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A1332 – August 11, 2013 – 2 Corinthians 2:14-3:8
Ministers Of A New Covenant

Today we're going to work our way up to what has become a controversy in dispensational circles, 2 Cor 3:6, the Church's relationship to the New Covenant. Everyone agrees that the New Covenant finds as its *locus classicus* the OT text of Jer 31:31-34 where God promises, "Behold, days are coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, ³²not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them," declares the Lord. ³³"But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the Lord, "I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. ³⁴"They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them," declares the Lord, "for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more."

Several observations are pertinent to note. First, the parties of the covenant are the house of Israel and Judah not the Church. Since the Church is not a party of the new covenant then it cannot be fulfilled to the church but can only be fulfilled to Israel and Judah. Any claim that the new covenant is fulfilled in the Church or partially fulfilled in the Church is a violation of the terms of the contract. It can only be fulfilled to Israel and Judah. Second, this new covenant promise is set in radical contrast to the Mosaic covenant. This contrast is in two ways. One, the Mosaic covenant was a conditional covenant based on Israel's performance but the new covenant is an unconditional covenant based on God's performance. At Sinai, when the nation Israel received God's requirements in the law blessing was conditioned on their performance of obedience to the law. If they obeyed they would enjoy life and

be blessed but if they disobeyed they would face death and be cursed. But the new covenant is not like that. The new covenant is an unconditional covenant based on God's performance. God will put His law in their heart and God will write it on tablets of flesh on hearts so that they will obey Him and enjoy life. So the first way the new covenant is different from the Mosaic covenant is that it is unconditional whereas the Mosaic was conditional. Two, the Mosaic covenant was written by God at Mt Sinai on external tablets of stone but the new covenant was written by God on internal hearts. These tablets of stone contained the law the nation Israel was to obey and was kept in or by the Ark of the Covenant. But the new covenant will be written by God on internal hearts of flesh. The actual hearts of men, given to the natural fleshly disposition, will have God's laws written on them so that they will obey, enjoy life and be blessed. So the new covenant was to be radically different than the old Mosaic covenant. Third, the new covenant includes eschatological (future predictive) elements. In verse 31 He says, "Behold, days are coming," declares the Lord," when I will make a new covenant. It had not yet been made, it was yet future. So the original context presents the new covenant as the future, eschatological hope of Israel in contrast to the old Mosaic covenant. Fourth, the new covenant includes soteriological (salvific) elements. In verse 34 He says, "for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more." The new covenant, when applied to Israel would result in the forgiveness of sins and consequent life. Therefore the new covenant relates to the soteriological plan of God for the nation Israel. In conclusion these four observations at least should be noted as we move forward into the NT. The new covenant is made with Israel and can thus only be fulfilled to Israel, is not like the old Mosaic covenant in that it is not conditional but unconditional and is not external but internal and contains both eschatological hope and soteriological blessing.

With those things in mind what do you do with a reference such as the one by Jesus at the Last Passover in Matt 26:26-28 when He took the bread and said, "Take, eat; this is My body," and then took the cup and said, "Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins." Here He mentions His blood, obviously in connection with His cross work and the new covenant attaching the forgiveness of sins to this covenant just as in Jer 31:34. When He says His blood of the covenant is poured out for many is that to be understood as for Israel only? Some would say so. Or does the "many" refer to more than Israel

