

The Master Key: Pope Benedict XVI's Theology of Covenant

By Stephen Pimentel

What is a covenant?

In the biblical conception, a covenant is not a contract or mutual agreement between God and man, but an unsought gift of God to man. "The covenant then is not a pact built on reciprocity, but rather a gift, a creative act of God's love." In their concrete historical realizations, the covenants of God take multiple forms. The Apostle Paul uses "covenants" in the plural to describe God's dealings with Israel (cf. Rom. 9:4). Ratzinger notes, in particular, that the Old Testament distinguishes the Noahite, Abrahamic, Mosaic and Davidic covenants.

For Paul, the most important of these covenants are the Abrahamic and the Mosaic, which relate to the new covenant in different ways. While all the covenants enter into human history, the Abrahamic and new covenants share in a divinely guaranteed permanence, in contrast to the "transitory" and "provisional" nature of the Mosaic covenant. Whereas the Abrahamic covenant is "fundamental and enduring," the Mosaic covenant is "intervening" (Rom. 5:20). The Mosaic Law was a form of divine pedagogy designed to "fall away once the pedagogical goal has been achieved," and the goal of the Law is none other than Christ himself (cf. Rom. 10:4). Hence, the Mosaic covenant is a transitory "stage in the decrees of God, which has its own time. All this Paul has brought out clearly, and no Christian can revoke it."

The new covenant

The establishment of the new covenant is described by the words of institution spoken by Jesus over the cup during the Last Supper. In the Gospels of Mark and Matthew, Jesus says, "This is my blood of the covenant" (Mark 14:24), which echoes the institution of the Mosaic covenant in Exodus 24:8. A covenantal ritual of this kind establishes a blood-union or kinship between its participants. Through the covenant, God establishes a "mysterious consanguinity" between himself and man.

By declaring the cup to be the "blood of the covenant," Jesus is stating that his blood, poured out in his Passion and made really present in the Eucharist, will reestablish the bond of kinship between God and man. In this way, "the words of

Sinai are intensified to an overwhelming realism." The Last Supper was fundamentally the "sealing of the covenant," and the Eucharist is now "an ongoing reenactment of this covenant renewal." The Letter to the Hebrews describes the institution of the Eucharist, in which the blood of Jesus is really offered to the Father, as "a cosmic Day of Atonement" (cf. Heb. 9:11-14, 24-26). In sacramental communion, the disciple is united both physically and spiritually with Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 6:16).

The broken covenant

Paul and Luke give a somewhat different version of the words that Jesus spoke over the cup. Instead of the "blood of the covenant," the cup is described as the "new covenant in my blood" (1 Cor. 11:25). This formula alludes to Jeremiah's prophecy of the new covenant (Jer. 31:31-34). In this prophecy, the new covenant, never to be broken, is expressly contrasted with the Mosaic "covenant they have broken" (Jer. 31:32). "The history of Israel repeatedly appears in the Old Testament as a history of the broken covenant. In contrast, the covenant with the patriarchs is considered eternally valid." It is the Mosaic Law that renders the covenant conditional and subject to being broken. Moreover, the tablets of the Law, which symbolized the Mosaic covenant, have been "lost forever" with the destruction of the temple. Indeed, it has not been possible to live in accordance with the Mosaic covenant, as formulated in Deuteronomy, since that destruction. By the preaching of the prophets, "Israel knew that even though it celebrated again and again the renewal of the covenant, it could not regain the lost tablets, which God alone had the power to give and to inscribe."

The implication of Ratzinger's observation is crucial. It is not the New Testament, much less later Christian theology, that first declared the Mosaic covenant to have been broken. It was the prophets of the Old Testament. Thus, the neo-Deuteronomic program advanced by the Pharisees and later adopted by the rabbis is not in accordance with Scripture, even if attention is restricted to the Old Testament. Rather, the way forward lies with the new covenant given by God "in the flesh and blood of the Risen Christ." In the final analysis, the Mosaic Law points from within itself to beyond itself, "for Moses himself is a prophet and can be understood correctly only if understood prophetically." This is a particular application of St. Augustine's principle, reaffirmed by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, that "the New Testament lies hidden in the Old and the Old is unveiled in the New."

Paul's understanding of the Body of Christ as an organic "grafting" of the Gentiles into Israel was confirmed by the Second Vatican Council in *Nostra Aetate* 4; the Church "draws nourishment from that good olive tree onto which the wild olive branches of the Gentiles have been grafted (cf. Rom. 11:17-24)." God prunes from this tree only those branches that refuse belief in Christ (cf. Rom. 11:20). Therefore, the Old Testament remains central to faith in Christ. "There is no access to Jesus and thereby can be no entrance of the nations into the People of God without acceptance in faith of . . . the Old Testament."

Ecumenical dialogue

In regard to dialogue between Catholics and those outside the faith, Ratzinger insists that Jesus Christ must be seen not as a barrier but as the only doorway to the desired unity, for through Jesus, "the God of Israel has become the God of the nations." As Paul described, Jesus has united Jew and Gentile in one Body:

For he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility, by abolishing in his flesh the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby bringing the hostility to an end. (Eph. 2:14-16)

This communion in Christ "is not empty theological rhetoric, but an empirical state of affairs," visible wherever the Church is present.

Ratzinger qualifies the authentically Catholic approach to ecumenical dialogue with a distinction drawn from J. A. Cuttat. "To try to make mankind better and happier by bringing the religions together is one thing," which one might call humanitarian ecumenism; "To pray ardently for the unification of all mankind in the love of the same God is something else," which one might call Christocentric ecumenism. "And it may be that the former is Lucifer's most subtle temptation, designed to frustrate the latter." Ecumenical dialogue, in order to be authentically Catholic, must be firmly Christocentric, i.e., centered on the new covenant established in Jesus Christ, for "the renunciation of truth and conviction does not elevate man but hands him over to the calculations of utility and robs him of his greatness.