

Regeneration and Indwelling in the Old Testament

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Abstract

There is only one means of eternal salvation in history—salvation by grace through faith in Christ. However, that should not be interpreted to mean that the temporal aspects involved in the application of the various components of salvation (justification, regeneration, indwelling, sanctification, etc.) are uniform throughout history. We are living at a time when biblical theology—doctrine as derived directly from Scripture—is being prostrated to the requirements, or convenience, of extra-biblical theological models. The desire of covenantalists to demonstrate that there is only one people of God in history has led some to argue that the application of the atonement in time prior to the cross was the same as afterward (*i.e.*, that the Old Testament believers were immediately cleansed of sin, regenerated, and indwelt upon the exercise of faith, as is the case after the cross). The objective of such argumentation seems to be to demonstrate uniformity between the Old and New Testaments and to lessen the impact of any distinctions—which might better be interpreted using dispensational, rather than covenantal assumptions regarding the nature of God’s work in history. It is the purpose of this paper to demonstrate that such a position is without biblical or theological support. Ultimately, incorrect theology has a way of tainting biblical interpretation. In this case, the biblical teaching regarding the pre-cross abode of the saints in Paradise—as distinct from Heaven—is in jeopardy and even some leading dispensationalists have unwittingly bought into this covert covenantal foray. It is not, as covenantalists hold, the covenant of grace instituted in the Garden with Adam that is the fountainhead of salvation, but the new covenant inaugurated at the cross. That cross is a stake driven into history, and it worked a profound

change in the outworking of divine grace—sins committed under the Law could henceforth be remitted, not simply “covered” or “passed over” as under the Law. The cross and the change it wrought at a precise moment in time is the fountainhead of a dispensational understanding of history, and vital to sound biblical interpretation.

Salvation, while often thought of as a singular truth, is actually a process involving many distinct operations of God. Even today, after the cross, we refer to believers as the “saved”—as if salvation were a completed work rather than a work in progress. The fact is, salvation is not complete until the entire process has taken place, including justification, regeneration, sanctification, and glorification. The fact that God, from His eternal perspective regards one’s salvation as complete, signifying the certainty of its ultimate achievement, does not make it “actually” complete. Salvation is a temporal process, because we are temporal, and it will not be complete (actually—that is, in reality) until that temporal process is complete (at the coming of Christ to resurrect or transform our physical bodies). It is important that we recognize the difference between how God regards a saved sinner, often referred to as the believer’s “position,” and the believer’s actual experience—as a sinner still under the effects of sin and the curse. No one, whether saved prior to the cross or after, has yet completed this process since Christ has not yet returned to redeem the bodies of believers. So, if in this New Testament era some aspects of salvation must await the out-working of temporal events (*i.e.*, the completion of sanctification and the redemption of the body) we should not be surprised to discover that the same was (and remains) true of the Old Testament saints. In fact, since they exercised faith before the cross, they were even further up the stream of temporal events, for Christ had not yet come and died to effectuate their redemption from sin. Not only do they have to wait for bodily redemption, which like ours is even now not accomplished, but they also had to await the sacrifice of Christ upon to the cross in order to have their sin remitted. (The sins of the Old Testament believers were not

removed, they were merely “covered” until the time when Christ would make a cleansing atonement.) The fact that they lived when they did resulted in their entering into the stream of salvation events at a different point; thus just as we must wait for our glorification (despite the fact that God “reckons” it as a fact, *cf.* Rom. 8:31), so they had to await the cross for their remission of sin (despite the fact that God reckoned their faith as righteousness, *cf.* Rom. 3:21-26). All of this underscores the importance of a dispensational perspective of history, through which biblical statements can be understood within their temporal/theological setting, and this is no doubt the underlying reason that some covenantalists are intent on unformatizing all aspects of salvation in the Old and New Testaments so as to minimize the otherwise obvious need for dispensational interpretation.

