

2 Corinthians 3:6 and The Church's Relationship to the New Covenant

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*Who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant,
not of the letter but of the Spirit;
for the letter kills,
but the Spirit gives life.*

(2 Corinthians 3:6 NASB 1995 Update)

Dispensationalists regard the distinction between Israel and the church to be of fundamental importance. Likewise, the question of how the church relates to Israel's covenants must be fundamentally important. If there is "overlap" between Israel and the church in the area of Israel's covenants, then perhaps dispensationalism is built on a faulty foundation. This is a crucial issue, not a peripheral one.

Purpose of This Article

This article's purpose is to investigate the hermeneutical issues involved in the interpretation of 2 Corinthians 3:6 in light of how the church is related to the new covenant. Obviously there is a broader theological discussion that must take into consideration numerous other Biblical references, this article's purpose will be more limited in scope. The principal goal will be to focus on the matter of authorial intent and how the initial audience (the first century Corinthian congregation) may have been expected to understand 2 Corinthians 3:6.¹

Introduction

The relationship of the church to the new covenant has long been a point of considerable theological discussion among dispensationalists.² God's program for

¹ By referring to the way the initial audience may have been expected to understand the text, I do not intend to sanction the various reader-response theories of hermeneutics that seem to have gained much attention with a certain segment of modern scholarship. I merely mean that we need to attempt to understand the shared presupposition pool between original author and original audience. For one such reader-response theory approach, actually based on an interpretation of 2 Cor 3, see Richard B. Hays *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) 122-125, 129 in which he refers to an "ecclesiocentric hermeneutic" and a "new covenant hermeneutic"; and a response by Robert B. Sloan, Jr., "2 Corinthians 2:14-4:6 and 'New Covenant Hermeneutics' A Response to Richard Hays" *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 5 (1995) 129-154.

² Some more recent articles: R. Bruce Compton, "Dispensationalism, The Church, And the New Covenant," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 8 (Fall 2003); Richard Daniels, "How Does the Church Relate to the New Covenant? or, Whose New Covenant is It, Anyway," *Faith and Mission* 16: 2, Spr 1999, 64-98; Rodney J. Decker, "The Church's Relationship to the New Covenant," Part I, *Bibliotheca Sacra* Volume

Israel's future on the millennial earth is rooted in the four unconditional, eternal covenants: Abrahamic, Land (a.k.a. "Palestinian"³), Davidic, and New. These covenants, made between God and national Israel, describe God's administrative/dispensational program for Israel's millennial existence. Traditional dispensationalists believe that God has a separate and distinct administrative/dispensational program for the church. These distinct programs for Israel and the church have led dispensationalists historically to reject covenant theology's view that the church has become the new replacement party to these covenants. Nevertheless, because the New Testament Scriptures make multiple references to the new covenant, both covenant theologians and many dispensationalists have argued for some degree of participation by the church in the new covenant.

Theological Issues

5 Views of the Church's Relationship to the New Covenant may be defined:⁴

1. Replacement Theology: *Replacement* - The church is entirely fulfilling the new covenant. National Israel has been superseded by the church, the true, or spiritual, Israel. The church's ministers, by fulfilling the Great Commission, function as ministers of the new covenant.
2. Dispensational View #1: *Partial Fulfillment* - The church, by fulfilling the Great Commission, is accomplishing a partial fulfillment of the new covenant, but complete fulfillment awaits the spiritual renewal of national Israel in the millennium.
3. Dispensational View #2: *Participation* - The church, by fulfilling the Great Commission, does not partially fulfill the new covenant, but does participate in some of the blessings of the new covenant.
4. Dispensational View #3: *Two New Covenants* – The church has its own “new covenant” with God that is distinct and separate from Israel’s new covenant of Jeremiah 31.

152. (July 1995), 290-305, Part II, (October 1995), 431-456; Homer A. Kent, Jr., “The New Covenant and the Church,” *Grace Theological Journal* 6 (Fall 1985); John Master in chapter 5 (“The New Covenant”) of *Issues in Dispensationalism*, edited by Wesley R. Willis and John R. Master (Moody Press, 1994), 93-110; Russell L. Penney “The Relationship of the Church to the New Covenant,” *Conservative Theological Journal* 2:7, (December 1998) 457-477; Larry D. Pettegrew, “The New Covenant,” *Master’s Seminary Journal* 10:2 (Fall 1999) 251-270; Paul R. Thorsell, “The Spirit in the Present Age: Preliminary Fulfillment of the Predicted New Covenant According to Paul” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 41:3 (September 1998) 397-413.

³ I have chosen to refrain from using the title “Palestinian Covenant.” While this title may have been acceptable in a bygone era, the abuse of the term “Palestinian” by today’s Arab claimants to territorial rights in Israel, makes continued use of that term unacceptable, in my opinion. The original application of the term *Palaestina* to *Iudaea* by the Roman emperor Hadrian as an insult to the Jews ought to have been sufficient reason for God-fearing Christians to reject the term in the beginning. However, such, unfortunately, was not the case.

⁴ Compton, pp. 5-9.

5. Dispensational View #4: *No Relationship* - The church is not directly related to the new covenant in any way. The church is related to the Mediator of the new covenant and to the blood of that covenant, but is not a participant in the covenant itself.

Obviously, these 5 views could be grouped together as suggested above in the following way:

The view of Covenant Theology (view #1)

The views of Dispensational Theology (views #2-5)

However, it is also possible to group these views in another way:

The Church has *some* participation in the new covenant (views #1-4)

The Church has *no* participation in the new covenant (view #5)

In the remainder of this paper, these views will be referred to by the names, “Replacement View,” “Partial Fulfillment View,” “Participation View,” “Two Covenants View,” and “No Relationship View.”

Darby, often held to be the first systematizer of dispensationalism,⁵ held to the No Relationship View; the church is related to the *blood* of the covenant, but not to the covenant itself.⁶ Chafer, Ryrie and Walvoord early popularized the Two Covenants View,⁷ but both Ryrie and Walvoord appear to have moved more in the direction of the Participation View.⁸ Most dispensationalists today seem to prefer either the Partial Fulfillment View (notably, progressive dispensationalists⁹) or the Participation View.¹⁰ I will state up front, that my preference is for the No

⁵ Charles C. Ryrie *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995) 67.

