

## THE NEWNESS OF THE NEW COVENANT:

### Better Covenant, Better Mediator, Better Sacrifice, Better Ministry, Better Hope, Better Promises (Part II)

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In the first part of this study<sup>1</sup> we examined the text of Hebrews, focusing on the “new covenant,” taking special note of the phrase “better,” and following closely the argument of the writer in chapters eight and ten, where the key prophetic passage Jer. 31:31-34 is cited, applied, and interpreted within the context of the author’s presentation. In this part of our study we will recap our exegetical conclusions and then interact with the presentations of various paedobaptist writers, all reflecting on the issue of the New Covenant, focusing on the presentation given by Pastor Jeff Niell in *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*.<sup>2</sup> Pastor Niell co-authored *The Same Sex Controversy* with me, and hence this topic provides an opportunity for modeling exegetically based dialogue and even disagreement regarding important issues, while honoring our common bond in Christ.

#### Recapitulation of Exegesis

Throughout his epistle, the writer of Hebrews presents a defense of the supremacy of Christ, seeking to demonstrate that in every aspect Christ is superior to the former administration, so that there is nothing in the “old ways” to attract the believer in Him. We also saw that the complex of terms related to “better” (mediator of a “better covenant,” “better sacrifices,” “better promises,” “better hope” and “more excellent ministry”) are found in distinctively soteriological contexts. The writer introduced the citation of Jeremiah within a context of contrast (8:6-7), continued it within the citation itself (“not like the covenant which I made with their fathers,” v. 9), and made the contrast explicit in his conclusion at 8:13. The text presents an apologetic argument that unlike the Old Covenant, where “they did not continue in My covenant” (v. 9), the New Covenant presents a perfect, full work of God which includes the internal renovation of the heart, salvific knowledge of God, and the forgiveness of sins. There is nothing in the text that suggests that there are different audiences envisioned in vv. 10-12; those who have God’s law written on their hearts are also those who know the Lord savingly and whose sins are remembered no more. Unlike under the Old Covenant, in the New all know the Lord, “from the least to the greatest of them.” That we have accurately discerned the writer’s intention in seeing the New Covenant *soteriologically* is borne out by reference to the second citation of Jer. 31 in Heb. 10:16-17, for not only does the author cite the passage in support of one of the central soteriological arguments of the entire book (Heb. 10:10-14), but his interpretation of the final words regarding forgiveness of sins is clearly expressed in the same context.

Reformed Baptists have asserted that this passage is directly relevant to the commonly presented arguments of covenantal paedobaptists. Arguing from the common ground of a Covenant of Grace, Reformed credobaptists have asserted that if this passage teaches that the New Covenant differs from the Old in the matter of the extensiveness of the work of grace in the lives of the members (i.e., the New Covenant is not a mixed covenant of regenerate and

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<sup>1</sup> See RBTR I:2, Summer 2004, 144-168.

<sup>2</sup> Gregg Strawbridge, ed., *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2003).

unregenerate, elect and non-elect), then the most needed element of the paedobaptist argument regarding the continuity of the covenants and the covenant sign is disrupted at its most vital point. The “continuity” of the Covenant of Grace is seen in the *expansion* of God’s work of grace, so that the New Covenant in the blood of the Son encompasses all of God’s elect, with the older administration’s ceremonies pointing forward to the perfection that would come in Christ. The New Covenant is *soteriologically extensive* in scope: all who are in it receive eternal life. The giving of the covenant sign, then,<sup>3</sup> must reflect the *nature* of the New Covenant as the covenant in the blood of Christ, a covenant which *fulfills*, and hence a covenant that differs on the level of membership. If the New Covenant is extensive in that all those who are in it know the Lord and have forgiveness of sins in the blood of Christ, this fact must be allowed to speak directly to the question, “To whom do we give the sign of the new covenant?” While the common theme in paedobaptist writings emphasizes *continuity* (while other writings go to the opposite extreme seeking to create complete *discontinuity*), the biblical emphasis is on *fulfillment* and *completion*. The “not like” of Heb. 8:9 points to a perfect covenantal work in the blood of the Son of God shed in behalf of His people.

Classically, credobaptists have seen the elect filling the New Covenant (due to its nature), and hence have recognized that the visible church is a mixed body, not to be seen as fully co-extensive with it. Apostasy, then, is viewed as apostasy from a profession of faith, not from membership in the New Covenant. The visible church contains true covenant members and false: but since the New Covenant is inherently soteriological in nature, and is made in the blood of Christ Himself, its members cannot apostatize anymore than Christ can lose His sheep (Jn. 10:27-30) or fail to do the Father’s will (Jn. 6:38-39). Apostasy then is not from the New Covenant, but from false profession of faith in Christ, which may include membership in the visible church. As we interact with the paedobaptist position, we will note that its understanding of the classic apostasy passages is, we believe, allowed to overturn the presentation of the inspired writer regarding the perfection and extent of the New Covenant.

