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Contents

Hermeneutical Ramifications of Applying the New Covenant to the Church: An Appeal to Consistency.....5
Christopher Cone

Second Corinthians 3:6 and the Church’s Relationship to the New Covenant.....25
George Gunn

How Immeasurable Is God?: A Vision of the Greatness of God in Isaiah 40:9-20 Examined.....47
Kenneth R. Cooper

BOOK REVIEWS

Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion: 1541 French Edition*.....74

Cross, Whitney R. *The Burned-Over District: The Social and Intellectual History of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850*.....84

Currid, John D. *Calvin and the Biblical Languages*.....83

Fletcher, Jim. *It’s the End of the World As We Know It (and I Feel Fine)*.....75

Foster, Richard J. *Life with God: Reading the Bible for Spiritual Transformation*.....76

Goheen, Michael W. and Craig G. Bartholomew. *Living at the Crossroads: An Introduction to Christian Worldview*.....78

Harvey, Dave. *When Sinners Say “I Do”: Discovering the Power of the Gospel for Marriage?*.....82

MacArthur, John. *A Tale of Two Sons*.....81

Showers, Renald E. *The Coming Apocalypse: A Study of Replacement Theology vs. God’s Faithfulness in the End-Times*73

HERMENEUTICAL RAMIFICATIONS OF APPLYING THE NEW COVENANT TO THE CHURCH: AN APPEAL TO CONSISTENCY¹

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In his very thorough assessment of the development of replacement theology in the history of the church, Ronald Diprose recognized that misunderstanding the role of Israel in God's plan has a ripple effect on every aspect of theology. He said, “. . . ecclesiology and eschatology are not the only areas of Christian theology to have been affected by the Church's views concerning Israel. In fact, the omission of Israel in Christian theology has had detrimental, yet deterministic effects on a wide variety of theological issues.”² He concluded with even greater emphasis. “*Failure to reflect seriously on Israel in light of the relevant biblical data has serious consequences for the entire enterprise of Christian theology.* It was the neglect of relevant biblical data concerning the place of Israel in God's plan which permitted replacement theology to develop during the early centuries of the Christian era.”³

¹ The author read an earlier draft of this article at the meeting of the Council on Dispensational Hermeneutics on 24 September 2009 at Baptist Bible Seminary, Clarks Summit, PA. In preface, this author acknowledges that the subject is not an easy matter to discuss personally, for the simple reason of appeal in this study to the works and positions of great and godly men who have in many cases had a direct and personal bearing on his own spiritual growth and understanding, and yet on this vital topic he identifies himself at odds with nearly all of them. Nonetheless, if they have taught this author anything they have taught that reliance must be upon God's word as authoritative, and that the church must be willing to challenge each other to accuracy in interpreting the word of truth—even contending earnestly for the faith which was once delivered to the saints. The hope and pray of this author is that none would perceive the challenges herein to the views of these men as anything but an attempt to honestly evaluate their views in the light of Scripture. Dispensationalists in this present age may readily acknowledge the reality of standing on the shoulders of giants—imperfect giants, but giants nonetheless. It is appropriate that all dispensationalists demonstrate gratitude and appreciation, honoring them as fathers and fellow servants who have brought the church far in the quest for a more biblical theology. It is likewise appropriate to be unwilling to squander the rich heritage they have afforded and which reminds the church (as one dear father in the faith has so succinctly phrased it), “The biblical data gives us the correct doctrine. Everything must be tested against those data” (Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* [Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1986] 76).

² Ronald Diprose, *Israel and the Church: The Origin and Effects of Replacement Theology* (Waynesboro, GA: Authentic Media, 2004) 3.

³ *Ibid.* 171.

As Diprose correctly observed, one can trace much faulty doctrine to the improper interpreting of the biblical teaching regarding the nation of Israel. This faulty doctrine often, though not always, manifests itself in the behavior of believers. Arnold Fruchtenbaum stated even further when he (correctly) asserted that while replacement theology does not cause anti-Semitism, the two are not uncomfortable with one another.⁴ The history of the church at times reflects a storied distortion of God's plan for Israel and at other times the revolting consequences of such distortions. Theological method results in theological conclusions, and theological conclusions generally give origin in their likeness to the fruit of behavior.

In an evenhanded consideration of dispensational conclusions one must turn to the devices that derive the conclusions. Has a purity of method necessary for the accurate interpretation of Scripture been maintained or has one fallen prey to devices he would otherwise consider wholly inadequate? The answer is directly evidenced in understanding how the new covenant will be fulfilled. Be certain that this matter of the new covenant and the nation with whom He made it remains no small concern to God, as He indicates that the fixed order of His created world hangs in the balance (Jer 31:35-36). On matters of such importance to God, one might expect to find near universal agreement among His people, but there is nothing of the kind. Postmillennialism, amillennialism, and covenant-premillennialism offer explanations that are unacceptable. However, even within the dispensational tradition the understandings are varied and disparate. At least three major views are readily discernible upon examination of dispensationalism's development. (1) The *Multiple New Covenant* view (hereafter referenced as MC): this was the view of Chafer and Walvoord, for example, who believed there to be an Old Testament covenant for Israel, to be fully and literally fulfilled by Israel, and a New Testament covenant for the church, fulfilled presently and in the future by the church. (2) The *Single Covenant Multiple Participants* view (hereafter referenced as SCMP): this was the view of Scofield, for example, who believed that the church participates during the present age in aspects of Israel's new covenant, though the covenant will be fulfilled literally with Israel in the future. A variation of this view was presented by Pentecost and is perhaps the most accepted of all dispensational views on the new covenant. (3) The *Single Covenant Israel Only* view (hereafter referenced as SCIO): Darby was one of the few to espouse this view, as he believed the church to be totally unrelated to the new covenant, yet having a relationship with the One who ratified the new covenant.

The three views each require the utilization of distinct hermeneutic devices for their derivation, and upon review of these devices it seems clear that

⁴ Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology: The Missing Link in Systematic Theology* (Tustin, CA: Ariel Ministries, 1993) 836-37.

the devices are as incompatible as the conclusions themselves. Which conclusion is correct, or nearest correct? Which hermeneutic device is to be employed? As Diprose observed, these are not simply matters of ecclesiology or eschatology, rather these matters are applicable to the very character of God and how believers understand His word. In light of the importance of this issue, what follows is an attempt to evaluate the three basic views and the legitimacy of the three devices applied to derive them.

THREE VIEWS, THREE DEVICES

The Multiple New Covenant View (MC)

Lewis Sperry Chafer suggested that the church is “sheltered under a new covenant made in His blood.”⁵ Further, he distinguished between “the new covenant yet to be made with Israel and . . . the new covenant now in force with the church.”⁶ In agreement, Walvoord wrote, “Most premillenarians (Darby excepted) would agree that *a* new covenant has been provided for the church, but not *the* new covenant for Israel.”⁷ Walvoord believed the MC view has two significant advantages. First,

It provides a sensible reason for establishing the Lord’s supper for believers in this age in commemoration of the blood of the new covenant. The language of 1 Corinthians 11:25 seems to require it. . . . It hardly seems reasonable to expect Christians to distinguish between the cup and the new covenant when these appear to be identified in this passage.⁸

It seems that this argument misses the revealed purpose of the ordinance, at least as it pertained to Paul’s immediate audience. Paul added a postscript to Jesus’ words, saying “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes” (1 Cor 11:26). If the new covenant was a significant aspect of the cup *for the Corinthians’ application*, then why were they not told to proclaim the new covenant? Why did Paul say nothing more of the matter in his letter? The ordinance focuses on His death, not on the covenant.

Second, Walvoord appealed to one of Paul’s two other direct references to the new covenant, saying,

In 2 Corinthians 3:6, Paul speaking of himself states: “Our sufficiency is of God: who also made us sufficient as ministers of a new covenant.” It would be difficult to adjust

⁵ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. in 4 (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947-48; reprint, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1993) 4:49.

⁶ *Ibid.* 4:325.

⁷ John Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959) 214.

⁸ *Ibid.* 218-19.

the ministry of Paul as a minister of the new covenant if, in fact, there is no new covenant for the present age.⁹

This argument is based on the premise that in order for one to serve a covenant that covenant must be in effect. That premise seems flawed, however, in light of Paul's stated hope of Israel's national salvation (e.g. Rom 11:13-15). Notice he used the same term here (*diakonous*) as he did in Romans 11:13 (*diakonian*). He magnified his service that Jews might be saved. Additionally, the covenant can be ratified and awaiting fulfillment without being in effect or presently fulfilled, and one can be serving it even as he hopes for its future fulfillment.

Another writer explained that the theological framework of dispensations understood in a particular way requires multiple new covenants.

Each dispensation is, in fact, a covenantal arrangement that establishes the stewardship required of each dispensation. The dispensations of "human government" and of the "Mosaic Law," or any dispensation including the "church age," involve "new covenants." By definition, a change in dispensations results from a change in stipulations (with the implied or specifically articulated blessings and cursings). The former covenant relationship is replaced with an updated and revised covenant. In some cases this involves the updating of the historical prologue section of the covenant as well. *Every new dispensation involves some "new covenant," not only the present church age.*¹⁰ [emphasis added]

Here, the theological hermeneutic is employed. The writer cannot identify specifically and precisely identified covenants in Scripture that would characterize each dispensation. This is the same device used to derive the covenants of redemption, works, and grace. If one is to have any credibility in his assertion that dispensationalists are *uniquely* literal grammatical-historical in interpreting the text, then one cannot engage in such maneuvers.

The writer added, "When the new covenant and the Melchizedekian priesthood have begun to function, there is no going back to the Aaronic priesthood and the Mosaic Law (Heb. 7:17-19)."¹¹ While there is no return to the Mosaic Law, the continuation of the Levitical priesthood is demanded by God's eternal salt-covenant with Aaron (Numb 18:19) and a literal fulfillment of an addendum to the Davidic covenant (Jer 33:12-23) and is to be fulfilled literally through the Zadokian line (Ezek 43:19ff). The writer crystallized the issue when he wrote, "The new covenant specifically mentioned in the Scriptures is yet future for a redeemed and sanctified Jewish people. Theologically there are many new covenants because each dispensation is a new covenant."¹²

⁹ Ibid. 219.

¹⁰ John Master, "The New Covenant," in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, eds. Wesley Willis and John Master (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994) 102.

¹¹ Ibid. 104.

¹² Ibid. 108.

Many admirable thinkers would agree with this statement, at least in part. Note for example, the observation of Eugene Merrill.

. . . the “New” Covenant of Jeremiah is not precisely the same as the New Covenant of most New Testament texts but that nonetheless both flow from the Abrahamic Covenant. Jeremiah’s covenant is made explicitly with a renewed, eschatological Israel and Judah (cf. Jer. 31:1, 17, 23, 27, 31) whereas the New Covenant of the New Testament is universalized to include not only Israel but also all the nations who turn to the Lord in repentance and faith.¹³

In this view, Jeremiah’s new covenant then is not for the church, but there is a theologically derived new covenant that is necessitated by the basic theological understanding of how God works in each dispensation. Note this understanding builds upon the premise that dispensations are soteriological outworkings of God rather than doxological ones. It cannot be overstated how destructive the soteriological centered understanding is, since the logical and theological requirements of such grounding force one to interpret the text as creatively as covenant-theology brothers.¹⁴ To say that “Church saints have a covenantal relationship with God”¹⁵ by way of the new covenant demands either that one identify a passage in which God directly made a new covenant (and consequently an old one) with the church or that one relinquishes the superiority of consistency in applying literal grammatical-historical hermeneutics, recognizing as John Gerstner did, that “far from determining dispensational theology, the dispensational literal hermeneutic (with all its inconsistencies), is in fact the direct result of that theology.”¹⁶

How can one criticize the covenants of redemption, works, and grace as being unbiblical and artificial when one refers likewise to, for example, an Adamic¹⁷ covenant and an Edenic covenant, when nothing is ever so called in Scripture? After all, if one adopts the view that every dispensation represents some kind of new covenant, then these “covenants” are indeed logically and

¹³ Eugene Merrill, “The Covenant with Abraham: The Keystone of Biblical Architecture,” *Journal of Dispensational Theology* 12 (August 2008): 16.

¹⁴ For sake of brevity, the importance of recognizing God’s doxological purpose rather than soteriological purpose as the central factor in defining a dispensation will not be addressed here. Nonetheless, this author believes it to be the greatest single issue that dispensational theology must rectify for the purpose of maintaining a truly biblical theology. Read, for instance, this author’s work, *Prolegomena: Introductory Notes on Bible Study & Theological Method* (Fort Worth, TX: Tyndale Seminary Press, 2009) 94-96.

¹⁵ Master, “The New Covenant,” 109.

¹⁶ John Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing the Word of Truth* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 2000) 111.

¹⁷ Though Hosea 6:7 may be best understood to reference Adam directly (it could reference men in general, as in the KJV), the passage references the severity of offense by way of analogy and does not provide explicit evidence that God made a covenant with Adam. If one were to affirm that such a covenant was made, there would be difficulty in demonstrating the location and content with specificity.

theologically necessitated, thus one defends a characterization of some promises as covenants based on something other than exegetical necessity. The result is a hermeneutic that becomes “a very shaky affair indeed.”¹⁸ Regardless of the grand heritage and tradition of the multiple new covenant view, one cannot affirm it as biblical, as the detriment to do so will erode the foundation. Consider the following statements:

Accordingly, the best solution to the problem is to recognize that Christ introduced by His death on the cross this covenant of grace which has many applications.

The covenant of grace, accordingly, is extended principally to Israel in the Old Testament, to the church in the present age. . . .

The reader would expect the comments to belong to perhaps the following: Zacharias Ursinus, Johannes Cocceius, O. T. Allis, Louis Berkhof, John Gerstner, or R. C. Sproul. It is actually none of these men. The statement comes from an affirmation of MC by John Walvoord.¹⁹ Contrast Walvoord’s words with Berkhof’s on dispensationalism’s “Adamic covenant,” and a near stunning role reversal is observed. Berkhof wrote,

The first revelation of the covenant is found in the protoevangel, Gen. 3:15. Some deny that this has any reference to the covenant; *and it certainly does not refer to any formal establishment of a covenant* [emphasis added]. The revelation of such an establishment could only follow after the covenant idea had been developed in history. At the same time Gen. 3:15 certainly contains a revelation of the essence of the covenant.²⁰

The covenant theologian argues that the text does not refer to the formal establishment of a covenant, and that deriving such a covenant requires reading theology into the text. Moreover, while he may not protest too vehemently (as he cannot with any great consistency), his methodology seems more characteristically dispensational in this instance than that of the dispensational theologian.

The Single Covenant, Multiple Participants View (SCMP)

C. I. Scofield, in his *Study Bible Notes* on Hebrews 8, summarized what he identified as eight biblical covenants, and said that the new covenant “secures the eternal blessedness, under the Abrahamic Covenant of all who believe.” Elsewhere he said that “Christians are now partakers”²¹ of the new covenant. J.

¹⁸ Gerstner, *Wrongly Dividing*, 110.

¹⁹ John Walvoord, *The Prophecy Knowledge Handbook* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1990) 503.

²⁰ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974) 293.

²¹ C. I. Scofield, *Scofield Bible Correspondence Course Volume I: Introduction to the Scriptures* (Chicago: Moody Bible Institute, 1959) 70.

Carl Laney in similar manner believes that “Under the New Covenant, spiritual blessings are secured for all believers through the redemptive work of Christ.”²² He emphasized the point further: “Virtually all the blessings we have in Christ are based on spiritual provisions of the New Covenant. . . .”²³ Believers today are living between the first and second advents of Christ under the provisions of the New Covenant. They are participating in a form of God’s kingdom, but are yet awaiting its full consummation when Christ will establish His reign on the earth.”²⁴

This understanding of the new covenant shows a reliance on the hermeneutic device of “already not yet.” John Witmer recognized the slight furthering of this device in progressive dispensationalism, which he said “identifies the spiritual blessings of the New Covenant with God’s promises to David in the Davidic Covenant.”²⁵ Witmer distinguished between spiritual blessings of the new covenant and physical blessings of the Davidic covenant. However, can one depict distinctions between spiritual blessings and physical ones within the framework of a covenant offered to specifically named recipients? Consider that the fulfilling of the spiritual blessing is immediately to be followed by the granting of the physical blessing (Ezek 36:27-28). In similar manner, Paul Benware seemingly voiced his agreement with SCMP. He wrote, “The church, then, is a partaker of the spiritual blessings of the new covenant, enjoying regeneration, the forgiveness of sin, and the presence and ministry of the Holy Spirit.”²⁶

While it is wholly appropriate to say that the church partakes of spiritual blessings, why the need to connect the spiritual blessings to the new covenant? The Abrahamic covenant promises blessing for those who are not Abraham’s physical descendants (Gen 12:3). Likewise, the ministry of the Holy Spirit to Gentiles is promised outside the context of the new covenant (cf. Joel 2:28ff with Acts 2, etc.). Additionally, there is significant revelation regarding salvation of Gentiles outside the context of the new covenant (Gen 12:3, Isa 11:10; cf. Gen 15:6 and Jon 3:5; Isa 42:6; 49:6; etc.). It should be also noted that the regeneration stated in Jeremiah 31 is not only related to the forgiveness of sins, but also to the planting of Israel in the land (v. 33), the writing of God’s law on the heart (v. 33), and the needlessness of any further teaching about God (v. 34). None of these things are ever said to accompany the regeneration of

²² J. Carl Laney, “God’s Plan of the Ages,” in *Understanding Christian Theology*, gen. eds. Charles Swindoll and Roy Zuck (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003) 249.

²³ Ibid. 228.

²⁴ Ibid. 231.

²⁵ John Witmer, “Christ’s Present Ministry at the Right Hand of God the Father,” in *Understanding Christian Theology*, gen. eds. Charles Swindoll and Roy Zuck (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003) 361.

²⁶ Paul Benware, *Understanding End Times Prophecy* (Chicago: Moody Press, 2006)

church age believers. Additionally, the sins to be forgiven in the new covenant are “their” sins (note in v. 34, the third person plural pronominal suffix: *la’avonam*). Following standard rules of grammar one must look for the antecedent to which the third person plural refers. It is *they* who also broke the old covenant: the house of Israel and the house of Judah.

Stanley Toussaint acknowledged that Christ, in the Upper Room (Matt 26:27; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20) was most assuredly referencing the Jeremiah 31 new covenant.

It seems that the King is looking back to the prophesied new covenant also known as the everlasting covenant and the covenant of peace (Jeremiah 31:31-34; 32:37-40; Ezekiel 34:25-31; 37: 26-28). This is what would immediately flash into the mind of the average Jew. *In fact, it could refer to no other covenant since no other covenant was still unconfirmed.*²⁷ [emphasis added]

Toussaint added that the new covenant was “clearly and definitely made with the nation of Israel exclusively.”²⁸ However, as he critiqued the view that the “new covenant is with Israel only and has no relationship to the church,”²⁹ he said, “to assert that there is one new covenant with Israel only having no relationship to the church is erroneous for several reasons.”³⁰ He acknowledged an exclusive audience with a still yet future fulfillment, while at the same time he suggested, “the new covenant must be in effect today.”³¹ Again, this seems to be at the very least a flirtation with Ladd’s “already not yet” hermeneutic device. Is it justified, however, by the New Testament references to the New Covenant? Clearly, the admirable Toussaint and others holding to SCMP believe so, as Toussaint offered four justifications. “First, Paul in 2 Corinthians 3:6 clearly states that he is a minister of a new covenant. It is certain that his ministry was not confined to Israel only. He was the minister of a new covenant then in effect which was applicable to Jew and Gentile alike.”³²

Unfortunately, Toussaint’s first argument is a non sequitur. Paul referenced himself and those serving with him as *diakonous kainēs diathēkēs* (servants of a new covenant). Note that Paul was *servicing* a new covenant, not *administering* it. Therefore, his audience (whether Jew or Gentile, or both) is irrelevant as it relates to this point. How then does he serve a new covenant? Perhaps he did this insofar as he magnified his ministry in order that the Jews might be moved to jealousy and be saved (Rom 11:13-14). Through his actions, Paul was certainly seeking to hasten the fulfillment of the covenant.

²⁷ Stanley Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1980) 299.

²⁸ Ibid. 300.

²⁹ Ibid. 301.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

Perhaps that is not sufficient and there remains more to consider, but nonetheless, the term Paul used (*diakonous*) does not provide or even imply any connection of the new covenant or the blessings of the new covenant to the church.

“Second, in 1 Corinthians 11:25, Paul quotes the Lord in saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood.” Therefore the new covenant must be in effect today, and it must sustain some relationship to the church.”³³ Again, this seems not an entirely accurate conclusion. The first premise is (apparently) that the moment the blood of the covenant was shed then the covenant became effective. Compare this with the ratification of the Abrahamic covenant, which did not see any of its precise aspects specifically fulfilled until much later. Perhaps it would be better to say the covenant was ratified but not fulfilled. If Toussaint meant that the covenant is ratified, this author would concur; however, if he meant that it is in effect, or that it is in progress, then if one expects a literal fulfillment of the covenant one would expect it to be fulfilled in the order it was given. Notice the first aspect of the new covenant proclaimed by God is the writing of God’s laws on the hearts of those of the house of Israel and the house of Judah. Is this in effect or has this already occurred? Again, note the order of the covenant reiterated in Ezekiel 36:24ff. The first event proclaimed is a national ingathering. Even if one argues that the events of 1948 fulfilled that the prophecy,³⁴ is one also to understand that the new covenant was not in effect before that? The answer is of course negative with regard to fulfillment. One must be careful not to parse the things necessary for fulfillment using the “already not yet” device.

Furthermore, if Christ’s death served as a ratification rather than a “putting into effect” of the covenant, then one would see a clear delineation of the church’s (non) relation to the new covenant: the church would be related to the Mediator, and not to the covenant. Nothing in 1 Corinthians 11:25 offers any indication either that the covenant is in effect today or that it is related to the church. The church is to remember Him, not the covenant. His death then met (at least) two purposes related to this present discussion. (1) He died to ratify the new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah; the covenant cannot be fulfilled unless it is first ratified, which His death accomplished. Notice that all in the room were only Jews, and the church had not been inaugurated yet. (2) He died to enable the fulfillment of the final component of the Abrahamic covenant (Gen 12:3), which was that all the families of the earth would be blessed through Abraham. It is the Lord’s death the church proclaims through the ordinance, not the covenant.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ It would be best not to believe it did in any manner, though it might serve as a precursor or a preparation.

