

## **Hermeneutical Ramifications of Applying the New Covenant to the Church: An Appeal to Consistency**

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### **Preface**

Allow me first to acknowledge that this is not an easy matter for me personally to discuss, for the simple reason that I appeal in this study to the works and positions of great and godly men who have in many cases had a direct and personal bearing on my own spiritual growth and understanding, and yet on this vital topic I find myself at odds with nearly all of them. Nonetheless, if they have taught me anything they have taught me that I must rely on His word as authoritative, and that we must be willing to challenge each other to accuracy in our handling of the word of truth - even contending earnestly for the faith which was once delivered to the saints. I hope and pray that none would perceive my challenges herein to the views of these men as anything but an attempt to honestly evaluate their views in the light of Scripture. As dispensationalists living in this age, we stand on the shoulders of giants - imperfect giants, but giants nonetheless. It is fitting that we show our gratitude and appreciation, honoring them as fathers and fellow servants who have brought us far in our quest for a more Biblical theology. It is likewise fitting that we be unwilling to squander the rich heritage they have afforded us and which reminds us that, as one dear father in the faith has so succinctly phrased it, "The biblical data gives us the correct doctrine. Everything must be tested against those data."<sup>1</sup>

### **Introduction**

In his very thorough handling of the development of replacement theology in the history of the church, Ronald Diprose recognizes that misunderstanding the role of Israel in God's plan has a ripple effect on every aspect of theology. He says,

...ecclesiology and eschatology are not the only areas of Christian theology to have been affected by the Church's views concerning Israel. In fact, the omission of Israel in Christian theology has had detrimental, yet deterministic effects on a wide variety of theological issues.<sup>2</sup>

He concludes with even greater emphasis,

*Failure to reflect seriously on Israel in light of the relevant biblical data has serious consequences for the entire enterprise of Christian theology. It was the neglect of relevant biblical data concerning the place of Israel in God's plan*

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<sup>1</sup> Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1986), 76.

<sup>2</sup> Ronald Diprose, *Israel and the Church: The Origin and Effects of Replacement Theology* (Waynesboro, GA: Authentic Media, 2004), 3.

which permitted replacement theology to develop during the early centuries of the Christian era.<sup>3</sup>

As Diprose correctly observes, we can trace much faulty doctrine to the improper handling of the Biblical teaching regarding the nation of Israel. This faulty doctrine often, though not always, manifests itself in the behavior of believers. Arnold Fruchtenbaum goes a bit further when he (correctly, I believe) asserts that while replacement theology does not cause anti-Semitism, the two are not uncomfortable with one another.<sup>4</sup> The history of the church at times reflects a storied distortion of God's plan for Israel and at other times the revolting consequences of such distortions. Theological method results in theological conclusions, and theological conclusions generally give birth in their likeness to the fruit of behavior.

In an evenhanded consideration of dispensational conclusions we must turn to the devices that derive the conclusions. Have we maintained a purity of method necessary for the accurate handling of the word of truth or have we fallen prey to devices we would otherwise consider wholly inadequate? The answer is directly evidenced in our understanding of how the new covenant will be fulfilled. Be certain that this matter of the new covenant and the nation with whom He made it remains no small concern to God, as He indicates that the fixed order of His created world hangs in the balance (Jer. 31:35-36). On matters of such importance to God we might expect to find near universal agreement among His people, but alas we find nothing of the kind. Postmillennialism, amillennialism, and covenant-premillennialism offer explanations that we find unacceptable. But even within the dispensational tradition the understandings are varied and disparate. At least three major views are readily discernible upon examination of dispensationalism's development. (1) The *Multiple New Covenant* view (here referenced as MC) – this was the view of Chafer and Walvoord, for example, who believed there to be an Old Testament covenant for Israel, to be fully and literally fulfilled by Israel, and a New Testament covenant for the church, fulfilled presently and in the future by the church. (2) The *Single Covenant Multiple Participants* view (here referenced as SCMP) – this was the view of Scofield, for example, who believed that the church participates during the present age in aspects of Israel's new covenant, though the covenant will be fulfilled literally with Israel in the future. A variation of this view was presented by Pentecost and has come to be perhaps the most accepted of all dispensational views on the new covenant. (3) The *Single Covenant Israel Only* view (here referenced as SCIO) – Darby was one of the few to espouse this view, as he believed the church to be totally unrelated to the new covenant, yet having a relationship with the One who ratified the new covenant.

The three views each require the utilization of distinct hermeneutic devices for their derivation, and upon review of these devices it seems clear that the devices are as incompatible as the conclusions themselves. Which conclusion is correct – or nearest correct? Which hermeneutic device is to be employed? As Diprose observed,

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>4</sup> Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology* (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 1993), 836-837.

these are not simply matters of ecclesiology or eschatology, rather these matters cut to the core of the very character of God and how we are to approach His word. In light of the importance of this issue, what follows is an attempt to evaluate the three basic views and the legitimacy of the three devices applied to derive them.

