

THE NEW COVENANT: ENACTED¹ OR RATIFIED?

by
Stephen R. Lewis²

Introduction

Today many ask, “What is the *sine qua non* (absolute essential) of Dispensationalism?” Most dispensationalists would answer that it centers around three propositions:³

1. God’s ultimate revealed purpose is to glorify Himself, freely and fully expressing His attributes and character.
2. A consistent literal or plain interpretation of the Bible is essential for understanding God’s revelation properly.
3. This literal interpretation leads to distinguishing Israel from the Church.

If so, why do many dispensationalists say that God also extends Israel’s New Covenant (Jeremiah 31:31) to the Church?

*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.*⁴

Predictably, amillennial Replacement Theology equates Israel and the Church here. Oddly, most dispensationalists join them in claiming that God enacts the New Covenant with the Church. Jeremiah 31:31 raises a crux hermeneutical question:

If this were the Church, which part of it would be the house of Israel and which part would be the house of Judah?

¹ To *enact* means to *implement* what had been ratified previously.

² The idea for this paper began with John Lawrence in 1974. Discussions and dialogs with Elliott Johnson and Stanley Toussaint (of Dallas Theological Seminary) have led to expanding the original idea.

³ E.g., Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), 38–41; Earl D. Radmacher, “The Current Status of Dispensationalism and Its Eschatology,” in *Perspectives on Evangelical Theology*, ed. Kenneth S. Kantzer and Stanley N. Gundry (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 171.

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the *New King James Version* (Nashville: Nelson, 1990).

Why not say that the New Covenant is only enacted with Israel? How could the Church fulfill a prophecy pertaining to Israel and Judah? Does not New Covenant enactment await the future Kingdom when Jesus Christ reigns on David's throne?

While God has entered into agreements with all mankind,⁵ Israel is the only nation with which He has entered into a covenant relationship. Scripture states this truth both positively and negatively.⁶ One cannot legally, morally, or spiritually transfer God's covenants with Israel to another people. God must, therefore, fulfill His covenantal promises to Israel, not to descendants of Ishmael, nor to the Church, nor to any other people. Romans 11 asserts that God will indeed enact His covenants with Israel.

The Nature of the New Covenant

The New Covenant⁷ not only enlarges and fulfills all the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant, but also supersedes the Mosaic Covenant (the Law). It does what the Mosaic Covenant never could do—not because the Law itself was deficient, but because of a deficiency in the people who received it (cf. Hebrews 8:8, *because finding fault with them [those under the Law] He said. . .*).

The following chart⁸ relates the New Covenant to Israel's covenants.

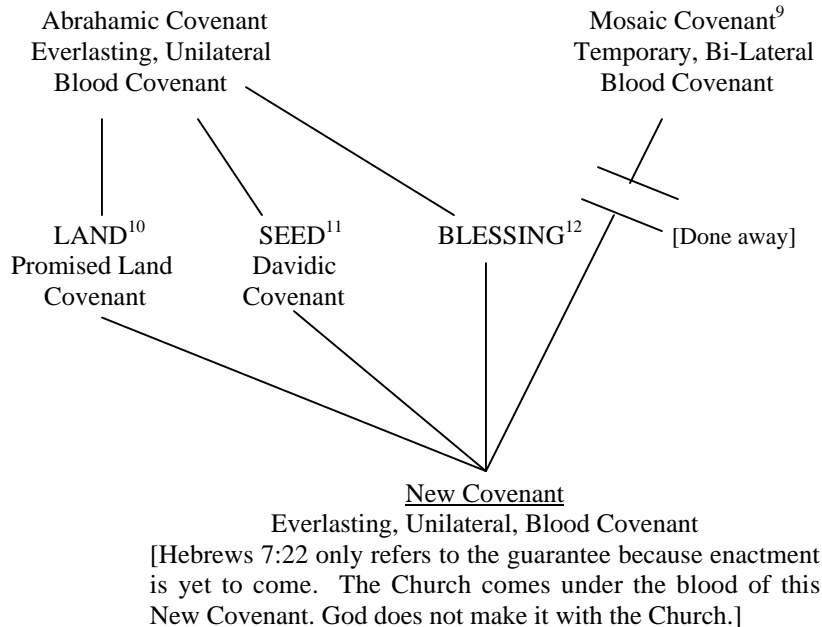
⁵ See Paul Schmidtbleicher, "Balancing the Use of the Old Testament," *CTS Journal* 8 (July–September 2002), who argues for what he calls "God's Eternal Law." God has even entered into covenant with the animal creation (Genesis 9).

