

UNDERSTANDING
GOD'S NEW
COVENANT IN JESUS
CHRIST



*O loving wisdom of our God! When all was sin and shame,
a second Adam to the fight and to the rescue came.*

(John Henry Newman)

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There is a difference between being a Christian and not being a Christian

Two English brothers both live in America, but their situation regarding the authorities is quite different. One has become an American citizen, he is married to an American citizen, his children are all American citizens. As such, he has certain privileges, access to health care and the right to vote, and, more importantly, he has a right to live in America on a permanent basis. He also has responsibilities. The other brother has lived there for a couple of years and is expecting to remain for some time, but he has neither the same privileges nor responsibilities. He does not have American citizenship.

Two neighbours who live in adjoining houses have very similar lifestyles and possessions. One has insurance on his belongings and the other does not. If a fire were to gut their houses, they would be in a very different position as far as compensation is concerned.

Two friends bought identical washing machines, which both failed during the first year. One received a new machine from the manufacturer whilst the other did not. On returning to the place where they bought them, one produced proof of purchase and a valid guarantee, whilst the other could do neither.

It is not always easy or possible to tell the difference between two people's situations simply by looking at them, but where differences do exist, they may be of great importance. It is possible for two people to attend a church together and, from a quick glance at their situation, to assume that they are both Christians, but that may not be case. Whilst it may be annoying,

and a matter of some inconvenience, to be unable to get a new washing machine because we have failed to retain the guarantee, at the worst, we have lost a few hundred pounds. Failure to produce our life guarantee when we stand before God will not be a matter of mere inconvenience, but of eternal consequence.

There may possibly be large numbers of people attending churches, who are uncertain how they stand as far as God is concerned. This booklet is for them. It is for you if you are one of those people.

This has not been written to persuade you or anyone else to become a Christian; that would need a different approach. It is primarily aimed at those who want to understand for themselves what it means to be a Christian, and what the privileges and responsibilities are of being one. It is for those who want to be certain whether or not they have the necessary proof of their citizenship of the Kingdom of God.

This is not about being a member of a particular church or group or sect – there is nothing visible that you can sign up for, and even if there was, there would be no need to do so. Many churches do have a membership procedure and there is nothing particularly wrong with that. However, it is important to realise that membership of a church or group, whatever it is, may not mean that you have membership of God's people.

As you read, pray that you will come through to a place of certainty; a place of assurance that you are a member of the New Covenant people of God.

Citizens of Heaven

The Greek city of Philippi, situated a few hours walk from the head of the Aegean Sea, was a Roman Colony. There were some important mines nearby, and in order to ensure that they were under the control of the Roman State, the Emperor Octavian made it a retirement settlement for a number of his veteran soldiers. Each soldier was allocated a parcel of land, and although it was a long way from Rome, they lived on their property as citizens of Rome. Philippi was ruled by two Roman military officers, and governed under the laws of Rome. All official documents and inscriptions were in Latin, the language of the Empire, and whilst most people would have been bilingual and able to speak Greek, Latin would have been spoken on the streets and in the homes of the old soldiers. It was considered a mini Rome, even copying its theatre and other places of entertainment and games.

The apostle Paul had visited this city and had seen a number of people there become Christians. When he wrote to them a few years later, his letter was a positive one, containing thanks and encouragement. One of the things he said was:

‘We are different, because our citizenship is in heaven’
(Amplified version Philippians Ch. 3 v 20)

The friends to whom he wrote would have immediately picked up his point. Just as the people of Philippi had the rights and responsibilities of the Empire, and lived, talked and breathed all things Roman, even though they were in Greece, so too the Christians were to live lives that had the mark of heaven on them, even though they lived in this world. This would not have been hard for them to grasp. It was a theme that had permeated the thinking of God’s people since the time of Abraham. In the letter

to the Hebrews (*Ch.11 v 8-10*) the readers are reminded that, even when he was living in the land that God had promised, Abraham did so as a stranger and pilgrim, because he was looking forward to the future city of God in heaven.

There is a saying, ‘He is so heavenly minded that he is no earthly good’, but in reality the opposite is more likely to be true – that we are so earthly minded that we are no heavenly good. Jesus instructed his followers not to save up their valuables on earth, but to deposit them in heaven (*Matthew Ch. 6 v 19-21*). He explained that ‘Where your valuables are, that is where your heart will be’. A good rule of thumb to know where we stand in our relationship with God, is how we live and talk about the things that are on our hearts. Do we live the same way that everyone else does, or do we gear up what we do, in order to bring about on earth the things that relate to our citizenship in heaven? Many of us have got out of the habit of thinking this way, but it is actually very basic to the Christian faith. We will all be familiar with the words of the Lord’s Prayer:

*Our Father who is in heaven, Your Name is holy,
Your Kingdom come, Your will be done,
On earth, as it is in heaven*

Jesus taught His followers to pray like this, and it would be very odd, to suggest that He did not really mean them to take it seriously. Just as God’s will is perfectly fulfilled in heaven, we are instructed to pray that the same happens on earth. It is no more than plain common sense to understand that our lifestyle and our thinking should change to fit in with our praying. Although the Christian Church kept this emphasis through large periods of history, it is something that is now out of fashion in the West. That does not mean that it is no longer relevant nor true. In practice, it is more likely to mean that we are uncertain of where we stand as far as the Kingdom of God is concerned.

The issue of Brexit over the past few years has meant that many people from other countries have been uncertain whether they can remain in the United Kingdom. Right of residency is based on citizenship, and without citizenship, there can be no certainty.

It is of course possible to be a bad citizen of a country and continually resist its culture and its laws. It is also possible, that someone who is not a citizen will try very hard to fit in with those who are. It is not simply a matter of whether we act like a citizen of heaven, but whether we actually are one or not. That will be the crunch. It is important therefore that we go through the stages of how we get our heavenly citizenship.

I believe in God, and in His Son Jesus Christ

There is a tendency in some churches today to classify virtually anyone who believes in the existence of God as a Christian. However, for much of history many people, in many countries, have believed in God. Their belief may not have been accurate, and sometimes it may have been wrong as far as the character and nature of God goes, but they have had a measure of belief. Humans are not natural atheists, and the fact that atheism has now become the predominate default position in the U.K., should not, and does not, mean that anyone who has come to an initial, though perhaps vague belief in God, may therefore be classified as a convert to Christianity.

Neither is a person a Christian simply because they believe that certain facts about Jesus Christ are true.

Charles Blondin was perhaps the most famous tightrope walker of all time. He would walk across a rope about a quarter of a mile

long, suspended above Niagara Falls. People from both Canada and America came to see this great act, which he repeated many times and with many variations. He did it in a sack, on stilts, on a bicycle, in the dark, and blindfolded. One time he even carried a stove and cooked an omelette whilst in the middle of the rope.