Introduction

Were the Old Testament believers regenerated and indwelt by the Holy Spirit? Some covenantalists say “Yes,” but the biblical and theological facts indicate that they were neither regenerated, nor indwelt by the Spirit of God. As one surveys scripture regarding the work of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament, they cannot help but be somewhat perplexed—if not shocked—at the total absence of any reference to the Holy Spirit’s indwelling. Likewise, the concept of the new birth, or regeneration, seems equally absent.¹ Nevertheless, some insist Old Testament believers were both regenerated and indwelt.²

How Covenantalists Argue for Old Testament Regeneration and Indwelling

Offering an affirmative statement for the regeneration and indwelling of Old Testament believers, Walter Kaiser has said:

Never had an individual in the Old Testament been completely without the aid and work of the Holy Spirit. Certainly, Jesus held that the subjects of the new birth and the

special work of the Holy Spirit in the gift of salvation were not new or inaccessible doctrines to Old Testament men and women before the cross. In fact, he marveled that Nicodemus could have been a teacher in Israel and still have been so totally unaware of this fact (John 3:10). Thus if salvation is not of works so that no man or woman ever could boast but is a gift of God to all who ever believed so that it might always forever be by grace (Eph. 2:8), then Old Testament saints were indeed regenerated by the Holy Spirit...Finally, in no way must this special profusion of the ministry of the Holy Spirit that operates much in accordance with the blessing found in the new covenant be interpreted in such a way as to suggest that the individual Old Testament saints and believers were unaware of any ministry of the Holy Spirit in their lives apart from temporary endowments of the Spirit for special tasks at special times. On the contrary, the Holy Spirit was the author of new life for all who believed in the coming man of promise (=regeneration), and he also indwelt those same Old Testament redeemed men, at least to some degree, even as David testified in Psalm 51:11.³

Regardless of the position one takes with respect to the regeneration and indwelling of Old Testament believers, there does seem to be a consensus that regeneration and indwelling occur co-extensively.⁴ This seems only reasonable since regeneration is the re-establishment of vital (life giving) union with God (Jn. 6:63; 7:38-39; 1 Cor. 6:11). The question of whether Old Testament believers were regenerated and indwelt is a singular issue. If they were regenerated, they were indwelt, and if they were indwelt, they had been regenerated. The Old Testament historian, Leon Wood, states the relationship in the following way.

By *indwelling* is meant the continuedness of the Spirit's residence within the saint following the occasion of regeneration. Regeneration is a momentary act, when spiritual life is imparted to a sinner. It happens instantaneously. Indwelling

on the other hand, only begins then. It is the Spirit that enacts regeneration, and when he does he enters into the person, so that the person becomes “the temple of God” (1 Cor. 3:16,17; 2 Cor. 6:16). Indwelling means that this relationship continues from that point on.⁵

Accordingly, proof that Old Testament believers were either regenerated or indwelt would substantiate both claims.

Basically, the arguments for the regeneration and indwelling of the Old Testament believers follow one of two patterns. The first pattern presupposes that all saved people, whether before or after Christ’s death, are regenerated immediately when they exercise faith. The logic proceeds in this way: All saved people are regenerated at the time they are saved, and Old Testament believers were saved; therefore, Old Testament believers were regenerated, and thus indwelt. The other pattern of argument presupposes that all saved people, whether Old Testament or New Testament, are indwelt. This argument proceeds as such: Old Testament believers were indwelt, and indwelt people are regenerated; therefore, Old Testament believers must have been regenerated. As can be seen, both lines of argumentation are built on assumptions. In one case, regeneration is assumed in order to prove indwelling. In the other case, indwelling is assumed in order to prove regeneration.

A. How Proponents Attempt to Support Old Testament Regeneration

After conducting an extensive examination of every instance in the Old Testament where the Spirit is said to have come upon or left an individual, Leon Wood, himself a proponent of Old Testament regeneration, says:

The conclusion has been definite: every instance concerned an aspect of empowerment for a task, with no instance seeming to involve spiritual renewal.⁶

Having concluded that none of the passages regarding the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament support the notion of the regeneration of Old Testament believers, Wood proceeds to establish their regeneration based upon two arguments. The first argument is that Old Testament believers lived in such a way as is only possible for a regenerate person—he cites Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David as examples. While there can be no doubt that these biblical characters, as well as a good many others, were the recipients of the Spirit's empowering, that fact does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that they were regenerated by the Spirit.

