

One By One Until Done

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Some groups, usually on the religious fringe, teach that God has not yet established the New Covenant. Adherents of this heresy are quick to point out Jeremiah 31:34 to support their contention. We will get a running start; beginning in verse 31. As we proceed today, you will come to see how important the plural *days* is in this passage.

Jeremiah 31:31-32 (ESV) Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day . . .

Day is singular there.

Jeremiah 31:32-34 (ESV) . . . when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, My covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put My law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be My people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord.

The heretics aver that, because the church of God *teaches* today, the New Covenant has not yet come. If we were now under the New Covenant, they assert, we would all know God and we would not be teaching others, according to verse 34. They argue that Christ’s command that His disciples teach proves Christ’s work did not immediately presage the coming of the New Covenant. And that He knew that. I am going to read Matthew 28:19-20, just for the record:

Matthew 28:19-20 (ESV) Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.

That last statement seems to notify us that the teaching activity will continue to “the end of the age.” The heretics assert, therefore, that the New Covenant will not come until “the end of the age,” until some time in the future.

That is what they errantly assert. Now, it is absolutely true that teaching is an essential part, an absolutely essential part, of God’s work today. I could not find the quote, but Mr. Armstrong actually did say something to the effect that the work of the church of God is an *educational* work. He rightly considered himself to be an educator—to be a teacher. In I Corinthians 12:28, Paul lists teachers as the third category of members in God’s church, only after apostles and prophets.

The noun *teacher* (or *teachers*) appears 16 times in the books of Acts through Revelation—I chose those books because they were written in the time of the New Covenant. The noun *teaching* (that is, *doctrine*) appears about 24 times in those books. The verb *teach*, in its various forms, appears about

39 times. Additionally, the words *instruct*, *instruction*, *instructor* appear some 18 times, just in those books. Teaching is clearly a major part of the New Covenant church of God.

While I appreciate that the church is not currently distracted by this heresy (certainly not this particular congregation), yet, in view of the indisputable centrality—if not the primacy—of teaching in God’s work, it may be valuable to refute the heretics here. That value is enhanced by the fact that, along the way, we shall connect some important dots which describe aspects of the New Covenant. Emphatically, Jeremiah 31:34 does *not* say what the heretics aver. Today, let us take a look into this false notion that the church’s emphasis on teaching proves that the New Covenant has not yet come. To believe that is to believe a lie. Let us see why.

We shall start by looking at the uniqueness of the New Covenant. Back there in verse 32 of Jeremiah 31, remember, God says that the New Covenant will “not [be] like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt.” This does not mean that the New Covenant is different *just* because it is new. My new pair of Levi’s are essentially just like my old pair of Levi’s, except they are newer. The cut is the same; the fabric is the same. But, no, with the Old and New Covenants, the differences are far, far more profound than that. I refer you to John Ritenbaugh’s 1987 Bible Study on the book of Hebrews, specifically Parts 9 and 10. There he reviews some of the key differences between those two covenants. I shall not take the time to rehearse them here.

One key difference, germane to my comments today, is this: God ratified the *Old* Covenant with a large number of people, with a nation, but He consistently ratifies the *New* Covenant with selected individuals, and then later on He turns those individuals into a nation. Notice Exodus 24. This deals with the confirmation of the Old Covenant at Mount Sinai.

Exodus 24:3 (ESV) Moses came and told the people [He told all the people.] all the words of the Lord and all the rules. And all the people answered with one voice and said, “All the words that the Lord has spoken we will do.”

I will not have the time to review the Deuteronomic iteration of the Covenant in Moab, just before the people entered the land, when they crossed the Jordan River and moved west. That is recorded at Deuteronomy 29:10-15. It makes the point of a nation-wide, blanket covenant even clearer.

Now, compare this conceptually to John 6:44 (ESV), a memory scripture for sure: “No man can come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him.” The concept of community, and certainly the concept of nationhood, are simply absent here. Christ speaks in the singular, using the word *man*, using the word *him*, indicating a *personal* approach on God’s part, an *individual* calling rather than a blanket—a national—calling. At John 10:3, Christ says that He, the Good Shepard, “calls His Own sheep, each one by name.” (CJB). This too bespeaks a personal approach on God’s part.

Let us look at some more scriptures which make God’s *personal* approach in New Covenant times crystal clear. Consider Isaiah 44:3-5. This prophecy has application both to restored Israel at the start of the Millennium and to us today.

Isaiah 44:3-5 (GNT) I will give water to the thirsty land and make streams flow on the dry ground. I will pour out My spirit on your children and My blessing on your

descendants. They will thrive like well-watered grass, like willows by streams of running water. One by one, people will say, "I am the Lord's." They will come to join the people of Israel.