In one feat, which drew gasps from the crowd, Blondin walked across whilst pushing a wheelbarrow containing a sack of potatoes. He then addressed his audience: "Do you believe I can carry a person across in this wheelbarrow?" The crowd yelled, "Yes! We believe!" Blondin then asked for a volunteer whom he could push across. The crowd went silent. Some accounts say that no one responded whilst others record that one person finally did so, but by far the majority of them would not even consider committing themselves to trust Blondin with their lives.

Every single one of them said that they believed Blondin, but that was a completely different thing to actually trusting Blondin. So too, many people believe facts about Jesus – that He is the Son of God; that He came to earth as a man; that He lived, died, and rose again to accomplish forgiveness of sins and to reconcile us to God. However, they do not move on to trust in the competence of Jesus to bring them into a place of full reconciliation and obedience to God.

We sometimes speak about putting all our eggs in one basket – committing everything to a course of action without leaving any alternatives – but that is the difference between a Christian and someone who is not a Christian. A Christian puts all their trust in Christ and closes all their other options.

Jesus warned His followers about taking the decision to follow Him lightly, without considering the cost of doing so (*Luke Ch.14 v 28-33*). Becoming a Christian is a serious business. It means a

shift from believing about Jesus to believing in Jesus. The difference between believing Blondin can push the wheelbarrow across Niagara Falls and getting into the wheelbarrow. It is both sensible, and completely in line with the teaching of Jesus, to weigh up carefully the pros and cons of becoming a Christian, but if we decide to do it, we need to do it whole-heartedly.

What more do I need to do?

At the time of Jesus, the temple in Jerusalem was a magnificent affair. Built after the pattern of the portable tent of worship, which God had instructed Moses to erect, it had an inner, a middle and an outer courtyard. In addition to these, the Jerusalem temple had another large courtyard, especially for a category of worshippers called God-fearers. They were people from the non-Jewish nations who shared belief in the God of the Jews. Whilst these believing Gentiles shared a common belief about God, they remained a step short of becoming part of the people of God. It was not possible for a Gentile to take this step without taking up Jewish citizenship. Changing citizenship has never been a simple affair in any country, and for a Gentile to become a Jew involved some definite actions which required careful consideration.

Someone making the change had to relinquish all previous ties and allegiances, affirm acceptance of God's law in its entirety, and make a commitment to obeying it in every respect.

For a man, the next step was to be circumcised. This dated back to the founding of the Jewish nation through Abraham, and was

later confirmed by Moses. It originated, and continued to be, a sign that the person was in a Covenant relationship with God. Today, we would tend to refer to a contract or an agreement (along the lines of a guarantee) rather than Covenant, but it is an important biblical word. God instituted an original Covenant, which detailed what it meant to be His people, including the benefits, responsibilities and penalties. Today, an agreement would be legalised by the participants signing it, but for the Jewish people it required the shedding of blood, and this was effected both by sacrifice and in circumcision. In some of the old cowboy and Indian movies, the Indians made treaties by cutting wrists and binding them together. Blood rituals such as these have not just been part of Native American culture, but have been common throughout history, especially in the early civilisations of the Middle East. The act of shedding blood to seal an agreement by something like circumcision would not have been considered strange, for it provided a permanent sign of the Covenant agreement made with God.

The final stage involved a ritual bath, a baptism which cleansed the convert from the past, and incorporated the person into the Jewish nation. The nation was formed when the descendants of Abraham were set free from slavery in Egypt. This occurred through a series of events: the killing and eating of a lamb, the passing through the waters of the Red Sea and the eventual entry into the land of promise when God parted the river Jordan. In baptism it was as if the Gentile convert was symbolically reliving what the Jewish nation had been through in reality.

When a baby is born, we speak of the waters breaking as the baby emerges from the fluid in the womb. A person emerging from the ritual bath was seen as a baby emerging from the womb and was considered to have been reborn. They had lost their old identity and were now a Jew.

Once through this conversion process, a Gentile was allowed into the next court of the temple. The priests and their assistants were the only ones who could go into the middle court, and only the High Priest into the inner court. However a convert was in as favourable position as any Jew who was not part of the priesthood. In this new position as a member of God's people, the convert then brought a sacrifice for the priest to offer to God.

The bible refers to the agreement that existed between God and the Jews and any incoming Gentile converts, as the **Old** Covenant. It revealed what God was like, and set out how the people should live and how the relationship with Himself would work.

When Jesus came to earth, He instituted a **New** Covenant. A Christian is someone who has entered into this new agreement with God. The old and new agreements are not at odds with one another, but they are not identical. There is both continuity and discontinuity. Much of the wrong understanding about Christianity occurs when we fail to understand the relationship between the two.

We need to ensure that we are in the new agreement with God. Under the old agreement, a God fearing Gentile had to take certain steps to become part of God's people. In the new agreement there are also steps to take in order to move from being a person who believes in God, a God-fearing person, to becoming someone who trusts God, a Christ follower or Christian.

Why did God need Christianity if He had the Old Covenant?

God already had an agreement in place with His people. Why would He want to scrap that and replace it with another one?

In the Old Covenant, God had gathered a people to Himself and gave them some understanding of who He was and how He wanted them to live. They freely entered into the agreement with Him, and accepted the terms that He laid down. However, even though they had every opportunity to live in right relationship with God, they continually failed to do so.

The failure went right back to the beginning with their ancestors, Adam and Eve. God had made the couple capable of following His instructions, and of realising their created potential, but they had chosen not to do so. Adam was the constituted head of the human race (like a king or a prime minister), and any action he took was not only his own choice, but was also made on behalf of all people he represented. Adam was also the biological father of the human race. We are all descended from him, and we all inherited the genetic streak of rebellion that he introduced.

This means that all people are born with a twofold tendency to live the wrong way. The first comes from the fact that our appointed leader took us in the wrong direction, and the second from the self-willed heart we have all inherited. All of us continually confirm ourselves in that wrong direction through our own free choice.

When Adam failed, although the blame was firmly upon his shoulders and, through him, on ours also, there was someone else involved in the situation. God had previously created angels, and

one of these, Satan, had gone bad and led a rebellion in heaven. He came in the guise of a serpent and tricked Eve, who then persuaded Adam to try things out in their own way instead of God's. Since then, Satan, also known as the Devil, constantly lurks in the shadows of earth's affairs, drawing people further into lives of rebellion against God.

The overall answer to the situation would have to be a new leader who would reverse the process, take us in the right direction, deal with the Devil's interference, and obtain for us a new heart to enable us to learn and follow in God's way. Because God is Holy and righteous the matter has a further dimension. In order to be true to Himself and to retain His integrity, God cannot overlook the matter of our rebellion. He must judge us. However, God had, and still has, a way to judge us in which it is also possible for Him to give us a fresh start. God had made us with free will, and so it is necessary that we **choose** to co-operate with Him, He will not force us. To do this we need to be convinced that doing our own thing was, and is wrong, and following God's way was, and is right.

