

The New Covenant

“Behold days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a New Covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah”

Jeremiah

“This cup is the New Covenant in my blood”

Jesus

Bible quotations are taken from the
NIV or retranslated

of God, and a counterfeit people based on baptism or church membership.

We see Levitical priests, Melchizedek priests and ecclesiastical priests.

There was an Old Covenant tabernacle and then temple, a marvellous New Covenant human temple that far exceeded it, and then pagan buildings claiming to be houses of God.

We have Levitical shadow festivals, New Covenant realities, and pagan counterfeit festivals.

Finally, we have an Old Covenant Sabbath, a New Covenant spiritual rest, and a pagan church Sunday.

Jesus inaugurated the New Covenant with his blood. Many of his first followers shed their blood for the privilege of walking in it. The letter to the Hebrews was written largely to strengthen them in that conflict. It abounds in warnings to those who want to turn back to the old. Every chapter of it is relevant to the present topic. Let me finish with a quote from chapter 12 verses 18 to 25:

“For you have not come to a mountain that may be touched and to a blazing fire ... but you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels, to the general assembly and church of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the Judge of all, and to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, and to **Jesus, the mediator of a New Covenant**, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel. **See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking.**”

This and other writings available
from website
www.GrowthInGod.org.uk

Introduction

The Bible as we have it is divided into two sections which have been named *The Old Testament* and *The New Testament*. These names clearly come from the words God spoke to Jeremiah, “Behold, days are coming when I will make a **New Covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.**” The English words *testament* and *covenant* are different translations of the one Hebrew word ברית (berit) and the one Greek word διαθήκη (diatheke).

Most Christians, I believe, live under the Old Covenant. No doubt they read the New Testament and base their doctrines upon its contents, but many aspects of their life and experience are Old Covenant rather than new. A proper understanding of the difference between the two covenants is vital to real spiritual growth.

I believe the same was true in Bible times. Some believers in new testament days failed to receive and experience the fullness of the New Covenant which Jesus inaugurated with his blood. On the other hand, many old testament saints lived beyond the privileges of their days, and experienced deep things with God. They walked in the ways of the New Covenant.

The terms of the New Covenant are set out in Jeremiah chapter 31 verses 31-34:

“Behold days are coming,” declares the Lord, “when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the 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, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,” declares the Lord. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,” declares the Lord, “I will 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. And they shall not teach again each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest of them,” declares

the Lord, “for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.”

This passage from Jeremiah is quoted in full in Hebrews chapter 8:8-12. Much of the letter to the Hebrews deals with the theme of the New Covenant and will be helpful for further study.

Why was it necessary for God to make a New Covenant?

We will consider this subject under the following headings: law, teachers, scriptures, people, priests, buildings, festivals and the Sabbath.

The Law

God made the first covenant with the people of Israel when he brought them out of Egypt. This first covenant was based on law. That law was summarised in the ten commandments and expanded in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. These books, together with the book of Genesis, are the foundation books of the Old Testament, and are known as the *Torah* or *Law*.

The laws God gave through Moses were just and fair and vastly superior to those of surrounding peoples. They were severe by modern standards. The death penalty was prescribed for witchcraft, adultery, rape and striking one's parents and other crimes, as well as for murder. However, if they were imposed today, I have little doubt that they would lead to a happier society. The guilty might begin to fear while the innocent could freely walk our streets.

Excellent though these laws were, they did not result in a righteous people. Nearly 1000 years after they were given, God's judgment fell first on Israel and then on Judah. They had broken all God's commandments and totally failed to keep their side of the Old Covenant. Above all they had broken the very first commandment, and had turned and worshipped other gods. So the Assyrians and the Babylonians came and devastated their land, ravaged Jerusalem, and took their people into captivity.

A New Sabbath

As with festivals so with the Sabbath. God appointed the Sabbath day as a solemn covenant between him and the people of Israel. The Sabbath was the seventh day of the week which was Saturday. The writer to the Hebrews saw clearly that the Sabbath spoke of a spiritual rest, quite independent of any day of the week. He spoke of it in the following words: “There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God ... Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no-one will fall by following their example of disobedience” (Hebrews 4:9,11).

Again the church, after it had gained acceptance with man and lost favour with God, turned to paganism for inspiration and adopted Sunday as its special day for observation. I have written on this under the title *Sabbath Rest*.

Summary

We have considered law, teachers, scriptures, people, priests, buildings, festivals and the Sabbath. In each of these aspects we can see the same three features:

- an Old Covenant order
- a New Covenant fulfilment
- a church counterfeit

There were genuine Old Covenant teachers, then the glorious reality of the indwelling Teacher, then the counterfeit religious hierarchy with its many and varied manifestations.

