

Herald

ANTIPAS

"Antipas, My faithful witness" (Rev 2:13)

No 17

The Relationship between the Old and the New Covenant

A few perspectives and implications

Nico van der Walt

Someone once said, "My son, the day you understand the relationship between the Old and the New Covenant, you can call yourself a theologian!"

Wise words indeed, for many of the most serious errors in theology and the church through the ages have arisen from an inadequate understanding of the relationship between the two stages of the Covenant of Grace.¹ This unhappy state of affairs continues to this day – and the result is untold misery in the church.

This study makes no claim to completeness. On the contrary, it simply offers a few fundamental perspectives.

THE COVENANT OF GRACE

□ God's covenant of grace with fallen man runs like a backbone right through His Word. Comprehending, and reckoning with this covenant, is essential for a correct understanding of the message of Holy Scripture, for truly knowing God, for properly understanding

1. Three great covenants are spoken of in the Bible. Firstly, there is the *Covenant of Redemption* between the three persons of the Divine Trinity – to cooperate for their own glory in the redemption of sinners. Secondly, there is the *Covenant of Works* between God and Adam, and also, later on, between God and the Last Adam – that man had to earn his promised inheritance through obedience. Thirdly, there is the *Covenant of Grace* between God and fallen man – that every sinner who repents and, in complete dependence, places his trust in the merits of Jesus Christ alone, will be declared righteous by God. This Covenant of Grace has two stages, or components: the *Old Covenant* and the *New Covenant*.

The concepts of *covenant* and *testament* are in reality alternative translations of single words in both Hebrew and Greek. So one can just as well speak of *Old and New Testament* as of *Old and New Covenant*.

and proclaiming the gospel, and for living the Christian life in the way that we are called.

□ Generally speaking, a covenant can be defined as *a mutual and solemn agreement between two parties which binds them absolutely and usually permanently to be certain things to each other and to do certain things for each other*.

• The Bible makes mention of many such covenants between people (Gen 21:22-34; 31:44-55; Josh 9; 1 Sam 18:3; 2 Sam 3:6-21; 5:3; 1 Kings 5).

□ God made use of this generally known concept in the ancient world to define and regulate His eternal and unbreakable relationship with those whom He would save as new humanity after the Fall. *The covenant is therefore the "constitution" of God's plan of salvation*.

□ The Covenant of Grace has a clearly discernible pattern of development in the Old Testament; in fact, in the whole of Scripture.

Embryonically it is already present in the *protevangelium* (Gen 3:15). It is then further developed in the covenant with *Noah* (Gen 9:1-17).

A giant step forward is taken in the covenant with Abraham (Gen 12:1-3; 15; 17; 22:1-19), which is confirmed with Abraham's descendants, *Isaac* (Gen 26:2-5) and *Jacob* (Gen 28:10-22). Later it is reconfirmed with *David*.

With *Moses* during the Exodus – that is to say, with the nation that was rescued

from Egypt – the covenant takes on new dimensions. This happens at Sinai, and again four decades later, just before Israel takes possession of Canaan. The last-mentioned event is described in the Book of Deuteronomy, which is written in the form of a typical covenant of the time. The Sinaitic Covenant, alongside the covenant with Abraham, is of the utmost importance and dominates the subsequent life of the covenant nation.

□ The *establishment* of the covenant is *one-sided or unilateral*. God, and He alone, takes the sovereign initiative in this, and unilaterally determines the nature of the relationship. The *implementation and maintenance* of the covenant, however, is *bilateral*. Both parties, God and man, are therefore actively involved in living out the covenant. Thus the Lord promises certain things to man as privileges (something which *He* does), while He prescribes other things as responsibilities (something which *man* must do).

□ In the covenant of grace the relationship between the two parties is not merely impersonal, formal and judicial. It is rather a relationship of unity and fellowship, characterised by mutual bonds of intimate love and loyal faithfulness. Two everyday and very striking pictures are used to emphasise this: the relationship between husband and wife (Is 54:5; Jer 31:31-32; Ezek 16:1-14; Hos 1:2; 3:1; Eph 5:24-25,32; Rev 21:9); and that between parent and child (Ex 4:22; Deut 1:31; 8:5; Hos 11:1; Rom 8:15; 2 Cor 6:18; 1 Jn 3:1).