Part of the method God chose to convince us, involved selecting a specific group of people, the nation of Israel (later commonly known as Jews). He took them through a series of situations, where because of the inherited human condition, when they relied on their own strength, they always failed. The Old Covenant was the agreement which He made with them to establish the ground rules whilst this was happening.

God did two things in parallel. The first was to give His people a clear set of instructions to keep, and the second was to give them promises to believe. When they tried to obey the instructions, they always fell short, and when they believed the promises, they succeeded. These alternatives are known as living

by works or living by faith. They still remain the governing principal of how God wants us all to respond.

The Old Covenant was particularly effective when combined with God's promises in picture form, pointing forward to the new leader whom He would eventually send. For instance:

Moses was a prophet.

Aaron was the High Priest.

Joshua was the one who led the people into their land.

David was the king who established God's rule.

The person who was coming, who became known as the Messiah, would combine all of these functions and abilities. He would be a prophet, a priest, a warrior and a king. Messiah is a title, meaning the appointed and empowered representative of a King. Similar to the senior Ambassador in an Embassy – someone who has the authority to act on behalf of the sovereign who sent them. Some aspects of the law also pointed toward particular functions of the Messiah. The priesthood, and the sacrifices they offered, gave an indication that the Messiah would act as a mediator before God, yet also need to suffer on behalf of the people.

The Old Covenant also acted as a fence to limit the inherited rebellious nature. When a horse has been broken, it will work in co-operation with its master. Before that, it needs to be fenced in a high corral. God promised that in the New Covenant, He would teach His people how to obey and co-operate with Him, but until that time came, they needed to be hedged in for their own benefit.

The Old Covenant was good. It was given by God as part of His plan and purpose, but it was only a laying out of the plan, not the fulfilment of it. A recipe for a cake may be a good step in the

process of making a cake, but it is not the cake itself. A plan of a building may be an essential element in the erection of a building, and a useful tool afterwards to check things out when there are problems, but no one would confuse the drawing with the bricks and mortar.

The relationship between the Old Covenant and the New, is similar to the relationship between the recipe and the cake and the plan and the building. There are obvious points of continuity; the completed thing is identifiable in the outline and details set out beforehand. But there are also points of discontinuity. The cake is much more than the recipe, and fulfils a different function to it. The building is the consummation of the seed idea that developed through the planning stage, but has now become something established and permanent.

Christianity, the New Covenant, is the fulfilment of the Old, the new agreement which makes real all that was foreshadowed in the first agreement. The person who heads up this new order and puts it into practice is Jesus Christ.

The arrival of God's new leader

The Jewish nation waited almost eighteen hundred years for this to happen. This was the length of time from when God first spoke the promises to Abraham their forefather, till the promised Messiah came into history. The bible says 'When the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law' (*Gal Ch.4 v 4*). When the Messiah Jesus did come, he caused a division in the Jewish nation, not on the basis

of whether they had kept the law and made a genuine attempt at being good, but on the basis of whether they believed Him or not. The principle of works or faith that had always existed, now became the touchstone of everything that God would do.

The bible verse we quoted from Galatians, gives a good summary of the new situation:

Firstly, the Messiah came at the right time. Many books have been written on this one point, showing how, not only in relation to the Jewish nation, but in terms of readiness of the surrounding nations, the birth of Jesus was at the turning point of history.

Secondly, we are told that the Messiah was God's Son. Although this move on God's part might seem astounding to us, what could be better from God's point of view? The new leader would be completely competent and absolutely trustworthy.

Thirdly, God's Son did not just appear out of heaven to take over the situation, but He came as a human being, born of a woman in a similar way to all of those He came to lead. Whilst none of us can claim to understand how Jesus was both fully God and fully human, the fact that He was, has become a bedrock belief of Christianity ever since. The more we have learned about who He was and what He has accomplished, the more it has become plain that only someone who was both God and man could have done it.

In particular, He had to be human in order to be the new human leader, but He had to be more than merely human in order to fulfil God's purpose. He came as the second Adam, but not merely identical to the first. Twice in his letters, Paul compares and contrasts Adam and Christ. In the letter to the Church in Rome, he states that, just as we were all made sinners by one man's disobedience, so we are all made righteous by one man's

obedience (*Ch. 5 v 14-21*). In the first Corinthian letter, he similarly says that as in Adam all died, so in Christ all will be made alive. He then enlarges further by explaining that though the first Adam was a living soul, the second or last Adam became a life giving spirit (*Ch. 15 v22 & 45*).

Fourthly, Paul wrote that Jesus was born under the law. This includes two things we need to understand. It would not have been right for God to test Jesus in a lesser way than He did the people of Israel. He had given them the law through Moses, and one of the reasons for this, was for them to have the opportunity of living as they should in their own strength. If they had kept the law, then God would not have needed to intervene. But when they did not, God demonstrated in Jesus that it could be kept. Jesus succeeded, not by human effort, nor because He was God, but because He totally relied on His Father in heaven in the way that the first Adam should have done. The second aspect of being born under the law, was that as the new leader, the second Adam, Jesus, took on the responsibility of sorting out the situation caused by the old leader, and He did so within the terms set out in the Old Covenant. The situation was both simple and terrible. God had told Adam, and confirmed within the law given to Moses, that disobedience would mean death. As their representative head, the people's leader must die on their behalf.

We need to understand that this was more than being merely punitive. If we tell our children 'if you pull the plug out of the television, it will go off and you will not be able to watch it', we are explaining the consequence of their action. God is life, and He had intended that Adam, and all humanity should live by drawing on His life in relationship with Him. When Adam disobeyed and chose the path of self-reliance, he pulled the plug on His life source connection to God.

Part of the task of Jesus was to re-connect the plug for us.

How God has dealt with the past.

We have seen that in the beginning, God created a man, Adam, to be the one through whom all humans would be procreated, and who would also stand as their representative head or leader.

It was God's intention that Adam should live and learn entirely from Himself. Prompted by Satan, the enemy of God, Adam chose to go his own way, and in doing so cut himself off from God who was the only source of true life. Aware that in creating humankind with free choice, they would follow in that wrong direction, God had determined beforehand a plan of recovery. That plan would involve a second Adam who would be God's own Son who would put right the things that had gone wrong.

In the wisdom of God, He foresaw a right time when everything would come together for Him to put this plan into operation. Until that time, God worked among humankind primarily through His chosen nation Israel. Through their corporate history, He demonstrated that, even when given a perfect set of instructions, they were still not able to obey. Knowing what to do is never enough. He also selected some individuals within Israel who understood that trusting Him was the only appropriate way to live, and He worked with them as examples for all of us. Through them, He also gave guidance, correction and promises for the future.