The phrase "one by one," is a paraphrase of the repetition of a Hebrew pronoun. More literally, the Hebrew reads something like, "This one and then this one and then this one will say, 'I am the Lord's.'" The stress is on the individual, in a sequence, one after another. People are responsible for their own sins. Accordingly, God grants repentance individually, on a one-by-one basis, not a blanket basis.

There are actually tens of scriptures in the New Testament addressing this one-by-one approach on God's part. You might consider Acts 3:24-26. Peter is speaking.

Acts 3:24-25 (MSG) God's covenant-word to Abraham provides the text: [Now he quotes from Genesis.] "By your offspring all the families of the earth will be blessed."

Yes, "all the families" sounds just a bit blanket, does it not? Not at all individual. But, let us read on. Peter says:

Acts 3:26 (MSG) But you are first in line: God, having raised up His Son, sent Him to bless you as you turn, one by one, from your evil ways.

All will be blessed, but on a one-by-one basis, in a line, sequentially, one after another. In the Greek, this "one-by-one" concept is carried by a word we need to discuss for a few minutes, *hekastos*.

The Greeks had a number of words for *each* or *every*. *Hekastos* is not vanilla; it does not just mean *each* or *everyone*, as we use them, but it means, as one lexicon puts it, "*each (individual) unit viewed distinctly*, as opposed to "severally" (as a *group*)." (emphasis ours throughout) *Hekastos* carries the idea of personal. Let me give you an example. In Greek, you would use one word for *every* to say, "The coach spoke to *every* boy," when you meant that he spoke to all the boys as a group, out in the field, talking to them all at once. But, you would use another word, you would use *hekastos*, to say, "The coach spoke to every boy individually," that is, he talked to each boy separately, privately. It is a convenient facility in Greek, one that we do not have in English. To get across the idea of individuality in our language, we need to insert adverbs like *personally*, *individually*, or the compound *one-by-one*, while the Greeks had only to use the little word *hekastos* for our word *each* or *every* when they meant individually. God deals with us, this passage indicates, on a one-by-one, individual, basis.

Another example of the use of *hekastos* appears at Ephesians 4:7, where the translators add the adverb *individually* in order to clarify the meaning of the Greek. Importantly, the word meaning "individually" is not present in the Greek text. It does not have to be, since *hekastos* carries that meaning.

Ephesians 4:7 (AMPC) Yet grace was given to each of us individually in proportion to the measure of Christ's gift.

At this point, let us look at another way the Greeks could indicate this personal approach, this personal touch on God's part. Paul writes:

I Corinthians 1:24 (MSG) But to us who are personally called by God Himself—both Jews and Greeks—Christ is God’s ultimate miracle and wisdom all wrapped up in one.

In paraphrasing the passage this way, the translators are recognizing what grammarians call the emphatic or the intensive use of the Greek pronoun *autos*. *Autos* appears over and over and over again, hundreds of times, in the New Testament, and you can understand why, because it means *him, her, it*. In the plural, it means *them*. So, every time you see those words in the New Testament, the Greek is probably some form of the word *autos*. One lexicon points out that, when you add the intensive inflection (or ending) to *autos*, then the word has the force of “self, to the exclusion of others.” You see, “happening to him, but not happening to some others.” A good example appears at Mark 6:31 in the *Disciples Literal New Testament* (DLNT). Christ tells the disciples, “Come, you yourselves privately, to a desolate place, and rest a little.” That term, “you yourselves privately” is *autos*, used with this special ending that means “self” in a very intensive, emphatical way. Come by yourselves alone; come by yourselves privately, individually, one by one.

I Thessalonians 4:9 provides another good example of this emphatic use of *autos*. Here again, the translators add the adverb *personally*—it is not there in the Greek. But, they add it to carry the meaning of *autos*.

I Thessalonians 4:9 (AMPC) But concerning brotherly love [for all other Christians], you have no need to have anyone write you, for you yourselves [*autos*] have been [personally] taught by God to love one another.

At this point, I need to insert a couple of paragraphs, as a little digression. *One-at-a-time* or *one-by-one* does not necessarily mean “slow.” God can move fast when speed fits His purposes. We see this in the days of the early church. At Acts 2:47 (ESV), we read that “the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.” Clearly, He did it over a period of time, day by day. God was making the choices, calling individually, but adding in pretty large chunks. At Acts 2:41 (ESV): we read: “So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls.” Two chapters later, at Acts 4:4 (ESV), we read: “But many of those who had heard the word believed, and the number of the men came to about five thousand.” Good-sized chunks. The number mentioned at Acts 5:14 (ESV) is more general, but it is a large number anyway: “And more than ever believers were added to the Lord, multitudes of both men and women.”

