

## THE “NEW COVENANT” IN MY BLOOD: NEW, OLD, or OTHER?

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Council on Dispensational Hermeneutics  
September 2009  
Clarks Summit, Pennsylvania

### Introduction

“It is no secret that there is more diversity among traditional dispensationalists regarding the church’s relationship to the new covenant than regarding any other comparable issue in our system.” So began Rodney Decker’s paper to the Council on Dispensational Hermeneutics last year.<sup>1</sup> His observations sparked interest and caused this year’s focus to be on the New Covenant and the issues surrounding that covenant for dispensationalists. The task this writer will seek to address involves references to the New Covenant in the Gospels, specifically the texts surrounding the Lord’s Supper.

While it would be well to do a complete examination of the entire subject using all relevant texts and contexts it would be an impossible task for one person and so many will take to examining various portions of the subject and seek to draw conclusions using the best methods available. It seems appropriate to summarize the major options that have been postulated in recent years regarding the New Covenant before beginning to examine the specific task at hand.

R. Bruce Compton<sup>2</sup> in his 2003 article lays out the major views with respect to Israel, the Church, and the New Covenant well and gives five different positions that are generally taken regarding this subject:

1. The Church replaces national Israel and fulfills the New Covenant in the present.
2. There are two New Covenants: One for Israel and one for the Church.
3. The New Covenant is exclusively for Israel and will be fulfilled by Israel in the future.
4. The Church partially fulfills the New Covenant now; Israel completely fulfills the New Covenant in the future.

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<sup>1</sup> Decker, Rodney J. 2008. Why do dispensationalists have such a hard time agreeing on the new covenant? Paper presented at Council on Dispensational Hermeneutics, Clarks Summit, PA, September, 2008.

<sup>2</sup> R. Bruce Compton is Professor of Biblical Languages and Exposition at Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, Allen Park, MI. and has served there since 1977.

5. The Church presently participates in the New Covenant; Israel fulfills the New Covenant in the future.<sup>3</sup>

While there may be other options, generally these are the ones that will be the subject of discussion throughout this conference. This author will assume that option one will not be one that is promoted at this conference therefore there remains four from which to choose. There may be varying degrees of comfort with a number of different options but suffice it to say this will be part of the discussion of this conference and maybe many more to come. It is with this background that we engage the subject of the New Covenant in the Last Supper narratives.

### **Approach and Methodology**

This paper will seek to consider how and to what extent the New Covenant should be understood in the three gospel narratives of the Last Supper: Matthew 26:28; Mark 14:24, and Luke 22:20. It is noteworthy that the phrase “new covenant” does not appear in either Matthew or Mark but does in Luke giving us only one verse with parallel contexts to examine with respect to the use of the phrase “new covenant.” While it is impossible to totally ignore ones theological framework or system; we are taught to seek to know and understand our presuppositions and to put them aside when doing exegesis and allow the text to speak for itself.<sup>4</sup>

We will begin with an analysis of each of the texts in the synoptic gospels, and move to an understanding of the historical setting with an examination of some possible options within that historical context. We will then seek to draw some conclusions based on the text, our observations, and a sound theological approach. One must recognize that it is ultimately impossible to totally ignore ones theological framework, so it is the intent of this author to admit that bias initially and seek to be as fair to the text as humanly possible.<sup>5</sup>

With that said there are some presuppositions or foundational beliefs that this author brings to the table that cannot be ignored as part of the methodological approach in this paper.

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<sup>3</sup> Compton, Bruce R. 2003. Dispensationalism, the church, and the new covenant. *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal (DBSJ)* 8. (pp. 5-9).

<sup>4</sup> Corley, Bruce., Steve Lemke and Grant Lovejoy, ed. 2002. *Biblical hermeneutics: A comprehensive introduction to interpreting Scripture*. Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman & Holman Publishers. (Chapter 14).

<sup>5</sup> To do otherwise is to be deceptive which in my humble opinion many writers inadvertently are because they fail to acknowledge their own bias. Whether the noetic effects of sin or the overall fallen condition of man it is impossible to totally be objective in any enterprise and it should be noted that I bring a set of biases to the table.