“Third, advocates of the view that there is one covenant only with one application to Israel argue that Jeremiah 31 is addressed to the Jews. This is true. *However this does not hinder the possibility of participation of the church in its blessings*” [emphasis added].³⁵ The emphasized statement is true, but it is no less an argument from silence: nothing indicates that such participation is impossible, thus it is possible. One could argue anything is possible, but how does one progress from possibility to actuality? The literal grammatical-historical hermeneutic does not permit one to make such a move based on a theological framework, but instead requires that it be exegetically warranted. Note how Saucy used an argument from silence to justify aspects of Davidic covenant fulfillment in the present age.

It would appear, therefore, that either Psalm 110 is a reference to heaven or Peter was giving a new interpretation to the psalm. As we have seen, the right hand of God was not spatially thought of as being in heaven. In fact, it was not primarily a spatial concept at all, but a metaphor for the supreme position of authority next to the king. *Thus Peter’s teaching that Christ assumed this position through the ascension added something that was probably not recognized in earlier interpretations of the Psalm* [emphasis added]. But this should not lead to the conclusion that Peter was denying the original meaning.³⁶

He argued that key aspects regarding David’s throne and the right hand of God were not limited by the Old Testament terminology, and thus allowed for later re-interpretation. This is the maneuver (i.e. the complementary hermeneutic) whereby progressive dispensationalism derives its “already not yet” device. Using this device, Saucy concluded that the Davidic covenant is at least partially being fulfilled at present.

That this present salvation is not the complete fulfillment of these promised blessings to the world is clear from Paul’s statement that when Israel returns to her God, the riches for the Gentiles will be far more than they are even today (Ro 11:12). The Gentiles, however, are being blessed with messianic salvation at present because the Messiah has come and has accomplished salvation . . . the evidence dealing with the restoration of the Davidic kingship reveals only an initial fulfillment of the covenant promises during the present age.³⁷

It seems that Toussaint’s defense of the SCMP is not only consistent with the methodology of many other traditional dispensationalist thinkers, but it is also surprisingly consistent with that of progressive dispensationalists.

Toussaint offered a fourth argument against the one covenant one recipient view. “Finally, in Hebrews 8:6 and 9:15, Christ is said to be the

³⁵ Toussaint, *Behold the King*, 301.

³⁶ Robert Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) 71.

³⁷ *Ibid.* 80.

mediator of a new and better covenant now. If His mediatorship is present, then the covenant upon which His mediatorship is based must be present.”³⁸ Toussaint’s final argument offered a conclusion (the covenant must be present) based on a single premise (His mediatorship is present). *First*, the distinction between being “in effect” and being presently ratified (past action with existing results) must be considered. It appears Toussaint intended the former, yet the latter would seem to meet the condition of the argument sufficiently. To argue specifically for “in effect” rather than presently ratified would require a more thorough argument with stated premises rather than assumed ones. In other words, if the structure of Toussaint’s fourth argument is accepted, it could just as easily be stated as follows: if His mediatorship is present then the covenant upon which His mediatorship is based must stand presently ratified. If restated in this way, then the argument would favor the single covenant single recipient view.

Additionally, note that inseparable from His role as Mediator of the covenant, Christ is a priest in the order of Melchizedek (6:20), which is to say that He is a priestly King. If the “already not yet” persupposition is applied to one aspect of Christ’s mediatorial role—by saying that His mediatorship is present and thus the (new) covenant is present—one cannot with integrity dismiss such application to other aspects. Is Christ reigning as a Melchizedekian king now? Progressive dispensationalism answers without hesitation in the affirmative: “Jesus’ resurrection-ascension to God’s right hand is put forward by Peter as a fulfillment of the Davidic covenant. . . . As the Davidic heir, Jesus sits in and rules from heaven.”³⁹ The problem of consistency is readily apparent: how can one apply “already not yet” to the new covenant and yet argue that it should not be applied to the Davidic covenant? Elliott Johnson observed a nuance in the methodology of progressive dispensationalism that might sound familiar. He said, “Craig Blaising relates an inaugural or present fulfillment due to Christ’s mediation of the covenants with the church after His first advent.”⁴⁰ The subtle distinction here between progressive dispensationalism and SCMP is that the former applies “already not yet” to the covenants (plural) while SCMP applies it only to the new covenant. Furthermore, the hermeneutic which derives “already not yet” is grounded in the silence of the Old Testament. Darrell Bock described the progressive dispensationalism argument as follows.

The progressive argument is that the New Testament treats a wide scope of provisions as realized in the current era, while also noting the fundamental shifts in the

³⁸ Stanley Toussaint, *Behold the King*, 302.

³⁹ Darrell Bock, “The Reign of the Lord Christ,” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 49-50.

⁴⁰ Elliott Johnson, “Covenants in Traditional Dispensationalism,” in *Three Central Issues in Contemporary Dispensationalism* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999) 122.

administrative structure and operation of God's promise in this era. These provisions and shifts are proclaimed in terms that point to the realization and advance of the promises of God. They show that *a covenantal stage has been reached as a result of Jesus' coming that is directly connected to the promises of old. In sum, some of what was promised in the covenants has come and has been instituted* [emphasis added]. The sheer scope of this covenantal language points to initial realization.⁴¹

The silence of the Old Testament on certain matters pertaining to the covenants has apparently become the impetus for expansion and "already not yet" fulfillments. Finally, it should be noted that the focus of Hebrews is the qualification and superiority of Jesus Christ, and that none of the sixteen appearances of *diathēkē* demonstrate any exegetical connection whatsoever to the church. On the contrary, the new covenant is repeated verbatim with the distinct recipient language completely intact (8:8-12).

Dismissing then (1) the non-literal view, (2) the single covenant single recipient view, and (3) the multiple covenant view, Toussaint offered a fourth option he considered more tenable. He wrote, "It asserts that the new covenant was made with Israel and will ultimately find its fulfillment in that nation, but in the meantime the church enters into certain blessings of the new covenant."⁴² He further explained, "It must be concluded, therefore, that the church benefits from certain spiritual blessings of the new covenant such as regeneration and the forgiveness of sins, but all the blessings will be Israel's as manifested in the future earthly kingdom."⁴³

A glaring problem remains. On what basis is regeneration and forgiveness of sins for church age believers related to the new covenant? The argument from silence is not sufficient. There must be a clear and definite exegetical connection, and yet there is none. Note for emphasis that John's Gospel is the only one of the four that references regeneration (specifically, being born again), and it is the only one of the four that ignores entirely the ratification of the new covenant, as John's record of the Upper Room discourse does not include the ordinance of the cup (which is not a careless omission on John's part).

The church bearing a relationship to the Mediator has strong exegetical support, but the church participating in any aspects of God's new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah can only be defended by an abandonment of the literal grammatical-historical hermeneutic in favor of the complementary hermeneutic and the "already not yet" device so eagerly embraced by progressive dispensationalism. Once again, should one hold to this view, it will be difficult to criticize "development" using the "already not yet" device. Particular hermeneutic methods result in particular conclusions. If one

⁴¹ Darrell Bock, "Response: Covenants in Traditional Dispensationalism," in *ibid.* 157.

⁴² Toussaint, *Behold the King*, 302.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

is accepting of the methods, the outcome will be persuasion to likewise approve of the conclusions derived from consistently applying the methods. *Progressive dispensationalism simply does with the Davidic covenant what SCMP has done with the new covenant.* Perhaps this is one reason that only a minority of “traditional” dispensationalists has articulated meaningful arguments against progressive dispensationalism.

It should be noted at this point that Fruchtenbaum,⁴⁴ Decker,⁴⁵ and others have identified a dispensational view closely related to SCMP, highlighting a distinction between this view that the church participates in some way in the new covenant, and the view (SCMP) that the church has a preliminary part in the new covenant. Fruchtenbaum, for example, identified Pentecost as representative of this better perspective. Despite this endorsement, it seems that this view uses the same device as SCMP, and really is not significantly different after all. Pentecost, though representing that the church is not under or fulfilling the new covenant, asserted that the church is receiving new covenant blessings. He said, “Since the church receives blessings of the Abrahamic covenant (Gal. 3:14; 4:22-31) by faith without being under or fulfilling that covenant, so the church may receive blessings from the new covenant without being under or fulfilling that new covenant.”⁴⁶

What seems to be missed is a critical factor in this discussion: that Gentile believers during the church age *are indeed under and fulfilling directly* the seventh aspect of the Abrahamic covenant (Gen 12:3, cf. Gal 3:14), an assertion which if true would remove the Abrahamic covenant from consideration as a proof text for an “already not yet” approach to covenant blessings. This view, though emphasizing primarily (if not only) soteriological shared blessings, nonetheless relies entirely on the “already not yet” device. For this reason, it should not be considered distinct from SCMP, but rather a more subtle form of the same.

The Single Covenant Israel Only View (SCIO)

Bernard Ramm made an astute and troubling observation when he suggested “to say that we are under the benefits of the covenant without actually being under the covenant is to clandestinely admit what is boldly denied.”⁴⁷ Connecting the church directly to benefits promised specifically to Israel

⁴⁴ Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology*, 366-69.

⁴⁵ Rodney Decker, “New Covenant, Dispensational Views of the,” in *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology*, gen. ed. Mal Couch (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996), 280-82.

⁴⁶ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* (Finlay, OH: Dunham Publishing, 1958; reprint, Grand Rapids: Academie/Zondervan, 1964) 127.

⁴⁷ Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation: A Textbook of Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1970) 264.

requires any one of three maneuvers. (1) The application of the allegorical hermeneutic to the end that Israel and the church are not viewed as completely distinct. (2) The employment of the theological hermeneutic to the end that a covenant is artificially derived outside the parameters of exegetical warrant. (3) The utilization of the “already not yet” device to show some degree of present fulfillment or present application of the new covenant. Certainly, no legitimacy can be discovered whatsoever in any of these three options, as all three supplant literal grammatical-historical hermeneutics in favor of other hermeneutic devices, which, if applied consistently, would distort the biblical text beyond recognition and undermine its perspicuity beyond comprehension. There must be a simpler way, and one that allows a greater degree of consistency in hermeneutic method. It would seem that SCIO is the view most consistent with a literal grammatical-historical hermeneutic, and no special-case hermeneutic device is required to derive it.

Examining the New Testament record, one can discover that the synoptic Gospels point to the ratification of the new covenant (Matt 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20), and each delineate clearly that ratification occurring at Jesus’ death (which is an event that necessarily precedes the inauguration of the church). Likewise, Jesus’ audience was entirely Jewish (and not yet members of the church), and it would not have been at all inappropriate for Him to discuss an entirely Jewish covenant. Finally, there is *nothing in these passages* that would imply the covenant is related in any manner to the church. Therefore, the new covenant referenced here is not a covenant with an as of yet non-existent church. Paul’s later inclusion of the ordinance in 1 Corinthians 11:25-26 teaches the purpose for the ordinance in the church: to proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes. The emphasis is not on the covenant He ratified but is rather on His own death, that is, a death that Paul characterized later as a critical part of the Gospel (15:3), yet with no relation to or mention of the covenant. Furthermore, though John made exclusive Gospel reference to blessings of the same (or at least similar) kind as those identified in the new covenant (i.e. regeneration in John 3) and near exclusive (only elsewhere specifically discussed in Luke 12:12; 24:49) reference to the future ministry of the Holy Spirit (John 14—16), he excluded the ordinance entirely, and made no mention of any covenants in any of his letters.

Similarly, Paul returned to the theme of regeneration in Titus (3:5) without any mention of the covenant in that all-important pastoral letter. He discussed the ministry of the Spirit in all of His epistles but Philemon, yet mentioned the covenant directly on only three occasions (Rom 11:27; 1 Cor 11:25; 2 Cor 3:6). Even the forgiveness of sins cited in Romans 11:27 references specifically the sins of Israel and forgiveness for Israel. Note the distinct usage of second person (you, your, vv. 25 and 28) and third person pronouns (them, their, v. 27). Israel and Jacob are directly identified in 11:26

and are clearly the antecedents for the third person pronouns of 11:27. Paul's final mention of the covenant in 2 Corinthians 3:6 was an assertion that he (and those serving with him) are servants of the new covenant—presumably to the extent that the church is intended *in part* to move Jews to jealousy in order that they might call upon their Messiah (Rom 11:13-15). He did not relate the new covenant with the church in any manner. Indeed, he offered no definition of the new covenant nor did he relay any of its content (which is a reality that suggests he expected his readers to understand the covenant from already existing revelation). Although in these passages Paul did not invoke either a new and separate covenant with the church nor a shared application of the previously revealed one, some argue that he did the latter in Ephesians 2:11—3:6, a passage in which Gentiles are described as, among other things, “strangers to the covenants” (v. 12).

In Ephesians 2:12, Paul presented five conditions of unsaved Gentiles, and he did not assert that all of these conditions are reversed at the time of salvation. Notice the remedy he diagnosed: those formerly excluded have been brought near (2:13), having access through Him in one Spirit to the Father (2:18). Believing Gentiles have been made fellow citizens with the saints (believing Jews) (2:19). What, however, is the fellow citizenship? Is the church now partakers of Jewish covenants? Is the church now of the commonwealth of Israel? Has the church now become “spiritual” Jews? The answer must certainly be “no” to these questions. The mystery was precisely identified in 3:6 that the church consists of fellow members of the body and fellow partakers of the promise (note: not promises). Church believers are brought near to the Jews by virtue of oneness in the body of Christ, but nowhere in this grand section is the church identified as co-partakers or fellow citizens in any aspect outside that body (which is according to promise).

Paul's first mention of the promise in Ephesians appears in 1:13 referencing the Holy Spirit. One could also consider the seventh aspect of God's covenant with Abraham (Gen 12:3) and compare this with John's concise description of the promise: eternal life (1 John 2:25). Whether the promise here references the related aspects of the ministry of the Spirit, the Gentile blessings under the Abrahamic covenant, or eternal life, there is no stated or implied connection between the church and the covenants of Israel. Paul said the church is composed of those who were once strangers to the covenants of promise and that now the church has been brought near (*eggus*). “Near” does not mean *inside* or *upon*.

Peter also considered the concept of new birth (1 Pet 1:23) and did not reference any related covenant, in either of his letters. Jude also did not mention the covenants, though he considered the present ministry of the Holy Spirit (v. 20). The author of Hebrews references the new covenant more frequently than all other New Testament writers combined. The new covenant is first

mentioned in Hebrews by implication in 7:22 as “a better covenant.” The clear contrast is between the Law (the inferior covenant), referenced also as the first covenant (8:7; 9:1), and the second (8:7), also tabbed the new covenant (8:13; 9:15; 12:24) and the eternal covenant (13:20). At least three major points can be made in argument that the new covenant discussed in Hebrews does not pertain to the church in any manner.

First, the purpose of the epistle is primarily to extol the superiority of the person of Christ (1:3-14), and secondarily to ensure the readers do not neglect in position or practice the great salvation that He provides (2:1-4). The new covenant, of which He is the Mediator, is contrasted with the old as only one of numerous contrasts in the epistle (e.g. Levitical priesthood vs. Melchizedekian priesthood; angels vs. Christ; copies of things vs. the things themselves; sacrifices vs. the Sacrifice; and, Moses vs. Christ, etc.). All of the contrasts serve as means to support the primary theme. One would not and should not assume that because the writer appeals to a particular role of Christ that such a role is necessarily and immediately applicable to the church. For example, note that the superiority of Christ’s priesthood is clarified as being identified with Melchizedek, the priestly king. Is Christ reigning today? Is there an expectation that Christ will be King of the church? Applying any aspect of Christ’s work discussed in this context directly to the church requires one to extend not only beyond the scope and stated purpose of the text, but it also requires that one reconsider *every* role of Christ identified in this context. Again, as in other contexts (e.g. 1 Cor 11:25ff), the focus is the Mediator, not the covenant He mediates, which is simply raised in this context as a means whereby believers can understand the Mediator to be superior and sufficient. It is by one offering, not one covenant that Christ has perfected for all time those who are sanctified (Heb 10:14).

Second, the distinction of pronouns used and inclusion of original-recipient language in the new covenant passages indicate that there have been no changes or additions to the original and directly identified recipients of the new covenant. Note in 10:15 the Holy Spirit bears witness to “us,” yet in 10:16 the covenant will be made with “them,” and He will put His laws upon “their” heart and will write them on “their” mind, and “their” sins will be forgiven. *Us* is not *them*. The pronouns maintain the distinction between the readers of Hebrews and those with whom the covenant is made and to whom it is fulfilled. Likewise, 8:8-12 offers a retelling of Jeremiah 31:31-34, and includes the original-recipient language (“with the House of Israel and with the House of Judah,” 8:8). There is absolutely no indication of a redefining or an altering in any manner of the recipients. One cannot assume that since the passage appears in a letter to church age believers (at least in part) that one can thus arbitrarily apply what is quoted to the church or the church age. It cannot be overstated that there is no language here, directly or implied, that would indicate a shift or

expansion of the recipients of the new covenant; on the contrary, the pronouns and names included tell the reader *there is to be no expansion or redefinition*.

Third, there is no new content added to the covenant that would imply any possibility for expansion or redefinition. It is not insignificant that the covenant is recounted in full without any alterations, which would confirm that the reader is rightly to understand the new covenant of Hebrews as the new covenant of Jeremiah, and thus neither as a second new covenant nor an alteration of the first to accommodate the church's blessing.

It would seem certain blessings had by the church that are often associated by interpreters with the (or, a) new covenant are discussed regularly by the New Testament writers with either no mention of the covenant or with no view to applying the new covenant to the church in any manner. If this is so, then one must ask the question, "from whence comes the blessings of the church?" If those blessings are not derived from the new covenant then from what are they derived? It is critical to the SCIO premise that the present day blessings of the church are derived from the seventh aspect of the Abrahamic covenant (Gen 12:3)—an aspect that would anticipate and include the substitutionary atonement of Christ on behalf of not only Jews but also Gentiles. While it is observed that there is no exegetical warrant for relating the new covenant to the church, SCIO is encumbered by no theological necessity to do so. By method of the literal grammatical-historical hermeneutic, SCIO is able to uniquely maintain—unlike the other views considered—the *complete* distinction of Israel and the church, and the complete, literal, and *only* literal fulfillment of the provisions of God's new covenant with Israel.

CONCLUSION

Perhaps a little wordplay akin to Pascal's wager would be beneficial, though such will no more prove the superiority of SCIO as Pascal's wager does the existence of God. Furthermore, though typically bristling at such utilitarian considerations, perhaps this one might motivate a reconfiguring and a reexamination of some theological premises that call for reconfiguring and reexamination. Therefore, two questions are posed.

First, what does one have to gain by applying the new covenant to the church? The suggestion of this author is nothing whatsoever. Each of the blessings that the church presently enjoys correlates neatly within God's revealed plan as an aspect of the Abrahamic covenant. (Perhaps one may gain the approval of certain peers, though with all due love and respect that must be regarded as nothing worthy of pursuit.)

Second, what does not have to lose by applying the new covenant to the church? The theological method upon which dispensationalists depend—the literal grammatical-historical device—would be lost. By applying the new

covenant to the church, one can no longer claim consistency, as other devices wholly foreign to literal grammatical-historical must be utilized. Having lost one's theological method and consistency, one would soon expect to lose confidence in the veracity of the text and the theology that it reveals. One would expect no more to stand firmly in sound doctrine nor to recognize error when it manifests itself in doctrines affirmed either personally or externally, for one would have no more standard for understanding written language. What benefit is inerrancy, inspiration, or infallibility without a standard by which to interpret what has faithfully been recorded? Like Nietzsche, one would expect that even if there were truth or meaning, one would be incapable of ascertaining it, and thus it would be lost to anyone. To state briefly, if one's loses consistency in hermeneutic method, the interpreter loses the text and all for which it stands.

George Peters marveled at those who, by applying kingdom elements of the Davidic covenant to the church, traded in the greatness of God's revealed plan for an artificial theological construct. Peters lamented, "It is *strange* and *sad*, that some of the most eminent and talented men of the church, *blinded by a subtle theory*, cannot and will not see how antagonistic such a theory is to God's faithful promises. No wonder that we are so carefully cautioned to beware of mere human wisdom."⁴⁸ Perhaps the reader might consider that an error of the same kind—even if made with regard to a different covenant—produces equally strange and sad results.

⁴⁸ George N. H. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom*, 3 vols. (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1884; reprint, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1978) 1:657.

SECOND CORINTHIANS 3:6 AND THE CHURCH'S RELATIONSHIP TO THE NEW COVENANT¹

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Dispensationalists regard the distinction between Israel and the church to be of fundamental importance. Likewise, the question of how the church relates to Israel's covenants must be fundamentally important. If there is "overlap" between Israel and the church in the area of Israel's covenants, then perhaps dispensationalism is based upon a faulty foundation. Consequently, this is a crucial issue, not a peripheral one.

PURPOSE OF THIS ARTICLE

The purpose of this article is to investigate the hermeneutical issues involved in the interpretation of 2 Corinthians 3:6 in light of how the church is related to the new covenant. Obviously there is a broader theological discussion that must take into consideration numerous other biblical references; therefore, this article's purpose will be more limited in scope. The principal goal will be to focus on the matter of authorial intent and how the initial audience (the first century Corinthian congregation) may have been expected to understand 2 Corinthians 3:6.²

The relationship of the church to the new covenant has long been a point of considerable theological discussion among dispensationalists.³ God's

¹ The author read an earlier draft of this article at the meeting of the Council on Dispensational Hermeneutics on 24 September 2009 at Baptist Bible Seminary, Clarks Summit, PA.

² By referring to the manner in which the initial audience may have been expected to understand the text, it is not intended to sanction the various reader-response theories of hermeneutics that seem to have gained much attention with a certain segment of modern scholarship. This author merely means that one needs to attempt to understand the shared presuppositions between original author and original audience. For one such reader-response theory approach, actually based on an interpretation of 2 Corinthians 3, see Richard B. Hays *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) 122-25, 129 in which he referred to an "ecclesiocentric hermeneutic" and a "new covenant hermeneutic"; and, a response by Robert B. Sloan Jr., "2 Corinthians 2:14-4:6 and 'New Covenant Hermeneutics' A Response to Richard Hays," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 5 (1995) 129-54.