⁶ At least many dispensational theologians claim this to be Darby’s position (J. Dwight Pentecost *Things to Come* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958] 121-122, John F. Walvoord *The Millennial Kingdom* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1959] 210, 218); however, I have read Darby both on Jeremiah, the Gospels, 2 Corinthians and Hebrews, and he is difficult to categorize. It might be possible to argue that he holds to the participation view. Both views are almost merged in this oft quoted excerpt: “The gospel is not a covenant, but the revelation of the salvation of God. It proclaims the great salvation. We enjoy indeed all the essential privileges of the new covenant, its foundation being laid on God’s part in the blood of Christ, but we do so in spirit, not according to the letter.... The new covenant will be established formally with Israel in the millennium.” (Darby, *Synopsis V*, 286, as cited in Pentecost *Things to Come*, *ibid.*). When all of Darby’s statements are examined, however, I suspect that the No Relationship view does, in fact, most closely represent his thinking.

⁷ Lewis Sperry Chafer *Systematic Theology* Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1948) VII:98-99; Charles C. Ryrie *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1953) 117; Walvoord *Millennial Kingdom* 218-219.

⁸ Charles C. Ryrie *Dispensationalism*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995) 170-174; John F. Walvoord, “Does the Church Fulfill Israel’s Program?” Part 3 *Bibliotheca Sacra* 137/547 (July-Sept 1980) 220.

⁹ Bruce A. Ware, “The New Covenant and the People(s) of God” in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church* edd. C. Blaising and D. Bock (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 68-97.

¹⁰ Robert Thomas *Evangelical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2002) 249; Larry D. Pettegrew *The New Covenant Ministry of the Holy Spirit*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2001) 36-37; J. Dwight Pentecost *Thy Kingdom Come* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1990) 175; David K.

Relationship View. In my opinion, this is the only view that avoids theological confusion and maintains a consistent distinction between Israel and the Church. As I see it theologically, the church has no more place in this age participating in the new covenant, than it does in the Davidic covenant. However, the question must ultimately be settled on exegetical grounds rather than theological preference.

The Significance of 2 Corinthians 3:6

In 1994, John Master contributed a chapter entitled, “The New Covenant” to the book *Issues in Dispensationalism*.¹¹ In that chapter, Master argued cogently that the vast majority of NT references to the new covenant are set in an eschatological¹² context and need not be interpreted in terms of a present realization. The notable exception among these NT references is 2 Corinthians 3:6. Having commented on the references to the new covenant in the Gospels and the Pauline epistles,¹³ Master states:

To this point, the passages that refer to the new covenant of Jeremiah follow a common thread. All refer to a time when the messianic kingdom is introduced and the people of God are glorifying God through their obedience, brought about by a sovereign work of God. Only if one asserts that 2 Corinthians 3:6 teaches the fulfillment of the new covenant of Jeremiah 31 by the church (which this author doubts), does the future fulfillment of the new covenant for national Israel come into question.¹⁴

I do not intend here to reproduce Master’s arguments for the other NT references. Instead, the scope of this paper will be to grant his arguments for the other NT references, but to look in greater depth at how 2 Corinthians 3:6 is to be interpreted.

Furthermore, progressive dispensationalism, which prefers the Partial Fulfillment view, places great significance on this verse. Paul Thorsell, for example, speaking of the significance of this passage for proving a present realization of the new covenant to the church, wrote:

Traditional dispensationalists have usually argued, however, that Paul’s ministry is related to the predicted new covenant only peripherally or analogically. There is no present fulfillment or inauguration of the new covenant at all. In contradistinction to this thesis of traditional

Lowery, “2 Corinthians” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* edd. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1985) II:560; Compton 47–48.

¹¹ John R. Master, “The New Covenant” in *Issues in Dispensationalism* edd. Wesley R. Willis, John R. Master, Charles C. Ryrie (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994), pp. 93–110.

¹² When I use the term “eschatological” I am not including any reference to a “realized eschatology” or “already-not-yet” scenario that views the present church age as “eschatological.”

¹³ Mt 26:28; Mk 14:24; Lk 22:20; 1 Co 11:25. The Hebrews references are a slightly different matter, but the specific references are Heb 8:8, 13; 9:15; 10:16–17; 12:24.

¹⁴ Master, 103.

dispensationalism, 2 Corinthians 3 presents formidable reasons to regard the new covenant as partially fulfilled or inaugurated in the gospel-proclaiming ministry of Paul.¹⁵

Is Thorsell correct in claiming “formidable reasons” supporting a partial fulfillment or inauguration of the new covenant based on 2 Corinthians 3? To answer this question, a careful exegetical study of how Paul referred to the new covenant in 2 Corinthians 3 is needed.

Hermeneutical Issues

Several questions of a hermeneutical/exegetical nature arise when we seek to understand how Paul envisioned the church’s relationship to the new covenant when he addressed the Corinthians as he did in 2 Corinthians 3:6. These questions include the following:

1. Is “ministers of a new covenant” (*διακόνους καινῆς διαθήκης diakonous kainēs diathēkēs*) an objective genitive or a genitive of description?
2. What is the referent to “us” (*ἡμᾶς hēmas*)?
3. What is the context of this statement?
4. Is there significance to the fact that “covenant” (*διαθήκης diathēkēs*) is anarthrous?
5. What was the state of theological development when Paul wrote 2 Corinthians? How well developed was Paul’s concept of the church as an entity separate and distinct from Israel?
6. Why would Paul be referring to a passage from the Hebrew Scriptures when addressing a largely Gentile Christian church?

*1. Is “ministers of a new covenant” (*διακόνους καινῆς διαθήκης diakonous kainēs diathēkēs*) an objective genitive or a genitive of description?*

This is probably the most fundamental hermeneutical question in this discussion. In fact, it is a syntactical way of stating the essential problem. If this is an objective genitive,¹⁶ then we may paraphrase, “those who minister (or ‘administer’) the new covenant.” In other words, Paul would be referring to the new covenant as the content of his ministry. For example, Hafemann comments, “... he is a minister of the new covenant (i.e., his function). As a minister, he mediates the Spirit in

¹⁵Paul Thorsell, “The Spirit in the Present Age” 406, emphasis mine. Thorsell also states: “2 Corinthians 3 is perhaps the most prominent reference to the new covenant in the Pauline corpus,” 400. Note also Bruce Ware’s estimation, “The most extensive treatment Paul gives of the transforming new-covenant work of the Spirit is found in 2 Corinthians 3” (Ware, 88).

¹⁶Thorsell, “The Spirit in the Present Age,” 407; Murray J. Harris, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians: A commentary on the Greek text.* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005) 270. Curiously, Harris sees the roughly parallel *διακονία τοῦ πνεύματος* in verse 8 as “more probably adjectival ... than objective ... or subjective... (p. 286).

establishing the church... The content of Paul's activity as a minister is the 'new covenant.'¹⁷

On the other hand, if this were a genitive of description, an appropriate paraphrase might be, "new covenant-like' ministers." As a genitive of description, the new covenant does not necessarily point to the content of Paul's ministry, but rather provides a helpful description of the kind of ministry in which he was engaged – in other words, how Paul conducted himself in carrying out the ministry.

