

Ch 4 Covenant in the New Testament

Covenant People

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4

The promise of a New Covenant

In the Old Testament we read how the people of Israel, in their disobedience, broke their side of the covenant agreement again and again. Some of the prophets had foretold the day when God would make a new covenant with His people. Isaiah had spoken of the coming servant of God who would not just be the mediator of a covenant as Moses was; rather he would 'be a covenant for the people'.¹ Jeremiah too, had told of a time when God would 'make a new covenant with the House of Israel and with the House of Judah'. Here, one of His covenant promises was that 'I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people'.²



Throughout the centuries following the close of the Old Testament records, many faithful Jews held onto these promises and the beliefs spelled out in the Old Testament. In His lifetime, Jesus had seen the completion of the building of a magnificent new Temple. It was here, once a year, that the Jewish High Priest would enter a little room, hidden behind a sacred veil (called the Holy of Holies), taking with him the blood of a bull and a goat to atone for the sins of the people. In the Temple too, once a year at the Feast of the Passover, Jewish families would offer the blood of a young lamb to commemorate the first Passover when the Jewish people were still slaves in Egypt. Then a lamb had been killed in each household and some of its blood painted on the lintel and two door-posts of each house. God, the Jewish people had been taught, slew every first-born male of the Egyptians but, seeing the blood at the entrance of the houses of the Israelites, 'passed by' or 'passed over' and they were spared. This night was the night of their deliverance when the Egyptians cast them out of the land and their centuries-long slavery came to an end.

The death of Jesus secures God's New Covenant

It was the Feast of the Passover. Life held many dangers for

¹ Isaiah 42:6 ² Jeremiah 31:31, 33

celebrate the feast. Many were jealous of His power and popularity and wanted to destroy Him. During the celebratory meal, He took a cup and passed it to His disciples saying: 'Drink from it, all of you. This is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.'³

Shortly after uttering these words, Jesus was betrayed, handed over to the Roman authorities and nailed, helpless, to a cross. When He finally cried the words 'It is finished'⁴ and bowed His head and died, the sacred veil that separated the Holy of Holies from the rest of the temple was ripped in two, from top to bottom, and the New Covenant was born.

The blood of animals secured the Old Covenant.⁵ The blood of Christ secured the New Covenant. Jesus is the Mediator of – and the Sacrifice needed for – God's New Covenant with mankind.⁶ Indeed, He is the Covenant Himself. Through Him God offers His free gift of pardon; through Him the power of sin that has a stranglehold on mankind is torn away; through Him, once again, is given the gift of eternal life that was lost at the Fall. Jesus, through His death, secured for mankind a restored relationship with God – so long disjointed and spoiled by sin. The New Covenant is God's new agreement or settlement with mankind. Our part in the agreement is a willingness to yield ourselves fully to Him in obedience and to receive God's undeserved forgiveness, gained by Jesus on the cross.

Baptism is part of this new covenant 'agreement' and is likened in the New Testament to circumcision, which was the outward sign of God's covenant with Abraham. In baptism our old sinful nature is cut away, buried in the tomb with Jesus and, with Him, we rise into a new life.⁷

The New Covenant and a people for God's possession

Many have sought to interpret the New Covenant rather individualistically – particularly in this day and age when the Western mind set is so often centred around 'me' as an individual rather than 'we' as a living society of people. The emphasis has often been that 'in the New Covenant my special relationship with God is restored.'

It is true that through the New Covenant, the great divide between God and individual people is healed and relations are restored. But it does not end there. Like the Old Cov-

³ Matthew 26:27, 28 ⁴ John 19:30 ⁵ Exodus 24: 6-8 ⁶ Hebrews 9:15-26
⁷ Colossians 2:11,12

enant, the New Covenant has a huge ‘corporate’ aspect. The Old Covenant was with a people, a nation. The New Covenant likewise, although appropriated by individuals, is all to do with God’s relationship with a people, the Church. Covenant is with a people – a people so closely associated because they share together in the saving work of Christ that they are actually called one body – Christ’s body. The dividing wall is broken down, writes Paul, and we are ‘one new man’.⁸

In Old Testament times, God’s people had to keep His law and commandments if they wanted to keep their covenant relationship with Him. When God made a New Covenant with mankind, He gave a new law that similarly had to be kept if the Covenant was not to be broken. This time it was not mainly an outward set of rules that had to be followed; rather it was the rule of the Holy Spirit that was needed within each new member of this body of believers – and the law to be followed was the law of love. This law requires that each carry each other’s burden and help fulfil one another’s need: ‘Carry each other’s burden, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ’⁹ wrote the apostle Paul.

