

What's New About The New Covenant?

*³¹“Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, ³²not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD.
(Jeremiah 31:31-32. ESV)*

Or: Why Don't We Baptize Babies?

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Jeremiah 31:27-40

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Introduction:

Good morning! Open your Bibles to Jeremiah 31:27-40. On January 19th we are going to begin a 12 week series where we will unpack exegetically our understanding of the mission, values and vision of the church in general and this church in specific, but when I was planning that series I left the first two weeks in January open because it takes us a week or two to come back from vacation and to get our lives back in order after the delightful chaos of Christmas. That left me with the very unusual task of trying to figure out what to preach on this morning. Normally we just preach on whatever is next – but this Sunday and next Sunday there is no “next” and so that left me thinking about what it would be most helpful for us to look at that we could reasonably cover in single sermon servings. As I considered my FAQ archive and to do pile it occurred to me that we would greatly profit from a discussion about what exactly is NEW about the New Covenant. Most of the big questions Christians discuss with other Christians have to do with the specific relationship between the Old and New Covenants. The reason there are Lutherans and Baptists or Presbyterian and Alliance churches is because we don't all see eye to eye on the issue of how the Old relates to the New. So let's take a look at the very interesting relationship between the Old and New Testament. Our goal this morning is to discover what is New about the New Testament, or if you like more concrete outcomes, to answer the question: why don't we baptize babies? Hear now the Word of the Lord:

²⁷“Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will sow the house of Israel and the house of Judah with the seed of man and the seed of beast. ²⁸And it shall come to pass that as I have watched over them to pluck up and break down, to overthrow, destroy, and bring harm, so I will watch over them to build and to plant, declares the LORD. ²⁹In those days they shall no longer say:

“The fathers have eaten sour grapes,
and the children’s teeth are set on edge.’

³⁰But everyone shall die for his own sin. Each man who eats sour grapes, his teeth shall be set on edge.

³¹“Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, ³²not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. ³³But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.”

³⁵ Thus says the LORD,
who gives the sun for light by day

and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night,

who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar—

the LORD of hosts is his name:

³⁶ “If this fixed order departs

from before me, declares the LORD,

then shall the offspring of Israel cease

from being a nation before me forever.”

³⁷ Thus says the LORD:

“If the heavens above can be measured,

and the foundations of the earth below can be explored,

then I will cast off all the offspring of Israel

for all that they have done,
declares the LORD.”

³⁸“Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when the city shall be rebuilt for the LORD from the tower of Hananel to the Corner Gate. ³⁹And the measuring line shall go out farther, straight to the hill Gareb, and shall then turn to Goah. ⁴⁰The whole valley of the dead bodies and the ashes, and all the fields as far as the brook Kidron, to the corner of the Horse Gate toward the east, shall be sacred to the LORD. It shall not be uprooted or overthrown anymore forever.” (Jeremiah 31:27-40)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

You could easily write an 800 page book about this topic – in fact I just read an 800 page book about this topic – so we are clearly not going to say everything that could be said about this topic or even about this passage. There are more questions answered in the text we just read than

simply the question we're interested in this morning but this is the text you would go to first to answer the question what is New about the New Covenant?

That the New Covenant is NEW is agreed to by all. God says it will be new, he calls it the NEW covenant and he also explicitly says that it will NOT be like the previous covenant. He says that in verse 32:

³²**not like the covenant** that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt (ESV)

Whatever the New Covenant is going to be, its NOT going to be exactly like the Covenant God made with Israel through Moses at Sinai – there are going to be points of discontinuity. Everyone in the Christian world agrees that there is continuity and discontinuity between the Old and New Covenants – the key is where you draw the lines. Is the New Covenant MOSTLY continuous? If you think so, you end up a Presbyterian. Is it almost entirely discontinuous? If you think so, you end up a Brethren Dispensationalist. So, where do we draw the line? What do we see as NEW in the New Covenant? Let's dig into the text. We'll need to move fairly rapidly here because I want to show you 5 points of discontinuity from the text and then connect the dots to 5 practical implications for how those points work out in the life of our church. I'll embed some footnotes in the printed copy that you can use to chase down more information if you are so inclined.

What's New In The New Covenant?

First of all we notice that, under the New Covenant:

1. There is an individual as opposed to a tribal focus

Look again at verses 29-30:

²⁹In those days they shall no longer say:
“The fathers have eaten sour grapes,
and the children's teeth are set on edge.”