and extend to the Church? And if it does extend to the Church then does that mean that the Church is connected to the new covenant? The next day He shed His blood of the new covenant and provided forgiveness of sins. Was that only for Israel? Or was it also for the Church? The difficulty becomes all the more poignant when we read Paul in 1 Cor 11:23-25 quoting what Jesus said in the Last Passover and clearly making application to the Church. Paul reminds us how Jesus took the bread and gave thanks and broke it, saying, "This is My body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of Me." And then how He took the cup after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me." Is this communion passage not clearly applying the new covenant to the Church? And yet we originally found in Jer 31:31 that the Church was not party to the new covenant, only Israel. So how could the Church be partaking of the blood of the new covenant made with Israel? Has the Church taken over the covenant? Is God done with Israel and replaced them with the Church? What about our passage today, 2 Cor 3:6 where Paul says God, "made us adequate servants of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." Was Paul not a minister of the new covenant? Clearly he has in mind Jer 31:32-33 where he contrasts the old Mosaic covenant with the new covenant and how the old Mosaic covenant kills but the Spirit related to the new covenant gives life. Paul was not a minister of the old but of the new. And yet, how can that be since the new covenant was to be made with Israel and not the Church? In short, what is the relationship of the Church to the new covenant? This is a vexing and very difficult theological question. And we haven't even started looking at all the texts that relate to the question; what about Christ's high priesthood in Heb 7-10 and all the discussion there regarding the new covenant in contrast to the old and how very much better the new covenant is and how these Hebrew believers needed to stop going back to the old because it was passing away and the new had come? That Christ is our high priest and with the change of priesthood there is a change of law? And Christ is the mediator of a new and better covenant which has been enacted and was inaugurated by His blood. With all these and more apparent connections between the Church and the new covenant, how could some say that the church has no connection to the new covenant? Yet some are. Granted it's not easy as we want to keep Israel and the Church distinct. But does this mean there is absolutely no connection at all such that not even the church may partake of some spiritual blessings

that stem from Israel's covenants while not fulfilling them? Some people say absolutely no.

Two books, recently published on the new covenant, have been written to try and explain the Church's relationship to the new covenant. In one view, the authors of the book *An Introduction to the New Covenant*, contend that the way we are to understand how all these passages fit together is to say that the Church has absolutely *no relationship* to the New Covenant. Jer 31, we are told, says the new covenant is to be made with Israel only, therefore the Church has no relationship to it. Christ's death on the cross was necessary, they tell us, but it did not ratify the new covenant since the ratification will only take place in the future when Israel makes an oath promising to keep the terms of the new covenant. When the Church partakes of the cup in communion the cup does represent the blood of the new covenant but the Church has no relationship to that blood. We are, to be sure, related to the blood of Christ but not to the blood of the New Covenant. Paul then, we are told, was not ministering the new covenant way of life, but was ministering in a metaphorical new covenant-type of way. The long of the short of it is, these authors try to disconnect the Church in each passage that mentions the new covenant to claim that the Church has no relationship to the new covenant at all. Is this true?

In a second view, the authors of the book *Dispensational Understanding of the New Covenant*, contend that the way to understand how all these passages fit together is to say that the Church has a relationship to the New Covenant. However, as Jer 31 said, the new covenant can only be fulfilled to Israel. This does not negate the possibility that the Church is receiving some spiritual blessings from the new covenant prior to its future fulfillment to Israel. This enjoyment of spiritual blessings from the new covenant can come to the Church because Christ's death on the cross has ratified the new covenant. When we take communion our partaking of spiritual blessings from the new covenant is memorialized because it is a reminder of the salvific blessings of forgiveness of sins promised in the new covenant. Paul, in this view, was ministering the new covenant and it was this which gave him reason to thank God for the victorious results in ministry since it evidenced the Spirit had written upon their hearts. Which is it, is the Church connected to the new covenant or is there no connection whatsoever?

2 Cor 3:6 has been a bone of contention in this debate. The connection of the Church to the new covenant seems obvious in this verse as Paul says God made us adequate as servants of a new covenant. Yet some claim that this is a metaphor and only means that Paul ministered in a new covenant kind of way. In other words, was the content of Paul's ministry the new covenant gospel or was the new covenant a metaphor for Paul's manner of conducting his ministry? To say that Paul was a minister of the new covenant is to say that the new covenant is in effect and related to the church. To say that Paul was only conducting his ministry in a new covenant type of way is to say that the new covenant is not in effect and completely unrelated to the church.

