

Intercontinental Church of God

19. Biblical Covenants

DOCTRINAL STATEMENT

Both testaments record that God made certain promises to man in the form of specific contracts or agreements with man. "These are called covenants" and define the terms of God's relationship with individuals or groups in various circumstances and eras. Of these covenants the best known are the covenants made with physical Israel and the New Covenant established on "better promises," which will be fully confirmed with spiritual Israel after the return of Jesus Christ. The New Covenant, which also applies to the New Testament Church from the time of the original apostles, makes God's law even more relevant by expanding it to include one's mental attitude and spiritual intent.

DOCTRINAL OVERVIEW

In recording the history of God's relationship to mankind, the Bible reveals various examples of covenants made between God and certain individuals or nations. A covenant may be defined as an agreement, written or verbal, whereby two or more parties agree to a certain relationship governed by specific rules and yielding commensurate results. This usually involves certain conditions to be fulfilled by one or all parties. Therefore, a covenant is most closely analogous to our present day "contract," though any such analogy must be an oversimplification.

A contract implies a clear bilateral agreement with both (or all) sides fully agreeing to the terms. But God's covenants are not always so bilaterally equal. In almost every situation it is God who sets all the ground rules, God who formulates all the conditions, and God who stipulates all the results. Man is simply given the choice of agreeing to comply and receiving the tremendous benefits, or not agreeing to comply, in which case he not only does not receive the benefits but suffers the terrible liabilities as well. As such, God's covenants could perhaps be better characterized as "promises" since they are most often *unilateral*. As God has defined His covenantal relationship with man, He *promises* to do something if man does something, and He *promises* to do something *else* if man does something *else*.

God's purpose in making covenants has always been, and still is, to officially and clearly delineate what He expects from man and what man can expect from Him. By understanding these covenants an individual may come to a better knowledge of God's will and desire for mankind and also realize the conditions which will lead to prosperity and abundance.

In the Old Testament a number of important covenants are discussed. In Genesis 9:8-17, for example, God promises Noah He will never again destroy life with a huge flood. Later on in Genesis we read how God made a covenant with Abraham—which He later reiterated and expanded—which provided physical benefits to him and eventually to all humanity through Abraham's descendants (Gen. 15:18-21; 17:1-27). Another covenant example was the agreement God made with King David (2 Sam. 7:12-16; 1 Chron. 17:11-14). To one degree or another most of the major biblical covenants interrelate and intertwine. To understand any one covenant wholly, we must usually have a working knowledge of the others. For example, the covenant God made with Abraham has as its promises certain blessings that are reiterated in whole or in part in later covenants.

The best known of the Old Testament covenants is that between God and the Israelites made at Mount Sinai. After bringing the Israelite slaves out of bondage in Egypt, God made an agreement or covenant with them (Ex. 19-24). In return for obedience to the Ten Commandments and other laws enumerated in Exodus 20-23, God promised certain physical blessings. Included among these were protection from enemies, removal of sickness,

and abundance of food and water. Noticeably absent from among these promises was any mention of spiritual benefits, such as forgiveness of sin and eternal life. The promises of the covenant given were strictly temporal and physical, as Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 bring out in clear detail. Conversely, disobedience to these laws would be followed by curses affecting the same areas of the Israelites' physical lives as did the promises. Moses served as the mediator of this covenant, which was then ratified with the blood of animals. Despite temporary periods of relative obedience, the later history recorded in the biblical account shows the unfaithfulness of the Israelites who repeatedly broke their part of the covenant.

In the New Testament, another covenant is proposed by God to replace this old covenant that had been made with the nation of Israel. This New Covenant had already been prophesied in Jeremiah 31:31-34 and is discussed in detail in Hebrews 8:6-13. This New Covenant is to be a "better covenant" than the Old Covenant since it will be established upon "better promises" (Heb. 8:6). These "better promises" are spiritual in nature and far transcend the physical promises given to ancient Israel. These promises include: grace (unmerited favor in God's sight demonstrated in numerous ways), forgiveness of sins, eternal life as sons in God's family, God's putting His laws into our minds and writing them in our hearts, the Holy Spirit dwelling in us, and other spiritual blessings of various kinds and of inestimable value.

Through these better promises God immeasurably extends the benefits of His relationship with man. For example, by means of the Holy Spirit, it is now possible to keep the spiritual intent of the law, whereas those under the Old Covenant did not generally keep even the physical letter of the law. The New Covenant is also nonethnic, being offered to all who repent and through baptism become Abraham's spiritual descendants and heirs (Gal. 4:28; Is. 55:1-3; 59:20-21).

The New Covenant will not be applicable in its full force and widest sense until Jesus Christ returns and establishes it with Israel. This is the clear message of the prophets. All peoples and nations of the world shall then have an opportunity to enter into this same New Covenant relationship with God, though Israel will be the international example as God's law will go forth from Zion (Mic. 4). Nonetheless, since Jesus Christ is called "the mediator of the New Covenant" (Heb. 12:24), the New Covenant is already in force for all true Christians today who have accepted Him as their Savior.

