Beginning of the New Testament

Testament or Covenant?

In **Matthew 26:26-28** we read:

> *"And as they were eating, Jesus took bread and blessed it, and brake it, and gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is my body'. And He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, 'Drink ye all of it; For this is my blood of* ***the new testament****, which is shed for many for the remission of sin'"* (KJV, my emphasis).

In the above-mentioned text the King James Version translates the Greek word *diathéké*, as **testament**, but the NIV and some other translations translate this same word as covenant.. In classical Greek it was used in the context of the making of a will by a person in the prospect of death. To confirm this, we quote what Spiros Zodhiates says about it: "*There is ample evidence in papyri that this is the ordinary meaning in the New Testament."* It is unfortunate that this word diathéké was translated as covenant in some Bibles.

The NIV, for instance, uses covenant in **Matthew 26:28**, but then translates the same word *diathéké* as "*will"* in **Hebrews 9:16**; *"In the case of a will, it is necessary to prove the death of the one who made it.."* The topic of discussion in the context of **Hebrews 9**, which is a will, does not allow covenant to be used. It is very important to understand that there is a difference in meaning between the word covenant and the word testament.

The word "covenant" is frequently used in the Old Testament, and it relates to a mutual agreement between two parties. It is in this sense that we understand the Old Covenant. God's covenant with Moses was based on a conditional promise that He made to Israel based on them keeping the Law (**Deuteronomy 28**).
A testament, however, is a unilateral expression of the will of the testator. *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary* confirms this understanding of the word *diathéké* as used in **Matthew 26:26:**

> ***"...****diathéké primarily signifies a disposition of property by will..In contradistinction to the English word "covenant", which signifies a mutual undertaking between two parties or more, each binding himself to fulfil obligations, diathéké does not in itself contain the idea of joint obligation, it mostly signifies an obligation undertaken by a single person".*

Because this meaning of the New Testament has not been properly emphasised in the church it has been robbed of much of its authority.

The correct understanding of **Matthew 26:26** is likely to have a profound impact on the life of the believer. When a person gets reborn by placing his/her faith in the Lord Jesus Christ as Saviour he/she automatically qualifies as recipient of an inheritance as set out in the New Testament. Unfortunately many are not enjoying the full benefit of their inheritance because through ignorance they cannot exert faith through which to make it real. In many cases the truth concerning the meaning of the New Testament has been neutralized, because their thinking has been influenced by some traditional teachings which are not in

accord with the meaning of the New Testament. On the other hand, many Christians, because of a lack of interest in spiritual things, have just thrown their inheritance away!

One can imagine what would happen if earthly testaments were treated in the same way as many churches carelessly handle the Testament of our Lord Jesus Christ! – the will of the deceased would be ignored and one court case upon another would follow as heirs bicker and dispute the right of ownership of valuable articles.

When did the New Testament take effect?

Many people think that the beginning of the New Testament is indicated by the division in the Bible between the Book of Malachi and the beginning of the Gospel according to Matthew. Some are of the opinion that the New Testament started with the birth of Jesus. They do not take into account the fact that it was announced by Jesus only in **Matthew 26:26-28** during the Lord's Supper. While breaking the bread, Jesus announced: "*Take and eat; this is my body."* While taking up the cup He said: "***This is my blood of the New Testament**, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."* At that stage not a drop of Jesus' blood had been spilt, neither had anything happened to His body. He must therefore have been referring to some futuristic event. We now know that He was referring to what would soon afterwards happen to him during His crucifixion.

Translating *diathéké* as covenant does not fit into the context of in **Hebrews 9:15-17** where the same word is used. Clarification is provided by the context where it is explained that a will or testament does not come into effect until the death of the testator, the one who made it. The King James Version puts it like this:

> *"For where a **testament** is, there must of necessity be the death of the testator, for a testament is of force after men are dead, otherwise it is of no strength at all while the testator liveth."*

The NIV translation is:

> *"In the case of a will, it is necessary to prove the death of the one who made it, because a will is in force only when somebody has died; it never takes effect while the one who made it is living."*

It is therefore very clear that the New Testament started at the moment of Christ's death on the cross. Understanding this fact is essential for interpreting the Bible correctly. Many things that Jesus referred to before his death were spoken in the context of the Old Covenant, which at that stage had not yet lost its power.