### **The Newness of the New Covenant**

Pastor Jeffrey Niell’s contribution to *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism* is entitled “The Newness of the New Covenant.” The thesis of the chapter can be summarized briefly. Its fundamental assertion is that of the things listed in Heb. 8:10-12, only the content of v. 11 is truly “new.” Since men experienced the writing of God’s law on their hearts under the Old Covenant, and since God’s mercy was expressed under the Old Covenant as well, these are not “new.” The essence of the newness of the covenant is in the doing away with the mediating Jewish priesthood that was involved in teaching the people. As Niell writes, “one can see that Hebrews 8:11 is referring to the removal of the old covenant priesthood and the people and duties associated with it.”<sup>4</sup> His thesis is that the Old and New Covenants are substantially the same in reference to the fact that both present a mixture of regenerate and unregenerate members, leading to the assertion that “God has implemented no change whatsoever in covenant membership in the new covenant.”<sup>5</sup>

Pastor Niell rightly points out:

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<sup>3</sup> We do not here engage the argument over whether water baptism, in and of itself, is the best candidate for the “covenant sign” in light of the importance of the presence of the Spirit as the *down payment* in the life of all of the elect, and in light of the intimate connection between the Spirit’s presence and the intention of God in the atoning work of Christ. The discussion here proceeds on the basis of the assumed paedobaptist argumentation, and contrasts it with the viewpoint of Hebrews on the nature of the New Covenant.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

Many misunderstandings arise because of the failure to properly understand the experience of the regenerate in the older covenant....The entire quotation is concerned with its newness, not just Hebrews 8:11.<sup>6</sup>

This is perfectly in line with our own exegesis. The entire quotation is indeed concerned with newness, as our exegesis showed. But this truth must be kept in mind when seeing the *contrast* inherent in the context before and after the citation of Jer. 31. The only way to remove this element is to bring in outside considerations, and this is what Pastor Niell does. Responding, seemingly, to Paul Jewett's oft-repeated (and documented) assertion regarding the reading of the NT as if it were the Old, and vice-versa, Niell writes:

All too often, covenant theologians have been accused of treating the New Testament as if it were the Old. This misrepresentation of covenant theology is not helpful. But the question remains, How is the new covenant different? Does the newness pertain to its *essential* nature, making it qualitatively different from the previous covenant, or does the newness pertain to *membership*—or both? Those who would utilize the Hebrews passage to argue against paedobaptism would say that the new covenant is new in both respects.<sup>7</sup>

This assumes that “covenant theology” must, as a necessary element, include the assertion that the essential nature and membership of all administrations of the Covenant of Grace are identical (and therefore that credobaptists cannot, despite the claims of Reformed Baptists, truly hold to “covenant theology”). Yet, if one believes the Covenant of Grace began with Adam, was the essential nature and membership of the covenant the same from Adam to Abraham? From Abraham to Moses? From Moses to Christ? From Christ to the present? What covenant sign was given to covenant members from Adam to Abraham? Unless one limits “essential nature” to the mere description of everything that God does being “gracious,” differences in administration (and, in the covenant in the blood of the Son of God, in the qualitative nature of it) would be contrary to the needed foundation that underlies the insistence that the covenant sign should be given to all offspring of covenant members. When credobaptists look at the insistence that we change our hermeneutical process solely in this one area of investigation, and when we insist that outside traditions are operational in paedobaptist interpretations so that they are reading *out* of the text the very distinctions emphasized *by* the text, we are not being “unhelpful.” We must identify violations of proper hermeneutical process, and when deeply held traditions are *very* likely to impact our reading, we should be quick to recognize and consider them.

A common element of paedobaptist discussions of the New Covenant is the prioritizing of a particular view of apostasy *above* the direct teaching of Heb. 8 and 10 regarding the nature of the New Covenant. That is, we are told that since apostasy from the New Covenant is taught elsewhere (the exegesis of said passages is, of course, questionable on many grounds), this consideration must become the *a priori* interpretational grid through which Heb. 8 must be seen. This is seen in these words:

Hebrews 8:11 cannot mean that every single member of the new covenant knows the Lord savingly, for that would be contrary to the rest of the New Testament. We must avoid equating covenant membership with election while we recognize that Scripture exhorts new covenant disciples to continue on in the faith. We will see that the distinction between the new covenant and the previous one does not relate to its essential nature or membership.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 133.

When the final conclusion of the argument provides the foundation for its own annunciation, we have encountered a hermeneutical circle. We believe that the direct teaching of the text should determine the nature of the New Covenant first and foremost. Then, we can look at other passages *assumed* to be about it and determine, from a solid foundation, if in fact we are addressing apostasy *from the New Covenant* or apostasy from an *empty profession of faith*. But when we have clear, compelling didactic revelation concerning the nature and extent of the New Covenant, we surely are working backwards to mitigate such teaching on the basis of an assumed doctrine of apostasy from highly questionable passages in foreign contexts. It is unlikely that in any other area of exegetical study (Trinity, deity of Christ, justification, etc.) would Pastor Niell allow this kind of *a priori* interpretational methodology to go unchallenged.

