

JEREMIAH 31: INFANT BAPTISM IN THE NEW COVENANT

by Dr. Richard Pratt

31 *a* "The time is coming," declares the LORD,
b "when I will make a new covenant
with the house of Israel
c and with the house of Judah.

32 *a* It will not be like the covenant
b I made with their forefathers
c when I took them by the hand
d to lead them out of Egypt,
e because they broke my covenant,
f though I was a husband to them,"
g declares the LORD.

33 *a* "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel
b after that time," declares the LORD.
c "I will put my law in their minds
d and write it on their hearts.

e I will be their God,
f and they will be my people.

34 *a* No longer will a man teach his neighbor,
b or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,'
c because they will all know me,
d from the least of them to the greatest,"
e declares the LORD.

f "For I will forgive their wickedness
g and will remember their sins no more."

(Jeremiah 31:31-34 NIV)

Many evangelicals appeal to Jeremiah's prophecy of the New covenant in Jeremiah 31:31-34 as a basis for rejecting infant baptism, but a careful examination of this passage in the light of the rest of Scripture reveals that it actually supports the historical Christian practice of infant baptism. Our study will address three main topics: 1) how Jeremiah's prophecy is often used to argue against infant baptism; 2) the original meaning of Jeremiah's prophecy; and 3) the New Testament's outlook on Jeremiah's prophecy. As we will see, Jeremiah's prediction of the new covenant

actually encourages Christians to continue the practice of infant baptism until the Lord returns.

How is the New Covenant Used against Infant Baptism?

The universally accepted designation “New Testament” is based on the terminology of “new covenant” in Jeremiah 31:31-34. Accordingly, all evangelicals agree that Jeremiah’s new covenant prediction is fulfilled in the New Testament era. Yet, opinions divide over how Jeremiah’s predictions relate to the practice of infant baptism. Many evangelicals who reject infant baptism believe that Jeremiah’s prophecy offers nearly conclusive evidence in favor of their view. We will return to these evidences below, but at this point we should summarize three ways in which Jeremiah’s prophecy is often understood in this way.

In the first place, it is thought that infant baptism is contrary to Jeremiah’s prophecy because Jeremiah declared that *the new covenant couldn’t be broken*. As the prophet said in Jeremiah 31:32:

It will not be like the covenant
I made with their forefathers
when I took them by the hand
to lead them out of Egypt,
because they broke my covenant ...

In this verse, the prophet declared that the new covenant would “not be like” the old covenant in that the “forefathers ... broke” the old covenant. Along with a number of other expressions, the OT uses the terms “to keep” (רמב) and “to break” (ררפ) covenant to describe, respectively, the obedience and disobedience of God’s covenant people to the stipulations or regulations of their covenants. To keep covenant was to offer faithful (albeit imperfect) service in order to receive divine blessing, but to break covenant was to commit unrepentant, flagrant violation that nullified the offer of blessing and brought divine judgment.

Although Jeremiah’s words “to lead them out of Egypt” indicate that he had in mind especially a contrast between the covenant with Moses and the new covenant, a quick survey reveals that the possibility of breaking covenant and incurring divine wrath was a dimension of every major OT covenant. The covenant with Noah (Gen. 6:13-21; 8:20-9:17) focused primarily on God’s blessing of natural stability for the human race, but the threat of execution for murderers (Gen 6:9) and the severe curse on Noah’s grandson Canaan (Gen. 9:25-27) indicate that divine judgment may fall on those who rebel against God’s covenant requirements. Abraham’s covenant (Gen. 15:1-21; 17:1-21) also had

much to say about divine blessing, but God explicitly warned against the judgment that would fall on those who broke this covenant (Gen. 17:14). As Jeremiah himself pointed out, the covenant with Moses repeatedly warned of the horrible curses against those who broke that covenant (see also Deut. 28:15-68; 31:16-18). The covenant with David also reflected this basic pattern (Pss. 89; 132:11-18). God stipulated to David that his descendants would sit on his throne “if your sons keep my covenant” (Ps. 132:12; cf. 2 Chr. 6:16; Ps. 89:30-31), but as Israel’s history indicates, they suffered severely for violations of the covenant (2 Sam 7:14).

