

# The Church & The New Covenant

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## Introduction

“It is no secret that there is more diversity among traditional dispensationalists regarding the church’s relationship to the new covenant than regarding any other comparable issue in our system.” This was the opening statement in Rodney Decker’s well-researched and scholarly paper titled *Why Do Dispensationalists Have Such a Hard Time Agreeing on the New Covenant?*<sup>1</sup> As a dispensationalist, I believe this is a justifiable title taking into consideration all the disagreements and differing views on the issue among past and present dispensationalists. It is interesting to note that there is considerable agreement regarding other biblical covenants, but when it comes to the New Covenant<sup>2</sup> there is no consensus among dispensationalists.

I have studied this topic carefully over the last many years and have enjoyed my discussions with students of Scriptures with a “Berean” mind. I have wrestled with the various theological interpretations of the NC and its relationship to the church and the present dispensation. Our Lord’s statement at the institution of the Lord’s Supper,<sup>3</sup> “This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood” (**Luke 22:20**)<sup>4</sup> has provoked my thinking more than any other verse on this topic. The truth of this verse has paved the way for me to better understand the relationship between the Church and the NC. Another verse which throws much light on this matter is **2 Cor.3:6**: “who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant.” Still, several pressing questions confront me, but I believe the basic truths related to the relationship between the church and the NC are better clarified in my thinking.

This article’s purpose is to investigate how the church is related to the NC. The task I will seek to address involves primarily the references to the NC in the passages in the Gospels in relation to the LS. Not only Jesus, but apostle Paul and the author of Hebrews also highlighted some vital links between the church and the NC. How can we best interpret their statements? The principal goal will be to focus on these matters briefly without the imposition of any theological-system-driven conclusions into the text. I am free from the “theological worry” of many dispensationalists that any involvement of the church in the NC will raise significant questions in relation to the *sine qua non* (the absolutely indispensable part or essentials) of

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<sup>1</sup> Paper presented at the Council on Dispensational Hermeneutics, Clarks Summit, PA, September 2008. Decker has also contributed enlightening and instructive articles on the “New Covenant and the Church” in *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (1995): 290-305, 431-56.

<sup>2</sup> Hereafter NC

<sup>3</sup> Hereafter LS

<sup>4</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the *New American Standard Bible*.

dispensationalism.<sup>5</sup> Dispensationalists have always emphasized the distinction between Israel and the church. **This is a valid and legitimate distinction born out of sound hermeneutics.** But sometimes this emphasis has led to an extreme view on discontinuity at the expense of continuity in God's redemptive plan. In this context, as Andy Woods has observed, "dispensationalists have often had difficulty explaining the New Testament verses that seemingly apply Israel's New Covenant to the church age."<sup>6</sup>

I hold my convictions in grace without being unnecessarily dogmatic, and with due respect to the views of other fellow dispensationalists. My prayer is that the biblical text should determine my theology, and not my theology determine my understanding of the text. I rejoice over the fact that we, dispensationalists are united on the essential features of the **NC in its final and full eschatological fulfillment** with "the house of Israel and with the house of Judah" (**Jer. 31:31**).

The position that the church replaces national Israel and entirely fulfills the NC in the present age (Replacement Theology) generally championed by Amillennialists and Covenant theologians, are **totally rejected here as it violates the basic hermeneutical principles in interpreting the Bible.** The basic presuppositions or foundational beliefs of these theological systems in relation to biblical eschatology deny the legitimate and normal (literal) interpretation of God's covenant promises to Israel.

## **The New Covenant with Israel**

**The NC was doubtlessly promised to the house of Israel and the house of Judah.** Even if there are texts in Scriptures that associates the NC with the church, *the church is not Israel*. The NC promises the salvation of Israel during the Millennial Kingdom age and the Spirit's indwelling of their lives. These covenant promises are given in the context of Israel's revival after her terrible experiences in the Great Tribulation. The NC is spoken of many times in the Old Testament<sup>7</sup> but highlighted in **Jer. 31:31-34** (the OT passages on the NC include Isa.59:20-21; Jer.32:37-40; Ezk.16:60-63; 36:23-27; 37:21-28). The promised provisions of the NC (*a change of heart, fellowship with God, knowledge of the Lord, and forgiveness of sins*) will be fulfilled for them when the Lord returns to establish His Millennial Kingdom. In contrast to the Postmillennial and Amillennial views, the Premillennial Dispensational position, though varying in details of the interpretation of the NC, **insists that the NC concerns Israel and requires fulfillment at the return of Christ.**

**Jer.31:31-34**, the central passage on the NC does not specify the exact time when it will be ratified. Other OT passages on the NC also seem to be ambiguous and inconclusive concerning the ratification of the NC. This leaves us with the necessity of awaiting further revelation in the

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<sup>5</sup> Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 38-41.