³ Some more recent articles include: R. Bruce Compton, "Dispensationalism, The Church, and the New Covenant," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 8 (Fall 2003) 3-48; Richard Daniels, "How Does the Church Relate to the New Covenant? or, Whose New Covenant Is It,

program for Israel's future on the millennial earth is rooted in the four unconditional, eternal covenants: Abrahamic, land (a.k.a. "Palestinian"⁴), Davidic, and new. These covenants, made between God and national Israel, describe God's administrative/dispensational program for Israel's millennial existence. Traditional dispensationalists believe that God has a separate and distinct administrative/dispensational program for the church. These distinct programs for Israel and the church have led dispensationalists historically to reject covenant theology's view that the church has become the new replacement party to these covenants. Nevertheless, because the New Testament Scriptures make multiple references to the new covenant, both covenant theologians and many dispensationalists have argued for some degree of participation by the church in the new covenant.

THEOLOGICAL ISSUES

Five views of the church's relationship to the new covenant may be defined.⁵

- 1) Replacement Theology: *Replacement* – The church is entirely fulfilling the new covenant. National Israel has been superseded by the church, the true, or spiritual, Israel. The church's ministers, by fulfilling the Great Commission, function as ministers of the new covenant.
- 2) Dispensational View #1: *Partial Fulfillment* – The church, by fulfilling the Great Commission, is accomplishing a partial fulfillment of the new covenant, but complete fulfillment awaits the spiritual renewal of national Israel in the millennium.
- 3) Dispensational View #2: *Participation* – The church, by fulfilling the

Anyway," *Faith and Mission* 16 (Spring 1999) 64-98; Rodney J. Decker, "The Church's Relationship to the New Covenant, Part I," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (July-September 1995) 290-305; idem, "The Church's Relationship to the New Covenant, Part II" (October-December 1995) 431-56; Homer A. Kent Jr., "The New Covenant and the Church," *Grace Theological Journal* 6 (Fall 1985) 289-98; John Master, "The New Covenant," in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, eds. Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994) 93-110; Russell L. Penney, "The Relationship of the Church to the New Covenant," *Conservative Theological Journal* 2 (December 1998) 457-77; Larry D. Pettegrew, "The New Covenant," *Master's Seminary Journal* 10 (Fall 1999) 251-70; and, Paul R. Thorsell, "The Spirit in the Present Age: Preliminary Fulfillment of the Predicted New Covenant According to Paul," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41 (September 1998) 397-413.

⁴ While the "Palestinian Covenant" title may have been acceptable in a bygone era, the abuse of the term "Palestinian" by today's Arab claimants to territorial rights in Israel, makes continued use of that term unacceptable, in this author's opinion. The original application of the term *Palaestina* to *Iudaea* by the Roman emperor Hadrian as an insult to the Jews ought to have been sufficient reason for God-fearing Christians to reject the term in the beginning. However, such, unfortunately, was not the case.

⁵ Compton, "Dispensationalism, The Church, and the New Covenant," 5-9.

Great Commission, does not partially fulfill the new covenant, but does participate in some of the blessings of the new covenant.

- 4) Dispensational View #3: *Two New Covenants* – The church has its own “new covenant” with God that is distinct and separate from Israel’s new covenant of Jeremiah 31.
- 5) Dispensational View #4: *No Relationship* – The church is not directly related to the new covenant in any way. The church is related to the Mediator of the new covenant and to the blood of that covenant, but is not a participant in the covenant itself.

Obviously, these five views, as suggested in the prior definitions, could be grouped together.

The view of covenant theology (view #1)

The views of dispensational theology (views #2-5)

However, it is also possible to group these views in another manner.

The church has *some* participation in the new covenant (views #1-4)

The church has *no* participation in the new covenant (view #5)

In the remainder of this article, these views will be referenced by the names, “Replacement View,” “Partial Fulfillment View,” “Participation View,” “Two Covenants View,” and “No Relationship View.”

Darby, often held to be the first systematizer of dispensationalism,⁶ affirmed the No Relationship View; the church is related to the blood of the covenant, but not to the covenant itself.⁷ Chafer, Ryrie, and Walvoord early popularized the Two Covenants View,⁸ but both Ryrie and Walvoord appear to

⁶ Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995) 67.

⁷ At least many dispensational theologians claim this to be Darby’s position (J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958] 121-22; John F. Walvoord *The Millennial Kingdom* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959] 210, 218); however, in reading Darby both on Jeremiah, the Gospels, 2 Corinthians, and Hebrews, and he is difficult to categorize. It might be possible to argue that he held to the participation view. Both views are almost merged in this oft-quoted excerpt: “The gospel is not a covenant, but the revelation of the salvation of God. It proclaims the great salvation. We enjoy indeed all the essential privileges of the new covenant, its foundation being laid on God’s part in the blood of Christ, but we do so in spirit, not according to the letter. . . . The new covenant will be established formally with Israel in the millennium” (Darby, *Synopsis*, 5:286, as cited in Pentecost, *Things to Come*, 121-22). When all of Darby’s statements are examined, however, one may suspect that the “No Relationship” view did, indeed, most closely represent his thinking.

⁸ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 8 vols. (Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948) 7:98-99; Charles C. Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1953) 117; Walvoord, *Millennial Kingdom*, 218-19.

have moved more in the direction of the Participation View.⁹ Most dispensationalists today seem to prefer either the Partial Fulfillment View (notably, progressive dispensationalists¹⁰) or the Participation View.¹¹ Let it be stated initially that this author's preference is for the No Relationship View. It would seem this is the only view that avoids theological confusion and maintains a consistent distinction between Israel and the church. Theologically, the church has no more place in this age participating in the new covenant, than it does in the Davidic covenant. However, the question must ultimately be settled on exegetical grounds rather than theological preference.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF 2 CORINTHIANS 3:6

In 1994, John Master contributed a chapter entitled, "The New Covenant" to the book *Issues in Dispensationalism*.¹² In that chapter, Master argued cogently that the vast majority of New Testament references to the new covenant are set in an eschatological¹³ context and need not be interpreted in terms of a present realization. The notable exception among these New Testament references is 2 Corinthians 3:6. Having commented on the references to the new covenant in the Gospels and the Pauline epistles,¹⁴ Master stated:

To this point, the passages that refer to the new covenant of Jeremiah follow a common thread. All refer to a time when the messianic kingdom is introduced and the people of God are glorifying God through their obedience, brought about by a sovereign work of God. Only if one asserts that 2 Corinthians 3:6 teaches the fulfillment of the new covenant of Jeremiah 31 by the church (which this author doubts), does the future fulfillment of the new covenant for national Israel come into question.¹⁵

⁹ Ryrie, *Dispensationalism*, 170-74; John F. Walvoord, "Does the Church Fulfill Israel's Program?—Part 3," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 137 (July-September 1980) 220.

¹⁰ Bruce A. Ware, "The New Covenant and the People(s) of God," in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, eds. Craig A. Blaising and Darrell L. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 68-97.

¹¹ Robert Thomas, *Evangelical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2002) 249; Larry D. Pettegrew, *The New Covenant Ministry of the Holy Spirit*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2001) 36-37; J. Dwight Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1990) 175; David K. Lowery, "2 Corinthians," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, eds. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, 2 vols. (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1985) 2:560; Compton, "Dispensationalism, The Church, and the New Covenant," 47-48.

¹² Master, "The New Covenant," 93-110.

¹³ When the term "eschatological" is used, this is not including any reference to a "realized eschatology" or "already-not-yet" scenario that views the present church age as "eschatological."

¹⁴ Matthew 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25. The Hebrews references are a slightly different matter, but the specific references are Hebrews 8:8, 13; 9:15; 10:16-17; 12:24.

¹⁵ Master, "The New Covenant," 103.

Master's arguments for the other New Testament references will not be reproduced here. Instead, the scope of this article will be to grant his arguments for the other New Testament references, but to look in greater depth at how 2 Corinthians 3:6 is to be interpreted.

Furthermore, progressive dispensationalism, which prefers the Partial Fulfillment view, places great significance on this verse. Paul Thorsell, for example, speaking of the significance of this passage for proving a present realization of the new covenant to the church, wrote:

Traditional dispensationalists have usually argued, however, that Paul's ministry is related to the predicted new covenant only peripherally or analogically. There is no present fulfillment or inauguration of the new covenant at all. In contradistinction to this thesis of traditional dispensationalism, *2 Corinthians 3 presents formidable reasons to regard the new covenant as partially fulfilled or inaugurated* in the gospel-proclaiming ministry of Paul.¹⁶

Was Thorsell correct in claiming "formidable reasons" supporting a partial fulfillment or inauguration of the new covenant based on 2 Corinthians 3? To answer this question, a careful exegetical study of how Paul referred to the new covenant in 2 Corinthians 3 is needed.

HERMENEUTICAL ISSUES

Several questions of a hermeneutical/exegetical nature arise when one seeks to understand how Paul envisioned the church's relationship to the new covenant when he addressed the Corinthians as he did in 2 Corinthians 3:6. These questions include the following:

- 1) Is διακόνους κατηγῆς διαθήκης an objective genitive or a genitive of description?
- 2) What is the referent to ἡμᾶς?
- 3) What is the context of this statement?
- 4) Is there significance to the fact that διαθήκης is anarthrous?
- 5) What was the state of theological development when Paul wrote 2 Corinthians? How well developed was Paul's concept of the church as an entity separate and distinct from Israel?
- 6) Why would Paul reference a passage from the Hebrew Scriptures when addressing a largely Gentile Christian church?

¹⁶ Paul Thorsell, "Spirit in the Present Age," 406 (emphasis added). Thorsell also stated: "2 Corinthians 3 is perhaps the most prominent reference to the new covenant in the Pauline corpus" (p. 400). Note also Bruce Ware's estimation: "The most extensive treatment Paul gives of the transforming new-covenant work of the Spirit is found in 2 Corinthians 3" (Ware, "New Covenant and the People(s) of God," 88).

1. *Is διακόνοῦς καινῆς διαθήκης an objective genitive or a genitive of description?*

This is probably the most fundamental hermeneutical question in this discussion. Indeed, it is a syntactical way of stating the essential problem. If this is an objective genitive,¹⁷ then one may paraphrase, “those who minister (or ‘administer’) the new covenant.” In other words, Paul would be referring to the new covenant as the content of his ministry. For example, Hafemann commented, “. . . he is a minister of the new covenant (i.e. his function). As a minister, he mediated the Spirit in establishing the church. . . . The content of Paul’s activity as a minister is the ‘new covenant.’”¹⁸

Conversely, if this were a genitive of description, an appropriate paraphrase might be, “‘new covenant-like’ ministers.” As a genitive of description, the new covenant does not necessarily point to the content of Paul’s ministry, but rather provides a helpful description of the kind of ministry in which he was engaged—in other words, how Paul conducted himself in accomplishing the ministry.

It is interesting that the closest parallel construction using διάκονος with a genitive in 2 Corinthians occurs in 11:15, διάκονοι δικαιοσύνης, “ministers of righteousness” which is almost certainly a genitive of description,¹⁹ not an objective genitive (see in context the parallel ἄγγελον φωτός). Although the parallel is suggestive, by itself, this observation is not sufficient proof of the use of the genitive in 3:6, and, on the face of it, both syntactical options are possible in 3:6 and make decent sense. The deciding factors must hinge on other exegetical considerations.

2. *What is the referent to ἡμᾶς?*

When Paul wrote, “. . . who also has made us sufficient as ministers,” to whom was he referring? A popular way of looking at this verse might be to see the

¹⁷ Thorsell, “Spirit in the Present Age,” 407; Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) 270. Curiously, Harris regarded the roughly parallel διακονία τοῦ πνεύματος in verse 8 as “more probably adjectival . . . than objective . . . or subjective. . . .” (p. 286).

¹⁸ Scott J. Hafemann, *2 Corinthians* (The NIV Application Commentary) (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000) 129.

¹⁹ It could be considered a genitive of attribute, which is really only a sub-category of the genitive of description. Thorsell attempted to argue for διάκονοι δικαιοσύνης in 11:15 being an objective genitive (“Spirit in the Present Age,” 407, n. 32), but his interpretation there was strained, and did not take into consideration the parallel expression ἄγγελον φωτός. The other examples of διάκονος used with a genitive in 2 Corinthians are all possessive genitives: θεοῦ διάκονοι, “God’s servants” (6:4), διάκονοι αὐτοῦ, “his servants” (11:15), διάκονοι Χριστοῦ, “Christ’s servants” (11:23).

“us” as referring to all Christians, so that Paul was referring generally to Christian ministry in the accomplishing of the Great Commission. Christians, whose responsibility it is to fulfill the Great Commission, are made sufficient for such a task by the enablement of God.²⁰ Such a view would correspond well with taking καινήσ διαθήκης as an objective genitive.

The hermeneutical issue here is: Who is to be included in the reference to the 1st person plural? There are several possibilities.

Paul alone. “The editorial ‘we’ (also known as the *epistolary plural*) is the use of the first person plural by an author when he is in reality referring only to himself.”²¹ In this sense, Paul would be seen as addressing the Corinthian congregation regarding criticisms that had been leveled against his own ministry. It is generally recognized among commentators that Paul’s defense of his ministry is a major theme of 2 Corinthians.

Paul and Timothy (and Titus?). Paul and Timothy are mentioned in 1:1 as the co-authors of the epistle.²² Titus may also be considered as part of the “team” (2:13; 7:6, 13, 14; 8:5, 16, 23; 12:17). In this sense, the meaning would be similar to the former possibility, the editorial “we,” assuming that Paul’s detractors in Corinth would have leveled the same charges against the other members of Paul’s ministry team.

Paul and the Corinthian Christians. In this sense, Paul would be addressing the Corinthian congregation as fellow-laborers with him. As such, he would be describing the Gospel ministry in which they were all involved.

The apostles. Though less likely, it is possible that Paul was describing the ministry of the apostles in a limited sense, perhaps in inaugurating the new covenant ministry.

All believers. In this sense, Paul would be issuing a general statement describing how all believers fulfill the Great Commission as a ministry of the new covenant.

Paul’s use of 1st person deictic indicators in chapters 1-3 is quite interesting. He switched often between the singular (“I/me”) and the plural (“we/us”). A personal deixis analysis²³ of these chapters reveals some helpful and interesting observations. Such an analysis can be summarized as follows.

²⁰ For example, *Experiencing the Word New Testament* (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2001) 408; G. Coleman Luck, *Second Corinthians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1959) 34; D. E. Garland, *2 Corinthians* (The New American Commentary) (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999) 163.

²¹ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999) 394.

²² R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul’s First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1937) 838-39.

²³ Peter Cotterell and Max Turner, *Linguistics & Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1989) 236.

1:1-13a,

Plural – In this section, verse 4, “who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God,” makes it obvious that Paul was distinguishing himself (along with Timothy²⁴ and Titus?) from the Corinthians (“us” as opposed to “those who”).

1:13b,

Singular – Verse 13 has an interesting change from the plural to the singular: “For we write nothing else to you than what you read and understand, and I hope you will understand until the end.” It is likely that until this point, Paul had been speaking in the plural in order to include Timothy, and possibly Titus, in his remarks. His switch to the singular makes the comment of 13b a bit more personal and direct, since, after all, Paul was really the focal point of the criticisms emanating from Corinth, and Timothy and Titus were merely “along for the ride.”

1:14,

Plural – Verse 14 can be considered as a return to the default plural that Paul has been using since verse 1, with the lone exception of 13b.

1:15-17,

Singular – In this brief section, Paul’s switch to the singular accompanies a switch also to the past tense as Paul made reference to his past plans to visit Corinth and his subsequent cancellation of those plans. To this point the plural has been the default, and switches to the singular have been the notable exceptions. From 1:15—2:13 the singular will become the predominant and default 1st person reference, with plurals constituting the notable exceptions.

1:18-22,

Plural – A return, once again to the plural. An interesting note: Paul specified the plural as a reference to Paul, Silas, and Timothy.

1:23,

Singular – As with vv. 15-17, Paul’s use of the singular here accompanies a past time reference to his previous plans to visit Corinth and his subsequent cancellation of those plans.

1:24,

Plural – A return to the plural accompanies a departure from past tense to a

²⁴ Lenski, *First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, 839.

gnomic present time frame (κυριεύομεν, ἔσμεν, ἔστήκατε) as Paul expressed a timeless generality.

2:1-10,

Singular – Once again, Paul’s use of the singular here accompanies a past time reference to his previous plans to visit Corinth and his subsequent cancellation of those plans.

2:11,

Plural – The plural is used here to make a general statement that is applicable to all.

2:12-13,

Singular – This can be considered a return to what has been the default while Paul discussed his past plans.

2:14 – 3:6,

Plural – With this verse, Paul brought his discussion of past plans to an end and began an extended section in which he used a series of metaphors to describe the nature of his ministry. There is a different reason for his switch to the plural here than there was in 2:11. This can be seen by the observation that in this section (3:3) the 1st person plural is contrasted with the 2nd person plural; whereas, no such contrast is seen in 2:11.²⁵ Paul’s use of the plural in this series of metaphors²⁶ was intended to depict the ministry as conducted by himself, Timothy and Titus, as distinguished from others (his critics) whose ministry takes a different character. This would tend to support the view that καΐνης διαθήκης is a genitive of description.

3. *What is the context of this statement?*

There are two contextual issues that affect the interpretation of 2 Corinthians 3:6. The first addresses the literary style of the section in which the verse occurs. The second addresses the topic Paul was discussing.

a. Literary Style. A major theme of 2 Corinthians is Paul’s defense of his ministry in the face of numerous criticisms.²⁷ These criticisms seem to have

²⁵ Indeed in 11:3, Paul entertained the possibility that Satan had actually deceived the minds of some of the Corinthians!

²⁶ The series of metaphors is discussed in following.

²⁷ In any exposition of the book of 2 Corinthians, it is important to identify that in defending his ministry and conduct, Paul’s ultimate motive was not to retaliate at those who were harming his reputation. Paul’s main concern in defending himself was that the Corinthians were

resulted initially from Paul's failure to visit Corinth as he had planned (1:15—2:2). Interpreted as vacillation on Paul's part (1:17), this seems to have created numerous other criticisms about Paul's conduct as well. Beginning in 2:14 and extending at least through 5:5, Paul employed a series of 8 metaphors to explain why he conducted himself the way that he did. Most of the metaphors are based on Old Testament imagery, including the new covenant. They may, quite possibly, all have been drawn from chapters 30—31 of Jeremiah.

- 1) The Triumphal Procession, 2:14a
- 2) The Odor of Life and Death, 2:14b-16a
- 3) Letters Written on Stone vs. Written on the Heart, 3:2-3
- 4) New Covenant Ministers, 3:6
- 5) The Veil Removed, 3:14-18; 4:3-4
- 6) The Light of Creation, 4:6
- 7) Earthen Vessels, 4:7
- 8) Earthly House vs. Heavenly House, 5:1-4

Metaphors #3-8 appear to be drawn from Jeremiah 31—32.²⁸ The 3rd and 4th metaphors are clearly drawn from the Jeremiah 31 new covenant passage (as well as Ezek 11:19; 36:26). The 5th and 6th metaphors are suggested by the same new covenant language in that the new covenant's replacing of the Mosaic law calls to mind the veil that blocked the light of God's glory reflected in Moses' face (Exod 34:29-35). The 7th metaphor may also have been suggested by the same general section of Jeremiah, since the "clay jar" symbolism may well have come from Jeremiah 32:10-14. The 8th metaphor, though more difficult to relate to specific language in Jeremiah, could conceivably be taken from the notion of houses destroyed by the Babylonians and later rebuilt under the new

adopting a faulty standard of judgment: a fleshly standard, not a spiritual one. Paul defended himself, not so much from concern for his own reputation, but for the purpose of having the Corinthians examine themselves (12:19-21; 13:5-6) so that they might be approved at the judgment seat of Christ (5:10).

²⁸ Various scholars have discussed the problem of identifying the source of the first two metaphors. For example, Richard B. Hayes noted, ". . . 3:1 . . . introduces a new cluster of metaphors. . . . The difficult metaphors of 2:14-16a belong to an entirely different circle of images" (*Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989] 216, n. 5). It is possible that the images of life and death in those metaphors are derived from Jeremiah 30—31 and their discussion of the Babylonians leading the Israelites to captivity; for instance, some would go to death while others would live through the captivity in life in hope of a future restoration of Israel. However, it is impossible to be certain whether this is what Paul intended, since there is no overt connection between Paul's language and the language of Jeremiah 30—31. Specifically, Jeremiah spoke neither of triumphal processions (θριαμβεύω) nor of odors (ὄσμή, εὐωδία). Quite possibly Paul was thinking of the Babylonian deportation but was referencing it in terms of contemporary Roman victory processions (Hafemann, *2 Corinthians*, 106-08).

covenant (32:29, 42-44).

Throughout this passage, the language is metaphorical. For example, when Paul wrote, “You are our letter, written in our hearts” (3:2-3), he was formulating a classical metaphor. By using Jeremiah’s new covenant passage as a metaphor for his own ministry, Paul was not using the language of “fulfillment”; that is, he was not saying that his ministry was a realization of what was promised in Jeremiah, but rather that what Jeremiah was describing provides a suitable figure to describe his ministry. Consider how Paul used the passages from Jeremiah. A letter written on the heart is reminiscent of the new covenant’s provision of God’s law written on Israel/Judah’s heart (Jer 31:33). The Corinthian believers are likened to God’s law written on Israel’s heart, but this is not to say that the Corinthian believers were a fulfillment of this element of the new covenant. In the fulfillment of the new covenant, God’s law is God’s law, not God’s people! Similarly, the inability of some to discern the glory of the Gospel ministry is likened to the veil that covered Moses’ face (3:14-18; 4:3-4; cf. Exod 34:29-35), but clearly this does not mean that the veil is somehow fulfilled by the unbelief of Paul’s opponents. The new covenant ministry in 3:6 likewise needs to be understood as a metaphor and does not necessarily mean that there is some kind of fulfillment or realization of the new covenant. Rather, the new covenant provides a suitable Scriptural figure to describe Paul’s ministry in such a way as to respond to the specific criticisms that had been raised against him. In order to understand the point Paul was trying to make with these metaphors, it is necessary to focus on the topic of the passage, which will be addressed in the next section.

b. Topic. Who were Paul’s opponents? What was the essence of his defense? Why did he argue the way that he did? The identity of Paul’s opponents may affect the way one understands the meaning of 3:6.