Wood's second argument is one that argues back from the New Testament. Wood himself states that such an argument is necessary because, "For some reason, the Old Testament does not speak of the matter directly."⁷ His argument is essentially that of the first syllogism given above (*i.e.*, that all saved people are regenerated at the moment they believe and Old Testament believers were saved; therefore, Old Testament believers were regenerated, and thus indwelt). There are two serious flaws in this reasoning. The first is a structural flaw in which the major premise assumes the conclusion. One cannot know that "all saved people are regenerated at the time they become saved" [major premise] without first knowing that Old Testament believers were regenerated at the time they were saved [conclusion]. Since the major premise assumes the conclusion, this argument is circular. The second flaw results from ignoring temporal relations. To be sure all saved people must eventually be regenerated, however, this in no way necessitates that Old Testament believers had to be regenerated at the moment they exercised faith, any more than that believers today must be glorified at the moment they exercise faith (even though glorification must eventually occur in order for salvation to be complete).

Proponents of Old Testament regeneration offer two additional arguments. First, it is sometimes asserted that Jesus' surprise at Nicodemus' lack of knowledge about the new birth (Jn. 3:10) implies

that such was, or at least should have been understood prior to the cross (see Kaiser's statement above).⁸ To this we must agree; however, this in no way implies that regeneration was experienced in the Old Testament—only that Nicodemus as a teacher of the scripture should have recognized that what Christ was teaching was part and parcel of the new covenant, which Messiah came to implement. Naturally, there were many things conceptualized in the Old Testament—which should have been understood by informed and God fearing Jews, that were not fulfilled (or actualized) until later (*cf.* Heb. 11:13).

Second, it is suggested that since there is only one means of salvation in both the Old and New Testaments we should naturally assume little if any distinction between salvation in the Old and New Testaments. While it is true there is only one means of salvation in history, that does not mean that the application of the individual elements of salvation must be uniformly timed. Although regeneration at the moment of faith is the New Testament pattern, that does not necessitate that it must have been the pattern prior to Christ's death. We are partly beset by the problem of historical perspective, for in the present age those who are saved are immediately regenerated, and there is a strong temptation to generalize this to the Old Testament. However, there is simply no logical necessity for the Old Testament saints to have been regenerated prior to the time that Christ offered himself as the sufficient and efficient sacrifice for their sins, particularly since there is no biblical evidence to support this contention.

B. How Proponents Attempt to Support Indwelling in the Old Testament

As Wood pointed out, there is no direct reference to indwelling in the Old Testament, neither is there any New Testament reference to the indwelling of Old Testament believers. J. Oliver Buswell refers to Numbers 27:18 where the Spirit is said to dwell "in" Joshua. It must be pointed out, however, that the word "dwell" does not appear in the original text and the Hebrew preposition *b^e* can mean

“with” (associative) as well as “in” (locative). Therefore, we simply cannot prove anything more specific from this passage than the Spirit was “with” Joshua. Buswell also cites Isa. 63:11 where he states “It is said of Israel under Moses’ leadership that ‘God put his Holy Spirit within him.’” This passage, however, is not referring to the Spirit’s indwelling of Moses (personally) but rather His being present among the people (the singular is employed here, as commonly, to denote “the people,” or “Israel,” collectively). It is also worth mentioning at this point that Kaiser who argues elsewhere so passionately for Old Testament indwelling fails to even mention the subject in his biblical theology of the Old Testament—a glaring omission were there any evidence to support Old Testament indwelling.^{9, 10}

The question we must ask is: “If inductive support for Old Testament indwelling is absent from the Old Testament record, is there any such evidence from the New Testament?” Kaiser points to John 14:17 for support that Old Testament believers were indwelt. He says:

Likewise, John 14:17 is especially important, for it affirms that our Lord’s disciples already had known the “Spirit of truth” because he was living with them. The prepositions are *para* “with,” the same word used in John 14:23 of the Father and the Son’s abiding in the disciples—a non-fluctuating relationship, and *en*, “in,” with a present tense verb *éstai*, “is” (rather than “will be” as in RSV, NASB, and NIV).¹¹

