

I. Read II Corinthians 3:6-11

Note from Simon J. Kistemaker, taken from his commentary on II Corinthians:

Last, Paul introduces the words new covenant, which Jeremiah prophesied (31:31), Jesus spoke at the institution of the Lord's Supper (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25), and the writer of Hebrews quoted and applied to Christ (9:15). To say that Paul is speaking of the New Testament's formation in its rudimentary form is incorrect. Paul stresses not the canon but the covenant that God has made with his people. And God appointed him to be a servant of this new covenant. As Moses was given the appointment to be the mediator and prophet of the old covenant in Israel (Ex. 24), so Paul has been commissioned to be the mediator and prophet of the new covenant in the Corinthian setting.

Noteworthy is the parallel between Moses and Paul as servants of the old and new covenants respectively. When God called Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt, Moses doubted his own ability (Ex. 4:10). And when Paul reflects on his task of preaching the gospel, he questions his own competence (2:16b). Moses relied on God to grant him ability; so did Paul. Another parallel is that of Moses receiving from God the Decalogue written on two tablets of stone (Exod. 24:12; 31:18; 34:29). Paul says that his ministry is written on tablets of human hearts (v3). But his ministry surpasses that of Moses, for he is privileged to be the mediator of Christ's new covenant.

The new covenant has come forth out of the old covenant (v14), and the adjective new indicates that this covenant has a quality that is superior to the old. Jesus inaugurated the new covenant in his blood at the time he instituted the Lord's Supper (Luke 22:10; 1 Cor. 11:25) and thus fulfilled the prophecy recorded by Jeremiah. More than six hundred years earlier, through Jeremiah, God announced the coming of a new covenant that he would make with Israel (31:31-34). Note that God took the initiative for making both the old and the new covenants: the old at Sinai and the new in Zion. And God made these agreements with his people for their benefit and well-being.

The benefits of the old covenant were God's daily provisions of food and water, protection from sickness, fertility and full-term pregnancies, a long life span for every Israelite. God would fight for them by driving the nations out of the promised land, so that his people could take possession from the Red Sea to the Mediterranean, from the southern border of the desert to the northern part of the Euphrates (Exod. 23:25-31). The people were obliged to obey God by keeping the laws of the Decalogue, those pertaining to protection and responsibility, and those that promoted justice and mercy in social life (Exod. 20-23). In fact, the blessings and the obligations of the old covenant are recorded in these four chapters.

The new covenant is superior to and differs from the old in respect to the place of God's law, promise, knowledge, and remission of sin. In the new covenant, the laws of God are written not on stone or paper but on human hearts and minds. They are part of the people's inner being. God fulfils his promise by proving that he is their God and they are his people. Also, God's revelation becomes so universally known that it covers the earth "as the waters cover the sea" (Is. 11:9; Hab. 2:14). Throughout the world all classes of people knew the Lord. And last, God forgives sin and remembers it no more (Jer. 31:31-34; Heb. 8:10-12). He grants complete remission through his Son Jesus Christ, who shed his blood on Calvary's cross. "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" (Heb. 9:22b).

- A. In verses 6-11, the Apostle Paul alludes to the outworking of Covenantal Theology. A key premise of Covenantal Theology is that God deals with man through the framework of covenants. The foundational covenant upon which the others rest is the Covenant of Redemption. In this Covenant, which was initiated before time, God decreed the plan of redemption. (Read Ephesians 1:4.) In I Peter 1:2, the *economy* (who does what) of that plan of redemption is explained. What part do the Father, Son and Holy Spirit play in redemption or the plan of salvation?
God the Father decrees our redemption. The Holy Spirit applies redemption. The Son accomplishes redemption through the shedding of His blood.

As mentioned above, the Covenant of Redemption is the foundation of the covenants God established with man. There are two key or primary covenants in the outworking of God's plan of redemption for man. They were both initiated in Eden — the first before the Fall, the second following the Fall. What are they?

The first covenant was the Covenant of Life or Works (Hosea 6:7).

The second covenant was the Covenant of Grace (Gen. 3:15-16).

What were the conditions or terms of the first covenant and what is its status now?

God required perfect obedience from man and promised eternal life. (See Genesis 2:15-16.) It continues to be in effect, thus the *consequences* for the breaking of the Covenant of Works affect each person on earth unless they are relieved of those *consequences* through their participation by faith in the Covenant of Grace.

What were the conditions or terms of the second covenant?

God promised eternal life and pardon through Christ as our mediator. The conditions or terms were met by Christ as He fulfilled the requirements of the Covenant of Works on our behalf (by keeping the law) and paid the penalty on the cross for our breaking of the Covenant of Works. Christ's shed blood satisfied God's requirement that justice be done to lawbreakers.

Summarize the three major covenants explained by the questions and answers above.

God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit entered into a Covenant of Redemption before creation in which the *Father promised to give a people to the Son, the Son promised to save or redeem this people, and the Holy Spirit promised to draw, regenerate and sanctify this people.* This plan of redemption was accomplished through the interplay of the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace. Man (Adam) broke the Covenant of Works in Eden, immediately suffering the consequences of breaking the covenant. Adam acted as man's federal head or representative, and thus all men sinned with Adam. God then immediately instituted the Covenant of Grace in which a Redeemer was promised to the elect. Jesus the Redeemer is the second Adam and serves as the representative of all the elect in the Covenant of Grace.

Are there other covenants?