God gave a good and just law to His people, followed by the wonderful reality of an inward law written on their hearts. Sadly, we then see for many centuries a reversion to human laws, rituals and prayer books that were never inspired by God.

We find an Old Covenant people descended from Abraham through Isaac and Jacob, a New Covenant people born of the Spirit

no doubt God looked at the motives of his heart and accepted his offerings. Many righteous kings of Judah in later times allowed this practice to continue. King Hezekiah rose above the standards of his ancestors and destroyed these high places. God's verdict: "... after him there was none like him among all the kings of Judah, nor among those who were before him. For he clung to the Lord ... and the Lord was with him ..." (2 Kings 18:5-7).

New Festivals

With festivals we find the same principles that we have already met. God ordained Old Covenant festivals. The main ones were Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles. Through Moses he commanded the Israelites to go up three times a year to Jerusalem to observe them. To keep these festivals faithfully required a lot of time, effort and expense, and for many centuries they were largely forgotten. The kings Hezekiah and Josiah, and later Ezra the scribe, revived these festivals and instructed the people to observe them.

Jesus had something far better to offer. He brought in their New Covenant fulfilments. Paul referred to this in the words, "Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us: therefore, let us keep the Festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and wickedness, but with bread without yeast, the bread of sincerity and truth" (1 Cor 5:7,8). Gradually the early followers of Jesus moved away from outward festivals, after they had discovered their much better inward counterparts. I have expanded this subject in the article *Festivals of Israel*.

The organised church, especially after it became established under the Roman emperor Constantine, lost the spiritual realities of the New Covenant and reverted to heathen festivals that were never commanded by God. Christmas, Easter and other festivals of the church calendar all have their origins in ancient pagan religions. I have expanded this topic in the article *Festivals in the Old Covenant, New Covenant and Church*.

It was at this critical point in Israel's history that Jeremiah announced God's promise of a New Covenant.

The root problem did not lie in the laws God had given. It lay in human nature. "The heart," said Jeremiah, "is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick" (Jer 17:9). The essence of the New Covenant is God's promise to change the heart. "I will put my law inside them and on their heart I will write it" (31:33). As long as the human heart is proud, covetous and idolatrous, there is no way it will keep the laws of God, no matter how much it is disciplined, exhorted and drilled. It has an internal law of operation that is in conflict with God's demands.

Many people never discover this. They may experience a genuine conversion. They may turn away from bad habits and totally change their life style. In spite of this the corrupt inward self is still there much as it was before.

Paul was dramatically converted on the Damascus road. His life completely changed direction. The zeal that had gone into persecuting Christians began now to go into preaching the gospel. But his problems were not over. In some ways they had just begun. He tells us in Romans chapter 7 of how he then struggled with the law and found he could not keep it. I don't think he was referring to his pre-conversion days. I believe these battles came after he met with Jesus on the Damascus road. Eventually he found victory and proclaimed in triumph, "The law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death. For what the Law could not do, God did ..." In Romans chapter 8 describes the new way of victory he had discovered.

What does it mean to have God's law written on the heart? It is nothing less than a complete change of nature. It is a supernatural miracle. You can train a dog to beg and stand on its hind legs and do all kinds of tricks. With perseverance and rewards you can even make it act contrary to its nature. But you can never change its nature. However much you try to make it act like a human it will

remain a dog. God remakes our nature so that we act in accordance with his laws. It becomes natural to do so. Peter speaks of this truth when he writes, “He has granted us precious and very great promises, that by them you might become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust” (2 Pet 1:4). An animal can never become human, but a human by God’s grace can become divine.

By nature, the human heart is sinful. Many factors may obscure this basic fact. Good upbringing, good friends and influences, public pressure to do right and religious pride may all contribute to improve the exterior; but none of these things can change the heart. A new birth from above is the only thing that can and this is the essence of the New Covenant promise.

Teachers

After speaking about the law Jeremiah goes on to speak about teaching: “And they shall not teach again each man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest of them.” John confirms these words with the statement, ...“ you have no need for anyone to teach you ... His anointing teaches you about all things ...” (1 John 2:27).