First, is the belief in the existence of God and his revelation to man without error in the original autographs of the Scripture. Second, is a foundational belief in the inspiration of the Scripture, that being God's superintendence of the writers which guarantees that what was written is the Word of God without error in the original autographs!<sup>6</sup> The consequence of this thinking ultimately colors how one looks at the text of Scripture and what one is willing to consider with respect to what it says. Yet as has already been pointed out last year by one of our own we must be careful to "...walk [the] fine line in delineating legitimate exegesis from the invalid imposition of premature, system-driven conclusions into the text."<sup>7</sup>

With that admonition in mind let us proceed to begin our examination of the relevant texts seeking to avoid the error already identified.

### **Analysis of the relevant texts of Scripture**

**Matthew 26:28** "for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins." Two phrases immediately jump out requiring both questions and answers. First, Jesus says that this is His, "blood of the covenant." Now it is important to remember to whom he is talking. His disciples...JEWS...and while it cannot be proved empirically it is interesting that very phrase appears in Exodus 24:8 and the historic context involves the people of Israel getting from Moses and God the Law, and then God calling them to confirm the covenant with Him. In exodus 24 Moses reads the covenant to the people and then with the blood of a heifer he sprinkles the people confirming the covenant with God. Now one must wonder what the disciples would think and understand when Jesus uses the same phrase in the "last supper" narratives. It seems that if they knew the Law of Moses they may remember such an event and have that as the backdrop for considering what would follow.

Second, Jesus says, "which is poured out for many" which is not exactly what was spoken in the Old Testament but the concept of the many is clearly referential to the people of Israel as suggested by Ham referring to Isaiah 53.<sup>8</sup> We also see this concept in Daniel 9, 11, 12, and again in Romans 5. This phrase would cause, in this writer's opinion, the reader to

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<sup>6</sup> This is a modification of the definition of inspiration by Charles Ryrie in his book *Basic Theology*, Moody Press, 1999.

<sup>7</sup> Decker, Rodney J. 2008. Why do dispensationalists have such a hard time agreeing on the new covenant? Paper presented at Council on Dispensational Hermeneutics, Clarks Summit, PA, September, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Ham, Clay. 2000. The last supper in Matthew. *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 10.1: 53-69

remember those passages and be focused on the promises already made to the people of Israel. Consider also that the historic event takes place the evening before the traditional Passover meal, one of the most significant Jewish holidays. It seems hard to believe that Jesus did not use words that would resonate and have referential understanding in his hearers and equally hard to believe that his disciples would not make the connection. Because both Mark and Luke say it is a Passover meal one must either conclude that the writers were incorrect in the reporting of the events or that Jesus in anticipation of the events to follow actually invited them to a Passover meal before the regular Jewish timetable. Clay Ham suggests that it is possible that Jesus used this event to elaborate on their understanding of the New Covenant, and that the meal was indeed a Passover meal out of sequence to the Jewish practice.<sup>9</sup>

The question before us is what did Jesus mean by these phrases and to what was he referring? Before we answer those questions we must consider the other two passages. Mark 14:24 (τοῦτό ἐστιν τὸ αἷμά μου τῆς διαθήκης) is nearly identical to Matthew 26 (τὸτο γάρ ἐστιν τὸ αἷμά μου τῆς διαθήκης) which engenders the same questions. It is Luke's gospel that offers a different reading.

**Luke 22:14-23** describes this same even only now the phrase is “this cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood.” These words would cause the hearers to listen carefully and wonder, even contemplate what they were taught as youth. The phrase “poured out” is the word ἐκχυννόμενον which is translated “poured out” or “shed”. Even within the New Testament the connection of this word to the drink offering is clear in 2 Timothy 4. This would have evoked some response on the part of the hearers.<sup>10</sup> That response would clearly be one of confusion in light of their anticipation of the kingdom but still they would have understood the connection in the words used by Jesus.

A second element is the “new covenant in My blood” it is here that the concept of the new covenant is clearly distinguished from the phrase in Matthew and Mark. It seems to this writer that the audience would not consider another understanding than a reference to the New Covenant in Jeremiah. To suggest that the disciples knew, in any way shape or form, that Jesus was referring to anything other than Jeremiah 31 would require knowledge beyond the elements

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<sup>9</sup> It must be acknowledged that there is a textual variant here which eliminates this word from consideration and thus eliminates the essential nature of this particular argument but I believe I am safe in at least connecting the word to the concept prevalent in the Old Testament where wrath, drink offerings, and other elements are said to be “poured out” or “shed”.

