

10 Things You Should Know about the New Covenant

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During Holy Week, on the night when Jesus gathered with his disciples in the upper room, he declared that through his shed blood there would come into existence a “New” covenant, a glorious reality described in some detail in Hebrews 8. Here are some ten things about the New Covenant that all Christians should know.

(1) We know from [Luke 22:19-20](#) that when Jesus offered up his body on the cross and poured out his blood so that we might be forgiven of our sins, he was inaugurating and establishing the New Covenant. Here is how Luke records it: “And he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, ‘This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.’ And likewise the cup after they had eaten, saying, ‘This cup that is poured out for you is *the new covenant* in my blood’ ” ([Luke 22:19-20](#)).

(2) But what need is there for a New Covenant between God and his people? Why wasn’t the Mosaic Covenant good enough for all people and for all time? In saying that the Old or Mosaic Covenant wasn’t “good enough” I’m not saying it wasn’t “good”. It was. It was an unprecedented blessing for the people of Israel. It provided them with laws to govern their behavior. It promised them spiritual and material and even military blessings if they obeyed that law and remained true to the covenant. God even instituted in that covenant the office of high priest so that the people would have someone to offer sacrifices on their behalf and represent them in the presence of God. That old covenant provided a sacrificial system in which the blood of bulls and goats at least temporarily enabled them to remain in fellowship with God. The Old Covenant under Moses was filled with grace, mercy, longsuffering, and love.

But the Old or Mosaic Covenant had three fundamental flaws. First, although there was a high priest who would regularly offer an animal sacrifice for their sins, such sacrifices could never fully and finally secure their forgiveness. “For it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” ([Heb. 10:4](#)).

Second, the law of the Old Covenant that came through Moses was unable to supply the power that people needed to fulfill and obey it. The Law of Moses was very clear in stating, “Thou shalt not” or “Do this and live” or “Be ye holy.” But there was nothing in the law itself that could empower the people to obey it. The Law of Moses told the people of Israel what they should and

should not do but it was never capable of supplying them with the internal energy or the spiritual power to obey. As someone once said:

*“To run and work the law commands,
Yet gives me neither feet nor hands.
But better news the gospel brings:
It bids me fly, and gives me wings!”*

The point here is that with the New Covenant that Christ established and the gift of the Holy Spirit who indwells all its members, we not only know what to do, we also have been given the power and strength to do it. More on this in a moment.

Third, the Old or Mosaic Covenant was temporary. It was designed by God with a ***built-in obsolescence***. God never intended for the Old Covenant to last forever. He never intended for it to be the final revelation of his will for mankind. We know this because we read in [Hebrews 8:5](#) that everything Moses did in constructing the Old Covenant tabernacle, together with its rituals and sacrifices, was only “a copy and shadow of the heavenly things.” We also know the Old Covenant was temporary because of what we see in [Jeremiah 31:31-34](#), a passage that is cited in [Hebrews 8:8-12](#). There we read that God always intended to establish a new covenant with his people that would be different from the one he made with Moses and Israel following the exodus from Egypt. To this we add [Hebrews 8:13](#) – “In speaking of a new covenant, he [God] makes the first one [the old covenant] obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.”

(3) We read in [Hebrews 8:6-7](#) that the very existence of this New Covenant is just one more proof or demonstration that the high priesthood of Jesus is superior to the high priesthood of Aaron and his descendants. The priestly “ministry” of Jesus is better than that of Aaron because the “covenant” he established and now mediates is better than that which came through Moses.

(4) I’m not happy with how the opening line of v. 8 is translated. I’m going to take issue with the ESV here, although I should point out that they make reference to this other possible translation in a footnote. [Hebrews 8:8a](#) should read, “For finding fault with ***it***, he says to ***them***.” God found fault with the ***covenant***, ***not*** with the ***people***. He just mentioned in v. 7 that the first or old or Mosaic covenant was not “faultless.” That is why there was a need for a second or new covenant. That point is then reaffirmed in v. 8a.