I find it interesting that the closest parallel construction using "minister" (*διάκονος diakonos*) with a genitive in 2 Corinthians occurs in 11:15, *διάκονοι δικαιοσύνης (diakonoi dikaiosunēs)*, "ministers of righteousness" which is almost certainly a genitive of description,¹⁸ not an objective genitive (see in context the parallel *ἄγγελον φωτός angelon phōtos*, "angel of light"). Although the parallel is suggestive, by itself, this observation is not sufficient proof of the use of the genitive in 3:6, and, on the face of it, both syntactical options are possible in 3:6 and make decent sense. The deciding factors must hinge on other exegetical considerations.

2. What is the referent to *ἡμᾶς*?

When Paul wrote, "... who also has made us sufficient as ministers," to whom was he referring? A popular way of looking at this verse might be to see the "us" as referring to all Christians, so that Paul was referring generally to Christian ministry in the carrying out of the Great Commission. Christians, whose responsibility it is to carry out the Great Commission, are made sufficient for such a task by the enablement of God.¹⁹ Such a view would correspond well with taking *καὶ νῆς διαθήκης* as an objective genitive.

The hermeneutical issue here is: Who is to be included in the reference to the 1st Person Plural? There are several possibilities:

Paul alone. "The editorial 'we' (also known as the *epistolary plural*) is the use of the first person plural by an author when he is in reality referring only to himself."²⁰ In this sense, Paul would be seen as addressing the Corinthian congregation regarding criticisms that had been leveled against his own ministry. It is generally recognized

¹⁷ Scott J. Hafemann 2 Corinthians The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000) 129.

¹⁸ It could be considered a genitive of attribute, which is really only a sub-category of the genitive of description. Thorsell tries to argue for *διάκονοι δικαιοσύνης* in 11:15 being an objective genitive ("The Spirit in the Present Age," 407, n. 32), but his interpretation here is strained, and does not take into consideration the parallel expression *ἄγγελον φωτός*. The other examples of *διάκονος* used with a genitive in 2 Cor. are all possessive genitives: θεοῦ διάκονοι "God's servants" (6:4), διάκονοι αὐτοῦ "his servants" (11:15), διάκονοι Χριστοῦ "Christ's servants" (11:23).

¹⁹ E.g., *Experiencing the Word New Testament* (Nashville: Holman Bible Publishers, 2001) 408; G. Coleman Luck, *Second Corinthians* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1959) 34; D. E. Garland *The New American Commentary Vol. 29: 2 Corinthians* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999) 163.

²⁰ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics - Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999) 394.

among commentators that Paul's defense of his ministry is a major theme of 2 Corinthians.

Paul and Timothy (and Titus?). Paul and Timothy are mentioned in 1:1 as the co-authors of the epistle.²¹ Titus may also be considered as part of the "team" (2:13; 7:6, 13, 14; 8:5, 16, 23; 12:17). In this sense, the meaning would be similar to the former possibility, the editorial "we," assuming that Paul's detractors in Corinth would have leveled the same charges against the other members of Paul's ministry team.

Paul and the Corinthian Christians. In this sense, Paul would be addressing the Corinthian congregation as fellow-laborers with him. As such, he would be describing the gospel ministry in which they were all involved.

The apostles. Though less likely, it is possible that Paul was describing the ministry of the apostles in a limited sense, perhaps in inaugurating the new covenant ministry.

All believers. In this sense, Paul would be issuing a general statement describing how all believers fulfill the Great Commission as a ministry of the new covenant.

Paul's use of 1st person deictic indicators in chapters 1-3 is quite interesting. He switches often between the singular ("I/me") and the plural ("we/us"). A personal deixis analysis²² of these chapters reveals some helpful and interesting observations. Such an analysis can be summarized as follows:

1:1-13a,

Plural – In this section, verse 4, "who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God," makes it obvious that Paul is distinguishing himself (along with Timothy²³ and Titus?) from the Corinthians ("us" as opposed to "those who").

1:13b,

Singular – Verse 13 has an interesting change from the plural to the singular: "For we write nothing else to you than what you read and understand, and I hope you will understand until the end." It is likely that up to this point, Paul has been speaking in the plural in order to include Timothy, and possibly Titus, in his remarks. His switch to the singular makes the comment of 13b a bit more personal and direct, since, after all, Paul was really the focal point of the criticisms emanating from Corinth, and Timothy and Titus were merely "along for the ride."

1:14,

²¹ R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Paul's First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1937) 838-839.

²² Peter Cotterell and Max Turner, *Linguistics & Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1989) 236.

²³ Lenski, 839.

Plural – Verse 14 can be considered as a return to the default plural that Paul has been using since verse 1, with the lone exception of 13b.

1:15-17,

Singular – In this brief section, Paul’s switch to the singular accompanies a switch also to the past tense as Paul makes reference to his past plans to visit Corinth and his subsequent cancellation of those plans. To this point the plural has been the default, and switches to the singular have been the notable exceptions. From 1:15 – 2:13 the singular will become the predominant and default 1st person reference, with plurals constituting the notable exceptions.

1:18-22,

Plural – A return, once again to the plural. An interesting note: Paul specifies the plural as a reference to Paul, Silas and Timothy.

1:23,

Singular – As with vv. 15-17, Paul’s use of the singular here accompanies a past time reference to his previous plans to visit Corinth and his subsequent cancellation of those plans.

1:24,

Plural – A return to the plural accompanies a departure from past tense to a gnomic present time frame (“we lord it over” κυριεύομεν, “we are” ἐσμεν, “you are standing firm” ἔστήκατε) as Paul expresses a timeless generality.

2:1-10,

Singular – Once again, Paul’s use of the singular here accompanies a past time reference to his previous plans to visit Corinth and his subsequent cancellation of those plans.

2:11,

Plural – The plural is used here to make a general statement that is applicable to all.

2:12-13,

Singular – This can be considered a return to what has been the default while Paul discusses his past plans.

2:14 – 3:6,

Plural – With this verse, Paul brings his discussion of past plans to an end and begins an extended section in which he uses a series of metaphors to describe the nature of his ministry. There is a different reason for his switch to the plural here than there was in 2:11. This can be seen by the observation that in this section (3:3) the 1st person plural is contrasted with the 2nd person plural; whereas, no such contrast is seen in 2:11.²⁴ Paul’s use of the plural in this series of metaphors²⁵ is intended to

²⁴ In fact in 11:3, Paul entertains the possibility that Satan had in fact deceived the minds of some of the Corinthians!

depict the ministry as conducted by himself, Timothy and Titus, as distinguished from others (his critics) whose ministry takes on a different character. This would tend to support the view that “of a new covenant” (*καῖνης διαθήκης*) is a genitive of description.