<sup>6</sup> Andy Woods, *What Is the Relationship of the Church to the New Covenant?* spiritandtruth.org

<sup>7</sup> Hereafter OT.

New Testament<sup>8</sup> concerning the ratification of the NC. The NT also sheds light on how the NC relates to the church.

## The New Covenant in the New Testament

There are texts in the Scripture that associate the NC with the church (**Luke 22:20; 1 Cor.11:25; 2 Cor.3:6** etc.)<sup>9</sup> and it is not an easy task to establish a consensus among us (Dispensationalists) as to the real nature of the relationship of the church to the NC. Is the church a NC community that really participates in the covenant itself or does the church only enjoy some spiritual benefits of the NC? Or does the church have nothing at all to do with the NC? **In which way is the church related to the NC?** Why did the Lord Jesus Christ (Luke 22:20)<sup>10</sup>, apostle Paul (1 Cor.11:25; 2 Cor.3:6) and the author of Hebrews refer to the NC (8:8,13; 9:15; 12:24)?<sup>11</sup> These New Testament references are primarily in relation to the spiritual blessings of the church age saints. In which way the church is related to the NC blessings?

## Dispensational Views of The Church's Relationship to The New Covenant<sup>12</sup>

1. **Two New Covenants View:** One for Israel and one for the church. This view was held by Lewis Sperry Chafer, the founder of Dallas Theological Seminary. Dispensational scholars John Walvoord and Charles Ryrie held on to this view early but later have moved away from this position and embraced a *Participation View*, widely held among dispensationalists today.
2. **NO Relationship View:** The NC is exclusively for Israel and will be fulfilled by Israel in the future. This is generally considered to be the view of J.N. Darby (sometimes known as the "Father of Systematized Dispensationalism"). Darby is difficult to understand at times. It seems to me that Darby's position is not that easy to categorize. Probably the *No Relationship View* closely represents his thinking as evidenced from his writings. But his oft-quoted statement can be even interpreted as a sort of minimal participation view: "The gospel is not a covenant, but the relation of the salvation of God. It proclaims the great salvation. **We enjoy all the essential privileges of the new covenant**, its foundation being laid on God's part in the blood of Christ, but we do so in spirit, not according to the letter. The new covenant will be established formally with Israel in the

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<sup>8</sup> Hereafter NT.

<sup>9</sup> Explicit mention of the NC occurs six times in the New Testament, though there are thirteen references to it.

<sup>10</sup> Parallels in Matthew and Mark mention "covenant" (Matt.26:28; Mark 14:24).

<sup>11</sup> In addition, several other references in Hebrews employ the word "covenant," presumably to the New Covenant (8:10; 9:16-17;10:16).

<sup>12</sup>For more detailed survey of these views, see, Rodney Decker, "New Covenant, Dispensational Views of," in *The Dictionary of Premillennial Theology*. Decker has treated them at length in "The New Covenant and the Church," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (1995):290-305, 431-56. See also, Bruce Compton, "Dispensationalism, The Church, and The New Covenant," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal*, (Fall 2003); 3-48. Compton's treatment of these views is superb with a mastery of the subject matter and the relevant literature. Homer A. Kent has included a survey of these various views in his excellent commentary on Hebrews – *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 156-160.

Millennium.”<sup>13</sup> In Darby’s so-called *no relationship view* the church still gets the benefit of the new covenant as we are associated with the Mediator of the covenant.<sup>14</sup> It seems very difficult for me to see a *No Relationship View* in some of Darby’s statements though that is the view he promoted. This view is not held by most dispensationalists today. John Master is a modern proponent of this view.<sup>15</sup> I personally find a lot of “strain” and “struggle” in this view to explain some NT passages.

3. **Participation View:** The church participates in some way in the NC; Israel fulfills the NC in the future - fulfilled eschatologically with Israel but participated in soteriologically by the church today. This view (with slight modifications) is widely held among dispensationalists (Scofield Reference Bible, Homer A. Kent, Jr., Bruce Compton, Rodney Decker, Dwight Pentecost, and many other Dispensational writers). Some dispensational writers may describe this view as *one New Covenant with a two-fold application*.
4. **Partial Fulfillment View:** The church fulfills some aspects of the NC in a preliminary inaugurated way, but a future final fulfillment for Israel at the return of Christ. Progressive Dispensationalists embrace this view. Some traditional dispensationalists also lean towards this interpretation.