The promises that God gave consistently pointed to the fact that He would provide the necessary solution for the human predicament. Everything had gone wrong when Adam had chosen to work things out for himself rather than relying on God. What God did not want, was for us, the descendants of Adam, to

make the same choice, and try and go it alone ourselves. The solution that God promised was not a moral charter that would set out a pattern for us all to live by, but it was a person, His Messiah, who would have both the ability and the authority to put things right.

That person was of course Jesus. Jesus was unique in that He was both God's Son and hence fully divine, and also born of a woman, and hence fully human. The outcome of all human history rests both on who Jesus was and on what He did. It was only because of **who** He was that He was able to do **what** he did.

It was God who appointed Jesus as the new representative head of the human race. God is not a democrat, He is the Lord of the universe, and as such, has the authority to appoint whom He wishes, to whatever position He chooses. As the new head, Jesus began to demonstrate God's love for humanity and to show and teach the way that people should live. This teaching was set down in the bible and became, and remains, the most widely read book in the world.

We said earlier that God could not overlook the matter of our rebellion, which Adam had initiated, and which every person ever since has confirmed. Because God is Holy and righteous, He must judge us. However, that judgement must first come upon the appointed head of humanity. Because he was the second Adam it therefore had to come upon Jesus Christ, not for His own wrongs for He lived a perfect life, but for the sin of humanity whom he represented. The death of Jesus Christ accomplished a number of separate, but equally important things. This first, receiving judgement as our representative head, satisfied the issue of the holiness and righteousness of God as far as the human race as a whole was concerned. However whilst that aspect of Christ's death dealt with our corporate guilt, there was still the matter of our individual guilt.

The best picture that we have in the bible of how God did this, is Noah's ark. God had pronounced judgement by water upon the whole world, but those that were sealed in the ark, though under judgement, in that it rained upon the ark as well as everywhere else, were carried through it to the other side. When God's judgement came upon Jesus Christ, the whole of humanity was sealed in Him, in the same way that Noah and his family were sealed in the ark. Acting cosmically outside of time and space, God exercised judgement upon us in Christ. This was not a pretend situation – God does not pretend – but a reality which stretches our understanding. However, when we agree with God that this is what He has done, we will experience the effects of it in our lives. The apostle Paul was quite emphatic about where he stood in this respect when he stated, 'I have been crucified with Christ' (*Galatians Ch. 2 v 20*).

In the same passage, Paul develops the matter further. He explains that when he died in Christ, the Old Covenant, which was operative up until then, stopped having any further claim on him. He expands the argument further in Romans (*Ch. 7 v 1*) where he reminds the church, that the law only applies to people until they die – after that, they are free from both its claims and punishments.

Incredible as it may seem, it gets even better. Elsewhere (*Colossians Ch. 2v 11 – 3v 1*), Paul explains that, not only did we die in Christ, but when He was raised from the dead, we were raised up with Him. Christ accomplished such a complete reversal of Adam's failure, that the result is that we are raised up to heaven, to be seated with Him at the right hand of God.

What is more, we have seen that whilst Adam's initial rebellion was his fault, and our continuing rebellion is our fault, both sins are made worse because of Satan. It was he who approached Eve and lied to her about God, so that being deceived she persuaded

Adam to sin. It is Satan and his demonic army who have pursued the advantage they gained then, by constantly feeding lies into the human race ever since. Every one of us has listened to the lies, whispered in our mind, fed through the media, or pursued in lusts, which promise much and deliver little. Through believing Satan's propaganda, we have given ourselves into slavery to him. However, in the death of Christ we also died to sin (*Romans Ch. 6 v 1-7*). Satan has no power over us except what is yielded through sin, for when we give in to sin it allows him to exercise authority in our lives. He still has authority in the world and over the things of this world, but in Christ we have died to the world (*Galations Ch. 6 v 14*). Satan's authority no longer extends into our lives.

Through our inclusion into the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, God accomplishes in us a reversal of what went wrong under Adam's headship and our compliance with it. God has fully dealt with the past; we have a new beginning.

How God has dealt with the future

God's decisive action in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, has released us from slavery to sin, self, Satan and the world. As far as God is concerned, our past record is wiped clean. As the new head of the human race, Christ has borne all the consequences of corporate human sin caused through the failure of Adam the first head, and our subsequent complicity in it. Incorporating us into Christ in His death, has meant God has put us to death, and in Him we have received the just punishment we deserve. There remains no record of crime against us.

Incorporating us into Christ in His resurrection, has meant that God is able to receive us to Himself as reconciled rebels. Even under human law in our country, a person cannot pay for the same crime twice. If a man was convicted of murder, hanged, and subsequently raised from the dead, the law would be powerless to have any further claim on him; he would have to be released. God's law operates in the same way. In Christ, we died both to sin and to the law, to its requirements and its penalties. Our participation in Christ's resurrection gives us a new life. We are born again.

The question we may well all ask is 'will a new start do any good?' God knows how many of us have tried to turn over a new leaf and failed miserably again and again. We said earlier, 'The overall answer to the situation would be a new leader who would take us in the right direction, deal with the Devil's interference, and obtain for us a new heart to enable us to learn and follow in God's way.' This is precisely what God has done.

We have seen that Jesus has been appointed as God's new head or leader of humanity. As part of the process of establishing His right to take this position, He was subject to a series of temptations by the Devil. These are recorded in three of the Gospels (*eg. Matthew Ch.4 v 1-11*) and we read that Jesus came through them all successfully. In the confrontation between them, the Devil asserted his right to authority in this present world system. It is important to note that Jesus did not disagree with that. The bible makes it clear that when Jesus came to earth, although part of His purpose was to establish God's Kingdom, it was not going to be done by overthrowing the existing systems, but by overlaying them with His Kingdom, which was, and remains, primarily a heavenly one. Jesus made this plain when He stood on trial before Pontius Pilate, and told him that the reason that his followers did not fight, was because His Kingdom was not of this world (*John Ch.18 v 36*).

The Devil retains authority in this world system, and the evidence of that, is in the way that human affairs are constantly in a mess. It is even more evident in the fact that the attempts to put things right nearly always end up in a mess as well. But his authority is not absolute. He gained it when Adam believed him instead of God, and it can only be outworked as long as we humans continue to believe him. As soon as we switch our allegiance to our new head, Jesus, then God's authority (which Jesus spoke of as His Kingdom) becomes operative in our lives. This will then have an impact on the world around us. This does not happen by changing the world systems, but by establishing counter-cultural pockets of resistance.

The final result is certain. The world system governed by Satan will come to an end, and all of those involved, both demonic and human, will be judged and removed. It is at that time, that God's Kingdom will be fully manifest. Until then, the position of those who are followers of Jesus is similar to the Christians at Philippi, who lived as a colony of heaven. Our pleasures, conversation, outlook and laws are all based on God's Kingdom, even though we are in the middle of the kingdom of this world.