It is largely upon this statement that Kaiser bases his assertion that Old Testament believers were indwelt. As can be seen, the weight of his argument hinges on the tense of the verb *éstai*, which he takes to be a present tense. However, *éstai* is unquestionably a future tense. [It is possible that Kaiser meant to write *éstin*—present tense, which is to be found in only a handful of later manuscripts dating from the fourth through the sixth century. If this is what he intended to do, he failed to state that he was following a variant

reading of the text. This is particularly significant in view of the fact that his entire argument hinges on the tense of this word, and the future tense is well attested.] Suffice it to say that Kaiser's argument on this point fails to support the notion that Old Testament believers were indwelt.

Having noted the lack of both Old and New Testament inductive evidence for the indwelling of Old Testament believers, we now turn attention to the deductive arguments employed in support of this position. The general line of reasoning may be stated as follows: Regenerate individuals must be indwelt and Old Testament believers were regenerate; therefore, Old Testament believers must have been indwelt. Wood posits this argument when he says:

...a strong argument that Old Testament saints were indwelt may be built on the fact that they were regenerated, as shown above. It was argued that, since they were regenerated, it must have been the Holy Spirit who brought this about. Now it may be argued that, since these Old Testament saints remained in a regenerated condition, it must have been the Holy Spirit who kept them so.¹²

The difficulty here is not with the major premise (that all regenerated people must be indwelt) but with the minor premise—that the Old Testament believers were regenerated. Interestingly enough, the major argument for the regeneration of Old Testament believers (cited by Wood) is that they were indwelt. This is the circular path trod by all who argue for the regeneration and indwelling of Old Testament believers: they must have been regenerate because they were indwelt and they must have been indwelt because they were regenerate. Is there any wonder one gets the distinct impression there is simply a lack of inductive support for either?

Before moving on, we should note one additional point. It is sometimes argued that the New Testament teaches that only people who are indwelt truly belong to God (=are saved) and passages

such as Romans 5:5; 8:9,11; 1 Corinthians 2:12; 6:19-20; 2 Corinthians 5:5; Galatians 4:6; 1John 3:24 and 4:13 are used as support. In the New Testament regeneration and indwelling occur instantaneously at the time a person exercises faith. Therefore, in the New Testament era it is only logical that a person who “does not have the Spirit” would also not be regenerate. However, in order to generalize this back to the Old Testament one would have to assume that regeneration and indwelling occurred there at the time faith was exercised, this of course is what one is attempting to prove; therefore, this is simply another attempt at circular reasoning on the part of those who wish to support Old Testament regeneration and indwelling. Sound dispensation interpretation (*i.e.*, interpreting within the framework of the theological/historical perspective of the subject material) would prevent this type of error. Unfortunately, covenantalists do not interpret from a dispensational perspective, so they flounder in a soup of temporally uncorrelated theological ideas.

C. Summary of the Covenantal Position on Old Testament Regeneration and Indwelling

From the standpoint of induction, covenantalists have been unable to provide even the slightest support for the immediate regeneration of Old Testament believers. On the deductive side, the arguments employed are faulty with respect to either the facticity of the premises or the logical structure of the arguments. The most common error seems to be that of circular reasoning. We have also observed the lack of inductive support for indwelling in the Old Testament. Wood’s analysis of the Old Testament passages relating to the comings and goings of the Spirit fails to yield even one instance of spiritual renewal (regeneration) associated with the work of the Spirit.¹³ If Wood’s analysis is correct, then none of these instances of empowering can be classified as indwelling. Furthermore, one cannot argue for the immediate regeneration and indwelling of Old Testament believers from New Testament normative experience. Any such argument would be circular since it must assume its own conclusion in the premise (*i.e.*, it must assume that Old Testament

and New Testament normative experience is the same)—clearly a logical problem. Nothing short of clear inductive evidence from the Old Testament, or a clear New Testament reference specifically referring to Old Testament normative experience, will suffice for proof. Proponents of Old Testament regeneration and indwelling simply have not brought forth such proof.