- The typical covenant formula, "*I will be your God and you will be my people*", admirably brings this wonderful truth to the fore. It is used throughout the Bible and holds true for eternity (see for instance Gen 17:8; Jer 24:7; 31:33; Ezek 11:20; 14:11; 36:28; 37:23,27; 2 Cor 6:16; Heb 8:10; Rev 21:3).

□ A few further issues relating to the Covenant of Grace are:

- At the heart of God's covenant with Abraham is the statement of Gen 15:6: "Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness" (NIV). As the New Testament shows in more than one instance, justification comes only through faith – and that was true from the very beginning after the fall (Rom 4:3, 9, 22; Gal 3:6; Jas 2:23).

- Although God's moral law, as summarised in the Ten Commandments, was at the heart of the Sinaitic Covenant, the Lord also gives in that covenant a mass of ceremonial prescriptions which later dominated the religion of Israel. The New Testament emphasises that the moral law remains the norm by which the covenant people continue to express their grateful love and obedient faithfulness (Mt 5:17-20). But it also insists that the ceremonial laws were fulfilled in the coming of Christ and therefore no longer apply to the covenant people. The letters to the Galatians and the Hebrews in particular underline this latter point as they warn earnestly against upholding these ceremonies (Gal 5:1-10).

- In Galatians 3 and 4 Paul

explains that God had already, 430 years before Sinai, in His covenant with Abraham, laid down the fundamental and unchangeable principle of justification through faith alone (Gal 3:15-18). The ceremonial law was simply given as a child-minder (the sense of the Greek in 3:24) who had to guard the people of God and the revelation of the covenant until *the faith* had come (3:23-25) – the complete revelation of God in Christ. The people of Israel were like little children who could not look after themselves, but the ceremonial law took care of them and attended to them through the ages. However, with the arrival of the New Covenant's fullness, in particular the gift of the Holy Spirit, and the maturity which it brought for God's covenant nation, the need for this child-minder fell away (4:1-7).

The ceremonial law, therefore, functioned as scaffolding during the erection of God's covenant building. It was simply a means to an end. And when that goal was reached, the scaffolding had to go.

- Circumcision was central to Israel's covenant obligations. It was *the* sign of the covenant, and failing to carry it out was a very serious offence (Gen 17:14). What did circumcision point to?

- ~ As was typical of a covenant, it constituted a self-condemning oath: if I don't keep to this covenant, may my blood flow, and may I be cut off from the people of God.

- ~ Why was circumcision applied specifically to the male

reproductive organ? Because this indicated that growth in covenant numbers would take place primarily through natural birth. After all, *national* Israel was the covenant nation. A person was born into the covenant. That this was the only requirement is clear, since the sign was applied at the age of only eight days.

- ~ It was truly a covenant of grace. Does anyone have control over the family or nation into which he is born? And being part of the nation of Israel held wonderful privileges for this life (Rom 9:4-5). Yet, eternal life did not follow automatically.

- ~ Circumcision was part of the scaffolding that was dismantled with the coming of Christ. No one who reads Paul's letters can doubt this. But the fact that it had been instituted centuries before Sinai is surely not without significance. Why? God instituted it as a sign to distinguish his people from the heathen nations. Clearly He considered it of extreme importance to have a covenant sign. It is no surprise then that the New Testament should continue with an external sign of entry into the covenant – baptism.

- It is of the greatest importance to understand that there is only one way for a sinner to receive salvation. Galatians 3:16 provides a key in this respect: "The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say 'and to seeds', meaning many people, but 'and to your seed', meaning one person, who is Christ." At its deepest level the covenant

is therefore a covenant between God the Father and God the Son – and indeed in His capacity as the *man* Christ Jesus (1 Tim 2:5), the Adam and Covenant Head of the new humanity (1 Cor 15:45,47).

~ How then does a person, who is a sinner, obtain a share in this covenant? *By being united to Christ through faith – and thus also becoming a child of Abraham* (Gal 3:6-7, 29). Through faith he is thus taken out of the old and disobedient Adam and planted into the last and perfectly obedient Adam (cf. Rom 5:12-21).