At this point in his study, Pastor Niell addressed the views of various writers<sup>9</sup> and concludes, “These writers surprisingly assert that the internal operations of divine grace were not present for the old covenant saint.”<sup>10</sup> Whether this is an accurate summary of the positions of each individual is itself an interesting question, but not one to be pursued here. The point is that for Niell, the “counter-point” to which he is responding is an either/or situation: either the elements of the New Covenant described in Heb. 8:10 were *completely* absent in the Old Covenant (as he understands the citations he presents to assert) or they were present *and hence cannot be definitional of what is ‘new’ in the New Covenant*. But it is just here that the position of Reformed Baptists in general, and that seen in our exegesis, must be allowed to speak to the issue. We must agree that considered individually, each of the elements of the New Covenant listed in Heb. 8:10-12 can be found, in particular individuals in the Old Covenant. Surely David knew of the work of God’s law in his heart, knew God intimately and personally and salvifically, and experienced the forgiveness of sins. Our exegesis of the text has not lead us to conclude that no one in the Old Covenant ever experienced these demonstrations of divine favor. But that is hardly the issue, for it is just as clear that for every David there were a dozen Ahabs; for every Josiah a legion of Manassehs. Unfaithfulness, the flaunting of God’s law, the rejection of the role of truly being God’s people, the rejection of His knowledge, and the experience of His wrath, were the *normative* experiences seen in the Old Covenant, which is why the writer to the Hebrews says that they did not keep His covenant and that He did not care for them. So, if *some* in the Old Covenant experienced these divine works of grace, but *most* did not, what then is to be concluded? That the newness of the New Covenant is seen in the *extensiveness* of the expression of God’s grace to *all* in it. It is an *exhaustive* demonstration of grace, for *all* in the New Covenant experience *all* that is inherent in the covenant in the blood of the Son of God. It is not merely a remnant that experiences these things, but all, so that the saying, “They did not keep my covenant” cannot be said of them, for unlike the Old Covenant where there were many who did not have the law in their hearts and minds, did not know the Lord, and did not know the forgiveness of their sins, *this is not the case in the New Covenant*. Therefore, Pastor Niell’s comments are not relevant to the Reformed Baptist position. We are not saying there were *none* who experienced God’s grace under the Old Covenant, but that the Old Covenant, *in and of itself*, did not *guarantee* that those who partook of it were, in fact, heirs of grace. The newness of the New Covenant in the blood of Christ is found in the reality that the better mediator, better hope, better sacrifices, mean that *all*, from the least to the greatest of them, know the Lord savingly. This is its glory, for it reflects the power of the blood in which it is sealed. Hence, when we read, “God’s law, the transcript of his holiness and his expectations for his people, was already on the hearts of his people, and so is not new in the new covenant,”<sup>11</sup> we respond by saying it is not the mere existence of the gracious act of God writing His law on the heart that is new, but it is the *extensiveness* of that work that is new. While *some* in the Old Covenant experienced this, *all* in the New Covenant do so. This fulfills each and

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<sup>9</sup> John MacArthur, Leon Morris, and Philip E. Hughes.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

every element of the apologetic argument of the writer to the Hebrews that we identified in our exegesis of the passage. The importance of this point is seen repeatedly in examining the position presented by Niell:

To state the matter as simply as possible, the writing of the law of God on the hearts of his people is *not new* in the new covenant, nor are the internal operations of God's Holy Spirit upon the hearts and minds of his people new in the new covenant. These were precious realities for the old covenant saint as well.<sup>12</sup>

We agree that the Old Covenant *saint* experienced the writing of God's law upon his or her heart. Obviously, Ps. 119 gives elegant testimony to this reality. But the point is not the presence of the elect as a sub-group in the Old Covenant anymore than it would be that the elect are a mere sub-group in the New Covenant. Ahab was an Old Covenant member but God's law was not written upon his heart so that he delighted in it. The newness of the New Covenant, as we have seen exegetically, is that *all* of these divine actions are true for *all* of those in it. *All* who receive forgiveness of sins (8:12) likewise have God's law written upon their hearts, for there is no textual disruption of the audience in view from verse ten to verse twelve. For Niell's thesis to be established, the text would have to *demand* a break in audience through 8:10-12, but it does not.

Having asserted that the writing of God's law on the hearts of the members of the New Covenant is not "new," Pastor Niell moves to the central part of his presentation: the concept that Heb. 8:11 does not mean that all members of the New Covenant know God savingly. Instead, he argues, the passage is about the removal of the Old Covenant priesthood. This concept is built upon insisting that something that was going on under the Old Covenant would cease. He writes:

Nonetheless, the phraseology is stated negatively: 'They shall *not*.' Something is going to cease; it will disappear in the new covenant era, and it will pertain to teaching and the knowledge of the Lord. It has to do with a form of teaching that occurred among the covenant people of the Lord.<sup>13</sup>

And what is the essence of the "newness" introduced by Heb. 8:11? We are told that v. 11 "is referring to the removal of the old covenant priesthood and the people and duties associated with it."<sup>14</sup> Or, again in Pastor Niell's words:

To state it negatively: the newness of the new covenant is seen in *the cessation of the ceremonial aspects of the law*. To state it positively: Jesus Christ has fulfilled the law. He has become our perfect High Priest and has accomplished our redemption (atonement) through the perfect sacrifice of himself.<sup>15</sup>

What does this mean? The thesis is that the "newness" of the New Covenant is found in the cessation of the priestly office, described in v. 11 in terms of teaching.

