

## Relationship to God

It's popular in preaching the gospel or sermons to tell people that they **must** have a personal relationship with God. But what does that mean? For example, what is the nature of the relationship, how does it get started, what expectations are there in the relationship and how does it work in a practical sense? These are all valid questions that race through a person's mind but usually go unanswered.

The name of the relationship is **covenant** and it is the basis for Biblical Christianity. All denominations of Christians acknowledge this covenant relationship, yet many forget about it and what it means when it comes to arguing their particular point of view. Without knowledge of what a covenant is and how its parts work, much of what it means to be a Christian is difficult to understand. So let's take a closer look at the key concept of covenant.

### - The Covenant Relationship -

An individual becomes a Christian by entering into a covenant with God. The Biblical name of that covenant is the "New Covenant"<sup>1</sup> and is referenced by Scripture in Jeremiah 31:31-34. *"Behold, days are coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers in the day I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. "But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days," declares the LORD, "I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. They will not teach again, each man his neighbor and each man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they will all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them," declares the LORD, "for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more."*

A covenant in its simplest terms is an **agreement** or **promise** between two or more parties. It is derived from the Hebrew word "berith", which means to divide or cut in two. It has come to mean, "a coming together" which signifies a mutual undertaking between two or more parties each binding himself to fulfill obligations. It does not in and of itself contain the idea of joint obligation. It mostly signifies an obligation undertaken by a single person.

Covenant is the way that **God has chosen** to enter into relationship with men. There are several of these covenants recorded in the Bible. Seven predominant ones are the: Adamic, Noahaic, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Palestinian, Davidic and the New.

Covenants have been used since ancient times as a way for people to come together. For example, friends would pledge their friendship forever, enemies would make peace and become friends and conquerors brought the conquered into submission and worked out a friendly relationship with them.

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<sup>1</sup> The Hebrew name for this covenant is "Brit Hadashah".

The key word in all these covenant agreements is **friend**. Our modern day usage of the word friend has been corrupted. In most cases we should be using the term, “acquaintance”. The word friend, according to the dictionary, comes from prehistoric times and has a root meaning of “to love”. A friend is one who is attached to another by esteem or affection, or one that is not hostile, or one that is of the same nation, party or group. The most common form of covenant that people participate in today is **marriage**.

Covenants are entered into by representatives who become functionally one and are bound together in an unbreakable treaty. They are in fact **exchanging** their lives with one another. The representatives can be the actual people engaged in the covenant themselves or they can also represent their families, organizations, nations, the unborn or those who wish to be part of it.

Covenants are formally binding agreements much like are modern day contracts however they differ in five primary ways:

1. A covenant is initiated based on the concept of friendship, whereas a contract is initiated to achieve an agreement.
2. A covenant is based on trust between the parties. (I.E. “I know you care for me.”) A contract is based on distrust for one another.
3. A covenant is based on unlimited responsibility. (I.E. “I will do everything in my power to bless you.”) A contract is based on limited liabilities.
4. A covenant cannot be broken if new circumstances occur, whereas a contract can be voided by mutual consent.
5. A covenant is made before impartial witnesses, whereas a contract needs only the agreement of the two participating parties.

### - The Parts of a Covenant -

Every covenant, including the New Covenant has four basic parts:<sup>2</sup>

1. The Choice
2. The Law or terms of the agreement
3. The Sacrifice
4. The Sign which is “a memorial” or “in remembrance of”

### - The Choice -

The “Choice” consists of an **invitation** or proposal by one party to another to come into a covenant agreement. The stronger one usually makes the invitation or proposal since he has more to offer. The weaker one accepts the offer. This is why we historically see a man proposing marriage to a woman.

In the New Covenant, God invites or proposes that an individual enter into a covenant relationship with Him. The invitation comes through the preaching of the gospel or as some would say by declaring the “good news” of Jesus Christ. It is God calling out to people to come to Him. When a person **hears** this invitation it is what the Scripture refers

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<sup>2</sup> The last page of this book has a comparison chart of the parts of three major covenants.

to as being “**called**” by God. Once a person **accepts** the invitation and enters into the New Covenant the terms **chosen**<sup>3</sup> or elect apply to him.

The choice also includes a discussion of what the parties’ relationship had been up to this time, what brought them together and what their relationship would be in the future.

In the New Covenant the relationship of Christians had been that of enemies of God and sinners. The goodness of God is what brings them together and their relationship in the future will be that of friends and family.

The choice also includes a preliminary exchange of gifts such as clothing, weapons, rings or dowry. This demonstrates the parties’ goodwill toward one another.

In the New Covenant the exchange of gifts takes place around the sacrament of **baptism**. The individual brings his gifts of repentance from dead works and faith towards God when he gets water baptized. That is why water baptism is sometimes referred to as a baptism of repentance. God also brings His gifts ... the forgiveness of sins and a new life for the individual or as some would say ... the gift of eternal life. God evidences these gifts by giving the individual the Holy Spirit who then comes to dwell within the individual. This is called being baptized with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit serves as the seal of the covenant or in other words it is God’s way of “sealing the deal.”