~ It is important to understand that Old Testament believers were also saved through faith alone (Rom 4). What does this say? That they too had to be united with Christ in order to obtain a share in the covenant of grace! They had to believe in what He would do; just as we must believe in what He has done. What did their faith involve? It came to expression in the maintenance of the ceremonial laws – *with understanding* (according to God's revelation up to that point), *humbly* (aware of one's own sinfulness), *sincerely* (more than just outward ritual) and *believing* (trusting that the Lamb who God would eventually provide would die as the final sacrifice for sinners). And all this had to be packaged in converted and repenting lives before the face of their Covenant God – as proof of genuine faith.

~ Since the fall, therefore, there has never been any salvation, except through faith in Christ – the Head of God's new creation and humanity. In Old

Testament times this faith was expressed by taking hold of God's promises concerning Him. Being united to Him through faith has thus always been the only way of fleeing the fallen humanity in Adam and the subsequent judgement by God (Rom 5:12-21; 1 Cor 15:21-22).

The Puritan, Thomas Goodwin (1600-1680), stated it splendidly: *There are but two men standing before God, Adam and Christ, and these two men have all other men hanging on their girdles.*

• Going hand in hand with God's developing revelation in the Word, His salvific dealings with His covenant nation also had a progressive character – culminating finally in the coming and work of Jesus Christ. Apart from regular covenant renewal and development in the Old Testament, it is of particular importance for the purpose of this discussion to note that the covenant of grace is divided into *two clear phases*: the *Old Covenant* (or Testament) and the *New Covenant* (or Testament). In this connection, two parallel truths are of the utmost importance:

~ There is only one covenant of grace. This is undeniably clear from what has been explained above. Those who, before His coming, were united to Christ through faith, and those for whom this happens afterwards, will together eventually receive the perfection of their covenant inheritance (Heb 11:39-40). The first cardinal point is this: *there is an unbreakable unity, an unmistakable continuity between the Old and the New Covenant.*

~ Yet the Bible also speaks in explicit terms of the *Old Covenant* and the *New Covenant* (Heb 8, especially v.13). There is obviously a difference between the two. This then is the second cardinal point: *there is a distinction, a discontinuity between the Old and the New Covenant.*

□ The continuity and unity between the Old and the New Covenant has already been emphasised and explained. Now we must look more closely at the other side of the issue: *the discontinuity or difference between the two.*

THE DUAL CHARACTER OF THE OLD COVENANT

□ The dual character of the Old Covenant is expressed in two ways. *On the one hand* it lay in the nature of both the covenant privileges and the covenant obligations. *On the other hand* it led to a two-fold division within the covenant nation itself.

□ Firstly, the *covenant privileges and obligations* had a dual character. This is seen in more than one way:

• Many of the nation's privileges and obligations in terms of the Old Covenant pointed *forward*. True faith therefore came to expression in a *future orientation*.

~ As a *privilege*, for instance, they received the promised land, Canaan. But this also foreshadowed the *eternal Canaan* which true believers would receive (Heb 11:8-10; 13-16).

~ As an *obligation*, for instance, they had to maintain the sacrificial worship. This, however, was also a foreshadowing of the *final sacrifice of the Lamb of God*, in Whom all who truly believed would share.

• Many of the nation's external obligations in terms of the Old Covenant pointed *inwards*. As is still the case today, true faith had to come from a *sincere heart*.

~ The sacrifice of an animal, for instance, served to remind the people that it was really they who should have died. This action therefore had to be much more than a simple ritual. In order to be acceptable to God, the worshipper's action had to be accompanied by *inner* contrition and penitence. And the authenticity of these qualities would manifest itself in a life of obedience to God's Law.

~ Circumcision, for instance, was external, applied to the male reproductive organ. But it also pointed *inwards* and was meant to remind the nation of the necessity of circumcision of the heart (Deut 10:16; 30:6; Jer 4:4; etc.). So, what made people acceptable to God, was a holiness of heart – which necessarily leads to a life of holy devotion and obedience.

□ Secondly, obedience (or otherwise) to the above created a *two-fold division in the nation*.

• The Old Testament itself makes it increasingly clear that only the

believing and sincere, the converted and obedient – the circumcised in heart – constituted the *true covenant nation*. Only these belonged to God and would inherit eternal life. After all, from the beginning justification was by faith alone. These people were the *remnant*, the *seven thousand who did not worship Baal* (1 Kings 19:18).