Fundamentally, all human teaching is by its very nature Old Covenant. It is done by man and can only ever be external. New Covenant teaching is done by the Holy Spirit and is internal. Jesus said to His disciples, “It is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you ... I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth ...” (John 16:7,12,13). Jesus was saying that the teaching of the indwelling Holy Spirit would be better for the disciples than His own teaching, which was, like all other human teaching, external. Even though he was the best teacher the world had ever seen, the teaching of the Holy Spirit was going to be better. In spite of appearances,

The returning exiles from Babylon rebuilt it. Antiochus Epiphanes defiled it by putting a statue of Jupiter in it and offering a sow on the altar. It was later rebuilt by the ungodly Herod the Great and made into the magnificent structure that stood in the time of Jesus.

The Jews at that time regarded it with the utmost reverence. Jesus, Stephen and Paul were all accused of blasphemy with regard to it. When the disciples were admiring it, to their dismay Jesus said, “Do you see all these great buildings? Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down.”

God’s mind was upon building another temple - a New Covenant temple. “The Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands,” said Stephen in a speech that led to him becoming the first martyr for Jesus. The divine plan was infinitely higher. His real temple was to be made of human beings. He did not want to live in brick and stone, but in flesh and blood. The new testament is full of the message: “You are the temple of the Holy Spirit.” The idea that God wants a special building where he can be worshipped is finished for ever. He gave his final verdict on the earthly temple in 70 AD when the Roman legions fulfilled Jesus’ prophecy to the word by literally leaving not one stone of it upon another as they searched its foundations for hidden gold.

What about our church buildings? Architecturally no doubt many of them have great merit and many people have a deep emotional attachment to them. However, we cannot allow such considerations to cloud our spiritual judgment. To regard them as houses of God or as holy places is to deny the New Covenant. To reverence a building is idolatry which can only lead to spiritual blindness and confusion.

Many country churches here in England are actually built on ancient sites of heathen worship. A similar situation existed in Old Testament times. Through long periods of Israel’s history Yahweh was worshipped at the high places, where the heathen had previously sacrificed. Even the prophet Samuel appears to have done this, and

Hebrews 7:3 describes Melchizedek as “without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God, he abides a priest perpetually”. Jesus entered this new priesthood, “not on the basis of a law of fleshly requirement (natural descent), but according to the power of an indestructible life” (Heb 7:16). He entered it, not because his foster father Joseph had been in it, nor because an ecclesiastical committee accepted him, but by God’s appointment. Simply he fitted God’s job description for priesthood. His ordination was not a religious ceremony, but God’s proclamation at his baptism, “This is my beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased”, as the Holy Spirit descended on Him in the form of a dove.

The Levitical priesthood has served its purpose. Ecclesiastical priesthoods have never been more than a counterfeit imitation of it (despite many sincere and upright men in their ranks). God ordains priests into the New Covenant Melchizedek priesthood on the same basis as He did their great High Priest. He anoints with the Holy Spirit those whom He has chosen to perform the tasks He has appointed them.

A New Building

The New Covenant has a new people, a new priesthood, and also a new building.

At the peak of Israel’s national history Solomon built the first great temple. David’s armies had been victorious everywhere they went and Solomon was enjoying the consequent peace and prosperity. He turned his energies to building a house for God. God had never commanded this, though he had instructed Moses to build the tabernacle. It was David’s well-intentioned idea which God allowed Solomon to implement.

God did not regard this temple very highly. He allowed it to be damaged by an earthquake in the days of King Uzziah. Nebuchadnezzar burnt it to the ground at the time of the captivity.

they were now ready to make this transition from the external to the internal.

We may contrast the words of Jesus with the words of Moses: “I know that after my death you will act corruptly and turn from the way which I have commanded you” (Deut 31:29). That was the Old Covenant situation (and the one that exists for the majority of Christians now); without a teacher and leader everything falls to pieces.

We find the same contrast in the prophecy of Joel, quoted by Peter on the day of Pentecost: “It shall be in the last days”, says God, “that I will pour out of my Spirit upon all flesh ... sons ... daughters ... young men ... old men ... male servants ... female servants” Each individual down to the illiterate female servant is able to have a direct, personal, revelatory, inward experience of God. The dependence on great leaders and teachers is gone.

Most religious leaders have an attitude that is closer in spirit to the words of Moses, “... after my death you will act corruptly ...” than to the words of Jesus, “It is to your advantage that I go away.” They want to feel indispensable. At best they are genuinely concerned for the welfare of their flock, but lack a proper understanding of the New Covenant, and faith in the keeping power of the Holy Spirit. At worst they are concerned that they will lose their position, income and security if no one depends on them.

What then is the place of teachers in the New Covenant? We find the answer to this question in Ephesians 4:11-16. This passage lists teachers as one of five ministries or services that are given by the ascended Christ to his church - apostles, prophets, pastors, *teachers* and evangelists. Paul says that the purpose of these ministries is to protect new believers from deception and to bring the body of Christ to maturity.