Arguments That the Old Testament Believers Were Not Regenerated And Indwell Prior to Christ's Death Upon the cross

While the lack of evidence for the affirmative position is sufficient cause to view it with great suspicion, the lack of evidence for any position is not conclusive negation. We will now seek to provide evidence that Old Testament believers were not regenerated and consequently not indwelt until Christ actually effected their redemption upon the cross.

A. Arguments Against the Immediate Regeneration of Old Testament Believers

Bear in mind the argument is not that Old Testament believers were never regenerated, but that their regeneration was effectuated in time only after Christ's death. In other words, they were redeemed, justified, regenerated, and indwelt at the moment Christ's sacrifice became, in time, the efficient means of their salvation. Accordingly, redemption, justification, regeneration, and indwelling could not have predated the cross (nor could the Old Testament believers have been received into God's presence in Heaven prior to the accomplishment of their salvation "in historic fact" upon the cross—though this last point is beyond the scope of the present topic).

The rationale for this position can be stated as follows: Eternal redemption is exclusively a provision of the new covenant. No one was ever saved on the basis of the former covenant (*i.e.*, the covenant of Law, *cf.*, Gal. 3:2 1; Heb. 10:1-18). Upon this fact, there is general agreement. Since eternal redemption (and likewise, justifi-

cation, and regeneration) is effected exclusively through means of the new covenant, the question arises: “Could God make application of the atonement provided by Christ’s sacrifice prior to the time at which that sacrifice was actually offered? While there are several faulty arguments that seem to allow for this, Scripture unequivocally asserts that the answer is “No.” Hebrews 9:15-17 says,

(9:15-17) And for this reason he is the mediator of a new covenant, in order that since a death has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were committed under the first covenant [the Law], those who have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance. (16) For where a covenant is, there must of necessity be the death of the one who made it. (17) For a covenant is valid only when men are dead, for it is never in force while the one who made it lives. [Explanation in brackets added]

Note the following observations from this passage: 1) Christ is now the Mediator of a new covenant; 2) that mediation is based upon his death having taken place [Gr. *genomenou*—aorist participle]; 3) this new covenant makes possible the redemption of sins committed under the former covenant (the law); 4) redemption under the new covenant is the basis upon which those who were called (contextually including those called under the former covenant) might receive the eternal inheritance; 5) the new covenant could not have been in force prior to Christ’s death since a covenant has no force prior to the death of the one making the covenant.

We can now state our argument in the following manner. 1) Eternal redemption (and consequently, justification and regeneration/indwelling) are exclusively provisions of the new covenant. 2) The new covenant could not have been in force prior to the time of Christ’s actual death (in time and space, *i.e.*, historically). 3) Therefore, no one could have been redeemed (and consequently,

justified and regenerated/indwelt) prior to Christ's death. This of course is the reason why eternal redemption, regeneration, and indwelling are not pictured in the Old Testament, except perhaps prophetically as relates to the implementation of the new covenant (*cf.* Jer. 31:31-34). Hebrews 9:8 provides further evidence by stating that the very figure of the outer tabernacle signifies that the way into the Holy Place (the presence of God) had not yet been disclosed while the outer tabernacle stood. The readers were no doubt aware of the events surrounding Christ's death and the fact that the veil of the temple was torn in two when Christ died upon the cross (Matt. 27:51). Both the teaching of Hebrews 9:15-17 and the symbolism from Matthew 27:51 are quite clear. The way into God's presence was inaugurated at the time of Christ's death—not before.

A faulty line of deduction has arisen in order to allow for the application of the atonement prior to Christ's actual death. John Feinberg states this position as follows:

In trying to understand how this can be so before the event occurs historically, we must distinguish between God's perspective and man's. God has known about Christ's death from all eternity. Since he decreed it, it was an accomplished fact in history. Because God knows that the deed will be done (since he decreed it), and because he sees all of history (including the completed work of Christ) at once, God can grant man salvation, even before the sacrifice is performed in history. ¹⁴

Feinberg's statement employs a combination of two lines of argumentation. 1) Since God knew from eternity that Christ would die for man's sin he could make application of the atonement prior to the actual death of Christ in time. 2) Christ's death became an accomplished fact from the instant it was decreed in eternity past. Both of these arguments illustrate the fuzzy logic often employed by proponents of Old Testament regeneration (and which seems to pervade covenantal interpretation in general).

