

13. THE PROMISE OF A NEW COVENANT

The Bible does not use the term *a new covenant* until the time of the exile. The prophet Jeremiah writes, “‘The time is coming,’ declares the LORD, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them, declares the LORD’” (Jer 31:31, 32).

Jeremiah 31:31 is the only verse in the Old Testament where the expression “a new covenant” is used. From there it finds its way into the New Testament. The question is: what is meant by the word *new*? To what is this new covenant compared? How is it different from what went before?

It should be noted that even though the term new covenant is not used elsewhere in the Old Testament, the matter itself is evident in various other places. Isaiah 55 speaks of “an everlasting covenant” with all who come to God, and this everlasting covenant, we read, is an expression of God’s faithful love “promised to David.” God’s mercy will be extended not only to Israel but also to others, to foreigners and even to eunuchs, who were formerly banned from the temple. “These I will bring to my holy mountain...for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations” (Isa 56:4-8). This certainly is “new” information.

Isaiah writes: “‘As for me, this is my covenant with them,’ says the LORD. ‘My Spirit, who is on you, and my words that I have put in your mouth will not depart from your mouth, or from the mouths of your children, or from the mouths of their descendants from this time on and forever,’ says the LORD” (Isa 59:21). This comes very close to the description given of a new covenant in Jeremiah 31.

Furthermore, the prophet Ezekiel speaks in glowing terms of a “covenant of peace,” manifest in the work of the one shepherd, “my servant David” (namely, the Christ). He writes: “Then they will know that I, the LORD their God, am with them and that they, the house of Israel, are my people, declares the Sovereign

LORD. You my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, are my people, and I am your God, declares the Sovereign LORD” (Ezek 34:24, 30). We can think also of other prophecies, e.g., those of Ezekiel 37 and Joel 2. The new covenant comes very much to the fore in the time of the exile. A new era is dawning.

“New” as compared to the covenant of Sinai

It is important to note that the “new covenant” is new especially in comparison with the covenant made at Mount Sinai or Horeb. Jeremiah says: “It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt” (Jer 31:32). When God makes his covenant at Sinai explicit in the giving of the law, Moses says, “The LORD our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. It was not with our fathers that the LORD made this covenant, but with us, with all of us who are alive here today” (Deut 5:2, 3). The fathers are the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Deut 4:31, 37).

How are we to understand all this? The answer is, as was stated before, that there is only one covenant of love as relationship between God and his people, but that this covenant goes through various dispensations. There was a time when the law had not been written on tablets of stone, but was passed on through oral tradition. This was the time before Sinai. Therefore Moses could say when the law was given, “It was not with our fathers that the LORD made this covenant....” He refers here to the written law with its many ordinances and ceremonies. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob never knew all these ceremonial stipulations.

Before Sinai, the law of God was primarily a matter of oral transmission. But when the law was written and expanded (at Horeb), as Paul writes, the trespass increased (Rom 5:20). God’s people could not keep this law; it only made things worse. The law became, Paul says, our curse, not our salvation! This is not the fault of the law, for it is “holy, righteous and good” (Rom 7:12). But we are sinful and cannot keep the law, and thus it condemns us. The more commandments were revealed, the more our sinfulness became apparent: “through the law we become conscious of sin” (Rom 3:20).

But in the new covenant it will be different. The law will be written in the hearts of God’s children. Jeremiah says: “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts...they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest” (Jer 31:33, 34). What is happening? The LORD is going to take a great step forward by fulfilling the ceremonies of the Mosaic law and by bringing about a dispensation focused on cleansing and renewal through the blood and Spirit of Christ. It will be fully evident that the covenant is a matter of the heart. As John wrote, “For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17). The old covenant is connected with Moses; the new covenant with Jesus Christ.

Of course we understand that the entire covenant history from Adam to David could not bring about full and lasting reconciliation. Our Lord Jesus Christ is the heart of all covenant history, and with his coming everything changes forever. The

demand of the law – given already in paradise and expressly proclaimed at Horeb – was fulfilled in Christ alone, as Paul writes to the Galatians: “But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive the full rights of sons” (Gal 4:4, 5).

