

# **New Covenant in Christ**

## **A Biblical Theology of Holiness**

David A. Ackerman

### **Introduction**

Discussions on holiness buzz in the grand halls of theological seminaries, Sunday classrooms, and internet forums. I myself have been a participant in some of these over the years, much to my enrichment. We hold theological conferences that strain to “articulate holiness” for specific contexts. This conversation is good and necessary. Many of the dominant voices approach the questions of holiness from the disciplines of philosophy, history, or systematic theology. There is one particular approach to the topic of holiness from a biblical perspective that has answered many questions for me and offers to me a fresh perspective for understanding God, God’s will for His people, and how His people are to live with each other and unbelievers.

One of the central and unifying themes of the Bible is that in grace, God seeks to have a relationship with the human race. From the earliest pages of scripture, a relentless hope permeates the story of the holy God creating relationship with the beloved creature called human. The various covenants in the Bible serve to establish this relationship of grace. This relationship has been guided by the call to be holy like God (Lev. 11:44; 1 Pet 1:15). The relationship between God and the human race was broken in the Garden of Eden but restored through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The life of holiness is the goal and end of the covenant concept of the Bible. God’s grace demands the response of commitment. This essay attempts a biblical theology of holiness by exploring God’s desire for relationship in the covenants made and broken in the Old Testament but fulfilled in the new covenant with Christ. Significant support for a biblical doctrine of holiness can be found in the covenant concept in the Bible.

### **I. The Problem**

The Bible begins and ends with promise. God created humans with the quality of life and level of existence by which we can enter into relationship with Him. God created us with the ability to choose in

freedom to love Him. Adam and Eve=s choice of disobedience caused a rift in this relationship. God had a plan through the lineage of Abraham to restore this marred relationship. God=s covenant with Abraham was a significant milestone in this restoration of relationship.

### **A. Definition and Description of *Covenant***

At the core of any relationship is the reciprocal exchange of something. In the ancient world, this relationship was established with a covenant. The term “covenant” denotes an agreement, deal, contract, partnership, pledge, or pact. The English word “covenant” comes from the French word *Acovenir*.<sup>6</sup> The Hebrew word for “covenant” is *berith*. The etymology of this word suggests that it may be related to an Akkadian preposition meaning “between” or “among,” which developed into a noun. It could also have come from the second meaning of *brh*, a verb meaning to “choose,” or “determine.” It may also be associated with the Akkadian noun *biritu*, which means a class or fetter that binds two or more parties together. This general background sets the stage for a more refined investigation in the Bible, for the final meaning of any word must be determined by its context.

The term basically means an obligation implied on both sides. An example is a marriage covenant where two parties enter into a relationship by mutual agreement and then are obligated, through the commitment of love and oath, to keep the relationship. Covenant can be also commanded (Judges 2:20). Commitment is essential to covenant. Covenant is confirmed by an oath which gives an obligation that binds the two parties together (Gen 26:28). Relationship can be kept by goodwill shown by love, friendship, and brotherhood. The result of keeping covenant is peace (*shalom*), completeness, soundness, welfare, harmony, and salvation.

Covenants were sealed by oaths and/or ceremonies, often including sacrifices. To “make a covenant” in Hebrew was expressed, literally, by “cutting” (*kr*) a covenant (Gen 15:18; Jer 34:18). Usually in establishing a covenant, an animal was cut in two. The lesser party then passed through the middle of the split animal and gave an oath like this: AMay what has happened to this animal happen to me if I ever break the terms of the covenant.<sup>7</sup>

A theologically significant word related to covenant is *hesed*, which means “covenantal faithfulness,” “steadfast love,” “goodness,” “kindness,” or “loyalty” (Deut 7:9). It describes one’s attitude towards the other partner in the relationship expressed as love or loyalty to covenant obligation in operation prior to establishment of covenant. In terms of God’s covenants with people, it represents God’s grace upon which people can be assured that God will keep God’s side of the relationship.

There were two types of ancient treaties. The suzerainty treaty was an unequal relationship between a great king and a vassal. In the Old Testament, God is the sovereign great king and Israel is the vassal. Only the inferior vassal is obligated to the treaty. The parity treaty was between two equal parties, such as two great kings. Here, the legal agreement is important and must be upheld by an oath.