Yet, for all that, these large numbers—multitudes, 3,000, 5,000—represent a rather small subset of Israelites, especially when you consider the number of Hellenistic Jews living around the Roman Empire, when you consider those Jews living outside Judea, outside Galilee, when you consider the number of Jews living in places like Babylon—there were large numbers of them over in that area, to the east, and especially when you consider scattered Israel living in Europe, North Africa and other places. Then, as now, we all understand, Israel was still scattered. God had not regathered her then, and of course He has not to this day. Early church growth was fast, but we do not see anything like a covenant being ratified with *all* Israel, with millions of people at once, as was the case at Mount Sinai.

Summarizing: God made the Old Covenant precipitously; He made it explosively fast, dramatically so, with an entire nation, which in those days was well more than two million people—all at once. That is pretty blanket. With the New Covenant, however, He works *individually*, and that means gradually. It means less publicly, at least as a rule. It means often with less commotion, with a lot less fanfare than what happened at Sinai—with its smoke and with its earthquakes and with its thunders and lightnings. When we speak of the implementation of the New Covenant, we could use such terms

as *bit-by-bit*, *one-by-one*, *incremental*, *phased*, and *progressive*. Those terms just really do not work so well when we are speaking about the Old Covenant.

We are going to take a look at this matter from another angle. In Acts 2, the apostle Peter refers to an elongated, extended period of time for the implementation of the New Covenant, its incremental or its progressive implementation on God's part. Speaking on Pentecost, 31 AD, Peter says, as recorded at Acts 2:16 (AMP), "this is [the beginning of] what was spoken of through the prophet Joel." Now admittedly, the word *beginning* does not appear in the Greek text. It is a translator's gloss; we could even say it is an interpretation. But we are going to see that it makes sense in the context of the passage, because Joel's prophecy—which Peter is just about ready to quote in the next verse—spans a whole lot of time. Pentecost, 31 was just its start. Let us read Peter's "translation" of Joel's prophecy.

Acts 2:17-21 (DLNT) And it shall be in the last days [Please hold on to that "in the last days." We are going to come back to that.] God says, that I will pour-out from My Spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters will prophesy, and your young men will see visions, and your older men will dream with dreams. And indeed upon My male-slaves and upon My female-slaves I will pour-out from My Spirit in those days [Please, notice *days* there; it is plural.] and they will prophesy. And I will give wonders in the heaven above, and signs on the earth below—blood, and fire and a vapor of smoke. The sun will be changed into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the great and glorious day of the Lord comes. And it shall be that everyone who calls-upon the name of the Lord will be saved.

Notice that Joel covers here a long span of time. In verse 16, Peter says Joel is speaking about events *beginning*—just beginning—on Pentecost, 31 AD. Those various events of which Joel spoke *began* at that time. How long do those events continue? Well, take a look at verse 20. Peter mentions here astronomical events concerning the heavens, the sun, the moon. Those are to happen *before* the Day of the Lord. That is close to the start of the Millennium. That has not happened yet. For instance, the moon has not yet turned to blood. And, in verse 21, both Peter and Joel speak of something that certainly had not happened in their day—it has not happened yet: "[I]t shall be that everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." We know that has not happened yet—and it certainly had not happened in 31 AD. Joel and Peter must be speaking there of the White Throne Period, when God will pour out His Spirit broadly—apparently on everyone. You may want to write down Revelation 22:17, where both the Spirit (that is, Christ) and the Bride say,

Revelation 22:17 (ISV) Let everyone who is thirsty come! Let anyone who wants the water of life take it as a gift!

Importantly, the Bride will not come into existence until the Marriage Supper, at the beginning of the Millennium.

So, we are talking about a lot of time here. We are talking about an implementation of the New Covenant as an extended implementation indeed. It started at Pentecost, 31 AD; it continues through these last days; it will continue through the Millennium; and, it will continue through the White Throne Period.

Let us munch on all this a bit more, this time focusing on Acts 2:17. I asked you to remember that phrase, "in the last days," and that is what we will look at now. Peter translates Joel's words in that

particular verse as “in the last days.” Translated from the Greek, those are the words Peter is using, “in the last days,” in Greek. But, the term “in the last days” does *not* appear in the Hebrew text of Joel 2 (which Peter is quoting). It is not there. Joel simply uses the Hebrew adverb for *afterwards*. Nor does the term “in the last days” appear in the Greek translation of Joel, that is, in the Septuagint, where it reads, “after these things.” So, in both cases, it uses the word *after* or *afterwards*. So, Peter is not quoting the Septuagint; he is not quoting from the Masoretic Text at all.