We know from history, that there have been periods when the size of the Christian colony has become large, and the influence of it has spilled over into the world, but any influence has been temporary. The abolition of slavery in the Nineteenth Century, largely achieved through the influence of the Christian community, was a marvellous thing. However, even in England, children were still being bought and sold fifty years afterwards (a fact exposed by the early Salvation Army). Today, slavery has re-emerged in different forms with different people in different places, but it is still thriving.

When Jesus began to preach, He announced that the Kingdom of Heaven had drawn near. It was accessible but its influence was

primarily confrontational. Paul said that anyone living a godly life in line with the Kingdom of God in this world, would be persecuted (2 Timothy Ch. 3 v 12). Jesus told His followers that as the world had hated Him, it would also hate them as well (John Ch. 15 v 18 -20).

If we started with misgivings about the possibility of turning over a new leaf, the prospect of that being in a counter-cultural situation, with probable opposition, will not have cheered us up. However, Jesus said 'In this world you will have trouble, but cheer up, for I have overcome the world' (John Ch. 16 v 33). Previously, He had encouraged His disciples not to let themselves be troubled (John Ch. 14 v 27). The only reason they could have for being cheerful and untroubled, was that although He was going to leave them, He was going to come back and live with them for ever.

This is the most important factor of Christianity – the promise of the continuous presence of Jesus.

Although Israel had received all the instructions they needed to live in the Old Covenant, they were unable to do it. The teaching of Jesus was even harder (Matthew Chs. 5 – 7). If Israel could not keep the old agreement, how on earth could Jesus' followers keep the new one if it was even more difficult? The answer is very simple. In the beginning, it had been God's intention that humanity should live by His **life**, on the strength of His promises, not by His **laws**. They, and we, are to draw on His ability, His wisdom, His strength. When Adam believed the lie that he would be better off living independently, he cut himself off from the enabling and sustaining life of God. In the New Covenant, God simply kept to the original plan of imparting His life to His people, but with an added dimension.

Originally, God had established a relationship with Adam in which He would both live with and sustain him through a close,

but at that time, external relationship. Jesus told His followers that after His death and resurrection, God, in the person of the Holy Spirit, who had been **with** His disciples, would return and be **in** them (*John Ch. 14 v 16 -17*). The distinction between ‘**with**’ and ‘**in**’ would make all the difference in the world. This was not a new idea that Jesus was introducing. The prophets in the Old Testament had explicitly foretold that God would introduce a new agreement and that this would include something quite astonishing; He would put the agreement into practice by living within those to whom He gave it. It is worth quoting two of these prophecies at length. In Jeremiah (*Ch. 31 v 31 - 34*) it says:

“The days are coming in the future,” declares the Lord,
“when I will make a new agreement
with the people of Israel
and with the people of Judah.
It will not be like the agreement
I made with their ancestors
when I took them by the hand
to lead them out of Egypt,
because they broke my agreement,
even though I was a husband to them,” declares the Lord.
“This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel
after that time,” declares the Lord.
“I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.
I will be their God,
and they will be my people.
No longer will they teach their neighbour,
or say to one another, ‘Know the Lord,’
because they will all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest,”
declares the Lord.
“For I will forgive their wickedness
and will remember their sins no more.”

Ezekiel also refers (*Ch. 36 v 25 -27*), to this same new agreement when he says:

“I will sprinkle clean water on you,
and you will be clean.
I will make you clean from all your impurities
and from all your idols.
I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you.
I will take away from you your heart of stone,
and give you a heart of flesh.
I will put my Spirit in you,
and move you to follow my decrees,
and enable you to keep my laws.”

The new agreement would include everything necessary for people to be in right relationship with God. He would deal with their need for forgiveness and cleansing, He would give them a new heart that would be soft and receptive, He would impress His laws and His will on their minds, and, to cap it all, He would put His own Spirit within them as well.

The old agreement was good, but ultimately inadequate, because it relied upon the efforts of rebellious people to make it work. Even when people sincerely sought to put aside their rebellion and to obey God, they still could not do it. The new agreement is infinitely better, because it relies on what God Himself will do. This includes enabling people to change in order to work with Him and not against Him.

Whilst, as Jeremiah says, the New Covenant is not like the Old, insofar as the Old was external and the New internal, the pattern of their inauguration shares a number of similarities. This is similar to the way a plan, whilst materially different from the building it represents, will have the same outline as it. The plan will help us understand the building.

Understanding the New Covenant in the light of the Old

Looking at the pattern of the old agreement will help us understand the fulfilment in the new.

Most people will be familiar with the stories about Moses. God used him to deliver the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, and to lead them through the parted waters of the Red Sea. It was Moses who received the Ten Commandments on the mountain, and he who led the people through the wilderness, right to the border of the land God had promised them. Moses had confronted Pharaoh in order to get him to release the people from slavery. The final act of the confrontation was when God sent the angel of death throughout Egypt to kill all the firstborn. The only ones who survived, were those sheltering in houses where the blood of a sacrificed lamb had been splashed on the doorpost. This was known as the Passover.

In the New Covenant, it is Jesus, rather than Moses who is the central figure. Jesus, God's lamb, was killed at the Passover in Jerusalem. The blood that Jesus shed was splashed on the cross, and all who took shelter there, were passed over by death. In that work on the cross, Jesus also confronted Satan, and in the act of His sacrifice, disarmed the enemy and released us, his captives.

Just as Moses led the people through the sea and out the other side, so Jesus took all of us into the grave and out into resurrection. God parted the waters of the Red Sea to make this possible for Israel, and He parted the waters of death for us as well. When Pharaoh and his army tried to follow Moses, they could not, and Satan and his demons cannot follow us either.

Although Egypt had been a land of slavery, the Israelites always had sufficient food, but there was no food or water in the desert. The first thing they had to do in their new found freedom was to switch from trusting their slave masters to trusting God. God did not fail them, and supplied water miraculously from a rock, and a special food, manna, from heaven. Satan has always been happy to provide pleasures and to pander to the flesh if it keeps people in slavery. However, when Christ takes us through the cross, as we are set free from Satan, we are also separated from all the things that once fed our souls. It then seems that we have no visible means of support, and the temptation that we nearly all fall to, is to keep looking back to our old life to get what we need. But God has made provision for us. This applies both spiritually and materially. Our sustenance now is Jesus, who is the bread of life and who shouted out that if anyone thirst, they should come to Him and drink (*John Ch. 6 v 32 – 63*).

The next stage on Moses' journey, was receiving the law, and establishing the Old Covenant. This took place on Mount Sinai when the fire of God descended upon the mountain. Moses received the law including the Ten Commandments written on two slabs of stone. Afterwards, the nation of Israel commemorated this event at the festival of harvest called the feast of weeks or, later on, Pentecost. Pentecost comes from the word for 'fifty' and indicated that there was a fifty day period between the festival of Passover and the festival of weeks.