Several writers have attempted to argue on the basis of the context surrounding 3:6 that Paul’s point was to contrast the new covenant with the old covenant, and that therefore he was arguing that the new covenant was now in force.²⁹ However in considering the context, the discourse boundaries should not be limited to chapter 3. The passage really needs to be seen in light of the broader discourse boundaries of 2:14—5:5 and the series of 8 metaphors Paul employed in this section. This broader context shows that Paul’s point had to do with the *character* of his ministry, rather than with the *content* of his ministry. Thorsell recognized this when he noted about the first four metaphors, “In 2:14–17 the nature of his ministry (as a weak, on-the-way-to-death captive) is

²⁹ Decker, “Church’s Relationship to the New Covenant, Part II,” 450; Penney, “Relationship of the Church to the New Covenant,” 467-68; Thorsell, “Spirit in the Present Age,” 401. Thorsell, however acknowledged, “The subject under discussion is not primarily the new covenant but the character of Paul’s ministry of proclaiming the gospel” (ibid.)

compared with a Roman triumphal procession. . . . Paul continued to develop the theme of adequacy in 3:1-6.”³⁰

Some believe that Paul’s opponents were “Judaizers.”³¹ This “opponents” = “Judaizers” formula makes it easy to say that in 3:6 Paul was answering critics who were seeking to enforce Mosaic legislation.³² If this were the case, Paul’s reply would be to say that believers are now administering the new covenant, as a replacement for the Mosaic covenant. Such a view would favor the objective genitive. However, identifying Paul’s opponents is not quite as simple as claiming that they are “Judaizers.”³³ Harris found at least 19 different identifications of Paul’s opponents in the history of the interpretation of 2 Corinthians!³⁴

There are, in fact, two groups of critics whom Paul answered in this epistle. In chapters 1-9 Paul addressed criticisms that were being directed against him by the Corinthian congregation. In chapters 10-13, he addressed criticisms made by the false apostles (ψευδαπόστολοι/ψευδαδελφοί).³⁵ While the false apostles may indeed have been “Judaizers” (though this is doubtful) the general makeup of the Corinthian congregation seems to have been of a more Greek or pagan worldview. If the opponents of chapter 3 were of a Greek philosophical worldview, the issue might more likely be one of the teacher’s lifestyle and conduct³⁶ (which favors the genitive of description). This issue is complicated because of the two distinct sources for criticism of Paul. There may have been some intermingling of ideas between these two groups, but they also represent separate sets of criticisms. Chapter 3 falls within the section of the epistle that represents the criticisms of the Corinthian congregation. The outsiders’ criticisms are not dealt with until chapters 11—13.

Evidence suggesting a Judaizing background for the second group of critics would include 2 Corinthians 11:4 (εὐαγγέλιον ἕτερον and the parallel in Galatians 1:6) as well as 11:22 (Ἑβραῖοί εἰσιν; κἀγώ. Ἰσραηλιταί εἰσιν; κἀγώ.).

³⁰ Thorsell, “Spirit in the Present Age,” 400.

³¹ Robert Gromacki, *Stand Firm in the Faith* (The Woodlands, TX: Kress Christian Publications, 2002) 162; Alfred Plummer, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1915) 320; Harris, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 76; and, William MacDonald and Arthur Farstad, *Believer’s Bible Commentary: Old and New Testaments* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995) on 2 Corinthians 3:6; etc.

³² Rodney J. Decker, “New Covenant, Theology of the,” in *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology*, gen. ed. Mal Couch (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996) 280.

³³ An excellent summary of the various views can be found in Harris, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 67-87.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 79-80.

³⁵ Another issue in the interpretation of 2 Corinthians is whether the ὑπερλίαν ἀπόστολοι represent the same, or a different group than the ψευδαπόστολοι (*ibid.* 75-76). However that issue does not seem to be relevant to the discussion of 2 Corinthians 3:6.

³⁶ For example, see Garland, *2 Corinthians*, 166.

However, these references only suggest a *Jewish* origin, not necessarily a *Judaizing* origin.³⁷ Second Corinthians 10:2-3 is interesting in this respect. Paul's use of prepositions is precise here. In v. 2b he referred to some (τινάς) who regarded Paul as walking κατὰ σάρκα ("according to the flesh"), where κατὰ gives a standard of measurement. It is not so much that his critics accused him of walking according to the flesh, but rather that they used the flesh as their own standard of measurement for Paul's walk. Using this standard of measurement, they judged Paul as lacking (he is poor, he is sick, he is not eloquent, etc.). In verse 3, Paul admitted that he walked ἐν σαρκί ("in the flesh"), where ἐν indicates the sphere. Though he did not conduct himself *according* to the flesh, he admitted that he walked *in the sphere* of the flesh. Rather, the standard of his conduct (or "warfare") was according to (κατά) a different standard of measurement (i.e. the Spirit). Garland noted with regard to the first group of critics: "They understand him only in part (1:14) because they still evaluate things from the perspective of the flesh."³⁸ Apparently the same could be said of this second group of critics as well. So it is entirely possible that the second group of critics is not to be characterized as *Judaizers*, but could be of (diaspora?) Jewish origin and simply reflecting a more pagan philosophical perspective. Missing from 2 Corinthians are the specific references to Judaizing teaching found in other epistles of Paul's (e.g. references to circumcision, Jewish dietary restrictions, or observance of special Jewish days).³⁹

Regardless of the identity of the second group of Paul's critics, chapter 3 represents Paul's response to the first group of critics. These appear to have very Greek notions of how a successful teacher should be characterized. They criticized Paul for the following reasons:

- He had failed to visit Corinth as he had planned (1:15–2:2).
- He was not a skilled orator (1:12; 10:10; 11:6).
- He was physically weak in presence (10:10).
- He had not been financially successful, and did not charge an acceptable philosopher's fee (2:17; 6:10; 11:7; cf. 8:9; 12:13).
- He had been in numerous hardships and even jail (1:4-10; 6:4-5, 8-10).

These criticisms have to do with conduct of life, not content of message. As Garland observed:

Today, we may revere Paul for his determined hard work for the gospel that endured the suffering of imprisonments, beatings, shipwrecks, poverty, and fatigue to further its reach into the world. These things did not sap his love for God or his commitment to the cause of Christ. Rather, they only whetted his zeal to do more. Some Corinthians

³⁷ Ibid. 464, n. 26.

³⁸ Ibid. 32.

³⁹ See also Thorsell, "Spirit in the Present Age," 400, n. 8.

apparently did not share the same appreciation for this selfless suffering. To them Paul cut a shabby figure. Religion, in their mind, is supposed to lift people up, not weigh them down with suffering. They may well have asked how someone so frail, so afflicted, so stumbling in his speech and visibly afflicted with a thorn in the flesh could be a sufficient agent for the power of God's glorious gospel. Paul writes an impressive letter, but his physical presence is disappointingly unimpressive. He is too reticent to boast and to act forcefully. His refusal to accept their financial support and allowing himself to be demeaned as a poor laborer reflected badly on them as well. Such unconventional behavior betrays a lack of dignity appropriate for an apostle.⁴⁰

The five criticisms on the previous page reflect a very Greek worldview of what should be expected of a successful philosopher (physical stature, good oratorical skills, evidence of a healthful, wholesome life free of trouble, teaching that is worth a good philosopher's fee). Harris noted on 10:10,

In the ancient rhetorical handbooks ὑπόκρισις denoted an orator's "delivery," which included not only his verbal and elocutionary skills but also his bodily "presence," the impression made by his physical appearance, his dress, and his general demeanor. The dual allegation of Paul's adversaries reflects these two aspects of ὑπόκρισις.⁴¹

This is basically a "fleshly" view, a focus on the outward man. Paul's reply to such criticisms was to describe the character of his ministry as spiritual not fleshly:

- 2 Corinthians 1:12 For our boast is this: the testimony of our conscience that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you, with God-given sincerity and purity, not by fleshly wisdom but by God's grace.
- 2 Corinthians 1:17 So when I planned this, was I irresponsible? Or what I plan, do I plan according to the flesh so that I say "Yes, yes" and "No, no"?
- 2 Corinthians 1:21-22 Now the One who confirms us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, is God; 22 He has also sealed us and given us the Spirit as a down payment in our hearts.
- 2 Corinthians 3:3 since it is plain that you are Christ's letter, produced by us, not written with ink but with the Spirit of the living God; not on stone tablets but on tablets that are hearts of flesh.
- 2 Corinthians 3:6 He has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit produces life.
- 2 Corinthians 3:8 how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious?
- 2 Corinthians 3:17 Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.
- 2 Corinthians 5:12 We are not commending ourselves to you again, but giving you an opportunity to be proud of us, so that you may have a reply for those who take pride in the outward appearance (τοὺς ἐν προσώπῳ) not in the heart.
- 2 Corinthians 5:16 From now on, then, we do not know anyone according to the flesh. Even if we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we no longer know Him like that.

⁴⁰ Garland, *2 Corinthians*, 31-32.

⁴¹ Harris, *Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, 700. See also Garland, *2 Corinthians*, 446-49 on the physical and rhetorical expectations of a leader in Greek society.

- 2 Corinthians 6:6 by purity, by knowledge, by patience, by kindness, by the Holy Spirit, by sincere love,
- 2 Corinthians 10:2-6 I beg you that when I am present I will not need to be bold with the confidence by which I plan to challenge certain people who think we are walking in a fleshly way. 3 For although we are walking in the flesh, we do not wage war in a fleshly way, 4 since the weapons of our warfare are not fleshly, but are powerful through God for the demolition of strongholds. We demolish arguments 5 and every high-minded thing that is raised up against the knowledge of God, taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ. 6 And we are ready to punish any disobedience, once your obedience is complete.
- 2 Corinthians 11:18 Since many boast according to the flesh, I will also boast.

This “Greek” worldview of Paul’s critics fits in well with what is known of Corinthian society⁴² and would suggest that in 3:6 Paul was responding not to criticism about the content of his message, but to his conduct. This fits best with understanding our genitive as a genitive of description. Paul’s point was not that he was administering the new covenant, but rather that his conduct was determined by a Spirit-based standard, not a fleshly standard, or as Master stated, “In 2 Corinthians 3:6, the contrast between ‘letter’ and ‘Spirit’ is a contrast between a ministry based on works and self-effort and a ministry dependent upon the Spirit of God.”⁴³ If Paul were to look in the Hebrew Scriptures for support of this idea, Jeremiah’s new covenant provides one of the few suitable metaphors to describe such a phenomenon.

c. Putting it all together. When one examines this section (2:14—5:5) as: (1) a series of metaphors intended not as fulfillment of OT promises, but as descriptions based on Scriptural language, and (2) Paul’s answer to his detractors’ criticisms of his conduct based on a Greek worldview, one may understand the metaphors in something like the following way:

- 1) The Triumphal Procession, 2:14a
Weakness in physical appearance may not match the fleshly standards of cultured Greek society, but it is precisely what characterized the children of Israel who were led in triumphal procession by the Babylonians into captivity. Both the godly and the ungodly alike were led away in weakness; thus weakness in physical appearance is no sign of ungodliness.
- 2) The Odor of Life and Death, 2:14b-16a
As the presentation of the captive Israelites was accompanied by the offering of incense sacrifices to the pagan gods of their captors, the smell signified death for

⁴² Though recently rebuilt and established as a Roman colony, Corinth continued to retain its Greek ethos, in contrast with Philippi, another Roman colony. See the review by J. Brian Tucker of *Urban Religion in Roman Corinth: Interdisciplinary Approaches*, eds. Daniel Schowalter and Steven J. Friesen (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005) in the *Journal of Biblical Literature* 6 (June 2006) 38-54 (especially 41-42).

⁴³ Master, “The New Covenant,” 101.

some, but life for others. Likewise, though Paul appeared no better physically than those ancient captives, yet his message was a powerful one, bringing both life for those who believe, and death for those who rejected it.

- 3) Letters Written on Stone vs. Written on the Heart, 3:2-3
Paul's detractors put great confidence in outward fleshly commendation in the form of commendatory letters. But just as the new covenant points to the superiority of the internal affairs of the heart over an outward written code, Paul's commendation comes from the very transformation that had taken place in the lives of the Corinthians. It was a spiritual commendation, not a fleshly one.
- 4) New Covenant Ministers, 3:6
The old covenant focused on fleshly matters of outward conformation to a legalistic standard, but Paul's conduct was more like the new covenant, directed by the Spirit. Thus, his failure to keep his "written itinerary" (planned visit to Corinth, parallel to the written law) was due to the fact that he was sensitive to the Spirit's leading (cf. Ac 16:6-10) and God's sovereign, providential direction.
- 5) The Veil Removed, 3:14-18; 4:3-4
After Moses spent time in God's presence, he reflected God's glory. The Israelites were unwilling to look at that glory; they would rather see Moses than God, so they requested that Moses put a veil over his face. Similarly, Paul's detractors were focused on man—what he looked like, how he sounded, how financially successful he was—but Paul desired to conduct himself as one with an unveiled face, so that those who saw him would not focus on his personal appearance, but would see the glory of God.
- 6) The Light of Creation, 4:6
"Glory," "light," "appearance": these are the things that pertain to God, not to the creation. The creation exists to glorify God. Paul, as part of God's creation, exists not to be noticed for his physical appearance or oratorical skill, but "to give the light of the knowledge of God in the face of Jesus Christ."
- 7) Earthen Vessels, 4:7
On the very eve of the Babylonian captivity Jeremiah purchased the field in Anathoth from his cousin Hanamel and placed the deed of purchase in a clay jar. The clay jar need not be ornamental nor costly; the treasure was what was inside. Paul's outward appearance was like that jar—unimpressive, and not very costly, but inside was a precious treasure—a message of hope.
- 8) Earthly House vs. Heavenly House, 5:1-4
The coming of the Babylonians would be accompanied by the destruction of the cities and houses of Judah, but just as surely as God had promised the destruction of those cities, He had also promised the rebuilding of new cities and new houses when He would bring to fulfillment the new covenant. Similarly, though Paul's body may be wasting away and an embarrassment to the cultured Corinthians, it was symbolic of a future glorified body in the resurrection.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Both the Stoic and the Epicurean (Acts 17:18-32) Greek philosophical schools had serious problems with the doctrine of the resurrection (see W. J. Conybeare and J. S. Howson,

When viewed in this way, the context argues strongly for Paul's referring to the *conduct* of his ministry, not the *content* of his ministry. Thus, the context would suggest the genitive of description in 3:6, rather than the objective genitive.

4. *Is there significance to the fact that διαθήκης is anarthrous?*

The anarthrous Greek text is represented in most English translations with the indefinite article (“a new covenant”);⁴⁵ although a few translations make it definite by adding the English definite article (“the new covenant”).⁴⁶ Master suggested, “the anarthrous construction [was used] possibly stressing ‘quality’ more than ‘identity.’”⁴⁷ If Master’s suggestion is correct, then clearly the anarthrous construction is what one would expect to correspond with a genitive of description, as opposed to the objective genitive which might favor a more definite construction (e.g. διακόνοῦς τῆς καινῆς διαθήκης, or διακόνοῦς καινῆς διαθήκης αὐτοῦ⁴⁸). Pettegrew, who saw some church participation in the new covenant, countered this by claiming that the anarthrous construction is the most accurate way to represent Jeremiah’s Hebrew original: “Interestingly, by leaving out the article, Paul follows Jeremiah’s prophecy precisely: ‘I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah’ (Jer 31:31).”⁴⁹ Pettegrew may be pressing his point a bit further than is warranted. In fact, twice in the New Testament, Jeremiah’s new covenant is referenced using the articular construction (ἡ καινὴ διαθήκη in both Luke 22:20 and 1 Cor 11:25). If Pettegrew is correct, and the anarthrous is more accurate, then one might reasonably ask why Paul used the articular construction in his first epistle to the Corinthians. And the logical question to follow is, why did he change to the anarthrous construction in his second epistle? However, one should not dismiss Pettegrew’s point altogether, since the anarthrous construction is used in the other three New Testament references to Jeremiah’s new covenant (Heb 8:8⁵⁰; 9:15; 12:24). More to the point is probably Decker’s observation that, “This would seem to be placing too much weight on the lack of an article,

The Life and Epistles of St. Paul [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964] 284-85), and this attitude appears to have promulgated into the Corinthian congregation (1 Cor 15:12-19).

⁴⁵ (ASV, ESV, HCSB, NASB, NET, NCV, NIV, NRSV, RSV)

⁴⁶ (TEV, KJV, NKJV, and, surprisingly, Darby)

⁴⁷ Master, “The New Covenant,” 101; also Compton, “Dispensationalism, The Church, and the New Covenant,” 29.

⁴⁸ Note the rendering “his new covenant” in the New Living Translation, “his new agreement” in the Contemporary English Version, or “his new agreement to save them” in The Living Bible.

⁴⁹ Pettegrew, *New Covenant Ministry*, 216, n. 45; also Decker, “New Covenant,” in *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology*, 280.

⁵⁰ Hebrews 8:13 should probably also be included here, but the noun διαθήκη does not occur here, only the adjective; nevertheless, the adjective is clearly referring to the expression διαθήκην καινὴν in verse 8.

particularly when the phrase in question could well be treated as a proper name and consequently definite whether articular or anarthrous.”⁵¹

It would appear that the most one can say about the anarthrous vs. articular construction is probably that, had the articular construction been used, Paul would not have been referring to the quality of the ministry. The anarthrous construction certainly allows for, but does not require our understanding Paul as referring to the quality of the ministry. So the anarthrous construction may be irrelevant to the issue under discussion.

5. What was the state of theological development when Paul wrote 2 Corinthians? How well developed was Paul's concept of the church as an entity separate and distinct from Israel?

Perhaps one of the most challenging hermeneutical tasks is that of departing from our world and entering into the world of the ancient writers. This requires not only diligent study of the history and sociology surrounding the first century Greco-Roman world, but also an attempt to adjust one's own mindset in reading the words of Scripture. It requires not only the mind of the historian, but also the soul of the artist. When Paul wrote to the Corinthians there was a great deal of shared knowledge between author and recipients of which one may be ignorant.⁵² For example, as with the previous discussion, one may not know precisely who Paul's opponents were, but one can be fairly certain that both Paul and the Corinthian congregation knew exactly who they were. Likewise, with regard to the subject of the new covenant and its fulfillment, one may ask just how did a first century believer in Jesus think about it? The tendency may be to look at this from a 20th/21st century perspective. One may see the millennial fulfillment of the new covenant with Israel as something that has now been postponed for nearly two millennia. As such, if the church is not participating in the covenant, it may seem a bit awkward, maybe even absurd, to use new covenant language to describe anything relevant to the church of today. The apostolic church, however, likely saw the preaching of the Gospel to the Gentiles as a very brief interlude before the second coming, and thus the millennial fulfillment of the new covenant was anticipated as something quite near. Clearly, the disciples in the upper room did not have anything like the church of our past 2,000 years in mind when Christ uttered His Eucharistic words, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20). They would have thought, instead, of the millennial fulfillment of the new covenant and the restoration of the kingdom to Israel. Even for the later apostolic church, the fulfillment of the new covenant was likely viewed as something to come very shortly (cf. Acts 1:6; 15:14-17; Gal 6:16; 2 Thess 1:6-10). So perhaps it should

⁵¹ Decker, “Church's Relationship to the New Covenant, Part I,” 301, n. 35.

⁵² Cotterell and Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation*, 90-97.

not be too surprising if Paul were to use the new covenant metaphorically, as somehow loosely descriptive of his Gospel ministry. The new covenant, though not yet operative, would nevertheless have been something very much on the minds of those early believers. As time progressed, however, the metaphor might become less apropos—even, say, for the later epistles of Paul. And perhaps for modern readers this is part of the difficulty in accepting “new covenant language” as something merely metaphorical. The readers want to make it more highly realized.

If one imagines being transported in time to the upper room, without having any other New Testament revelation, one would find no reason to read into Christ’s words at the Last Supper any idea of a realization of the new covenant in the church. He was simply speaking of the new covenant’s fulfillment in terms of national Israel in the Messianic Kingdom. If one then moved forward in time to Paul’s use of those same words in 1 Corinthians 11, he would only be understood as quoting the words from the upper room. It is not compelling to understand a church realization of the new covenant itself. A church realization may be a *possibility* in 1 Corinthians 11, but not a necessity. One would need much more evidence to make it a necessity. If one then thinks with regard to 2 Corinthians 3, there is no reason to be convinced of any church realization of the new covenant. Taken in its context as previously described, one can easily see Paul’s referring to the new covenant as an apt description of the spiritual standard by which his conduct should be judged, but one should not be compelled to come to the conclusion that the church is participating as a party to the new covenant. It remains to be seen how the relevant Hebrews passages would influence this view of the progress of revelation.

Another issue concerning hermeneutical perspective: Has one been unwittingly influenced by the use of the expression “New Testament” to refer to the Christian Scriptures? For example, Walvoord argued, “From the very fact that the Bible is divided into the Old Testament and the New Testament, or the Old covenant and the New covenant, it is clear that Christianity fundamentally is based on a New covenant brought in by Jesus Christ.”⁵³ The expression, “New Testament,” as a title for the Christian canon, appears first to have been used either by Tertullian or Origen in the third century. Prior to this the Christian canon was not referenced as the “New Testament.” By the third century already assumptions of a replacement theology were beginning to influence Gentile Christian thought significantly.⁵⁴ However, such would not necessarily have been the case either for Paul or for the first century Corinthian congregation (or any other first century Christians, for that matter). Their view of the church was not preconditioned by the title “*Novum Testamentum*” or H

⁵³ Walvoord, “Does the Church Fulfill Israel’s Program,” 218.

⁵⁴ Justin Martyr (100-65) in his *Dialogue with Trypho the Jew* represents one of the earliest examples of replacement theology.

KAINH ΔΙΑΘΗΚΗ appearing at the beginning of their Christian Scriptures! It is not certain whether the church has been unwittingly preconditioned by the use of this title or not, but one must wonder. When coming to 2 Corinthians 3:6 and reading the words “ministers of the new covenant,” does one have a psychological attachment to those words? Is there feeling that the “new covenant” and the “New Testament” belong to the church, while the “old covenant” and the “Old Testament” belong to the Jews?

6. *Why would Paul reference a passage from the Hebrew Scriptures when addressing a largely Gentile Christian church?*

As has already been observed, other New Testament references to the new covenant occur in Jewish (Jerusalem upper room) or Hebrew Christian contexts. Second Corinthians, however, is addressed to a largely Gentile church. Does this observation have any influence on how one might view Paul’s use of the Old Testament?

