

A NEW COVENANT

“This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, saith the Lord, I will put my laws into their hearts, and in their minds will I write them . . .” (Hebrews 10:16 (KJV))

I have just finished reading a biography of Martin Luther by Eric Metaxas. While the life of this great reformer is fresh on my mind let us illustrate the relevance of the new covenant by reference to the Reformation which Luther began. There is no doubt that Luther was brilliant. His natural genius was enhanced by the discipline of education. Metaxas points out that young Luther was thrashed 15 times for failing to conjugate a certain Latin verb correctly (p. 14). Years later, in a debate with Cardinal Cajetan regarding the papal decree of 1521, Luther’s knowledge of Latin verb tenses proved invaluable. He said to Cajetan, “*Most Reverend Father, you should not believe that we Germans are ignorant even in grammar! There is a difference between ‘there is’ a treasury and ‘to acquire’ a treasury*” (p. 150). His scholarship provided him with complete confidence in his understanding of the Scriptures and led him to reject others whom he deemed to be in error. Unfortunately, squabbling over the Scriptures not only divided believers 500 years ago, but squabbling over the Scriptures still divides believers today. It is undeniable that Luther’s reformation produced division. Perhaps there was a reason Jesus chose unlettered peasants as His apostles.

There is also a reason why God decided to write a new covenant!

Sadly, two major areas of conflict and division in the Reformation involved baptism and the Lord’s Supper. It seems that God designed both to bring people together, not divide them. Believers from every kindred, nation and tongue, for example, are united in one body by means of one baptism (1 Cor. 12:13; Eph. 4:5). So also the Lord’s Supper should unite believers. Regardless of social standing or ethnic background, all believers are to partake of the Lord’s Supper as one body and one bread (1 Cor. 10:16). It is diabolical that the wicked one uses baptism and the Lord’s Supper to divide us. Unfortunately, Luther’s scholarship led him to be dogmatic. He was completely confident, for example, in his understanding of the Lord’s Supper. To him it was obvious that the words of Christ, “This is My Body” should be taken literally. He was so sure of himself that his understanding of these words became a test of fellowship. When Zwingli, another reformer, dared to disagree, Luther denounced him and said that to unite with such a dissembler would be to meet with damnation body and soul. In similar fashion he dogmatically defended infant baptism. While the infant obviously had no faith, Luther insisted that the faith of a person baptizing an infant literally transformed the infant (p. 372). Sadly, there is only a small step between being willing to die for a cause, and being willing to kill for it. During the Peasant’s War of 1524 - 1525 Luther insisted that the Peasants be put to death just as one would beat to death a mad dog. In Germany alone over 100,000 died in less than ten weeks time.

Luther defended his disagreement with the Catholics based on “sola scriptura” (only Scripture). In an effort, however, to preserve the purity of his own doctrine, he saw the need of adding to the Scriptures. On June 25, 1530 the official Lutheran doctrine was codified in the Augsburg Confession of faith. This 1530 version is known as the “unaltered version” and is still

accepted as authoritative by the Lutherans all over the world.

Remember! God wants all believers to be one, that's why He wrote the new covenant!

Someone has observed that the Catholic Church sought to obtain unity by an infallible interpreter, and Luther sought to maintain unity by an infallible interpretation. Unfortunately, neither attempt at unity has been successful.

Just as we have “commentaries” to explain the Bible, the Augsburg Confession was deemed so important that Leif Grane also wrote a “commentary” to explain it. Each article of the confession is reproduced in the commentary with an English translation. Next Grane provided notes on the text, with theological and historical explanations of each article. He also included an extensive introduction to the confession, together with footnotes, a selected bibliography, and an index. To be a Lutheran in good standing you must agree with this confession whether you understood it or not..

If the Bible is not sufficient to unite believers, obviously the Augsburg Confession of Faith isn't either. Consequently, the Lutheran Church today is as divided as any other denomination. There are many different kinds of Lutherans today and some of their differences are foundational. That's why they divide over them. Some Lutheran churches will unite with other denominations, and others will not. The Evangelical Church in Germany, where it all began, is a federation of twenty Lutheran, Reformed and United Protestant denominations. In 2016, it had a membership of 21,922,000 members, or 26.7% of the German population. A dear friend, Burt Ott, was born in Germany in 1939. His father, Adolf Ott was a devout Lutheran who directed the music for all the Lutheran churches in the state of Baden. Burt, however, left the Lutheran church to preach only the Bible. He started a non-denomination congregation near the German city of Eisingen. At that time he became friends with the Lutheran pastor in Eisingen. Burt told me that the Lutheran pastor was a nice fellow, but didn't believe the Bible. He received his sermons in the mail every week and faithfully read them from the pulpit every Sunday. Not only did he not believe the Bible, he had never met anybody who did. He was therefore fascinated to meet a man like Burt who did believe the Bible. If you think this pastor was fascinated by Burt Ott, just think how fascinated Martin Luther would be with him.

