

NEW HEART, NEW COVENANT

BY RICH LUSK

For too long, the Bible has been read through the lens of individualism and experientialism. Getting hold of the corporate and redemptive-historical dimensions of Paul's thought better helps us understand how Old Testament passages like Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36-37 have come to fulfillment in Christ. These sorts of passage are regularly individualized and psychologized, and therefore ripped from their covenantal context. While Old Testament passages no doubt had proximate fulfillments within the range of the old covenant itself, their ultimate realization is found in Christ and the church.

The old covenant was "stone hearted" – that is to say, its central feature was the "Word made stone" in the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments were deposited in the Ark of the Covenant in the center of the tabernacle/temple. Everyone in the ancient world knew that temples were microcosms of both the universe and the individual person (especially the High Priest). The Most Holy Place contained the "heart" of the Old Covenant, namely, the stone tablets of the Ten Commandments. (The centrality of the Ten Commandments to the Sinaitic/Mosaic covenant is obvious from a careful reading of Exodus.)

Thus, when Ezekiel speaks of the Lord removing Israel's heart of stone (note that it's singular!), he's not saying every person living under the Old Covenant regime was wicked and hard-hearted, nor that they would all undergo an individual conversion experience when the new covenant arrived. Rather, he's saying they were tied to an inferior, preliminary covenant system centered in the tabernacle/temple. He's referring to the covenant document engraved on tablets of stone at the center Israelite society.

The promise of a heart of flesh is fulfilled in the incarnation, as Jim Jordan has shown:¹ "The Word was made flesh and tabernacled among us" (Jn. 1:14). Jesus himself is the heart of the New Covenant. What the stony heart of the law could not do, the Word-in-Flesh has done (cf. Rom. 8:1-4). He has established a new covenant and formed a new community, with full access to the divine sanctuary.²

It's critical to notice that promises such as those in Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36-37 are given to a community *in exile*. The promises of a new heart and a new covenant are really promises of a *new exodus*, as corroboration with Isaiah (especially chapters 40-66) reveals. Thus, when these prophecies are appropriated by Paul and applied to the church (e.g., 2 Cor. 3; Heb. 8), his point is clear: The church is God's promised New Israel, the community the prophets spoke about ahead of time. Just as Israel was sprinkled with

¹ See his essay, "Thought on Sovereign Grace and Regeneration."

² As Jordan has argued elsewhere, the restoration prophecies came to a preliminary fulfillment in Israel's return from exile. And yet it is obvious that Israel was still in some sense in the old age and in need of an even greater prophetic fulfillment. For the purposes of simplicity, we will focus on the old covenant/new covenant relationship, and essentially ignore the restoration-from-exile covenant.

water and blood in the Mosaic exodus (cf. Ps. 77:17, 1 Cor. 10; Ex. 24), so we have received a greater water and blood sprinkling – the promised baptism of the Spirit and the blood of Christ (cf. Ezek. 36:25, Acts 2, 1 Pt. 1:2). The covenant of stone is now an epistle of flesh; the church herself is the living letter and temple of the new age. The stony Ten Commandments (or, better, Ten Words) have been replaced by Christ himself, who is the Word made flesh and the heart of the new covenant. Through union with him, the new covenant community is itself the enfleshment of the new word of the gospel (cf. 2 Cor.3).

To put all of this another way: The ark of the covenant, the mystery of God, the treasury of God, has been opened in Christ (Eph. 3:1ff). The veil has been torn, and we have been given full access to the gifts of God. We may boldly draw near to the throne of grace, the true and heavenly most holy place (Heb. 4; 10; Rev. 4; 10-15)

This redemptive-historical shift also factors into our reading of John 3.³ In the redemptive historical sense, no one was born again, or born from above, until Jesus came. Old covenant saints looked ahead to the new creation by means of Spirit-wrought faith, but did not yet experience it in fullness. In that sense they were still “in Adam,” who was made “from below,” from the dust of the earth; they did not have access to the heavenly sanctuary. Jesus is the pre-eminent Born Again One, the One Born From Heaven. He is born of water and Spirit, not the dry dust of the earth, as his Virginal Conception proves. In union with him, we share in this new creation existence. We too have been born again, from above. Our lives are shaped by union with the Son of Man, the Second Adam.

The term “regeneration” is only used twice in the New Testament and in neither place does it function in the way it has come to be used in Reformed systematics for a “transubstantiated heart,” as Jordan has called it. In Matthew 19:28, the “regeneration” is identified as the new kingdom age Jesus came to inaugurate. Jesus himself is the embodiment of this regeneration; in union with him, his people also become a new creation (cf. 2 Cor. 5:17). From Tit. 3:5, we can surmise that we enter this new creation through the waters of baptism. As we are washed with water from above, we are united in covenant with the Savior (cf. Rom. 6). Thus, technically, no one was “regenerate” under the old covenant. Regeneration, in the Bible’s vocabulary, refers to a corporate and redemptive historical reality co-extensive with the new covenant. “Regeneration” is, essentially, union with the glorified Christ by the Spirit, through faith.

John 3, therefore, is not a discussion about personal soteriology as such. Rather, Jesus is making a point about redemptive history and wonders aloud why Israel’s best teacher cannot grasp it. Nicodemus should have seen that the promises of Ezekiel and the other prophets required a great change in redemptive history, not just a change in the hearts of individuals.

Unfortunately, much of modern evangelicalism has truncated God’s saving work, reducing it to the individual’s private experience. Reading Scripture in a redemptive-

³ Again, Jordan’s essay, referenced above, is very helpful here.

historical, promise-to-fulfillment framework enables us to break free of this individualistic bias and see the “big picture” of what God has done, is doing, and will do.