Without a doubt Jeremiah distinguished the new covenant as one that would not be broken, but this aspect of Jeremiah’s prophecy poses a serious challenge for infant baptism. As all evangelicals would agree, not everyone baptized in infancy proves to be a covenant keeper. Many people who are baptized into the new covenant as infants turn away from Christ and the salvation he offers. This undeniable reality raises an important question: How can we think that infants are to be baptized into the inviolable new covenant when they often rebel against the new covenant and suffer the judgment of God?

A second feature of Jeremiah’s prophecy 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 in his covenant people. The words “mind” (brq) and “heart” (bl) often denotes 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.

Jeremiah predicted that this inward change would take place as God intervened into history to inscribe his Law deep within the participants of the new covenant. Many times prior to Christ, it is apparent that the law of God regulated the lives of the people of Israel as little more than an external code. Obedience often came reluctantly and resulted from external pressures. But Jeremiah promised that the new covenant would bring this situation to an end. In this regard, Paul echoed Jeremiah’s words when he contrasted the old covenant “ministry ... which was engraved in letters on stone” (2 Cor. 3:7) with the “new covenant ... ministry of the Spirit...that brings righteousness” (2 Cor 3:6,8-9).

Jeremiah’s emphasis on the inward character of the new covenant also raises significant questions about the practice of infant baptism. It is common for evangelical paedobaptists to speak of baptized children as participating only in

the external dimensions of the covenant, without inward transformation. Although they may not be regenerated, covenant children experience blessing because they are part of the visible church or covenant community. In fact, paedobaptists often draw parallels between the condition of baptized children in the visible church today and children in the nation of Israel during the OT.

It is not difficult to see why these outlooks raise objections. According to Jeremiah the law of God is internalized in the participants of the new covenant. They are transformed from within. How then may we baptize people into an external covenant environment apart from regeneration? Does this outlook not deny an essential feature of Jeremiah's prophecy?

A third aspect of Jeremiah 31:31-34 that often leads to objections against infant baptism is that *all participants in the new covenant are eternally redeemed*. Jeremiah was emphatic in this regard.

"No longer will a man teach his neighbor,
or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,'
because they will all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest."

In these words Jeremiah characterized the time of the new covenant as a period in which it will be entirely unnecessary for anyone to encourage other covenant people to "know the Lord." They will already know him "from the least of them to the greatest." The precise connotations of the expression "know the Lord" are difficult to establish. In this context the word "know" ([dy) appears to have the connotations of "acknowledge, take recognition of, be rightly and intimately aware of." In this sense, knowing the Lord means properly acknowledging and recognizing the Lord. This is why Jeremiah 31:34 closes, "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." In a word, to know God as Jeremiah spoke of it was to receive eternal salvation.

So it is that in the covenant of which Jeremiah spoke salvation would come to each participant. There would be no exceptions.

In light of Jeremiah's stress on the distribution of salvation within the new covenant, it is no wonder that his words are used to oppose infant baptism. Evangelical paedobaptists consistently stress that baptized children are in the new covenant but that they are not automatically or necessarily saved. In effect, infant baptism introduces unregenerate, unbelieving people into the community of the new covenant. But this practice appears to contradict Jeremiah's prophecy that salvation will be fully distributed in the new covenant. How can it be right for infants to receive the covenant sign of baptism when they often do not and may never "know the Lord"?

So we have seen at least three ways in which Jeremiah's prophecy of the new covenant has been used to object to the practice of infant baptism. To be sure, other facets of the passage come into view at times, but we have touched on the main ways these verses are often employed for this purpose. How can we believe in infant baptism when God himself said that the new covenant would be inviolable, internalized, and include only those who know the Lord?

What Did Jeremiah Mean?