It is important to understand what changes took place from the change over from the Old Covenant to the New Testament.

A Physical Demonstration of the Start of the New Testament

Throughout the Bible we see how God explains and illustrates spiritual truths by means of physical demonstrations. In **1 Corinthians 10** Paul explains the symbolic meaning of the water that flowed from the rock that was struck by Moses (**Ex. 17)**. He explains that the rock

was Christ. In **John 3** Jesus also makes use of an Old Covenant shadow type to explain a spiritual principle to Nicodemus; just like the snake was lifted up in the desert **(Numbers 21:8, 9),** so the Son of Man had to be lifted up so that all who put their faith in Him could be saved. Many more examples could be cited. **The most significant symbolic incident mentioned in the Bible took place at the exact moment of the death of Jesus on the cross – the veil dividing the most holy place from the rest of the Jewish temple, tore in two.** It was behind this veil that God manifested His presence to the Old Covenant high priest.

Just before his death Jesus uttered: *"It is finished*" (**John 19:30**). What was finished? These words implied that the mission that had brought him to earth had been accomplished. He had "finished" making atonement for sin by dying on the cross and He had also finished initiating a new order, the New Testament. The full meaning of this completed task is symbolically illustrated by the tearing of the veil. The implication of this symbolic event is so far reaching that it divides the Bible into two sections, the Old Covenant and the New Testament. The tearing of the veil was a Divine sign announcing symbolically the start of a new era, a totally new dispensation. The Amplified Bible states it like this:

> "*By this the Holy Spirit points out that the way into the true Holy of Holies is not yet thrown open as long as the former (the outer portion of the) tabernacle remains a recognised institution and is still standing. Seeing that the first outer portion of the tabernacle was a parable – a visible symbol or type or picture of the present age…For the ceremonies deal only with clean and unclean meats and drinks and different washings, mere external rules and regulations for the body imposed to tide the worshippers over until the time of setting things straight – of reformation,* ***of the complete new order*** *when Christ, the Messiah, shall establish the reality of what these things foreshadow, a better covenant"* (Hebrews 9:8-10, my emphasis).

Thus the division of the two different dispensations in the Bible does not lie between the end of Malachi and the beginning of the Book of Matthew, but at the exact moment of the tearing of the veil in the Jewish temple, coinciding with the moment of Christ's death on the cross **(Matthew 27:50-51).**

Without a complete understanding of this symbolic message from God that day in the temple (remember it was torn from top to bottom), one cannot fully appreciate the new dispensation of the New Testament that it inaugurated. Unfortunately many Christians are not fully experiencing the benefits of this "complete new order" because of so many concepts and practices that are carried over from the Old Covenant or are based on the traditions of men.

Because the importance of this event is not adequately emphasised, **many do not realise how radically it should influence our traditional concept of church life.** In fact, if the tearing of the veil and what it stands for does not form the centre of your theology, it is difficult to understand how you can interpret the Bible properly!

Change of Law – Heb.7:11-12

*"**For when the priesthood is changed, there also has to be a change in the law"*** (GNB)

"Nor do people pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst, the wine will spill out, and the skins will be ruined. Instead, they pour new wine into fresh wineskins, and both are preserved" (Matt. 9:17).

Changes from the Old Covenant to the New Testament

Old Covenant	**New Testament**
1. Mosaic Law (Deut.28:1-15). *"...if you diligently obey the LORD your God to carry out all his commands that I'm giving you today, then the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth"* (Deut. 28:1).	**1. The Teachings of Jesus and the New Testament epistles:** *"And Jesus came and spoke to them...**All authority** is given to Me in Heaven and in earth...teaching them to observe all things, **whatever I commanded you**"* (Matt. 28:18-20). *"Therefore, everyone who hears these words of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock"* (Matt. 7:24). **The Royal Law of Love**: (James 2:8, Matt. 22:36-40, Gal. 5:14).
2. God spoke through prophets *"God, who at many times and in many ways spoke **in time past to the fathers by the prophets…"*** **(**Heb.1:1-2).	**2. God spoke through His Son** *"God...has in these last days spoken to us **by His Son"*** **(Heb.1:1-2).**
3. God gave the Law from Mount Sinai (Ex.20)	**3. Jesus spoke from the Mount of Olives** (Matt. 5:1).
4. **The temple in Jerusalem, the central place of worship** (Deut.15).	4. *"Or do you not know that **your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit…"*** (1Cor. 6:19). *"...the hour is coming when you shall neither worship the Father in this mountain nor yet at Jerusalem...But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth..."* (Joh 4:20-24).
5. Old Testament priesthood: Aaron, High priest and Levites: (Lev.8:12-13, Heb.7:11).	**5. New High Priest, Jesus Christ** (Heb.7:11) **and New Testament priesthood of all believers:** (1 Pet.2:9, Rev. 1:6).