I want to show you why one of those views is completely erroneous. I grant that it's difficult, entirely troublesome and has taken a lot of work, but I think that when all the exegesis is done only one of these views makes any sense. To understand let's go back earlier in the context to 2 Cor 2:9. The context is always determinative of meaning. It's the first rule so let's get the context. In 2:9, "Why did Paul write the severe letter?" "For to this end also I wrote, so that I might put you to the test, whether you are obedient in all things." Paul wrote the letter as a test, to find out if they are obedient. That's what he wanted to find out; are the Corinthian's obedient? The Greek word for "a test" is *dokime* and refers to "a test designed to reveal attitude." Paul wrote the letter, in other words, to find out if they had the right attitude toward the word of God. The right attitude would be manifested by obedience to the Scriptural commands to discipline an erring brethren. Such obedience would be sourced in "the Spirit" resulting in life. The wrong attitude would be manifested by disobedience to the commands to discipline an erring brother. Such disobedience would be sourced in "the flesh" resulting in death. This is the Spirit/flesh dichotomy found throughout the NT. No problem. Paul believed that their response to his severe letter would demonstrate their true attitude toward the word of God which is sourced in either the Spirit or the flesh.

The letter had been sent via Titus while he himself returned to Ephesus. In 2:12 he departed from Ephesus and traveled "to Troas for the gospel of Christ." He planned to meet Titus at Troas where they would co-labor for the gospel. However, after a while Titus had not arrived and so Paul could not get relief for his spirit because of his strong desire to find out from Titus how the Corinthians responded to his letter. Because he could not rest he took

leave of the fruitful ministry in Troas and went on to Macedonia looking for Titus. He found him and was comforted by him (2 Cor 7:5-6). He was also comforted by the report which he received from Titus concerning the Corinthians (2 Cor 7:7-16). They had repented of their failure to originally discipline the erring brother and had acted in obedience. Their actions were clearly sourced in the Spirit of God. This is a major turning point in Paul's interaction with the Corinthians. Up to this point they have been fleshly, the entire letter of 1 Cor is written to warn them that they were fleshly and would not inherit the kingdom if they continued to live fleshly lives. Now they were living by the Spirit and Paul was overjoyed they had passed the test.

Consequently, in 2:14 Paul begins by giving "thanks to God," the God "who always leads us in triumph in Christ." The present tense "leads" combined with the adverb "always" refers to the ongoing triumphs that Paul (and his co-laborers) enjoyed as a minister of the word of God. Since Christ has been triumphant in the death/resurrection then ultimately Paul could not fail in the ministry. He may have felt dejected and downtrodden at Troas but upon finding Titus and receiving the glowing report of the Corinthians, Paul bursts forth here in thanks to God who always leads us in triumph in Christ and who manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Christ in every place. In other words, God is the one who gets the credit for the success of Paul's ministry. Paul is nothing more than a captive soldier being led by God in the triumphal procession of Christ, a mere instrument through which Christ's sweet perfume of the gospel is being spread throughout the world. However, this sweet perfume of the gospel, though categorically sweet, is not sweet to all men. To those who reject and are perishing it is a scent of death, reminding them that apart from faith in Christ they are destined for final judgment. But for those who believe and are being saved it is a scent of life, a reminder that true life is found in Christ.

Since the Corinthians had repented and acted obediently, giving evidence of their new life by the Spirit Paul asks, "And who is adequate for these things?" That is, who is adequate to produce this victorious result? Who gets the credit for such a triumph in these believer's lives? Was this victory due to how Paul conducted himself in his ministry? By no means. Paul was not adequate to produce these kinds of results. In 3:5 Paul answers unequivocally, "Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves,

but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant. God gets the credit because God made Paul adequate by giving him a ministry which consists of the Spirit who gives new life on the basis of the new covenant. But for now we will leave that verse and return to the verse at hand, 2:17.