### **Three Views, Three Devices**

#### *The Multiple New Covenant View (MC)*

Lewis Sperry Chafer suggests that the church is “sheltered under a new covenant made in His blood.”<sup>5</sup> Further, he distinguishes between “the new covenant yet to be made with Israel and...the new covenant now in force with the church.”<sup>6</sup> In agreement, Walvoord says, “Most premillenarians (Darby excepted) would agree that a new covenant has been provided for the church, but not *the* new covenant for Israel.”<sup>7</sup> Walvoord believes the MC view has two significant advantages. First, he says,

It provides a sensible reason for establishing the Lord’s supper for believers in this age in commemoration of the blood of the new covenant. The language of 1 Corinthians 11:25 seems to require it...It hardly seems reasonable to expect Christians to distinguish between the cup and the new covenant when these appear to be identified in this passage.<sup>8</sup>

It seems that this argument misses the revealed purpose of the ordinance – at least as it pertains to Paul’s immediate audience. Paul adds a postscript to Jesus’ words, saying “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes.” (1 Cor. 11:26) If the new covenant was a significant aspect of the cup *for the Corinthians’ application*, then why were they not told to proclaim the new covenant? Why did Paul say nothing more of the matter in his letter? The ordinance focuses on His death, not on the covenant.

Second, Walvoord appeals to one of Paul’s two other direct references to the new covenant, saying,

In 2 Corinthians 3:6, Paul speaking of himself states: “Our sufficiency is of God: who also made us sufficient as ministers of a new covenant.” It would be difficult to adjust the ministry of Paul as a minister of the new covenant if, in fact, there is no new covenant for the present age.<sup>9</sup>

This argument is based on the premise that in order for one to serve a covenant that covenant must be in effect. That premise seems flawed, however, in light of Paul’s stated hope of Israel’s national salvation (e.g., Rom. 11:13-15). Notice he uses the same term here (*diakonus*) as he does in Romans 11:13 (*diakonian*). He magnifies

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<sup>5</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology, Volume IV* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1993), 49.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 325.

<sup>7</sup> John Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1959), 214.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 218-219.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

his service that Jews might be saved. Additionally, the covenant can be ratified and awaiting fulfillment without being in effect or presently fulfilled, and one can be serving it even as he hopes for its future fulfillment.

Another writer explains that the theological framework of dispensations understood in a particular way requires multiple new covenants. He says,

Each dispensation is, in fact, a covenantal arrangement that establishes the stewardship required of each dispensation. The dispensations of “human government” and of the “Mosaic Law,” or any dispensation including the “church age,” involve “new covenants.” By definition, a change in dispensations results from a change in stipulations (with the implied or specifically articulated blessings and cursings). The former covenant relationship is replaced with an updated and revised covenant. In some cases this involves the updating of the historical prologue section of the covenant as well. *Every new dispensation involves some “new covenant,” not only the present church age.*<sup>10</sup> [emphasis mine]

Here, the theological hermeneutic is employed. The writer cannot identify specifically and precisely identified covenants in Scripture that would characterize each dispensation. This is the same device used to derive the covenants of redemption, works, and grace. If we are to have any credibility in our assertions that we as dispensationalists are *uniquely* literal grammatical-historical in our handling of the text, then we cannot engage in such maneuvers.

The writer adds, “When the new covenant and the Melchizedekian priesthood have begun to function, there is no going back to the Aaronic priesthood and the Mosaic Law (Heb. 7:17-19).”<sup>11</sup> While there is no return to the Mosaic Law, the continuation of the Levitical priesthood is demanded by God’s eternal salt-covenant with Aaron (Num. 18:19) and a literal fulfillment of an addendum to the Davidic covenant (Jer. 33:12-23) and is to be fulfilled literally through the Zadokian line (Ezek. 43:19ff). The writer crystallizes the issue when he says,

The new covenant specifically mentioned in the Scriptures is yet future for a redeemed and sanctified Jewish people. Theologically there are many new covenants because each dispensation is a new covenant.<sup>12</sup>

Many admirable thinkers would agree with this statement, at least in part. Note for example, the observation of Eugene Merrill:

...the “New” Covenant of Jeremiah is not precisely the same as the New Covenant of most New Testament texts but that nonetheless both flow from the Abrahamic Covenant. Jeremiah’s covenant is made explicitly with a

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<sup>10</sup> John Master, “The New Covenant,” *Issues in Dispensationalism*, Wesley Willis and John Master, eds. (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1994),102.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

renewed, eschatological Israel and Judah (cf. Jer. 31:1, 17, 23, 27, 31) whereas the New Covenant of the New Testament is universalized to include not only Israel but also all the nations who turn to the Lord in repentance and faith.<sup>13</sup>

In this view, Jeremiah's new covenant then is not for the church, but there is a theologically derived new covenant that is necessitated by the basic theological understanding of how God works in each dispensation. Note this understanding builds upon the premise that dispensations are soteriological outworkings of God rather than doxological ones. It cannot be overstated how destructive the soteriological centered understanding is, since the logical and theological requirements of such grounding force us to handle the text as creatively as our covenant-theology brothers.<sup>14</sup> To say that "Church saints have a covenantal relationship with God"<sup>15</sup> by way of the new covenant demands either that we identify a passage in which God directly makes a new covenant (and consequently an old one) with the church or that we relinquish the high ground of consistency in applying literal grammatical-historical hermeneutics, recognizing as John Gerstner did, that "far from determining dispensational theology, the dispensational literal hermeneutic (with all its inconsistencies), is in fact the direct result of that theology."<sup>16</sup>