<sup>10</sup> Ham, Clay. 2000. The last supper in Matthew. *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 10.1: 53-69.

of this or any other text which we have considered to this point. Therefore it is incumbent upon us to at least acknowledge that there is a relationship between this event and the Old Testament promise of a New Covenant with Israel in Jeremiah.

With that in mind it is necessary to consider how and to what extent the New Covenant in Jeremiah is the focus or understanding in these texts or if there is something more being expressed by Jesus with respect to the new entity which he will establish on the day of Pentecost. That is did Jesus have the Church in mind with reference to this event giving credence to the Covenant position of replacement theology. One must acknowledge that there is insufficient textual data within these passages to formulate a full picture of the New Covenant and must move beyond single verses to a more complete understanding of what Jesus is saying through this event. Yet even in these three passages we can see a clear relationship to the New Covenant. Rata writes:

Although Luke is the only one to mention that the covenant being instituted is the “new” covenant, the audiences of Matthew and Mark were aware that Jesus was instituting a covenant that was new in the sense that it was not one of the covenants that were in existence since creation... The fact that Jesus chooses to institute the new covenant at the Passover meal is not an accident. First, he wants his disciples to understand that he is the fulfillment of the mosaic covenant... Second, Jesus wants his disciples to understand that a new covenant is instituted. The same covenant that was prophesied by Jeremiah is now instituted by Christ, and later the same covenant will be inaugurated in his blood.<sup>11</sup>

Luke further helps us by presenting Christ as a sacrifice and it is this whole overarching presentation that connects, at least for the hearer of Jesus at this time in history, this event to the passage and concepts found in Jeremiah 31.

What we see from these three passages is that Jesus had in mind communicating to his disciples’ truths that they would have connected to Old Testament understanding regarding covenants. Jesus connects for them that He is the one who is going to bring the Kingdom that they were all looking for and He makes sure they understanding that this is the means by which the New Covenant would be begun. Christ himself being the sacrifice was not something that they were expecting. Messiah would come and usher in the Kingdom not die! But Jesus was getting them to understand that the initial work of the Kingdom was the soteriological provision for the New Covenant allowing for all to be saved! Rata notes, “The relationship between

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<sup>11</sup> Rata, Tiberius. 2007. *The covenant motif in Jeremiah's book of comfort*. Ed Hemchand Gossai. Studies in Biblical literature. New York: Peter Lang. (p. 96).

Christ's blood and the covenant is established in all synoptic gospels. The fact that Matthew and Mark omit the adjective "new" to refer to the covenant could be because their audiences would know of which covenant they are referring."<sup>12</sup>

It seems clear to this writer that the passages in the gospels either directly or indirectly are referring to the New Covenant of Jeremiah 31. Jesus is connecting the meal to the sacrifice of His own body which will occur within hours of this event and the blood of the cross becoming the seal to provide for the New Covenant fulfillment within the nation of Israel. The textual evidence seems to clearly connect the "last supper" narratives to the New Covenant of Jeremiah 31:31-34.

### **Theological Considerations**

At the outset of this paper we examined at least five different views regarding the New Covenant and how it is understood today. It is fair to say that this audience will probably not argue for replacement theology and the Church taking over the promises of Israel. In addition while there may be a few that would suggest the possibility of two different New Covenants one for Israel and one for the Church it would seem from just the above considerations that some connection between the "last supper" narratives and Jeremiah 31 is demanded. Therefore we must wrestle with the three options that are left:

1. The New Covenant is exclusively for Israel and will be fulfilled by Israel in the future.
2. The Church partially fulfills the New Covenant now; Israel completely fulfills the New Covenant in the future.
3. The Church presently participates in the New Covenant; Israel fulfills the New Covenant in the future.<sup>13</sup>

Let us examine the basic assumptions of each position and key people who help to articulate those positions.

### **The New Covenant is Exclusively for Israel and will be fulfilled by Israel in the future**

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<sup>12</sup> Rata, Tiberius. 2007. Dispensationalism under fire: The new covenant, the lord's supper, and the future of Israel. Unpublished paper delivered in Winona Lake, IN: Grace Theological Seminary.