In 2:17 Paul explains the difference between his motives in ministry and his opponent's motives. **For we are not like many, peddling the word of God.** The Greek word for **peddling** means "to sell cheap wares at an exorbitant price." The cheap wares we'll discover in a moment but the emphasis here is on his opponents who taught with selfish motives. They desired to make money off of their teaching. In sharp contrast Paul ministered **from sincerity, as from God, speaking in Christ in the sight of God.** **From sincerity** means Paul ministered with "pure motives." This was evident from the fact that he didn't charge them any money for teaching (1 Cor 9). What kept his motives pure was the fact that he was **from God, teaching in Christ in the sight of God.** That is, Paul was fully cognizant that when he was **speaking** concerning **Christ** he was being watched by **God.** This meant he spoke carefully, that He took Christ and the word of God very seriously; it was of the utmost importance not to falter. Further, he refused to take any money for teaching from the Corinthians. The Corinthians could not deny these two facts. They also could not deny the fact that Paul's opponents had taken money from them for their teaching. This set Paul's ministry to them apart from his opponents in a very obvious way, his opponents were interested in their money, Paul was not. And yet Paul's ministry had been a triumph. It had resulted in repentance and obedience showing their life by the Spirit. His opponent's ministry had not produced those kinds of results. How could an unfunded ministry like Paul's be more successful than the fully funded one of his opponents? These questions Paul will answer in due time but before he answers the question he wants to make sure they understand that he was not giving himself the credit in verse 17.

So he asks the question in 3:1, **Are we beginning to commend ourselves again?** The Greek requires a negative response. Paul was not commending himself to them again. Letters of commendation were often written to commend an unknown figure to a new group. The Corinthians already knew Paul. He had come to them five or six years earlier when he first preached the gospel and had triumph when many believed. He had visited them

recently and though a disaster they had now repented. They did not need Paul to commend himself again. By repeating what they already knew then he was not trying to demean them but simply explain to them the superiority of his ministry; that is, the gospel of the new covenant of Christ which results in the impartation of the Spirit who gives life, in contrast to those who peddled a false gospel of the old covenant of Moses which deals death.

He continues with another question, **Or do we need, as some, letters of commendation to you or from you.** The Greek again requires a negative response. Paul was in no need of their approval of his ministry although his opponents may be. Paul's evidence for no need is verse 2, he already has all the evidence he needs. **You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men;** the changed lives of the Corinthian's were all the letter Paul needed for the validity of his ministry. Could his opponent's boast of such changed lives? Of course not, all a minister of the old letter of the law could boast of was in how the law kills, it shows us our sin and how we do not measure up, but in contrast a minister of the Spirit of the new covenant could boast in the fact that the Spirit gives life. The changed lives of the Corinthian's was a point of fact! They were therefore all the approval Paul needed for his ministry. Paul says they were **written in our hearts** meaning their changed lives made an indelible impression (i.e. engraving) upon his heart. He had led them to Christ and was their spiritual father (1 Cor 4:17), he had spent countless hours training them in the word of God (Acts 18:1-18), he had written multiple letters to them, some while weeping (2:4). Their changed lives at long last left an indelible imprint on Paul's heart. An imprint **known and read by all men**, that is, made readily available to all men as Paul verbally boasted of them now that they had learned to live by the Spirit (cf 2 Cor 7:14). Paul's letters of commendation for his ministry then, were in no need of further validation, he had incontrovertible evidence, the changed lives of the Corinthian's based on the work of the Spirit who came into their lives on the basis of the new covenant that Paul mediated.

Verse 3, **being manifested that you are a letter of Christ, cared for by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.** Their Corinthian's changed lives **manifested** that they were **a letter of Christ. The letter was cared for** or "delivered by" Paul when he preached the gospel message

that ultimately resulted in their changed lives. The letter was written **not with black ink** like the words of the old Mosaic covenant, but **with the Spirit of the living God**. The medium upon which Christ engraved this letter by the Spirit was **not on tablets of stone** like the Ten Commandments given by God on Mt Sinai **but on tablets of human hearts**. The Greek for **tablets of human hearts** literally says, “heart tablets given to flesh,” that is, our hearts are naturally given to live by the flesh. So if any change in living comes about it is due only to the **Spirit of the living God**. This is what had happened to the Corinthians. They had been living fleshly lives; that is one’s natural inclination, but now that their lives were changed it was made manifest that the **Spirit of the living God** was at work in their lives to transform them. In short, it was evident that they were new people living new lives. They were thus Paul’s letter of commendation.

Verse 4, **Such confidence we have through Christ toward God**. Paul and his co-laborers had a new-found confidence toward God because of Christ. The *dia* with the genitive can be causal and is here. Paul had new confidence toward God because of Christ. What had Christ done? Verse 3, he had written a letter on the Corinthian’s heart through the preaching of Paul and the ink of the Holy Spirit. Their changed lives were the evidence. Paul gained confidence because of it.