3. What is the context of this statement?

There are two contextual issues that affect the interpretation of 2 Corinthians 3:6. The first addresses the literary style of the section in which the verse occurs. The second addresses the topic Paul is discussing.

a. Literary Style. A major theme of 2 Corinthians is Paul’s defense of his ministry in the face of numerous criticisms.²⁶ These criticisms seem to have stemmed initially from Paul’s failure to visit Corinth as he had planned (1:15–2:2). Interpreted as vacillation on Paul’s part (1:17), this seems to have spawned numerous other criticisms about Paul’s conduct as well. Beginning in 2:14 and extending at least through 5:5, Paul employs a series of 8 metaphors to explain why he conducted himself the way that he did. Most of the metaphors are based on OT imagery, including the new covenant. They may, quite possibly, all have been drawn from chapters 30-31 of Jeremiah.

1. The Triumphal Procession, 2:14a
2. The Odor of Life and Death, 2:14b-16a
3. Letters Written on Stone vs. Written on the Heart, 3:2-3
4. New Covenant Ministers, 3:6
5. The Veil Removed, 3:14-18; 4:3-4
6. The Light of Creation, 4:6
7. Earthen Vessels, 4:7
8. Earthly House vs. Heavenly House, 5:1-4

Metaphors #3-8 appear to be drawn from Jeremiah 31-32.²⁷ The 3rd and 4th metaphors are clearly drawn from the Jeremiah 31 new covenant passage (as well as

²⁵ The series of metaphors is discussed below.

²⁶ In any exposition of the book of 2 Cor I think it is important to point out that in defending his ministry and conduct, Paul’s ultimate motive is not to “get back” at those who were harming his reputation. Paul’s main concern in defending himself is that the Corinthians were adopting a faulty standard of judgment – a fleshly standard, not a spiritual one. In the end, Paul defends himself, not so much out of a concern for his own reputation, but in order to get the Corinthians to examine themselves (12:19-21; 13:5-6) so that they might be approved at the judgment seat of Christ (5:10).

²⁷ The problem of identifying the source of the first two metaphors has been discussed by various scholars. For example, Richard B. Hayes notes, “... 3:1 ... introduces a new cluster of metaphors The difficult metaphors of 2:14-16a belong to an entirely different circle of images” *Echoes of Scripture* 216 n. 5. It is possible that the images of life and death in those metaphors come from Jer 30-31 and their discussion of the Babylonians leading the Israelites away to captivity, some would go away to death while others would live through the captivity in life in hope of a future restoration of Israel. But it is impossible to tell for sure whether this is what Paul had in mind, since there is no overt connection between Paul’s language and the language of Jer 30-31. Specifically, Jeremiah speaks neither of triumphal processions (*Θριαμβεύω*) nor of odors (*όσμή, εὐώδία*). Quite possibly Paul is

Ezk 11:19; 36:26). The 5th and 6th metaphors are suggested by the same new covenant language in that the new covenant's replacing of the Mosaic law calls to mind the veil that blocked the light of God's glory reflected in Moses' face (Ex 34:29-35). The 7th metaphor may also have been suggested by the same general section of Jeremiah, since the "clay jar" symbolism may well have come from Jeremiah 32:10-14. The 8th metaphor, though more difficult to relate to specific language in Jeremiah, could conceivably be taken from the notion of houses destroyed by the Babylonians and later rebuilt under the new covenant (32:29, 42-44).

Throughout this passage, the language is metaphorical. For example, when Paul writes, "You are our letter, written in our hearts" (3:2-3), he is formulating a classical metaphor. By using Jeremiah's new covenant passage as a metaphor for his own ministry, Paul is not using the language of "fulfillment"; that is, he is not saying that his ministry is a realization of what was promised in Jeremiah, but rather that what Jeremiah was describing provides a suitable figure to describe his ministry. Consider how Paul uses the passages from Jeremiah: A letter written on the heart is reminiscent of the new covenant's provision of God's law written on Israel/Judah's heart (Jer 31:33). The Corinthian believers are likened to God's law written on Israel's heart, but this is not to say that the Corinthian believers are a fulfillment of this element of the new covenant. In the fulfillment of the new covenant, God's law is God's law, not God's people! Similarly, the inability of some to discern the glory of the gospel ministry is likened to the veil that covered Moses' face (3:14-18; 4:3-4; cf. Ex 34:29-35), but clearly this does not mean that the veil is somehow fulfilled by the unbelief of Paul's opponents. The new covenant ministry in 3:6 likewise needs to be understood as a metaphor and does not necessarily mean that there is some kind of fulfillment or realization of the new covenant. Rather, the new covenant provides a suitable Scriptural figure to describe Paul's ministry in such a way as to respond to the specific criticisms that had been raised against him. In order to understand the point Paul is trying to make with these metaphors, it is necessary to focus on the topic of the passage. This we do in the next section.

b. Topic. Who are Paul's opponents? What is the essence of his defense? Why does he argue the way that he does? The identity of Paul's opponents may affect the way we view the meaning of 3:6.

Several writers have attempted to argue on the basis of the context surrounding 3:6 that Paul's point was to contrast the new covenant with the old covenant, and that therefore he was arguing that the new covenant was now in force.²⁸ However in considering the context, the discourse boundaries should not be limited to chapter 3. The passage really needs to be seen in light of the broader discourse boundaries

thinking of the Babylonian deportation but is speaking of it in terms of contemporary Roman victory processions (Hafemann, 106-108).

²⁸ Decker, "The Church's Relationship to the New Covenant, Part 2" 450; Penney, "The Relationship of the Church to the New Covenant," 467-468; Thorsell, "The Spirit in the Present Age," 401. Thorsell, however acknowledges that, "The subject under discussion is not primarily the new covenant but the character of Paul's ministry of proclaiming the gospel," *ibid.*

of 2:14 – 5:5 and the series of 8 metaphors Paul employed in this section. This broader context shows that Paul's point had to do with the *character* of his ministry, rather than with the *content* of his ministry. Thorsell recognizes this when he notes about the first four metaphors, “In 2:14–17 the nature of his ministry (as a weak, on-the-way-to-death captive) is compared with a Roman triumphal procession.... Paul continued to develop the theme of adequacy in 3:1–6.”²⁹