The first issue to be addressed is whether the decree of God made the atonement immediately actual. On this point Feinberg himself seems a bit confused, for while he states that the decree of God rendered the atonement actual, he also says, "It did not become a historical fact until it actually occurred."¹⁵ Feinberg was obviously feeling the tension created by historical necessity. While it is quite correct to say the decree of God necessitated the events so decreed, it is not reasonable to think that the decree made those events actual (much less, immediately actual) since the decree of God necessitated not only the events themselves, but also the means for bringing those events about and the temporal relations involved. To say that the decree of God made all decreed events immediately actual is to ignore that God also decreed their temporal relations. The decree of God is that certain events will become actual in history, not apart from history. Failure to make this critical distinction can lead to many theological absurdities. That God intended and decreed that the new covenant and its redemptive benefits not be in force prior to the actual historical death of Christ is quite certain, according to a normal reading of Hebrews 9:15-17. Feinberg's approach further underscores the inadequacy of covenantal interpretation to deal with the temporal issues involved in biblical interpretation. His argument from foreknowledge is susceptible to the same criticism. While God certainly knew what he would do historically in providing for the sacrifice of his Son, he also knew when he would effectuate the covenant under which man's redemption would be made possible (*cf.* Tit. 1:1-3). According to Hebrews 9:15-17, that divinely appointed time was at the death of Christ upon the cross.

Another inconclusive argument is that God's "reckoning" (or "imputing") of faith as righteousness to Old Testament believers (*e.g.* Abraham, *cf.* Rom 4:9) somehow implies an actual transfer of righteousness to those believers. If this idea could be sustained, it would indeed be a powerful argument for the immediate redemption, regeneration, and consequent indwelling of Old Testament believers.

However, the idea of such a transfer of righteousness cannot be sustained on the basis of reckoning. The Greek term *logizomai* refers to an essentially cognitive operation; that is to say, it defines how God regarded, or thought of Abraham in the light of Abraham's faith. There are two possibilities: 1) that God cleansed Abraham of sin and transferred righteousness to him actually and immediately, or 2) that God did not cleanse Abraham or transfer righteousness to him since the new covenant was not yet in effect, but chose to regard him in the light of his ultimate redemption—even though it had not yet been accomplished. The latter possibility is the only view consistent with Hebrews 9:15-17.¹⁶

One objection that is sure to arise from this line of reasoning is this: Doesn't the Old Testament talk about redemption and forgiveness? Are we to conclude that the Old Testament believers knew nothing of soteriological cleansing from sin? The answer is that they knew of it, but only as prophetic of a future act of God. [For instance, a study of the Hebrew term *gaal*, "redeem" reveals the following usages: civil (Lev. 25), corporate—or national (Isa. 43:1, 44:22,23), physical (Ps. 69:18; 103:4), and future soteriological redemption (Hos. 13:14). Likewise *padah* "redeem" is used of Israel corporately (2 Sam. 7:23), of ceremonial practices (Ex. 13:13), of physical redemption (Ps 26:11 *cf.* v. 9; 31:5 *cf.* v. 4; 34:22 *cf.* vv. 19-21 {note "redeems the soul" in verse 22 refers to redemption of the soul from the pit, or deliverance from death}; 71:23 *cf.* v. 24 (note again, "my soul which thou has redeemed"—from Sheol); of future redemption (Ps. 49:15). Even the much quoted Psalm 107:2, "Let the redeemed {*gaal*} of the LORD say so," is a reference not to soteriological redemption, but to the physical and corporate redemption of Israel from slavery in Egypt (*cf.* vv. 2b-16). There simply is no passage in the Old Testament that requires a contemporaneous, soteriological, redemptive interpretation.]