Ancient covenants followed a more or less set structure. The form was not rigid, and there is considerable variation in the order of the component parts. The *preamble* introduced the covenant and praised the king or dominant power, listing his characteristics, titles, and genealogy. The *historical prologue* spoke of the previous relationship between the two parties, especially what the great king had done for the vassal. Its intent was to exchange future obedience for past deeds. The *stipulations* were the most important part of a covenant. They stated the obligations that the vassal must follow to stay in good standing with the king, and thus to keep in covenant. Allegiance is owed only to the great king. To break the stipulations could bring the wrath of the king and cancellation of covenant. The treat was *deposited* in the temple or a sacred precinct for periodic reading. The intent of this was to familiarize oneself with the treaty. The gods or elements of nature were called as *witnesses*. *Blessings* were bestowed for obedience and keeping of the stipulations, and *curses* resulted from disobedience. Other features might include a formal *oath* of pledge of obedience; accompanied by a solemn *ceremony* in conclusion. Many of these aspects of ancient covenants can found in the various covenants recorded in the Bible and help us to understand holiness in a dynamic way.

## **B. Relationship Lost**

The Bible begins with the creation of humans in the *image of God* (Gen 1:26-27). God created Adam and Eve with the quality of life

and level of existence by which they could be in relationship with Him. The idea of personhood sets humans apart from the rest of creation. The idea behind the concept of the image of God is not the natural or physical image, but the spiritual image that enables humanity to respond to love in relationship. It makes fellowship possible. The first humans were able to respond freely to the grace of God and be in a relationship with God. The possibility of love is central to the idea of creation.

Like all covenantal relationships, the one between God and the first humans had a stipulation: not to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil (2:16-17). The relationship of love necessitated that Adam and Eve to be free-moral agents with the ability to choose to obey this simple command. The tree represents knowledge to know what is good for humanity. The blessing of obedience would be a relationship of love. By eating of the fruit of this tree, they were able to make their own choice about their destiny. The curse of the stipulation was, "When you eat, you shall surely die."

The most severe consequence of disobedience was the death to intimate relationship with God. The stories that follow in Genesis give evidence that something fundamental was lacking in humanity. God would not leave the human race to wallow in its depravity but began to unfold the eternal plan of redemption and restoration through the lives of the patriarchs.

### **C. The Birth of Promise**

God breaks into human destiny with a word of blessing through the life of Abram. The universal curse of the wages of sin (Rom 6:23) is answered with a universal blessing, "all nations will be blessed through you" (Gen 12:1-3). God's promises to Abram in this initial call were given later with the cutting of a covenant in Genesis 15. God promised to Abram descendants and land and confirmed the promise with the symbolism of a blazing torch and fire pot passing in between the two halves of several animals that Abram had cut in half. The text does not say what these symbols represent, but the context suggests that the torch and pot represent God's presence. Thus, Abram knows that this promise will be fulfilled based on the character of God. The irony of this covenant ceremony is that it was usually the weaker party that passed through the animal halves, but here, it is the almighty God, thus confirming, without any doubt, that the promises would come about.

Over time, God began to unfold His plan for restoration through the promises made to Abraham. Tangible evidence of promise-fulfillment on an individual level began with the soon birth of Ishmael and later Isaac. The initial promise of land was mostly fulfilled by Joshua in the conquest of Canaan, and more fully under the leadership of David. The universal blessing to all people needed divine help and would wait for the greatest gracing of all time.

#### **D. Establishing a People**

The exodus from Egypt was the transition from the old way of life to a new way of life marked by relationship with God and was the chief defining moment for the people of Israel. God chose the people of Israel to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exod 19:5-6). This choice was conditioned upon the obedience to the stipulations of the covenant: “if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant.” The stipulations in this covenant described how the nation should live as holy people in relationship with the holy God.

Importantly, this covenant began with grace-established relationship expressed in the covenant formula of Exodus 6:7: “I will be your God, you will be my people.” The first, formal expression of this was at Mt. Sinai and included the entire nation. Covenant law was given to the whole nation, but addressed to individuals. The individual is responsible to obey; the individual is always a member of a community which consists of individuals bonded together in hope. The individual is never apart from the body. Community and individual are kept in balance. Life assumes a dignity and meaning for the individual. All people are treated equally under the law. A God is no respecter of persons.®

The story of the making of covenant follows the biblical pattern of grace first (“I am the Lord who brought you out of Egypt”), followed by the obligation to follow the law (“you shall have no other gods”; Exod 20:2-3). Covenant and command belong together. We cannot merely emphasize God’s initiative and grace as the full content of covenant; humanity’s response is necessary. Law is vital to covenant relationship. The function of the law was to give an outline of the new life for the covenant people of Israel. Redeemed Israel had to respond in obedience. Law is the interpretation and implementation of the faith of Exodus.