The differences between the promises of the Old and New Covenants extend beyond their content—there is also a difference in the timing of their fulfillment, and this difference is instructive in further understanding the application of the New Covenant under the Old Covenant, the physical promises of blessings or cursings were fulfilled (within whatever time period) according to whether Israel obeyed or disobeyed God's law. Under the New Covenant, God's promises are surely given to His begotten children, but even such converted Christians will not *receive* the promises in their fulfillment until Christ's return. This event is described in 1 Corinthians 15:51-53 when:

"...we shall be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality."

Indeed all the patriarchs and prophets of the Bible have not yet had God's promises to them fulfilled:

"And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promises: God having provided something better for us, that they without us should not be made perfect" (Heb. 11:39-40).

God has determined that He will fulfill His better promises of the New Covenant to all His people, from all the ages and eras of man, at the same time; this will be at the momentous turning point of history, the return of Jesus Christ.

It is critical to understand that the agreement and acceptance of the New Covenant commits both God and men to stricter—not lighter—terms. God is now bound to the spiritual promises mentioned above. Likewise man is more tightly bound to God's law, the Ten Commandments and Jesus' expansions of it. Far from being free from obedience to God's law, the true Christian is now more fully responsible to keep the law in its complete spirit and intent. As Jeremiah 31:33 states, "I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts." Thus God says His law shall not be done away but rather become more deeply ingrained in his people (see also Heb. 8:8ff; 10:16ff).

Note that God's writing His law "within" His people and "upon their hearts" will not be some magical transformation or mystical experience by which God will suddenly and mechanistically rewrite our brains and reprogram our minds. God, in His wisdom, has determined that true character cannot be built instantly by fiat, not even by divine fiat. While it is possible for God to command and enforce instant obedience, that is not at all the same thing as developing true godly *character*. Character can be defined as the internalized desire and determination to obey God, backed by the mental fortitude and resolve to in fact obey through all circumstances, however difficult. Character can only be generated by a process of conscious experience, test and trial, growth and development. God designed human beings to become His Sons; and sons must do more than just obey, they must radiate God's character from within. Consequently, under the New Covenant, God shall make His laws known and His Spirit available, enabling people to understand and keep those laws. Thus, the opportunity to enter into the *process* of conversion—of living God's way throughout a long, rich physical life—will be available to all who accept the invitation to be included in the New Covenant. Today it is only available to the relative few, those who have been called out of the world by God into His Church. After the return of Christ it will be available to the vast multitudes—those comprising physical Israel, as the example, and then every other nation on earth, all people who will gladly submit themselves to God.,

The fundamental unity between Old and New Covenants is an essential element in biblical understanding. The law is principally the same, created by the same God, but our relationship to it differs. The law of the Old Covenant required physical obedience and offered physical promises; the law of the New Covenant requires spiritual obedience, which is far tougher, and offers spiritual promises, which are enormously greater.

The greatest illustration showing that God's law is expanded and made more binding (rather than abrogated) by the New Testament is the "Sermon on the Mount" (Matthew 5ff). Here Christ, speaking to His disciples (who would receive God's Spirit and hence enter into a new covenantal relationship with Him), clearly told them that not one "jot or tittle" would pass from the law. (This is indeed logical since the Jesus Christ of the New Covenant is the same being who was the God of Israel in the Old Covenant. See Jesus Christ.) Jesus further spoke against the concept that obedience was not necessary by saying whosoever taught this error would not be in His kingdom (Matthew 5:19). He goes even further and gives definite examples which conclusively show we must *keep* the Ten Commandments more strictly in their spiritual intent than under the Old Covenant. For example, the commandment against the physical act of murder is expanded to include the spiritual attitude of anger; the physical act of adultery is expanded to include the spiritual attitude of lust, etc. Clearly the concept that the law need not be kept under the New Covenant is an error. Indeed what God is developing is an "internalization" of obedience to Him, flowing out of our own intrinsic mental character rather than through the external coercion of physical punishment.

The offer of the New Covenant to the world as a whole is a yet future event. Thus, its full effect will not occur until the return of Christ and His thousand-year reign. But God today is calling a few elect individuals to His Church and the accompanying New Covenant relationship. Upon repentance and baptism these individuals can receive God's Holy Spirit and enter into this New Covenant (Matthew 26:26-28, Heb. 10:9-10); and those who indeed will abide by its terms (acceptance of Christ's sacrifice and God's grace, obedience, faith, etc.) shall receive its incredible promises.

God is not a God who leaves our relationship with Him to chance or doubt. He has rather formulated covenants through which He makes plain our responsibilities as Christians toward Him and His responsibility toward us. If

we fulfill our responsibilities toward God, we will surely receive the abundant physical and spiritual blessings He promises.

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This publication is intended to be used as a personal study tool. Please know it is not wise to take any man's word for anything, so prove all things for yourself from the pages of your own Bible.

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