Unfortunately Luther's plan to purify the church with man made creeds was contagious. Now it seemed that “sola scriptura” was not sufficient for any denomination. It seems that each new denomination crafted it's own creed to preserve the purity of it's faith. Thus the Bible plus the Anglican Creed makes you an Anglican. The Bible plus the Methodist Book of Discipline makes you a Methodist. The Bible plus the Philadelphia Confession of faith makes you a Baptist. The Bible plus the Westminster Confession of Faith makes you a presbyterian, Etc. Etc. Etc.

In addition to Protestant denominations who base their creeds upon their own unique

understanding of the Scriptures, there are others who based their belief on modern day revelations from individuals like Joe Smith, C. T. Russell, Ellen White, and many others.

David Barrett in his World Christian Encyclopedia lists over 33,000 Christian denominations in 238 different countries. Every one of these denominations has some sort of rationale for their existence and many have their own creeds to codify what they believe.

The late Robert Morse once told me: “Every time you try to protect light, you produce darkness”!

Remember! God wants all believers to be united, that’s why He wrote the new covenant!

HONEST MEN CAN STUDY THE BIBLE AND STILL DISAGREE

Based on their different understanding of the Bible the Jews at the time of Jesus were divided into a number of different “sects” or “denominations”. The Bible mentions several such as the Pharisees, Sadducees, Zealots, Herodians, and the disciples of John the Baptist.. There were also other Jewish sects not mentioned in the Bible such as the Essenes, Ebionites, Zadokites, Etc. All of these different groups read the same Bible but still disagreed on how to understand it.

Remember! Because God wanted all believers to be one He decided to write a new covenant!

When inspired men wrote the New Testament Scriptures their inspired words were also subject to different interpretations. Some of the things Paul wrote, for example, were wrested by the unlearned and unstable to their own destruction (2 Pet. 3:16). Some disagreements, however, did not occur out of malevolence, but out of immaturity. For example, in Rome one sincere disciple believed that he could eat all things, but another who was weak ate only herbs. One man esteemed one day above another, and another man esteemed every day alike (Rom. 14:1 - 8). Note that weak people with an immature understanding of the Scriptures were to be received without arguing about their opinions. Little children are welcome in the family of God as well as adults.

JESUS IS THE ONLY FOUNDATION FOR CHRISTIAN UNITY

When discussing this very subject of unity, Paul reminded the Corinthians: **“Other foundation an no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 3:11)**. Again we emphasize that Jesus is not “a” foundation for unity, He is the “only” foundation for Christian unity. “Other foundation can no man lay . . .” Only Jesus. At the risk of being misunderstood, not even

the Bible is the foundation for Christian unity. At the time Paul wrote these inspired words to the Corinthians more than one third of the books of our Christian Scriptures had not yet been written.

But what does Jesus being the Foundation have to do with the “new covenant”? I’m glad you asked, for receiving Jesus Christ into your heart is the new covenant.

Remember! To as many as “receive Him”, to them He has given the right to become the sons of God (Jn. 1:12).

The concept of “sonship” is both simple and profound. We know how Adam and Eve had a son. Adam “knew” his wife and she conceived and bore a “son”. Casual contact does not produce a son, it requires intimacy.

We become sons of God in the same way. That is, becoming a son of God by faith requires intimacy. Casual contact with Christ is not sufficient to make you a son of God. The demons believe and tremble, but they are not sons of God (Ja. 2:19).

Since Cain was born of a corruptible seed, his body was also corruptible. The same was true of Nicodemus. The same is true of everyone. That’s why everyone must be “born again” to enter into the Kingdom of God (Jn. 3:5). Believers are born again, not of a corruptible seed, but of the incorruptible, even the Word of God that lives and abides forever (1Pet. 1:23).