Law helps the people grow in God's will and experience God's blessing. A holy God demands that His people be holy. The law reveals God's will and helps people live as holy people, as a kingdom of priests, by guiding them into holiness. Israel saw law not as a penal burden, but as a gift of God. The law leads to fullness of life and not the bondage of legalism. It brings delight to the soul (see Ps 1, 119). The law was grace (a gift) to Israel and was to be obeyed as a response to salvation (Lev. 11:45). The holiness of Israel should be seen in imitating the purity of God, especially in personal relationships (see Lev 19:2, 33-34 and the context of loving the neighbor).

The biblical pattern is that a person is justified before God by faith and not by works, merit, or the quality of one's life (Gen 15:6; Rom 4). The life of faith, however, is to be demonstrated by obedience to the law. Law governs how redeemed people live. "Torah" meant more than legal code, but referred rather to teaching and guidance. William Greathouse comments, "God, as the Giver of Torah, was seen primarily not as the giver of commandments but as the Source of divine teaching and guidance that defined the life of the faithful community."<sup>1</sup> Holy living would evidence a people in covenant with God.

The law given on Sinai and subsequent desert wanderings can be divided into two general areas, both of which have significant meaning for understanding holiness. First, the law functioned in a religious sense by defining the cultic system. There is more to the cultic practices of ancient Israel than simply regulations surrounding the giving of sacrifices and the job descriptions of the priesthood. Holiness and cult go together and are a central theme to Leviticus. One of the basic meanings of "holiness" is separation. God's character as the "Other" sets the standard for holiness. Leviticus makes a distinction between the holy and profane, the clean and unclean, by setting both fixed and flexible boundaries. Holiness separates things into classes and these classes should not be mixed. That which is in relationship to the holy God must be separated and clean. That which is or becomes defiled must be cleansed and sanctified to God. There were degrees of holiness. The closer one was to the Holy of Holies, the holier one was. The holiest place in the Israelite camp was the Ark of the Covenant where God's presence was said to dwell, located in the "most holy place" of the tabernacle (Exod 25:22). That which was considered unclean was to be put outside the camp. God's design for holiness was to define the

covenant community and enable it to be in relationship with Him. Holiness was the prime mission of Israel, for without it, they could not stand in the presence of the Holy One.

Second, because Israel was separated to God and separated from its pagan surroundings, it was obligated to act in a way consistent with this separation. Sanctification is the result of divine activity (20:8; 21:8, 15, 23; 22:9, 16, 32), but there is a necessary human response to this divine activity: to keep holy that which has been sanctified. Because Israel was associated with the Holy God, they were to live by God's characteristic of righteousness. The religious and moral aspects of holiness are in a reciprocal relationship: holiness as separation leads to ethical conduct in keeping with God's purity (Lev 11:44-45; 19:2; 20:26; 1 Pet 1:15-16). If we separate the two, the idea of holiness becomes imbalanced. Thus, holiness is first and foremost relationship; second it is lifestyle consistence with this relationship. God defined moral perfection, with the three chief characteristics being love, purity, and righteousness. The law defined how these were to be applied in holistic and practical ways in the community and beyond.

Deuteronomy, as an exposition of Israel's faith, provides a complete picture of how the covenant community ought to live. It faces the basics of faith, the meaning of covenant, God's will, the lifestyle of people facing Canaanite temptations, and how to be holy before a holy God. The central theme of Deuteronomy is covenant relationship. Covenant gave meaning to community and supplied norms for right and wrong. The norm became loving the neighbor as the self. Law, as the stipulation, defined this lifestyle and should be viewed as gospel ("good news"). The context of law is grace and can only be kept by those redeemed from bondage. An important sequence to bear in mind is that holy living must be an outgrowth of a love relationship (note the sequence of imperatives in Deut 6:4-19). Faith and obedience must be balanced.

At the heart of the covenant relationship is *hesed*, loyalty to the other party in the relationship. The basis of this relationship must be total love for God in response to what God has done. The theological setting of torah is grace and love. As in the New Testament, love holds a primary place in the Old Testament. Love here can be commanded and involves an act of the will. Love is not separated from the duty of

faithfulness and obedience. Love is combined with covenant promise (AI will be your God@). The concepts of love and obedience are wedded in Deuteronomy 11:1-2: “love the Lord your God and keep his charge.” In covenant, Israel was placed under the spiritual obligation of complete devotion and commitment to the object of their love.