How can we criticize the covenants of redemption, works and grace as being unbiblical and artificial when we likewise refer to, for example, an Adamic covenant and an Edenic covenant, when nothing is ever so called in Scripture? After all, if we adopt the view that every dispensation represents some kind of new covenant, then these "covenants" are indeed logically and theologically necessitated, thus we defend our characterization of some promises as covenants based on something other than exegetical necessity. Our hermeneutics become "a very shaky affair indeed."<sup>17</sup> Regardless of the grand heritage and tradition of the multiple new covenant view, we cannot stand upon it, as the cost to do so is nothing less than our very feet. Consider the following statements:

Accordingly, the best solution to the problem is to recognize that Christ introduced by His death on the cross this covenant of grace which has many applications.

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<sup>13</sup> Eugene Merrill, "The Covenant with Abraham: The Keystone of Biblical Architecture," *Journal of Dispensational Theology* (Volume 12, Number 36, August 2008), 16.

<sup>14</sup> For sake of brevity I will not address here the importance of recognizing God's doxological purpose rather than soteriological purpose as the central factor in defining a dispensation. Nonetheless, I believe this to be the greatest single issue that dispensational theology must rectify if we would hope to maintain a truly Biblical theology. I do address this in some detail in *Prolegomena: Introductory Notes on Bible Study & Theological Method* (Tyndale Seminary Press, 2009), 94-96.

<sup>15</sup> John Master, "The New Covenant," *Issues in Dispensationalism*, Wesley Willis and John Master, eds. (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1994), 109.

<sup>16</sup> John Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 2000), 111.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

And

The covenant of grace, accordingly, is extended principally to Israel in the Old Testament, to the church in the present age...

Are these the comments of Zacharias Ursinus? Johannes Cocceius? O.T. Allis? Louis Berkhof? John Gerstner? R.C. Sproul? None of the above. They come from an affirmation of MC by John Walvoord.<sup>18</sup> Contrast Walvoord's words with Berkhof's on dispensationalism's "Adamic covenant," and a near stunning role reversal is observed. Berkhof says,

The first revelation of the covenant is found in the protoevangel, Gen. 3:15. Some deny that this has any reference to the covenant; *and it certainly does not refer to any formal establishment of a covenant.* [emphasis mine] The revelation of such an establishment could only follow after the covenant idea had been developed in history. At the same time Gen. 3:15 certainly contains a revelation of the essence of the covenant.<sup>19</sup>

The covenant theologian argues that the text does not refer to the formal establishment of a covenant, and that deriving such a covenant requires reading theology back into the text. And while he doesn't protest too vehemently (as he cannot with any great consistency), his methodology seems in this instance more characteristically dispensational than that of the dispensational theologian.

*The Single Covenant, Multiple Participants View (SCMP)*

C.I. Scofield, in his *Study Bible Notes* on Hebrews 8, summarizes what he identifies as eight Biblical covenants, and says that the new covenant "secures the eternal blessedness, under the Abrahamic Covenant of all who believe." Elsewhere he says that "Christians are now partakers"<sup>20</sup> of the new covenant. J. Carl Laney in similar fashion believes that "Under the New Covenant, spiritual blessings are secured for all believers through the redemptive work of Christ."<sup>21</sup> He emphasizes the point further saying, "Virtually all the blessings we have in Christ are based on spiritual provisions of the New Covenant."<sup>22</sup> He adds that

Believers today are living between the first and second advents of Christ under the provisions of the New Covenant. They are participating in a form of God's kingdom, but are yet awaiting its full consummation when Christ will establish His reign on the earth.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>18</sup> John Walvoord, *The Prophecy Knowledge Handbook* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1990), 503.

<sup>19</sup> Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 293.

<sup>20</sup> C.I. Scofield, *Scofield Bible Correspondence Course Volume I: Introduction to the Scriptures* (Chicago, IL: Moody Bible Institute, 1959), 70.

<sup>21</sup> J. Carl Laney, "God's Plan of the Ages" in *Understanding Christian Theology*, Charles Swindoll and Roy Zuck, gen. eds. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2003), 249.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 228.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 231.

This understanding of the new covenant shows a reliance on the hermeneutic device of “already not yet.” John Witmer recognizes the slight furthering of this device in PD, which he says “identifies the spiritual blessings of the New Covenant with God’s promises to David in the Davidic Covenant.”<sup>24</sup> Witmer distinguishes between spiritual blessings of the new covenant and physical blessings of the Davidic covenant. But can we draw distinctions between spiritual blessings and physical ones within the framework of a covenant offered to specifically named recipients? Consider that the fulfilling of the spiritual blessing is immediately to be followed by the granting of the physical blessing (Ezek. 36:27-28).