⁶ Romans 9:4: *who are Israelites, to whom pertain the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises.* Ephesians 2:12: *that at that time you [Gentiles, per verse 11] were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.*

⁷ Jeremiah 31:31–34; Ezekiel 11:17–21; 16:60–63; 36:26–38; Romans 11:25–27; Hebrews 8:6–13; 10:16–17.

⁸ John Lawrence, unpublished class notes for Theology 302, Ecclesiology and Eschatology (Multnomah School of the Bible, 1974) [adapted by author].

The New Covenant: Enacted or Ratified? 57



All of God's covenants are with Israel and (except for the Mosaic Covenant) all are explicitly everlasting. As the Abrahamic Covenant underlies God's entire subsequent covenant program, so the New Covenant culminates (or completes) that program. It is a unilateral, everlasting, blood covenant which is still

⁹ The Lord gave the Mosaic Covenant in three parts: the commandments (Exodus 20:1–17); the judgments (Exodus 21:1–24:11); the ordinances (Exodus 24:12–31:18). This covenant governed Israel's moral, civil, and religious life as they lived under the Abrahamic Covenant. The Mosaic Covenant was never an everlasting/perpetual covenant, but one promising blessing for obedience, or cursing for disobedience.

¹⁰ This is the re-affirmation of God's intention to give to the Jews the land promised originally to Abraham (cf. Deuteronomy 28–30 [especially 29:1] with Genesis 12:7; 13:15–17; 15:18–21; 17:8)

¹¹ This is the promised fulfillment of the national and seed promises given to Abraham (2 Samuel 7; Psalm 89; Jeremiah 33:17). God promised to David through Solomon (7:12–15)—and ultimately through Jesus Christ (7:16)—as the everlasting ruling seed (house), a kingdom in which to rule, and an exercise of ruling authority (throne).

¹² See Genesis 12:2–3; 15:1.

future—awaiting future enactment with the *house of Israel* and the *house of Judah*¹³ (Hebrews 8:8). Christ has already:

1. given the covenantal promise,
2. shed the blood for ratifying the covenant,
3. instituted the tokens (bread and cup) of the covenant,
4. has ascended (as its mediator) to the mount of God.

Even so, enactment of the New Covenant itself will not occur until the Lord Jesus Christ returns.

The Provisions of the Covenant

The problem with the Old Covenant was not the Law itself, for it is *holy, righteous, and good* (Romans 7:12). The problem is with the heart of man. The New Covenant solves this by changing man's heart and by giving him complete understanding of the Lord (Jeremiah 31:33). Man (that is, believers) will return to the place of fellowship with God, which he lost in the Garden of Eden. Moreover, God's solution for the sin problem will be in effect (Jeremiah 31:33b).

How the Church Relates to Israel's New Covenant

If God's covenant program concerns only the nation of Israel, how does the Church relate to the New Covenant? Has God already established the New Covenant with the Church? If so, has God finished with Israel as a nation? Romans 11:11 answers the latter question with *Certainly not!* (**Mh genoito**). When answering a question, this phrase denies a false inference drawn from a true

¹³ Replacement theology, which spiritualizes the covenant and transfers it to the Church, cannot explain which part of the Church is the *house of Israel* and which is the *house of Judah*.

premise.¹⁴ That is, Paul fears that someone might infer from Israel's current status that God had set it aside, but he rejects such a notion.

The Scripture presents several reasons the New Covenant cannot presently be in effect. First, Romans 9:4 says the covenants pertain to Israel, but the Church is not Israel. If the Church were to become Israel, then with whom would God deal in the future as He casts off the Gentiles and grafts in Israel once again in covenant relationship with Himself (Romans 11:1–26)?

Second, the author of Hebrews says to second or third generation Hebrew Christian believers¹⁵ in the Church Age that the enactment of the New Covenant will be *in the future* (cf. Hebrews 8:6–13). He states: *Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away* (8:13b)—literally, “Now that which is growing old and aging is near disappearing.” The old has not yet disappeared because the new has not come. Nowhere does the Scripture say the New Covenant has already come into existence. (Not even 1 Corinthians 11:25 asserts this, as the article will show.)¹⁶

¹⁴ Ernest De Witt, *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek*, 3d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1890; reprint, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1979), 79, “The phrase **μη genoito** is an Optative of Wishing which strongly deprecates something suggested by a previous question or assertion. Fourteen of the fifteen New Testament instances are in Paul's writings, and in twelve of these [the ones in which it answers a question] it expresses the apostle's abhorrence of an inference which he fears may be (falsely) drawn from his argument.”