Well, where did that translation “in the last days” come from? It seems to come from thin air, from nowhere. Some might even consider it to be a capricious, if not a promiscuous, translation of the Hebrew. Some commentators have tried to prove that *afterwards* or that “after these things” means the same thing as “in the last days.” Well, that is really a stretch; it does not mean the same thing at all. A few more right-minded commentators point out that Peter’s reference to “the last days” is “an interpretation,” an “expounding,” of Joel’s meaning. And, that is getting closer to the truth.

Because, in point of fact, the Holy Spirit inspired Peter to use the Greek words that meant “the last days” rather than the word *afterwards*. Peter understands Joel’s prophecy to pertain to the last days, and, indeed, he is defining for us what the term “last days” means. Just one verse up, in verse 16, Peter says those last days *began* at Pentecost, 31 AD. The gradual implementation of the New Covenant is a “last days” phenomenon; it started about two thousand years ago, in 31 AD. That is two days ago, when you consider how God looks at time, a thousand years for a day. It has taken a long time for God to implement the New Covenant, and He is not finished yet. It is a work in progress; it is continuing to this very day.

With this background, we are ready to take a closer look at Jeremiah 31:34. That is the scripture, remember, that the heretics use to support their contention that the New Covenant has not yet come—because we are *teaching*. But, in point of fact, Jeremiah here is inexplicitly speaking of a *gradual* implementation of the New Covenant. Now he is not saying that directly; he is going through the back door. It is rather interesting to see how he says it. Yes, he is saying that God is going to implement the New Covenant gradually. Let us see how he says that.

Jeremiah 31:34 (ESV) And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest.”

The Hebrew word rendered *longer* here is *owd*. (You probably did not know Hebrew had such small words.) It means, literally, “a going around.” It is like a snowball which goes around and around and around as it rolls down a hill, getting bigger and bigger all the time. That would be *owd*. Or, you could say it is like a wheel rotating on an axle, or a carousel going around, over and over and over and over again. *Owd* carries the idea of repetition or of iteration. Translators most commonly render *owd* with the adverb “again,” “more,” or “longer.” The use of the noun *owd* in verse 34 buttresses the concept that God will implement the New Covenant *person by person by person by person*, around and around and around, through an iterative process, rather than a single national event.

Notice though: In verse 34 there is also the negative adverb. It is *lo*. *Lo* means *no* or *not*. So, we have *lo* modifying *owd*, or “no more,” “no longer.” It speaks of the time the iterative process stops; when it comes to an end, when there will be no more turnings, when there will be no more agains. Since Pentecost, 31 AD, the snowball has been turning and turning. It has been getting bigger and bigger as more and more people, each one individually called, falls under the New Covenant. You understand what I am saying.

We could put it this way: The list of names in the Book of Life incrementally gets longer and longer and longer. The scroll just keeps getting bigger. Finally, however, the snowball will *stop* turning, bespeaking the time God stops calling. At that time, He will have *completed* His worldwide work of salvation, as in Psalm 74. He will have completed the implementation of the New Covenant. *Lo owd*.

Paul speaks of this terminus, of this ending, at I Corinthians 15:24 (ESV): “Then comes the end, when [Christ] delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power.” This concept of eventual termination is probably a major intent of Christ’s comment in the Sermon on the Mount, recorded at Matthew 5:18 (ISV): “not one letter or one stroke of a letter will disappear from the Law until everything has been accomplished.” Finished. You may also want to jot down Revelation 21:6 (CEV): “Everything is finished.”

Concluding: What is Peter saying in Acts 2? While God implemented the Old Covenant in a day, He is implementing the New Covenant over a long period of time, a number of days. At any given period of time as the snowball rolls, at any given point along the implementation process—until it is complete, until the time of *lo owd*—there will be some people under the New Covenant and some people *not* under it. That is really pretty easy to understand. That is just another way of saying what we have known all along, that God is not calling everyone to come under the New Covenant at once. It is taking time. It makes sense, then, that some people will be “teaching” others—following Christ’s instructions in Matthew 28:20 to make disciples, teaching the full counsel of God.

Consider, as I begin to wind down, the inclusiveness of Revelation 21:4. This verse indicates the time the New Covenant’s implementation process will come to an end. As verse 1 indicates, the context is the coming of the New Heaven and the New Earth.

Revelation 21:4 (ESV) He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.

The old order is over. *Finito*. At that time, all those who are willing to accept the terms of the New Covenant will have done so. Then, and only then, the teaching responsibilities God has given His people today will cease. Then, instruction will no longer be necessary since “they all shall know” God. Then, Jeremiah 31:34 will finally have been fulfilled.

Jeremiah 31:34 does not teach that the New Covenant is still waiting in the wings somewhere—waiting to be instituted at some future date. That notion is not true! Rather, it clarifies that the implementation of the New Covenant will be incremental; it is progressive. Once God finally completes its implementation, teaching will no longer be necessary, for all who are left alive will know God.