As challenging as the preceding questions may appear, these objections against infant baptism dissipate when we consider the original meaning of Jeremiah 31:31-34. From the reference in Jeremiah 32:1-2 to "the eighteenth year of Nebuchadnezzar" when his armies were "besieging Jerusalem," we can assume that the prophet's words about the new covenant were declared during the years near Jerusalem's fall to Babylon in 586 B.C. Jeremiah spent much time warning the people of Jerusalem and Judah that massive destruction and exile were imminent, but he also encouraged them not to lose hope that God would one day end their exile and return them to the Promised Land. Jeremiah's new covenant prophecy was one of his words of encouragement to a people about to go into exile. We will approach Jeremiah's words about restoration from exile from three vantage points: 1) the structure and content of the passage itself; 2) the surrounding context; and 3) the context of OT prophecy in general.

To grasp what Jeremiah had in mind as he delivered God's promises about the New Covenant, we should begin with a more careful analysis of the structure and content passage itself. This passage may be outlined as follows:

Negative Announcement of Covenant to Come (31:31-32)

Declaration (31:31)

"declares the Lord" (31:31a)

Denial (31:32)

"declares the Lord" (31:32g)

Positive Clarification of Covenant to Come (31:33-34e)

Declaration (31:33a,b)

"declares the Lord" (31:33b)

Affirmation (31:33c-e)

"declares the Lord" (31:33e)

Explanation of Covenant to Come (31:34f-g)

As the outline above suggests, Jeremiah 31:31-34 divides into two main parts followed by an explanation. The first two portions of the passage are marked by the expression "declares the Lord" at the beginning and end of each.

The added explanation is marked by the introductory word “for” (yK). In effect, the prophet made one announcement of a coming covenant (31:31-32), followed it with another announcement of that covenant (31:33-34e), and explained how such a covenant could come about (31:33f-g).

The first portion of this passage (31:31-32) amounts to a declaration that a new covenant is coming to Israel and Judah (31:31). It would not have been immediately apparent that this was a good thing. After all, the Mosaic covenant had brought God’s people under divine judgment. So, in order to present this new covenant as a hopeful event, Jeremiah denied that this covenant would be like the Mosaic covenant (31:32).

The second part (31:33-34e) announces the coming covenant (31:33a,b) in language recalling the opening line of 31:31. This time, however, the hopeful character of this covenant is highlighted by positive affirmations of the wondrous nature of this future covenant arrangement (31:33c-e).

The third portion (31:33f-g) explains how it is possible for such a wondrous covenant to be made with Israel. All of this is possible even for those facing exile because the Lord will one day provide radical and unchanging forgiveness of his people’s sins (31:34).

This overview of the structure of the passage allows us to summarize the passage in this way. To begin with, Jeremiah says that the Lord will make a new covenant that cannot be broken; it cannot fail to bring wondrous blessings from God. When Jeremiah spoke these words, God had already begun to punish his people with foreign oppression and exile. Soon, Jerusalem itself would fall to the Babylonians. What was so remarkable about having another covenant in the future when the great covenant with Moses had failed to bring eternal salvation? The remarkable thing was that new covenant would not end in failure.

In the second place, Jeremiah reported positive elaborations on what would happen under the administration of this new covenant (31:33-34e). The new covenant would not fail because God would do two things to ensure success. First, he would put his law in their minds and hearts (31:33c,d). The internalization of the law was God’s ideal for his people throughout OT history (e.g. Deut. 6:6; 10:16; 11:18; 30:6; Pss. 37:31; 119:34; Isa. 51:7) and was often obtained (Deut. 30:11-14; 2 Kings 23:25; 2 Chr. 31:21; Ps. 40:8; 119:11). In the new covenant, however, God would touch all his hardened and wayward people to give them hearts that loved and obeyed his law. Second, God would establish the bond of loyalty and intimacy between Himself and all of his people (31:33c-e). Unlike times before when dross corrupted the covenant community, this covenant bond would extend to every covenant person without exception. This distribution of salvation would also ensure that the new covenant could not fail.