Yes, but they are all subsumed within the framework of the Covenant of Grace. Another way to explain it is that these lesser covenants (proto-evangel, Noahic, Mosaic, Abrahamic, Davidic) all establish a *progressive revelation* in which more and more of the Covenant of Grace is revealed to man. These lesser covenants are actually part of the progressive fulfillment of the larger Covenant of Grace.

Leaders: See attached diagram to share with your class.

Note: For those wanting a more in-depth study of Covenantal Theology, I recommend the excellent study entitled "Covenant of Grace" by J.G. Vos. (available in the office)

- B. There is an opposing interpretive framework (in opposition to Covenantal Theology) in biblical theology which attempts to explain the covenants as merely subsequent and alternative plans of God by which He *tested* man. These alternative plans or *tests* are referred to as *dispensations*.

This approach is called Dispensationalism. It appeared on the scene in the early to mid-1800s. It has many flaws, but the most serious ones are implicit rather than explicit. For the whole system to make sense (God testing man, etc.), God could not have known whether or not man would pass the various *tests* He offered. Further, God Himself would have had to change His plan according to man's response to each test. Therefore, God cannot be omniscient, immutable (unchanging), and sovereign. The strength of Covenantal Theology is that it considers and does justice to *the*

attributes of God and is consistent in its understanding of God's plan of redemption throughout the Old and New Testaments.

Another important mistake the Dispensationalist school of interpretation makes is in supposing that the plan of salvation changed from Old Testament to the New Testament. How did Paul explain God's plan of salvation in Galatians 2:21; 3:6-8; Romans 4:1-3; 8:3-4?

He made it clear that man was never — can never — be saved by keeping the law. The plan of redemption was always *by grace through faith*, in the Old and New Testaments. This was true for the people of Israel in the Old Testament, just as it is true for men this side of the cross (in the New Testament).

- C. In 2 Corinthians 3:9, reference is made to “the ministry of condemnation” and “the ministry of righteousness.” To what is Paul referring?

According to the commentary of the *New Geneva Study Bible*,

“Righteousness is given in justification, the gracious legal declaration that begins the Christian life. It continues in sanctification, the progressive growth of a believer in righteous thoughts, words, and deeds. Sanctification takes place by grace through faith, but it also requires study, prayer, and conscious effort.”

Paul is contrasting the condemnation under the old covenant (the law) with the forgiveness which comes with the new covenant. The note for the *New Geneva Study Bible* calls our attention to the fact that redemption involves more than justification, but continues in the other aspects of the *ordo salutis*.

- D. To what is Paul referring in II Corinthians 3:11? (“*that* which remains is in glory”)

Note from Kistemaker's commentary:

“...Paul stresses the abiding nature of glory in the ministry of the new covenant. The process of being set aside is compared with that which remains. Paul speaks not of making the glory of Moses' face ineffective but of the ministry in its totality as it pertains to the old covenant.”

“The meaning of the Greek verb katargein is “to put aside.” The verb has a variety of meanings depending on its context, but in the current passage the verb indicates that which is transitory or evanescent. The ministry of the old covenant is put aside in its passing significance. Also, the verb to put aside is in the passive voice and has the people as the implied agent. Hence, human beings who are rebellious make the covenant useless. Because of their persistent disobedience, the Israelites made the old covenant ineffective (see Jer. 31:32b; Ezek. 36:16-23) and caused its glory to vanish.”

“The glory that accompanied the old covenant ministry is nothing in comparison with the glory that is permanent. The previous verse (v10) described the surpassing glory of the new covenant, but this verse mentions permanency. In verse 10 Paul spoke of degree; here he notes duration.”

“Paul reveals himself as a person who has left the framework of the old covenant and has fully embraced the new. He skillfully points out the transitoriness of the old and the lasting significance of the new covenant. As a Jew who became a Christian, he now addresses his fellow countrymen and others. At the same time, he vigorously opposes those Jews who attack him in Corinth and elsewhere. ‘In this argument the Apostle has chiefly in view the Judaizers who made the Law indispensable and superior to the Gospel.’” (Kistemaker)

The redemption which comes through the Covenant of Grace. Kistemaker makes the vital point that “Paul...has left the framework of the old covenant and has fully embraced the new.”

- E. What is the *visible church*?
All those who profess true religion.

What was the *visible church* during the Old Testament?
The nation of Israel.

What is the *visible church* in the New Testament?
Christian churches that continue to profess biblical and orthodox Christianity.

- F. What is the *invisible church*?
The elect, or true believers of all times in all nations.

- G. Are the *visible* and *invisible church* ever the same thing?
Within the *visible church*, the *invisible church* is found. Not every member of the *visible church* is a true believer. This was true in Old Testament Israel. It is true in our church today as well.

- H. How is this distinction between the *visible* and *invisible church* important to Covenantal Theology?
Because it explains the continuity between testaments of the *visible and invisible church*. Israel in the Old Testament was the *visible church*. In the New Testament Christian churches became the *visible church*. The form, including the sacraments, changed, but not the substance. Membership in the *invisible church* did not change from the Old Testament to the New Testament. In other words, it also remained the same in regard to its substance. It has always been *through faith* that one is saved. In the Old Testament, it was *faith in the Messiah who would come*. In the New Testament: *faith in the Messiah who has come*.

- I. Comment on the following:
The Covenant of Grace began in Eden following the Fall and continues in our day. Though the Covenant of Grace was administered differently in the Old Testament than in the New Testament, it is still the same Covenant of Grace.
This is an expression of Covenant Theology. (See Westminster Confession XII.5)

The New Testament is concealed in the Old; the Old Testament is revealed in the New.
This statement is often expressed differently but the substance remains at the very heart of Biblical Theology and the covenantal view.