³⁰But everyone shall die for his own sin. Each man who eats sour grapes, his teeth shall be set on edge. (ESV)

Under the Old covenant structure the obligations were national, tribal and familial. When the king sinned or apostasized – the entire nation could be sent into exile! On the other hand when the king was obedient and faithful – the entire nation was blessed. That’s why the expression arose: “The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge”. The modern equivalent of that would be for me to say: “I sucked a lemon and Max’s lips puckered up”. Meaning my children were experiencing the curses earned by my disobedience. My action resulted in their FATE! Under the New Covenant, that isn’t going to be the case anymore!! You will be saved or condemned on the basis of your own response to the Gospel! God will have no grandchildren in heaven! You won’t get to heaven because your mommy loves Jesus and neither will you go to hell because your dad was an alcoholic! The New Covenant is individual – not personal mind you – there is no such thing as “your personal relationship with Jesus” – even in the New Covenant we are called into community with one another – its not personal, but it is individual. Everyone comes in through the narrow gate in single file.

Secondly, under the New Covenant:

2. There is an internal as opposed to an external operation

Look at verse 33:

³³But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. (ESV)

The problem with the Old Covenant was not the Old Covenant per se. The problem was the people in it. That’s been the problem since the fall.

⁵The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. (Genesis 6:5. ESV)

Only evil all the time. That is the verdict of God upon the heart of humankind and that is the reason they could never keep the Old Covenant. There was nothing wrong with the Old Covenant – it was not defective, WE WERE DEFECTIVE. And so in the New Covenant God applies the solution directly to the point of the problem; the human heart. The miracle of the

New Covenant is the miracle of regeneration, which is to say, the miracle of being born again. It is the miracle of being made to WANT the righteousness of God. That is a whole new approach.

Think of it like this, the Old Covenant was like a fence around a field. It was intended to keep the sheep inside. But the sheep were stubborn and stupid and they always found a way out of the field and into trouble. The New Covenant is like a well at the centre of the field. More than that, the New Covenant is like new sheep who have been taught to thirst after the water from the new well at the centre of the same old field. That's what we mean when we say that we are not "under the law"; we don't mean that we have left the field – the grass under our feet should look the same – God's character hasn't changed, he's still holy, adultery and theft and dishonesty are still bad, but the way God keeps us here has totally changed! Same grass, new game plan. That's what's new about the New Covenant.

Thirdly, under the New Covenant:

3. The knowledge of God is unmediated

I've already talked about how children are not experiencing blessing or curses on the basis of their elders' relationship to God, we saw that in verses 29-30, but that same idea is carried forward and expanded in verse 34, we see there:

³⁴And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. (ESV)

Under the Old Covenant there were certain human mediators that facilitated the relationship between God and his people. There were prophets like Jeremiah who would come out of their tents or caves and proclaim: "THUS SAITH THE LORD!" and new revelation about God would be given. There were also priests who made atonement for sin and facilitated intimacy and who represented the whole covenant community even down to the stones sewn into their clothing – one for each of the 12 tribes. He went into the presence of God FOR ALL the people of God. There were also kings and as we mentioned already, when the king was faithful, the entire covenant community was blessed, when the king was unfaithful the entire covenant community was cursed. The relationship that people had with God under the Old Covenant was MEDIATED

but flawed and often faithless human beings and this was the central burden of the Old Covenant. That is why the central blessing under the New Covenant is the one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus.

Under the New Covenant your faith experience will not rise and fall on the performance of any merely human prophet, priest or king – that’s what I mean when I say it is unmediated. Unmediated in the way the Old Covenant was mediated. No one stands between you and Jesus. I am not your priest!! I am your pastor, which just means shepherd. My job is to feed you from God’s Word, not to atone for your sins or represent you before God. I am not your PROPHET. If you ever hear me open a sermon with something other than: “Open your Bibles to...” Run for your life!!! I have no new words from God to share with you, I have THIS WORD, the unchanging, all sufficient WORD OF GOD! Now, there is a sense in which all truly saved persons, standing in the Word of God, speaking with the Help of the Holy Spirit are prophets, that’s what Acts 2 is talking about, but I am not and you are not AN APOSTOLIC PROPHET. There is only one foundation in the church and that foundation was laid by the Apostolic Prophets with Christ as chief and cornerstone. I am also not your king. I am one of your 14 elders and on most of our deliberations as a Board I don’t even get to vote and when I do I am only 1 of 14. Christ is our head and we seek his counsel collectively and collaboratively.