## The Lord’s Supper and The New Covenant

The texts that surround the LS in the Synoptic Gospels involve references to the NC by Jesus Himself. Matthew (26:28), Mark (14:24) and Luke (22:20) record the Lord speaking of a NC in the context of the LS. The actual form of the saying varies somewhat among the Synoptics. *But the statement of Jesus clearly connects the shedding of His blood with the NC – “My blood of the covenant”* (Matt.26:28; Mark 14:24); “the new covenant in My blood (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor.11:25).

How did the disciples understand Jesus’ reference to the NC? They would not consider another understanding than a reference to the NC in Jer.31. The absence of any clarification or further disclosure by Jesus reinforces this conclusion. **Therefore, it is incumbent upon us to acknowledge that there is a vital link and relationship between the LS and the NC promised in the OT.** Jesus wants His disciples to understand that He has established a NC; the same covenant prophesied by Jeremiah. **This is an inescapable conclusion from the text**, and we must be willing to accept with respect to what it says. Without being bogged down in unnecessary details, we must consider the obvious truth

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<sup>13</sup> J. N. Darby, *Synopsis of the Books of The Bible*, V:286. Highlighted for emphasis.

<sup>14</sup> *Collected Writings*, XXVII, 565-566.

<sup>15</sup> John R. Master, “The New Covenant,” in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, ed. Wesley R. Willis & John R. Master, 93-109.

in Jesus' statement: "This cup which is poured out for you **is the new covenant** in My blood" (Luke 22:20. Emphasis added). I like Barclay's suggestive rendering, "This cup is the new covenant and it cost my blood."<sup>16</sup>

How was Jesus relating His death to the NC? Several observations emerge from the Synoptic accounts (also compare Paul's statement in 1 Cor.11:25):

1. **When He instituted the ordinance of the LS, Christ stated that the cup is the NC in His blood** (Matt.26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20). "This is My blood of the covenant" (Matt.26:28) parallels Moses' words in Exo.24:8: "Behold the blood of the covenant which the LORD has made with you." In Hebrew history God *sealed* covenants with the blood of a sacrifice. When God made the Covenant of the Law with the Jewish people, the blood of bulls was used to institute it (Exo.24:5-6). The covenant was publicly ratified (made valid) with various forms of ritual ratification<sup>17</sup> which included blood sacrifice. The sacrificial death of animals had originally ratified the Abrahamic covenant (Gen.15:9-10). *As the body and the blood of the lamb had been the sacrifice that was instrumental in accomplishing the redemption from Egypt, so Jesus would be the sacrifice that would accomplish redemption under the new covenant. This understanding of Jesus' words seems obvious and has to be taken in its face value.*
2. **The wine is a symbol of Jesus' shed blood through which He ratified the NC** which was foretold in the Old Testament. *Jesus meant that the NC would take effect in some way (not a fulfillment) through that which the contents of the cup signified, the blood of His sacrificial death.* "This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood" (Luke 22:20). Luke's account is more similar to Paul's in 1 Cor.11:25. **The institution of the LS memorialized the ratification of that covenant.** Jesus reinterprets the cup to show that this represents **His blood poured out in sacrificial death for His people to establish the NC.** Jesus the Messiah saved His people from their sins by His sacrificial death. **The resulting relationship between God and His people is a covenant relationship based on the NC.** Even though the Jews will be the major beneficiaries of all the aspects of the covenant in the Millennium, all believers have entered into its spiritual benefit from the death of Christ.

*If the benefit of the NC has been imparted to believers today, then the covenant itself is **in effect** in the present age in some sense. Its spiritual blessings are applied to us.*

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<sup>16</sup> William Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians (The Daily Study Bible Series)*, 114.

<sup>17</sup> *Ratification* is the official implementation of the covenant, the formal sanction, sealing, the time when its provisions and stipulations become legally binding. This is commonly enacted with a formal blood ceremony.