The Mosaic covenant obsolete

Hebrews 8:6 states that the new covenant is “superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises.” The old covenant did not work as it should have, and this was not because this covenant was faulty, but “God found fault with the people” (Heb 8:8). God’s people did not remain faithful to this covenant (verse 9), and therefore God came with a new version which focused on the renewal of his people.

By this act of God the old covenant became outmoded. “By calling this covenant ‘new,’ he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear” (Heb 8:13). The word obsolete does not mean that something totally loses its value, but that it is no longer current, because something better and more effective has been made or found. What does not function well anymore, is slated to be replaced.

The word new does not indicate here something that never existed before. It denotes a renewing of what previously existed. It is new in the sense of having been improved. The new covenant is better than the old, but does not destroy the old covenant; rather it takes the old covenant into itself to realize better the purpose and potential of the old.

In the Belgic Confession we speak of the relation between old and new covenant as follows in Article 25: “We believe that the ceremonies and symbols of the law have ceased with the coming of Christ, and that all shadows have been fulfilled, so that the use of them ought to be abolished among Christians. Yet their truth and substance remain for us in Jesus Christ, in whom they have been fulfilled.”

The old is gone, but still has meaning in Christ, and therefore it is added in Article 25: “In the meantime we still use the testimonies taken from the law and the prophets, both to confirm us in the doctrine of the Gospel and to order our life in all honour, according to God’s will and to his glory.” Since the Scriptures are one and find their unity in Christ, we can still learn much about the Gospel from the stipulations and ceremonies of the old covenant.

The new covenant rests on the ministry of Jesus Christ. He fulfilled all the demands of the old covenant and so renewed it, placing us in the reality of a new covenant, one that gives greater riches and comfort.

Characteristics of the new covenant

Keeping the foregoing in mind, we can list the main characteristics of the new covenant, especially as compared to the covenant made at Mount Sinai.

First, the new covenant is based on the lasting reconciliation brought about by

the Messiah, the faithful servant of the LORD. Isaiah speaks about this in chapter 53: “But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that bought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed” (verse 5). The old covenant stressed reconciliation by means of the many sacrifices of atonement that were to be brought day after day. But the new covenant is based on the one sacrifice of Christ (Isa 53:10; Heb 10:10, 12). The many ceremonies and practices connected with the law of Moses no longer have a place, for they find their fulfilment in Christ’s work of reconciliation.

Second, the new covenant is evident in the fact that God’s law is written by the Holy Spirit in the hearts of God’s children, so that they all may know God truly and serve him fully. (See also the section on the covenant and the Holy Spirit, chapter 16 below.) Jeremiah 31:33 states, “‘This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,’ declares the LORD. ‘I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.’” Isaiah speaks in the same vein: “All your sons will be taught by the LORD” (54:13). We find a similar message in Joel 2:29: “Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days.” And in Ezekiel 36:26 and 27 we find this description: “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.”

To be sure, serving the LORD from the heart was also the requirement of the covenant made at Horeb. Moses reminds Israel, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts” (Deut 6:4-6). The LORD was never satisfied with lip-service; he wanted to be loved and obeyed from the heart. It is now in the new covenant that this becomes a deeper reality.

Return from exile

Third, for Israel, the new covenant means a return of the exiles to the promised land and a rebuilding of Jerusalem. At least, a remnant will return. The notion of the remnant is important in the history of God’s covenant. In times of disobedience many of God’s children are lost. Deformation makes many casualties. Yet God preserves for himself a remnant out of which he will again build his covenant people. We read about this in Isaiah 10. Of this remnant it is said that they will trust in the LORD alone. The revelation about the remnant stresses again God’s sovereign grace. In his love he will not cast away his children.

God will call his children home. “Do not be afraid, for I am with you; I will bring your children from the east and gather you from the west. I will say to the north, ‘Give them up!’ and to the south, ‘Do not hold them back.’ Bring my sons from afar and my daughters from the ends of the earth...” (Isa 43:5, 6). Isaiah speaks of the glory of Zion: “No longer will violence be heard in your land, nor

ruin or destruction within your borders, but you will call your walls Salvation and your gates Praise” (Isa 60:18). Ezekiel speaks at length of the return of God’s people and the rebuilding of the temple. “They will live in the land I gave to my servant Jacob, the land where your fathers lived. They and their children and their children’s children will live there forever, and David my servant will be their prince forever. I will make a covenant of peace with them; it will be an everlasting covenant” (Ezek 37:25, 26). The return of the exiles is connected inseparably to the coming of the Messiah.