These priests, in dealing with the ceremonial aspects of the law, revealed the gospel in pictures and illustrated the way of salvation. Their unique teaching was to cease at the time of the new covenant....Therefore, when God removed the priesthood (the persons and the work), the new covenant is precisely described with these words, "I will be their God, and they shall be My people. And...all will know Me, from the least to the greatest of them" (Heb 8:10-11)....Hebrews 8:11 explains that part of the newness of the new covenant is found in the removal of the Levitical

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 138, 139.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 148.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 143.

priesthood—an office that was especially engaged in teaching and representing the knowledge of the Lord to the people.”<sup>16</sup>

While the case can surely be made that, in a sense, the ministry of priests included elements of “teaching” through the institutions in which they ministered, our exegesis has shown the text from Jeremiah to be a consistent whole, with all of the descriptions of its newness having the same audience and the same soteriological implications. There simply is no contextual reason to look for this distant application, one that would require some level of explication on the part of the author (in which we would expect the application to be made with significantly greater clarity and force), when the context itself points us in the opposite direction. When a consistent interpretation of the passage is at hand that requires no disruption of the flow of thought, we need a truly compelling reason to look for anything other than the plainest meaning of the words as they would have been read by the original audience. In this instance, while all agree that priesthood terminology in the context of shadow and fulfillment is central to the argument of the author, the specific idea of priests as teachers is far removed from the immediate discussion of the New Covenant as better and superior because it accomplishes that which the Old did not. Further, as we saw before, there is no reason to think the knowledge spoken of here is anything other than that seen in 1 Sam. 2:12, which states that Eli’s sons “did not know the LORD.” Ironically, here you have *priests* who, by their actions, would be engaged in the very types and shadows that are involved in teaching the knowledge of the Lord to the people of Israel, and yet they did not *know the Lord*. Was this because they did not perform their duties correctly? No, it is because they were “worthless men,” men who did not have the law written on their hearts and minds, did not know Yahweh, and hence did not experience His mercy and forgiveness. There simply is no contextual reason to think that any other kind of knowledge was in view in Jer. 31, or that the writer to the Hebrews applied such a construct to this one verse without informing his audience of his meaning or intention.

It is important to understand that this interpretation has wider ramifications than simply throwing into question the actual nature of what is “new” in the New Covenant. Pastor Niell includes a footnote regarding what it means to “know the Lord” in Heb. 8:11:

It has been asserted that Heb. 8:11 refers to saving knowledge, but it must be recognized that *know* can refer to nonsaving knowledge (Jer. 16:21; Gen. 4:1). As argued throughout this chapter, the context deals with the removal of the ceremonial aspects of the law and refers to the knowledge that is possessed and published by the priests. This is true whether or not they were elect before the foundation of the world. With the author of Hebrews, we must be careful to avoid equating covenant membership with election. This is shown by the warnings of apostasy that are given to new covenant members throughout this epistle—referring to apostasy from the covenant, not apostasy from election....”<sup>17</sup>

What is the exegetical basis for seeing the knowledge of Heb. 8:11 as non-salvific? The alleged foundation is two-fold: the already addressed idea that nothing in vv. 10 or 12 is “new” to the New Covenant (i.e., they were present in some, but not in all, of the members of the Old Covenant), along with the continued pre-eminence of a particular understanding of apostasy texts. In other words, we do not find the argument to be exegetically derived, but instead to be an argument based on an over-riding theological grid that pre-determines the outcome of the study. The text has not driven us to divide up the audience envisioned in the New Covenant in this fashion; it has instead shown its consistency and harmony through its emphasis upon the “better” way in Christ. And the soteriological thrust of the entire passage is not interrupted here, and is instead carried on through v. 12. But it is just here that Pastor Niell introduces a most interesting

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 149, 151, 153.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 153.

idea. When initially presenting the thesis that the newness of the New Covenant is limited in Heb. 8, he says, “God’s full pardon for sinners was just as present and real for saints in the Old Testament as it is for saints in the New.”<sup>18</sup> So it seems here that in saying this is not new in the New Covenant the words are understood to refer to pardon for sinners. But, once you claim that the knowledge of God in 8:11 is not salvific, how can you then revert back to a context of salvation? When addressing this, Pastor Niell says:

The ceremonial aspects of the covenant of grace are also in view in Hebrews 8:12. Since God’s grace, mercy, and forgiveness are not new in the new covenant, this passage must refer to something else and must accord with the context. Hebrews 8:12 refers to the abrogation of the ceremonies of sacrifice, the priestly duties, of the old covenant....God has always been merciful to his people, to their iniquities. Psalm 103 declares that he will separate our sins from us, as far as the east is from the west. He has always offered full pardon, but now, in the new covenant, the continual reminder is removed.<sup>19</sup>

Heb. 10:3-4 is cited as evidence of this function of the old priesthood “reminders” of the sin of the people. Surely the writer to the Hebrews does contrast the once-for-all, completed, finished sacrifice of Christ with the repetitive sacrifices of the Old Covenant which did, indeed, function as an annual reminder of sin. One of the great truths of the New Covenant is that while those repetitive sacrifices were an ἀνάμνησις of sin, a regular reminder, built into the economy of the priesthood worship by God himself, *there is no such ἀνάμνησις* in the New Covenant, for all those in that covenant have received forgiveness of sins. The “remembrance” of the New Covenant is the Lord’s Supper, in which we proclaim the Lord’s death till He comes as an ἀνάμνησις of Him (1 Cor. 11:25-26). Evidently, the function of a reminder of sins is no longer needed in the New Covenant; but, if it, like the Old, is a mixed covenant, this introduces an odd discontinuity, *unless we recognize the very superiority of the covenant in the blood of Christ*. And this is the very point of the writer to the Hebrews. As we noted in our exegesis, the *reason* all in the new covenant know the Lord is laid out in v. 12, “*for I will be merciful to their iniquities.*” This is not merely the removal of sacrifices: this is the removal of the very sins of the people so that they are brought into relationship with God through their Savior, Jesus Christ.