<sup>13</sup> Compton, Bruce R. 2003. Dispensationalism, the church, and the new covenant. *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal (DBSJ)* 8. (pp. 5-9).

This position while primarily held by Darby and others<sup>14</sup> of another generation, there are those today who still hold that the Church's relationship to the New Covenant is limited to the mediator of that covenant Jesus.<sup>15</sup> Lewis Sperry Chafer while seemingly arguing for two separate covenants clearly places the New Covenant in Israel and a future fulfillment which is totally disassociated from the Church. Were it possible to extricate the passages in the New Testament that seem to clearly indicate a relationship between the Church and the New Covenant one might argue for this position. But that does not seem adequate to the evidence, even the limited evidence presented in this paper. Therefore it seems appropriate for this discussion to eliminate this position as a valid option to explain what is observed in the "last supper" narratives.

### **The Church Partially Fulfills the New Covenant Now; Israel Completely Fulfills the New Covenant in the Future**

This position follows the movement in our circles which embraces an "inaugurated eschatology" or "already-not yet"<sup>16</sup> which according to Compton means, "certain Old Testament prophecies involving the eschaton are presently being fulfilled, though in a limited way, and will have a future, final fulfillment with the return of Christ."<sup>17</sup> This view wants the New Covenant in some way to be addressed "to" the Church as well as Israel, and not just be "for" the Church. To fully appreciate this view one must understand those who promote this position. "It should be noted that progressive dispensationalism is not an abandonment of 'literal' interpretation for 'spiritual' interpretation. Progressive dispensationalism is a development of the 'literal' interpretation into a more consistent historical-literary interpretation."<sup>18</sup> This is clearly tied to new hermeneutical views of how literature informs interpretation and accentuates the literary weight of any passage over the grammatical. This shift moves beyond the written elements of

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, (p. 7).

<sup>15</sup> Chafer, Lewis Sperry. 1948. *Systematic theology volume VII*. Dallas, Texas: Dallas Seminary Press. (pp. 98-99).

<sup>16</sup> Blaising, Craig A. and Darrell L. Bock, ed. 1992. *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan. (p.54.)

<sup>17</sup> Compton, Bruce R. 2003. Dispensationalism, the church, and the new covenant. *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal (DBSJ)* 8. (p. 8).

<sup>18</sup> Blaising, Craig A. and Darrell L. Bock. 1993. *Progressive dispensationalism*. Wheaton, IL: A Bridgepoint Book. (p. 52).

the original autographs and extends to meaning being linked to understanding. Listen to Darrell Bock:

Meaning is what the author intended to say in the original setting in which the text was produced; significance refers to all subsequent uses of the text...in this view all legitimate interpretations must be tied to the author's meaning...but its simplicity shrouds a whole series of issues...since Scripture is about linked events and not just abstract ideas, meaning of events in texts has a dynamic, not a static quality.<sup>19</sup>

Space does not allow the necessary quotes to demonstrate that there is a fundamental shift in how we understand authorial intent which has been a part of progressive dispensationalism. We have moved beyond discourse analysis to embrace the totality of speech act theory which differentiates between locution, illocution, and perlocution. Following John R. Searle, the Slusser Professor of Philosophy at the University of California, Berkley, hermeneutics is embracing the idea that what was actually written is not necessarily what was meant by the author.<sup>20</sup> The essential issue is one of perspective. There is a growing belief that the symbols (language) that were used and recorded are not sufficient alone to determine the meaning of those texts. It is incumbent upon scholarship to find the illocution and proclaim it for those of us who are not qualified to discern this level of subtlety of language.

In the opinion of this writer whenever you seek to separate the locution (the words used) from the illocution (the meaning of those words) when you are dealing with Scripture you have just undermined and eliminated the ability to maintain the doctrine of inspiration. Inspiration is the work of the Holy Spirit superintending the writers of Scripture guaranteeing that what is written is God's message to man without error in the original autographs. The autographs are all that was written...no illocution just locution! Therefore the illocution must be resident in the locution or inspiration must be rejected!