Jesus fulfilled Passover. At that feast, he became God's lamb and obtained salvation. Fifty days later, having ascended to heaven, Jesus then fulfilled Pentecost. He did this when, seated at God's right hand, He received the New Covenant promise of the Holy Spirit. God gave laws and guidance again, but this time they were not written on stone tablets, but on the hearts of men and women. The work that God accomplished on that day was a direct fulfilment of the prophecies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel seen earlier.

On that day, Jesus' disciples received inward cleansing and new hearts. Upon those new hearts, God inscribed His laws so that everyone could know Him for themselves. Most importantly, He gave them His own Spirit so that they might learn how to abide in the good of the Covenant.

At the first Pentecost, when God wrote His laws on stone, He manifested His presence through fire. At the fulfilled Pentecost, when God wrote His laws on people's hearts, the fire came again, but this time it was on each individual person, showing that the Covenant was to be given to and received by each one of us.

The final act of Moses, was to enter into the land which God promised through Abraham. This was to be the land of the Covenant, where all of the promises, blessings, warnings and chastisements of the Old Covenant would be outworked and tested in the lives of God's people. They had failed at the first hurdle. All but two of them refused to enter the land. They considered it too difficult and far too dangerous. Consequently, they did not go in. All those over twenty years old died wandering around in the wilderness. Of the adults, only Joshua and Caleb, the two who had previously been willing to go in, survived. Moses also died before they entered the land, and it was under the leadership of Joshua, who had been his assistant, that the Israelites eventually made it. Just as the Red Sea had miraculously parted, the River Jordan did so as well. God was with them after all. They had been right to consider the job of taking the land too difficult for them, but they had been wrong in not believing that God could do it for them.

The letter to the Hebrews (*esp. Chs. 3 - 4*) makes a strong point concerning the danger of not taking possession of what God has already promised. Having assured us of His presence through the gift of the Holy Spirit, God now desires and requires us to live as His Covenant people.

Under Joshua, the people did not occupy the land all at once. They were instructed to take it one step at a time, but from the time of the first promise to Abraham it had always been theirs, even when it was occupied by someone else. At the right time, as they moved forward, God would enable them to occupy it, to possess their possessions. Similarly, in the New Covenant, under the second Joshua (Joshua and Jesus are both the same name, Yeshua, in Hebrew), we do not necessarily **experience** the benefit of everything God has done all at once. But because it is already ours, we can take it as God enables, one step at a time. We own it by faith and then we receive it in experience.

God has already given us everything that He promised for this life. The task is not to get some elusive 'extra', but to move steadily forward and lay hold of and experience what is already ours for the taking. It is as we move forward step by step that we grow in the reality of who we already are in Christ. We grow by faith, utilising and moving forward with what we already have.

Though the stages of both Covenants are similar, their nature is dissimilar. The Old could indicate what was right and good, but it never lifted a finger to help anyone achieve it. The New brings us into a total union with Christ, so that it is Him living it out through us.

How do we get into the New Covenant?

Because the New Covenant is entirely dependent upon Jesus Christ, the question could also be phrased more pertinently by asking, 'How do we get into union with Him?'

There are two aspects we need to understand. The first is that, as far as the cross and resurrection go, we are already there. God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself (*2 Corinthians Ch. 5 v 19*). God incorporated the whole of humanity, past, present and future in Christ, in His death, burial, and resurrection. Jesus used an illustration of when the Israelites rebelled against God during their desert wanderings. God brought judgement in the form of snakes, but instructed them to make a bronze snake and put it on a pole. Everyone who looked at the snake was healed, but those who did not look, died. (*John Ch. 3 v 14 & Numbers Ch. 21 v 9*). The remedy was available for all, but if refused, it had no effect. In the same passage in John, Jesus explains that a person's condemnation will be in not receiving God's provision. The remedy of Christ's death is available for all, but needs to be received and appropriated in order to be effective.

Although God's workings are cosmic, metaphysical and miraculous, they also have an element of plain common sense. If a person is ill and the doctor prescribes an appropriate medicine that will cure them, if they take it, they live, and if they refuse it, they die. Death comes through the refusal to accept the remedy.

However, dealing with the cause of a problem and providing the solution to that problem, does not in itself solve the problem. If I offend my wife and she tells me that she forgives me, unless I respond to that forgiveness and become reconciled to her, it will make no practical difference – we will still be alienated from one another. Through God's forgiveness we are reconciled to Him, and we can return to the original purpose He had for humankind at the beginning. We cannot claim forgiveness and still insist on doing our own thing in defiance of God. Forgiveness is not exclusive to the New Covenant, it was possible under the Old, the issue was always whether, having been forgiven, the people would choose to live their way or God's way.

The second aspect of coming into the New Covenant, follows on from the decision to choose God's will. We know that we are simply not capable of obeying it on our own, and this is where the graciousness of God is astonishing. The Covenant not only includes accepting the will of God, but receiving His Spirit so we are equipped to keep it. We saw earlier in the prophecies through Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the new agreement God makes with us includes the gift of a new spirit, His laws written on our heart and His Spirit to enable us to live by them

Normal practice in any human agreement is to seal it with some form of recognised action. In Western cultures, this tends to be by the signing of names. When I was a market trader, it was often done by shaking hands. In other times and in other cultures there have been different ways. Written agreements have been sealed with an impression on a piece of wax. Verbal ones have been affirmed by the gift of a shoe (*Ruth Ch. 4 v 7*), or by the dividing of an animal (*Genesis Ch. 15 v 8 -10*). As we mentioned earlier, many cultures have some form of cutting and shedding blood. In Roman times, when a piece of land was transferred, they would sometimes dig up a small square, which was taken away as proof of ownership. When we recognise that it is normal in human practice to have some form of action to seal an agreement, we should not be surprised that God has accommodated Himself to giving some similar proof that His agreement with us is valid.

The nation of Israel could look back on four things, which gave them confidence that they were the Covenant people of God.

The first was the Passover when God judged both them and their enemies. The shed blood of a lamb meant they came through it unscathed, the blood on their doorposts indicating they were God's people.

The second was the parting of the Red Sea. No one forgot that. Passing through water symbolised both death and life, as had been previously established in God's dealings with Noah.

The third was the giving of the law at Mount Sinai. Similar to the Passover, this was affirmed by sacrifice and the splashing of blood, but this time upon both the altar and the people.

The fourth, for the males of the nation, was circumcision. A permanent physical sign in the body which also involved shedding blood, but in a way that did not require death.

Earlier we looked at the process of a Gentile becoming a Jew and saw that this incorporated a similar pattern for conversion.

A convert would have to believe God's action in the Passover.

They would undergo baptism in a ritual bath, symbolising the passing through the Red Sea.

