

## ARE YOU PARTY TO THIS CONTRACT?

### ⇒THE NEW COVENANT - 1←

We have now reached the Christian covenant in our study of the covenants in the Bible. Our starting position must be Jesus' own statement about it. When Jesus was alone with the twelve disciples in the upper room on the night of his arrest celebrating the Passover, he did and said something that he had not done before and would not repeat.

In the New English Bible from Matthew's gospel (chapter 26:26-28) we read: "During supper Jesus took bread, and having said the blessing he broke it and gave it to the disciples with the words: 'Take this and eat; this is my body.' Then he took a cup, and having offered thanks to God he gave it to them with the words: 'Drink from it, all of you. For this is my blood, the blood of the covenant, shed for many for the forgiveness of sins.'" Paul tells of the same event in his second letter to the church at Corinth, and adds the command of Christ to repeat the eating of the bread and the drinking of the wine in His memory. (2 Corinthians 11:23-25).

In considering all the previous covenants, we have looked at who the parties were, the conditions and promises in the covenant, and sought out the means by which the covenant was sealed, and the sign by which it was to be remembered. In the case of the Christian covenant the promise of God is clear. It is a promise of the forgiveness of sins. Jesus makes no explicit condition for that forgiveness. At this point He doesn't say we have to do anything.

The idea of forgiveness occurs earlier in the gospels. John the Baptist, who in some ways prepared for the coming of Jesus, called upon people to repent and be baptised for the forgiveness of sins. (Mark 1:4). Jesus repeated the call (Mark 1:15). Later, after his resurrection, Jesus told his disciples that this was to be their message. (Luke 24:46-48). The response demanded was repentance. The apostles did indeed repeat this message in their preaching in Acts. (Acts 2:38-39). So there can be little doubt about the basis of the Christian covenant. It is God's forgiveness of our sins and our acceptance of it shown by repentance.

Of course in Jesus's time the idea of sin was well established among the Jews he spoke to. In our time this may not be the best way of initiating the preaching of the gospel to those who do not know it. Indeed, throughout the book of Acts the apostles used a different approach in talking to non-Jews. John, in his gospel, did not start with the forgiveness of sins. He wrote about the "Word", which was a concept in Greek religious thought. He then led the readers on to Jesus as the "Word" who became man. Today a good Christian preacher, like the early apostles, will generally use the language and concepts of the people he is talking to to express the gospel, but underlying what he says will be the covenant of the forgiveness of sins. The covenant does not change, but its external expression may. As a simple example, we may wish to express the meaning of forgiveness of sins as a "fresh start" in life with God, with the wrongs of the past forgotten.

We must also ask, as we did with the earlier covenants: Who was the covenant with? At the Last Supper, Jesus said it is for "many". Later He tells the apostles to preach to all nations, which they did. So in many ways it had a wider scope than the covenant with Israel which Moses prepared. That covenant was for Israel only. But in another way it had a narrower scope than the covenant of Moses. That covenant was with the whole nation as a nation. Jesus's covenant is for individuals of any nation who will accept it. Not everyone in any nation will accept it. Indeed Jesus had said that few would find the "narrow way". Because Jesus's covenant is for individuals, it makes no attempt to lay down national laws such as civil laws and criminal laws. Those accepting the new covenant would be a minority in the nations they belonged to, and in no position to impose

national laws upon their fellow countrymen. You can be a Christian and live under any form of national law, however good or poor, without compromise (unless, of course, the national law forbids you to be a Christian, explicitly or implicitly), because national law is not the point of the new covenant. The point of the covenant is a relationship with God.

There are two more vital matters in relation to this new covenant. When and how was it sealed and what was its sign? As these require some detailed consideration we will leave them to a separate chapter.

While I was writing this book and simultaneously publishing the chapters as articles in the Perranzabuloe Parish Magazine, Christmas arrived at this point and I wrote a special article on Christmas. I feel it is not inappropriate to include it here as the next chapter.