¹⁵ The writer of Hebrews addresses believers (not a mix of saved and unsaved or false believers/professors). Besides the evidence that doctrinal sections address the audience as believers (3:1; 4:16; 5:12; 10:19–22, 32–34; 12:7; 13:1, 20–22); the warning passages also address believers (e.g., Hebrews 2:3–4): The writer includes himself within the admonition [that is—“this is what **we** ought to do; this is what **we** ought not to do; this is **our** danger if **we** do not pay heed.”] The writer does not have the slightest suggestion that he intends the warnings sections for any but his entire readership.) One cannot *neglect* something that he (or she) does not already possess.

¹⁶ Discussion of 1 Corinthians 11:25 appears on page 61 of this article.

Third, both the Old and New Testament specifically attach the New Covenant to *the house of Israel and the house of Judah* (Jeremiah 31:31; Hebrews 8:8¹⁷). The Lord and His holy prophets made no mistake in wording. The Lord says what He means and means what He says. He does not say *Israel*, while meaning the Church.¹⁸ The covenant belongs to the nation of Israel. Those who assert the enactment of the New Covenant for the Church must ponder the following questions: Which part of the Church is the *house of Judah* and which, the *house of Israel*? Did God lead *our* fathers out of Egypt and make a covenant with them? The Holy Spirit's choice of words proves that the Church (predominantly Gentile in composition) is not the entity with whom the Lord Jesus Christ enters into the New Covenant.

Fourth, Romans 11:26 states that God will establish the New Covenant with Israel at Christ's second coming. At that time, the Deliverer will remove Israel's sins and provide complete deliverance from them (Romans 11:26–27; Hebrews 9:28b; 10:16–17). God did not forgive Israel at Christ's first coming. In fact, just the opposite took place—the sins from Abel to Zecharias God required of that generation (Matthew 23:34–36).

Fifth, at the enactment of the New Covenant, no one will need to teach another about the Lord (Jeremiah 31:34). All will know Him in a personal, intimate way. This is not yet true today, proving that the New Covenant is not yet in force.

¹⁷ Hebrews 8:8 must speak of Israel, not the Church, because Israel is the people God led out of Egypt (verse 9).

¹⁸ The Church possesses the following distinctives: (1) It is not New or Spiritual Israel, for Spiritual Israel was the believing remnant in national Israel, not the Church (Romans 9:6). (2) It is not the seed of Abraham, for the seed of Abraham is Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:16). We as believers relate to God's blessings upon Abraham because we are in his Seed. (3) It does not continue an O.T. **ekklesia**, for it was not a technical term denoting the Old Testament people of God. (4) It is not synonymous with the Kingdom of God, despite being an aspect of God's total Kingdom dealings. In that sense, a believer is in the Kingdom of God. But the Kingdom of God is broader in scope and purposes than the Church (Matthew 13; Colossians 1:13).

Ratification versus Enactment

How, then, does the Church relate to the New Covenant that God will yet ratify or put into effect with the nation of Israel? Examine carefully what the Lord Himself told His disciples at the Last Supper. Christ made two statements about the New Covenant: *This is My blood of the new covenant* (Matthew 26:28; Mark 14:24) and *This is the new covenant in My blood* (Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25). The blood of the New Covenant is not itself the New Covenant, nor is the New Covenant His blood.¹⁹ When Christ returns to the nation of Israel and appears the second time, He will appear without need to deal with man's sin problem (Hebrews 9:28). No future sacrifice²⁰ for sin and no shedding of blood will ratify the (already ratified) New Covenant. The blood sacrifice necessary for the ratification already occurred years earlier, at the Lord's first coming. The one sacrifice of Christ is the basis of every provision. Note what Hebrews 7:22 says.

By so much more Jesus has become a surety [literally, 'guarantee'] of a better covenant [or 'testament'].

