Corinthians 3:6 does not say “the New Covenant” but rather says “a new covenant,” Jeremiah 31 does not say “the New Covenant” either. Paul probably did not use the expression “the New Covenant” because his purpose was not to point out which covenant. Rather, his purpose was to emphasize the different nature of the New Covenant when compared to the Old Covenant. Interestingly, the passage does not specify the Mosaic Covenant either. However, the context makes it clear that the Mosaic Covenant is in view. Similarly, the context also makes it clear that the New Covenant is in view without the necessity of the passage specifically identifying the New Covenant.<sup>94</sup>

Furthermore, the argument that the “letter” (gramma) refers to the misuse of the Mosaic Law rather than the Mosaic Law itself seems to ignore numerous contextual factors to the contrary. For example, the passage also mentions “engraved in letters of stone” (v. 7), “written on tablets of stone” (v. 3), and “the face of Moses” (v. 7). These references all seem to point to the Law of Moses itself rather than the mere misuse of it. It is also seems odd to view the misuse of the law as that which was glorious before the coming of the New Covenant (vv. 7-11).<sup>95</sup>

Some following Master’s view might contend that the church cannot be benefiting from the provisions of the New Covenant because there is no universal knowledge among God’s people today. In light of the New Covenant provision found in Jeremiah 31:34, such universal knowledge would have to be the present experience of God’s people if they are indeed sharing in the New Covenant’s blessings.

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<sup>92</sup> Master, 100-1.

<sup>93</sup> Decker, "Dispensational Views of the New Covenant," 281.

<sup>94</sup> Penney: 468.

<sup>95</sup> Decker, "The Church's Relationship to the New Covenant (Part Two)," 440 n. 45.

However, the New Testament regularly teaches about the illuminating ministry of the Holy Spirit (John 6:45; 16:12-13; 1 John 2:20, 27). All New Testament believers experience such illumination because of the Spirit's work in their lives. When viewed from this standpoint, all believers experience the type of universal knowledge spoken of in Jeremiah 31:34.<sup>96</sup>

## COMPLEMENTARY HERMENEUTICS

Complementary hermeneutics offered by progressive dispensationalism represents a final inadequate approach toward understanding the church's relationship to the New Covenant. Most normative and progressive dispensationalists agree that the church shares in some of the blessings of the New Covenant. However, normative dispensationalists often disagree with the hermeneutical methodology employed by progressives in reaching this conclusion. Complementary hermeneutics means:

...that the New Testament does introduce change and advance; it does not merely repeat Old Testament revelation. In making complementary additions, however, it does not jettison old promises. The enhancement is not at the expense of the original promise.<sup>97</sup>

Progressives believe that the New Testament uses this complementary approach when it applies the New Covenant to the Gentiles. Bock notes:

...some themes and texts have a complementary relationship. The additional inclusion of some in the promise does not mean that the original recipients are thereby excluded. The expansion of promise need not mean the cancellation of earlier commitments God has made. The realization of a new covenant hope today for Gentiles does not mean that the promise made to Israel in Jeremiah 31 has been jettisoned.<sup>98</sup>

However, must one believe that the New Testament has introduced change and advance in applying the New Covenant to Gentiles? God's covenant program has always contemplated Gentiles as beneficiaries (Gen 12:3). New Covenant prophecies from the Old Testament also contemplate Gentiles as beneficiaries (Isa 55:5; Ezek 36:36; 37:28). Thus, when the New

<sup>96</sup> Kent, "The New Covenant and the Church," 294-95.

<sup>97</sup> Craig A. Blaising, "Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: Assessment and Dialogue," in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, ed. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 392-93.

<sup>98</sup> Darrell L. Bock, "Interpreting the Bible-How Texts Speak to Us," in *Progressive Dispensationalism*, ed. Darrell L. Bock and Craig A. Blaising (Wheaton: Victor, 1993), 103-4.

Testament speaks of Gentiles sharing in the blessings of the New Covenant, it is not really introducing change but merely restating what has already been disclosed in the Old Testament. It is true that the Old Testament does not use the word “church” when discussing the Gentiles as New Covenant beneficiaries. However, this absence is only due to the fact that the church was an undisclosed mystery during the Old Testament era (Eph 3:9).

Rather than seeing the church’s participation in the New Covenant as a complementary addition made by the New Testament, it is better to view such participation as more specificity further disclosed in the progress of revelation. Lightner explains this distinction:

“Complementary hermeneutics” must not be confused with the historic orthodox doctrine of progressive revelation. The latter truth means that God revealed His truth gradually, sometimes over a long period of time. What was revealed later never changed the original revelation, however. The meaning and the recipients of the original promise always remain the same.<sup>99</sup>

The inclusion of the Gentiles and the church in the New Covenant is merely a more specific amplification of what was already revealed in the Old Testament. Ryrie correctly observes, “Concerning the church’s relation to the covenant, it seems best understood in light of the progress of revelation.”<sup>100</sup> Thus, categorizing the church’s inclusion in the New Covenant as a complementary change is inappropriate.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to present a view of the New Covenant’s relation to the church that maintains both the continuity and discontinuity between God’s programs for Israel and the church. The paper has accomplished this objective by presenting what the Old Testament says about the New Covenant and how the New Testament applies the New Covenant to the church. This paper has also provided a contrast between the approach presented herein and other inadequate options for understanding the church’s relationship to the New Covenant.

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<sup>99</sup> Robert Lightner, *Last Days Handbook*, rev. ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 210.

<sup>100</sup> Ryrie, “Covenant, New,” 1:392.

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