It is surely not without significance that more and more attention is paid to this theme as the Old Testament revelation progresses (Deut 4:23-31; Is 6:13; 10:20-22; Ezek 5:1-4; etc.).

- The New Testament is clear: *the majority of the Old Testament covenant nation was never saved, but died under God's wrath* (1 Cor 10:1-5; Heb 3:7-9; Jude 5). Why? They understood very little of the future and inward aspects of the covenant! Unlike the remnant, God's chosen and favoured ones, they were unbelieving, insincere and disobedient!

ROMANS 9 : THE TRUE ISRAEL

□ The New Testament clearly confirms this dual character of the Old Covenant. Romans 9:6 and context are especially explicit in this connection:

- In the first verses of Romans 9 Paul answers a question which he anticipates from his readers. In Romans 8 he gives the assurance that the perseverance and salvation of God's elect are guaranteed, because they are rooted in God's eternal decree. The question now arises: *What, then, of the Jews? Were they not God's chosen covenant people? Yet they rejected Christ and consequently are under God's wrath* (v.4-5).

- However, this does not mean that God's plan of redemption and covenant of grace are frustrated. How so? *"For not all who are descended from Israel are Israel"* (V.6). There is, therefore, a true and eternal Israel within the external and temporary Israel (national Israel), and the covenant promises of which Romans 8 speaks, *apply only to this true Israel*.

- In v.7-13 the apostle explains and illustrates his shocking assertion in v.6. He uses two examples: in v.7-9 that of *Ishmael and Isaac*, Abraham's children; and in v.10-13 that of *Esau and Jacob*, Isaac and Rebecca's children.

~ V.7-9: There are descendants and descendants; children and children. And there is a world of difference between the two. There is a descendant in the natural sense; but then there is a descendant through whom God's covenant is carried forward. There are the children of the flesh; and there are the children of the covenant – the children of God. So when it comes to the covenant, only some are children. Ishmael had no share in the covenant of grace; Isaac, however, did – and in him, as God's elect and part of the remnant, the plan of God is carried forward.

~ V.10-13: Paul anticipates an objection. *All very well, but Ishmael and Isaac had two different mothers. And, what is more, in Ishmael's case Abraham acted "in the flesh"*.

Alright, says Paul, let's take a look then at Esau and Jacob. They had the same father and mother; as a matter of fact, they were twins. Yet, when they were still in their mother's womb God's

election had already taken place! Only Jacob would share in the covenant of grace. In *him* the plan of God is carried forward.

- Thus there was a true, chosen Israel within the nation of Israel. *Everyone was completely involved in the temporary and outward aspects of the covenant, but only the true Israel were loved ones in terms of the covenant of grace*.

□ Other New Testament Scripture alluding to the same truth can be found in Romans 2:28-29 and Philippians 3:3.

JOHN THE BAPTIST

□ John was the Messiah's forerunner. He stood, as it were, with one foot in the Old Testament and the other in the New. As such, his preaching is of the utmost importance. *In fact, it contains the key to understanding the relationship between the two Testaments*. Consequently, Matthew 3:1-12 is wonderfully illuminating.

- V.2-3: *Repent!* Why? The kingdom of heaven is near! A new dispensation is at hand – the reign of the Messiah.

- V.5-6: Those who embrace this prophecy in faith are baptized by him – with the confession of sin.

- V.7-9: The self-righteous Pharisees and unbelieving Sadducees also want to be baptized. They appeal to their descent from Abraham as a qualification for this baptism. But this is inadequate.

There is but one qualification: *the fruit of repentance!*

- V.10 and 12: The end of the old dispensation is at hand. *No longer will the dual nature of the Old Testament covenant people continue!* The King is going to bring a division!