In summary, obedience to the law is at the heart of the covenant concept but must come in response to established relationship. This relationship is based first and foremost on the Lord’s redemption of humanity. Redemption obliges us to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength (cf. 1 Cor 6:19-20). The covenantal relationship is always based on God=s grace but never stops with grace alone but issues forth the call and source for living holies lives worthy of being in relationship with the Holy God.

## **II. Anticipation**

The optimism and idealism of the first generation of freed Israelites were soon dashed by the reality of inbred sin vividly displayed by the next generation after the desert wanderers (Judges 2:10-11). Soon after the conquest of the land, the people disobeyed the law and began to worship idols. The story of Israel in the land shows that the problem of sin could not be remedied by purely human effort. The problem was deeper in the human heart which is inclined towards sin. This is demonstrated by the kingdom period of the nations of Israel and Judah. The curses from disobedience to God’s law were realized at the close of the period of the monarchy through destruction and exile. Prophets like Amos, Hosea, Micah, and Isaiah called the people back to holiness and love, but the problem of sin could not be remedied by purely human efforts.

In the theocracy of the earliest days of Israel’s history, God was the Great King enthroned at Sinai, and Israel’s was God’s vassal. This was a suzerainty treaty with no place for syncretism. The law, given in the midst of polytheism and immorality, demanded exclusive loyalty to Yahweh. The relationship of Yahweh and Israel was like the relationship of a husband and wife. The metaphor of marriage is common in the prophets (Hosea, Jeremiah, Ezekiel) and is expressed in the terms of betrothal in “I will be your God.” The tribes resisted earthly kingship at



first (Judg 8:22-23) but eventually wanted to be like the other nations (1 Sam 8:19-22). In reality, they were rejecting the rule of God, a major compromise that would later have serious consequences.

### A. The Monarchy

God in grace established another important covenant by which His plan for full salvation from Adam's curse would be revealed. God's covenant with David was promissory and involved two parts: the choice of the Davidic dynasty and the choice of Mt. Zion as His dwelling place. According to 1 Kings 8:25, there was a condition: there would always be a son on the throne *if he walked* in the ways of God. The "lamp of David," that is, his dynasty, went out after Zedekiah and never to be relit from a political perspective.

The covenant with David became both a trap and a blessing to the people. Because of the promises to David, the people of Judah developed a false sense of security based on the faulty assumption that God's covenants were unconditional and that God would not judge the nation. This has been labeled "royal theology." The covenants with Abraham and on Sinai became subsumed under the covenant with David. To some extent, the Davidic covenant tended to push Sinai aside. A tension arose between the stipulations of Sinai and the optimism of David's "glory days." People paid no attention to the laws of Sinai. The prophets counter-attacked the Davidic covenant with its false sense of security and called the people back to the moral obligations of Sinai.

Trust in the ultimate triumph of the king and dynasty had value but also could lapse into complacency. Trusting only in the line of David and the temple cult and the belief that these would protect the people was misguided without observance of Torah. The people forgot to trust in God. The terms of the covenant were externalized and institutionalized instead of personalized. This led to a false sense of security that can be seen during the days of Jeremiah. The people did not believe that God would allow Jerusalem and the temple to be destroyed.

In a positive way, the Davidic covenant brought hope to a defeated people. The ideals for the coming king matched the ideals of the Sinai covenant, especially righteousness and justice. In a sense, every king was a messiah, an Anointed one, a covenant official. But, after Solomon, no one fulfilled this so the people of Israel and Judah looked

to a messiah, an ideal king. This took on eschatological connotations and was mostly politicized by the time of Jesus.

## **B. Exile**

After over 500 years of unfaithfulness, disobedience to the terms of the Sinai covenant came to a crisis during the days of Jeremiah. The most serious criticism leveled against the people is that they had forsaken Yahweh as their God. This influenced all other ethical issues. Israel was semi-nomadic before the conquest and faced a new culture in Canaan. In Deuteronomy Moses warns against the coming temptations in the new land. There were significant differences in religion between the Canaanites and the Israelites. Israel was monotheistic, but Canaan was polytheistic. The two could never mix without the religion of Israel being influenced. The new lifestyle demanded by the covenant (the holy stipulations of the law) was challenged because of the agricultural setting and the appeal of the fertility cults which encouraged sexual immorality. Canaanite worship had no concept of covenant with God. The Israelites saw how the Canaanites= crops grew and became enticed by their form of worship based on the agricultural cycle.