We must further note that the contrast in Heb. 10 is between the repetitive sacrifices of the Old Covenant, which could never take away sins, and the singular sacrifice of the New, which not only *can* but in reality *does* do so for those who are in the covenant (Heb. 10:10-18)! This is the reason why the writer again introduces the Jeremiah passage and connects these very words to the “one offering” which “perfected for all time those who are sanctified” (8:14).

### **Do the Apostasy Passages Provide an Over-Riding Theological Matrix?**

Though we can hardly enter into a full discussion of all the passages cited in support of a particular theory of apostasy, and though it seems clear that not all of the writers represented in *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism* would agree with Pastor Niell on this topic, a brief response to the key passage that is related to our central text (Heb. 10:29) may make our response fuller and more useful.

For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much severer punishment do you think he will

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 154.

deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace?

Following Owen's understanding of context, we will assume the essential correctness of the position that sees the context of 10:29 as an act of apostasy on the part of a baptized, confessing member of the congregation of Jewish Christians to which the author is writing.<sup>20</sup> Recognizing this immediate context protects the passage from its most common misapplications and brings us to the key issue in our inquiry: in the case of those who knowingly reject their profession of faith and return to Judaism, were these individuals, in the thinking of the writer to the Hebrews, members of the New Covenant, perfected by the death of Christ, sanctified by His blood, who then became imperfect and were lost? Who is the object of the phrase ἐν ᾧ ἡγιάσθη ("by which he was sanctified"): the apostate or the Son of God? Those who press this passage as a clear indication that the New Covenant can be entered into and yet violated assume that the phrase, which can grammatically be attached to either antecedent, *must* be applied to the apostate.

The exegesis that we have offered, together with the compelling argumentation (that reaches its climax in Heb. 10:10-18) regarding the perfection that flows from the singular, completed sacrifice of the New Covenant, provides a very strong ground on which to argue that the writer would hardly turn around and vitiate the central core of his apologetic argument within a matter of only a few sentences by robbing the New Covenant of its intrinsically perfect soteriological content. And we would be in very good company to assert that the depth of the sin of apostasy here noted is aggravated by recognition that the blood treated as *common* or *unclean* (κοινὸν) by the apostate through returning to the sacrifice of goats and bulls is greatly *increased* by seeing the antecedent as Christ, the very Son of God who has set Himself apart as High Priest as well as offering. And we are hardly alone in seeing the text in this fashion. John Owen expressed it forcefully:

The last aggravation of this sin with respect unto the blood of Christ, is the nature, use, and efficacy of it; it is that "wherewith he was sanctified." It is not *real* or *internal sanctification* that is here intended, but it is a *separation* and *dedication unto God*; in which sense the word is often used. And all the disputes concerning the total and final apostasy from the faith of them who have been really and internally sanctified, from this place, are altogether vain; though that may be said of a man, in aggravation of his sin, which he professeth concerning himself. But the difficulty of this text is, concerning whom these words are spoken: for they may be referred unto the person that is guilty of the sin insisted on; he counts the blood of the covenant, wherewith he himself was sanctified, an unholy thing. For as at the giving of the law, or the establishing of the covenant at Sinai, the people being sprinkled with the blood of the beasts that were offered in sacrifice, were sanctified, or dedicated unto God in a peculiar manner; so those who by baptism, and confession of faith in the church of Christ, were separated from all others, were peculiarly dedicated to God thereby. And therefore in this case apostates are said to "deny the Lord that bought them," or vindicated them from their slavery unto the law by his word and truth for a season, 2 Peter 2:1. But the design of the apostle in the context leads plainly to another application of these words. It is Christ himself that is spoken of, who was sanctified and dedicated unto God to be an eternal high priest, by the blood of the covenant which he offered unto God, as I have showed before. The priests of old were dedicated and sanctified unto their office by another, and the sacrifices which he offered for them; they could not sanctify themselves: so were Aaron and his sons sanctified by Moses, antecedently unto their offering any sacrifice themselves. But no outward act of men or angels could unto this purpose pass on the Son of God. He was to be the priest himself, the sacrificer himself, — to dedicate, consecrate, and sanctify himself, by his own sacrifice, in concurrence with the actings of God the Father in his suffering. See John 17:19; Hebrews 2:10, 5:7, 9, 9:11, 12. That precious blood of Christ, wherein or whereby he was sanctified, and

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<sup>20</sup> John Owen, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, (reprint ed., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1991), 6:530, 531.

dedicated unto God as the eternal high priest of the church, this they esteemed “an unholy thing;” that is, such as would have no such effect as to consecrate him unto God and his office.<sup>21</sup>

Owen’s exegesis is only strengthened by the considerations raised in our own study of the text. It should be noted that some might be unaware that Owen took this viewpoint, in light of the fact that in the more popular work, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*,<sup>22</sup> Owen did not even mention this exegetical possibility, but took the phrase to refer to the apostate. Why this inconsistency? The answer is easy to ascertain: Owen wrote *The Death of Death* as a young man; it was his second work, and his first widely received polemic effort. But his massive commentary on Hebrews came many years later, and is the work of a mature exegete. It is clear that he had not even considered the possibility in his younger days.