*Even in Darby's No Relationship View, "we enjoy all the essential privileges of the new covenant" and the blessings of it since we are associated with the Mediator of the NC.*

3. **Based on Jesus' words, we can safely conclude that there is only one NC, that it was ratified<sup>18</sup> at the cross, and that the church is related to that one NC.** I wonder how one can argue that believers in the church age are related to the blood of the NC, and to the Mediator of the NC, but not to the covenant itself!<sup>19</sup> Such thinking makes no sense in my mind. *Being related to the blood of the covenant and the Mediator of the covenant gives us some relationship to the covenant itself.*

**Everything in the covenant language in the LS relates the church to the NC.** The relationship between God and His people today is a covenant relationship. Some dispensationalists try to avoid any sense of benefit, or blessing, and relationship between the church and the NC. To do this they have to really "strain" and "struggle" with the obvious meaning of the text.

4. ***The blood was "poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins"*** (Matt.26:28). Jesus meant that the NC would take effect that through which the contents of the cup signified, namely, His death. This statement has sacrificial overtones involving atonement for sin. The Passover recalled the emancipation of Israel from slavery. The LS is to remind believers in Christ of deliverance from sins through His once-for-all sacrifice. **Jesus' blood would be the basis of the covenant's enactment.** Jesus' shed blood will open the way for the redemption of all humanity, and they can enter into a NC relationship with God. We enjoy a new covenantal relationship with God today. **All believers, whether Jewish or Gentile, are already in the enjoyment of the blessings of the NC which will be made with Israel and fulfilled for them in a coming day.**

As William MacDonald rightly observes, "The covenant is in force at the present time, but unbelief keeps the nation of Israel from enjoying it. All who trust the Lord Jesus receive the benefits that were promised. When the people of Israel turn to the Lord, they will enjoy the blessings of the new covenant; that will be during Christ's thousand-year reign on earth." He further comments: "The fact that the church is related to the New Covenant is seen in the Lord's Supper, where the cup represents

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<sup>18</sup> The technical term for this ratification in the Old Testament is *karath* ("to cut a covenant" means to "make a covenant," Gen.15:18). Some may prefer to use the word "established", "enacted," "instituted." These terms can be legitimately used in this context. I have struggled with the terminology of "inauguration." "Inauguration" is not my preferential term. But I should admit honestly whether a covenant can be "ratified" (or established or instituted) but not "inaugurated" in some sense?

<sup>19</sup> It is like saying, I am related to my wife by marriage covenant, but I don't have anything to do with the covenant itself!!

the covenant and the blood by which it was ratified (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor.11:25). Also, Paul spoke of himself and the other apostles as ministers of a New Covenant.”<sup>20</sup>

*The cross of Christ did not simply guarantee the NC or just seal the contract of it; through the death of Christ the NC came into force. At the institution of the LS Jesus taught His disciples that His death would mean the beginning of the NC – “This cup which is poured out for you **IS the new covenant**” (Luke 22:20. Emphasis added). As the body and blood of the lamb had been the sacrifice that was instrumental in accomplishing the redemption from Egypt, so Jesus would be the sacrifice that would effect redemption under the NC.*

- 5. The LS is a NC memorial feast, a covenantal ordinance, vitally linked to the NC.** The LS recalls Jesus’ once-for-all-time sacrificial death as our Passover Lamb (1 Cor.5:7). In the celebration of this covenantal ordinance the church remembers Jesus’ death for His people and the NC which He established with His blood. We celebrate the LS based on our union with the Lord Jesus Christ, who is the “mediator of a new covenant” (Heb.9:15). The believer of the present age enters into NC blessings because he is **united with its mediator**. Through His alteration of the Passover tradition, Jesus initiated something new. **He explicitly distinguished the new observation of the bread and wine by calling it “a new covenant.”** The initial sign by which the covenant was made effective was our Lord’s blood together with His death and resurrection (Heb. 12:24; 13:20). Today the sign is symbolically portrayed by the “cup” of the LS (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor.11:25-26).

## **Forgiveness of Sins in the New Covenant**

The NC is God’s final provision for sin. Matt.26:28 expressly links the NC with the forgiveness of sins – “...for this is My blood of the covenant which is poured for many for forgiveness of sins.” **NC and forgiveness of sins is found in the central passage on the NC in the Old Testament (Jer. 31:34).** The entire New Testament teaching on forgiveness is an extended exposition of the new covenant. *The concept of the forgiveness of sins would have been understood as a reference to Jeremiah’s promise by those who heard Jesus’ words.* Israel as a nation will enjoy this salvific blessing in the future. But those who receive Jesus Christ as their Savior would participate in the NC blessing of salvation today. **The individual aspect of salvation is in effect as a part of the NC blessing.** Jesus’ death provides full and final forgiveness of sins for all who believe in Him. This is the Gospel which the church proclaims. *We can clearly see a link here between the message of the forgiveness of*

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<sup>20</sup>*Believer’s Bible Commentary*, 1789, 43.