(5) We must also take note of the *identity* of those with whom this new covenant is made or established. In [Hebrews 8:8](#) he says the new covenant is established or made “with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.” But wouldn’t that mean that we, the Church of Jesus Christ, have no membership in this covenant and can’t benefit from its blessings? After all, most of us are Gentiles and have not descended physically from Israel or Judah. No, it means no such thing!

First, when the apostle Paul quotes the words of Jesus in 1 Corinthians 11 and tells the Church about its responsibility to celebrate the Lord’s Supper, he explicitly mentions that this is the celebration of the New Covenant prophesied in Jeremiah 31. That makes no sense unless Jeremiah’s prophecy is applicable to the entire Body of Christ, the entire Church, which is comprised of both believing Jews and believing Gentiles.

Second, in [2 Corinthians 3:6](#) Paul explicitly says that we are the recipients of and ministers of the New Covenant.

Third, the blessings of the prophesied New Covenant, those described here in Hebrews 8 and throughout the rest of the NT, are identical with the blessings that Christians in the Church receive and enjoy: forgiveness of sins, the empowering ministry of the Holy Spirit, and the knowledge of God inscribed on our hearts.

Fourth, the people to whom the book of Hebrews was written are members of the Church! His point in this epistle is, “You now have and are participants in the new and better covenant promised in Jeremiah 31 and established by Jesus through his death and resurrection; so why would you ever want to go back under the old covenant and its inferior ways?” If the members of the church in Rome, to which this letter was addressed, are not also members of the New Covenant, nothing in this entire book makes any sense at all.

Fifth, according to [Hebrews 8:6](#) the new covenant “is” better (present tense) and “has been enacted” (perfect tense) on better promises. And those better promises are precisely what he describes in vv. 10-12 that apply to us, the Church.

Sixth, in [Hebrews 10:15](#) our author says that the Holy Spirit bears witness to “us” the Church that God has made this new covenant with us!

Seventh, who was present in the upper room when Jesus inaugurated the new covenant and established the Lord’s Supper as the ordinance by which we celebrate it? Jews! The only people present were the disciples and their close friends, all members of either the house of Israel or

Judah. We mustn't forget that according to [Galatians 3:16](#) and [3:28-29](#) (and numerous other texts) anyone who believes in Jesus Christ is now the "seed" of Abraham and thus an heir according to the promise. In other words, *the Church of Jesus Christ is the true Israel of God*.

That doesn't mean believing Jews are excluded or replaced as heirs of the promise made to Abraham. All ethnic Jews who believe in Jesus are members of the New Covenant. But so too are ethnic Gentiles who believe in Jesus. The blood in your veins no longer matters for anything. The only thing that matters is the faith in your heart: if you trust in Jesus, whether you are male or female, slave or free, Jew or Gentile, you are the seed of Abraham, the true Israel of God, and thus members of the New Covenant.

(6) With the New Covenant comes *the promise of an internal power*. "I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts" ([Heb. 8:10b](#)).

People during the time of the old covenant could obviously memorize the law of God, and many did. But this in itself didn't come with a promise of power to obey what the law commanded. When he speaks about God himself writing the law on our hearts he means that our obedience will flow from a transformation that has occurred within us, by virtue of a power that God has himself provided. This means that every member of the New Covenant has been regenerated and has had the law of God placed on their minds and written on their hearts (on this see especially [Ezek. 36:26-27](#)).

In the new covenant, the will of God is inscribed on our heart, internally, experientially, in the sense that whatever God requires of us in terms of our obedience he provides for us in terms of the Spirit's internal, enabling power.

(7) With the New Covenant comes *the promise of a personal relationship*. "I will be their God, and they shall be my people" ([Heb. 8:10c](#); see also [Rev. 21:3](#)).

God isn't just God. He's not just there. He's not simply the omnipotent, infinitely kind and gracious supreme being who created all things and upholds all things. What we rejoice in isn't simply that God exists. Rather, he is *my* God! He is *your* God! He belongs to you. And I'm not just a human being. I'm more than a creature. God says of me: "Sam is mine!" God says of you: "Amy is mine! John is mine! Dustin is mine! They all belong to me!"