They would agree to keep the law (given on Sinai), and get the priest to offer a sacrifice.

They (males) would be circumcised.

In the New Testament, after the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost, those who responded to God's New Covenant also received signs or seals of that agreement. They did this by acknowledging God's sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross as the Passover lamb. No one can add or take away from that, but for it to become real in us, it must be accepted and publically acknowledged by us. In that way we embrace it as God's act of deliverance, freeing us from slavery to Satan, sin, and our past lives.

In doing this, they repented. This not a word we use very often in modern English and it is sometimes thought of as saying sorry. Whilst it might include that, it is far more. It involves a complete change of direction. If you get on a No.7 bus in one direction and

discover you should be on a No.8 going the opposite way, the only appropriate course of action is to get off the one and get on the other. That is repentance. You might be sorry that it happened, but that is secondary to the action of putting it right. Virtually any change of direction involves hassle, and is generally undertaken with some degree of reluctance. In practice, we only do it when we are convinced beyond doubt that we have been going the wrong way. It says of the first converts to Christianity that when they realised their position, they were cut to the heart (*Acts Ch 2 v 37*). This a helpful way of understanding one of the elements of repentance. There needs to be such conviction that we have got it wrong, that we are cut inwardly and can never be the same again. We do not undergo the outward circumcision that the Jews did, but we do undergo an inward circumcision of the heart. We bear for ever the inward mark of God's dealings with us.

Thirdly, recalling the passing of the Israelites through the Red Sea, they were baptised in water in a similar way to Gentile converts to Judaism. This visible action in which they participated, was not merely a picture of passing from death unto life, it **was** a passing from death to life. It was equivalent to writing a death certificate and a birth certificate all in one go.

Fourthly, they received the promised gift of the Holy Spirit. The sign, seal and executor of the New Covenant came to make it real in them, writing God's laws on their hearts. By uniting them to Jesus Christ in every aspect of His life, death, burial, resurrection, ascension and glorification, God reinstated His original plan for humanity.

As we are joined to Jesus in a similar way as a branch to a vine (*John Ch. 15 v 1 - 5*), His Spirit flows through us to teach, enable and empower us to live as God wishes. ***That is the difference between not being a Christian and being a Christian.***

Some objections

One of the objections commonly made against what I have said is ‘Ah! That is all very well, but it is just impractical, we cannot possibly live like that.’

I agree. It is impractical, and **we** cannot live like that. That is exactly the argument that the Israelites made when told to enter the land that God had promised. The answer for us is the same as for them. **God** will do it. Their perception of the difficulty was correct, but their perception of God’s willingness and ability to make it happen was not.

The whole point of the New Covenant, is that it is based on our inadequacy and God’s sufficiency. We cannot do it; only God can do it. It will not work, it cannot work, unless God’s promises are fulfilled through God’s actions. If God is not faithful, we are sunk. Of course we will need to co-operate, and of course, we will need to completely surrender to God’s strategy and methods. This is what the act of repentance is - we have been on the No.7 bus going our way, and now we must get off the No.7 and board the No.8 going God’s way.

We cannot get to God’s intended destination if we are at the driving wheel, and it is absolutely essential that we realise it. That is why God’s New Covenant is driven by Jesus.

It is at the same time, both the most difficult thing in the world and yet the easiest. It is difficult, because almost everything in the world will try to persuade us that the only virtue which really matters, is personal choice and personal control of our own lives.

But the world is wrong, and it is essential that we come to terms with that. If we follow Jesus and walk in His Spirit, we will walk a different pathway to the world. The way of the Christian has always been against the way of the world, and the world has always responded with ridicule and persecution. Going God’s way is going the hard way, but what makes it easy, is that it is God’s way. He walks with us, He encourages us, enables us and, if we stick with Him, He will bring us through every difficulty and hardship. This will probably involve a real degree of pain along the way, but all life involves pain, and pain with God, is infinitely better than pain without God.

Another objection that may be raised is, ‘If what you say is right, why doesn’t my church teach it?’ Truth can only, must only, be tested out by the bible. At times, the Church has lost some of its biblical emphasis and the Reformation stands as a testimony of both loss and recovery. The present Church in our country is at a particularly low ebb in terms of its grasp and proclamation of truth. Perhaps we need another season of Reformation.

The crucial thing is not what I teach – I am as fallible as the next person – nor what the next person says either – they are as fallible as me, but what is crucial, is what God has said in the bible. We all have a responsibility to check things out for ourselves, and that does not depend on how competent we are, for in the New Covenant, we rely on the competence of the Holy Spirit to teach us, and He is able to get through all our inadequacies. Read your bible and be open to the Holy Spirit to highlight the truth to you.

Some of you may respond, ‘If that is what real Christianity is, I do not want it. I am quite content with doing my best, getting on with my own life, minding my own business and keeping my nose clean.’ Some may consider that commendable, as it appears to be taking responsibility for ourselves, but it is not Christianity.

The last thing that God needs or wants, is people who do their best. 'God helps those who help themselves' may be a popular motto, but it is certainly not Christian. God helps those who admit that they cannot help themselves. Whatever else they may or may not be, Christians are not merely those who believe in Christian values and try their best to live up to them. That was the problem with the Old Covenant. It taught the highest values of any nation in the ancient world, but failed to enable people to live up to them.

The New Covenant is not simply a re-statement of the Old, with Jesus replacing the sacrificial lamb, but everything else the same.

The love of God is not the good news of Christianity. Forgiveness of sins is not the good news of Christianity. The Jews were always loved by God, and forgiveness was available before Christ came. The Jews were able to obtain forgiveness and covering of their sins through the Old Covenant. Of course the New Covenant includes the love of God and forgiveness of sin, but that is not what distinguishes it from the Old.

The supreme thing that differentiates the New from the Old, and from any other type or form of religion, is the gift of the Holy Spirit, imparted by the crucified, buried, resurrected, ascended and glorified Christ. It is Christ **within** us that is the hope of Glory (*Colossians Ch. 1 v 27*).

Paul says very plainly in the letter to the Romans (*Ch. 8 v 9*), that if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him. Some churches seem to give the impression that all it takes to be a Christian is to ask God for your sins to be forgiven, but that is just one part of it. Of course it is a good and necessary part, but being a Christian is not defined by whether we have our sins forgiven, but by whether we have entered into the New Covenant agreement with God and been sealed by His Spirit.

Is it possible to be sure that I am in the New Covenant?

The plain answer is yes. Not only is it possible to be certain of where you stand, but God intends you to be certain.

The usual reason for any agreement, from a washing machine guarantee to a pact between nations, is that the parties concerned know exactly where they stand. An agreement where the parties are unsure of what it entails, defeats the object of it.