~ Up to now Israel was like an orchard with two kinds of trees: those bearing good fruit and those bearing none. To this the King will put a stop. His axe is already in His hand. *Every tree which does not bear fruit (the fruit of repentance, from the context) will be chopped down and burned. From now on there will only be fruit-bearing trees in the King's orchard!*

~ To ensure that the point is not missed, John repeats it with another picture. Up to now Israel was like a threshing-floor on which lay both wheat and chaff. The King will now bring an end to this unholy mixture. His winnowing fork is already in His hand. He will gather up the wheat and burn the chaff. *There will be absolutely no mixing any more - He will cleanse the threshing-floor through and through.*

- V.11: Precisely how will the King bring about the division? In order to make it complete and final, He will take dual measures – negative and positive. What is more, the new dispensation will be much more glorious than the old.

~ The merely temporary and external elements of the Old Covenant, together with those whose covenant-keeping got no further than that, will be

destroyed² by the fire of His judgement. From the context, *fire* clearly signifies judgement (v.10,12).

~ The true Israel, those who are united to Him through faith, will be submerged by the King in the overflowing work of the Holy Spirit – in order to fulfil in them the Old Testament promises regarding the New Covenant (see, e.g., Deut 30:6; Jer 24:7; 31:31-34; Ezek 11:19-20; 36:22-32; Hos 2:13-22; Joel 2:28-32).

❑ The division would therefore be dramatic and total. Those for whom the Old Testament was only external and temporary would finally be removed from the covenant framework. And those who really did belong to Him would be lifted far above the experiences of the Old Testament's true Israel by a much richer work of grace.

HEBREWS

❑ In the Book of Hebrews the inspired author addresses himself to Jewish Christians who were weak in the knees. The claims of discipleship were becoming too great and they were considering a return to Old Testament ceremonial religion.

❑ The warnings of Hebrews against such an about face come with an urgency

2. The destruction of the merely external and ceremonial component of the Old Covenant was dramatically demonstrated and sealed when God tore the curtain during the crucifixion (Mt 27:51). And historically it was finally ratified when Jerusalem and the temple were demolished by the Romans in 70 AD.

and a holy indignation hardly equalled elsewhere in the New Testament. It is explained in every conceivable manner that the ceremonies of the Jewish religion *are fulfilled in Jesus Christ*. The addressees therefore want to return to something that doesn't exist any more!

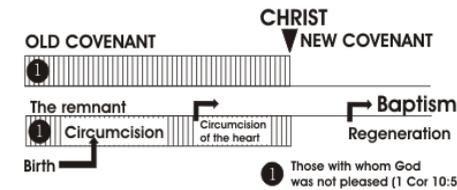
• The six pastoral warnings in the book fill any Christian with the fear of the Lord (2:1-4; 3:7-4:13; 5:11-6:12; 10:26-39; 12:14-17; 12:25-29). Such a turn-around, it is said with unmistakable clarity, amounts to a denial of what God has done finally and completely in Christ. It is stated in shockingly strong language. It amounts to crucifying the Son of God again and spurning Him; to mocking Him publicly; to despising the blood of the covenant (Heb 6:6; 10:29). It is such a serious matter that those who are guilty of it have only one destiny - the terrible and eternal wrath of God.

❑ The whole argument of Hebrews is based on the distinction between the Old Covenant and the New – and especially on the fact that Old Testament ceremonies are fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

The author works powerfully with the Messianic promise of Jeremiah 31 (Heb 8:8-13; 10:15-18) to show that the coming of the New Covenant has brought an end to the external and shadowy elements of the Old Covenant (8:13). *Those who have a share in the New Covenant now have the moral Law in their minds and hearts (8:10). They are acquitted and all of them –from the least to the greatest –know the Lord (8:11-12).*

CONCLUSIONS

❑ The relationship between the Old Covenant and the New can be presented as follows:



❑ God has only *one* covenant of grace, and only *one* eternal people – in which a person obtains a share through faith in Christ alone, the Covenant Head and the Adam of the new humanity. Herein lies the unity of God's eternal plan of salvation, and of the Word as His special revelation to man.

There is therefore a continuity between the Old and the New Covenant.

❑ Yet there is a dramatic and extremely meaningful distinction between the Old and the New Covenant – and therefore between the dual-natured Old Testament covenant nation and the New Testament congregation of committed believers. These two covenantal dispensations are divided by the incarnation and work of Christ, and the accompanying outpouring of the Holy Spirit.

There is therefore a discontinuity between the Old and the New Covenant.

• The Old Covenant bore the stamp of expectation; the New bears the stamp of fulfilment.