When Jesus was asked what the most important commandment of the Old Testament was, He replied ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this: Love your neighbour as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these.’¹⁰ It is these commandments that lie at the heart of the New Covenant.

During the last Passover meal that Jesus shared with His disciples, He gave them some important instructions to prepare them for His departure. After washing their feet He said: ‘A new command I give to you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.’¹¹

What could be clearer than the words of the ageing Apostle John who wrote, towards the end of the first century in one of his letters: ‘If anyone says, “I love God,” yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And He has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.’¹²

⁸ Ephesians 2:13, 14, 15

⁹ Galatians 6:2 ¹⁰ Mark 12: 29, 30, 31 ¹¹ John 13:34, 35

¹² 1 John 4:20, 21

relationship and relationships. Man's relationship with God is restored – at the Cross – and this restoration extends to relationships between God's people, the Church. Within the heart of the New Covenant lies what the Apostle Peter calls 'the brotherhood'¹³ or 'spiritual family'.¹⁴

This same Peter wrote, 'But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.'¹⁵ These words echo the familiar covenant words coming down through the centuries, 'I will be their God and they will be My people.'¹⁶

In summary, God's New Covenant with mankind was gained by the death of Jesus on the Cross. It is firstly a covenant that establishes a relationship, God's relationship, with His people. The huge barrier that caused God and man to have severed ties, our accumulated guilt due to our turning aside from His ways, has been cleared away and we have ready access to God. Our union, our friendship, with God is restored. Secondly, this covenant is worked out in relationships between fellow believers who make up the Church. Obeying God's commands, those within the New Covenant become a distinct people, a new society of believers. Taking the words of Jesus to their logical conclusions, they become a society of justice and equality, where divisions of class, gender, ability and race are broken down, where lives are interconnected in a very practical way and material goods are shared.

In short, the outworking of this aspect of God's New Covenant with mankind is a rich, deep, open-hearted brotherhood.

Covenant making and renewal in the New Testament

Every true believer is a participant in God's New Covenant. From New Testament days onwards, the sharing of bread and wine to commemorate the Last Supper has been seen as a vital part of renewing or re-pledging covenant. Its importance can be compared to the Passover meal for the Jews. Sharing in the covenant meal reminds believers of God's covenant

¹³ 1 Peter 2:17 ¹⁴ The Message version ¹⁵ 1 Peter 2:9, 10
¹⁶ Jeremiah 31:33

promises; it speaks to us of our commitment to God and His people. Our hearts are searched and our desire is to turn from anything that might harm our covenant relationship with God and our fellow Christians. Indeed, the New Testament warns of the danger of facing God's fierce displeasure if we eat the covenant meal while carelessly continuing to sin in some way against other members of the brotherhood.¹⁷

Taking the bread and wine is an outward way of expressing an inward heart-covenant. Another symbolic act of covenanting in the New Testament is seen in what is called the 'right hand of fellowship.' It has already been noted how, in the Old Testament, people sometimes covenanted together through the external sign of clasping hands. In the New Testament Paul relates how he went to Jerusalem to see the leaders of the Church there. This was in order to explain to them the gospel which he preached so as to make sure they were all in perfect agreement about its contents. In his letter Paul wrote, 'James, Peter and John, those reputed to be pillars, gave me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship when they recognised the grace given to me.'¹⁸

Breaches of covenant in New Testament times

Jesus had instructed His disciples on what course of disciplinary action to take when believers sinned against each other – and persisted in it.¹⁹ There would be a series of entreaties culminating in exclusion if needed. Local churches in New Testament times sometimes moved in such action when people in the church were guilty of serious breaches of covenant. An example of this is found in Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, where he instructs the church to exclude a man committing incest with his father's wife.²⁰ This barring was not meant to be permanent. Rather, its intention was to bring the man to his senses so he could eventually be restored to full participation in church life.²¹

Frequently in churches today those who stray are not effectively restored. This can be due to a lack of involvement between members or between those who lead and those who are led at a personal level. It can also be because of the absence of commitment to individuals – often such commitment is sadly lacking in churches. Such involvement and commitment must always have a central place in covenant churches.

¹⁷ 1 Corinthians 11:27-32

¹⁸ Galatians 2:9 ¹⁹ Matthew 18:15-17 ²⁰ 1 Corinthians 5:1-5

²¹ 2 Corinthians 2:5-11