There is a common literary pattern in the prophets called the *rib* structure (see Isa 1; Jer 2; Hos 4; Mic 6; and others) which comes from the Hebrew word meaning “to contend,” or “to quarrel.” It is employed for verbal combat and legal disputes and was also used when one party broke the terms of a covenant. In the case of the prophets, God is the judge and prosecutor of Israel. Living in the land in peace (*shalom*) was dependent upon obedience to the law. Disobedience would lead to a break down of community (injustice, immorality, idolatry) and eventually expulsion from the land. It took the grace of exile to cure Israel’s problem of idolatry (see Hosea 2:14-20).

## **C. Prophecy of a New Covenant**

The story of Israel does not end with total defeat. Hope was expressed even before exile was experienced. Prophets like Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Joel, and others looked forward to the day when God would do something with the human heart to make relationship in covenant possible. The obedience necessary for relationship would be possible through the transforming power of God’s Spirit. God Himself would

change the heart and make holiness in relationship possible. The change would begin in the heart and influence behavior (Isa 1:18-20).

Evidence mounts in the prophetic literature of the inability of the people of Israel to keep the old covenant. Something new had to be done. There would be no effort to go back to the old days of Israel which were a miserable failure. A reoccurring thought is given in this phrase: "I will return the fortunes of Israel." This would not be a renewal of the old Israel but a transformation of a new Israel that would include the whole world (Isa 2:1-4; Mic 2). There would be a continuation of the old covenant in many respects. God would continue to reveal Himself and His will through the law. Jeremiah does not say covenant on Sinai would be nullified but that it would be internalized. The problem is not with the old covenant itself but with it being broken by the people. Gerhard Von Rod writes, "If God's will ceases to confront and judge men from outside themselves, if God puts His will directly into their hearts, then, properly speaking, the rendering of obedience is completely done away with, for the problem of obedience only arises when man's will is confronted by an alien will. Now, however, the possibility of such a confrontation has ceased to exist, for men are to have the will of God in their heart, and are only to will God's will. What is here outlined is the picture of a new man, a man who is able to obey perfectly because of a miraculous change of his nature."<sup>2</sup>

Jeremiah is known as the prophet of covenant. The prophecies of Jeremiah make clear that the past covenants were no guarantee of security and could be annulled through disobedience. The idea of a "new" covenant is expressed in 31:31-34. These verses begin with the eschatological note, "the days are coming" when God would establish a new covenant with both Israel and Judah. God did not turn to another people but chose to work with the same imperfect and rebellious people. Verse 32 introduces a new element: the new covenant would be different than the old covenant. The old one was not kept because of the people's unfaithfulness. Something needed to be done to the human situation to remedy this. Verse 33 describes the newness: *the law would be written on their hearts*. This would not be an external law, like the former covenant, but an internal principle. This would give immediate and spontaneous obedience so that the covenant terms might be fulfilled. The relationship would be kept: AI will be your God, and you will be my people.Ⓒ This was impossible to keep because of the problem of sin and

disobedience, a fact proven in the history of Israel. God needed to do something with the human heart where the problem laid.

The new covenant would bring full and free forgiveness and would involve inner relationship. The new covenant would fulfill the purpose of the old covenant, which was relationship. There would be a transformation and spiritual renewal. Verse 34 illustrates this transformation. No longer would torah need to be taught because people would know God intimately and personally. The new covenant is the counterpart to the Sinai covenant. There is no difference in purpose but in action. God enables people to obey Him. All of this is enabled by the redeeming love of God. The new covenant is *new*; it is not made over, but something brand new. The law itself could not solve the problem of broken relationship. Only God's grace could solve this problem.