PLEASE PONDER 1 CORINTHIANS 15:49. THIS VERSE TEACHES THAT AS WE HAVE BORNE THE IMAGE OF THE EARTHLY, WE CAN ALSO BEAR THE IMAGE OF THE HEAVENLY!

When Adam and Eve gave birth to Cain they gave to him a genetic code or “image”. This DNA “image” proved his identity. Paternity suits today prove to what father a child belongs by matching their DNA. When we are “born again” we become a “new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17). The new covenant contains the “image” of God that he writes in our minds and hearts. This “image” provides proof that this “ew creation” is a child of God. This identify is made sure because God’s Seed abides in us (1 Jn. 3:9). As we grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ we are destined to be conformed to the “image” of Jesus (Rom. 8:29).

Even though Nicodemus was a teacher in Israel he didn’t understand this. He should have! From the very beginning we are told that every seed reproduced after it’s own kind (Gen. 1:11). Jesus therefore explained: **“That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (Jn. 3:6)**. This should be obvious! Our fleshly life is produced by a fleshly seed

and our spiritual life is produced by a spiritual seed. Certainly flesh and blood which are temporal, cannot inherit the Kingdom of God which is eternal (1 Cor. 15:50). Since a “spirit” is not temporal, life produced by the Spirit is eternal. That’s why we have to be born again with a spiritual seed from heaven in order to inherit an eternal kingdom.

THE OLD COVENANT AND THE NEW

The Old Covenant was written in stone when God took His people by the hand to lead them out the land of Egypt (Heb. 8:9). The symbolism is significant. Life does not come from stones! Therefore the covenant written in stone was a covenant of death. This is precisely the way it is described by Paul in 2 Cor. 3:7.

Further, the Old Covenant was a perpetual source of controversy as scholars debated the meaning of the Ten Commandments. To this day brilliant scholars still debate and disagree on virtually every one of the Ten Commandments. That’s why the Old Covenant brought bondage (Gal. 4:24). That’s why the Old Covenant is allegorized by Hagar and Ishmael. Remember! Ishmael was a “wild man”. His hand was against every man and every man’s hand was against him (Gen. 16:12). Wherever Ishmael was there was controversy. Wherever the Old Covenant is taught there is also controversy. While controversy over the Sabbath is wide spread and well known, let us further illustrate the controversial nature of the Old Covenant by reference to the commandment “Thou shalt not kill”. This seems crystal clear at first glance. Beneath the surface, however, it is not clear at all. Deut. 19:5, for example, makes provision for someone who “accidentally” kills his neighbor. If an “axe head accidentally” slips off the handle and kills your neighbor you are not guilty of a capital offense. Aye, there’s the rob! How can mortal man accurately discern the motives of another man. No man knows the things of a man save the spirit of man which is in him (1 Cor. 2:13). Thus the inevitable conflict! No man or group of men can accurately determine every murder case with certainty. Sometimes what appears to be an accident may actually be premeditated murder.

If you think that no miscarriages of justice occurred under the Law you need look no further than the trial of Jesus. Even though Jesus wrote the Law, the Jews twisted it to demand His death. They told Pilate: **“We have a law, and by our law he ought to die . . .” (Jn. 19:7).**

Every law that is written down has to be interpreted. It is not at all unusual for one judge to “interpret” the law one way, and for a higher court to reverse his decision and “interpret” the same law in a totally different way. In addition to the appeals process in interpreting law, it is also necessary to have someone authorized to enforce the law. Written law would be meaningless if there were no mechanism to enforce it!

Therefore to eliminate controversy and promote unity, God wrote the new covenant where men couldn't read it. He did not write this law on tablets of stone, or pieces of paper, but by means of His Holy Spirit He writes it inside of our minds and hearts .

The nature of the new covenant could not be more clear. **“This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, saith the Lord, I will put my laws into their hearts, and in their minds will I write them” (Heb. 10:16)**

WHEN DID THE NEW COVENANT BECOME A REALITY?

A covenant is of force after men are dead. It is of no strength while the testator lives (Heb. 9:17). The New Covenant became a reality on the Day of Pentecost following our Lord's death and resurrection. This is when the church began. This is when the genius of God regarding the new covenant became obvious. The Jews at Pentecost were not united because they suddenly came to understand the Scriptures in exactly the same way. Neither were they united by some man made creed. They were united because they believed and were baptized into Christ (Acts 2:38; Gal. 3:27). When they became the sons of God by faith in Christ Jesus God wrote His laws on their minds and hearts and they became members of the same spiritual family.