In light of this exegesis and its consistency with the apologetic argument of the epistle, it is interesting to note that though a number of the authors featured in *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism* cite Heb. 10:29 as evidence of apostasy from the New Covenant with accompanying New Covenant curses, only two even note this other interpretation, and then only in footnotes, and none make any note of Owen’s words. Gregg Strawbridge writes:

A minority of interpreters take the implied “he” in “the blood of the covenant by which *he* was sanctified (*hegiasthe* [third person singular])” as referring to Christ. However, the grammar certainly does not necessitate that interpretation. Such a view seems to be an *ad hoc* response to the theological difficulties of a baptistic Calvinism, which are alleviated in the general Reformed view of the covenant with its internal and legal dimensions.<sup>23</sup>

Surely Owen would not be guilty of coming up with an *ad hoc* response due to his holding a baptistic Calvinism, so perhaps it is better to see this view as flowing from a contextual exegesis that is driven by maintaining the apologetic thrust and argument of the epistle to the Hebrews while likewise refusing to allow an external tradition or practice to become an over-riding consideration in our interpretation. Likewise, Randy Booth provides a footnote to his use of Heb. 10:29:

Some contend that the words “by which he was sanctified” refer to Jesus (see John 17:19). Such an interpretation cannot be sufficiently supported. Moreover, even if they did refer to Jesus, it must be admitted that the word “sanctify” is used in a different way than it is earlier in Heb. 10:14. Surely the sanctification experience of Jesus is far different from that which we experience.<sup>24</sup>

One cannot respond to the assertion that “such an interpretation cannot be sufficiently supported” since the author does not expand upon the statement. In light of the above provision of what seems to be more than sufficient support for the position, we cannot accept the assertion. And while the “self-sanctifying” of Christ by His sacrifice must, by nature, be “far different from that which we experience,” it is hard to see how this is relevant to the point at issue, i.e., who is “sanctified” by the blood of the covenant and how this relates to the great guilt of the apostate. It is our firm conviction that this understanding of the text not only comports better with the context, but it has not at all been allowed to have a sufficient voice in the use of the text by paedobaptist authors seeking to establish the case for apostasy from the New Covenant. Further, in reference to Pastor Niell’s thesis, and the centrality of an over-arching concept of apostasy to his entire reading (Heb. 10:29 figuring prominently in the listing of passages supporting his view

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 545, 546.

<sup>22</sup> John Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (reprint. Ed., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1985), 252-256.

<sup>23</sup> Strawbridge, ed., *Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, 281.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 198. Previous to this Booth had stated, “The old and new covenants are essentially one.”

as he sees it), these considerations seriously undermine the position, especially in light of the positive exegetical thrust of the passage established in the first part of this study.

### The New Covenant As Future Fulfillment

Other authors in *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism* present the thesis that the New Covenant experiences a gradual growth or fulfillment over time, so that the final establishment awaits the consummation of the ages in the coming of Christ. In fact, Richard L. Pratt Jr. of Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando supports the exegetical conclusions we presented regarding the inherent *soteriological* nature of the New Covenant in his presentation. Directly contrary to Pastor Niell, Dr. Pratt writes:

A second feature of Jeremiah's prophecy that is often used to oppose infant baptism is that *the new covenant is fully internalized*. Jeremiah 31:33 speaks plainly in this regard: "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts." This feature of the new covenant demonstrates that God himself will bring about deep internal transformation of his covenant people. The words "mind" and "heart" often denote the inner person, the deeper recesses of personality, or, in contemporary parlance, "the soul." Jeremiah did not see entrance into the new covenant community as entrance into an external environment, but as undergoing a spiritual, inward change.<sup>25</sup>

And in reference to "knowing" the Lord as cited in Heb. 8:11, Pratt says, "In a word, to know God as Jeremiah spoke of it would be to receive eternal salvation. In the covenant of which Jeremiah spoke, salvation would come to each participant."<sup>26</sup> We note this simply to demonstrate that the exegesis we have offered of the *nature* of the new covenant is surely not to be relegated to something that is derived from the uncritical application of "baptistic" presuppositions to the text, since obviously Dr. Pratt brings no such presuppositions. In light of these statements, then, how does Pratt maintain a paedobaptist commitment in light of the nature of the New Covenant? He does so by differentiating between the *inauguration* of the New Covenant and the final establishment thereof, putting that final consummation off until the return of Christ. He writes:

The new covenant was inaugurated in Christ's first coming; it progresses in part during the continuation of Christ's kingdom; but it will reach complete fulfillment only when Christ returns in the consummation of all things. We must approach Jeremiah 31:31-34 just as we approach all prophecies regarding the restoration after exile: with the understanding that the restoration of the kingdom and the renewal of the covenant will not be complete until Jesus returns....When we apply the basic pattern of New Testament fulfillment to Jeremiah's prophecy of the new covenant, it becomes clear that his expectations provide no basis at all for opposing infant baptism.<sup>27</sup>

This means that the perfect fulfillment of God's purpose, seen in the New Covenant, is, from the vantage point of both Jeremiah *and* the author of Hebrews, a future reality. While acknowledging the indefectibility of New Covenant membership, Pratt does not believe this is yet a reality for Christ's people in the church. "In the consummation of Christ's kingdom, this prediction will be completely fulfilled. Once Christ returns, it will not be possible to break the new covenant and thereby to enter into another exile."<sup>28</sup> Evidently, until then, the New Covenant, while inaugurated, is not fully established.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 161.