When the Old Covenant was ratified between God and the Israelites, Moses read out the terms and conditions which God had laid down, and asked all the people whether they accepted them or not. They replied 'All that the Lord has said we will do.' (*Exodus Ch. 24 v 7*). Moses then took the blood of sacrificed oxen and poured half of it upon the altar (symbolising God's presence) and splashed the other half over the people. No one was in any doubt what the agreement was, nor that it was sealed.

Should we believe that God would bring in a better agreement on vaguer and less definite terms?

The teaching of the New Covenant is found in the life, ministry and words of Jesus. He is God's Messiah, the second Adam, the new appointed head of humanity. If we acknowledge him as such, and accept His authority to exercise His Kingdom rule over us, God does not then need to give us a list of do's and don'ts to be read out. Whatever Jesus says to do, we will do, and whatever He says not to do, we will not do it. We will know what to do by the dual witness of His Spirit in our hearts and his teaching recorded in the bible.

Peter preaching on the day of Pentecost, got to the point where he said, ‘God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah’ (*Acts Ch.2 v 36*), It was then that the people responded ‘What shall we do?’ As Jews who had the Old Covenant, they had already benefited from the love of God and forgiveness of sins. However, they had not received the promise of the New Covenant. Peter had preached that the promise was for them, and as soon as they understood that Jesus had been designated by God as Messiah and Lord of all, they asked to be given the next step.

Jesus lived the life of a carpenter to demonstrate that it was possible to walk in the Spirit in every aspect of ordinary life, but He did not die in that role. When Jesus died and rose again, it was not as the lowly carpenter, but as the Messianic King of God’s people. It was as the one through whom heaven and earth had been created, taking authority as Lord and Messianic King and laying down His life on behalf of all humanity. It was as our representative, the Second Adam, that He asked God, His Father to forgive us. Jesus is able to save, not just because He died, but because He died as Lord and Messiah. His work as Saviour follows, rather than precedes His Lordship.

So the New Covenant terms are very simple indeed. We do not accept a written agreement with pages and pages of rules and regulations, but a Person who is our sovereign Lord. Acceptance of Christ, who rules from His throne at the right hand of God, allowing Him to take over our lives, and receiving from Him His poured out Spirit to be Lord in our lives, is acceptance of the New Covenant. The making of Christian disciples is based on the fact that all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Jesus Christ. The declaration of this authority, as recorded by Matthew (*Ch. 28 v18 – 20*), is followed by the promise of His constant presence. That presence, made real through the pouring out of the gift of the Holy Spirit, is the guarantee of the Covenant.

Previous generations of Christians, sometimes called the knowledge of the presence of the Spirit, Christian assurance, and it was an integral part of being a Christian. When we completely accept the Lordship of Christ and His right over every area of our lives, the Holy Spirit will give that full assurance to us.

God has sealed the New Covenant, not with the blood of bulls and goats as in the Old, but with the blood of His Son. Though that was visible to the first disciples of Jesus, we cannot see it. However, we can be certain of it, because the cleansing of our sins results in a clear conscience before God, and, as a result of that, we have boldness to enter His Presence. In heaven, however, the blood of Christ is the constant evidence and guarantee of the Covenant before God, and He can never break it nor deny it.

On earth, we can be satisfied with the symbol that Jesus left us. When he shared the Passover cup of wine with His disciples, He told them that it was His blood of the New Covenant. That is why we are to repeat that act throughout our Christian life, to remind us of what God sees in heaven, but we can no longer see on Earth.

Many people today struggle to understand the significance of the sacraments of breaking bread and baptism. That is because they are Covenant symbols and many do not fully understand the Covenant. Both sacraments have a significant part to play in the reception, and the ongoing life in the New Covenant. Both of their roots are in the initiation of the Old Covenant. The breaking of bread was part of the feast of Passover, in which the Jews were to remember the saving action of God when He brought them into relationship with Himself. At the Passover meal - before He was about to offer Himself as the real Passover lamb - Jesus gave fresh meaning to the significance of one of the cups of wine, and thereafter it became the symbol of the New Covenant.

After the Passover, when the Israelites passed through the Red Sea, they remembered the Exodus as a baptism (*I Corinthians Ch.10 v 2*). The Exodus took place between Passover, when the lamb was slain, and Pentecost when the Old Covenant law was given. As, among other things, water baptism symbolises that Exodus event, the most appropriate timing of water baptism in a new believer's life, is between their acknowledgement of Him as God's Messiah, who died for them (Passover), and their reception of the Holy Spirit sealing them in the New Covenant (Pentecost). Whilst valid baptism can and has been done at other times, that was the pattern usually followed by the apostles.

The apostles generally viewed baptism as the tangible first response following acknowledgement of the Lordship of Christ. It was part of a believer's step of faith to appropriate the whole work of Christ in their life, and it fulfilled the role of a human signature accepting the agreement with God.

Jesus told the apostles to preach the gospel, baptising in water as the first thing to follow in the task of making disciples.

After that, they were to teach the new disciples to obey all that Jesus had taught and said. (*Matthew Ch.28 v 17-20*). It would have been a peculiar thing, to continue to preach the Lordship of Christ and teach obedience to Him, if their hearers refused to take the very first step that Jesus the Lord had commanded. Teaching on water baptism has become confused in most churches. God may exercise grace and give assurance to someone who has been disobedient on the issue. But to anyone seeking assurance, it is important to ensure that this step is made. Truth has little effect, unless it is believed and acted upon.

If, in the beginning, Adam had done just that, he would have grown in the knowledge and grace of God, and who knows what

might have resulted. But he believed a lie. Many of us have continued in his footsteps and spent most of our lives in the pursuit of shadows, half-truths and false dreams. This has not necessarily been in what we classify as bad, but also in what we would consider the good or even the best in purely human terms. But in either case, the reality we have longed for has slipped away as sand through our fingers.

Jesus claimed to be The Truth, or The Reality (as it can be read in the Greek) (*John Ch. 14 v 6*). If His claim to be Reality was not true, then He was a deceiver like Satan, but if it was true, then union with Him under His Lordship and guidance, should be the ultimate reality in our lives. If the sort of Christianity we experience is not real and life sustaining, then something somewhere is likely to be wrong. Reality does not mean being happy and feeling good. Real Christianity is often tough and may involve tears and heartache, but real pain is always better than false ease and false joy.

Just as it is not possible to be half married, it is not possible to be half joined to Jesus. You can have struggles and arguments within marriage and you can have struggles and arguments in your relationship with Jesus, but they take place within the security of a Covenant agreement, that is signed and sealed with His blood. What can be more secure than that? It is not fashionable to speak of things as true. But Jesus is not bound by fashion. He said that we would know the truth and that the **truth** would set us free. God's truth in Jesus, outworked in our lives through the Holy Spirit is ultimate freedom.

Many of us have lived in the company of Christians for years, but we may still be uncertain whether we are citizens of heaven or not. We can know. What possible reason is there for not making sure?