Now why is this important, because any system of hermeneutics that says what we have to work with is in some way deficient to inform us of the intended meaning of the author relegates understanding to those who have "special knowledge?" We are told that we must now apply all these new tools to make sure we understand the text which in some subtle way denies inspiration and embraces a form of rationalism that supersedes the writings in order to know the

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid. (p. 64).

<sup>20</sup> Consult the book *Speech Act Theory and Pragmatics* by Searle, Kiefer, and Bierwisch. D. Reidel Publishing Co. (1980). for a complete understanding of the philosophical underpinnings for this view as it is now being expressed in hermeneutics in the Evangelical community.

truth. While many progressive dispensationalists will not admit that they have problems with inspiration, the hermeneutical approach they use indicates a firm belief in something beyond the text itself. It is this “something” that informs actual meaning not the text alone. It embraces a new way of looking at things that allows for the conclusions we see in how the New Covenant is presently fulfilled in the Church. An example of this can be seen in the argument of Darrell Bock regarding the throne of David.

Darrell Bock argues that Jesus in the resurrection, ascension, and seating at the right hand of God is a present fulfillment of the Davidic covenant and that the throne which Jesus sits on today is the Davidic Throne.<sup>21</sup> While his reasoning seems compelling at times his argument assumes the same limitation as his objection. He states, “This objection assumes that the throne of David...as promised in the Davidic covenant should be understood solely as a national political office geographically located in Israel.”<sup>22</sup> But in placing Christ on the Davidic throne in heaven he has made it a universal political office geographically located in Heaven. Is there any evidence that the throne of David is something other than a political office geographically located? Now the question is where is that geographical location? Bock exchanges one location for another and fails to solve the problem. If he is reigning as the Davidic King then which kingdom does he reign over...heaven or earth? Well the answer seems simple to the progressive dispensationalists, heaven now-earth later! Yet the text of Scripture does not give us any Old Testament evidence that God intended such an “already-not yet” understanding for the kingdom promised to Israel. Israel certainly does not seem to understand that Messiah is reigning over the kingdom in heaven...they are still looking for Messiah on the earth! So what justifies such an understanding? It is the dynamic meaning of events in the text of Luke which for Bock extends the understanding beyond the simple reading of a text to a more holistic understanding of meaning.<sup>23</sup>

The conclusions of this position are founded on a methodology which at best questions normal definitions of inspiration and at worst rejects inspiration altogether. For that reason this

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<sup>21</sup> Blaising, Craig A. and Darrell L. Bock. 1993. *Progressive dispensationalism*. Wheaton, IL: A Bridgepoint Book. (pp. 174-182).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. (pp.182-183).

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. (p. 64). It would be difficult to provide any degree of certainty as to the meaning of any text pending a more complete revelation of linked texts for which we must still wait concerning our own Testament and revelations about the Church. No rather I would seek to find the meaning (only one) in the Text itself!

write must reject it as a valid interpretation of the passages in question and of interpretation in general.

### **The Church Presently Participates in the New Covenant; Israel Fulfills the New Covenant in the Future.**

This view has the support of many more traditional dispensationalists according to Compton. Men like Homer A Kent, Jr., Rodney Decker and others although Compton suggests in a note that Decker may be changing his position to see a more progressive understanding.<sup>24</sup> This position maintains that there is a present soteriological benefit to the New Covenant which the Church experiences but understands that the New Covenant belongs to Israel and will be accomplished in the Day of the Lord. Larry Pettegrew argues:

Thus the New Covenant will not be fulfilled with Israel until the Day of the Lord events when the nation in repentance accepts the One whom it previously considered to be “stricken, smitten of God, and Afflicted” (Isa 53:4; cf.. Zech 12:10-14). Before that happens, Gentiles outside God’s covenant program, and Jews under the shadow of a curse are blessed to be able to participate in the New Covenant. This they can do through Spirit baptism into Christ at the time of Conversion.<sup>25</sup>

While this position most closely resembles the training this writer has received it is necessary to investigate further issues before drawing conclusions. These three have some merit although this writer finds the presuppositions surrounding some of the progressives quite disturbing. Theologically the movement is not monolithic and therefore one must investigate what is really believed by each writer before judgments can be made. It is important however to be increasingly more careful about definitions within the discipline of hermeneutics because of these new hermeneutical approaches. We all practice the Historical-Grammatical interpretative method but as Robert Thomas points out not all who say that mean the same thing.<sup>26</sup> Add new developments in what is now called post-foundationalism which seeks to limit what can be known in the Scripture ultimately and to define that knowledge within a community of faith.