Ezekiel's prophecy also anticipated a day when God would do something radical to heal the disease of a sinful heart. An important passage for reflection is Ezekiel 36:22-38. This passage starts off by saying that God would do something new to Israel for the sake of His holy name so that the nations would know that Yahweh is Lord. This is in the spirit of Exodus 19:5-6 and the mission emphasis throughout the Old Testament. God would accomplish this through an internal change and outward empowerment of His people. It will start with cleansing of impurities and idolatry (v. 25). Verses 26-27 say that they would be given a "new heart." The heart is the very center of one's being, will, and emotions. Their old heart of stone would be taken away. A stony heart was hard and would not listen to God's desires and laws. It was selfish and sinful. God would give them a new heart of flesh. This new heart would be open to God's impression. Jeremiah does not say how God would write His laws on the human heart. Ezekiel tells us. God will put His Spirit within them, causing them to walk (hiphil, the causative tense in Hebrew) according to His laws. The Holy Spirit would enable the people to follow the stipulations of the covenant. A key thought is expressed in verse 28 with the restating of the covenant formula: "You will be my people and I will be your God." God was going to do something similar to the first covenant. Thus, God's purpose with the new covenant would be similar to the old covenant. He would make it possible for people to be in covenant relationship with Him by filling them with His Spirit in order that they might follow His decrees and be

His witnesses in the world. Joel 2:1-32 also anticipates a new day coming when God would restore Israel to honor with the purpose that Yahweh may be known as the only true God (2:27). God will pour out His Spirit on all people, with the result that people will be enabled to prophecy and perform wonders. Thus, these passages show that at the heart of the new covenant miracle would be the giving of the Holy Spirit and this would bring a fundamental change within people, enabling them to be in covenant relationship and to fulfill God's purpose for them of proclaiming God's holy name to the nations.

### **III. The Divine Answer**

Jesus' ministry inaugurated the Kingdom of God and brought fulfillment to the longing expressed in the Old Testament. The night before his death, Jesus took a cup and said, "This is my blood of the new covenant which is poured out for you." The sacrament of the Lord's Supper invites us to consider covenant concepts. Jesus as the sacrificial Lamb of God ratified the new covenant with His own blood.

#### **A. This is My Body**

The law of Sinai was a revelation of God's grace, but the climax of God's grace was in Christ. The new covenant, like the old, is based on grace. The Christian is a member of the new covenant community by grace through faith. Christ is the end and goal of the purpose of covenant. The new relationship in Christ is offered, not forced. Jesus saw His own death as the means by which the new covenant would be inaugurated. He uses Himself as the sign and seal of the new covenant. Like ancient covenant ceremonies, the new covenant is confirmed by the offering of a sacrifice. Jesus' death on the cross was not simply the offering of a sacrifice but also the sign of love (Rom 5:8). Where God symbolically passed through the halves of the animals when God made covenant with Abraham, in the new covenant Christ confirms the covenant by becoming the sacrifice of ceremony. No greater seal or oath could be offered than that of the love of Christ (1 John 4:10).

The last supper is a celebration and a time of thanksgiving for what Jesus has done for us. Jesus died "in behalf of" us (Greek *huper*). The Greek preposition *huper* "in behalf of" is significant theologically. We are guilty of breaking the terms of the covenant, therefore, deserve

the curses of the covenant—death. The good news is that Jesus takes the punishment upon Himself that we deserve (Isa 53; Rom 6:23). Because of this, we can have covenantal relationship with God. Jesus paid the ultimate price for the atonement of our sins. He paid the penalty that the covenant demanded for breaking the terms of the stipulations. Humanity chose to go its own way in sin. God gave us the remedy for sin in Christ. Where Israel failed, Christ us to be victorious!

Participants in the new covenant must also be partakers of the cup of the new covenant—Jesus’ blood. The stipulation for the new covenant is to “take up your cross daily” and follow Jesus (Luke 9:23). The life of committed discipleship should be the human expression to the divine gift of life in Jesus Christ. The pattern for discipleship life can only be expressed in a faith that counts all things as loss compared to knowing Christ Jesus as Lord (Phil 3:8-11). The church lives under both promissory and obligatory patterns of covenant. As disciples, we are not free to do as we please. The love of Christ compels us (2 Cor 5:14). Out of relationship with Christ flows the life lived in imitation of Christ. The Lord said, “If you love me, you will obey what I have commanded” (John 14:15; Matt 5:43-48). The ability to live in love comes through the abiding Holy Spirit.

## **B. New Creation In Christ**

What Jesus did by through death and resurrection brings new creation to those who submit to His lordship through consecration and faith lived out in obedience. After Jesus ascended to heaven, He left His disciples anticipating divine power to enable them to fulfill God’s plan of reaching the world through faithful and obedient people. The disciples had experienced outwardly the power of God in the ministry of Jesus but needed inward change and empowerment. The coming of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost brought transformation and fulfilled the hopes of Old Testament prophets like Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Joel. The Holy Spirit grows believers into having the “mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:10-16) and remakes them into the likeness of Christ (2 Cor 3:18).