Though it is frequently stated that the church at Corinth was largely “Gentile,” this may be overstating the case. According to Acts 18:1-8, the core of early believers in Corinth actually came from the synagogue. These initial believers would have consisted of both Jews and God-fearing Gentiles, both of whom would have been well acquainted with the Hebrew Scriptures. Thus it is not surprising that Paul would use Old Testament language when referencing church truth, even if doing so metaphorically.

Paul actually made quite frequent use of the Old Testament in both 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians. However, the way Paul used the Old Testament in 1 Corinthians can be contrasted with the way he used it in 2 Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians he tended to cite the Old Testament as authoritative Scripture to prove his point, using such introductory formulae 12 times,⁵⁵ as follows:

γέγραπται γάρ (1:18; 3:19)
καθὼς γέγραπται (1:31; 2:9)
γάρ (2:16; 6:16; 14:27)
ἐν γὰρ τῷ Μωϋσέως νόμῳ γέγραπται (9:9)
ὡσπερ γέγραπται (10:7)
ἐν τῷ νόμῳ γέγραπται ὅτι (14:21)
οὕτως καὶ γέγραπται (15:45)
τότε γενήσεται ὁ λόγος ὁ γεγραμμένος (15:54).

On the other hand, in 2 Corinthians, Paul tended to quote and allude to Old Testament Scripture much less formally,⁵⁶ using introductory formulae only 5

⁵⁵ The United Bible Societies’ *Greek New Testament*, 4th edition, “Index of Quotations” contains 17 Old Testament quotes in 1 Corinthians and 91 Old Testament allusions.

⁵⁶ The United Bible Societies’ *Greek New Testament*, 4th edition, “Index of Quotations” has 11 Old Testament quotes in 2 Corinthians and 44 Old Testament allusions.

times, as follows:

κατὰ τὸ γεγραμμένον (4:13)
 λέγει γάρ (6:2)
 καθὼς εἶπεν ὁ θεὸς ὅτι (6:16)
 καθὼς γέγραπται (8:15; 9:19).

This less formal use of the Old Testament corresponds with what one would expect for a metaphorical use of Old Testament language that refers not to a fulfillment or realization of the Old Testament promise, but rather to a broad, loose description.

CONCLUSION

With reference to the new covenant, 2 Corinthians 3:6 may be viewed in two possible ways. The expression “new covenant” expresses either the *content* of Paul’s message, or it expresses the *manner in which* Paul conducted his ministry. Having examined various exegetical/hermeneutical issues, the studied opinion may be that Paul was not describing the content of his message, but rather the manner in which he conducted his ministry. Ultimately, the chief exegetical/hermeneutical issue questions whether the expression διακόνους καινῆς διαθήκης represents an objective genitive or a genitive of description. A consideration of the referent of ἡμᾶς, the context of the statement, the use/non-use of the article, the theological viewpoint of author and recipients and the way in which Paul referred to the Old Testament lead, it seems, to the conclusion that Paul’s point was that his ministry is a “new-covenant-like-ministry,” not that he was administering the new covenant. Reference was to the style of his ministry, rather than to the doctrinal content of the new covenant. Thus, this verse does not support any kind of a realized eschatology, or church participation in the new covenant. Of the New Testament references to the new covenant, 2 Corinthians 3:6 is the only one that is set in neither an overtly eschatological nor Hebrew-Christian context. As such, it is something of a *crux interpretum* for those who wish to see some sort of a present realization of the new covenant. According to Jeremiah 31:31, the parties to the new covenant are God and the houses of Israel and Judah. Though Christ’s blood has been shed for the ratification of the new covenant, the realization of its blessings awaits that time when God brings Israel and Judah into the covenant. Until that time, others (*viz.* the church) may be benefitting from the same blood that ratified the new covenant, but there seems to be no exegetical necessity for seeing the church as having been brought in as a new party to the covenant. At least, 2 Corinthians 3:6 does not require that one see the church as having been brought into the new covenant.

**HOW IMMEASURABLE IS GOD?
A VISION OF THE GREATNESS OF GOD
IN ISAIAH 40:9-20 EXAMINED**

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In his magnificent song exalting the victory of Yahweh over Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt, Moses cried, “Who is like You among the gods, O LORD? Who is like You, majestic in holiness, Awesome in praises, working wonders?” (Exod 15:11, NASB). The question is at best rhetorical, since among all the gods of the earth in all the ages of time, there is *none* like the God of Moses. He is incomparable! He is indescribable! He is incomprehensible! Along these lines, C. J. Labuschagne noted, “The distinctiveness of Old Testament religion can be explained solely by the distinctiveness of the God of the Old Testament.”¹ However, in spite of man’s inability to comprehend God, He has revealed Himself in the pages of Scripture and in the Person of His Son. Had He not offered such a revelation, one would have no knowledge of God except scrawny images conjured in the imaginations of men. And these images invariably have resulted in the grossest forms of idolatry.

Still, in spite of all that God has done to reveal Himself, men have failed to apprehend that revelation. In the preface to *The Knowledge of the Holy*, for instance, A. W. Tozer wrote regarding what he called, “the loss of the concept of majesty” in the minds of men. Tozer added, “The Church has surrendered her once lofty concept of God and has substituted for it one so low, so ignoble, as to be utterly unworthy of thinking, worshiping men.”² Tozer explained this loss as a gradual diminishing of the concept of God as the concerns of the world and its culture encroach upon the church. The affairs of life amalgamate until “With our loss of the sense of majesty has come the further loss of religious awe and consciousness of the divine Presence. We have lost our spirit of worship and our ability to withdraw inwardly to meet God in adoring silence.”³ More and more the influence of the world has overtaken believers and drawn them from the spiritual realm, as mankind in general has turned its attention to the natural world. Francis Schaeffer described the situation succinctly.

The vital principle to notice is that, as nature was made autonomous [by educated men of the past], nature began to “eat up” grace. Through the Renaissance, from the time of

¹ C. J. Labuschagne, *The Incomparability of Yahweh in the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1966) 3.

² A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1961) 1.

³ *Ibid.*

Dante to Michelangelo, nature became more gradually autonomous. It was set free from God as the humanistic philosophers began to operate ever more freely. By the time the Renaissance reached its climax, nature had eaten up grace.⁴

In the three hundred fifty plus years since the Renaissance, nature has continued to encroach upon the minds of men. As a result, religion and Christianity have become more and more materialistic and humanistic in their outlook. More and more churches are shifting their focus from the things of God to address the “felt needs” of men. If the church does not develop a “seeker friendly” attitude, she may lose whatever impact she may have had on the surrounding community. Conversely, if the church adopts a “seeker friendly” attitude, she often turns God into the servant of men, a kind of cosmic bellhop. “Left to ourselves,” Tozer noted, “we tend immediately to reduce God to manageable terms. We want to get Him where *we can use Him*, or at least know where He is *when we need Him*. We want a God we can in some measure control.”⁵ Such a God is not the God of the Bible. Nor is He, nor should He be, the God of the church.

Tozer wrote these words nearly half a century ago. More recently, John Piper noted very little has changed, unless one understands the situation as having worsened. Piper noted, “In the church, our view of God is so small instead of huge, so marginal instead of central, so vague instead of clear, so impotent instead of all-determining, and so uninspiring instead of ravishing that the responsibility to live life to the glory of God is a thought without content.” Piper added, “Until you share a passion for the supremacy of God, your life will not be lived for the glory of God.”⁶ Most would agree that the primary purpose of man is to live for the glory of God.

How is this possible? How can one regain that sense of the majesty and glory of God? If God truly is incomparable and indescribable, how can one even catch the slightest glimpse of His glory? Where would one even begin?

The best place to begin, of course, is with the revelation of God that He Himself has given us. From Genesis to Revelation, God unfolds His person, His character, and His activities. In confronting this revelation of God, man not only needs to regain a sense of God’s glory, but also His majesty in its truest and most basic sense. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the earliest usage of this word majesty in English, used as early as A.D. 1300, also meant “The greatness and glory of God.”⁷ So, since God is a sovereign, who rules over His creation, His majesty alone reveals Him to be a God one cannot

⁴ Francis A. Schaeffer, *Escape from Reason* (Chicago: InterVarsity Press, 1968) 13.

⁵ Tozer, *Knowledge of the Holy*, 8 (italics added).

⁶ John Piper, “A Passion for the Supremacy of God,” *Spirit of Revival* 33 (March 2002)

5.

⁷ *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971) 1:1699.

manage. Nor is He a God over whom one can in any measure exercise control. Instead, one needs to submit to His control, and one need to turn to the Scriptures wherein, by reading them, one can begin to regain a full sense of the majesty, of the greatness, of the sovereignty, and of the glory of God.

A good place to begin this renewed quest is Isaiah 40. Although Isaiah devotes the entire chapter and more to expressing in various ways God's greatness, this article will limit its scope to verses 9 through 20. These verses not only reflect the infinite greatness of God in power and wisdom and knowledge, but also express His infinite incomparability. Moses had asked, "Who *is* like You, among the gods, O LORD?" The obvious answer is, "No one!" However, Isaiah lived eight hundred years after Moses' and in the context of worldwide devastation, first by the Assyrians and then by the Babylonians. God's people needed a reminder of the distinctiveness of their God.

YAHWEH IS A GOD WHO RELATES TO HIS PEOPLE ISAIAH 40:9-11

Isaiah 40:9 instructed the people of Zion, the inhabitants of Jerusalem, to lift their voices and cry to all the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!" This expression along with the next two verses indicates that this great God nevertheless condescends to establish a relationship with His people. Indeed, His very greatness is reflected in establishing that relationship. It was more than a territorial thing as with all the pagan gods of the ancient world, because Yahweh is God of the entire world. Furthermore, rather than establishing one person, such as Pharaoh in Egypt or King Keret in Canaan, to be identified as the son of the gods, Yahweh identified the entire nation of Israel as His son, saying, "Israel *is* my son, *even* my firstborn" (Exodus 4:22, KJV).

Isaiah prophesied to future captives in exile that God had not forgotten that relationship, but was calling them to deliverance as His people. He would accomplish their deliverance. By using Hebrew parallel structure, Isaiah stressed that in proclaiming the coming of the Lord, Zion is the "bearer of good news." This section of the book looks into the future to the time when Judah has long since been taken into the Babylonian captivity. Partly for this reason, many scholars believe that Isaiah 40 through 66 was written by an anonymous prophet who himself lived during the post-exilic period. Robert B. Chisholm Jr. explained, "Because of the obvious exilic setting of chapters 40—66, most scholars deny Isaianic authorship of these chapters and attribute them instead to an unnamed individual (called 'Second Isaiah' or 'Deutero-Isaiah') who lived during the exile."⁸ Chisholm added that while these chapters assume that the exile had already occurred and Jerusalem already lay in ruins, this does

⁸ Robert B. Chisholm Jr., *Handbook on the Prophets* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002) 14.

not mean that the eighth century prophet Isaiah did not write this section of the book.

It is granted that the style is somewhat different and the text contains different subjects and issues. However, a major theme of this entire section of the book focuses on the sovereignty of Israel's God, who controls all of history, a theme not exactly absent from the first part of Isaiah. For instance, in the vision during which God called him, Isaiah saw "the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up" (Isa 6:1b). In the same vision, he heard the seraphim calling to each other that "the whole earth *is* full of His glory" (6:3b). Commenting on God's sovereignty, B. F. Huey noted, "God's ultimate purpose in history is to establish His sovereignty over all mankind, but it will be brought about by love and not by compulsion (43:4). Such love invokes a response of faith and obedience."⁹ From the beginning, God has been declaring His sovereignty. Therefore, because God is clearly sovereign over all the earth, Chisholm noted, "He can decree and announce events long before they happen."¹⁰ This is true predictive prophecy, and it flows from the greatness of God in creation and in history.

Granted also that these chapters are significantly different in content from the first part of the book, rhetorically they link with the first part to form a coherent whole. Isaiah is predominantly a prophet of salvation. For this reason, he opened this section of his prophecy with a command to comfort God's people, an announcement that their sovereign God is coming to them as victor over all their enemies, and the declaration that Zion/Jerusalem is the "bearer of good news" to the captives. Thomas Constable graphically portrayed the relationship between the two parts of Isaiah in a chart that reflects the relationship between them by comparison and contrast.

Isaiah 1—39	Isaiah 40—66
Focus upon Assyria	Focus upon Babylon
Primary theme is judgment	Primary theme is deliverance
Historical details are present	Historical details are absent
Messiah is "shoot from Jesse."	Messiah is "Servant of the Lord."
Life of Isaiah is prominent	Life of Isaiah is absent¹¹

⁹ B. F. Huey, "Great Themes in Isaiah 40-66," *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 11 (Fall 1968) 48.

¹⁰ Chisholm, *Handbook on the Prophets*, 14.

¹¹ Thomas L. Constable, "Notes on Isaiah" [online] (Sonic Light, 2005, accessed 5 May 2009) available from <http://www.soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/isaiah.pdf>. Constable's chart is an adaptation from Charles Dyer and Eugene Merrill, *Nelson's Old Testament Survey* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001) 561. Other works that discuss the unity of the book of Isaiah include: Oswald T. Allis, *The Unity of Isaiah* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1950); Walter Brueggemann, "Unity and Dynamic in the Isaiah Tradition," *Journal for the Study of the*

The primary theme of this section of Isaiah, therefore, is the deliverance of God's people from their exile by the mighty hand of their sovereign God (this is the "good news").

Zion was to announce, "Behold your God!" Following this announcement, in rapid succession, the prophet added two significant statements introduced with the exclamatory word, "Behold!" Isaiah 40:10 declares:

Behold, the Lord GOD will come with might,
With His arm ruling for Him.
Behold, His reward is with Him
And His recompense before Him [emphasis added].

The brief phrase at the end of verse nine establishes that God is personal: "Behold *your* God!" Moreover, as previously indicated, if Israel as a whole is God's firstborn son, the nature of the relationship is also established. Furthermore, Isaiah told Zion to announce the good news that God would not abandon His people. In the two additional expressions "behold" in verse 10, Isaiah mentioned a second relationship between God and His people. *First*, He is not only their king, but He is also a conquering king. J. Alec Motyer noted how Isaiah emphasized this coming of God as king and its intended effect on Israel: "The same word [introduces God's coming] on all three occasions, 'Behold/Look!' It is all happening before their very eyes: the divine coming of One who is *God*, the mighty coming of One who is *with power* (lit. 'as a strong One') and the successful coming of One who brings with Him what He has achieved."¹² Isaiah stressed first God's divinity: "The Lord GOD will come." He did not use the basic word for God, אֱלֹהִים or אֱל, but rather the covenant name of God (יהוה) that further emphasizes the strength and nature of God's relationship. He is Lord—אֲדֹנָי, master, commander; and He is God—יהוה, the One who has committed Himself by an unconditional contract to protect, defend, and deliver *His* people. He is bound to them by a covenant relationship, which for Him is a personal relationship, established with their fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Hence, Isaiah stressed God's commitment to them. Subsequently, in the same passage, he stressed God's mighty power to encourage Israel with His ability to deliver them from captivity.

Old Testament 29 (June 1984) 89-107; R. E. Clements, "The Unity of the Book of Isaiah," *Interpretation* 36 (April 1982) 117-29; Robert Vasholz, "Isaiah Versus 'The Gods': A Case for Unity," *Westminster Theological Journal* 42 (April 1980) 389-394; Eugene H. Merrill, "The Literary Character of Isaiah 40-55: Part 1," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 144 (January 1987): 24-43; "The Literary Character of Isaiah 40-55: Part 2," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 144 (April 1987) 144-56; and, William J. Dumbrell, "The Purpose of Isaiah," *Tyndale Bulletin* 36 (1985) 111-28.

¹² J. Alec Motyer, *Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999) 245-46.

God Himself returns to the city of Jerusalem, to the Temple that will be rebuilt, and to the land of Judah He had promised to His people. He comes to deliver, to redeem, and to save His people. “His arm” amplifies the picture of God’s strength, because in the Bible, the arm often symbolizes strength or power. Albert Barnes, for instance, explained, “it is by [the arm] that we accomplish our purposes; by that a conqueror slays his enemies in battle, etc.”¹³ Isaiah encouraged Judah to depend upon God’s mighty power since time and history have shown that they could not depend on their own strength to save them. John Oswalt noted, “Jerusalem informs the hearers that God comes as a mighty man, who depends on His own strong arm to achieve the victory. . . . With the blows of His sword and battleaxe, He will gain dominion over His enemies for Himself (see also 59:15-21b; 63:1-6).”¹⁴

This brief vignette of God as conquering king should be encouraging, but it is not complete. Not only did Isaiah describe the king’s coming in power but he also described the king’s coming as if the battle is over and the victory already won. “Behold, his reward *is* with Him. . . .” Yahweh comes in a triumphal march bringing the booty of His conquest with Him. Christopher R. Seitz remarked on how striking is this portrayal of Yahweh.

The victor typically comes home with spoils of war, with booty, with “reward and recompense” (v. 10). In the days of holy war, this booty, “man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey,” was to be given over to God, whose victory it was (see 1 Sam 15:1-35). But here the booty is of a different order, appropriate to this unconventional victory and victor. Driven like a flock before a careful shepherd, and even carried on the arm of battle, are the spoils of war, God’s own children, returned to mother Zion under the image of lambs and nursing mothers.¹⁵

God’s own children—whether He relates as God, King, Ruler, or Conqueror—possess Him as theirs and they are His in a binding relationship.

Before moving to a picture of God’s incomparable majesty, Isaiah added yet another picture to stress that God relates to His people in a personal manner.

Like a shepherd He will tend His flock,
In His arm He will gather the lambs
And carry *them* in His bosom;
He will gently lead the nursing *ewes* (Isa 40:11).

¹³ Albert Barnes, *Notes on the Old Testament: Isaiah*, 2 vols. (Glasgow: Blackie & Son, 1851; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, n.d.) 2:63.

¹⁴ John W. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah Chapters 40-66* (New International Commentary on the Old Testament) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998) 54-55.

¹⁵ Christopher R. Seitz, “The Book of Isaiah 40-66: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck, 12 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001) 6:337.

In this passage, Isaiah revealed something of the greatness of God's heart. Yahweh condescended to care for His people in the gentle, loving way that a shepherd cares for his sheep. This picture of God's return to His people after the long exile adds color and detail to the previous picture of the victorious king. Page H. Kelley noted, "What is emphasized here is God's strength and His gentleness. The two are not contradictory but complementary."¹⁶ From the time Israel had a king, God has stressed the need for His rulers to care for His people as shepherds care for their sheep.

Indeed, the first king of Israel who received God's approval, the king whose dynasty God established forever (2 Sam 7:8-17), was anointed king in his father house almost immediately after he had come from "tending the sheep" (1 Sam 16:11-13). Furthermore, earlier Samuel told Saul, "But now your kingdom shall not endure. The LORD has sought out for Himself a man after His own heart, and the LORD has appointed him as a ruler over His people, because you have not kept what the LORD commanded you" (13:14; see also Acts 13:22). As a shepherd, David learned what Saul did not; he learned to be God's king. He cared for God's people as a shepherd cares for his sheep.

In Isaiah 40:11, the prophet described the manner of God's care for His people. The first line contains an interesting "play on words" in the Hebrew text. It reads, "like a *shepherd* He will *shepherd* His sheep." The New American Standard Bible reads, "Like a shepherd He will tend His sheep." The word translated "tend" in the NASB and "feed" in the King James Version significantly covers the whole area of responsibility of the shepherd. J. A. Alexander noted, for instance, "The word correctly rendered *feed* denotes the whole care of a shepherd for his flock, and has therefore no exact equivalent in English."¹⁷ Albert Barnes agreed but indicated a more comprehensive meaning, noting that the word translated "feeds"

denotes more than our word *feed* at present. It refers to all the care of a shepherd over his flock; and means to tend, to guard, to govern, to provide pasture, to defend from danger, as a shepherd does his flock. It is often applied in the Scriptures to God, represented as the tender shepherd, and especially to the Redeemer (Ps xxiii.1; Ezek. Xxxiv.23; John x.14; Heb. xiii.20; 1 Pet. ii.25; v.4).¹⁸

In this one word lies the comprehensive description of the greatness of God in His tender, shepherding care of the people of Judah.

Isaiah included additional activities of God to further extend the image of His shepherding of His people. He *gathers* the lambs, He *carries* the lambs,

¹⁶ Page H. Kelley, "Doing It God's Way: Introduction to Isaiah 40-55," *Review and Expositor* 88 (Spring 1991) 169.

¹⁷ J. A. Alexander, *The Prophecies of Isaiah*, rev. ed., 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985) 2:102.

¹⁸ Barnes, *Isaiah*, 64.

and *leads* the nursing ewes. These various verbs reflect the concern of Yahweh for the needs of His people, beginning with the arm that gathers them to Himself. James Muilenburg observed, “The arm raised in triumph is lowered in compassion. The shepherd gathers to His bosom the young lambs unable to follow where He leads. . . .”¹⁹ Edward J. Young added, “The *arm* is the symbol of His might and power and is sufficiently strong to gather up the sheep for protection and care. When they are in the Shepherd’s arm, nothing can harm or come near to separate them from Him.”²⁰ In a footnote on this statement, Young noted, “According to the punctuation the text should read, *With His arm He will gather the lambs, and in His bosom He will lift (them) up.*”²¹ Not only does He gather the lambs in His arm, but He also “gently lead[s] those that are with young.” In the character of Psalm 23, this great Shepherd leads the nursing ewes to a place of rest and refreshment. Muilenburg described the scene as follows: “. . . He guides to quiet waters the mother ewe which requires special care and is solicitous for her offspring.” He also noted, “Thus the closing lines strike the note of comfort of the beginning (cf. vss. 28-31).” Muilenburg offered an excellent summary of these three verses (9-11) in Isaiah’s prophecy of the greatness of God: “**behold your God!**—*He comes, He rules, He feeds, He gathers, He carries, He gently leads.*”²²

YAHWEH IS A GOD WHO POSSESSES INFINITE POWER
ISAIAH 40:12-17

In discussing the overall thrust of Isaiah 40, Page H. Kelley noted:

This has continuing significance for us all, for all our questions about God could be reduced to two: ‘Is He able?’ and ‘Does He care?’ To believe in a God who is loving and compassionate, yet powerless to act on our behalf, would leave us with a feeling of utter helplessness. On the other hand, to believe that God’s power and might were absolute, but that he was unloving and unmoved by our hurts, would plunge us into despair. He *does* care, and he *is* able!²³

Isaiah 40:9-11 indicates that God does care, and He showed His care by coming to Judah’s rescue not only with the arm of a ruler, but also especially with the arm of a shepherd. Isaiah answered the second question: Is God able? Isaiah’s answer was a definite Yes! Beginning with verse 12, the prophet focused on God’s ability to rescue His people.