*sins in the NC in Jeremiah and the Gospel message of the church. I see this as a dynamic relationship between the church and the NC.*

All who exercise faith in the saving work of Christ during the Church Age, Tribulation Age, and the Kingdom Age will receive the promised salvation blessings of the NC. **However, not all the recipients of these covenant blessings will have the same functional place in God's program. That is why a dispensationalist keeps Israel and the church distinct.**

## **The Blessing of the Bestowal of the Holy Spirit in the New Covenant**

The NC will give Israel the inner ability to obey God's righteous standards and thus to enjoy His blessings. Ezekiel indicated that this spiritual transformation would result from God's bestowal of the Holy Spirit on them. This is a promise in the NC. "Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you.... And I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes" (Ezk.36:26-27). **The indwelling presence of the Spirit is specifically promised in the NC.**

*What about us? Yes, believers in the church age also participate in the NC spiritual blessings of regeneration and the indwelling Spirit. What the NC promised for the Israelite nation (regeneration and the Holy Spirit's indwelling), we enjoy today as the participants in the NC blessings. As members of the body of Christ we are united in a covenantal relationship with Jesus Christ and His ongoing spiritual presence with us in the Person of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God motivates and enables us to fulfill our covenantal responsibility.*

**Moreover, through the coming of the Holy Spirit, He has given us a NC document, The New Testament.** The teaching ministry of the Holy Spirit has guided the church into all the truth since the Spirit's coming. These truths were then recorded in the NT (John 14:26; 16:13-14). "The New Testament (covenant) documents thus should be looked at as an instruction on how to live out the New Covenant in the present age."<sup>21</sup>

The spiritual aspects of the NC blessings are realized for Jewish and Gentile believers in the church era. Thomas Constable clarifies the issue well. He writes:

"The New Covenant is similar to a last will and testament. When Jesus died, the provisions of His will went into effect. Immediately all people began to profit from His death. For example, the forgiveness of sins and the possession of the Holy Spirit become the inheritance of everyone who trusts in Him, Jew, and Gentile alike. However, those provisions of Jesus' "will" have to do with Israel as His particular focus of blessing will not take effect until the nation

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<sup>21</sup> Larry D. Pettegrew, "The New Covenant," *Masters Seminary Journal* 10:2 (Fall 1999), 268.

turns to Him in repentance at His second coming. Thus, the church partakes in the benefits of the New Covenant though God made it with Israel particularly.”<sup>22</sup>

I consider the above statement as a balanced Scriptural view without denying the obvious facts of the texts related to the NC in the NT.

### **Jesus Christ “The Mediator of a New Covenant” (Heb.12:24; 8:6)**

The crucial passages on the NC in Hebrews are addressed to the Christians. They may well have been Jewish Christians, but the essential fact is that **they were Christians. The author of Hebrews discusses the NC strictly in relation the church, not in relation to its future fulfillment for Israel.** His whole argument is that NC is the basis on which Christians draw near to God.

In Hebrews chapter 8, the author begins his elaborate discussion on the superior service of Jesus the high priest according to the order of Melchizedek. **The superiority of the new priestly service is related to a superior covenant, which He established,** founded on better promises. Jesus’ ministry surpasses that of the Levitical priests just as the covenant He mediates supersedes theirs. In Heb.8:6-13, the NC is contrasted with the first covenant.

The covenant Christ mediates is a “better covenant”, a reference to the NC (Heb.9:15). Moses is called the mediator of the covenant made at Sinai (Gal.3:19). Christ, however, is called the “mediator of a new covenant” (Heb.9:15; 12:24). By calling Christ “the mediator of a new covenant,” the author of Hebrews clearly establishes the overarching theme for the rest of chapter 9. The word “Mediator” is used of Jesus by the author of Hebrews three times – 8:6; 9:15; 12:24. “As mediator (*mesites*) He is the “middleman” who gets the parties together and makes possible the agreement.”<sup>23</sup>

