

The Relationship of the Church to the New Covenant

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The relationship of the Church (i.e., the Body of Christ, which is being built during the present Dispensation of Grace) to the New Covenant is the subject of long and considerable debate among theologians. On the one hand, Replacement theologians view the Church as having entirely “replaced” the nation of Israel as the one and only people of God, and for this reason they view the Church as the party with which God has made the New Covenant, and that the New Covenant is in effect today. On the other hand, some Dispensationalists of the early 20th century concluded there must be two New Covenants, one made with the nation of Israel and another made with the Church. Both of these extremes seek to make the Church a party to the New Covenant, and both view the New Covenant as in effect during the present dispensation.

Nowhere in Scripture is it stated that the New Covenant is made with the Church. Rather, a literal interpretation of Scripture results in the understanding that God has pledged to make the New Covenant with the nation of Israel.

“Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah.” (Jeremiah 31:31)

Since “the gifts and calling of God are without repentance” (Romans 11:29), God’s pledge to make a New Covenant with the nation of Israel has not changed, nor can it be revoked. Furthermore, Romans 11:26-27 reveals, “And so all Israel shall be saved ... For this is my [new] covenant unto them, when I shall take away their sins.” Since the nation of Israel remains in unbelief during the present dispensation, it should be clear that the New Covenant is not in effect today.

Confusion arises for many theologians when they consider the blessings promised under the New Covenant. Those blessings include, in part, individual regeneration, forgiveness of sins, and an indwelling Holy Spirit (cf. Jeremiah 31:33-34; Ezekiel 36:26-27). Clearly, the Church is experiencing these very blessings (cf. Titus 3:5; Ephesians 1:7, 13-14), so they erroneously conclude that the Church must in some way be a party to the New Covenant, and that it is in effect today.

It is a fact that the work of the Lord Jesus Christ at His first advent, culminating in His death, resurrection, and ascension, secured the blessings of the New Covenant (cf. Matthew 26:28; Hebrews 9:16-17). But those blessings were secured for the nation of Israel¹, and would have

¹ In Matthew 26:28, Jesus asserted, “For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for **many** for the remission of sins.” See my article, “Who Are the Many?”, which explains why the pronoun “many”, when used in Scripture without a definite referent, is best understood to be a covenant descriptor for the nation of Israel. Note that the Apostle Paul asserted that Jesus was “... made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law ...” (i.e., the nation of Israel; Galatians 4:4-5).

been made available to individual believing Jews within the nation of Israel had that generation received Jesus of Nazareth as Messiah and installed Him as King. Since that generation of the nation of Israel did not receive Jesus (John 1:11), the formal inauguration of the New Covenant was deferred and awaits that future generation of the nation of Israel which will receive Him during the Tribulation (cf. Ezekiel 20:33-37).

However, with the work of Christ having secured the blessing of the New Covenant in time, God is now free to graciously bestow those blessings upon whom He chooses without violating His attribute of justice (cf. Romans 3:23-26). He is bound by covenant with the nation of Israel to bestow these blessings upon them, once they believe (in the Tribulation/Kingdom), but He has chosen by grace to bestow many of the blessings of the New Covenant upon those who believe during the Dispensation of Grace and are incorporated into the Church. But this does not make the Church a party to the New Covenant; we do not receive these blessings by a covenant commitment, but by the grace of God.

Why is God dispensing blessings of the New Covenant to the Church today? There is more than one right answer to this question. First, “Christ loved the church, and gave himself for it” (Ephesians 5:25), and “he is the propitiation for our sins; and not ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world” (1 John 2:2). While Christ’s intentionality at His first advent was to redeem Israel (cf. Galatians 4:4-5; Romans 15:8), His work of propitiation was sufficient to redeem all men. Second, and often overlooked as an objective, is that God is pouring out the blessings of the New Covenant on all believers today in order “to provoke [Israel] to jealousy” (Romans 11:11). It is still God’s purpose to redeem the nation of Israel and bring them into the New Covenant. One means God is using to call Israel to Himself is to bestow on the Church (i.e., Gentiles; Acts 15:14) the blessings of the New Covenant which were intended for them. Jealousy is not always a negative attribute. God Himself is jealous (Exodus 34:14), and He will engender jealousy among the Jews for the blessings He is graciously bestowing upon the Church in order to eventually bring them into the New Covenant.

In conclusion, the Church has no formal relationship to the New Covenant. The New Covenant will be inaugurated by God with the nation of Israel during the coming Tribulation (in preparation for the Kingdom), and at that time He will bestow all the blessings promised under the New Covenant upon Israel according to His covenant commitment with them. In contrast, God has chosen to bestow upon the Church by grace certain blessings of the New Covenant secured by the sacrificial work of the Lord Jesus Christ, in part to provoke the rebellious nation of Israel to return to Him out of jealousy.