¹⁹ James Muilenburg, “The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 40-66,” in *The Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. George A. Buttrick, 12 vols. (New York: Abingdon Press, 1956) 5:433-34.

²⁰ Edward J. Young, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 40-66* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972) 41.

²¹ Ibid. fn. 43.

²² Muilenburg, “The Book of Isaiah,” 434.

²³ Kelley, “Doing It God’s Way,” 169.

God's Omnipotence

Immediately, the prophet refreshed the Jewish memory of the great Creator whose omnipotence Moses had taught them in the first book of the Torah, Genesis 1—2. Having exhausted four hundred years in Egypt, Israel knew only of Egypt's theology of creation. Moses led them to see that not the gods of Egypt, but their God, Yahweh, created all things. In Egypt, creation stories played a large part in both the theology and the religion of the people. These stories were developed from Egypt's view of the world as static and of creation as the prime source of change. The Egyptians, however, credited different gods with creating the world, depending on what section of the country in which one lived. Henri Frankfort noted, for instance, "Several gods were named as the primary source of existence. At Memphis, Ptah, the power in the earth, was the creator. At Heliopolis and Hermopolis it was the power in the sun, and at Elephantine it was said that Khnum, who appeared as a ram, had made all living beings on a potter's wheel, a detail which remains an enigma."²⁴ Frankfort noted that the Egyptians did not concern themselves with discrepancies in the creation stories nor did they consider them completely incompatible. Nevertheless, the existences of the gods were filled with vagueness of character and power, not like the holy and powerful God of Israel.

To counter the polytheism, not to mention the materialism of Egypt's gods, Moses penned the sublime words of the Genesis prologue, beginning, "In the beginning *Elohim* created the heavens and the earth" (1:1). In many of the stories, Egypt's gods produced the world through some form of procreation. Israel's God merely spoke and it was done (Ps 33:6, 9). Egypt's gods exist within various natural phenomena. Israel's God lives above them and apart from them. Egypt's gods are, in this sense, wholly immanent; whereas, Israel's God is both immanent and transcendent. For forty years in the wilderness, Moses prepared Israel to do what he had told Pharaoh to let them go into the wilderness to do: worship the one true and living God, Yahweh.

In this section of his prophecy, Isaiah looked to the time when his people will be returning from or will have already returned from the seventy years of exile in Babylon. There they were exposed to the pagan worship of Babylon's gods along with various other creation myths new to Israel, among them the most popular, *Enuma Elish*. In this famous Babylonian epic of creation, the world, if not the entire universe, resulted from a conflict between the gods Marduk and Tiamat.²⁵ Therefore, to effectively answer the question whether Yahweh is able to deliver His people from Babylonian exile, Isaiah

²⁴ Henri Frankfort, *Ancient Egyptian Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1948) 20.

²⁵ See A. Leo Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia: Portrait of a Dead Civilization*, rev. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977):264.

recollected the creation story, reintroducing Yahweh as the God of creation, reflecting upon His great power and might as revealed in all that He created.

The prophet accomplished his task by introducing a series of rhetorical questions to which the only answer can be God. In Isaiah 40:12, he emphasized Yahweh's limitless power.

Who has measured the waters in the hollow of His hand,
And marked off the heavens by the span,
And calculated the dust of the earth by the measure,
And weighed the mountains in a balance
And the hills in a pair of scales?

J. J. M. Roberts, although taking the liberal stance that Isaiah 40—66 was written by a later prophet during the exile, did note that this second part of Isaiah

continues this emphasis on Yahweh's sole exaltation and gives it new depth by his use of the doctrine of creation. No power among gods or men can be compared to Him, for He alone created all that exists (40:25-26). His power exhibited in creation remains the power which has directed and will continue to direct history, as is demonstrated by His fulfillment of His ancient prophecies (41:21-29).²⁶

Adding to this note, Oswalt declared, "In the strongest of terms, [Isaiah] asserts that there is none like the Lord, either in the cosmos (vv. 12-14, 22, 25-26) or in history (vv. 15-17, 23-24). He is utterly without compare (vv. 18, 25), especially to the gods (vv. 19-20, 25-26). Thus it is plain that such a being is able to do whatever He wishes to do."²⁷ Yahweh is unique in His Person and He is unique in His power. In asserting both these facts, by his question, Isaiah challenged the imagination.

Approximately the time A. W. Tozer wrote *The Knowledge of the Holy*, J. B. Phillips wrote a book about God's greatness; however, he called his book, *Your God is Too Small*.²⁸ In his work, Phillips challenged evangelical Christianity to evaluate again their views of God (indicating as did Tozer that evangelicals have indeed lost the sense of the majesty of God). Some time before the publication of either of these books, Princeton astronomer, Henry Norris Russell delivered a lecture on the Milky Way. Following the lecture, a woman came to Russell and asked, "If our world is so little, and the universe is so great, can we believe God really pays any attention to us?" Dr. Russell replied, "That depends, madam, entirely on how big a God you believe in."²⁹

²⁶ J. J. M. Roberts, "Isaiah in Old Testament Theology," *Interpretation* 36 (April 1982) 133-34.

²⁷ Barnes, *Isaiah*, 58.

²⁸ J. B. Phillips, *Your God Is Too Small* (New York: Macmillan, 1963).

²⁹ "How Big Is Our God?" [online] (NET Bible, 2005-2009, accessed 5 May 2009) available from <http://net.bible.org/illustration.php?id=7418>.

Isaiah said God is so “big” that He “measured the waters in the hollow of His hand.” While this is an anthropomorphic statement—since God is spirit and as such has no hands—the statement still challenges the imagination to grasp a God so vast He measures all the waters of the earth in the hollow of *one* hand. The hollow is the cuplike indentation formed when the hand is partially closed, so it does not even involve the whole hand. One may wonder how much water would this actually be. Although Isaiah did not say, it is reasonable to assume he meant all the waters in the world. Young noted, “Isaiah uses the term *water* to designate the waters of the seas generally.”³⁰ Motyer seemed to think the term is more inclusive, referring to the totality of water and more.³¹ Therefore, it is not just all the seas, but all the seas, all the rivers, all the streams, all the lakes, all the ponds, and all the oceans. Marva Sedore stated this more poetically. Moving from the smallest drop of moisture to the largest body of water, she noted,

First, imagine all the raindrops in the world. Then add all the snowflakes and hailstones, the fog and the mists. Next, bring in all the creeks and ponds and puddles. Finally, add all the glaciers and snowpacks, the streams and rivers, the wells and underground rivers and springs, and even all the lakes and the mammoth oceans. All the waters of the earth, added together—and God holds them in a single handful! Incredible!³²

Isaiah had to be astounded himself by the image. For the modern reader, the volume of water can be even more accurately measured. According to the United States Geological Survey Office, “The total water supply of the world is 326 million cubic miles. . . . A cubic mile of water equals more than one trillion gallons.”³³ God holds it all in the *hollow of one hand!* In this one phrase, “Who hath measured the waters in the hollow of his hand,” Isaiah offered a brief glimpse of the awe-inspiring majesty of God.

The next line states that Yahweh “marked off heavens with a span.” The expression is also an anthropomorphic representation, which is another awe-inspiring expression. A span is the distance between the tip of the little finger and the tip of the thumb when the fingers are spread like a fan, approximately nine inches. What is a span for God? How big is God’s span?

Astronomers measure the heavens, or rather distances in space in terms of light years, a term that many have trouble envisioning. For example, one

³⁰ Young, *Book of Isaiah*, 43.

³¹ See J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993) 303.

³² Marva Sedore, *To Walk and Not Faint: God’s Comfort from Isaiah 40* (Chappaqua, NY: Christian Herald Books, 1980) 67.

³³ U.S. Geological Survey, “How Much Water Is There On, In, and Above the Earth?” [online] (USGS Georgia Water Science Center, 2009, accessed 8 May 2009) available from <http://ga.water.usgs.gov/edu/earthhowmuch.html>.

light year is the distance light travels in one year's time. At 186,000 miles per second, that calculates to 5,865,696,000,000 miles in one year, or, rounded to six trillion (6,000,000,000,000). The nearest star after the sun is four light years away or twenty-four trillion miles. To Isaiah, the heavens likely meant all the stars and black sky he could see at night from horizon to horizon, which even that would encompass a lot of heaven. If however, as is also likely, he meant everything contained in that heaven, the picture is more awe-inspiring. The Boy Scout troop with whom this author worked for twelve years held a family camp one night at Sid Richardson Scout Ranch in Bridgeport, Texas. For the first night of the campout not a cloud filled the sky. After sunset, the troop could see virtually every star in the night sky. Since there was no air pollution or man-made lights to interfere with the visibility, the troop could see virtually the entire Milky Way Galaxy, perhaps everything Isaiah could see on a clear night at the time he penned his words. If one limits the heavens to just the Milky Way Galaxy, the idea that God measured the whole thing with just a span is still mind-boggling.

Scientists have determined that the Milky Way Galaxy is one hundred thousand light years in diameter, which is one hundred thousand times six trillion miles. The Milky Way is spread like a disk, but at its center, it bulges to a thickness of approximately one thousand light years. The sun, and the entire solar system, moves at a distance of approximately twenty-six to thirty thousand light years from the center of the galaxy.³⁴ God measures it all with merely a span.

It is possible to know that there is more to the universe than the one galaxy, more than what one can see with the naked eye in the night sky. Indeed, in December 1995, Robert Williams, made a discovery that impacted astronomy for many years to come, a discovery that should intensify the awe of Christians as they read Isaiah 40 and contemplate Isaiah's God. Robert Williams is director of the Space Telescope Science Institute that operates the Hubble Space Telescope. According to *Newsweek Magazine*, Williams utilized his director's discretionary time to focus the telescope on the farthest edge of the known universe for ten days that December in 1995. As a result, *Newsweek* reported,

In 342 shots, the telescope spied at least 1,500 galaxies, Williams announced at a meeting of the American Astronomical Society in San Antonio, Texas last week [one week prior to the publication of the *Newsweek* article in January 1996]. Extrapolating

³⁴ Elizabeth Hays, "The Quest for Gamma Rays: Exploring the Most Violent Places in the Universe, 65th Compton Lecture Series: Lecture 5: Journey to the Center of the Galaxy" [online] (University of Chicago, 28 April 2007, accessed 8 May 2009) available from <http://uchicago.edu/~ehays>.

from the number, he calculated that the universe is stuffed with 50 billion galaxies, not the 10 billion that astronomers previously thought.”³⁵

If we consider the Milky Way as an average galaxy in size, and consider fifty billion galaxies at roughly the same size, one will have a known universe in its breadth of fifty billion times one hundred thousand times six trillion miles. God measures the whole thing between the tip of His little finger and the tip of His thumb. What a great, omnipotent God!

After noting these facts, the next two lines seem almost anti-climactic. However, they, too, emphasize the majestic omnipotence of God. For instance, the standard in the third phrase—“comprehended the dust of the earth in a measure”—is literally “in a third.” Scholars, if they refer to it at all, seem in agreement that the measure is a third of something already rather small, generally an ephah.³⁶ As a contemporary comparison, Young suggested the fourth part of a gallon (a quart to give some idea of the smallness of the measure). Marva Sedore described it beautifully: “All the sands of the ocean beaches, all the dust in your house and mine, all the dirt that all kids everywhere bring home from their play—all the dust of the earth God can hold, or measure, in His quart-sized bucket.”³⁷ God is so great that He can measure even something so insignificant as dust as easily as a man can measure a small quantity of grain in a pouch. Furthermore, is it possible that Isaiah was picturesquely commenting at the same time on the insignificance of man when compared to the majesty of God? When he spoke of “the dust of the earth,” could he have had in mind the psalmist’s observation?

For He Himself knows our frame;
He is mindful that we are *but* dust (Ps 103:14).

Was Isaiah saying that God measures man in a small, quart-sized bucket? Or is this merely stretching the image? One thing is certain: Isaiah was declaring the greatness of God as compared to the insignificance of man, especially the “man” who has taken captive the people of God in Isaiah’s day.

In the last phrase of verse 12, it is as if Isaiah is saying that God is taking all the mountains of the earth, or perhaps mountain ranges of the earth (e.g. Mount McKinley, Mount Rainier, Mount Everest, all the Himalayas, the Rockies, the Appalachians, and the Alps) and assessing their value in a pair of laboratory scales or the balances of a merchant. Sedore noted, “Isaiah says, the Lord GOD can easily pick up that mountain [or those mountains] and, with a

³⁵ Sharon Begley, “Science: A Heavenly Host,” *Newsweek* (29 January 1996) 52.

³⁶ For instance, see Alexander, *Prophecies of Isaiah*, 104; Barnes, *Isaiah*, 65; Young, *Book of Isaiah*, 44.

³⁷ Sedore, *Walk and Not Faint*, 69.

flick of the wrist toss [them] on the scale!”³⁸ How small and powerless are the enemies of God’s people when measured against the omnipotence of God Himself!

The fact that God is not only powerful enough to have created everything, but also intelligent enough to have “measured” everything adds another significant dimension to the prophet’s portrayal of Yahweh’s majesty, and another dimension to his encouragement of God’s people that Yahweh is able to deliver them in their distress. There is nothing in creation that should not be there, and nothing missing that should be there. God designed the balance of nature, and “measured” every component to make it all complete. There is just enough water on the planet, just enough stars in the sky, just enough sands on the beaches, just enough dirt on the earth, and just enough mountains and hills for God’s world to be what He intended it to be. He has measured them all. Barnes summarized as follows: “Throughout this entire passage, there is not only the idea of majesty and power in God, but there is also the idea that He has *fitted* or adjusted everything by His wisdom and power, and adapted it to the conditions and wants of His people.”³⁹ God is infinitely greater than anything man can imagine. Isaiah portrayed God’s omnipotence first, demonstrating He is able to deliver His people because He possesses infinite power, so much power that everything in creation that appears great to the human eye—the oceans, the mountains, etc. —pales in insignificance by comparison to the Creator.

God’s Omniscience

God can have great power and still be an arrogant, self-serving despot. Isaiah wanted God’s people to know He is not. The prophet wanted God’s people to know that along with His infinite power, their God also possesses infinite knowledge and wisdom. Therefore, in Isaiah 40:13-14 the prophet wrote:

Who has directed the Spirit of the LORD,
Or as His counselor has informed Him?
With whom did He consult and *who* gave Him understanding?
And *who* taught Him in the path of justice and taught Him knowledge
And informed Him of the way of understanding?

In the first phrase, Isaiah uses the same verb that he used in the second line of verse 12, *תָּכַן*, to “measure” the heavens. It is as if he was saying, if none but God can measure the heavens with a span, who can measure the Spirit of God, or God Himself? Since God is greater than the heavens, greater than His creation, how can any part of His creation even think of measuring Him?

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Barnes, *Isaiah*, 66.

Oswalt noted, “The sense of the first phrase, *who has taken the measure of the Spirit of the Lord*, is well illustrated by the parallel phrase in Prov. 16.2, which speaks of God’s mastery of, and evaluation of, the human spirit in its choices and actions. Thus Isaiah asks, if we cannot even take the measure of the physical world, how can we take God’s measure?”⁴⁰ He who has measured all of creation cannot be measured by any of creation.

Indeed, the focus here is interestingly on the Spirit of God who was quite instrumental in the original creation. Many scholars, however, seem to agree that Isaiah did not refer to the third Person of the Trinity, but rather to the “Spirit of intelligence and understanding who hovered above the waters at the creation (cf. Isa 34:16; Gen 1:2; Job 33:4, etc.). It is the Spirit that brings life and makes alive, who brought order out of chaos.”⁴¹ Oswalt noted that “*spirit* here is not precisely the Holy Spirit or the third person of the Trinity, but neither is it merely ‘mind’ (as per LXX, quoted in Rom. 11:34 and 1 Cor. 2:16) in the sense of intelligence. Rather, it is the sum total of the interior life, including the volitional, affective, and cognitive aspects.” Therefore, he adds, “Who can accurately comprehend that aspect of God and so tell Him what to do?”⁴²

What these scholars say is all true, and the Hebrew word for “spirit,” רִיחַ is fairly inclusive so that, along with breath, wind, and spirit, it also covers mind, will, and understanding. Indeed, John D. W. Watts noted the word spirit “includes mind, purpose, and plans, but moves beyond them to include motivation and implementation.”⁴³ However, if one is to take Young at face value and reasonably evaluate Oswalt, one would have to conclude that Isaiah did refer to the Holy Spirit and the observations of these other scholars merely enhance the personality of the Spirit in this context. Over a century ago, for example, Franz Delitzsch noted, “‘The Spirit of Jehovah’ is the Spirit which moved upon the waters at the creation, and by which chaos was reduced to order. ‘Who,’ inquires this prophet,—‘who furnished this Spirit with the standard, according to which all this was to be done?’”⁴⁴ More recently, Geoffrey W. Grogan noted that in this passage, God was asserting His exclusive Godhood. Grogan stressed that the anthropomorphic phrases the prophet used throughout this discourse do not “reduce God to man’s level. They simply give vividness to the theological truth of His personality. The

⁴⁰ Ibid. Oswalt, *Book of Isaiah*, 59, added, “This line of thinking is similar to the one found in Job 38-41.”

⁴¹ Young, *Book of Isaiah*, 44.

⁴² Oswalt, *Book of Isaiah*, 59. See also, R. N. Whybray, *The Heavenly Counsellor in Isaiah XL.13-14* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971) 10-13.

⁴³ John D. W. Watts, *Isaiah 34-66* (Word Biblical Commentary) (Waco: Word, 1987) 90-91.

⁴⁴ Franz Delitzsch, *The Prophecies of Isaiah*, trans. James Martin, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969) 2:148.

prophet's rhetorical questions do not demean God in any way. Rather they magnify Him in the eyes of the hearer." In the light of this Grogan challenged those who limit "spirit" to mind, intelligence, and motivation, etc. He argued, "Against this, however, must be set the fact that this passage is about God's creative power, and Genesis 1.2 gives the Spirit a place in this work."⁴⁵ So the question is valid and personal: Who has measured God's Holy Spirit? Who has advised Him or given Him instructions?

The next three phrases merely amplify the message of these questions. Isaiah continued asking, "With whom did He consult and *who* gave Him understanding? And *who* taught Him in the path of justice and taught Him knowledge And informed Him of the way of understanding?" (Isa 40:14). The obvious answer again is, No one! Because no one among God's entire creation has the wisdom or the understanding to advise the Creator. Centuries later, the Apostle Paul expressed the same unfathomable mystery of the inscrutable God, when he summarized the sovereignty of God's wisdom and understanding in relation to Israel's history. The Apostle asked, "Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! For who has known the mind of the LORD, or who became His counselor?" (Rom 11:33-34). In Isaiah 40:12, Isaiah stressed God's omnipotence. In verses 13-14, he recalled God's omniscience and infinite wisdom. The God of Israel—the God who would deliver Judah from her enemies, return her from exile, and restore her to her land—is a God who possesses such absolute wisdom that no one can advise Him and no one can even understand Him, much less His ways, particularly since His ways are far above man's ways (Isa 55:9). He is the God who can guide the lives of His people through any difficulty and overcome any obstacle they may encounter along the way.

God's Total Sovereignty

Isaiah has not yet completed his picture of the greatness of God. It is almost as if he were laying a foundation to this point. Since this section of his prophecy seems to be addressing the returning exiles many years future to the prophet, the greatness of Babylon would still linger in their memories. These future Israelites might also remember the mighty Assyrians who had threatened them in the days of Hezekiah and devastated the northern kingdom of Israel. Therefore, the prophet now reflected on God's sovereignty as it compares with all the nations. Everything about the mighty nations with which Israel is most certainly familiar shrinks into insignificance when compared to Yahweh. With

⁴⁵ Geoffrey W. Grogan, "Isaiah," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gæbelein, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986) 6:245.

a couple more declarations beginning with “behold!” the prophet diminished the value of the nations of the earth. He proclaimed,

Behold, the nations are like a drop from a bucket,
And are regarded as a speck of dust on the scales;
Behold, He lifts up the islands like fine dust.
Even Lebanon is not enough to burn,
Nor its beasts enough for a burnt offering.
All the nations are as nothing before Him,
They are regarded by Him as less than nothing and meaningless (Isa 40:15-17).

When He announced the coming of Yahweh as victorious ruler and as a gentle shepherd, Isaiah used the word, הִנֵּה, “Behold!” Now, he was announcing the majesty of Yahweh when compared with all the nations of the earth, at least all the nations the prophet knows. Twice he used this word, “Behold!” “Behold the nations!” “Behold He taketh up the isles. . . .” The Hebrew noun used in this passage means much the same as the Greek word *ethnos* from which the word “ethnic” is derived. It means “the people,” and, as used by the Israelites, it carries the connotation of peoples separate from the chosen people (i.e. Gentiles). Sedore noted, “It can signify political entities, but it does not necessarily stress governments as does our modern word *nations*.”⁴⁶ Isaiah stressed the smallness of the nations in his image by the choice of a rare word to describe the nations. They are as a גֵּרַר, that is, a drop from a bucket. This word occurs only here in the Bible and it describes “the minute water drop in a measuring bucket,”⁴⁷ or, according to Oswald, “They are the drop of water falling back into the cistern as the bucket is pulled up. . . .”⁴⁸ Huey expressed a different but similar idea. He substituted rain cloud for bucket, as he noted, “The power of all the nations is no more to Him than a drop of water in a rain cloud (40:15).” In a footnote on this comment, Huey explained that “Ugaritic studies have shown ‘rain cloud’ to be the more likely translation of the word ordinarily rendered ‘bucket’ in 40.15. . . .”⁴⁹ This and the next metaphor—“a speck of dust on the scales”—are powerful images reflecting the inconsequential status of the nations. They are small, meaningless, and not worth a first notice, much less a second glance, when measured against the majesty of a sovereign God. “To begin with,” Watts noted, “He is not awed by them. They are miniscule elements in His creation.”⁵⁰

The second metaphor reduces the nations in significance to an even smaller value when measured against Yahweh. More than just a drop on the rim of a bucket perhaps flowing around the rim or a drop in a rain cloud, the nations

⁴⁶ Sedore, *Walk and Not Faint*, 83.

⁴⁷ Grogan, “Isaiah,” 245.

⁴⁸ Oswald, *Book of Isaiah*, 61.