Some believe that Paul's opponents were “Judaizers.”³⁰ This “opponents” = “Judaizers” formula makes it easy to say that in 3:6 Paul is answering critics who are seeking to enforce Mosaic legislation.³¹ If this were the case, Paul's reply would be to say that we are now administering the new covenant, as a replacement for the Mosaic covenant. Such a view would favor the objective genitive. However, identifying Paul's opponents is not quite as simple as claiming that they are “Judaizers.”³² Harris has found at least 19 different identifications of Paul's opponents in the history of the interpretation of 2 Corinthians!³³

There are, in fact, two groups of critics whom Paul answered in this epistle. In chapters 1-9 Paul addressed criticisms that were being directed against him by the Corinthian congregation. In chapters 10-13, he addressed criticisms made by the false apostles/false brothers ($\psi\epsilon\delta\alpha\pi\acute{o}\sigma\tau\omega\omega\iota/\psi\epsilon\delta\alpha\delta\acute{e}\lambda\varphi\omega\iota$).³⁴ While the false apostles may indeed have been “Judaizers” (though I have my doubts on this) the general makeup of the Corinthian congregation seems to have been of a more Greek or pagan worldview. If the opponents of chapter 3 were of a Greek philosophical worldview, the issue might more likely be one of the teacher's lifestyle and conduct³⁵ (which favors the genitive of description). This issue is complicated because of the two distinct sources for criticism of Paul. There may have been some intermingling of ideas between these two groups, but they also represent separate sets of criticisms. Chapter 3 falls within the section of the epistle that represents the criticisms of the Corinthian congregation. The outsiders' criticisms are not dealt with until chapters 11-13.

²⁹ Thorsell, “The Spirit in the Present Age” 400.

³⁰ Robert Gromacki *Stand Firm in the Faith* (The Woodlands, TX: Kress Christian Publications, 2002) 162; Alfred Plummer *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Second Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1915) 320; Harris, 76; William MacDonald and Arthur Farstad, *Believer's Bible Commentary : Old and New Testaments* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995) on 2 Cor 3:6; et al.

³¹ Rodney J. Decker, “New Covenant, Theology of the” in *Dictionary of Premillennial Theology* ed. Mal Couch (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1996) 280.

³² An excellent summary of the various views can be found in Harris, 67-87.

³³ Murray J. Harris *The New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2005) 79-80.

³⁴ Another issue in the interpretation of 2 Corinthians is whether the $\dot{\nu}\pi\epsilon\rlap{\beta}\acute{\iota}\alpha\omega\iota\dot{\alpha}\pi\acute{o}\sigma\tau\omega\omega\iota$ represent the same, or a different group than the $\psi\epsilon\delta\alpha\pi\acute{o}\sigma\tau\omega\omega\iota$ (Harris, 75-76). However that issue does not seem to be relevant to our discussion of 2 Cor 3:6.

³⁵ See e.g., D. E. Garland, *2 Corinthians*, New American Commentary, Vol 29 (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1999) 166.

Evidence suggesting a Judaizing background for the second group of critics would include 2 Corinthians 11:4 (“another gospel” εὐαγγέλιον ἔτερον and the parallel in Galatians 1:6) as well as 11:22 (“Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I.” Ἐβραῖοί εἰσιν; κἀγώ. Ἰσραηλῖται εἰσιν; κἀγώ.). But these references only suggest a Jewish origin, not necessarily a *Judaizing* origin.³⁶ 2 Corinthians 10:2-3 is interesting in this respect. Paul's use of prepositions is precise here. In v. 2b he refers to some (*tinas τινάς*) who regard Paul as walking “according to the flesh” (κατὰ σάρκα), where “according to” (κατά) gives a standard of measurement. It is not so much that his critics accuse him of walking according to the flesh, but rather that they use the flesh as their own standard of measurement for Paul's walk. Using this standard of measurement, they judge Paul as coming up short (he is poor, he is sick, he is not eloquent, etc.). In verse 3, Paul admits that he walks “in the flesh” (ἐν σαρκὶ), where “in” (ἐν) indicates the sphere. Though he does not conduct himself *according to* the flesh, he admits that he walks *in the sphere of* the flesh. Rather, the standard of his conduct (or “warfare”) is according to (κατά) a different standard of measurement, i.e., the Spirit. Garland notes with regard to the first group of critics: “They understand him only in part (1:14) because they still evaluate things from the perspective of the flesh.”³⁷ Apparently the same could be said of this second group of critics as well. So it is entirely possible that the second group of critics is not to be characterized as *Judaizers*, but could be of (diaspora?) Jewish origin and simply reflecting a more pagan philosophical perspective. Missing from 2 Corinthians are the specific references to Judaizing teaching found in other epistles of Paul's (e.g., references to circumcision, Jewish dietary restrictions, or observance of special Jewish days).³⁸

Regardless of the identity of the second group of Paul's critics, chapter 3 represents Paul's response to the first group of critics. These appear to have very Greek notions of how a successful teacher should be characterized. They criticized Paul for the following reasons:

- He had failed to visit Corinth as he had planned (1:15-2:2).
- He was not a skilled orator (1:12; 10:10; 11:6).
- He was physically weak in presence (10:10).
- He had not been financially successful, and didn't charge an acceptable philosopher's fee (2:17; 6:10; 11:7; cf. 8:9; 12:13).
- He had been in numerous hardships and even jail (1:4-10; 6:4-5, 8-10).

These criticisms have to do with conduct of life, not content of message. As Garland observes:

Today, we may revere Paul for his determined hard work for the gospel that endured the suffering of imprisonments, beatings, shipwrecks, poverty, and fatigue to further its reach into the world. These things did not sap his love for

³⁶ Garland 464 n. 26.

³⁷ Garland 32.

³⁸ See also Thorsell 400 n. 8.

God or his commitment to the cause of Christ. Rather, they only whetted his zeal to do more. Some Corinthians apparently did not share the same appreciation for this selfless suffering. To them Paul cut a shabby figure. Religion, in their mind, is supposed to lift people up, not weigh them down with suffering. They may well have asked how someone so frail, so afflicted, so stumbling in his speech and visibly afflicted with a thorn in the flesh could be a sufficient agent for the power of God's glorious gospel. Paul writes an impressive letter, but his physical presence is disappointingly unimpressive. He is too reticent to boast and to act forcefully. His refusal to accept their financial support and allowing himself to be demeaned as a poor laborer reflected badly on them as well. Such unconventional behavior betrays a lack of dignity appropriate for an apostle.³⁹

The five criticisms above reflect a very Greek worldview of what should be expected of a successful philosopher (physical stature, good oratorical skills, evidence of a healthful, wholesome life free of trouble, teaching that is worth a good philosopher's fee). Harris notes on 10:10,

In the ancient rhetorical handbooks ὑπόκρισις denoted an orator's "delivery," which included not only his verbal and elocutionary skills but also his bodily "presence," the impression made by his physical appearance, his dress, and his general demeanor. The dual allegation of Paul's adversaries reflects these two aspects of ὑπόκρισις.⁴⁰