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<sup>24</sup> Compton, Bruce R. 2003. Dispensationalism, the church, and the new covenant. *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal (DBSJ)* 8. (p. 9).

<sup>25</sup> Pettegrew, Larry D. 1999. The new covenant. *The Master's Seminary Journal (TMSJ)* 10.2 (p.270-271).

<sup>26</sup> Thomas, Robert L. 2002. *Evangelical hermeneutics*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic & Professional. The entire book is devoted to an analysis of how hermeneutics has change within the Evangelical community.

The position moves from understanding differences as doctrinal distinctions based on an ultimate foundational truth to many different interpretations of Scripture based on the interpretation of the community lacking any ultimate foundational truth.<sup>27</sup>

It should be clear that hermeneutics is in development. It continues to explore new approaches to the old enterprise of understanding the text of Scripture and obeying God. Not everything new is without merit but there are philosophical changes in the culture and in the methods we are using to understand God's revelation that make this a challenging time in which to minister. If we are to avoid the "great apostasy" spoken of by Paul in the book of Thessalonians we must be ever vigilant in maintaining a high view of Scripture and an even higher view of God Himself. A.W. Tozer's words are instructive here:

A right conception of God is basic not only to systematic theology but to practical Christian living as well...I believe that there is scarcely an error in doctrine or a failure in applying Christian ethics that cannot be traced finally to imperfect and ignoble thoughts of God.<sup>28</sup>

It may be that as we become more and more dependent on linguistic theory and our own ability to know and understand the text that we finally think imperfect and ignoble thoughts of God and His word!

### **Additional Considerations Regarding the New Covenant**

The very fact that this group has sought to meet and to engage in scholarly discussions regarding dispensationalism gives ready evidence to the fact that Dispensationalism is under fire; at least that brand of dispensationalism which seeks to maintain the highest regard for inspiration and the Word of God.<sup>29</sup> Paul Benware points out that from an Old Testament perspective when

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<sup>27</sup> Bacote, Vincent, Laura C. Miguez, and Dennis L. Okholm, ed. 2004. *Evangelicals scripture: Tradition, authority and hermeneutics*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press. This book traces the developments in hermeneutics and potential problems and offers solutions that increasingly redefine foundationalism and any certainty we may have about what is taught. While they still argue for Scripture it becomes less universal in its meaning and meaning moves to a more "community of faith" determination. Must read for where things are moving in the field of hermeneutics.

<sup>28</sup> Tozer, A. W. 1961. *The knowledge of the holy*. New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers. (p. 10).

<sup>29</sup> I have worked with colleagues who have dismissed anything I have had to say simply because I maintain that inspiration demands certain conclusions that are presently taken for granted in the academic community. Inspiration demands if the author of Scripture is identified in the text then he is the author of that text. Therefore Isaiah is the one who wrote Isaiah. This is not problematic for those

looking to the fulfillment of the New Covenant the prophets anticipated the coming of Messiah who would inaugurate His Kingdom.<sup>30</sup> He goes on to point out that whatever the Church shares in relationship to the New Covenant there are in his mind six considerations that must be acknowledged:

1. The Church does not fulfill the new covenant given to Israel in Jeremiah...He made the covenant with Israel and he will fulfill it with Israel.
2. The lack of reference to the Church and the New Covenant while conspicuous is not problematic because of the use of the word “mystery” by Paul in Ephesians 3.
3. Because provision for blessing the Gentiles is made in the Abrahamic covenant...and that blessing is presently part of the New Covenant does not mean Israel will not receive the full measure of the covenant in the future.
4. The Church does partake in the blessings of the New Covenant but not all of them including the restoration of national promise, land, and blessing.
5. The Church receives in the last supper a connection to the New Covenant “in His blood” making regeneration, indwelling, forgiveness, and filling of the Spirit possible.
6. Paul suggests that he and others are ministers of the New Covenant in 2 Corinthians 3 especially in his preaching to the Gentiles as they receive the blessing of salvation.<sup>31</sup>