⁴⁹ Huey, “Great Themes in Isaiah,” 49, fn. 17.

⁵⁰ Watts, *Isaiah*, 91.

are also no more than the dust that collects on the plate of a scale when not in use. The nations, like that dust, leave the scale virtually unaffected. Consequently, the person using the scale may ignore the dust or merely blow it away. Compared with Yahweh, the nations are mere dust. Finally, the islands of the sea are even smaller in God's sight; they are fine dust that God can grasp between thumb and finger as if they had been pulverized into the finest of dust. The idea is, as Sedore noted, "that nations and peoples who think they are important are really of no account in relation to the sovereignty of the Lord GOD."⁵¹ In the eyes of God, the nations are insignificant, for He created them; and, therefore, He has the right to do with them as He wills.

In this stanza of Isaiah's poetic prophecy, the reader has now moved from the work and wisdom of creation to the product of creation. Isaiah turned to application, applying the greatness of the Creator that he revealed in the first two stanzas already considered (9-11, 12-14): first to human strength or the "might" of the nations, and then to the fabric of creation itself (v. 15). In verse 16, the prophet moves to the religious exercises of mankind. Every civilization in the Ancient Near East offered sacrifices to their gods. To demonstrate that Judah's God is greater than all these gods of the nations, Isaiah noted that all of the magnificent trees in Lebanon, famous for its cedars, would not begin to provide a sacrificial fire for Yahweh. If that is not enough, all the finest of lambs or bulls in Lebanon put together would not begin to make a legitimate burnt offering. Motyer noted, "even the largest religious endeavor would fall short of His dignity. . . ."⁵² Young added, "The forests of mountainous Lebanon teemed with roaring wild animals; but all of these would not provide a sacrifice, for they were not sufficient. Yahweh, the God of Israel, is so high and exalted above man that man is in no way able to present unto Him a sacrifice or offering worthy of Him."⁵³ God is not only great in power and great in wisdom, He is great in authority and great in worth. He is the sovereign ruler of His creation, and the implication here is that He is so great in value that the best man can offer falls short of His worthiness.

Speaking of the trees and beasts of Lebanon, Albert Barnes offered a beautiful summary of Isaiah's evaluation of man's religious efforts.

All these ranges of mountains, abounding in magnificent trees and forests, would not furnish fuel sufficient to burn the sacrifices which would be an appropriate offering to the majesty and glory of God . . . all those animals, if offered in sacrifice, would not be an appropriate expression of what was due to God. . . . The image employed here by Isaiah is one of great poetic beauty; and nothing, perhaps, could give a deeper impression of the majesty and honour of the great JEHOVAH.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Sedore, *Walk and Not Faint*, 84.

⁵² Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 304.

⁵³ Young, *Book of Isaiah*, 49.

⁵⁴ Barnes, *Isaiah*, 67.

Of all the efforts of man to curry God’s favor, to gain God’s blessing, to acquire a measure of God’s grace, Isaiah simply responded, “Not enough!”

The final lines in this stanza again reflect on God’s greatness and man’s insufficiency.

All the nations are as nothing before Him,
They are regarded by Him as less than nothing and meaningless (Isa 40:17).

It is important to note what Isaiah did not say. He did not say that God counts mankind as nothing, but they are as nothing *before* God. In other words, in comparison with or in relation to, God, the nations are nothing. They are even less than nothing. They are as the chaos at the beginning of creation (“vanity,” תִּוְהוּ; see Gen 1:2). At this point, Isaiah has essentially ceased employing metaphors and figures of speech or poetic imagery, but has turned to direct statements. “With these powerful negative words,” noted Oswalt, “(‘ayin, ‘that which is not’; ‘epes, ‘that which does not exist’; and tōhû, ‘chaos, emptiness), Isaiah asserts that beside God the earthly nations do not exist.” Oswalt explained in greater detail.

He is not merely greater than they, as the gods were considered to be. Rather the nations are not on the same plane of existence as He is. This radical discontinuity between the human and divine is the central concept that distinguishes OT religion and its daughters—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—from all others. It is at the heart of the Western worldview, and if surrendered, will plunge us back into the darkest of dark ages.⁵⁵

It is important to notice also a slight shift in subject from the first line in this stanza to the last two lines in the stanza. Isaiah shifted from “the nations” in a general sense to “*all* nations” in a more specific and an all-inclusive sense. Not only a few nations, known to those in Israel or the ancient Near East, but *all* nations collectively have no substance in the eyes of Yahweh. He is the fullest of substance because He is eternal and unchanging and because He is the Creator of all else. The nations are of no substance at all because they are temporal and changing, and created by the Creator.

Nationalism was an important thing to many of the ancient Near Eastern civilizations; and this author is not attempting to denigrate nationalism in itself. There may be some value if only temporal in declaring love for country and in some form of patriotism, again if only temporal. For example, as an American and raised not far from where America first declared its independence from England, this author has climbed the Statue of Liberty, toured Valley Forge, and Brandywine Battlefields. Having touched the Liberty Bell and walked through Independence Hall, having taken a picture of the desk

⁵⁵ Oswalt, *Book of Isaiah*, 61-62.

and pen upon which the Declaration of Independence was signed, and having even visited the National Archives in Washington, D.C. and seen the original document, he must acknowledge that heritage here on earth is not his primary heritage. For instance, all Christians are residing as strangers and aliens in whatever land they reside. All Christians are ambassadors from another “land.” While one may be proud to be an American, and while living in a particular country demonstrate respect and honor both the country and its flag, at the same time, one must acknowledge that when compared to God, even great countries are no better than the chaos that first inhabited the earth before the Spirit of God and the Word of God began their work of shaping creation at the beginning. To summarize this stanza, Motyer noted, “*Less than nothing* is the ‘formless’ of Genesis 1.2, meaning ‘lacking evident purpose and meaning’: ‘compared to Him they are to be reckoned as pointless.’”⁵⁶ God is a powerful ruler and a gentle shepherd. He is omnipotent in His might, omniscient in His wisdom, and sovereign in His relation to all creation. He is a great God! Who can compare with Him?

YAHWEH IS A GOD WHO POSSESSES DISTINCT PRESTIGE
ISAIAH 40:18-20

At this juncture in his proclamation, Isaiah asked the question to which he had been hinting not so subtly from the beginning, that is, his own version of Moses’ question: “To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare with Him?” (Isa 40:18). Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, translated the second phrase, “or what counterpart will you put forward to *match* him.”⁵⁷ Mettinger explained the term “match” by noting, “It . . . seems natural to presume that the expression *’arāk d’ mût* implies something more than a mere comparison: a challenge to the listeners to advance a counterpart to God, that could claim to be His equal, that could match Him in a competition.”⁵⁸ According to Mettinger, the prophet was looking for more than just a comparison; he was looking for a rival. The prophet used the personal pronoun *’m*, “who,” to introduce the question or to classify the question, indicating immediately that he intended for his readers to understand that God is a person. Therefore, the rival god that can compare to Him must also be a living person. Since the question implies from the start that no one is like Him, it also indicates He is a Person of unique prestige, so prestigious that He falls into a

⁵⁶ Motyer, *Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary*, 248.

⁵⁷ Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, “The Elimination of a Crux? A Syntactic and Semantic Study of Isaiah XL 18-20,” in *Studies on Prophecy: A Collection of Twelve Papers* (Supplements to *Vetus Testamentum* 26) (Leiden: Brill, 1974) 78 (italics added).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* 79.

class all His own. Young stated the strength of Isaiah's comparison here, in addition to its personal focus.

The comparison has to do not merely with dumb idols but with all that is not God. Is there anything apart from God with which He may be compared? The answer is, 'There is not.' At the same time it should be noted that the question is *unto whom* and not *unto what will ye liken God?* Perhaps the thought is that there is no human creature to whom God may be likened. No man, be he ever so powerful and exalted, can be compared with God.⁵⁹

In fact, Isaiah's question contains a bit of irony. Instead of the usual name for God (אלהים), with which he was certainly familiar since he used it over eighty times in reference to God, the prophet here used the singular form, אֱל. In reading the Old Testament, one usually associates this form of the name with other names with which it is occasionally used to indicate some special character or some special power or some blessing related to God in some way (e.g. names such as *El Shaddai*, or *El Roi*, or even *El Elyon*). Here, however, *El* stands alone, as if Isaiah intended to stress God's sole deity over all other gods. John Oswalt reinforced this idea and explained the usage even further.

The word here translated *God* is 'ēl, not the most common term for God, which is ^עlōhīm. The difference between the two is that the latter speaks of the general qualities of deity. Isaiah uses the former, which is identical to that of the high god in the Canaanite pantheon, to indicate the absolute superiority of the Lord (so in 43:12; 45:14; 46:9; see also 31:3). If He alone is El, then there is nothing like Him in all the universe.⁶⁰

Motyer focused on the purpose of the prophet to exalt the majesty of God. He noted, "'ēl (*God*) is the most transcendent of the God-words, connoting dominion over all (42:5), absolute deity (43:10, 12; 46:9), the unique God of Israel (45:14) and the God of inscrutable purposes (45:15)."⁶¹ Since God is both unique and absolute, no one can compare to Him. The most prestigious of royalties, the most prestigious of the upper classes of society, the most prestigious of the ancient gods all turn invisible in the majestic light of the God who dwells in unapproachable light (1 Tim 6.16).

However, there is more. Isaiah was not content to merely ask the question or to singularly exalt God, he must also denigrate these other "gods." Therefore, he declared,

*As for the idol, a craftsman casts it,
A goldsmith plates it with gold,
And a silversmith fashions chains of silver.*

⁵⁹ Young, *Book of Isaiah*, 51.

⁶⁰ Oswalt, *Book of Isaiah*, 62.

⁶¹ Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 304.

He who is too impoverished for *such* an offering
 Selects a tree that does not rot;
 He seeks out for himself a skillful craftsman
 To prepare an idol that will not totter (Isa 40:19-20).

Early in history, men tried to understand the phenomena of nature in terms of the activities of gods. It did not take many years before they were creating images of the gods, images that they could see and seek to relate. This only added to their depravity, because not only did God command them to make no graven image, but also commanded them that no one was to make an image of the supreme invisible God. Oswalt noted, for instance, "If God's transcendence is the most fundamental truth of OT theology, its immediate corollary is the next most fundamental: one cannot make an image of God."⁶² Nevertheless, men tried, and men did make images, not of the true, living God, but of the god's conjured by their imaginations, gods they could understand, gods they could manage and manipulate according to their own preconceived notions.

In some cases, however, even corrupt Israelite leaders created images that they associated directly with Yahweh. Aaron, for example, at the peoples' bidding, formed a molten calf of gold, and the people associated it with Yahweh, saying, "This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt" (Exod 32:4b) When Jeroboam, son of Nebat rebelled against Solomon and Rehoboam and drew away the ten northern tribes of Israel, he performed a similar act. To prevent the people from returning to Judah and to Jerusalem to worship God (and possibly reunite the tribes), Jeroboam "made two golden calves, and he said to them, 'It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem; behold your gods, O Israel, that brought you up from the land of Egypt.' He set one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan" (1 Kgs 12:28b-29). It may be argued that neither Aaron nor Jeroboam was truly equating the idol with Yahweh. Whether or not they were, they created an image in opposition to the commands of God. Furthermore, these images were no less foolish and no less sinful than those created by unbelieving pagans. If anything, they were worse because God's people have no excuse. Furthermore, commenting on Isaiah's assessment, Harry Bultema noted, in these verses the prophet "shows us the foolish wastefulness of the rich person who squanders his gold and silver to obtain a metal idol."⁶³ What kind of god must be chained down to prevent thieves from stealing it for its gold? Cannot such a god protect itself?

After ridiculing the wastefulness of the rich, Isaiah turned to the average man (v. 20). This passage offers a small difficulty because the opening phrase has resulted in several different translations. The issue seems to be why is the man so impoverished? The King James Version implies that he was poor

⁶² Oswalt, *Book of Isaiah*, 62.

⁶³ Harry Bultema, *Commentary on Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1981) 383.

to begin, and so cannot afford any oblations. Consequently, he cannot afford a rich, metal idol either. As a result, he chooses wood that will not easily decay and seeks a craftsman to make him an idol of this material. The New American Standard Bible says essentially the same thing. J. A. Alexander took issue with these translations, however. Alexander noted, “As the form is evidently that of a participle passive, the best translation seems to be *impoverished*, and the best construction that proposed by Gesenius in his *Lehrgebäude* (p. 821), *impoverished by oblation* or religious gifts.”⁶⁴ Alexander thought that the man was not too impoverished *to* make an offering, but rather the man gave so much to the god that he had nothing left with which to purchase an idol.

Most of the translations since Alexander, however, continue the idea of the King James Version. The man was poor in the first place, and the value of his idol depended on what he could afford to pay for it. Motyer stated clearly: “. . . the point is not (as in the NIV) to make a contrast with verse 19 (*such an offering*). The MT simply has ‘one impoverished in respect of an offering,’ insisting that in idolatrous religion the ‘value’ of a god depends on the financial state of a devotee.”⁶⁵ Apparently Isaiah was less concerned with why the man was poor, and more concerned with how the poor man managed his devotion to his false god. The prophet expressed his sarcasm indiscriminately by focusing on the extreme ends of the economic/religious gamut of the ancient Near Eastern society. Each makes his own image of the gods; and in each case, the god reflects the economic status of the individual. More importantly for Isaiah, in each case, the god cannot compare in any way to the true, living, transcendent God of Judah. Young summarized Isaiah’s case when he noted,

There were actually those who bowed down to this [the manmade idol] rather than to the eternal and immutable God. Here the temporal would create the eternal, the weak the strong, the finite the infinite, the changeable the unchangeable. Man seeks to create God – and all in the image of man! Isaiah could not more clearly have placed in the open the utter folly and pointlessness of idolatry.⁶⁶

CONCLUSION

All that Isaiah has demonstrated in this short passage should compel man to fall on his face before God as Isaiah himself did when he first encountered God at the death of King Uzziah (Isa 6:1-11), and to worship Him as the only God. He is to be worshipped as the true God, as the living God, and as distinctively God. Labuschagne noted,

Israel knew one thing, and that was that her religion was different from other religions exactly *because her God was different from all other gods*. The distinctiveness of her

⁶⁴ Alexander, *Prophecies of Isaiah*, 110.

⁶⁵ Motyer, *Prophecy of Isaiah*, 305.

⁶⁶ Young, *Book of Isaiah*, 55.

religion exhibits itself in the distinctiveness of Yahweh. Naturally this idea emerges from the whole of the witness of the O.T., but still in a most explicit way Israel spoke about the distinctiveness of her religion, *whenever she proclaimed that her God, Yahweh, is incomparable.*⁶⁷

Isaiah, in just a few brief stanzas, revealed the distinctiveness of his God and has proclaimed the majesty and greatness of his God.

God revealed His majesty in His power as the coming ruler with a mighty arm. He is truly King of kings (1 Tim 6:15) and Lord of lords (Deut 10:17). Indeed, Moses even declared Him to be God of gods (10:17). Who then can claim to be like Him? Who can come even close to Him in might? He revealed His majesty in His wisdom. Who then has been His counselor or could even presume to be? Since He created all things, and any god man forms from any material whether gold, silver, or wood, stands so inferior to the God of Israel that they cannot even stand before Him (see 1 Sam 5:1-6). Reading just Isaiah 40:9-20 should re-instill within the hearts of believers a new and lofty concept of God that they overcome A. W. Tozer's sharp indictment. However, in the reading, they must *see* God, not just read about Him. Moreover, in seeing Him, they will look around as Elizabeth Barrett Browning once did and note:

Earth's crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees takes off his shoes,
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Labuschagne, *Incomparability of Yahweh*, 4.

⁶⁸ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, as quoted in "Reflections," *Christianity Today* (31 July 2000).

BOOK REVIEWS

The Coming Apocalypse: A Study of Replacement Theology vs. God's Faithfulness in the End-Times by Renald E. Showers. Bellmawr, NJ: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, 2009. 118 pp., paper, \$8.95.

In the Western world at least, in which racism is one of the few forbidden sins, the recent rise in anti-Semitism is perplexing. How can civilized, educated, tolerant, and pluralistic people despise a race solely because of their ethical lineage? For those who understand the biblical teaching with regard to Israel there is no surprise. Unfortunately, due to myriad of reasons from biblical illiteracy, to the popularity of Replacement Theology, to lack of interest in prophetic teaching, to an unwillingness to wade through massive tomes on the subject, the average Christian has little understanding of Israel's past, present, or future. Enter Dr. Showers's highly readable yet concise overview of Israel's God-ordained role throughout biblical times, today, and as related to end times. Showers aptly demonstrated that Israel has been, and remains, at the foundation of God's plans for mankind.

The Coming Apocalypse begins with a clear and forcible challenge to the doctrine of Replacement Theology—the idea that God is forever finished with Israel as a nation and has replaced Israel with the church. The roots of Replacement Theology (or supercessionism) can be traced to anti-Semitism that originated as early as the second century. Church Fathers from Justin Martyr to Origen to Augustine propagated a hatred for the Jews that heralded the development of unbiblical understandings of ecclesiology and eschatology. Concerning ecclesiology, the church began to mimic the Old Testament priesthood and systems of worship. Moreover, with Augustine's *City of God* the church became the equivalent of the kingdom of God on earth today. As for eschatology, premillennialism, which was the predominant view of the church for the first three centuries, was replaced with amillennialism, which denies a future kingdom on earth in which Christ will administer God's rule for a thousand years.

At the time of the Protestant Reformation, many biblical doctrines were restored such as justification by faith alone and the final authority of Scripture, but the Reformers retained Roman Catholic theology dealing with the church and end times. Furthermore and sadly, many of the Reformers accepted and proliferated Rome's anti-Semitism, chief of which was Martin Luther. Therefore, the persecution of the Jews by the church that began with Constantine continued throughout the Middle Ages, and through modern times. Showers, however, did more than document and lament the church's persecution of the Jews. He clearly demonstrated from Romans 11 that

Replacement Theology is unbiblical and God still has a unique relationship and a plan for the nation of Israel.

In chapter three, Showers presented a solid defense of Israel's rightful ownership of the Promised Land. God, through the Abrahamic Covenant, gave Israel the land permanently; however, the land has often been occupied and controlled by Gentiles. Adding to the problem is the Islamic teaching "that once Muslim forces have subjugated an area of the world to Islamic rule, that area belongs irrevocably to Allah forever. If a non-Muslim force should succeed in removing Islamic rule from that area, Allah is dishonored. Thus, for the sake of Allah, the non-Muslims must be eliminated and Islamic rule restored at any cost." Given this background the tensions between modern Israel and the Islamic world come into focus. The question is, "Who rightly holds the title deed?" Here Showers presented the evidence as found in Scripture, principally the Old Testament, to prove Israel's permanent ownership of the land.

The last chapter very clearly explained the eschatological events as related to Israel. Showers examined the nations as found in Scripture that will be involved in the final attempt to destroy Israel and then identified which peoples occupy those lands today. What is most interesting is to discover that all the modern occupiers of these lands are Muslim people or rapidly becoming predominately Muslim, including Russia. Showers worked through the pertinent passages on this subject and determined that the Ezekiel 38—39 invasion of Israel must occur during the tribulation just prior to the midpoint. Therefore, the events leading to the Tribulation, the unveiling of the Antichrist, and the invasion of Israel are being formed by the ancient Jewish/Islamic tension. This little book provides an excellent resource for anyone interested in the nation of Israel's part in history and the coming apocalypse.

Gary E. Gilley, senior pastor, Southern View Chapel

Institutes of the Christian Religion: 1541 French Edition trans. Elsie Anne McKee. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009. 735 pp., paper, \$39.00.

French theologian John Calvin (1509-64) wrote the first edition of his *magnus opum* in Latin in 1536 and completed the final composition of his work in 1559. The 1541 French edition, however, has long been regarded as a treasure among the various editions of Calvin's work. Calvin's *Institutes* were first written as six chapters but expanded and revised to four complete books with regard to Creator, Redeemer, Spirit, and the Church. Publication was in Basel where Calvin was exiled, and included dedication to the French king Francis I. Calvin desired his summary of biblical theology as refutation of the king who was persecuting the French Protestants and identifying the Huguenots erroneously as Anabaptists. By imploring the king to exercise compassion

toward the Protestants, the Reformer seemed to understand that peaceful times are conducive to evangelism. (Certainly it is true that, as opportunity for the proclamation of the Gospel, God has used persecution and war, but it must be assumed that Calvin understood correctly from Scripture that persecution and war are viewed as the exception, not the rule, when God so uses them.) The French Protestants, in addition to Christians in the twenty-first century, may have been inclined to regard government as an enemy exclusively, not understanding it in its divinely ordained role. Not only did Calvin provide theological commentary with regard to civil government, but also he addressed many other practical matters, in addition to an exposition of the Apostles' Creed, the Ten Commandments, and the Lord's Prayer. The French edition of Calvin's *Institutes* is particularly pastoral and reflects the Reformer's passion to encourage, exhort, and teach the church. Elsie Anne McKee has accomplished a masterful translation of John Calvin's 1541 French *Institutes*, which has been previously inaccessible to English-language readers. The first English translation of the French edition is highly recommended for renewed insights and perspectives into a classic text of pastoral theology.

Ron J. Bigalke Jr., author, lecturer, pastor, Eternal Ministries

***It's the End of the World As We Know It (and I Feel Fine)* by Jim Fletcher. Lake Mary, FL: Christian Life, 2009. 224 pp., paper, \$14.99.**

Having exhausted twenty years in publishing, as a newspaper editor and then book editor, Jim Fletcher is well known to the industry. According to the back cover, the majority of his adult life has been "in search of the truth about the Bible and Bible prophecy," and in his present work, "he clearly demonstrates just how relevant (and true) the Bible really is." Fletcher addressed a combination of apologetic and prophetic themes. Prophecy itself was regarded apologetically, that is, God may use the prophetic Word to convict skeptics with regard to its veracity. The empirical evidence for the authenticity and accuracy of Scripture is immense. Of course, understanding the prophetic Word is an encouragement to Christians in their faith for it demonstrates that all God's promises are true. Fletcher was particularly interested in the continual existence of God's chosen people, the Jews, in comparison to other ancient peoples. The only serious response to the nation of Israel is that the Jews are primary in God's plans for the end times and the existence (preservation) of the Jews is certainly not a coincidence. The author fully disclosed his own understanding of Scripture: "I believe the bible is exactly what it claims to be—the history of the world, inspired by the Creator of the world." Unfortunately, he confessed, "it knows us. But we don't know it" (p. xvii).