Fourth, the new covenant has an eschatological thrust. These promises about the Messiah direct us ultimately beyond this world to the new heaven and the new earth, and therefore we understand that also the arrangement in the new covenant is temporary. We seek a better country, a heavenly one (Heb 11:16). The promise of return and restoration points to the new Jerusalem: “The sun will no more be your light by day, nor will the brightness of the moon shine on you, for the LORD will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory” (Isa 60:19; compare with Rev 22:1-6).

Covenant, mission, and evangelism

Fifth, the idea of the new covenant does away with the idea that mission and evangelism are comparatively unimportant, as they were in the Old Testament. Salvation was then mostly restricted to Israel. The new covenant, however, will be greater than the old one also in the sense that under it the Gentiles will be included in the kingdom of God. As in the days of old, before Abraham, the covenant will have a universal reach.

Christ’s work of redemption will be too great to be restricted to one people. Perhaps the best-known text in this respect is found in Isaiah 42:6: “I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles” (see also Luke 2:31, 32). The LORD God proclaims that “it is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth” (Isa 49:6). The leaves of the tree of life will be for the healing of the *nations* (Rev 22:2). The new covenant has catholic dimensions.

The outpouring of the Holy Spirit and his indwelling in God’s people enable God’s people to prophesy, that is, to speak of God’s great acts of salvation in Christ. Especially Joel speaks in these terms, “And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people...” (2:28). The result will be that all God’s children will prophesy.

The period that commences with Pentecost will lead to the day of judgment (“the great and dreadful day of the LORD”, Joel 2:31), but it also means the gathering of the holy, catholic church: “And everyone who calls on the name of the LORD will be saved” (2:32). Prophesying is proclaiming God’s word in a manner

understandable to everyone, leading them to the Lord.

It is the last period of time, in which God's grace is proclaimed. It is therefore also the time of the final testimony: the Gospel must be preached to the whole creation (Mark 16:15). The new covenant era will be the conclusive period of history before Christ returns in glory. It is a decisive time for the church. There is a sense of urgency: "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus." (Rev 22:12, 17, 21). Therefore we read of the expansion of the church into Judea and Samaria and of the missionary journeys beyond ancient Israel. The Word must be brought to the ends of the world. The mandate to preach the Word to all creation still exists today.

Christ said before his ascension, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Matt 28:18, 19). It is a mandate to proclaim God's covenant love to the world. The promise of Christ's presence makes this command possible: "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age." In fellowship with Christ, the church will experience the joy of the Immanuel promise, which must now be proclaimed in all the earth.

No exclusivism

God has always in his covenant warned against haughty exclusivism. He called Rahab the harlot of Jericho and Ruth the Moabite woman, and made them mothers in Israel, placing them in the lineage of our Lord. True, they are exceptions to the rule, but also examples of the new era.

There are other examples. Our Lord Jesus Christ mentioned them in his own town of Nazareth: "I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah's time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. Yet Elijah was not sent to any of them, but to a widow in Zarephath in the region of Sidon. And there were many in Israel with leprosy in the time of Elisha the prophet, yet not one of them was cleansed – only Naaman the Syrian" (Luke 4:25-27).

Now, in the new covenant, it is of great importance that all the world be addressed, beginning in our own community. The emphasis on the covenant of love should not lead to any form of isolationism or exclusivism. In Christ, God has opened wide his heart: *the field is the world* (Matt 13:38). The field starts at our door.

When the apostle Paul solicits the prayer of the churches for the work of mission, he reminds the church members of their own duty wherever they have been placed. Having said: "And pray for us, too, that God may open a door for our message, so that we may proclaim the mystery of Christ, for which I am in chains," he adds: "Be wise in the way *you* act towards outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone" (Col 4:3-6). By its character and scope, the new covenant demands mission and evangelism; the Gospel must be

made known abroad and at home.

In conclusion, the time of the new covenant is the time of:

- a) justification: sin has been atoned for once for all for by the blood of Christ; we have been delivered from Satan and death
- b) sanctification: the Spirit is poured out over the church; God dwells in his people
- c) anticipation: the church longs and lives for the return of the Lord Jesus
- d) participation: the church is called and enabled to spread the Gospel.