In addition there are three primary terms employed in the Hebrew which carry the idea of forgiveness, they are: *kaphar*, meaning "to make atonement or reconciliation"; *nasa'*, meaning "to lift up"; and

salah, meaning “to send away.” While each of these words carries its own shade of meaning, each of them pictures an operation through which an individual or people may be spared divine wrath for sin. The question is: Do any of these terms picture soteriological (as opposed to temporal) forgiveness for sins? With the possible exception of *kaphar*, it does seem that these terms are capable of carrying such a meaning. Jeremiah 31:34 uses *salah* in relation to forgiveness under the new covenant. However, even in the New Testament we are familiar with a non-soteriological forgiveness (1 Jn. 1:9) that draws upon the same vocabulary as soteriological forgiveness.^{17, 18} The question then is not “which meaning *can* the terms convey,” rather “which meaning *do* they convey.” Take for example Psalm 32:5 where David says:

I acknowledged my sin to Thee,
And my iniquity I did not hide;
I said, “ I will confess my transgression to the
LORD;”
And thou didst forgive the guilt of my sin. [Selah]

Or, Psalm 103:12 where he states:

As far as the east is from the west,
So far has He removed our transgressions from us.

Whether one takes these passages (and the many others like them) to refer to soteriological forgiveness or non-soteriological forgiveness reduces to a matter of predisposing theology. That is, if one is disposed toward the notion that God did make application of the new covenant prior to the actual death of Christ, then he is likely to view such passages in an immediate soteriological sense. On the other hand, if one is disposed toward the view that God did not make application of the new covenant prior to the actual death of Christ, he will view such passages either as non-soteriological or—as in the case of Jeremiah 31 :34—soteriological, but future

rather than contemporaneous. The point is that these passages do not present a special problem for the view being present here.

If as has been suggested, the Old Testament believers were not redeemed until the actual offering of Christ, how were their sins dealt with? Romans 3:21-26 addresses this problem.

(3:21-26) But now apart from the Law *the* righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets, (22) even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction (23) for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, (24) being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; (25) whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. *This was* to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; (26) for the demonstration, *I say*, of His righteousness at the present time, that He might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.

Paul states that the Old Testament believers were forgiven in the sense that their sin was “passed over” [Gr. *pareisin*]. Although holding a somewhat modified view himself, the New Testament scholar, R. C. H. Lenski makes the following statement with regard to this “passing over.”

Paul’s “passing over” is used for the sake of exactness in the present connection. What actually took away the sins of the Old Testament saints was Christ’s blood. Until that blood was actually shed, all *aphesis* was, to be exact, a *pareisis*; all “remitting” a “passing over.” The final reckoning with the sins of the Old Testament believers was, as it were, postponed until the true mercy seat was set forth. In this way the Old Testament saints had their “remission,” it was in the form of a “passing over.”¹⁹

Did Old Testament believers experience forgiveness? “Yes,” God “passed over” the sins of Old Testament believers in anticipation of their actual redemption in Christ. That redemption, however, was only anticipated in the Old Testament. The realization of redemption could occur only through the new covenant, and that covenant had no force until Christ’s death actually occurred. Thus, God did not judge the Old Testament believers; He “passed over” their sin until that sin was in actuality removed at the cross. There was a suspension of divine justice (wrath) until such time as the sin could be removed, but this does not in any way suppose that those believers—still in their sin—could enter into God’s presence, hence the teaching of Christ regarding Paradise (Lk. 16:19-31) answers the question of the temporary disposition of the Old Testament believers until their redemption was secured at the cross. [Expanding on this point, it seems apparent from the New Testament that prior to the time of Christ’s resurrection believers were not immediately received into Heaven upon their death. While the existence of Paradise as a location separate from Heaven has been disputed, it seems a simple matter to demonstrate that prior to Christ’s resurrection believers who had died did not go to Heaven.²⁰ Upon the cross, Jesus stated to the repentant thief, “Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in paradise” (Luke 23:43). Note the following observations. 1) Jesus and the former thief went to the same location immediately [Gr. *semeron*, “this day,” “now”] when they died. 2) That location could not have been Heaven since Jesus made it clear upon his resurrection that he had not yet ascended to Heaven (John 20:17 cf. Mark 16:19). With this information we are able to conclude that the former thief did not go immediately to Heaven, so there must have been some other location to which believers went prior to Christ’s resurrection. Luke 16:19-31 refers to this place as “Abraham’s bosom.” It has been argued that since the place where Jesus went was called “Paradise” and since Heaven is also referred to as “Paradise” (2 Cor. 12:4) they must be the same location.²¹ However, this argument is not valid since Paradise may be understood simply as a generic designation for the abode of the