(8) With the New Covenant comes *the promise of an intimate knowledge*. “And they shall not teach, each one his neighbor and each one his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest” ([Heb. 8:11](#)).

During the time of the Old Testament or Old Covenant, the people of God were a mixed community. That is to say, Israel was composed of both believers and non-believers. Not everyone who was circumcised in his flesh was circumcised in his heart. Again, this simply means that not everyone who received the physical sign of the old covenant was born again or regenerate.

This is why members of the nation Israel had to be exhorted to “know” the Lord. But under the New Covenant we encounter an entirely different situation. Every member of the New Covenant is a believer. Every member of the New Covenant has been born again. Notice what our author says: “they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest” (8:11).

(9) This promise that every member of the new covenant will experience personal and first-hand intimate saving knowledge of God is one of the main reasons I believe that *only believers should be baptized*.

We must remember that God’s covenant with Israel was theocratic in nature. Israel was not only the people of God; Israel was also a political entity. Therefore, all those who were circumcised physically were members of the covenant community whether they ever came to saving faith or not. That’s not true in the New Covenant. Only those who come to saving faith are members of the new covenant community.

The Church is not a political entity. The Church is not a geo-political state. The Church is a spiritual organism united to Christ. That doesn’t mean the Church shouldn’t be involved in the political process. The degree to which you as individual Christians participate in that process is entirely up to you. I love my country. I’m as patriotic as the next guy. But *the United States of America is not in a covenant relationship with God. It never has been and it never will be*. I’m not talking about whether or not it is correct to describe the U.S. as a “Christian nation.” What I am saying is that men cannot institute or establish a covenant with God. God alone can initiate and establish a covenant with human beings. And he has done that only with the members of the body of Christ, the Church.

The Church is made up of men and women from every tribe and tongue and people and nation across the expanse of the globe. You and I have a deeper and more vital unity with a Christian

living in the Sudan or in Germany than we do with any non-Christian who is a card-carrying citizen of the United States.

To say that every member of the New Covenant knows the Lord doesn't mean that there aren't in our midst people who claim to know Christ but don't. But those who are genuinely saved and genuinely members of the New Covenant are all born again and justified by faith in Jesus.

Paedo-baptists argue that since in Old Testament times circumcision, as the sign of the covenant, was applied to all, even though many never came to saving faith, baptism, as the sign of the New Covenant, should be applied to all, even though many who are baptized will never come to saving faith.

But again, the Old and New Covenants differ significantly and thus the analogy breaks down. Unlike in the OT, everywhere in the NT we read that members of the New Covenant are born-again, justified believers in Jesus. Therefore it is only to them that the ordinance of baptism is applied. Members of the New Covenant are those who have the law of God written on their hearts; they are those who belong to God in a relationship of personal intimacy; they are those who know God; they are those whose sins have been forgiven. That is why we do not baptize infants at Bridgeway. Infants who have not as yet trusted Christ for salvation are not members of the New Covenant.

(10) With the New Covenant comes *the promise of final forgiveness of sins*. "For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more" ([Heb. 8:12](#)).

The forgiveness of sins was not a new idea when Jeremiah recorded this prophecy. The people of Israel were quite familiar with the concept that God graciously wipes us clean of the guilt of our sins and refuses ever again to bring them up or to use them against us. If you have any doubts about this, read Psalm 51 or Psalm 103.

But under the old covenant forgiveness was never final and forever. One had to return year after year after year on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16) so that the high priest could continually slaughter an animal and place the blood of the sacrifice on the altar in the Holy of Holies. For an OT believer, it was wonderful to experience forgiveness for sins previously committed. But each person knew that with future sins there was a need for another, future sacrifice. The blood of bulls and goats could never perfectly purge their consciences.

But in the new covenant, established by the shedding of Christ's blood, our sins are altogether and forever forgiven: past, present, future.