## **C. Freedom in Christ**

Christ brings to an end the epoch of where the power of sin reigned. The death and resurrection of Christ began a new age that would last forever. We become participants in this new age by faith.

This new age is governed by the terms of the new covenant. In this new age, those who are in fellowship with Christ (what Paul terms those “in Christ”) live in glorious freedom from sin and the law controlled by sin. There is freedom in the Spirit when one does not rely on one’s ability to keep the law for salvation but on the free grace of God.

For Paul, Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of every longing of ancient Israel (Rom 16:25-26). Christ conquered sin and makes relationship with God possible on a personal level. The problems that kept Israel from fulfilling its side of the covenant agreement are done away with in Christ. Sin as the deep cause of alienation between God and humanity is conquered by the inward, actual change within a person that is expressed outwardly in obedient love. According to Paul, the law defines sin and shows the need for a savior. Christ ends the struggle that the law created and makes freedom from sin possible.

The law for Paul is not sin but defines what sin is. The law is God’s revealed will and so is holy, righteous, and good (Rom 7:7-12). The problem with the law, however, is that it becomes the instrument of the power of sin and gives sin opportunity to exert itself. When law is controlled by sin, it becomes a trap and leads to bondage. The life lived outside of complete devotion to God will inevitably lead to transgression of the stipulation of the new covenant, the law of love, because the focus of this life is on something other than God. Obedient, selfless love in model of Christ (1 Cor 11:1) comes only when one has been entirely sanctified by the Holy Spirit through the crucifying of the old self, dying with Christ on the cross, and rising to newness of life (Rom 6:4) where the mind of Christ becomes the paradigm for life. This is the new covenant.

The law can exist in one of two spheres controlled by two contrary principles: flesh or Spirit. A person who is controlled by the flesh finds fulfillment in things of this world outside of God. This person is unable to keep the terms of the covenant because he or she has 1) the wrong reference point and 2) the wrong resource (Rom 7:13-24). The law serves as a catalyst for more sin (libertyism) or as a means to righteousness (legalism). On the other hand, the person controlled by the Spirit has his or her mind set on the things of the Spirit (Rom 8:5). For this person, the law becomes a well-spring of life because obedience

to it flows from established relationship. The law is allowed to do what it was originally meant to do—guide one to a holy life.

Thus, the law can be preserved as grace when obedience to it comes from a life completely given to God and filled with the presence of God. According to E. P. Sanders, Protestantism has misinterpreted Judaism as a religion of works and legalism. Judaism has always been a religion of grace, with human obedience understood as response to that grace. The covenant was God's initiative; the law was the guideline for life in covenant. Law was the way to stay in covenant, not the way to get into covenant. The law is allowed to serve its purpose as a wonderful guide to the holy life *when a person is controlled by Christ and not sin*. The moral imperative is a result of the indicative of salvation (see 1 Cor 6:19-20; Rom 6:1-11).

Christ makes it possible to keep the heart of the law, which is love (Matt 22:37-40; Gal 5:14). The core stipulation in the new covenant is love. We prove that we are disciples of Jesus by our love (John 15:13, 17; 1 John 2:3-11). One cannot love unconditionally, however, until one gives God total control (entire sanctification). Holiness is the life of perfect love. The Spirit produces love in the believer's life (Gal 5:22).

A transformation takes place in the life of one who has totally surrendered to the Lordship of Christ. Paul talks about this change in comparison to the old covenant in 2 Corinthians 3:1-18. Israel failed to see the significance of the law and focused upon the "written" letter of the law instead of the heart of the law. The old covenant was good but not the best. Its glory was fading. The glory of the new covenant does not fade. This glory is brought by the Spirit who transforms us into the image of Christ. The Spirit brings freedom and ability for new covenant people to be in the presence of God. The veil (the hardness of heart due to legalism, tradition, law) is removed and we reflect the glory of the Lord like Moses did on Mt. Sinai. Our glory does not fade like Moses'. We are free to become like Christ without hindrance.