<sup>27</sup> Richard L. Pratt Jr., "Infant Baptism in the New Covenant" in Strawbridge, ed., *The Case for Covenantal Infant Baptism*, 169.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 169.

We can have confidence that after Christ returns in glory, everyone in the new creation will have the law of God written on his or her heart. We will all love and delight in his ways, just as Christ already does....In this sense, we expect Jeremiah's prophecy to find complete fulfillment when Christ returns.

At the present time, however, this expectation is only partially fulfilled. To be sure, the hearts and minds of believers have been renewed by God's grace....At the same time, however, we are commanded to be guided by the Scriptures and to watch for corruption in our thinking....The New Testament speaks this way because, while the internalization of the law of God has begun within believers, it has not yet been completed.<sup>29</sup>

Based upon this "partial fulfillment" motif, Pratt can affirm the perfection of the New Covenant but only as it is finally and completely established in the future.

The promise that the new covenant will grant salvation to all who participate will be fulfilled by the removal of the unbelievers at the time of judgment. Only true believers will be left, and thus all who remain in the new covenant will be saved.

But prior to the judgment that Christ will render at his return, the new covenant community is not restricted to believers only. If it were, there would be no separation of people at Christ's return....Until the consummation, the new covenant will continue to be a mixture of true believers and sanctified unbelievers.<sup>30</sup>

Before interacting briefly with this concept, it is important to understand *why* Pratt says the New Covenant is only "partially" fulfilled. He refers to the fulfillment pattern of Jer. 31. "In a word, the fulfillment of the new covenant depended on the fulfillment of the other predictions of chapter 31."<sup>31</sup> Specifically, Pratt identifies three sections to Jeremiah's prophecy:

- Future planting of God's people in the land (vv. 27-30)
- Future new covenant with God's people (vv. 31-37)
- Future rebuilding and permanence of the holy city (vv. 38-40)

Pratt sees the fulfillment of the first and third portions of the prophecy as yet future, and hence the middle portion cannot yet have come to full completion. He writes:

Because the New Testament does not explicitly apply this threefold fulfillment pattern to Jeremiah's prophecy of the new covenant, the fulfillment of that particular prophecy is often misunderstood. Often interpreters approach this text as if the new covenant was realized in its fullness when Christ first came to earth, but this is a serious error.<sup>32</sup>

The two elements of this presentation, then, that need to be examined in light of the exegesis already offered are *first*, is there warrant to insist that a particular theory of fulfillment of prophetic material surrounding the Jeremiah passage must be obtained before the New Covenant it promises can be fully realized? and, *second*, what are the ramifications of creating a dichotomy between "partial fulfillment" and "final fulfillment" with reference to the use of the passage by the writer to the Hebrews?

With reference to fulfillment themes in the NT, we note that there are numerous passages that the NT writers saw as fulfilled completely in the ministry of Christ that are plainly part of a larger narrative that has not yet been fulfilled in a particular fashion. One can think of Ps. 22 and the

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 168.

fact that its entire thrust leads us from the suffering Messiah (1-18) through to the resurrected and conquering King (27-31). Can one section be fulfilled without the other? Surely.

Moving to Jeremiah, a close contextual passage is found in Jer. 32:40. “I will make an everlasting covenant with them that I will not turn away from them, to do them good; and I will put the fear of Me in their hearts so that they will not turn away from Me.” Here Jeremiah restates the New Covenant theme from the preceding chapter (indeed, Pratt likewise saw the element of indefectibility in the Jeremiah 31 prophecy that is here laid out with greater clarity). Yet, the immediate context is very closely tied to Jerusalem (v. 36), restoration (v. 37), and the very internal promises of the New Covenant (vv. 38-39). And though the context continues in close proximity with the historic Jerusalem motif (v. 42), clearly these promises are fulfilled in the church. So if particular elements of the prophecy can be fulfilled in the coming of the Spirit and His ministry in the church, upon what basis are we to insist upon a particular “level” of fulfillment of surrounding prophetic material before allowing a “full” fulfillment for the New Covenant?

Further, one could argue that it is artificial to insist upon such a strong connection between the elements Pratt lists. There is a clear break after Jer. 31:26, followed by two “days are coming” oracles. It is hard to insist that the first oracle is to be connected to the second, especially in light of the “sour grapes” saying (v. 29). And after v. 34 we have another break, with the form of the text changing once again to a poetic revelation motif. The real question that must be asked is, does the writer to the Hebrews see the same three-part fulfillment motif that Pratt insists must be followed? And we can only answer that we see no evidence that he does.