Even those who would hold to one of the conclusions regarding the New Covenant and the Church that would be rejected by this conference must admit that there is not hermeneutical “red pill” that solves all the issues and makes the connections clear and unambiguous. The distance and space between the events described in Jeremiah and the “last supper” cause this response by Bernard Robinson, “The thought that YHWH should pluck up and break down, should destroy and overthrow without going on to build and to plant could not be countenanced, for what then would become of YHWH’s everlasting covenant of **שלום** with the universe?<sup>32</sup> Walter Kaiser, well known Old Testament Scholar, and covenantal theologian states:

The “new” began with the “old” promise made to Abraham and David. Its renewal perpetuated all of those promises previously offered by the Lord and now more. Therefore Christians presently participate in the new covenant, now validated by the death of Christ. They participate by a grafting process into the Jewish olive tree and thus

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who are attending this conference but one need only spend time in other circles to find that such demands exceed the generally accepted understanding of scholarship.

<sup>30</sup> Benware, Paul N. 1995. *Understanding end times prophecy: A comprehensive approach*. Chicago. IL Moody Press. (p. 70-71).

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. (pp. 71-73). I have summarized his arguments not copied them verbatim so if there is any misrepresentation it is mine and mine alone, not Dr. Benware’s.

<sup>32</sup> Robinson, Bernard P. 2001. Jeremiah’s new covenant: Jer 31, 31-34. *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament (SJOT)* 15, no. 2. (pp. 203-204).

continue God's single plan. However, in the midst of this unity of the "people of God" and "household of faith" there is an expectation of a future inheritance. The "hope of our calling" and the "inheritance" of the promise (in contradistinction to our present reception of the promise itself) awaits God's climactic work in history with a revived national Israel, Christ's second advent, his kingdom, and the heavens and the new earth. In that sense, the new covenant is still future and everlasting but in the former sense, we are already enjoying some of the benefits of the age to come.<sup>33</sup>

This acknowledgement of difficulty in understanding how the New Covenant is realized in the present day by those who have generally replaced Israel with the Church and should indicate to us that the task is not a simple one. How do we understand the New Covenant and to what extent do we share, or inaugurate, or participate in that covenant? What relationship does our involvement have in the ultimate fulfillment of this covenant in the lives of the nation of Israel?

## CONCLUSION

We have examined the three "last supper" texts for which only one actually references the New Covenant giving us precious little to work with in isolating the connection of that covenant with the present body of believers called the Church. Walter Kaiser has reminded us that even from his perspective the primary sharing is soteriological and not ecclesiological making any significant fulfillment dubious.<sup>34</sup> We have seen the different options concerning the level of integration or sharing that exists with Israel and the Church in relationship to the New Covenant and we have considered some of the theological ramifications of the whole issue of the Church and the New Covenant. It is now time to draw some conclusions. To say that this writer is certain beyond doubt would be less than true, but here are a series of thoughts that help to bring this dilemma into focus.

First, is the clear and irrefutable statement of the words of Jeremiah where the New Covenant is found it is between God and Israel and Judah (Jeremiah 31:31) alone! This alone tells me that this covenant may be "for" us but it is clearly not "to" us. Any benefit we receive is ancillary to the actual covenant. That is not to say we participate in the benefits because as has already been pointed out the primary blessing of the New Covenant is the soteriological benefit

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<sup>33</sup> Kaiser, Walter C. Jr. 1972. The old promise and the new covenant: Jeremiah 31:31-34. *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 15, no. 1. (pp. 22-23).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.* (p. 23).

of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross of Calvary. That sacrifice makes it possible to receive everlasting life (John 10) and have the inheritance with Jesus Christ spoken of by Peter in 1 Peter 1: 18-19. This alone has caused many to interpret the relationship of the Church as sharing in the New Covenant.

Today many want to make this soteriological reality the “already” and the ecclesiological elements of the New Covenant the “not yet” to be fulfilled in the future but is that a fair analysis? Would that not demand that the nation of Israel participate in the “already” now as well? Would that not require that the nation of Israel find and accept their Messiah now in anticipation of His return to establish His kingdom? If these things were true it might go a long way to convince this writer to accept the progressive dispensationalists view of the New Covenant but that is not what is happening right now. Paul reminds us in Romans 11 that the nation of Israel has been temporarily hardened until the times of the Gentiles comes in (Romans 11: 25-29). The nation of Israel will share in both this “already” and “not yet” when Christ returns to establish His kingdom on earth at his second coming, making the “already” any New Covenant fulfillment dubious at best for now.