For Paul, therefore, Christ is the fulfillment of every longing of ancient Israel. The old covenant had a divine purpose but failed to deal with the problem of sin. Christ conquered sin, thus making relationship with God possible on a personal level. Moreover, Christ reverses the problems that Adam created (Rom 5; 1 Cor 15; Phil 2) and makes it possible for people to be holy and restored to the image of God in



increasing measures until the time of glorification, when we shall see Him as He is (1 Cor 13:9-13).

#### **D. Entering the Holy of Holies**

A central theme of the Epistle to the Hebrews is that the sacrifice of Jesus makes it possible for sinful humanity to enter into the presence of the holy God. It is impossible to grasp the depth of this epistle without knowing the covenant concept of the Bible. At the core is the concept that nothing unholy can enter into the presence of the holy God symbolized in the mercy seat/throne of grace on top of the ark of the covenant. The high priest could do this only once a year to make atonement for the sins of the people. Jesus did this once and made atonement for all sins by the shedding of His own blood. He identified with us in order to serve as the great high priest (mediator) before God (2:14-18). He was tempted in every way we are but did not sin. This gives us confidence to approach the throne of grace (4:14-16). He paves the way so that we can experience the “rest of faith” which is the life of holiness (ch. 4). The author urges his readers to move on to the perfection of holiness and to claim the promises of the new covenant. The story of the Old Testament demonstrates that the old covenant could not lead people into the presence of God because of sin.

A person can find the victorious freedom of the holy life by faith. Perfection could not come through the cult or the law (7:11, 19). Only a perfect high priest can make perfect atonement for sins, and Jesus is that priest (7:26-27). The new covenant implies that the old covenant was defective and not effective. The old covenant was obsolete. The new covenant is better because it is founded on a better promise—the promise of Jesus. In fact, the old covenant and old cultic system of sacrifices was *pointing* ahead to Jesus= own sacrifice (9:8). Only a perfect sacrifice could pay the penalty of sin. This perfect sacrifice was Jesus’ own blood (9:14). Jesus’ sacrificial death makes it possible to find freedom from sin which results from disobedience to the law (9:14). Blood must be shed for the forgiveness of sin. The penalty for sin is death (9:22). Christ takes away sin by His blood (9:26). The story of the Old Testament proves that the old covenant was inadequate to solve the problem of sin (8:7). Something else needed to be done. Christ makes perfect (*teleios*) those who are being made holy (10:14).

#### IV. Some Implications

The Bible, from beginning to end, calls people to be holy. The only way for people to be holy is through faith in the redeeming work of Jesus Christ. The new covenant relationship, like the old covenant, is based on grace. Grace demands response—the response of faith and love. The basis of the Old Testament covenants and the new covenant is no different. God has not changed the way He relates to the human race. The only thing that has changed is the human heart. The core command of the Bible is love, but this command can only be followed by the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.

The call to holiness is based on the fact that only the holy can be in relationship with the Holy God (Heb 12:14). The rebellion of sin alienates humanity from God. The problem of sin must be solved for relationship to be restored. The Life of Holiness is the goal and end of the covenant concept of the Bible.

Community is very important in the covenant concept in both the Old and New Testaments. We need each other in order to keep firm in covenant. Ezekiel helps us see the individual nature of responsibility to covenant demands (ch. 18). What binds us together is our common fellowship in Christ through the Holy Spirit. The church as the new covenant community serves to fulfill together the great commission first given to Israel: to be a royal priesthood, a holy nation of people belonging to God (1 Pet 2:9). The only way we can fulfill God's mission for us is when we have been cleansed, filled, and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

God gives the Holy Spirit to make holiness possible. Spiritually, the Holy Spirit purifies the heart of believers and makes love possible (Mal 3:1-3; Gal 5:13-26; 1 John 4; etc.). Morally, the fruit of the Spirit is a fulfillment of the law (Gal 5). The Spirit enables believers to live according to the law because 1) the law is written on the heart, 2) the heart is changed and cleansed from sin. God's grace demands the response of commitment. In every heart of a Christian is either a cross or throne. Christ is on the cross or throne, or self is on the cross and throne.

Finally, new covenant brings new creation in the image of Christ. The doctrine of holiness is christological in focus and intent. Calvary made Pentecost possible. Faith in Christ allows the Holy Spirit to work in our life to conform us to the image of God lost in the Garden of

Eden. New covenant is the hope for reversing the damage we all suffer from being the spiritual descendents of Adam.

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<sup>1</sup> William Greathouse, *Wholeness in Christ* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1998), 56.

<sup>2</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *The Message of the Prophets* (London: SCM Press, 1993), 183.