6. Sacrifices offered repeatedly, over and over: (Lev.16:34)	**6.** *"For **by one offering** He has perfected forever those who are sanctified"* (Heb. 10:14**).**
7. Only the priests could eat of the animal and grain sacrifices: *"They shall eat what was used in the ritual of forgiveness... Only priests may eat this food, because it is sacred".* **(Ex.29:33).**	**7. Anybody may eat of the spiritual sacrifice:** **"***But the bread that comes down from heaven is of such a kind that **whoever** eats it will not die...* *Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life..."* (Joh.6:5
8. Only the priests, kings and prophets were called God's anointed ones: *"Touch not my anointed, and do My prophets no harm"* **(Ps.105:15).**	**8. All believers are God's anointed ones:** In Acts 2 *"they were **all** filled with the Holy Spirit"* (Acts 2:4). *"But you have the anointing from the Holy One..."* (1 Joh. 2:20). **Gifts of the Holy Spirit available to all believers: (**1 Cor.14:1).
9. The anointed ones had status above that of common people: (Ps.105:15).	**9. The anointed have no special status:** *"Jesus said, You know that the rulers of the nations exercise lordship over them, and the great ones exercise authority over them. But it will not be so among you. But whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant"* (Matt. 20:25-27).
10. Only Levites and descendants of Aaron could be priests (Heb. 7:11-12).	**10. To be New Testament teachers, the ideal for all believers: "***For indeed because of the time, you ought to be teachers…"* (Heb. 5:12). (1 Cor. 14:1-3).
11. Only the priests could minister in the temple (Num.1:51)	**11.** "*When you come together, **each one of you** has a psalm, has a teaching, has a tongue, has a revelation, has an interpretation..."* (1 Cor. 14:26).
12. The people had to go up to Jerusalem to the temple, to be ministered to by the priests (Deut. 14).	**12. New form of getting together and a new form of ministry:** *"...where two or three are gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst"* (Matt. 18:20). (1 Cor. 14:26, "...everyone has a...).

13. Fleshly circumcision required in order to be incorporated into Jewish nation (Ex. 12:48).	**13. Inner circumcision of the heart necessary to become part of the body of Christ– to be born again:** *"...in whom also you are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ..."* (Col. 2:11-12).
14. Under the Law written on stone tablets (Ex.31:18, Deut. 28).	**14.** *"But **the Law of the Spirit of life in Christ** Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death"* (Rom. 8:2**).** **"***Christ is the end of the law for righteousness for everyone who believes"* (Rom. 10:4). (Eseg.36:26, Gal.5:16).
15. Priests supported by tithes (Mal.3:10).	**15. Principle of Stewardship: "***You should each give, then, as you have decided, not with regret or out of a sense of duty; for God loves the one who gives gladly"* (2Cor. 9:7). The needs in the body are looked after by applying the principle given by Jesus: "*Remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that He Himself said, It is more blessed to give than to receive"* (Acts .20:35).

Conclusion

In varying levels many Christian congregations are influenced by Old Testament teachings and practices. The most well-known example is the fact that the brick building called the church, is by many, respectfully called "the House of God," that is in spite of what is clearly stated in **Acts 17:24**: "*The God who made the world and all things in it...does not dwell in temples made with hands..."* If the teachings and principles of the New Testament had to be taken seriously, many congregations would be compelled to make radical changes in the model of the "church" that they are following. The sharp distinction between laity and clergy would fade and an alternative, freer way of meeting together could be implemented. The rigid adherence to traditions that do not correspond with New Testament principles, prevents many congregations from becoming "new wineskins."

Nick Maartens
Jeffreys Bay
0827826074
nickmaartens@hotmail.com