This is basically a "fleshly" view, a focus on the outward man. Paul's reply to such criticisms is to describe the character of his ministry as spiritual not fleshly:

- 2 Corinthians 1:12 For our boast is this: the testimony of our conscience that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially toward you, with God-given sincerity and purity, not by fleshly wisdom but by God's grace.
- 2 Corinthians 1:17 So when I planned this, was I irresponsible? Or what I plan, do I plan according to the flesh so that I say "Yes, yes" and "No, no"?
- 2 Corinthians 1:21-22 Now the One who confirms us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, is God;²² He has also sealed us and given us the Spirit as a down payment in our hearts.
- 2 Corinthians 3:3 since it is plain that you are Christ's letter, produced by us, not written with ink but with the Spirit of the living God; not on stone tablets but on tablets that are hearts of flesh.
- 2 Corinthians 3:6 He has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit produces life.
- 2 Corinthians 3:8 how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious?

³⁹ Garland, 31-32.

⁴⁰ Harris, 700. See also Garland, 446-449 on the physical and rhetorical expectations of a leader in Greek society.

- 2 Corinthians 3:17 Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.
- 2 Corinthians 5:12 We are not commanding ourselves to you again, but giving you an opportunity to be proud of us, so that you may have a reply for those who take pride in the outward appearance ($\tauοὺς ἐν προσώπῳ$) not in the heart.
- 2 Corinthians 5:16 From now on, then, we do not know anyone according to the flesh. Even if we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we no longer know Him like that.
- 2 Corinthians 6:6 by purity, by knowledge, by patience, by kindness, by the Holy Spirit, by sincere love,
- 2 Corinthians 10:2-6 I beg you that when I am present I will not need to be bold with the confidence by which I plan to challenge certain people who think we are walking in a fleshly way.³ For although we are walking in the flesh, we do not wage war in a fleshly way,⁴ since the weapons of our warfare are not fleshly, but are powerful through God for the demolition of strongholds. We demolish arguments⁵ and every high-minded thing that is raised up against the knowledge of God, taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ.⁶ And we are ready to punish any disobedience, once your obedience is complete.
- 2 Corinthians 11:18 Since many boast according to the flesh, I will also boast.

This “Greek” worldview of Paul’s critics fits in well with what we know of Corinthian society⁴¹ and would suggest that in 3:6 Paul was responding not to criticism about the content of his message, but to his conduct. This fits best with understanding our genitive as a genitive of description. Paul’s point is not that he is administering the new covenant, but rather that his conduct is determined by a Spirit-based standard, not a fleshly standard, or as Master put it, “In 2 Corinthians 3:6, the contrast between ‘letter’ and ‘Spirit’ is a contrast between a ministry based on works and self-effort and a ministry dependent upon the Spirit of God.”⁴² If Paul were to look in the Hebrew Scriptures for support of this idea, Jeremiah’s new covenant provides one of the few suitable metaphors to describe such a phenomenon.

c. Putting it all together. When we look at this section (2:14 – 5:5) as: (1) a series of metaphors intended not as fulfillment of OT promises, but as descriptions based on Scriptural language, and (2) Paul’s answer to his detractors’ criticisms of his conduct based on a Greek worldview, we may understand the metaphors in something like the following way:

1. The Triumphal Procession, 2:14a

⁴¹ Though recently rebuilt and established as a Roman colony, Corinth continued to hold on to its Greek ethos, in contrast with Philippi, another Roman colony. See the review by J. Brian Tucker of *Urban Religion in Roman Corinth: Interdisciplinary Approaches* edd. Daniel Schowalter and Steven J. Friesen (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005) in *JBL* 6/1 (June 2006), 38-54, esp. pp. 41-42.

⁴² Master 101.

Weakness in physical appearance may not meet up with the fleshly standards of cultured Greek society, but it is precisely what characterized the children of Israel who were led in triumphal procession by the Babylonians into captivity. Both the godly and the ungodly alike were led away in weakness; thus weakness in physical appearance is no sign of ungodliness.

2. The Odor of Life and Death, 2:14b-16a

As the presentation of the captive Israelites was accompanied by the offering of incense sacrifices to the pagan gods of their captors, the smell signified death for some, but life for others. Likewise, though Paul appeared no better physically than those ancient captives, yet his message was a powerful one, bringing both life for those who believe, and death for those who rejected it.

3. Letters Written on Stone vs. Written on the Heart, 3:2-3

Paul's detractors put great confidence in outward fleshly commendation in the form of commendatory letters. But just as the new covenant points to the superiority of the internal affairs of the heart over an outward written code, Paul's commendation comes from the very transformation that had taken place in the lives of the Corinthians. It was a spiritual commendation, not a fleshly one.

4. New Covenant Ministers, 3:6

The old covenant focused on fleshly matters of outward conformation to a legalistic standard, but Paul's conduct was more like the new covenant, directed by the Spirit. Thus, his failure to keep his "written itinerary" (planned visit to Corinth, parallel to the written law) was due to the fact that he was sensitive to the Spirit's leading (cf. Ac 16:6-10) and God's sovereign, providential direction.

5. The Veil Removed, 3:14-18; 4:3-4

After Moses spent time in God's presence, he reflected God's glory. The Israelites were unwilling to look at that glory; they would rather see Moses than God, so they requested that Moses put a veil over his face. Similarly, Paul's detractors were focused on man - what he looked like, how he sounded, how financially successful he was - but Paul desired to conduct himself as one with an unveiled face, so that those who saw him would not focus on his personal appearance, but would see the glory of God.

6. The Light of Creation, 4:6

"Glory," "light," "appearance": these are the things that pertain to God, not to the creation. The creation exists to glorify God. Paul, as part of God's creation, exists not to be noticed for his physical appearance or oratorical skill, but "to give the light of the knowledge of God in the face of Jesus Christ."

7. Earthen Vessels, 4:7

On the very eve of the Babylonian captivity Jeremiah purchased the field in Anathoth from his cousin Hanamel and placed the deed of purchase in a clay jar. The clay jar need not be ornamental nor costly; the treasure was what was inside. Paul's outward appearance was like that jar – unimpressive, and not very costly, but inside was a precious treasure – a message of hope.

8. Earthly House vs. Heavenly House, 5:1-4

The coming of the Babylonians would be accompanied by the destruction of the cities and houses of Judah, but just as surely as God had promised the destruction of those cities, He had also promised the rebuilding of new cities and new houses when He would bring to fulfillment the new covenant.