Fourthly under the New Covenant,

4. The covenant community is unmixed

Let me draw your attention to the end of verse 34:

they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. (ESV)

Under the Old Covenant not all Israel was truly Israel. Not all who were circumcised believed in the promises. The principle of election and the principle of faith were in operation. Paul said that in Romans 9:

For they *are* not all Israel, which are of Israel: ⁷Neither, because they are the seed of Abraham, *are they* all children: but, In Isaac shall thy seed be called. ⁸That is, They which are the children of the flesh, these *are* not the children of God: but the children of the promise are counted for the seed. (Romans 9:6-8. ESV)

The Old Covenant community was mixed – some believed and some didn't, that's the whole point of Hebrews 3! Within the larger visible, ethnic body was a remnant of the truly saved. That is not the case in the New Covenant community. All the members of the New Covenant community are those who truly believe.

Let me quote from Peter Gentry, the Old Testament scholar:

All are believers, all know the Lord, because all have experienced the forgiveness of sins. What Jeremiah is teaching in 31:33-34 is identical to what Isaiah is teaching in Isaiah 54:13: "all your children shall be taught by the Lord, and great shall be the peace of your children". Everyone in the covenant community will experience reconciliation (peace) with God, and so everyone will have a living relationship with the Lord, and so the divine instruction for living will be written upon the heart.¹

In the Old Testament church the members – the circumcised – were not all saved. In the New Testament church, all of the true members are truly saved. They shall all know the Lord.

Fifthly, under the New Covenant,

5. The structures of the covenant are guaranteed never to change

We see that in verses 35-37, all of which are making this one point which we can see by looking together at verse 36:

³⁶ "If this fixed order departs from before me, declares the LORD, then shall the offspring of Israel cease from being a nation before me forever." (ESV)

The New Testament tells us how to understand the seed or offspring of Israel under the New Covenant:

²⁹And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise. (Galatians 3:29. ESV)

In a nutshell then, what's new about the New Covenant is that the structure of it, this fixed order, will endure as long as there are children of the covenant upon the earth. As long as there are Christians, the New Covenant will remain unchanged; that's new. The Old Covenant underwent

¹ Peter Gentry and Stephen Wellum, Kingdom Through Covenant (Wheaton: Crossway, 2012), 510.

frequent and significant development. The Sinai covenant, sometimes called “the law covenant” was explicitly temporary. The Bible says that:

²⁴So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, ²⁶for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith. (Galatians 3:24-26. ESV)

The Law of Moses was never meant to be permanent! It was like a nanny trying to keep all of us dumb sheep from charging off over the cliff while that well was being dug. Let me switch analogies. The Old Covenant was like training wheels for your bike. They are intended to keep you from nose diving into the concrete but once you can stay upright on your own, you no longer need them. Taking them off does not signify your intent to nose dive into the concrete, it simply indicates that you are now able to stay upright without them. That is exactly the relationship of the Christian to the law. We don't say “we're under grace” so that we can dive into the gutter. We say “we're under grace” meaning that we no longer need the structure of the law to remain at the centre of God's will, we have the help of the Holy Spirit for that now. Same grass under our feet, new way of keeping us standing there. What's new about the New Covenant is that there is no newer or better way coming. This is how it will be until the Lord comes to take us home.

Real quick then, let me highlight out 5 practical implications. All of that truth, drawn from the text, hopefully explains for you the following:

5 Practical Implications

1. This is why we do not believe in generational curses

²⁹In those days they shall no longer say:

“‘The fathers have eaten sour grapes,
and the children's teeth are set on edge.’ (Jeremiah 31:29. ESV)

When you hear Christians talking about generational curses you are hearing them deny or demonstrate their ignorance of the blessings of the New Covenant. You do not have cancer because your grandfather was a Mason! I reject and rebuke that sort of thinking and talking in the strongest possible terms! The Bible says:

¹³Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, ^ε“Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”— (Galatians 3:13. ESV)

Jesus Christ bore the curse of the Old Covenant and there is no curse upon the children of the New Covenant because under the New Covenant everyone dies for his own sin or lives because of **HIS** RIGHTEOUSNESS so what curse are you talking about? How can someone curse what God has blessed? Absolute nonsense and hogwash! People who believe in the Gospel of the New Covenant need not worry themselves over so called generational curses. Live free of that.

2. This is why we are not bound by the Old Covenant Legal Code even while we pursue Biblical holiness

I guess a simpler way of saying it would be to say this is why you can wear a coat of mixed fibers but you still can't commit adultery. Or you can boil a goat in its mother's milk if you so desire, but you still can't gossip or commit murder. The Old Covenant way of keeping people in the right field was by use of constant word picture and warning – external motivations – the New Covenant way is through the internal ministry of the Holy Spirit but the goal is the same. Be holy as I am holy, says the Lord – Old Testament and New. Holy hasn't changed because God doesn't change. Christians are not free from moral obligation, we are simply subject to superior motivation.