According to the author of Hebrews, Christ’s sacrificial death is a necessary feature of the NC (9:18-26), just as the old/Mosaic covenant was inaugurated<sup>24</sup> (Heb.9:18) with sacrificial blood (Exod.24:1-8). Jesus is the mediator of the NC, because His death inaugurated a NC (**Heb.9:15-22**). It is important to note the “**inauguration**” terminology used by the author of Hebrews in this passage. It conveys his argument better than the word “ratify” (see footnote 23). The writer of Hebrews spoke to Christians of presently enjoying the benefits of the NC. It is very difficult to escape the idea of Christ’s death served to pay for the sins that could not be paid by the old covenant arrangement, thus enabling those who partake of the NC to inherit eternal

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<sup>22</sup> [planobiblechapel.org/constable-notes](http://planobiblechapel.org/constable-notes), matthew/pdf 2023 edition, 647-648.

<sup>23</sup> Homer A. Kent, Jr., *The Epistle to the Hebrews – A Commentary*, 150.

<sup>24</sup> “Dedicated” (KJV, NKJV; “Put into effect” (NIV). Philip Edgcumbe Hughes in his substantial commentary on Hebrews, points out that the idea of the word is “to introduce something new,” “to initiate” and the concepts of “inauguration” and “dedication” being closely related. “Inaugurate” is basically the sense of the same verb (*enekainisen*) in 10:20 – the only other occurrence of the verb in the New Testament. The rendering of our version (RSV), “to ratify” fails to convey the meaning accurately” (*A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, footnote, 21, pp. 373=374).

life. The author has made it clear that Christ's death has instituted a better covenant. This is the same truth we find in the synoptic Gospels and in 1 Cor.11:25.

“For where a covenant is, there must of necessity be the death of the one who made it. For a covenant is valid only when men are dead....” (Heb.9:16-17). **This is a strong proof that the death of Christ put into effect the NC with all its blessings.** The mention of the provisions of the NC as an inheritance (9:15) stresses the testamentary aspect of the covenant and paves the way for the statements in verses 16-17. A will<sup>25</sup> come into effect only at the death of the testator. “With this illustration the author demonstrated the legal appropriateness that Christ should die in order to inaugurate the new covenant and grant the inheritance of eternal life to the people of God.”<sup>26</sup>

In Heb.12:23 -24 both the church (“church of the first-born”) and OT saints (“spirits of righteous men made perfect”) are related to the NC.

Yes, Christ is the mediator of the NC. *The author of Hebrews argues that the force of the NC – like that of all human wills – depends on the death of the one who made it. That is when it takes effect. The natural conclusion is that the death of Christ put into effect the NC.* The mediator has established the NC (**not simply a basis for it**) **and the church age saints enjoy its promised blessings of regeneration, new heart, knowledge of God and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.**

Even though Jesus Christ established the NC when He died on the cross, the blessings that will come to Israel as prophesied by Jeremiah did not begin then. They will begin when Jesus returns and establishes His Kingdom on earth. However, the church enters into some of the blessing of the NC now. These blessings are available to all who believe.<sup>27</sup>

Zane C. Hodges gives a very helpful explanation of the blessings of the NC as it relates to the church and Israel. He clarifies the issue well:

“It is clear that all these benefits belong, in fact, to all the regenerate of every age since the Cross. Though the New Covenant is specifically focused on Israel....it is clear that Christians of the present time also stand under its blessings.....This perception does not lead to an inappropriate confusion between Israel and the church. The New Covenant is God's appointed vehicle for fulfilling the Abrahamic blessings to Israel. But the Abrahamic covenant also promised universal blessings, so the New Covenant becomes God's vehicle of salvation as well for believers since the Cross.....In no way should this impede the perception of the Christian church as a unique, interadvent body, closely united to Christ as His bride and significantly

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<sup>25</sup> In Heb.9:16-17 the Greek word *diatheke* (“covenant”) is used in the sense of a last ‘will and Testament.’ KJV & NKJV translate it as “Testament” while NIV, NET & ESV render it as “Will.” The testamentary aspect of the New Covenant is the focus of the author in these verses. Christ is the mediator of the “testamentary *diatheke* which does not come into effect before the death of the person who makes it” (F.F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 213).

<sup>26</sup> Charles R. Swindoll, *Hebrews, Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary*, 140.

