

14. THE NEW COVENANT ESTABLISHED

When did the new covenant come into force? Generally speaking, one can say that the old covenant of the law existed from Sinai until the appearing of the LORD Jesus in the flesh. It is true that some would place the beginning of this old covenant in paradise, after the fall, but I prefer to think that it is the one of the ceremonies and shadows instituted at Mount Sinai.

About the beginning of the new covenant we can be certain. It came about through the ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ, who, shortly before his death, at the last Passover, announced and instituted it.

During the Passover

We bring to mind that the Passover, celebrated first in the night of the Exodus, is the covenantal feast *par excellence*. Then the lamb is slaughtered and its blood put on the posts and frame of the doors. We have already noted how John the Baptist identified the LORD Jesus as the true paschal sacrifice, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

Christ confirmed this during his last Passover. When the bread was broken, he said to his disciples: "Take and eat; this is my body." Then he took the cup and said, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matt 26:26-28). In the version of Luke 22 we find the expression, "this cup is the new covenant in my blood..." (verse 20). The apostle Paul, who had a close acquaintance with Luke, follows the version of the beloved physician, "This cup is the new covenant..." (1 Cor 11:25).

The covenant is valid only through the sacrifice of atonement and reconciliation. In Leviticus 17:11 this covenantal principle is stated: "For the life of a creature is in the blood, and I have given it to you to make atonement for yourselves on the altar; it is the blood that makes atonement for one's life." Without the sacrifice, the shedding of blood, there can be no reconciliation.

It is no wonder, then, that Christ in bringing the final sacrifice speaks of the “new covenant in my blood.” When his blood has been shed the covenant has been renewed, once for all. He is the true Lamb of God.

“It is finished”

The new covenant cannot be considered binding until all that is required for it to take effect has been fully accomplished. This means that the Lamb of God had to undergo God’s full wrath over the sin of the whole human race; indeed, had to be plunged into hellish agony. Not one aspect of the justice of God could be left unfulfilled.

After Christ had come through the three hours of darkness, and had cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (Matt 27:46), he asked for something to drink, saying “I am thirsty” (John 19:28). It actually says, “Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, I am thirsty.” He needed to drink in order to have a clear and audible voice, so that, summoning his last strength, he could declare, “It is finished.” The work of atonement had been completed, the sacrifice brought, and now he could give himself over to the final act of dying. We therefore read, “With that, he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.”

This is the moment when the new covenant becomes an eternal reality.

The curtain torn from top to bottom

At the moment that Jesus died, in the temple not far away in Jerusalem, “the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom” (Matt 27:51). This event, coinciding exactly with Christ’s death, shows us that Christ made the final sacrifice and that the new covenant was established.

The curtain separated the “holy of holies” from the inner court. Behind it was the ark, where once per year the high priest made atonement for the people. The curtain signified that although God was near, yet there was a distance between him and his people. They could not enter into his holy presence.

But when Christ died and the great sacrifice had been brought, this curtain was no longer needed; for the distance between God and man had been bridged in the new covenant through the blood of Jesus Christ.

Notice that the curtain was torn from top to bottom. This means that it was not done by a human hand, for then it would have been torn from the bottom to the top. The fact that it was torn from the top down means that God’s hand was involved, and that he declared that the way to him was now unobstructed. We may go directly to the Father in the name of Christ, because of his one sacrifice on the cross.

This is the moment when the new covenant is publicly confirmed in Israel’s temple.

The peace of the new covenant

We noted earlier that a covenant leads to a situation of harmony and peace. In the night when Christ was betrayed, his disciples deserted him and one even denied him with an oath. One might think that Christ after his resurrection would rebuke them for the way they had acted. And surely they from their side will have felt ill at ease: would he now punish them for their fear and treachery?

But in meeting his disciples Christ assures them that all is forgiven and all is well. Be not afraid. Do not be alarmed. In John 20 we read twice that in the first meeting with his disciples Christ says to them, “Peace be with you!” (verses 20, 21). This is not a matter of mere repetition but has a deeper significance.

The first “peace be with you” may be seen as a general greeting by which the Lord seeks to reassure his disciples. He is not angry with them and does not hold their sins against them. They may still be assured of his love.

Then it says in verse 20, “After he said this, he showed them his hands and side.” This may be for the sake of identification: they would know it was really Jesus. Therefore it says, “The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.” At the same time, the showing of the hands and the side are signs of his sacrifice for them. He has fully paid for all their sins.

We read then in verse 21, “Again Jesus said, peace be with you!” This greeting has even greater meaning for them than the previous one. They now know for sure who he is and begin to understand what he has done. The words of the prophet Isaiah come to mind, “...the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all” (Isa 53:5, 6).

Peace be with you: this greeting is the very heart of the new covenant.

Beginning with Moses and the prophets...

The disciples of the Lord Jesus were at first subject to uncertainty. There were many things concerning Christ’s life, death, and resurrection that they could not understand.

We find this confusion with the two disciples who were on their way to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35). Remarkable is their statement about Jesus, “The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him; but we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel” (verses 20, 21).

Obviously Christ needs to do some explaining. How can the events of the last few days be explained? It says (verse 27), “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.” Moses and the prophets are the whole Old Testament. Christ explains his ministry starting with Genesis and going through the prophets, all the way to Malachi. The ministry of Christ can only be understood in a covenantal light, as

foretold and foreshadowed in the Word of God from the beginning of time.

Later that day, when he appeared to all his disciples, he said, “This is what I told you while I was still with you: everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms” (verse 44); and Luke adds, “Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures” (verse 45). They learned to read the Old Testament in the light of Christ’s ministry, and understood how in him the covenant of old had found its fulfilment.

Christ upheld the unity of the Scriptures and made it clear that his ministry must be understood in the light of the revealed Word of God given through the ages. This means that only in the light of the old covenant can we understand the greater glory of the new.