Why is Jesus right now the guarantee of a better covenant? He guarantees it only because the Lord has *not* yet enacted the better covenant. If He had already enacted it, no need for the guarantee would exist. *But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as He is also mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises* (Hebrews 8:6). This contrasts the old covenant given through Moses with the new one coming through Christ. The better covenant stands upon better promises,

¹⁹ A wooden view of predicate nominatives treats *is* as an *equal sign* (=). Although, "A father *is* a male" is always true, "A male *is* a father" is often false. *Father* does not equal *male*. Thus, *is* cannot equal an *equal sign*. One cannot accurately say, "The New Covenant equals His blood."

²⁰ Cf. John Niemelä, "No More Sacrifice: Part 2," *CTS Journal* 5 (January–March 1999): 44, "Hebrews 10:26b is good news, restating 10:18b, despite lying within a warning context. Since the New Covenant ended sin offering in 10:18, then 10:26 cannot attribute withdrawal of sacrifice to willful sin. Hebrews 10:26 affirms the good news that sacrifice is over, whether or not we sin willfully."

which are already ours. Yet Jesus Christ still mediates the better covenant in heaven.

Hebrews 12:22–24 states that believers come unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem: *And to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant*. The Lord Jesus stands today as the mediator of the New Covenant. Once He enacts it, He no longer will be the mediator, but rather the enactor of the New Covenant.

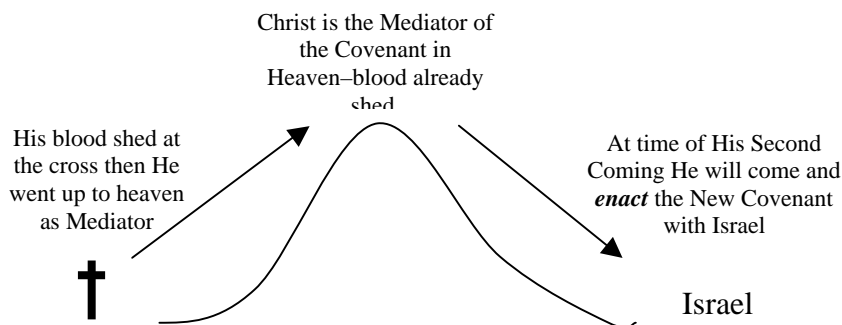
Just as the enactment of the Mosaic Covenant with national Israel did not occur until Moses came down from the mountain, so enactment of the New Covenant with national Israel awaits Christ's return *apart from sin, for salvation* (Hebrews 8:8–13; 9:28; Romans 11:26–32). While Moses was on the mountain, mediating the covenant, the Israelites were in unbelief. God desired to cast them off from His sight. However, Moses interceded for them and established the covenant with the nation of Israel after a second attempt. Covenant ratification occurred while Moses was on the mountain (Exodus 19:3—24:3a), but enactment did not happen until Moses descended from that mountain and the people agreed to the covenant (Exodus 24:3, 7).

| Covenant | Ratification | versus | Enactment |
|-----------|--|--------|--------------------|
| Abrahamic | <i>Genesis 12:1–15:17</i> | | Millennial Kingdom |
| Mosaic | <i>Exodus 20:1–31:18</i> | | Exodus 24:3, 7 |
| Land | <i>Deuteronomy 28–30</i> | | Millennial Kingdom |
| Davidic | <i>2 Samuel 7:4–16; 1 Chronicles 17:3–15</i> | | Millennial Kingdom |
| New | <i>Jeremiah 31:31–33; Matthew 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25</i> | | Millennial Kingdom |

Just as the Abrahamic Covenant (Genesis 12 and 15) was first only a promise which later God ratified with blood, making it doubly sure, so it is with the New Covenant. The believer has two immutable things upon which to stand by faith and in which it is

impossible for God to lie (Hebrews 6:18). One is God's promise or oath. The other is His ratification of the New Covenant promise with the blood of His own Son. Does any greater surety exist? As the Abrahamic Covenant contains blessings that extend to the whole world, so does the New Covenant. For this reason, Gentiles may experience the blessings of the New Covenant by faith today.

This is what takes place today. The nation of Israel is now in unbelief (Romans 11:20). Anyone—Jew or Gentile—may be saved by faith, (i.e., by believing in the One greater than Moses who has ascended to the Mount of God and is today mediating the New Covenant, the blood for which He shed). He is able to save all who come unto God through Him (Hebrews 7:27). God eternally saves believers today **by** the blood of the New Covenant. Hebrews 13:20 calls this blood *the blood of the everlasting covenant* because this covenant, once made, will *never* give place to another.