### - The Law -

The second element, “The Law” or “terms of the agreement” consists of a **promise** to **exchange** lives. For example, your debts are my debts, my bank account is your bank account, my house is your house, my strength is your protection and my body is your body. The legal term for this relationship of chosen bondage is “lovingkindness.”<sup>4</sup>

The idea of an exchanged life with Christ through the New Covenant has huge implications for Christians. Basically they get to exchange everything they are or have for everything that Christ is and has. For example their sins for His righteousness, their physical talents and gifts for His spiritual gifts, their worldly reasoning for His wisdom and their sorrows for His joy. He also gets their obedience in exchange for His provision and their faith in what He says in exchange for His reward. Is that a good deal or what?

Then the parties make vows or promises to one another. For example in a wedding ceremony we usually hear a promise of love and faithfulness to one another for better or worse, richer or poorer and in sickness and health as long as we both shall live.

Christians hear similar words as the Apostle Paul reminds them in Hebrews 13:5 that Christ said: *“I will never leave you or forsake you.”*

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<sup>3</sup> For example, *“Many are called (invited) but few are chosen”* (accept). (Matthew 22:14)

<sup>4</sup> Lovingkindness (covenant loyalty or faithfulness) is a tender (soft, delicate, yielding, mild, gentle, precious, considerate, dear) and benevolent (for the purpose of doing good, kindness, help) affection (to strive after).

The Law also consists of **curses** and **blessings**. In other words, bad things happen to those who do not adhere to the terms of the covenant and good things happen when they do.

We find some examples of New Covenant blessings and curses in the words of Jesus. For example, in the Beatitudes we hear these kinds of words: *“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth.”* Jesus also expressed **curses** when He said: *“Do not judge lest you be judged. If you do not forgive men, then your Father will not forgive your transgression. Therefore I say to you, any sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven men, but blasphemy against the Spirit shall not be forgiven.”*

### - The Sacrifice -

The third element, “The Sacrifice” consists of shedding the blood of at least one animal whose body is cut into pieces and divided into two separate piles of meat. This is done with the thought that the two bloody heaps of meat will stand as **witnesses** that the parties are giving each other to one another unto death. The sacrificial element of a covenant is foundational since the Hebrew word for covenant means to “**divide**” or “cut in two”.

The two bloody heaps of meat are meant to convey a couple of additional thoughts to the participating parties. They are: (1) If you dare break or become unfaithful to this covenant, may God do this to you and more and (2) In order to keep this covenant, I will die if necessary.

Once the meat is separated, the representatives **walk** through the pieces in a figure eight. The number eight has a dual meaning. In the Bible it represents a “new beginning”. From the book of Genesis we learn that God created the heavens and the earth in six days and on the seventh day He rested. From this we are to understand that the number seven represents the completion of the cycle, therefore the number eight represents “the starting another cycle” or “beginning something new.” A second meaning for the number eight arises when it is laid on its side. The number (∞) then becomes the symbol for “infinity” or “without end” or “eternal”.

A great picture of covenant making is found in the Bible, when God makes a covenant with Abram. This is found in the book of Genesis, chapter 15. A portion of that chapter reads as follows: *So God said to him, “Bring Me a three year old heifer, and a three year old female goat, and a three year old ram, and a turtledove, and a young pigeon.” Then Abram brought all these to Him and cut them in two, and laid each half opposite the other; but he did not cut the birds. It came about when the sun had set, that it was very dark, and behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a flaming torch which passed between these pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram. (Genesis 15:9, 10, 17 and 18)*

In the New Covenant, God provides the sacrifice ... His son, Jesus Christ, “the Lamb of God.” Jesus serves as a witness to the covenant. But God has called other witnesses as well. They are Heaven and Earth, the Law and the Prophets, heavenly angels and members of the congregation as well as the water, the blood and the Spirit as referenced in 1 John 5:7-8.

## - The Sign -

The fourth element of a covenant is “The Sign.” It is also known as a “**memorial**” or “in remembrance of”, and is used to help the parties remember the covenant they have made with each other. Throughout history people have used several different types of signs and memorials. For example: They heaped up stones, or planted a forest, or exchanged herds of animals and in marriages they exchanged rings.

Many times they exchanged names and when the covenant was complete they would eat a meal. The meal was usually a light one ... symbolic in nature consisting of bread and wine or water. This memorial meal can easily be identified at weddings. It’s when the bride and groom feed each other a piece of cake and share a glass of champagne.

When an individual enters the New Covenant he takes another name, “Christian” and participates in the covenant meal, which is known as “communion”.

After Jesus’ death the New Covenant was offered immediately to the Jewish people, which was in accordance with the Scripture. In Jeremiah 31:31 God had declared, “*I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.*” Some ten-years later the New Covenant was offered to the Gentiles. The story of how this occurred is the subject of chapter 10, in the book of Acts.