How beautiful! How simple! How profound!

In a family people of different ages, different intelligence, and different levels of maturity can all gather around the same table and share the same food. This is precisely what happened in the Jerusalem church. The unity of the sons of God in Jerusalem was so complete that not one of them considered the things they possessed as their own but they had all things in common. Neither was there among them any that lacked for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the price of the things that were sold and laid them down at the apostles' feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need (Acts 4:32 - 35).

Please note that not one word of the New Testament Scriptures was written at this time. As we have said, the new covenant was not written with ink on paper like the letters of Paul. The new covenant was written by the Spirit of God in the minds and hearts of believers. These new members of God's family continued stedfastly in the apostle's teaching, fellowship, the breaking of bread, and prayer (Acts 2:42). They did this, of course, because the Spirit of the Living God was in them. Jesus explained to Nicodemus that the wind blows where it wants to. While the wind is invisible you can still see what it does. In similar fashion it was obvious that the Spirit of God was doing something in the lives of believers in Jerusalem.

WHAT ABOUT THE SCRIPTURES?

Again, I'm glad you asked!

- When you receive Jesus Christ as Lord, spiritually speaking you are like a new born infant. As such you need to lay aside all malice, guile, hypocrisies, envies, and evil speaking and like a newborn babe desire the sincere milk of the word that you may grow thereby (1 Pet. 2:1 - 3).
- All Scriptures is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, and for instruction in righteousness that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works (2 Tim. 3:16, 17)
- Jesus said that man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes out of the mouth of God (Matt. 4:4)
- Famine and pestilence go hand in hand. Wherever there is a lack of nourishment, there is sickness. Amos spoke of a famine, not of bread or water, but of hearing the words of the Lord (Amos 8:11). No believer can be healthy or grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ without the Bible.
- THE WORD OF GOD IS ABSOLUTELY ESSENTIAL FOR SPIRITUAL LIFE AND GROWTH!
- BUT THESE INSPIRED WORDS ARE NOT THE NEW COVENANT!
- THE NEW COVENANT IS WRITTEN IN THE MINDS AND HEARTS OF BELIEVERS, NOT WITH INK ON PIECES OF PAPER.
- THE NEW COVENANT WAS A COMPLETE REALITY BEFORE ONE WORD OF THE NEW TESTAMENT SCRIPTURES WAS WRITTEN.
- UNDERSTANDING THE NATURE OF THE NEW COVENANT CAN PRODUCE UNITY. MAKING THE BIBLE INTO THE COVENANT PRODUCES DIVISION!

FINDING AND GIVING

The late Seth Wilson said: "Every child of God has a right to "find" a meaning in Scripture, but no one has the right to "give" it meaning".

At first this bold statement seems outrageous. In reality it is not!

The Scriptures teach, for example: "Abstain from all appearance of evil" (1 Thess. 5:22). Can you not see how a 5 year old would think differently about these inspired words than his 15 year

old brother? The same verse might speak differently to a newly wed than to someone who is aged and infirm. Some student of the Scriptures may prefer to limit the meaning to prophetic utterances based upon the context. If everyone considering this verse is a child of God, however, then we must allow the Word of God to have “free course” in their lives (2 Thess. 3:1). Since the Word of God is alive and active we need to allow it to effectually work in every believer (1 Thess. 2:13).

Who is going to have the last word on the meaning of what God said? Will it be the Pope or Luther? Will it be the Baptists or the Presbyterians? Will it be the scholars or the fishermen? What scholar, or group of scholars, in what denomination, is empowered by God to give the ultimate and complete meaning of any verse of Scripture?

If a person is truly born again we must permit them the privilege of hearing the Father speak and obeyed his commands to the best of their ability. Not one of us has yet attained to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ. If we are His sheep, however, we will recognize his voice and do our best to follow where He leads. Then, like sheep converging on the Shepherd, the closer we get to Christ the closer we will get to one another. We must have confidence that the Father who has begun a good work in His children, will complete it (Phil. 1:6).

REMEMBER! THE WORD OF GOD IS NOT THE FOUNDATION FOR UNITY - JESUS IS!