<sup>27</sup> *Scofield Study Bible* (KJV), 1297-1298; William Kelly, *Lectures on the Gospel of Matthew*, 491.

distinct from the nation Israel. But in as much as all salvation is through the Cross of Christ, it is also through the blood of the New Covenant.”<sup>28</sup>

Although I do not support D.A. Carson’s *fulfillment* language, his observation throws light on the clear relation of the church to the NC in the institution of the LS. He writes:

“It appears then that Jesus understands the covenant he is introducing to be the fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophecies, and the antitype of Sinai covenant. His sacrifice is thus foretold both in the redemptive history and in the prophetic word. The Exodus becomes a “type” of a new and greater deliverance; and as the people of God in the OT prospectively celebrated in the first Passover their escape from Egypt, anticipating their arrival in the Promised Land, so the people of God here prospectively celebrate their deliverance from sin and bondage, anticipating the coming kingdom.”<sup>29</sup>

Stanley Toussaint, in his solid dispensational commentary on Matthew points out the clear benefits of the NC to the church though the covenant is made with Israel specifically. His words are instructive:

“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. It also will reign with Christ during the millennial age. In a parallel manner, the church participates in the benefits of the new covenant. Therefore, in instituting the new covenant, Christ makes provisions for the covenant to include the present program of the church as well as the future age of Israel.”<sup>30</sup>

### **“Servants of a New Covenant” (2 Cor.3:6)**

In 2 Cor.3:1-18, Paul makes an extended contrast between the new covenant and the Mosaic covenant in terms of their respective ministries. His opponents were ministers of the old covenant. In this context Paul states here that God has made him and others competent as “servants of a new covenant.” *His is a new covenant ministry* because it involves the new covenant rather than the old. “Paul identifies himself as a minister of the new covenant, that is, as one who is presently serving under the auspices of the new covenant.”<sup>31</sup> Paul’s NC ministry is a ministry empowered by God’s Spirit (3:6, 17-18). Participation in the NC and participation in the empowering activity of God’s Spirit are corollaries and the same was not true with the old covenant. Paul was exulting in the ministry which God had given him under the NC as compared to the Mosaic covenant.

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<sup>28</sup> *Hebrews, The Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament Edition*, 800.

<sup>29</sup> *Matthew, The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8, 538.

<sup>30</sup> *Behold The King*, 303.

<sup>31</sup> Bruce Compton, “Dispensationalism, The Church, And the New Covenant”, *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 8 (Fall 2003), 40.

Paul was made sufficient to be a minister of the new covenant because of his call on the road to Damascus, just as Moses was called to be a minister of the old covenant at the burning bush. *Paul is not saying that his teaching includes NC doctrine, or his ministry is a “new-covenant-like ministry,”* but that God made him and the other apostles (“us”) adequate as servants of a NC. His ministry is a NC ministry<sup>32</sup>. He and the apostles are ministers of the NC. To be divinely commissioned was to be divinely equipped. Paul’s equipment to be a minister of the NC was given at his call as a chosen instrument of God and filled with His Spirit (Acts 9:15, 17-19). The basis of the OC was a lifeless written code. The basis of the NC is a dynamic, pervasive Spirit.

**The NC was prophesied in Jeremiah, established by Jesus’ death, symbolized in the communion cup, ministered by Paul, and becomes operative in our lives through the indwelling Spirit who imparts new life.** In this dispensation of grace, we, the people of God, are ministers of the NC as we proclaim the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul’s preaching of the gospel was promoting the NC.

Andy Woods, writing about Paul’s statement, argues, “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 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.”<sup>33</sup>

Paul’s message in 2 Cor.3:6-18 is well summarized by William MacDonald: “**The new covenant** is the gospel. Under it, God covenants to bless man freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. Everything under the New Covenant depends on God and not on man. Therefore, the New Covenant is able to accomplish what the Old could never do.”<sup>34</sup>

## Summary & Conclusion

1. Jer. 31:31-34 is the principal passage on the NC in the OT. This is the only passage that actually uses the designation “New Covenant.” The covenant was given only to the nation Israel. The only parties to the NC are God and Israel. The NC was destined to replace the OC (Mosaic Covenant). The covenant blessings will be fulfilled in the Millennial Kingdom Age. Jeremiah only announced the future NC. Its, ratification, establishment (or inauguration), and fulfillment awaited a future day.
2. The NT writers speak on the NC. In fact, they use the expression “New Covenant” more often than the OT prophets did. We must turn to the pages of the NT to receive more

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<sup>32</sup> This is one of the distinctive qualities of his ministry – it was of the NC. “New” because it was not established or inaugurated until Christ. Paul does not say here *a minister of the gospel* (though he is), because he was contrasting the two covenants, the OC, and the NC.