In similar fashion, Paul Benware, seemingly voicing his agreement with SCMP says,

The church, then, is a partaker of the spiritual blessings of the new covenant, enjoying regeneration, the forgiveness of sin, and the presence and ministry of the Holy Spirit.<sup>25</sup>

While it is wholly appropriate to say that the church partakes of spiritual blessings, why the need to connect the spiritual blessings to the new covenant? The Abrahamic covenant promises blessing for those who are not Abraham’s physical descendants (Gen. 12:3). Likewise, the ministry of the Holy Spirit to gentiles is promised outside of the context of the new covenant (cf. Joel 2:28ff and Acts 2, etc.). Additionally, there is significant revelation regarding salvation of gentiles outside of the context of the new covenant (Gen. 12:3, Is. 11:10; cf. Gen. 15:6 and Jon. 3:5; Is. 42:6; 49:6; etc.). It should also be noted the regeneration spoken of in Jeremiah 31 is not only related to the forgiveness of sins, but also to the planting of Israel in the land (v. 33), the writing of God’s law on the heart (v. 33), and the needlessness of any further teaching about God (v. 34). None of these things are ever said to accompany the regeneration of church age believers. Additionally, the sins to be forgiven in the new covenant are “their” sins (note in v. 34, the third person plural pronominal suffix: *la’avonam*). Following standard rules of grammar we must look for the antecedent to which the third person plural refers. It is *they* who also broke the old covenant – the house of Israel and the house of Judah.

Stanley Toussaint acknowledges that Christ, in the upper room (Mt. 26:27; Mk. 14:24; Lk. 22:20) was most assuredly referencing the Jeremiah 31 new covenant. He says,

It seems that the King is looking back to the prophesied new covenant also known as the everlasting covenant and the covenant of peace (Jeremiah 31:31-34; 32:37-40; Ezekiel 34:25-31; 37: 26-28). This is what would immediately flash into the mind of the average Jew. *In fact, it could refer to no*

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<sup>24</sup> John Witmer, “Christ’s Present Ministry at the Right Hand of God the Father,” *Understanding Christian Theology*, Charles Swindoll and Roy Zuck, gen. eds. (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2003), 361.

<sup>25</sup> Paul Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 2006), 77.

*other covenant since no other covenant was still unconfirmed.* [emphasis mine]<sup>26</sup>

Toussaint adds that the new covenant was “clearly and definitely made with the nation of Israel exclusively.”<sup>27</sup> However, as he critiques the view that the “new covenant is with Israel only and has no relationship to the church,”<sup>28</sup> he says, “to assert that there is one new covenant with Israel only having no relationship to the church is erroneous for several reasons.”<sup>29</sup> He acknowledges an exclusive audience with a still yet future fulfillment, while at the same time he suggests that “the new covenant must be in effect today.”<sup>30</sup> Again, this seems to be at the very least a flirtation with Ladd’s “already not yet” hermeneutic device. But is it justified by the New Testament references to the New Covenant? Clearly, the admirable Toussaint and others holding to SCMP believe so, as Toussaint offers four justifications.

First, Paul in 2 Corinthians 3:6 clearly states that he is a minister of a new covenant. It is certain that his ministry was not confined to Israel only. He was the minister of a new covenant then in effect which was applicable to Jew and Gentile alike.<sup>31</sup>

Unfortunately, this is a non sequitur. Paul references himself and those serving with him as *diakonous kaines diathekes* – servants of a new covenant. Note that Paul was *servicing* a new covenant, not *administering* it. Thus his audience (whether Jew or Gentile, or both) is irrelevant as it relates to this point. How then does he serve a new covenant? Perhaps insofar as he magnified his ministry in order that the Jews might be moved to jealousy and be saved (Rom. 11:13-14). By so doing he is certainly seeking to hasten the fulfillment of the covenant. Perhaps that is not sufficient and there remains more to consider, but nonetheless, the term Paul used (*diakonous*) does not provide or even imply any connection of the new covenant or the blessings of the new covenant to the church.

Second, in 1 Corinthians 11:25, Paul quotes the Lord in saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood.” Therefore the new covenant must be in effect today, and it must sustain some relationship to the church.<sup>32</sup>

Again, this seems not an entirely accurate conclusion. The first premise is (apparently) that the moment the blood of the covenant was shed, the covenant became effective. Compare this with the ratification of the Abrahamic covenant which did not see any of its specific aspects specifically fulfilled until much later.

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<sup>26</sup> Stanley Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1980), 299.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 300.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 301.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*



Perhaps it would be better to say the covenant was ratified but not fulfilled. If Toussaint means that the covenant stands ratified, I must concur, but if he means that it is in effect, or that it is underway, then if we expect a literal fulfillment of the covenant we would expect it to be fulfilled in the order it was given. Notice the first aspect of the new covenant proclaimed by God is the writing of God's laws on the hearts of those of the house of Israel and the house of Judah. Is this in effect or has this already happened? Again, note the order of the covenant reiterated in Ezekiel 36:24ff. The first event proclaimed is a national ingathering. Even if one argues that 1948 fulfilled that (I do not believe it did in any way, though it might serve as a precursor or a preparation), were we to understand that the new covenant was not in effect before that? Of course not. We must be careful not to parse the things necessary for fulfillment using the "already not yet" device. Further, if Christ's death served as a ratification rather than a "putting into effect" of the covenant, then we would see a clear delineation of the church's (non) relation to the new covenant: the church would be related to the Mediator, and not to the covenant. Nothing in 1 Corinthians 11:25 offers any indication either that the covenant is in effect today or that it is related to the church. The church is to remember Him, not the covenant. His death then met (at least) two purposes related to this present discussion: (1) He died to ratify the new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah – the covenant cannot be fulfilled unless it is first ratified. His death accomplished that. Notice that all in the room were only Jews, and the church had not been inaugurated yet. (2) He died to enable the fulfillment of the final component of the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 12:3) – that all the families of the earth would be blessed through Abraham. It is the Lord's death we proclaim through the ordinance, not the covenant.