All of these high hopes for the new covenant raised a serious question for Jeremiah and his audience: How could this be? How could such a marvelous,

unfailing covenant come to people whose disloyalty had led to the judgment of exile? The explanation of this passage (33:34f,g) is that God will one day forgive their wickedness and sins forever.

With the basic structure and content of the passage itself in mind, we should look at the immediate context of Jeremiah 31. Our passage is part of the larger segment comprising Jeremiah 31:27-40. This material is separated from the surrounding context by temporal notations at the beginning (31:26) and end (32:1).

Jeremiah 31:27-40 divides into three sections introduced by similar expressions: “‘The days are coming,’ declares the Lord” (31:27); “‘The time is coming,’ declares the Lord” (31:31); and “‘The days are coming,’ declares the Lord...” (31:38). The topics of each segment are easily discerned:

- Future Planting of God’s People in the Land (31:27-30)
- Future New Covenant with God’s People (31:31-37)
- Future Rebuilding and Permanence of the Holy City (31:38-40)

Jeremiah 31:27-30 announces that God will bring his exiled people back to their land. As surely as he watched over them to destroy them, he will watch over them to return them home. Then Jeremiah 31:31-37 announces that when the people are back in the Promised Land, a new covenant will secure the successful reception of divine blessings. This new, unfailing covenant is as sure as the divine decrees that give order to the universe (31:35-37). Finally, Jeremiah 31:38-40 announces that once the people have returned and come under the new, unfailing covenant, the entire city of Jerusalem will be restored. The entire city will be made “holy to the Lord ... never again [to] be uprooted or demolished” (31:40).

From this overview of the immediate context, we see that Jeremiah’s prophecy of the new covenant fit within a threefold scenario for the restoration of Israel after the exile. Israel would return to the Promised Land, a new unfailing covenant would be established, and a glorious, holy Jerusalem would be permanently erected.

Recognizing this context helps readers avoid removing Jeremiah’s new covenant from the context of his other predictions of the restoration of Israel after the exile. The new covenant did not stand alone in Jeremiah’s thinking. It was not a mere development from failure to success, from external to internal, nor from corruption within the covenant community to purity within the covenant community. The new covenant was part of a scenario that included a full inheritance for God’s people and the permanent establishment of the Holy City of God. In a word, the fulfillment of the new covenant depends on the fulfillment of the other predictions of chapter 31.

These observations lead to a third consideration: How does Jeremiah 31:31-34 fit within the broader context of OT prophecy? What insights may we derive from a panoramic outlook on the prophets? Simply put, we see even more clearly that Jeremiah's concept of new covenant was part of a set of predictions about the end of Israel's exile.

In the first place, we should see that the terminology "new covenant" (hvdx tyrB) connects Jeremiah's expectations to a more generic set of predictions. The terminology itself is unique to Jeremiah, but each element ("new" and "covenant") has significant parallels to other prophetic concepts. On the one hand, the term "new" appears elsewhere in the prophetic books as a way of describing the condition of things surrounding the restoration of Israel and Judah after the exile. Ezekiel spoke of God giving his people a "new spirit" (Ezek. 11:19; 36:26) and a "new heart" (Ezek 36:26). Isaiah spoke of God's intervention to free his people as "a new thing" (Isa 42:9; 43:19). He also described the time after the completion of the restoration from exile as the "new heavens and a new earth" (Isa 65:17; 66:22). In this sense, Jeremiah's concept of a "new" covenant fit within the broader portrait of Israel's restoration from exile.

On the other hand, other prophets also associated the concept of "covenant" with Israel's restoration from exile. The expression "covenant of peace" (l-v tyrB) and similar terminology appear in Isaiah 54:10 and Ezekiel 34:25; 37:26 as descriptions of the restoration period. These covenant expressions reflected a basic theological outlook which stemmed from the days of Moses: forgiveness, refreshment, renewal and blessings come to the sinful nation of Israel only as they renew covenant (e.g. Exod. 24:7-8; 34:10ff.; Deut 29; 31; Josh. 24:1-28; 2 Kings 23:2-3; 2 Chr. 34:30-32). So, it is not surprising at all that Jeremiah spoke of the divine arrangement after exile as a new *covenant*.