<sup>33</sup> Andy Woods, *What Is the Relation of The Church to The New Covenant?* spiritandtruth.org

<sup>34</sup> *Believer’s Bible Commentary*, 1828-1829.

understanding and clarification of the NC. The relation between the church and the NC was also revealed through NT revelation as the church was a mystery in the OT.

3. Christ's statement at the institution of the LS, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood" is the official ratification or institution of the NC. Jesus words instituted the ceremony of the LS, which commemorates that covenant. The reference to the cup as representative of the covenant and the forgiveness provided for sin are directly related to the blessings of the NC to those who participate in the LS. *Thus, the church receives a connection to the NC, making it possible for her to enjoy the NC blessings of regeneration, forgiveness of sins, and indwelling of the Spirit.* "It would be very odd for the church to have an ordinance which celebrates and remembers the cutting of the New Covenant if it were not in some way benefiting from it."<sup>35</sup> The church does partake in some of the blessings of the NC but not all of them. *The national, political, material, and geographical promises await future fulfillment with Israel.*
4. While participating in some of the blessings of the NC, the church is not a partner in the NC. *The partners of the NC are God and Israel. The church's relationship to the NC is never in terms of covenant partnership.*
5. Apostle Paul and the author of Hebrews affirm the relationship of the church age believers to the NC. Believers today share the soteriological blessings of the NC while the soteriological and eschatological blessings promised to Israel will be fulfilled in the Millennium.
6. Christ ratified and established the covenant by His death, and He is also the Mediator of the covenant. We who are united to Christ today, are related to the covenant which He mediates. But this does not in any way negate the future fulfillment with Israel.
7. *Most of the terms we use in relation to covenants are extra-biblical.* Many of us prefer the term "ratified" in relation to the covenants. Is there any essential difference between being *ratified, secured, enacted, instituted, established, or even inaugurated?* I do not think there is any essential difference between these terms. When Christ through His death ratified the NC, it is inaugurated and operative (though not fulfilled), and placed into effect, and the members of the church are benefitting from it. *If God has willed to apply some aspects of the NC to the church, it does not change the covenant promises to Israel.*

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<sup>35</sup> Russell L. Penney, "The Relationship of the church to the New Covenant," *Conservative Theological Journal*, Dec. 1998; vol.02:7 (accessed through Galaxie Software, galaxie.com).

8. The Scriptures teaches that Gentiles are beneficiaries under Israel's covenants. Provision for the Gentiles was made in the Abrahamic Covenant – “And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen.12:3). The salvation of Gentiles was always a part of God's plan. *The church is related to the universal soteriological blessing of the Abrahamic Covenant.* “A partial fulfillment has now been seen for millennia in that many people (including the church) have been blessed through Abraham and his descendants, yet other portions of the Abrahamic Covenant provisions remain yet unfulfilled (e.g., the land promises). Some of these provisions are for one people group – the Jews, others are for Gentiles, yet they are part of one covenant.”<sup>36</sup> *If Gentiles are beneficiaries under the Abrahamic Covenant, it should not be surprising that the church participates in some of the NC blessings.*

The relationship of the church to the NC need not be a “sore spot” for dispensationalists if we avoid our “extremes” in relation to the “continuity-discontinuity” in God's redemptive plan. **We should not be looking for things that fit our “system” well, rather let us concentrate on conclusions that have the best support in the text.**

*To focus only on the NC being for Israel, with NO connection to the church seems to ignore what the NT teaches about the NC. The view that NC is exclusively for Israel is rejected here. In my study, I have concluded that the church presently participates in the NC; Israel fulfills the NC in the future. Or in other words, the NC will be fulfilled eschatologically with Israel, but is participated in soteriologically by the church today. Believers in the present age participate in the blessings of the forgiveness of sins, the Spirit's indwelling ministry, and enjoy the benefits of Christ's high priestly ministry. All of these are directly related to the NC which Christ has established in His death. Praise and glory be to our Lord Jesus Christ, “the mediator a new covenant.”*

The NT evidence argues against any kind of *fulfillment* terminology in relation to the NC. The biblical distinction between national Israel and the church is recognized and the clear relationship of the church and the NC are upheld in this study. *The church presently participates in the NC while national Israel fulfills the NC is the most satisfactory interpretation of the biblical evidence.*

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<sup>36</sup> Rodney J, Decker, “Why Do Dispensationalists Have Such A Hard Time Agreeing on the New Covenant?” 16.