Verse 5, **Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God**. That is, our new confidence is not due to ourselves as those who preached this word, but our adequacy or sufficiency **is from God**, The successful results of Paul’s ministry in the changed lives of the Corinthian’s was not due to anything in Paul but rather to the ministry that God gave Paul in 3:6, namely, a message that centers on the death/resurrection of Jesus Christ that ratifies the new covenant and imparts the Spirit who gives life.

Not only had Paul received sufficiency from God but, verse 6, God **also made us adequate servants of a new covenant**. Paul was just a **servant**, a *diakonos*.ⁱ The real thing that changed their lives was an application of the **new covenant**, the content Paul ministered that resulted in the impartation of the Spirit who gives new life. The old Mosaic covenant could not impart life, it could only give death. Paul is here clearly saying that his ministry is a

ministry of the **new covenant**. This does not mean that the new covenant is being fulfilled by the Church. What it means is that the Church is receiving spiritual benefits of the new covenant because of the Church's relationship to the new covenant blood of Christ. We have forgiveness of sins and we have an impartation of the Spirit who writes Christ's word on our hearts enabling us to live a new life. This is not all that the new covenant holds in store for Israel but it is an application of it to the Church because of our relationship to the One who ratified the new covenant, Christ, who said, "This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood." And "Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins." And which Paul in 1 Cor 11:23-25 said is memorialized by the Church when we celebrate the bread=His body and the cup=His blood of the new covenant. The Church is enjoying soteriological benefits from the new covenant though it's eschatological and soteriological benefits will not be fulfilled to Israel until the future. We should give thanks to God as Paul, not that we are adequate in ourselves to produce such victorious results by how we conduct our ministry, but that the ministry God has given us, of the new covenant, imparts the Spirit whereby our lives are changed. For, as Paul says in verse 6, **the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life**. With the passing of one came the beginning of the other. Clearly the letter refers to the old Mosaic Law. This law was not a means of life, it was not a means of attaining righteousness, it was eternal and written on cold stone tablets, unable to enable us to have life, it only killed, it was a tutor to lead us to look outside of ourselves for righteousness, to look to Christ, and Christ is the end of the law for all who believe. The **Spirit** on the other hand, **gives life**. He is the means of attaining righteousness because He enables us to live victoriously. Paul himself, and all victorious ministry, is due to the superior content ministry of the new covenant itself which gives life by imparting the life-giving Spirit. May we give thanks to God that we have been made partakers of the rich spiritual blessings in the new covenant ratified by the blood of Christ and enacted on better promises and may we look forward to the fulfillment of this covenant to a future Israel.

In summary, Paul did not need to commend himself again to the Corinthians by a letter of recommendation. The Corinthian's changed lives were all the commendation necessary to approve Paul's ministry. Their changed lives made an impression upon Paul's heart, an impression readily made available by Paul to all men by his verbal boasting of them. Their changed lives

revealed that they were a letter of Christ, mediated by Paul's preaching of the life changing benefits of the new covenant, written on their hearts by the Spirit of the living God, giving Paul a new-found confidence because of Christ toward God. This adequacy came from God, who is the One who made Paul a sufficient minister of the new covenant that results in the imparting of the life-giving Spirit. Victory indeed!

In conclusion, what can we learn? What can we apply to our lives? First, we are ministers of a new covenant. The new covenant was made with Israel but due to Israel's rejection of Christ, Christ died and all who believe in Him enjoy the forgiveness of sins and the indwelling Spirit who works in our lives to give us triumph. Second, when we see changed lives we should give thanks to God since He is the one who gives us our adequacy and who gave us the ministry of the new covenant that produces changed lives. Third, we should leave legalism behind because it cannot produce victory. Legalism kills because it enacts the flesh, but grace produces victory because it enacts the Spirit who gives life.

ⁱ Diakonos comes from two words, dia "through" and konis "dust," to go through dust and cause it to raise up by one's hurrying, and so "to minister." See A. T. Robertson.

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