Third, advocates of the view that there is one covenant only with one application to Israel argue that Jeremiah 31 is addressed to the Jews. This is true. *However this does not hinder the possibility of participation of the church in its blessings* [emphasis mine].<sup>33</sup>

The emphasized statement is true, but it is no less an argument from silence: nothing indicates that such participation is impossible, thus it is possible. We could argue anything is possible, but how do we move from possibility to actuality? The literal grammatical-historical hermeneutic does not permit us to make such a move based on a theological framework, but instead requires that it be exegetically warranted. Note how Saucy uses an argument from silence to justify aspects of Davidic covenant fulfillment in the present age. He says first,

It would appear, therefore, that either Psalm 110 is a reference to heaven or Peter was giving a new interpretation to the psalm. As we have seen, the right hand of God was not spatially thought of as being in heaven. In fact, it was not primarily a spatial concept at all, but a metaphor for the supreme position of authority next to the king. *Thus Peter's teaching that Christ*

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

*assumed this position through the ascension added something that was probably not recognized in earlier interpretations of the Psalm [emphasis mine]. But this should not lead to the conclusion that Peter was denying the original meaning.*<sup>34</sup>

He argues that key aspects regarding David's throne and the right hand of God were not limited by the Old Testament terminology, and thus left room for later re-interpretation. This is the maneuver (the complementary hermeneutic) whereby PD derives its "already not yet" device. Using this device, Saucy concludes that the Davidic covenant is at least partially being fulfilled at present:

That this present salvation is not the complete fulfillment of these promised blessings to the world is clear from Paul's statement that when Israel returns to her God, the riches for the Gentiles will be far more than they are even today (Ro 11:12). The Gentiles, however, are being blessed with messianic salvation at present because the Messiah has come and has accomplished salvation...the evidence dealing with the restoration of the Davidic kingship reveals only an initial fulfillment of the covenant promises during the present age.<sup>35</sup>

It seems that Toussaint's defense here of the SCMP is not only consistent with the methodology of many other traditional dispensationalist thinkers, but it is surprisingly consistent with that of progressive dispensationalists as well.

Toussaint offers a fourth argument against the one covenant one recipient view:

Finally, in Hebrews 8:6 and 9:15, Christ is said to be the mediator of a new and better covenant now. If His mediatorship is present, then the covenant upon which His mediatorship is based must be present.<sup>36</sup>

This argument offers a conclusion (the covenant must be present) based on a single premise (His mediatorship is present). First, the distinction between being "in effect" and being presently ratified (past action with existing results) must be considered. It appears Toussaint intends the former, yet the latter would seem to meet the condition of the argument well enough. To argue specifically for "in effect" rather than presently ratified would require a more thorough argument with stated premises rather than assumed ones. In other words, if the structure of Toussaint's fourth argument is accepted, it could just as easily be stated as follows: If His mediatorship is present then the covenant upon which His mediatorship is based must stand presently ratified. If restated in this way, then the argument would favor the single covenant, single recipient view.

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<sup>34</sup> Robert Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1993), 71.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>36</sup> Stanley Toussaint, *op. cit.*, 302.

Also note that inseparable from His role as Mediator of the covenant He is a priest in the order of Melchizedek (6:20). That is to say that He is a priestly King. If we apply “already not yet” to one aspect of Christ’s mediatorial role, by saying that His mediatorship is present and thus the (new) covenant is present, we cannot with integrity dismiss such application to other aspects. Is Christ reigning as a Melchizedekian king now? PD answers without hesitation in the affirmative: “...Jesus’ resurrection-ascension to God’s right hand is put forward by Peter as a fulfillment of the Davidic covenant...As the Davidic heir, Jesus sits in and rules from heaven.”<sup>37</sup> The problem of consistency is readily apparent: how can I apply “already not yet” to the new covenant and yet argue that it should not be applied to the Davidic covenant? Elliott Johnson observes a nuance in PD methodology that might sound familiar. He says, “Craig Blaising relates an inaugural or present fulfillment due to Christ’s mediation of the covenants with the church after His first advent.”<sup>38</sup> The subtle distinction here between PD and SCMP is that PD applies “already not yet” to the covenants (plural) while SCMP applies it only to the new covenant. Further, the hermeneutic which derives “already not yet” is grounded in the silence of the Old Testament. Darrell Bock describes the PD argument as follows:

The progressive argument is that the New Testament treats a wide scope of provisions as realized in the current era, while also noting the fundamental shifts in the administrative structure and operation of God’s promise in this era. These provisions and shifts are proclaimed in terms that point to the realization and advance of the promises of God. They show that *a covenantal stage has been reached as a result of Jesus’ coming that is directly connected to the promises of old. In sum, some of what was promised in the covenants has come and has been instituted.* [emphasis mine] The sheer scope of this covenantal language points to initial realization.<sup>39</sup>

The silence of the Old Testament on certain matters pertaining to the covenants has apparently become the fertile ground for expansion and “already not yet” fulfillments.