Similarly, though Paul's body may be wasting away and an embarrassment to the cultured Corinthians, it was symbolic of a future glorified body in the resurrection.⁴³

When viewed in this way, the context argues strongly for Paul's referring to the *conduct* of his ministry, not the *content* of his ministry. Thus, the context would suggest the genitive of description in 3:6, rather than the objective genitive.

4. Is there significance to the fact that “covenant” (*διαθήκης*) is anarthrous?

The anarthrous Greek text is represented in most English translations with the indefinite article (“a new covenant”);⁴⁴ although a few translations make it definite by adding the English definite article (“the new covenant”).⁴⁵ Master suggested that, “the anarthrous construction [was used] possibly stressing ‘quality’ more than ‘identity.’”⁴⁶ If Master’s suggestion is correct, then clearly the anarthrous construction is what we would expect to correspond with a genitive of description, as opposed to the objective genitive which might favor a more definite construction (e.g. “ministers of *the* new covenant” *διακόνους τῆς καίνης διαθήκης* *diakonous tēs kainēs diathēkēs*, or “ministers of *His* new covenant” *διακόνους καίνης διαθήκης αὐτοῦ* *diakonous kainēs diathēkēs autou*⁴⁷). Pettegrew, who sees some church participation in the new covenant, counters this by claiming that the anarthrous construction is the most accurate way to represent Jeremiah’s Hebrew original: “Interestingly, by leaving out the article, Paul follows Jeremiah’s prophecy precisely: ‘I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house

⁴³ Both the Stoic and the Epicurean (Ac 17:18-32) Greek philosophical schools had serious problems with the doctrine of the resurrection (see W. J. Conybeare and J. S. Howson *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964] 284-285), and this attitude appears to have bled off into the Corinthian congregation (1Co 15:12-19).

⁴⁴ ASV, ESV, HCSB, NASB, NET, NCV, NIV, NRSV, RSV.

⁴⁵ TEV, KJV, NKJV, and, surprisingly, Darby.

⁴⁶ Master 101, also Compton, 29.

⁴⁷ Note the rendering “his new covenant” in the New Living Translation, “his new agreement” in the Contemporary English Version, or “his new agreement to save them” in The Living Bible.

of Judah' (Jer 31:31)."⁴⁸ Pettegrew may be pressing his point a bit further than is warranted. In fact, twice in the New Testament, Jeremiah's new covenant is referred to using the articular construction (ἡ καὶνὴ διαθήκη *hē kainē diathēkē* in both Lk 22:20 and 1Co 11:25). If Pettegrew is correct, and the anarthrous is more accurate, then one might reasonably ask why Paul used the articular construction in his first epistle to the Corinthians. And the logical question to follow is, why did he change to the anarthrous construction in his second epistle? However, we should not dismiss Pettegrew's point altogether, since the anarthrous construction is used in the other three NT references to Jeremiah's new covenant (Heb 8:8⁴⁹; 9:15; 12:24). More to the point is probably Decker's observation that, "This would seem to be placing too much weight on the lack of an article, particularly when the phrase in question could well be treated as a proper name and consequently definite whether articular or anarthrous."⁵⁰

It would appear that the most we can say about the anarthrous vs. articular construction is probably that, had the articular construction been used, Paul would not have been referring to the quality of the ministry. The anarthrous construction certainly allows for, but does not require our understanding Paul as referring to the quality of the ministry. So the anarthrous construction may be irrelevant to the issue under discussion.

5. What was the state of theological development when Paul wrote 2 Corinthians? How well developed was Paul's concept of the church as an entity separate and distinct from Israel?

Perhaps one of the most challenging hermeneutical tasks we face is that of stepping out of our world and into the world of the ancient writers we study. This requires not only diligent study of the history and sociology surrounding the first century Greco-Roman world, but also an attempt to adjust our own mindset as we read the words of Scripture. It requires not only the mind of the historian, but also the soul of the artist. When Paul wrote to the Corinthians there was a great deal of shared knowledge between author and recipients of which we may be ignorant.⁵¹ For example, as with the discussion above, we may not know precisely who Paul's opponents were, but we can be pretty certain that both Paul and the Corinthian congregation knew exactly who they were. Likewise, with regard to the subject of the new covenant and its fulfillment, we may ask just how did a first century believer in Jesus think about it? Our tendency may be to look at this from our 20th/21st century perspective. We see the millennial fulfillment of the new covenant with Israel as something that has now been postponed for nearly two millennia. As

⁴⁸ Pettegrew, 216 n. 45. Also Decker *Premillennial Theology*, 280.

⁴⁹ Hebrews 8:13 should probably also be included here, but the noun διαθήκη does not occur here, only the adjective; nevertheless, the adjective is clearly referring back to the expression διαθήκη καὶνή in verse 8.

⁵⁰ Decker, "The Church's Relationship to the New Covenant, Part 1" 301, n. 35.

⁵¹ Cotterell and Turner *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation* 90-97.

such, if the church is not participating in the covenant, it may seem a bit awkward, maybe even absurd, to use new covenant language to describe anything relevant to the church of today. The apostolic church, however, likely saw the preaching of the gospel to the Gentiles as a very brief interlude before the second coming, and thus the millennial fulfillment of the new covenant was anticipated as something quite near. Clearly, the disciples in the upper room did not have anything like the church of our past 2,000 years in mind when Christ uttered His Eucharistic words, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood” (Lk 22:20). They would have thought, instead, of the millennial fulfillment of the new covenant and the restoration of the kingdom to Israel. Even for the later apostolic church, the fulfillment of the new covenant was likely viewed as something to come about very shortly (cf. Ac 1:6; 15:14-17; Gal 6:16; 2 Thess 1:6-10). So perhaps it should not be too surprising if Paul were to use the new covenant metaphorically, as somehow loosely descriptive of his gospel ministry. The new covenant, though not yet operative, would nevertheless have been something very much on the minds of those early believers. As time progressed, however, the metaphor might become less apropos – even, say, for the later epistles of Paul. And perhaps for us this is part of the difficulty we have in accepting “new covenant language” as something merely metaphorical. We want to make it more highly realized.

If in my mind’s eye I transport myself back in time to the upper room, without having any other New Testament revelation, I would find no reason to read into Christ’s words at the Last Supper any idea of a realization of the new covenant in the church. He is simply speaking of the new covenant’s fulfillment in terms of national Israel in the Messianic Kingdom. If I then move forward in time to Paul’s use of those same words in 1 Corinthians 11, I only see him quoting the words from the upper room. I am not compelled to understand a church realization of the new covenant itself. A church realization may be a *possibility* in 1 Corinthians 11, but not a *necessity*. I would need much more evidence to make it a necessity. If I then move on in my mind’s journey to 2 Corinthians 3, I am still not convinced of any church realization of the new covenant. Taken in its context as I have described above, I can easily see Paul’s referring to the new covenant as an apt description of the spiritual standard by which his conduct should be judged, but I am not compelled to come to the conclusion that the church is participating as a party to the new covenant. It remains to be seen how the relevant Hebrews passages would influence this view of the progress of revelation.