The Abrahamic Covenant promised blessing through the seed of Abraham to all the families of the earth (Genesis 12:3, cf. Galatians 3:8). That seed, Galatians 3:16 tells us, is Christ. The New Covenant provides blessing through Christ to the whole world. Thus, believers today come under the blessings of the blood of the covenant. Therefore, *by faith* appropriate from the Mountain of God's throne the mediatorship of the Lord Jesus Christ. Israel, in its unbelief, never approaches this Mountain. We (even though Gentiles) by faith and by blood approach it as a throne of grace, not as a throne of judgment (Hebrews 4:16; 10:19; 12:22–24).

Conclusion

Jesus Christ has ratified the New Covenant, but has not yet enacted it. Its unenacted status is what necessitates that Jesus be the *guarantee* of the New Covenant (Hebrews 7:22). If enactment had already occurred, no need for the guarantee would exist. The Lord Jesus Christ Himself is that guarantee for the enactment with Israel of that better covenant.

The blessings that believers enjoy today (because Christ has ratified the New Covenant promise) are distinct from its enactment at Christ's second coming. These are two distinct and separate events. The ratification by blood has only made the future enactment of the New Covenant with Israel doubly certain. Guaranteeing its future enactment directly negates any claim that the cross has already enacted it. Today, Jesus' presence before the Father²¹ is the guarantee of its future fulfillment.

Present-day believers have received the temporary tokens of the future enactment of the New Covenant—the bread and the cup. These tokens recall the sacrifice that ratified the covenant until God enacts the covenant itself at the Lord's return.²² The tokens are only temporary, so believers must wait and patiently endure: *till He come* (1 Corinthians 11:26). In the meantime, *we have an altar, from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat* (Hebrews 13:10).

—End—

²¹ Nowhere does the text depict Jesus Christ presently reigning on the throne of David or sitting on that throne. He will, however, do so during the millennial Kingdom as prophesied when He *enacts* the New Covenant that He mediated in His blood at the cross.

²² John Lawrence, unpublished class notes for Theology 302, Ecclesiology and Eschatology (Multnomah School of the Bible, 1974).

Stephen R. Lewis earned a Th.B. from Multnomah School of the Bible, a Th.M. in Historical Theology from Dallas Theology Seminary, and a Ph.D. in Higher Education from the University of North Texas. Dr. Lewis is the Academic Dean of CTS as well as professor of Church History and the History of Doctrine. His email address is grace4now@aol.com.

| |
|--------------|
| ANNUAL INDEX |
|--------------|

Articles and Reviews in Volume 8 (2002)

| Author and Title | Issue and Pages |
|--|-------------------------|
| Andrew, Stephen L. Biblical Inerrancy | 8 #1:2–21 |
| Asher, Robert Isaiah 35: Exposition and Biblical Theology | 8 #2:2–25 |
| Beck, John Review of Bruce Wilkinson, <i>The Prayer of Jabez</i> | 8 #1:64–72 |
| Bigalke, Ron J., Jr. Christ as the “Mercy Seat”: Understanding the Shed Blood of Christ | 8 #2:42–55 |
| Bolender, Bob Memorials and Shadows: Animal Sacrifices of the Millennium | 8 #2:26–41 |
| Cunningham, Gene Expanding Ministry Through Missions | 8 #4:12–28 |
| Dean, Robert, Jr. Abiding in Christ: A Dispensational Theology of the Spiritual Life (3 of 3) | 8 #1:43–63 |
| Hodges, Zane C. 1. Harmony with God (1 of 3) 2. Harmony with God (2 of 3) | 8 #3:2–22 8 #4:29–54 |
| Ice, Thomas The Meeting in the Sky | 8 #3:64–70 |

Lewis, Stephen R.

1. Review of Simon Winchester, *The Professor and the Madman* 8 #2:56–59
2. The New Covenant: Enacted or Ratified? 8 #4:55–65

Niemelä, John

If Anyone's Work Is Burned: Scrutinizing
Proof-Texts 8 #1:22–42

Rapp, Clifford, Jr.

Can Fallen Ministers Be Restored? 8 #3:23–38

Schmidtbleicher, Paul R.

Balancing the Use of the Old Testament 8 #3:39–63

Veinot, Joy

Bad Heir Day 8 #4:2–11