Please consider:

- Believers in Christ were united by the New Covenant before one word of the New Testament Scriptures was written.
- The New Testament Scriptures were written by inspired men over a period of some 60 years but the canon of the New Testament Scriptures was not officially determined until the 4th century.
- Because copies of the Bible were both rare and expensive not every believe owned his or her own Bible.
- Even after the invention of the printing press thousands of believers still do not have a Bible, and thousands of other believers do not even have a written language.
- Of the believers who do have Bibles many have never read it all the way through.
- Of the believers who have read the whole Bible, many have never studied the whole Bible.
- Of those who have studied the Bible, most have studied under the direction of someone else. Those who studied under Martin Luther, for example, had a different understanding of the Scriptures than those who studied under Huldrych Zwingli.
- That’s why God wrote the new covenant in our minds and hearts! The new covenant is the same to every child of God regardless of age, ethnic background, social standing, or

intelligence.

CONCLUSION

This brief essay, of course, is not inspired. It was written by a fallible man who is prone to making mistakes. Therefore, everyone should read these words with skepticism. We should prove all things, hold fast to that which is good, and abstain from every appearance of evil (1 Thess. 5:21, 22)

When someone is unruly they need to be warned. When someone is feeble minded they need to be comforted. When someone is weak they need to be supported. With everyone we are to be patient for to their own master they will stand or fall (1 Thess. 5:14; Rom. 14:4).

The proliferation of divisions in the Body of Christ indicates to me that something is wrong. The problem cannot possibly be with the Bible for it is inspired by God. I believe the problem is with our attitude toward the Bible.

Many years ago I attended a trial presided over by the late Judge Herbert Casteel. The case involved a farm worker who fell from a tractor and was run over by an implement which the tractor was pulling. The worker lived but sustained permanent injuries. If I understood the case correctly, the verdict depended on the difference between a comma, and a semicolon, in an insurance policy. If it was a comma then the injured man was covered, if it was a semicolon he was not. The lawyer for the injured man, however, argued that even though it was a semicolon in the policy a higher court has already established a legal precedent involving a similar case. The judge took the case under advisement and I do not know what verdict he rendered.

While the Christian world has had many scholars on a par with Martin Luther, it is doubtful if few, or any, attained to the scholarship achieved by the Scribes and Pharisees who debated with Jesus. How many Greek and Hebrew professors do you know who can carry on a conversation in Greek or Hebrew with a 5 year old in Athens or Jerusalem? Yet the message of God was hidden from the wise and prudent scholars and revealed to a bunch of peasants who were like babes by comparison (Matt. 11:25).

On my first trip to Mexico in 1963 I preached to a congregation of Otomi Indians in the mountains near Mexico City. Even though they were believers, they didn't yet have a Bible in their own language and many were illiterate. When I used the example of David and Goliath as an illustration my translator turned to me and said that they had never heard that story before. Obviously these new believers had not yet read the whole Bible. There was no doubt, however, that

these simple people manifested the fruit of the Spirit. Before receiving Christ their community was filled with murder and mayhem. When the government sent a law enforcement officer to arrest one of their tribe they killed the officer, tied him on his horse, and sent him back to town. Now, however, these people were Christlike and gentle. They were not anywhere near ready, however, to count the jots and tittles of the Law or to debate the difference between a comma and a semicolon in some disputed passage of Scripture. (As a point of interest the oldest Greek manuscripts of the New Testament Scriptures are called “Uncial Manuscripts” and are written without space between the words or punctuation.)

Praise the Lord! Our loving Heavenly Father has deliberately chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise. He has chosen the weak to confound the mighty. He has chosen the base and despised that no flesh should glory in His presence (1Cor. 1:27 - 29).

On another occasion I was privileged to travel to South America and visit the Huarani Indians in the jungles of Ecuador. These stone age people made the front cover of Life Magazine by murdering five American missionaries on Jan. 8, 1956. Steve Saint, whose father Nate was one of the martyrs, told me that the Huaranis were considered the most violent tribe on earth. While they died in a variety of different ways, 60% of the deaths within the tribe came when they killed one another. During the 350 years that men were aware of their presence they had no king or counsel or any form of government. Every man did that which was right in his own eyes. At the time they murdered the missionaries their numbers had dwindled to a total population of only about 500. When I was there it was evident to me that God had written his law in the minds and hearts of these Stone Age people. While the men around me had formerly been killers, I slept by their side in the jungle without fear.

Most of us will never be as smart as Martin Luther neither as famous as those who founded great denominations. The good news is that we don't have to be! Remember! Christ in you is the hope of glory (Col. 1:27)

“And now brethren, I commend you to God, and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified” (Acts 20:32).

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