Finally, it should be noted that the focus of Hebrews is the qualification and superiority of Jesus Christ, and that none of the sixteen appearances of *diatheke* show any exegetical connection whatsoever to the church. On the contrary, the new covenant is repeated verbatim with the distinct recipient language completely intact (8:8-12).

Dismissing then (1) the non-literal view, (2) the single covenant, single recipient view, and (3) the multiple covenant view, Toussaint offers a fourth option he considers more tenable:

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<sup>37</sup> Darrell Bock, “The Reign of the Lord Christ,” *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 49-50.

<sup>38</sup> Elliott Johnson, “Covenants in Traditional Dispensationalism,” *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1999), 122.

<sup>39</sup> Darrell Bock, “Response: Covenants in Traditional Dispensationalism,” *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1999), 157.

It asserts that the new covenant was made with Israel and will ultimately find its fulfillment in that nation, but in the meantime the church enters into certain blessings of the new covenant.<sup>40</sup>

He explains further that

It must be concluded, therefore, that the church benefits from certain spiritual blessings of the new covenant such as regeneration and the forgiveness of sins, but all the blessings will be Israel's as manifested in the future earthly kingdom.<sup>41</sup>

A glaring problem remains. On what basis is regeneration and forgiveness of sins for church age believers tied to the new covenant? The argument from silence is not sufficient. There must be a clear and definite exegetical connection, and yet there is none. Note for emphasis that John's Gospel is the only one of the four that references regeneration (specifically, being born again), and it is the only one of the four that ignores entirely the ratification of the new covenant, as John's record of the upper room discourse does not include the ordinance of the cup. This is not a clumsy omission on John's part.

The church bearing a relationship to the Mediator has strong exegetical grounding, but the church participating in any aspects of God's new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah can only be defended by an abandonment of the literal grammatical-historical hermeneutic in favor of the complementary hermeneutic and the "already not yet" device so eagerly embraced by PD. Once again, should we hold to this view, we find ourselves on the low ground with no room to criticize "development" using the "already not yet" device. Particular hermeneutic methods result in particular conclusions. If we are accepting of the methods, we are forced to likewise approve of the conclusions derived from consistently applying the methods. *PD simply does with the Davidic covenant what SCMP has done with the new covenant.* Perhaps this is one reason that only a handful of "traditional" dispensationalists have mounted meaningful arguments against PD.

It should be noted at this point that Fruchtenbaum,<sup>42</sup> Decker,<sup>43</sup> and others have identified a dispensational view closely related to SCMP, highlighting a distinction between this view that the church participates in some way in the new covenant, and the view (SCMP) that the church has a preliminary part in the new covenant. Fruchtenbaum, for example, identifies Pentecost as a representative of this better perspective. Despite this endorsement, it seems that this view uses the same device as SCMP, and really isn't significantly different after all. Pentecost, though representing that the church is not under or fulfilling the new covenant, asserts that the church is receiving new covenant blessings. He says,

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<sup>40</sup> Stanley Toussaint, *op. cit.*, 302.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology*, 366-369.

<sup>43</sup> Rodney Decker, "New Covenant, Dispensational Views of the," *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1996), 280-282.

Since the church receives blessings of the Abrahamic covenant (Gal. 3:14; 4:22-31) by faith without being under or fulfilling that covenant, so the church may receive blessings from the new covenant without being under or fulfilling that new covenant.<sup>44</sup>

What seems to be missed is a critical factor in this discussion: that gentile believers during the church age *are indeed under and fulfilling directly* the seventh aspect of the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 12:3, cf. Gal. 3:14), an assertion which if true would remove the Abrahamic covenant from consideration as a proof text for an “already not yet” approach to covenant blessings. This view, though emphasizing primarily (if not only) soteriological shared blessings, nonetheless relies entirely on the “already not yet” device. For this reason, I do not consider it to be distinct from SCMP, but rather a more subtle form of the same.

#### *The Single Covenant, Israel Only View (SCIO)*

Bernard Ramm makes an astute and troubling observation when he suggests “to say that we are under the benefits of the covenant without actually being under the covenant is to clandestinely admit what is boldly denied.”<sup>45</sup> Connecting the church directly to benefits promised specifically to Israel requires any one of three maneuvers: (1) the application of the allegorical hermeneutic to the end that Israel and the church are not viewed as completely distinct, (2) the employment of the theological hermeneutic to the end that a covenant is artificially derived outside the parameters of exegetical warrant, and (3) the utilization of the “already not yet” device to show some degree of present fulfillment or present application of the new covenant. I can discover no legitimacy whatsoever in any of these three options, as all three supplant literal grammatical-historical hermeneutics in favor of other hermeneutic devices, which, if applied consistently, would distort the Biblical text beyond recognition and undermine its perspicuity beyond comprehension. There must be a simpler way, and one that allows a greater degree of consistency in hermeneutic method. It would seem that SCIO is the view most consistent with a literal grammatical-historical hermeneutic, and no special-case hermeneutic device is required to derive it.