The prophets' emphasis on restoration after exile rested on a scenario sketched by Moses in Deuteronomy 4:25-31; 29:1-30:10). Moses wrote that if sin increased to intolerable levels in Israel, God would send his people into exile. But failure and exile would not be the end of God's plan for his people. Instead, God also promised to return his people from exile and then to bless them more than ever before. As Moses recorded God's promise in Deuteronomy 30:4-6:

"Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the LORD your God will gather you and bring you back. He will bring you to the land that belonged to your fathers, and you will take possession of it. He will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers. The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live."

Time and again OT prophets reiterated this ancient promise. Even as they threatened exile, they also assured God's people of a wondrous restoration. As we have seen, Jeremiah 31:31-34 falls into this set of expectations.

These broader connections between Jeremiah's new covenant and the hope of restoration from exile alert us to a crucial interpretative perspective: the new covenant is not an isolated item which may be brought into Christian understanding by itself. Instead, the fulfillment of the new covenant must be understood as part of a much larger set of hopes for the way things will be when the exile is completed. Our Christian understanding of the new covenant and its bearing on the question of infant baptism must parallel our understanding of all other restoration prophecies.

How is the New Covenant Fulfilled in the Christian Faith?

With the background of the original meaning of Jeremiah 31:31-34 in mind, we are now in a position to ask how the hope of the new covenant is fulfilled in the NT era. Gaining perspective on the NT outlook will provide us with significant insight into how infant baptism fits within the new covenant.

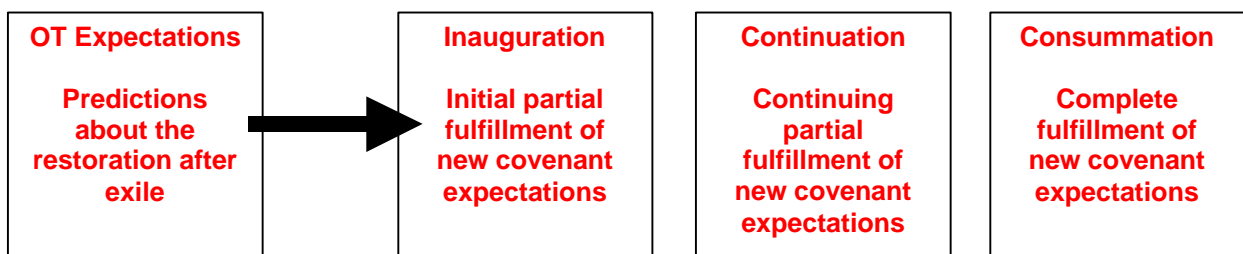
At least three NT authors explicitly wrote that the Christian faith was the fulfillment of Jeremiah's prophecy. Jeremiah 31:31-34 is quoted in whole or in part a total of seven times in the writings of Luke, Paul, and the author of Hebrews. Jesus called the cup of the last supper "the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:20) and Paul referred to Christ's words (1 Cor 11:25). Paul also spoke of himself and his company as "ministers of a new covenant" (2 Cor 3:6) because they proclaimed the gospel of Christ in the power of the Spirit. In several ways, the writer of Hebrews pointed to the superiority of the Christian faith over OT practices by identifying Christian faith with Jeremiah's new covenant (Heb 8:8, 13; 9:15; 12:24). In one way or another, these NT passages indicate that the new covenant has become a reality through the earthly ministry of Christ.

If we were to stop our investigation of the NT at this point, it might seem that we would be fully justified in using Jeremiah 31:31-34 to oppose infant baptism. The logic is straightforward. NT writers say that the new covenant has come in Christ's first coming; we should not introduce infants into this covenant through baptism because it would violate Jeremiah's description of the new covenant.

Yet, we must be careful not to think that these NT references to Jeremiah 31 exhaust the NT outlooks on what God promised in this portion of Jeremiah. To develop a more adequate understanding of the NT perspective, we must remember that Jeremiah's new covenant is inextricably enmeshed with a host of other promises about the return of Israel from exile. It is one fabric with the many OT expectations of a grand eternal future for the people of God after the exile.