But far more compelling is the consideration of the result of making the New Covenant something that is yet future in its fulfillment. We noted in our exegesis that central to the thrust of the writer is the establishment of the supremacy of Christ over the old ways, and in our key texts, he does this through the assertion of a better ministry, a better and New Covenant, with better sacrifices, and a better hope. We are never given the slightest indication that this better covenant is only *partly* better now, and will get *much* better in the future. When the writer says in 8:6 that this covenant *has been enacted* (νενομοθέτηται), there is nothing in the verb used, or in the tense form, to indicate a progressive action that has been “inaugurated” but is still in process and will not come into full force until far in the future. Instead, he chooses the very form of the term that is the most difficult to fit with such a concept. The covenant *has been enacted* (perfect tense) as a completed action. This establishment of a *second* covenant (in contrast with the “first,” Heb. 8:7) is related to the passing away of the first (8:13). But if the first passes away, and the second is not fully established, are we left with some form of “partial covenantalism” that is to fill the description of the “better” covenant to which the people should cling rather than returning to the old ways? Is this really how we are to read the writer to the Hebrews? We have insisted that any interpretation that diminishes the apologetic weight of the epistle is to be questioned. Surely the introduction of partiality (and hence imperfection) into the original readers’ experience of the New Covenant falls into this category. How could it not, when the writer concludes his citation with the assertion that the old ways are “about to disappear” (8:13) and yet must then, in the next breath, say that all the promises of the New Covenant are yet future in their final fulfillment, and that the partial covenant that he is offering to them continues to have the very same faults in it that the passage in Jeremiah had addressed (specifically, the fact that they did not keep the covenant, hence, there were apostates and unfaithfulness and individuals for whom the Lord “did not care”)? We suggest that any concept of partiality stands in direct opposition to the apologetic thrust of the writer himself. If we take the inspired interpretation of the NT as our norm, we must reject the partial fulfillment theory based upon the usage of the text itself.

But there is another immediate problem with this theory. As we noted, Jer. 31 is not cited only in Hebrews chapter eight. It appears also in chapter ten. There we saw that it was once again intimately tied to the salvific purpose of God in the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The writer cites it once again as the Holy Spirit’s testimony to the truthfulness of the point he just established, i.e.,

the once-for-all offering of Jesus Christ that perfects those who are sanctified. The writer's conclusion is, "Now where there is forgiveness of these things, there is no longer *any* offering for sin" (10:18). Consider well what the "only inaugurated, but only partially fulfilled" theory of the New Covenant means in a passage such as this. Is not the very forgiveness of sins dependent upon the *completed* sacrifice of Jesus Christ? Is it not a part of the writer's argument that the old offerings have been done away with because the *one* offering of Christ (the blood of the New Covenant!) has brought about forgiveness? Surely it is. So where is this concept of partiality in the text that directly addresses the nature and result of the New Covenant? It is nowhere to be found. Indeed, we are left to wonder exactly how this "partiality" would be applied in light of the fact that Pratt has clearly seen that the New Covenant is exhaustive and perfect in its soteriological element. Evidently Pratt believes the full establishment of the New Covenant implies sinless perfection on the part of its members. But this means that while the audience of the Jeremiah prophecy, as applied by the writer to the Hebrews, remains the same from v. 10 through v. 12 (as Pratt seems to agree), the actual fulfillment of the divine blessings differs along the line: there is a partial writing of the law upon the heart, a partial knowledge, but full forgiveness. We are again forced to point out the inconsistency created by not allowing the New Covenant to be fully established by the shed blood of Jesus Christ or to in any way seek to make room within its perfection for the unregenerate. The impact upon the apologetic thesis of the book of Hebrews of such a theory of "partiality," along with the simple fact that we do not have the first word of description of the covenant in this form as something that will only truly *become* better in the final completion of all things, argues convincingly against this theory.

### Conclusion

*Semper reformanda* is a phrase that despite its repetition is often set aside in the service of tradition. The concept underlying the phrase is the unfathomable riches of the Word of God, the very words of God inscripturated and given as a gift to Christ's body, the church. And while *semper reformanda* does not mean that we never set down boundary markers of truth, it does mean that the highest authority for the church is always the Scripture, and the church is constantly to be examining her faith in the light of God's Word, knowing our penchant for apathy, our love of the comfortable, the ease with which we confuse human traditions with divine revelation and call them "good." Engaging the text of Scripture afresh, seeking to hear only what the Holy Spirit has given us in it, eschewing the myriad forms of pious unbelief that mar the work of exegesis in modern times (and question its truly divine nature and clarity), is truly the highest form of obedience to the divine truth contained in the phrases *sola scriptura* and *semper reformanda*.

We have sought to fairly and honestly engage the text of the tremendous epistle to the Hebrews and to do justice to the themes and concerns of the writer. The text is clear, compelling, and once again captivates the heart with the glory of its self-consistency. The New Covenant is seen as a divine work, comprehensive in its perfection, reflecting the radiance of the One who defines its every contour, the Lord Jesus Christ, its mediator and its sacrificial offering.

We have likewise sought to be fair to those we have reviewed as we view them as our fellow heirs of grace, our brothers in Christ, even when our exegesis has led us to question, and reject, the substance of their position. We have written in the firm conviction that Christ's Word is truth, and Christian unity can only be forged when His people seek His truth there, and nowhere else. It is our hope that this interchange will aid those who seek to examine the issue of baptism, the covenant, and the proper place of these beliefs in the ministry of the church.