To focus only on the New Covenant being for Israel, fulfilled in Israel, with no connection to the passages in the New Testament clearly seems to ignore connections that Jesus makes to the New Covenant at least with respect to His sacrifice, and it would seem to demand that we do what Rodney Decker warned us not to do in his paper last year, and apply our theological system to the text instead of letting the text inform our theological system.<sup>35</sup> I agree with this conclusion but would offer one caution. We need to hold to our presuppositions, especially those that deal with God and inspiration. These presuppositions must have an effect on how we do exegesis especially in light of modern linguistic and hermeneutical theory. We must guard that door from being opened first and apply techniques consistent with the conventions of language instead of seeking to use linguistics to undo those conventions and thus reinterpret the text of Scripture. While no one here would question Dr. Decker it must be acknowledged that many in the world of academia are ignoring the conventions of language to invent new ways to handle language! It would seem reasonable to assume that God, who designed language for man, would know and understand how to use that language in

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<sup>35</sup> Decker, Rodney J. 2008. Why do dispensationalists have such a hard time agreeing on the new covenant? Paper presented at the Council on Dispensational Hermeneutics, Clarks Summit, PA, September 2008.

communicating to man, thus eliminating the need to try to move beyond that language to understand the message in it.

Then what position is left? Only that the Church presently participates in the soteriological nature of the New Covenant, but that Israel fulfills the New Covenant completely in the future. Compton raises two objections to this view, one, is there sufficient evidence to speak of the Church as actually participating in the New Covenant, and two, is it possible to separate the ramifications of a covenant from the fulfillment of its promises?<sup>36</sup> First, Compton addresses the first argument in his article when he says, “believers in this present age participate in the forgiveness of sins, they are recipients of the Spirit’s ministry, and they enjoy the benefits of Christ’s high priestly ministry. All of these directly related to the New Covenant which Christ ratified at His death.”<sup>37</sup> He is correct to identify those elements with the death of Christ and connect them to the soteriological blessing of the New Covenant extend to all who believe both Jew and Gentile alike in this present age. But it must be acknowledged that these same elements will be extended in the future to national Israel thus fulfilling of the words spoken in Jeremiah 31:31-34. This soteriological element to the New Covenant does not and is not the full nature of the Covenant. Rather the New Covenant focuses on the Ecclesiological or Mediatorial nature fulfilled in the kingdom.<sup>38</sup> The New Covenant does not require that all the elements of the covenant be fulfilled before the nation responds since the salvation of the nation is a part of the covenant. What the work done by Christ on the cross does is make the New Covenant possible in its literal and ultimate fulfillment within the nation of Israel. That should comfort those of us who look for the coming kingdom where Christ will fulfill all his promises to Abraham, David, and Daniel through the promise to Jeremiah.

This solution may not satisfy all here today but it should give us pause to open a dialogue to these and other passages and it should allow us to better frame any discussion of the New Covenant in relationship to the Church. We might want to frame our understanding of the

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<sup>36</sup> Compton, Bruce R. 2003. Dispensationalism, the church, and the new covenant. *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal (DBSJ)* 8. (p. 47).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* (p. 47).

<sup>38</sup> I am indebted to Dr. Alva J. McClain and his seminal work on the Kingdom of God, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*. (1974). Winona Lake, BMH Books. for influencing my ideas of the Kingdom and how the various aspects of that Kingdom work. It helps to at least mediate the arguments a little and provides a basis to evaluate and differentiate the soteriological benefits of the work of Christ from the ecclesiological reality of the Kingdom of God.

distinction of Israel and the Church in the very same way we articulate how the distinction of the Father and Son exists in the Godhead. All three persons of the Trinity are God but they are not each other, they do not lose their identity when the Godhead is together. In the same way we all are the people of God but we remain Israel, the Church, and the Nations, and the promises made to each carry the weight of the character of God in their fulfillment. Let us be careful not to challenge that character as we seek to find agreement on this subject.