3. This is why we do not have “Prophets”, “Priests” or “Popes”

Now again, almost everyone in this conversation within Christendom agrees that there are different levels of prophesy and different degrees of “prophet” in the Bible so hear me carefully. I'm not saying you can't speak the Word of God with authority and help – we call that prophetic “forthtelling” and all Christians can and should do it. I'm also not saying that the Holy Spirit can't guide you in special ways or illuminate your mind to understand his Word and Will, I believe in Guidance and in Illumination, I don't believe in Apostolic Prophecy in the church. No one gets to stand up and say: “I have a Word from God that we all need to receive as authoritative”. This is the Word of God that is authoritative in this place! We don't have capital “P” prophets in the church because ALL THY CHILDREN SHALL BE TAUGHT OF THE LORD!! Jesus is our Prophet in the New Covenant. Only the one who came down from heaven

is our authoritative guide on the things of God and heaven. You are not a capital P prophet and neither am I. We have 1 prophet and his name is Jesus.

Likewise we do not have priests or popes in this place. We have one mediator and He is alone is our prophet, our priest and our king.

Fourthly:

4. This is why we practice believers' church

They shall all know me, from the least to the greatest, declares the Lord. This is where we respectfully disagree with the Presbyterians. We part company with the Catholics and the charismatics in number 3, we part company with the Presbyterians here in #4. The Presbyterians believe that the church – the New Covenant community is a mixed community just like the old covenant church. The old covenant church had believing and unbelieving Jews in it, so too the New Covenant church will have believers and unbelievers in it. That's why they do membership totally different than we do. In a Presbyterian church the members are all the saved PLUS their children. You are a member of the church automatically, if your mom or dad is a believer in the Presbyterian church, that to me and to every Baptist who ever understood his or her own polity, seems like a complete contradiction of Jeremiah 31.

²⁹In those days they shall no longer say:

“‘The fathers have eaten sour grapes,
and the children's teeth are set on edge.’

³⁰But everyone shall die for his own sin. Each man who eats sour grapes, his teeth shall be set on edge.... (29-30. ESV)

they shall all know me (v. 34. ESV)

We think the Presbyterians are missing a key point of discontinuity here. The new covenant church is DIFFERENT than the old covenant church in that every one enters on their own and cannot be brought in by mom or dad. Every member is to be a true believer. That brings us to our final implication:

5. This is why we do not baptize babies in this church

Presbyterians and Lutherans baptize the babies of believers because they believe that the new covenant church can contain saved and unsaved people and that children can be brought in by their parents, even if they should later leave as responsible adults; we disagree and we do so on the basis of texts like Jeremiah 31.

Presbyterians and Lutherans see the New and Old Covenants as being almost entirely continuous and therefore they assume that the ritual of initiation under the New Covenant – baptism – is the exact equivalent of the ritual of initiation under the Old Covenant – circumcision - but clearly it is not. If they were meant to symbolize the exact same thing then why would you need a new symbol in the first place? If baptism means exactly what circumcision means, why not simply retain circumcision? Similarly we might ask, if the Lord's Table is exactly the same as Passover, why do we not eat lamb and bitter herbs? Because they ARE NOT EXACTLY THE SAME. This New Covenant is:

³²not like the covenant that I made with their fathers (Jeremiah 31:32. ESV)

There are differences and one of those differences is that children cannot be brought in by their parents; rather every member must have his or her own faith to be granted entrance. That is why the Bible says:

⁴¹So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. (Acts 2:41. ESV)

We don't baptize babies in this church; we baptize only those who have received His Word.

Conclusion:

This passage in Jeremiah is one of the most important texts of the Old Testament – one of the ways we know that is because it is inserted wholesale into the New Testament in Hebrews 8 as the largest single continuous quotation of the OT in the NT – the NT apostles obviously felt it was important. Let me close by reading to you the frame for that quotation out of Hebrews 8; look first at verse 6:

⁶But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as **much more excellent** than the old as **the covenant he mediates is better**, since it is enacted on better promises. (Hebrews 8:6. ESV)

Then we have the quotation from Jeremiah 31, now look at verse 13:

¹³In speaking of a new covenant, **he makes the first one obsolete**. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away. (Hebrews 8:13. ESV)

The Old Covenant is obsolete. Christ has born its curse and fulfilled its conditions and has thereby set us free. Not free to wander, not free to wallow in sin and selfishness, free to worship, free to obey and free to serve, in the power and with the help of the Holy Spirit. Things are different now, things are better. This is a more excellent way and this is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.