Another issue concerning hermeneutical perspective: Have we been unwittingly influenced by the use of the expression “New Testament” to refer to the Christian Scriptures? For example, Walvoord argued,

From the very fact that the Bible is divided into the Old Testament and the New Testament, or the Old covenant and the New covenant, it is clear that Christianity fundamentally is based on a New covenant brought in by Jesus Christ.⁵²

⁵² Walvoord, “Does the Church Fulfill Israel’s Program” 218.

The expression, “New Testament,” as a title for the Christian canon, appears first to have been used either by Tertullian or Origen in the third century. Prior to this the Christian canon was not referred to as the “New Testament.” By the third century already assumptions of a replacement theology were beginning to influence Gentile Christian thought significantly.⁵³ But such would not necessarily have been the case either for Paul or for the first century Corinthian congregation (or any other first century Christians, for that matter). Their view of the church was not preconditioned by the title “*Novum Testamentum*” or H ΚΑΙΝΗ ΔΙΑΘΗΚΗ (Hē Kainē Diathēkē) appearing at the beginning of their Christian Scriptures! I don’t know whether we have been unwittingly preconditioned by the use of this title or not, but I wonder about it. When we come to 2 Corinthians 3:6 and read the words “ministers of the new covenant,” do we have a psychological attachment to those words? Do we feel that the “new covenant” and the “New Testament” are ours, while the “old covenant” and the “Old Testament” are the Jews? I don’t know, but I do wonder.

6. Why would Paul be referring to a passage from the Hebrew Scriptures when addressing a largely Gentile Christian church?

As has already been observed, other NT references to the new covenant occur in Jewish (Jerusalem upper room) or Hebrew Christian contexts. 2 Corinthians, however, is addressed to a largely Gentile church. Does this observation have any influence on how we might view Paul’s use of the Old Testament?

Though it is frequently stated that the church at Corinth was largely “Gentile,” this may be overstating the case. According to Acts 18:1-8, the core of early believers in Corinth actually came out of the synagogue. These initial believers would have consisted of both Jews and God-fearing Gentiles, both of whom would have been well acquainted with the Hebrew Scriptures. Thus it is not surprising that Paul would use OT language when referring to church truth, even if doing so metaphorically.

Paul actually makes quite frequent use of the OT in both 1 Corinthians and 2 Corinthians. However, the way Paul used the OT in 1 Corinthians can be contrasted with the way he used it in 2 Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians he tends to cite the OT as authoritative Scripture to prove his point, using such introductory formulae 12 times,⁵⁴ as follows:

- γέγραπται γὰρ gegraptai gar “for it is written” (1:18; 3:19)
- καθὼς γέγραπται kathōs gegraptai “just as it is written” (1:31; 2:9)
- γάρ gar “for” (2:16; 6:16; 14:27)

⁵³ Justin Martyr (100-165) in his *Dialogue With Trypho the Jew* represents one of the earliest examples of replacement theology.

⁵⁴ The UBS Greek New Testament 4th edition Index of Quotations has 17 OT quotes in 1 Corinthians and 91 OT allusions.

- ἐν γὰρ τῷ Μωϋσέως νόμῳ γέγραπται *en gar tō Mōuseōs nomō gegraptai* “for it is written in the law of Moses” (9:9)
- ὡσπερ γέγραπται *hōsper gegraptai* “as it is written” (10:7)
- ἐν τῷ νόμῳ γέγραπται ὅτι *en tō nomō gegraptai hoti* “in the law it is written that” (14:21)
- οὕτως καὶ γέγραπται *houtōs kai gegraptai* “thus also it is written” (15:45)
- τότε γενήσεται ὁ λόγος ὁ γεγραμμένος *tote genēsetai ho logos ho geogrammenos* “then the word which was written will come to pass” (15:54)

On the other hand, in 2 Corinthians, Paul tends to quote and allude to OT Scripture much less formally,⁵⁵ using introductory formulae only 5 times, as follows:

κατὰ τὸ γεγραμμένον *kata to geogrammenon* “according to what is written” (4:13)
 λέγει γάρ *legei gar* “for it says” (6:2)
 καθὼς εἴπεν ὁ Θεὸς ὅτι *kathōs eipen ho Theos hoti* “just as God said that” (6:16)
 καθὼς γέγραπται *kathōs gegraptai* “just as it is written” (8:15; 9:19)

This less formal use of the OT corresponds with what we would expect for a metaphorical use of OT language that refers not to a fulfillment or realization of the OT promise, but rather to a broad, loose description.

Conclusion

With reference to the new covenant, 2 Corinthians 3:6 may be viewed in two possible ways. The expression “new covenant” expresses either the *content* of Paul’s message, or it expresses the *manner in which* Paul conducted his ministry. Having examined various exegetical/hermeneutical issues, it is my studied opinion that Paul was not describing the content of his message, but rather the manner in which he conducted his ministry. Ultimately, the chief exegetical/hermeneutical issue questions whether the expression διακόνους καὶ νῆς διαθήκης represents an objective genitive or a genitive of description. A consideration of the referent of ἡμᾶς, the context of the statement, the use/non-use of the article, the theological viewpoint of author and recipients and the way in which Paul refers to the OT lead, I believe, to the conclusion that Paul’s point was that his ministry is a “new-covenant-like-ministry,” not that he was administering the new covenant. Reference was to the style of his ministry, rather than to the doctrinal content of the new covenant. Thus, this verse does not support any kind of a realized eschatology, or church participation in the new covenant. Of the New Testament references to the new covenant, 2 Corinthians 3:6 is the only one that is set in neither an overtly eschatological nor Hebrew-Christian context. As such, it is something of a *crux interpretum* for those who wish to see some sort of a present realization of the new covenant. According to Jeremiah 31:31, the parties to the new covenant are God and the houses of Israel and Judah. Though Christ’s blood has been shed for the ratification of the new covenant, the realization of its blessings awaits that time when God brings Israel and Judah into the covenant. Until that time, others (viz.

⁵⁵ The UBS Greek New Testament 4th edition Index of Quotations has 11 OT quotes in 2 Corinthians and 44 OT allusions.

the Church) may be benefitting from the same blood that ratified the new covenant, but there seems to be no exegetical necessity for seeing the Church as having been brought in as a new party to the covenant. At least, 2 Corinthians 3:6 does not require that we see the church as having been brought into the new covenant.