Most new believers are unable to step straight into the New Covenant. They must first pass through an Old Covenant experience. Many in new testament times (as now) were pagans who had never

even known the Old Covenant. They had to come under the law which Paul describes as **a tutor to bring us to Christ**. He amplified this with the words: “As long as the heir is a child, he is no different from a slave although he is owner of everything, but he is under guardians and stewards until the time set by the father” (Gal 4:1,2).

The new believer can also fall prey very easily to deception. We live in the time in which Jesus said there would be many false prophets. The young believer (and many others who should have more discernment) often has great difficulty in recognising the wolf in sheep’s clothing. His senses are not yet trained to discern. If we had the five scriptural ministries soundly operating among us, deceivers would not find their task so easy. It is the lack of those genuine ministries that causes so many Christians to remain in spiritual childhood where they are an easy prey to false and misleading teaching.

Children of believing parents are in a similar position. They cannot yet walk in the New Covenant. We teach them and discipline them and apply law to their lives. Even though they may evidence a very genuine desire to follow Jesus, we cannot set them free from law and allow them to do whatever they want. They are not yet ready. They must first learn to obey an external law.

Shepherds (Pastors) and teachers are necessary to bring the new believer through an Old Covenant experience till he comes to spiritual maturity, and can then walk in the fullness of the New Covenant. Then their work is done. He will continue to enjoy fellowship with other saints (though at a richer and deeper level than before) and he in turn will teach and pastor young believers, but he himself will have no need of a teacher.

The Scriptures

The law written on stone and expanded on paper was the foundation of the Old Covenant. The law written on our hearts is the basis of the new. In the Old Covenant the scriptures gave a set of

But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong” (1 Cor 1:26,27).

Instead the new people of God have spiritual gifts and powers. Most of these are invisible to the natural eye and hidden from the natural mind. Nevertheless, their true benefit is much greater. Until the books of heaven are opened and their secrets revealed, the spiritual conflicts and victories of many humble men and women of God will remain hidden from their fellow beings. Only eternity will reveal what has brought lasting good to mankind.

It is a privilege to be born by natural birth a member of God’s Old Covenant people. It is a far greater privilege to be born by spiritual birth as a member of the new. Praise God, there are increasing numbers of those who are the people of God both by natural birth and by spiritual birth.

A New Priesthood

Under the New Covenant there is not only a new people, but also a new priesthood. Old Covenant priests were taken from the tribe of Levi and from the family of Aaron. They had clearly defined duties in the tabernacle and in the temple as they served as intermediaries between God and man. Chapter 7 of Hebrews makes it very clear makes it very clear that the New Covenant has a new priesthood which is far superior to the old. This new order is called the order of Melchizedek and Jesus is its high priest.

Membership of the Levitical priesthood passed by natural descent from father to son. This system did not always have good results. Good fathers do not always have good sons! The sons of Eli were utterly corrupt and Samuel’s sons were not much better. Inheritance based on the natural is unreliable. However, the Levitical system was workable and sufficient for illustrating the concept of priesthood, and God used it till He brought in the new order of the Melchizedek priesthood.

suffering and spiritual blindness fell on the chosen race as for nearly 1900 years they wandered from country to country never finding rest.

The last century saw events of unparalleled drama for the Jews as their long exile has ended and their spiritual blindness has begun to lift. Hitler's holocaust shocked the world and subsequently modern Israel's birth and survival has amazed it.

The achievements of the Jewish people have been out of all proportion to their numbers. They have given to the world the scriptures, communism and nuclear weapons. Their academic, scientific and artistic achievements have been amazing. All this has demonstrated that they are a special people with a special purpose in God.

Dramatic and wonderful though the manifestation of God's power in them has been, the natural Israel remains no more than the people of the Old Covenant. It was a great day when Yahweh with outstretched arm and mighty power brought his **Old Covenant** people out of Egypt. It was a greater day when Jesus with outstretched arms and shed blood brought his **New Covenant** people out of sin.

Entry to the ranks of the Old Covenant people is by natural birth. Spiritual birth brings us into the new. All those, and only those, who are born of the Spirit of God are his new people. Only new birth can make us sons and daughters of God.

Here we must stress that neither baptism, nor membership of any group or denomination, nor good deeds that we have done, nor nationality, nor colour nor anything else human, can make anyone a member of God's New Covenant people. The only way in is by spiritual birth.