It is well known that the NT teaches that Christ fulfilled OT promises about the restoration from exile. But these fulfillments take place in a manner unanticipated by OT prophets. Instead of happening completely and all at once, the restoration expectations were fulfilled and are being fulfilled over a long stretch of time. Jesus explained this process of fulfillment for the Kingdom of God after the exile in the parable of the mustard seed (Matt. 13:31-32). He explained that the grand kingdom would begin very small, slowly grow, and finally reach full maturity. It helps to think of this NT perspective on the fulfillment of restoration prophecies in three stages: the *inauguration* of fulfillment in the first coming of Christ; the *continuation* of fulfillment between the first and second comings of Christ; and the *consummation* of fulfillment at the return of Christ. The NT repeatedly explains that OT predictions of the glorious state of blessing after the exile began to be fulfilled at Christ's first coming, continue to be fulfilled in part today, and will finally be realized beyond imagination Christ returns.

Because the NT 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 had come in its fullness when Christ first came to earth, but this is a significant error. Christ has not yet completed the restoration, and thus we have not yet obtained the promised blessings in full. 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 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 NT fulfillment to Jeremiah's prophecy of the new covenant, it becomes clear that his expectations provide no basis at all for opposing infant baptism. To illustrate that this is the case, we will return to the three common objections often raised by Jeremiah 31:31-34.

In the first place, Jeremiah announced that *the new covenant couldn't be broken*. 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. Before that time, however, participants in the new covenant can break the new covenant. In addition to the numerous warnings against apostasy in the NT, we should give special attention to Hebrews 10:28-31:

“Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay,’ and again, ‘The Lord will judge his people.’ It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”

This passage makes it plain that until Christ returns it is possible for the new covenant to be broken. The writer of Hebrews acknowledges that covenant breakers under Moses were executed for capital offenses (Heb 10:28) and then argues, from the lesser to the greater (“how much more” [Heb 10:29]), that even more severe punishment is deserved by people who have “trampled the Son of God under foot ... treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified [them] ... and ... insulted the Spirit of grace” (Heb 10:29). The three objects in focus – Son of God, blood of the covenant, and Spirit of grace – are features of the new covenant. Flagrant violation of these new covenant realities is quite possible and leads to severe punishment.

In fact, the writer of Hebrews applied the warning “the Lord will judge his people” from Deuteronomy 32:36 – a warning to the covenant people under the Mosaic covenant – to this new covenant situation, thus equating the circumstance of the new covenant prior to the return of Christ to the situation Israel faced under the old covenant. Judgment was and is possible for both the old and the new covenant communities, and judgment flows only from covenant breaking, not from covenant keeping. If judgment is a possibility under the new covenant, then so is the covenant breaking that leads to that judgment.

As the NT indicates, until Christ returns it should never be thought that the new covenant cannot be broken. On the contrary, the NT expects some participants in the new covenant to break that covenant. Therefore, the rejection of infant baptism on the basis that infants may prove to be covenant breakers is not well founded.

In the second place, we have seen that *the new covenant is internalized*. This feature of Jeremiah's prophecy may appear to stand against the idea of bringing infants into external blessings in the new covenant through baptism.

This objection to infant baptism also falls when we think more carefully about how this expectation is fulfilled.

We can have confidence that when Christ returns in glory, everyone in the new creation after Christ's return 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 (2 Cor. 3:16-18; 1 Thess. 3:11-13). 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. There is a sense in which the hearts and minds of believers have been renewed by God's grace (Rom. 12:1-2). At the same time, however, we are also commanded by NT writers to observe guidance from the Scriptures and to watch for corruption in our thinking (e.g. Rom. 1:18-2:29; Eph. 4:17-32; 2 Pet. 3:17). The NT speaks this way because the promise of complete internalization of the law of God has begun within believers, but it has not yet been completed.