Examining the New Testament record we discover that the synoptic gospels point to the ratification of the new covenant (Mt. 26:28; Mk. 14:24; Lk. 22:20), and each delineate clearly that ratification taking place at his death – an event that necessarily precedes the inauguration of the church. Likewise, Jesus’ audience was entirely Jewish (and not yet members of the church), and it would not have been at all out of place for Him to discuss an entirely Jewish covenant. Finally, there is *nothing in these passages* that would imply the covenant is related in any fashion to the church. Thus the new covenant referenced here is not a covenant with an as of yet non-existent church. Paul’s later inclusion of the ordinance in 1 Corinthians

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<sup>44</sup> J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Grand Rapids, MI: Academie/Zondervan, 1964), 127.

<sup>45</sup> Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book, 1970), 264.

11:25-26 tells us the purpose for the ordinance in the church: to proclaim the Lord's death until He comes. The emphasis is not on the covenant He ratified but is rather on His own death – a death that Paul characterizes later as a critical part of the gospel (15:3), yet with no relation to or mention of the covenant.

Furthermore, though John makes exclusive Gospel reference to blessings of the same (or at least similar) kind as those identified in the new covenant – i.e., regeneration (Jn. 3) and near exclusive (only elsewhere specifically discussed in Lk. 12:12; and 24:49) reference to the future ministry of the Holy Spirit (Jn. 14-16), he excludes the ordinance entirely, and makes no mention of any covenants in any of his letters.

Similarly, Paul returns to the theme of regeneration in Titus (3:5) without any mention of the covenant in that all-important pastoral letter. He discusses the ministry of the Spirit in all of His epistles but Philemon, yet mentions the covenant directly on only three occasions (Rom. 11:27; 1 Cor. 11:25 and 2 Cor. 3:6). Even the forgiveness of sins cited in Romans 11:27 references specifically the sins of Israel and forgiveness for Israel. Note the distinct usage of second person (you, your, vv. 25 and 28) and third person pronouns (them, their, v. 27). Israel and Jacob directly are directly identified in 11:26 and are clearly the antecedents for the third person pronouns of 11:27. Paul's final mention of the covenant in 2 Corinthians 3:6 is an assertion that he (and those serving with him) are servants of the new covenant – presumably to the extent that the church is intended in part to move Jews to jealousy in order that they might call upon their Messiah (Rom. 11:13-15). He does not connect the new covenant with the church in any way. In fact, he offers no definition of the new covenant nor does he relay any of its content. This is a reality that suggests he expected his readers to understand the covenant from already existing revelation.

Though Paul does not in these passages invoke either a new and separate covenant with the church nor a shared application of the previously revealed one, some argue that he does the latter in Ephesians 2:11-3:6, a passage in which gentiles are described as, among other things, “strangers to the covenants.” (2:12) In 2:12 Paul presents five conditions of unsaved gentiles, and he does not assert that all of these conditions are reversed at the time of salvation. Notice the remedy he diagnoses: those formerly far off have been brought near (2:13), having access through Him in one Spirit to the Father (2:18). Believing gentiles have been made fellow citizens with the saints (believing Jews) (2:19). But fellow citizens of what? Are we now partakers of Jewish covenants? Are we now of the commonwealth of Israel? Have we now become “spiritual” Jews? No on all counts. The mystery is precisely identified in 3:6 that we are fellow members of the body and fellow partakers of the promise (note, not promises). We are brought near to the Jews by virtue of our oneness in the body of Christ, but nowhere in this grand section are we co-partakers or fellow citizens in any aspect outside of that body. This is according to promise. Paul's first mention of the promise in Ephesians appears in 1:13 referencing the Holy Spirit. We could also consider the seventh aspect of God's covenant with Abraham (Gen. 12:3) and compare this with John's concise description of the promise – eternal life (1 Jn. 2:25). Whether the promise here references the related aspects of the ministry of the spirit, gentile blessings under

the Abrahamic covenant, or eternal life, there is no stated or implied connection between the church and the covenants of Israel. Paul says we were once strangers to the covenants of promise and that now we have been brought near (*eggus*). *Near* is not *inside* or *upon*.

Peter also considers the concept of new birth (1 Pet. 1:23) and does not reference any related covenant – in either of his letters. Nor does Jude mention the covenants, though he considers the present ministry of the Holy Spirit (v. 20). This leaves remaining unconsidered only the author of Hebrews, who references the new covenant more frequently than all other New Testament writers combined.

The new covenant is first mentioned in Hebrews by implication in 7:22 as “a better covenant.” The clear contrast is between the Law (the inferior covenant), referenced also as the first covenant (8:7; 9:1), and the second (8:7), also tabbed the new covenant (8:13; 9:15; 12:24) and the eternal covenant (13:20). At least three major points can be made in argument that the new covenant discussed in Hebrews does not in any way pertain to the church.