The recurring references to pop culture (e.g. Homer Simpson) and life examples are crafted for appeal to younger readers. The author understands this “edgy” approach and faithfully presented the theology of classic eschatological works with the intent of impacting broader and modern readers. Although some readers may regard the title of this book as cynical (taken from the popular R.E.M. song), this is certainly not Fletcher’s attitude in this provoking work (unless perhaps addressing scoffers). The author would rather encourage his readers that the end of the world will be fulfilled precisely as God decreed; therefore (as in the subtitle) “stop worrying and learn to love these end times.” It is a privilege to recommend this relevant work by my friend and brother in Christ, Jim Fletcher, who both educates and entertains in communicating the truth of God’s Word.

Ron J. Bigalke Jr., author, lecturer, pastor, Eternal Ministries

Life with God: Reading the Bible for Spiritual Transformation by Richard J. Foster. New York: HarperCollins, 2008. 224 pp., cloth, \$24.95.

Life with God was published to coincide with the 30th anniversary of Foster’s first and best-known book, *Celebration of Discipline*. The original volume in many ways changed the landscape of evangelical Christianity by introducing “Christian” mystics, mostly from Roman Catholicism, to evangelicalism. Accompanying the mystics was the idea, heavily promoted by Foster, Dallas Willard and others, that mysticism offers a superior way of knowing God than other Christian traditions. In just three short decades since the publication of *Celebration of Discipline* mysticism has infiltrated virtually every Protestant denomination, school, and organization. *Life with God* is Foster’s latest attempt to progress the mystical influence.

Foster was correct to state that the Bible should not be studied for knowledge alone (p. 4), although I cannot think of anyone who teaches anything close to this. Nor did Foster deny the value of Bible study, although he warned that one should not attempt to control the Bible (pp. 7, 61). This idea needs to be understood in light of Foster’s disdain for propositional truth (p. 83), his accusation that the Pharisees practiced bibliolatry (p. 25) (a false accusation since Jesus condemned not their devotion to Scripture but their additions to it), the assurance that God will not “serve our favorite orthodoxy” (p. 73), and his belief that “trusting Jesus is ultimately not a matter of the mind, but the heart” (p. 50). What remains is a Bible whose value lies not in what it says but in how it transforms one through some other means. With all this in mind Foster had two main agendas to promote.

- Spiritual formation, defined as “the process of transforming the inner reality of the self in such a way that the overall life with *God* seen in the Bible naturally and freely comes to pass in us” (p. 10) (emphasis in original).
- Spiritual disciplines “which are the God-ordained means by which each of us . . . go about training in the spiritual life” (p. 13). “A spiritual discipline is an intentionally directed action by which we do what we can do in order to receive from God the ability (or power) to do what we cannot do by direct effort” (p. 16). Others would call this means of grace. The disciplines include those of abstinence (solitude, silence, fasting, frugality, chastity, secrecy, and sacrifice), and disciplines of engagement (study, worship, celebration, service, prayer, fellowship, confession, and submission) (pp. 142-43).

The idea is that spiritual transformation occurs as one practices the spiritual disciplines. Not that the disciplines have power in themselves but they connect one to the Source of Power—God (p. 137). The issue that must be critiqued is, do the Scriptures ascribe Foster’s disciplines as conduits by which the grace and power of God is brought into one’s life? The answer to this all important question is “no.” Only the Scriptures (John 17:17) and prayer (Heb 4:16) are described as means of God’s sanctifying grace in the life of the believer. This is not to say that none of the other disciplines has value, but God does not call believers to practice these as a means to spiritual reformation. The disciplines recommended by Foster, in addition to his entire spiritual formation system, are derived from the mystics. His list of recommended spiritual masters is witness to this: Ignatius of Loyola (p. 66); Teresa of Avila (p. 166); Jeremy Taylor; William Law; Dallas Willard (pp. 24, 80, 153); Henri Nouwen (pp. 64-65, 110); Father Anthony of Sourozh (p. 77); Phoebe Palmer (p. 114); Gregory the Great (p. 115); Hildegard of Bingen (p. 115); Francis of Assisi (pp. 115, 166, 168); Aimee Semple McPherson (p. 115); John Wimber (p. 115); David Yonggi Cho (p. 115); Brother Lawrence (pp. 126, 166); Flannery O’Conner (p. 126); Walter Rauschenbusch (p. 128); John Woolman (pp. 149ff); Julian of Norwich (p. 166); Mother Teresa (pp. 192-96); and, Soren Kierkegaard (pp. 189-90).

Life with God is focused mostly on how the Bible transforms one’s life. However, while Foster recognized other approaches to the Bible it is *lectio divina*, a method developed by Catholic mystics, which is “the primary mode of reading the Bible for transformation” (p. 62). *Lectio* is a contemplative means of approaching the Scriptures (not for understanding and application), but through imagination and “attentiveness to the heart of God” (p. 73) one allows the Holy Spirit to speak beyond the written Word (pp. 62-73). While the goal is to draw closer to God, *lectio* in practice is a highly subjective attempt to mystically unite with God who will speak apart from Scripture (pp. 15, 24, 58-59, 67-68, 70-71, 104-05, 162-63, 187). The draw of this type of experience is

not just a mystical encounter with God but also the promise of spiritual perfection: “Old affections of hate and guile and envy are simply gone, new affections of faith and hope and love are in their place. Love and joy and peace in the Holy Spirit seem to flow from us, simply, naturally” (p. xi).

While Foster wrote with flowery words and winsome offers, his mystical system fails the test of Scripture. God does not promise sinless perfection, does not instruct His people today beyond the Scriptures, does not offer a program of spiritual disciplines that connects one into His power, and does not prescribe a mystical approach to Scripture. Foster’s plan has the “appearance of wisdom in self-made religion and self-abasement and severe treatment of the body, but are of no value against fleshly indulgence” (Col 2:23).

Gary E. Gilley, *senior pastor, Southern View Chapel*

Living at the Crossroads: and Introduction to Christian Worldview by Michael W. Goheen and Craig G. Bartholomew. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008. 224 pp., paper, \$19.99.

For a work that is barely 200 pages the authors managed to include a massive amount of cultural analysis and worldview information between its covers. This reviewer plans to use the book as a reference tool because it provides such a concise summary of the history of the development of Western thought from humanism to postmodernity. The authors’ initial premise is that the Gospel message has in part become a captive to Western culture, and that biblical worldview may be of assistance in releasing the Gospel from its bondage to modern culture (p. 10). In order to underscore this premise, the authors suggested that Christianity has responded to cultural pressure by “limit[ing] . . . faith to the private realm of mere ‘religion’” (p. 8).

The writers affirmed that by reducing the Christian faith to private piety, the church has compromised her mission to embody the Gospel (p. x). The solution in part suggested by the authors is that instruction in biblical worldview tends to “deepen our commitment to living in the biblical story” (p. xiii). “The Bible as the true story of the world” is a way of conceiving of worldview (p. 2). The term “story” factors heavily in this book. The first chapter established a vivid antithesis between “two different and incompatible *stories* (worldviews)” thus the book title, *Living at the Crossroads* (p. 7).

The book contains a valuable section on the meaning of worldview in addition to a convincing explanation of how fully one’s worldview influences decisions and conditions one’s entire interpretation of life (pp. 12-30). The authors gave a caution with their endorsement of the value of biblical worldview—but of all places, the caution came from Roman Catholic mystic

Thomas Merton (*Contemplative Prayer*). “Meditation is something more than gaining a command of a *Weltanschauung* (worldview) . . . [for] such a meditation may be out of contact with the deepest truths of Christianity. . . .” (p. 20). By citing Merton, the authors were seeking to make their point that “thinking Christianly” is to be pursued, but “intellectualizing the gospel” is to be eschewed (p. 20). These statements could have been excluded from the book—the result being that potential confusion about a supposed intellectual and spiritual dichotomy would have been avoided.

The portions on the foundations of biblical worldview were very helpful. Christ as Lord of all and central to one’s biblical worldview were written persuasively (pp. 32-33). Additionally, the material with regard to God as Author of the creational order and Structurer of reality was also very useful. One segment was particularly stimulating intellectually. The authors asked, “Do you know what time it is in our culture?” They then provided “four signs of the times”: 1) The rise of postmodernity; 2) consumerism and globalization; 3) the renaissance of Christianity in the southern hemisphere; and, 4) the resurgence of Islam (pp. 105-26). Their conclusion was forthright, “God is historically turning out the lights of this culture as God always turns out the lights of idolatrous cultures” (p. 106).

Contextualization was commended as indispensable to biblical missions. In addition to the mandate of contextualization the authors gave the caution that contextualizing may also risk the possibility of “allowing the gospel to be compromised” (p. xiv). Regarding the dynamic of contextualization in missions, the Bible as the true story of the world engages, or enters the “context” of a culture’s erroneous view of the world. The authors cited New Testament examples of faithful contextualization in the writings of the Apostles Paul (in his treatment of fathers in a Roman patriarchal cultural context) and John (in his use of *logos* in answering Greco-Roman philosophy) (p. 137). According to the authors, faithful contextualization involves three discernment demands: 1) Discern God’s creational design; 2) Discern the cultural idolatry; and, 3) Discern the healing potential (p. 138). The book informs the reader that the central manner in which he is to stand against the idolatry of the culture is by being “an alternative community . . . [a] countercultural body . . . [a] guiding sign of the shalom of the kingdom” (p. 140-45).

The authors’ statements that “the gospel is the message of the kingdom” raised concerns in this reviewer’s mind. “The good news that Jesus announces and enacts, and that the church is commissioned to embody and make known, is the gospel of the kingdom. We make a grave mistake if we ignore this, the central image of Jesus’ proclamation and ministry” (p. 2). “[The Gospel] is God’s message about how He is at work to restore His world and all of human life” (p. 4). “[S]alvation is restorative: God’s saving work is about

reclaiming His lost creation, putting it back the way it was meant to be” (p. 51). One may appreciate the emphasis upon ultimate restoration and kingdom living as a needed corrective to private, pietistic Christianity; but what is disconcerting is the absence of substitutionary atonement in this model of Gospel proclamation (which will be addressed more fully in the conclusion of this review). The authors said, “It certainly is true that Jesus’ death is for us, but this is too narrow a version of the truth. In the biblical drama Jesus dies for the whole world, for every part of human life, for the whole nonhuman creation. The cross is an event whereby the course of cosmic history is settled” (p. 56). “The mission of the church is to make known a comprehensive restoration” (p. 57). Admittedly, the cosmic effects of Christ’s work are often neglected in evangelicalism. However, this reviewer would not want to see propitiation as the heart of the Gospel of Christ de-emphasized and the gospel of restoration as the new gospel center.

The section of the book with the subhead, “A comprehensive vision of cultural engagement” (p. 127), represented a call to cultural engagement (and an accompanying abandonment of private piety and privatized Christianity). Contextualization was touted as pivotal to the engagement of culture (p. 136). The contextualization enjoined was explained: “A faithful embodiment of the gospel in our own cultural settings demands that we discern between the creational structure and design in all things and the religious misdirection and rebellion that pervert God’s good world” (p. 136). Engaging culture (redeeming culture) was described as “highly contextual” and best accomplished by means of “perspectives on public life” (pp. 139, 146). These perspectives on public life are as follows: business, politics, art, sports, scholarship, psychology, economics, and education. The implicit message is that culture will be redeemed as Christians make a faithful contribution and impact in each of these disciplines.

To the book’s credit, there is much material in the final chapter that assists one’s efforts at bringing the Gospel to bear on erroneous worldview. “Witness is a reminder that in all areas of life, including education, our fundamental faith assumptions will clash with those of our non-Christian neighbors” (p. 170). “Worldview studies can make us more fully aware not only of the comprehensive scope of the gospel and of our mission, of the religious power and all-embracing reach of our culture’s secular ‘faith,’ but also the unbearable tension that comes with living at the crossroads where these two stories intersect” (p. 174).

This book is recommended to evangelists, pastors, Christian apologists, and teachers of biblical worldview. It is a scholarly work. There is much here to stimulate one’s thinking and to deepen one’s grasp upon the implications of biblical cosmology to Gospel outreach. Biblical worldview as a tool and framework to analyze and engage culture is also a useful theme. The

weaknesses of the book are of concern. If an unbeliever were to read the book, it might leave him with the impression that by adopting God's creational plan for every area of life, he would be a true Christian. Without a strong emphasis on the condition of the sinner, the need of regeneration, and the finished work of Christ, by default one is left with a social gospel—even if that was not the intent of the book. The final 50 pages would have been so much stronger if the power of God in the Gospel was displayed and expressed as the means by which sinners are changed. Without the message of the cross being central and the sinner's necessary response of faith and repentance, the cultural mandate can easily regress into social reform. The church is called to proclaim Christ crucified and risen for helpless and rebellious sinners. The biblical Gospel has penal substitution at its core. In the effort to engage the culture, Christians must never forget that culture is redeemed by the conversion of sinners—one at a time by the blood of Christ.

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A Tale of Two Sons by John MacArthur. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2008. 220 pp., cloth, \$22.99.

MacArthur provided his readers with a comprehensive, readable, and thoroughly biblical exposition of the "Parable of the Prodigal Son." In contrast to a well-publicized study of sermons on this great parable (see *Christless Christianity* by Michael Horton, pp. 48-61) which twisted the story into various therapeutic explanations, MacArthur rightly explained that the parable was aimed at the hard-hearted, legalistic Pharisees and the central figure is the "good" son, not the father or the prodigal. MacArthur's understanding is summarized early in the book.

The prodigal represents a typical sinner who comes to repentance. The father's patience, love, generosity, and delight over the son's return are clear and perfect emblems of divine grace. The prodigal's heart change is a picture of what true repentance should look like. And the elder brother's cold indifference—the real focal point of the story, as it turns out—is a vivid representation of the same evil hypocrisy Jesus was confronting in the hearts of the hostile scribes and Pharisees to whom He told the parable in the first place (Luke 15:2). They bitterly resented the sinners and tax collectors who drew near to Jesus (v. 1), and they tried to paper over their fleshly indignation with religious pretense. But their attitudes betrayed their unbelief and self-centeredness. Jesus' parable ripped the mask off their hypocrisy (p. xvi).

Occasionally, MacArthur made statements which, while very possible and logical, are nevertheless not provable within the text. For example, it is not possible to know where the elder son was when the prodigal left home (pp. 59, 154), or that the father wanted to reach his son before he arrived to the village

where he would receive scorn (p. 113), or that the town's people saw the father's reception of the son (p. 117). However, these are minor issues which do not significantly mar the overall content.

The book includes a useful appendix on how to interpret parables. This is especially helpful in light of much postmodern emphasis on "narrative theology" as opposed to propositional and objective truth. *The Tale of Two Sons* is highly recommended for its specific teaching on the prodigal son parable and for examples of how to approach parabolic biblical literature.

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When Sinners Say "I Do": Discovering the Power of the Gospel for Marriage by Dave Harvey. Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Press, 2007. 189 pp., paper, \$13.95.

Harvey has written an unyielding, biblical book based on a dual premise. *First*, as per the title, all marriages are the union of two sinners; therefore, problems are inevitable because in the heart of each resides a sinner (p. 51). Harvey did not deny the transforming work of the Holy Spirit, which is ever drawing believers nearer to Christlikeness (p. 140), but a battle with sin rages in the heart of God's children. When sin receives the advantage, not only do sinners offend a holy God, but they also bring damage to others including spouses. Wise then is the couple which recognizes that two sinners united as one will sin against one another, bringing pain and hurt. All is not lost, however, for the second premise, "What we believe about God determines the quality of our marriage" (p. 20), offers great hope. Marital happiness and fruitfulness is found not in self-help gimmicks and faddish theories and methods, but in theology. What one thinks (and applies) about God will determine what he becomes and in turn what one's marriage becomes. *When Sinners Say "I Do"* is developed around these two vital concepts that every married couple needs to grasp. Harvey wrote with humor and vulnerability. This is no "ivory tower" theologian who lives above the mess of life—he too has been there, and still is. However, he wrote with the hope and truth of the Gospel. The grace that justifies is the same grace that sanctifies both individual lives and marriages (pp. 138-50). Any married couple would profit from the reading of this book.

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Calvin and the Biblical Languages by John D. Currid. Fearn, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 2006. 106 pp., paper, \$16.99.

John Currid is the Carl McMurray Professor of Old Testament at Reformed Theological Seminary. His purpose in this short volume was to demonstrate Calvin's knowledge and use of the biblical languages in his sermons and commentaries. His plea was that more seminaries would produce pastor-scholars highly skilled in the biblical languages, which should come as a welcomed encouragement to both students and teachers of Greek and Hebrew. The book begins with a timeline of Calvin's life followed by six brief chapters, a postscript plea, a sermon from Calvin on Deuteronomy 16:1-4, and a helpful general index.

Currid began by describing Calvin's formal training in the languages. Of special interest to Greek teachers is Melchior Wolmar who was Calvin's first Greek teacher. This man not only taught the basics of Greek to Calvin but also was a great encourager and inspired Calvin to further studies in Greek. Language students today still have a strong need for encouragement and inspiration from their teachers to continue in their studies and maintain their skills. As evidence for his belief that Calvin was a solid exegete in both Hebrew and Greek, Currid described Calvin as a preacher. He came into the pulpit with only his Hebrew Old Testament or Greek New Testament using no notes or outlines. He would take 4-5 verses on average at a time while in the Old Testament and 2-3 in the New Testament. Each sermon would last 35 to 40 minutes. He would first give the natural sense of the passage then follow with its benefits. He stressed brevity and simplicity.

In his Old Testament commentaries, Calvin used lexical studies of Hebrew words much more than Hebrew grammar. Currid approved of Calvin's cautious use of etymology. He concluded, however, that Calvin did not show great depth and breadth in his use of Hebrew. While Calvin's Hebrew was good, his Greek was outstanding. At an early age, he was counted competent by his Greek teacher to work on a new translation of the New Testament. Greek later became one of Calvin's passions, and he even learned to think in Greek. Calvin was an able New Testament textual critic performing this work from the manuscripts available to him before translating the text. When Calvin founded the Geneva Academy, he immediately demonstrated the value he placed on the languages by securing three chairs: one each for Latin, Hebrew, and Greek. The Geneva Academy produced many excellent scholars who were well prepared in the use of the biblical languages and commissioned them into the world to faithfully teach the Word of God.

Currid's greatest concern appears to be the reduction of requirements in the biblical languages by seminaries today. He rightly recognized that pragmatism and professionalism are eliminating the study of Greek and

Hebrew. He believes that this de-emphasis of the languages in seminaries is a result of a “trade school mentality and a closet anti-intellectualism.” Currid believes that the movement from the Bible languages is really a movement from the centrality of the Scriptures. All this means that there is a danger of losing a distinctive characteristic of the Reformation. In support of the importance of knowing the biblical languages Currid noted that because there are so many translations of the Bible and commentaries available today it is hard to know which ones are right without the languages. Moreover, he is convinced that there is greater depth and freshness in preaching when the preacher has come into direct contact with the text. This reviewer highly recommends *Calvin and the Biblical Languages*. Whether a student, teacher, or one who needs to renew his use of Greek and Hebrew, the reader will have a greater appreciation for the role the biblical languages played in the Reformation and their value in the teaching ministry today.

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The Burned-Over District: The Social and Intellectual history of Enthusiastic Religion in Western New York, 1800-1850 by Whitney R. Cross. London: Cornell University Press, 1982. 383 pp., paper, \$24.95.

The Burned-Over District is a description of the religious character of Western New York during the first half of the 19th century (p. vii). The events and movements in the Burned-over District have left an astounding impact on the religious, political, and social development of American culture. Prohibition, emancipation of the slaves, numerous cults and utopian societies, and several questionable Christian methodologies and theologies all find their heritage in this exciting time and place.

Never revealing his own spiritual allegiance, Cross began his work with the Great Revival of 1799-1800 (what many call the Second Great Awakening). While Kentucky receives most of the attention from historians, Cross made a case that the most significant affect of the Great Revival was found in Western New York. The Revival spawned a desire for “enthusiastic” expressions of Christianity that would define the first half of the 19th century. In the wake of the emotionally/spiritual tsunami at the turn of the century would be a series of seasonal revivals (pp. 10-11) leading to the revivalism of Charles Finney, especially his 1826 and 1831 campaigns in and around Rochester. Finney would set the spiritual agenda that changed the face of Christianity and has had lasting impact to this day. Finney’s (and his imitators’) influence rest not in his theology, which seemed to have little form in the early years (pp. 158-160), although later Finney would train an army of preachers in his particular brand

of perfectionism. Nor were the so-called “new measures,” which changed the methodology of the evangelical church, the ultimate change agent (pp. 160-173). Rather it was the idea that particular types of enthusiasms must accompany vital religion (pp. 163, 183).

Since Finney did not believe that revivals were miraculous (p. 199) it was left to the ingenuity of men to manufacture spiritual excitement through whatever means worked. Since the normal means available to local churches (preaching, prayer, etc.) were unable to maintain such a high level of enthusiasm, traveling bands of revivalists were needed to conduct “protracted” and emotional meetings to elevate the spiritual passion of the people (pp. 183-84). Since such passion could not be maintained for long, regular revival meetings became necessary to keep the enthusiasm going. Believers soon became dependent on the revivalist and extended meetings, which were long on emotionalism but short on doctrine and true biblical exposition. Ultimately such artificial and empty passion could not be maintained and the people began to look to unorthodox ways of getting their emotional “fix” (pp. 257, 284). It began with what Cross called ultraism, which was enthusiasm without concern for truth (p. 252). Pragmatism ruled the day and since orthodox expressions of Christianity could no longer arouse the desired emotional effects, the Yankees began to look elsewhere. In general, ultraism led to “liberal religion, biblical criticism, and a social gospel” (p. 278, cf. p. 357). Specifically an amazing number of cults and other false teachings emerged including: Shakerism (pp. 30-32), Mormonism (pp. 114, 138-50), perfectionism (pp. 238-51), moralism (p. 211ff.), Millerism (Adventism) (pp. 287-321), utopian societies (pp. 322-40), spiritism (pp. 325, 342-52), and liberalism (p. 357).

What began as a desire to know and better serve God led to a wholesale erosion of the Christian faith in Western New York and eventually throughout much of the world. *The Burned-Over District* is a powerful reminder of what happens when God’s people distance themselves from biblical authority and chase the wind of unbridled passion.

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