For this reason, it should not surprise us to find that even in the NT some people are blessed simply to be involved in the more external dimensions of the new covenant community. This kind of circumstance occurs regularly in the NT, but a striking example appears in Paul's discussion in 1 Cor 7:14:

“For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy.”

When discussing the responsibilities of believers married to unbelievers, Paul made a remarkable observation. He argued that the unbelievers (*apistoi*) are set apart from the world or sanctified (*agia, zw*) by their association with their believing spouses. This language recalls the expression of Hebrews 10:29 that one who turns from Christ “treat[s] as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him.” Sanctification in this sense parallels the OT concept of “consecration” (*vdq*) which is applied both to people and things as they are set apart from ordinary life for special contact with the presence of God. These people are not necessarily “saved” or “regenerated” (to use common theological categories). The new covenant has not been internalized for them, but they are sanctified by external associations nonetheless. From Paul's use of this language for unbelieving spouses in 1 Corinthians 7:14, we see that prior to the return of Christ, it is appropriate to speak of association with the external dimensions of the new covenant. Such association sanctifies even those who have not been transformed by God's grace in their minds and hearts.

Interestingly enough, in 1 Corinthians 7:14 this concept of sanctification is not only applied to unbelieving spouses but also to the children of such marriages. As Paul put it, “your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are

holy.” Again, applying the old covenant designation of “unclean” to indicate unacceptability within the vicinity of the holy presence of God (e.g. Lev. 10:9-10; Num. 5:2-3), Paul asserts that the sanctification of the unbelieving spouse renders even their children holy or consecrated.

Until Christ returns in glory it is not only permissible and helpful, but also necessary to speak of certain people as consecrated or sanctified to God by their close associations with the people of God and with the activities of true believers. For this reason, it is quite appropriate to speak of the children of believers as sanctified or consecrated by their involvement in the more external dimensions of life in the new covenant even though they may not be regenerated. The internalization promised in the new covenant by no means opposes to the baptism of infants.

In the third place, we saw that many evangelicals object to infant baptism because *the new covenant distributes salvation to all of its participants*. As with the previous objections, this point of view is correct insofar as it relates to the complete fulfillment of the new covenant in the consummation. When Christ returns he will separate the just and unjust, the sheep and the goats, true believers and unbelievers in the church. 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 are in covenant will be saved.

Yet, 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. We have already mentioned Hebrews 10:28-31 which speaks of judgment coming against some who have been “sanctified by the blood of the covenant.” We should add to this passage those that warn the members of church communities (often called “brothers”) to be sure to pass the test of perseverance (e.g. 1 Cor. 9:27; 2 Cor 13:5; 2 Pet. 1:10; Rev. 2:7,11,17,26; 3:5,12,21; 21:7). The familiar explanation of apostasy found in 1 John 2:19 summarizes the situation well:

“They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.”

As the parables of the Ten Virgins and Talents (Matt 25:1-30) illustrate, there are many in the new covenant community who will prove themselves not to be truly regenerate. Consequently, there is no need to withhold baptism from infants on the basis of Jeremiah’s new covenant expectations. Until the consummation the new covenant will continue to be mixed with true believers and sanctified unbelievers.

As we have seen in this study, Jeremiah's prophecy of the new covenant in Jeremiah 31:31-34 has been the basis of a number of objections to the practice of infant baptism. We have looked at this prophecy in connection with the many other OT expectations for the return from exile. Moreover, we have noted how the NT understands the fulfillment of restoration prophecies in three stages. All followers of Christ look forward to the day when this age of sin and death will be entirely replaced by the new world of blessing. At that time, there will be no bearing of children and the question of infant baptism will be moot. Yet, until that day we live in a time when the new covenant still includes people who become covenant breakers, who benefit only from the external dimensions of the new covenant, and who have never been regenerated. Until that time, we continue to have children to multiply and to fill the earth. As a result, we baptize our children as believers circumcised their sons in the OT. We baptize them as the expected heirs of the new covenant, those blessed with a heritage of faith and special privileges and responsibilities before God.