Few members of this new spiritual race have outstanding natural gifts. God has chosen mainly the poor and the weak of this world. Paul reminds us that "**Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth.**"

laws and rules for daily life. Do we still need the scriptures in the New Covenant? If so, what is their place?

Let's start by asking the same questions about Jesus. Did *he* need the scriptures? What were their place in *his* life? I believe the answer is for himself, no, he didn't need the scriptures. The law of God was perfectly written on his heart. His relationship with His Father was perfect, and he needed nothing external to support it. They moved in unbroken fellowship throughout His life. He quoted scripture in his conflict with Satan in the wilderness. I do not know if he needed to. He quoted scripture in his confrontations with the Pharisees. He opened up the scriptures to his disciples on the Emmaus road. I have no doubt he delighted in the scriptures as he saw in them the reflection of his own mind. He found them "**profitable for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness**" (2 Tim 3:16), but I don't believe he needed them for himself.

Jesus is our Lord and Saviour, and also our model and example. God, our Father, intends us to be like him, and in the fullness of the New Covenant we will be. It is a mistake to think that we will achieve this by endless reading of the scriptures. That was not the way it was with Jesus, nor can it be with us. He inherited his character from his Father, and so also do we.

Reading of the scriptures will not cause their contents to be written on our hearts. They may stick in our minds if we have retentive memories, but that is not the same thing. Rather it works the other way round. When God has written his law on our hearts, we come to the scriptures and recognise their contents as what is already within us. We understand them and delight in them just as Jesus did. We also find them "**profitable for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness**". We can use them for teaching and training, for rebuking and exposing the works of darkness, and for the correction of ourselves and others. If we should be cast into prison and deprived of our Bibles we would no doubt miss them, but our spiritual lives would not depend on them. They reflect what is

already in our hearts, but they are not the means by which God puts it there. He does that by his Spirit.

Much misunderstanding is caused by referring to the Bible as *the Word of God* or simply as *the Word*. The Bible itself never does this. It refers to itself as the *scriptures* and means something quite different when it speaks about *the word of God*. If you doubt this, search through the Bible with a concordance and see. Note Acts 17:11: “... they received the word ... and searched the Scriptures ...”. The **word** here is clearly different from the **Scriptures**. Also when we read that *the Word was made flesh*, it was obviously not the Bible that was made flesh.

Three other verses are frequently quoted as referring to the Bible. “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.” “The sword of the spirit which is the word of God” - part of the armour in Ephesians 6. “The word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword.” To take these verses as referring to the Scriptures is to force an Old Covenant interpretation onto them. To believe and teach an Old Covenant concept of the Bible will never lead to a New Covenant experience.

If the ‘word of God’ does not mean the Bible, what does it mean? When we relinquish our preconceived ideas, we can begin to find the answer. Two Greek words, λογος (logos) and ρημα (rhema) are both translated *word* in English and are not greatly different from each other in meaning. λογος has a wide range of meaning, but it centres round the concepts of word and thought. The word (λογος or ρημα) of God is whatever God says or thinks. It is any message or thought originating from Him. God created the universe by speaking. He spoke to and through the prophets of old. He spoke in and through His Son Jesus Christ. He speaks to and through His people today. All this is His word. When His word comes to us, it is the food on which we live. It is active and pierces into our hearts. It is the sword of the Spirit. It does not return empty to Him, but accomplishes that for which He sends it.

Please do not misunderstand me. I am not disputing either the authority or the inspiration of the Scriptures. What I am seeking to do is to clarify their place in the New Covenant. I want to give them the place that Jesus gives them and that they give themselves.

I have written separately on this topic under the title *The Scriptures and the Word of God*.

Other Changes

What other changes come with the New Covenant? As we study the subject we begin to discover a wonderful consistency in God’s ways. Sometimes it is so simple that we are amazed we could have missed it for so long. As we have seen, we have moved from a visible external law to one that is internal and invisible. Similarly, external human teachers are replaced by the internal, indwelling Spirit of God.

We will now go on to see that the New Covenant brings many other parallel and related changes. We will begin by considering the new people of God.

A New People

Under the Old Covenant God chose one specific people from all the peoples of the earth. They were the people of Israel, the physical descendants of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob, later known as the Jews. To this day they remain God’s chosen people according to the natural order. Although people can become Jews by conversion to Judaism, the normal method of becoming a member of that people is through physical birth from the womb of a Jewish mother.

When the Messiah came to Israel, the leaders and the majority of the Jewish nation rejected him. Further, the majority went on to reject the powerful and pure testimony of the early church. For this God’s judgment fell on the Jews and in 70 AD the Romans sacked Jerusalem and scattered them throughout the earth. Both physical