• As a rule people obtained a share in the Old Covenant by *natural birth* – but

this did not of itself imply eternal salvation. That is why circumcision of the heart was necessary. A share in the New Covenant, however, is obtained not through natural birth, but through the *new birth* – which at the same time guarantees eternal salvation.

• The New Covenant is *qualitatively much richer* than the Old. This fact lies at the heart of the Old Testament promises. The Holy Spirit, as the great gift of the last days (the period between Christ's first and second coming), has come to make this a reality. The New Covenant, therefore, no longer leaves room for the dual character of the Old Covenant.

❑ When it comes to the relationship between the Old and the New Covenant, two dangers stare us in the face – dangers which distort our theology, and are therefore catastrophic for preaching, pastorate and practice:

• *A neglect of the continuity between the Old and the New Covenant.*

Those who overlook the wonderfully integrated nature of God's plan of redemption and of His Word pay a high theological and pastoral price. They can hardly avoid disparaging the Old Testament, and so miss large sections of divine revelation which are necessary for being a mature Christian. Even worst, extremely important aspects of God's character and being, which are only revealed in the Old Testament, pass them by. This error eventually manifests itself in the disease of a one-sided emphasis on God's goodness – at the cost of the equally important truth of His severity and

sternness, and the accompanying fear of the Lord (Rom 11:22).

• *A neglect of the discontinuity between the Old and the New Covenant.*

This is no small theological blunder. It brings with it a subtle "Old Testamentalising" of numerous New Testament truths. Nowhere does it have more dangerous and God-dishonouring consequences than in *soteriology* (the doctrine of salvation) and in *ecclesiology* (the doctrine of the church).

THREE PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

□ Where the relationship between the Old and the New Covenant is correctly understood, the necessity of the new birth – and that which accompanies it – will naturally be strongly emphasised (Jn 3:3-8). The full gospel will not only be proclaimed to the unbelievers of this world, but also to those inside the church. Believers will regularly examine themselves to see if they are living in the faith (2 Cor 13:5); and they will work out their salvation with fear and trembling (Phil 2:12-13; 2 Pet 1:10-11). The preaching will expose hypocrites to themselves. And the children of the congregation will know that they cannot rely on their parents' faith for salvation, but are themselves answerable before the Lord.

However, where the difference between the Old and the New Covenant is neglected, preaching almost always lulls the conscience. And this often goes hand in hand with deadly errors like *baptismal regeneration*, and the *assumed regeneration of so-called covenant*

children. And many who are on their way to eternal damnation will bluff themselves that they are reconciled to God!

□ Both Old and New Covenant have a *covenant sign* which follows entry into the covenant: *circumcision* and *baptism* respectively. What circumcision was to the Old Covenant, baptism is to the New. *Thus baptism has come in the place of circumcision.*

If, however, the discontinuity between the Old and the New is neglected, this analogy is often reduced to a simple equation – with infant baptism as a result.

But if the relationship is correctly understood, it leads with crystal clarity to New Testament baptism – the baptism of believers, the baptism of confession. Whereas a person under the Old Covenant obtained a share in the Covenant through *birth*, he now shares in it through the *new birth*. That is the qualification which controls the analogy between baptism and circumcision.

□ The New Testament speaks in the most exalted terms of the central and God-glorifying role of the true church in God's plan (see, e.g., Jn 17:20-23; 2 Cor 11:2-4; Eph 1:23; 3:9-11, 20-21; 4:1-16; 5:25-27, 32; Rev 1-3; 19:7-8). However, the realization of this grand calling relies totally on the purity and faithfulness of the church. What brings greater dishonour to the Lord's name than a worldly institution calling itself the church of Christ?

If the deep differences between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant are neglected, an "Old Testamentalising" of the church follows of necessity. And soon

the church looks like Old Testament Israel – with a large component (often the majority of the members!) being unsaved. Once this is the case, it is by definition impossible to be the true church – because people without the Spirit cannot even begin to attain New Testament standards.

However, if the relationship between the Old and the New Covenant is correctly understood, it is also understood that the true church is a congregation of believers called out from the world. And this is cardinally important for true church life, for effective evangelism, for the upbuilding of believers, and for the honour of God.



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