First, the purpose of the Epistle is primarily to extol the superiority of the Person of Christ (1:3-14), and secondarily to ensure the readers do not neglect in position or practice the great salvation that He provides (2:1-4). That the new covenant, of which He is the Mediator, is contrasted with the old is only one of numerous contrasts in the Epistle (e.g., Levitical priesthood vs. Melchizedekian priesthood; Angels vs. Christ; copies of things vs. the things themselves; sacrifices vs. the Sacrifice; Moses vs. Christ, etc.) serving as means to support the primary theme. We would not and should not assume that because the writer appeals to a particular role of Christ, that such a role is necessarily and immediately applicable to the church. For example, note that the superiority of Christ’s priesthood is clarified as being identified with Melchizedek – the priestly king. Is Christ reigning today? Is there an expectation that Christ will be King of the church? Applying any aspect of Christ’s work discussed in this context directly to the church requires us to extend not only beyond the scope and stated purpose of the text, but it also requires that we reconsider *every* role of Christ identified in this context. Again, as in other contexts (e.g., 1 Cor. 11:25ff), the focus is the Mediator, not the covenant He mediates, which is simply raised in this context as a means whereby we can understand the Mediator to be superior and sufficient. It is by one offering, not one covenant that he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified (Heb. 10:14).

Second, the distinction of pronouns used and inclusion of original-recipient language in the new covenant passages indicate that there has been no changes or additions to the original and directly identified recipients of the new covenant. Note in 10:15 the Holy Spirit bears witness to “us,” yet in 10:16 the covenant will be made with “them”, and He will put His laws upon “their” heart and will write them on “their” mind, and “their” sins will be forgiven. *Us* is not *them*. The pronouns maintain the distinction between the readers of Hebrews and those with whom the covenant is made and to whom it is fulfilled. Likewise, 8:8-12 offers a retelling of Jeremiah 31:31-34, and includes the original-recipient language (“with the House of Israel and with the House of Judah,” 8:8). There is absolutely no indication of a redefining or an altering in any way of the recipients. We cannot assume that since the passage appears in a letter to church age believers (at least in part) that we can thus

arbitrarily apply what is quoted to the church or the church age. It cannot be overstated that there is no language here, directly or implied, that would indicate a shift or expansion of the recipients of the new covenant, on the contrary, the pronouns and names included tell us *there is to be no expansion or redefinition*.

Third, there is no new content added to the covenant that would imply any possibility for expansion or redefinition. It is not insignificant that the covenant is recounted in full without any alterations. This would confirm that the reader is rightly to understand the new covenant of Hebrews as the new covenant of Jeremiah, and thus neither as a second new covenant nor an alteration of the first to accommodate the church's blessing.

It would seem certain blessings had by the church that are often associated by interpreters with the (or, a) new covenant are discussed regularly by the New Testament writers with either no mention of the covenant or with no view to applying the new covenant to the church in any way. If this is so, then we must ask the question, "from whence comes the blessings of the church?" If those blessings are not derived from the new covenant then from what are they derived? It is critical to the SCIO premise that the present day blessings of the church are derived from the seventh aspect of the Abrahamic covenant (Gen. 12:3) – an aspect that would anticipate and include the substitutionary atonement of Christ on behalf of not only Jews but gentiles as well. While it is observed that there is no exegetical warrant for relating the new covenant to the church, SCIO is encumbered by no theological necessity to do so. By method of the literal grammatical-historical hermeneutic, SCIO is able to uniquely maintain - unlike the other views considered here - the *complete* distinction of Israel and the church, and the complete, literal, and *only* literal fulfillment of the provisions of God's new covenant with Israel.

## **Conclusion**

Allow me a bit of wordplay akin to Pascal's wager, though such will no more prove the superiority of SCIO as Pascal's wager does the existence of God. And though I typically bristle at such utilitarian considerations, perhaps this one might spark us to a reconfiguring and a reexamination of some theological premises that call for reconfiguring and reexamination. So, I pose two questions.

First, what do I have to gain by applying the new covenant to the church? I would suggest nothing at all. Each of the blessings that the church presently enjoys fits neatly within God's revealed plan as an aspect of the Abrahamic covenant. (Perhaps I might gain the approval of certain of my peers, though with all due love and respect I must count that as nothing worthy of pursuit.)

Second, what do I have to lose by applying the new covenant to the church? I lose the theological method on which I depend – the literal grammatical-historical device. I can no longer claim consistency, as I must utilize other devices wholly foreign to literal grammatical-historical. Having lost my method and my consistency, I would soon expect to lose my confidence in the veracity of the text and the theology that it reveals. I would expect no more to stand firmly in sound doctrine nor to recognize error when it manifests itself in doctrines mine or externally held, for I would have no more standard for understanding written language. What benefit is inerrancy, inspiration, or infallibility without a standard by which to



interpret what has faithfully been recorded? Like Nietzsche, I would expect that even if there were truth or meaning I would be incapable of ascertaining it, and thus it would be lost to me. In short, if I lose consistency in hermeneutic method, I have lost the text and all for which it stands.

George Peters marveled at those who, by applying kingdom elements of the Davidic covenant to the church, traded in the greatness of God's revealed plan for an artificial theological construct. Peters laments,

It is *strange* and *sad*, that some of the most eminent and talented men of the church, *blinded by a subtle theory*, cannot and will not see how antagonistic such a theory is to God's faithful promises. No wonder that we are so carefully cautioned to beware of mere human wisdom.<sup>46</sup>

Perhaps we might consider that an error of the same kind - even if made with regard to a different covenant - produces equally strange and sad results.

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<sup>46</sup> George N. H. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom, Vol. I* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1978), 657.