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

By Stephen Pimentel

■ Among his many contributions to Catholic theology, one Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger's, now Pope Benedict XVI's, most important is his theology of covenant. Arguably as significant as John Paul II's theology of the body, Ratzinger's theology of covenant, once assimilated by the Church, promises to transform and revitalize the Church's approach to matters ranging from Scripture study to ecumenical dialogue. The theology of covenant gives nothing less than the master key to a unified interpretation of Scripture centered on the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Ratzinger's work in this area is firmly based on a fundamental principle: the theology of covenant is integral to Christian identity as given by divine revelation, especially as the latter is recorded in the New Testament. This theology cannot be primarily based on contemporary concerns, such as the per-

ceived needs of ecumenical dialogue, however important such concerns may be.¹

Ratzinger's approach to Scripture in working out the theology of covenant is noteworthy. He interprets the sacred texts with great scholarly care and learning. Yet, unlike many recent theologians, he also clearly treats these texts as normative for Christian doctrine. Ratzinger refuses to set aside central doctrinal statements of the New Testament or treat them as somehow "up for grabs." The theologian, above all, must fully confront the person and work of Christ, for "Christology thus appears as a synthesis of the covenantal theology of the New Testament, which is grounded in the unity of the entire Bible."²

What is a covenant?

In the biblical conception, a covenant is not a contract or mutual agreement between

God and man, but a relationship of reciprocity, but rather of God's love.³ In the various covenants, the covenantal forms. The Apostles refer to the covenant in the plural to describe the Old Testament (cf. Rom. 9:4), particularly, that the Old Testament covenants, the Noahite, Abrahamic, and Mosaic covenants.

For Paul, the covenants are the Abrahamic, which relate to the covenant in different ways. While all covenants share in the same permanence, in covenant and "provisional" covenant.⁴ Whereas the Mosaic Law is a covenant, the Mosaic Law was a covenant designed to "fall away" because its goal has been achieved. The Mosaic Law is none other than a transitory "stage in history" (Rom. 10:4). Hence, the Mosaic Law has its own time. All covenants are clearly, and no Christology.

The new covenant

The establishment of the new covenant is described by the Gospels as the work of Jesus over the centuries. In the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, Jesus says, "This is my blood of the new covenant" (Mark 14:24), which is the blood of the Mosaic covenant. The new covenantal ritual of the Eucharist is a blood-union or kinship. Through the Eucharist, there is a "mysterious consubstantiation" between self and man.⁸

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."³ 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.⁴ Whereas the Abrahamic covenant is "fundamental and enduring," the Mosaic covenant is "intervening" (Rom. 5:20).⁵ The Mosaic Law was a form of divine pedagogy designed to "fall away once the pedagogical goal has been achieved,"⁶ 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."⁷

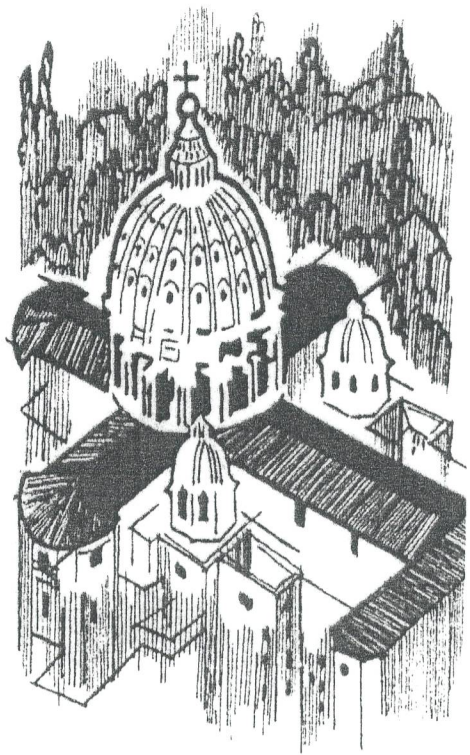
The new covenant

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.⁸

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).⁹ In sacramental communion, the disciple is united both physically and spiritually with Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 6:16).¹⁰

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).¹¹ "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."¹² 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."¹³



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."¹⁴ 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."¹⁵ 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."¹⁶

The Deuteronomic curses

By gravely violating the Mosaic Law, Israel had incurred the curses of the Deuteronomic covenant (cf. Deut. 28:15-68; 30:1). In order to perfectly fulfill the Law, Jesus had to take upon himself those curses. "Jesus fulfills the Law to the point of taking upon himself the 'curse of the Law' incurred by those who do not 'abide by the things written in the book of the Law, and do them.'"¹⁷ In Gal. 3:10, Paul quotes Deut. 27:26, the summary curse of the Deuteronomic covenant, which encapsulates the longer list of conditional curses ritually imposed on Israel when the covenant was instituted (cf. Deut. 27:14-26). Because Jesus took these curses upon himself on the Cross (cf. Gal. 3:13), his death served as "the perfect realization" of the Day of Atonement.¹⁸

The transitory nature of the Mosaic Law does not imply that the new covenant lacks a law of its own, for Paul also speaks of "the Torah of Christ" (Gal. 6:2), namely, "the dual commandment of love."¹⁹ Thus, the new covenant calls all who accept it to "their own faithful conduct" (cf. Heb. 3:13),²⁰ for Christ "imposes duties upon us and challenges us to obedience."²¹

The children of Abraham

For Paul, "the promise of Abraham guarantees from the beginning the inner continuity of salvation history, from the patriarchs of Israel to the coming of Christ and the Church of Jews and Gentiles."²² Scripture presents salvation history not as a dichotomy between the new covenant and those of the Old Testament but rather as a "dynamic unity of the entire history." Indeed, from the perspective of eternity, there is only "one covenant," the "eternally valid" covenant of Abraham now perfectly fulfilled in Christ.²³

The Abrahamic covenant was structured from the beginning to be fulfilled by Christ. In the very ritual establishing the Abrahamic

covenant (cf. Gen. 15), Abraham "symbolically" offered himself, offering his son Isaac as a "sign of the covenant" which God vouches for. Thus, the full meaning of the covenant with Israel is revealed in the very existence of the human nature upon which the new covenant is based.

For Paul, the new covenant is not just for those in covenant with Israel (cf. Gal. 3:6-7). God's promise of blessing for the Gentiles is the foundation of the gospel. In fact, the gospel cannot be proclaimed until the blessing now coming to pass (cf. Gal. 3:6). Within the new covenant of blessing was given by Jesus, who "fulfills the wholeness of the Law" for the pagans, who can now become children of Abraham.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* repeats the same teaching. "The nations' now takes the place of the patriarchs."²⁴ "The nations shoot of Judah, who are members of all nations. God with Israel through the covenant of God and through a Kingdom,"²⁷ under the temporal political earth extended from the beginning. In consequence, the new covenant, the Body of Christ and Gentiles are well united. Jesus is to unite Jews and Gentiles as the People of God.²⁸

Paul's understanding of the new covenant as an organic "grafting" of the Gentiles to Israel was confirmed by the Second Vatican Council in *Nostri*

covenant (cf. Gen. 15:12-21), God enacted "symbolically a conditional curse" upon himself, offering his own life as a surety. This ritual was a "sign of the Cross of Christ, in which God vouches for the indestructibility of the covenant with the death of his Son." Thus, the full meaning of the Abrahamic covenant is revealed only when "God binds his own existence to the creature, man, by taking human nature upon himself."²⁴

For Paul, the children of Abraham are those in covenant with God by faith (cf. Gal. 3:6-7). God's promise to Abraham of blessing for the Gentiles (cf. Gen. 12:3) is the foundation of the gospel (cf. Gal. 3:8-9). In fact, the gospel can be described as the proclamation that the blessing for the Gentiles is now coming to pass through Christ (cf. Eph. 3:6). Within covenantal history, the promise of blessing was given to Abraham and fulfilled by Jesus, who "opens up and fulfills the wholeness of the Law and gives it thus to the pagans, who can now accept it . . . , thereby becoming children of Abraham."²⁵

The *Catechism*, Ratzinger notes, presents the same teaching. The "'full number of the nations' now takes its 'place in the family of the patriarchs.'"²⁶ Jesus is "the promised shoot of Judah, who unites Israel and the nations in the kingdom of God." Therefore, members of all nations enter the "People of God with Israel through adherence to the will of God and through acceptance of the Davidic Kingdom,"²⁷ understood not merely as a temporal political entity, but as God's rule on earth extended from heaven (cf. Isa. 52:7). In consequence, there is only one People of God, the Body of Christ, in which both Jews and Gentiles are welcome. "The mission of Jesus is to unite Jews and pagans into a single People of God."²⁸

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."²⁹

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.³⁰

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."³¹ 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.”³² ■

End Notes

¹ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Many Religions - One Covenant: Israel, the Church, and the World*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 102, 106.

² Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “The New Covenant: A Theology of Covenant in the New Testament,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 22, no. 4 (1995): 635-651 at 650. This work later appeared, in a different translation, as the second chapter of *Many Religions* (pp. 47-77). All references herein to this work will be to the *Communio* translation.

³ Ratzinger, “New Covenant,” 636.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 638.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 639.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 640.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 646.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 642.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 643; cf. *idem*, *Many Religions*, 45.

¹⁰ Ratzinger, “New Covenant,” 642.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 644.

¹² *Ibid.*, 640.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 644.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 645.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 648.

¹⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 129; cf.

Ratzinger, *Many Religions*, 36.

¹⁷ *Catechism*, 580; cf. Gal. 3:10.

¹⁸ Ratzinger, *Many Religions*, 32.

¹⁹ Ratzinger, “New Covenant,” 647; cf. *idem*,

Many Religions, 33-34.

²⁰ Ratzinger, “New Covenant,” 645.

²¹ Ratzinger, *Many Religions*, 106.

²² Ratzinger, “New Covenant,” 646.

²³ *Ibid.*, 640.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 649.

²⁵ Ratzinger, *Many Religions*, 41.

²⁶ *Catechism*, 528; cf. Ratzinger, *Many*

Religions, 25.

²⁷ Ratzinger, *Many Religions*, 27-28.

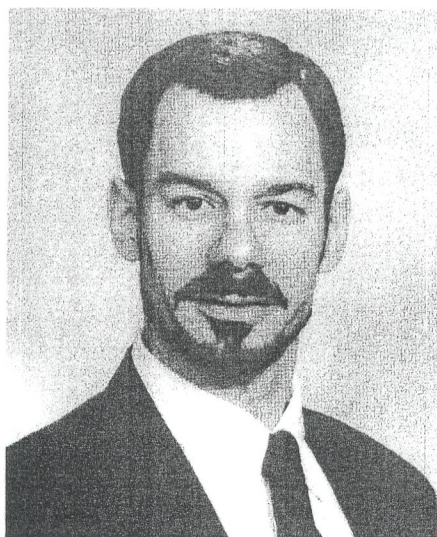
²⁸ *Ibid.*, 26; cf. *idem*, “New Covenant,” 646.

²⁹ Ratzinger, *Many Religions*, 28.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 103.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 102.

³² *Ibid.*, 106.



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