saints (referring to Sheol prior to Christ's resurrection and afterward to Heaven). Unless it can be demonstrated that Christ ascended into Heaven prior to his resurrection (which cannot be done) the conclusion seems obvious that Old Testament believers did not go immediately to Heaven upon their death. Yet, if they were redeemed and regenerated there would have been no reason that they should not have entered immediately into Heaven. While this line of reasoning does not prove that Old Testament saints were not regenerated, it is nevertheless, precisely what one would expect if Old Testament believers had to wait for the accomplishment of their redemption in Christ's death.^{22]}

B. Arguments Against the Indwelling of Old Testament Believers

Just as there is no direct statement indicating that Old Testament believers were indwelt, there is also no direct statement indicating that they were not indwelt. Indeed, why should there be? The proof they were not indwelt is to be seen from the foregoing conclusion—that they were not regenerated (which of course, would initiate indwelling). As we have already observed, there is general agreement that regeneration and indwelling are co-extensive and indwelling is simply the continuedness of regeneration.²³ If the Old Testament believers were not regenerated, then we can be certain they were not indwelt.

It is occasionally asserted that John 14:16-17 provides positive evidence that Old Testament believers were not indwelt since Jesus there asserts that the Spirit *will* (future tense) be “in you” (implying the Spirit was not hitherto indwelling believers). While this passage does seem to make such a statement, its value as a proof text in this dispute is limited since the distributive use of the plural (Gr. *en humin*) “in you” [plural], *i.e.*, “in *each one* of you [individually—distributively], rather than “among you” [corporately—as a group] cannot be positively supported.²⁴ Proponents of Old Testament regeneration and indwelling simply counter that this passage predicts a special presence of the Spirit “with” or “among” the Church (corporately)—not the beginning of the Spirit's work of regenera-

tion and indwelling. Nevertheless, it is clear that Jesus is signaling a significant change in the ministry of the Holy Spirit to believers—a change from “*with you*” to “*in you*.” (Note this transition is further supported by John 7:39, cf. 15:26; 16:13) Despite the fact that the grammar of this passage is somewhat imprecise, given the Old Testament context which Woods has pointed out (with no clear examples of indwelling), and the personal (and permanent) nature of the Spirit’s work within the lives of each individual believer beginning at Pentecost, it seems clear that this passage does indeed predict the beginning of the Spirit’s work of regeneration and indwelling and should not be so lightly dismissed by proponents of Old Testament regeneration and indwelling.

C. Summary of the Position that the Old Testament Believers Were Not Regenerated and Indwelt

In summary of the position that the Old Testament believers were not regenerated and indwelt, the argument is twofold: 1) Old Testament believers could not have been indwelt since they were not regenerated. 2) There is no biblical evidence, either Old Testament or New Testament, in support of indwelling which would contradict this position.

Conclusions

As regards the matter of regeneration and indwelling in the Old Testament, we have noted the lack of any firm biblical support for either. Arguments offered in support of Old Testament regeneration and indwelling are inferential, and we have seen the circular nature of these arguments (regeneration is assumed in order to prove indwelling, and indwelling is assumed in order to prove regeneration). Why does the Old Testament not discuss the new birth? Why are there no examples of indwelling in the Old Testament? Why does the Old Testament view the veiled Holy of Holies as the place of God’s dwelling, whereas the New Testament records the rending of the veil and declares the believer the temple [Gr. *naos* = Holiest Place] of God? Why is there no indication that Old Testament believers were received into Heaven prior to the cross?

Why does the New Testament declare that God “passed over” [Gr. *pareisis*] the sins of the Old Testament believers? Why does the New Testament refer to the Old Testament economy as “bondage” (Gal. 3:22-4:7)? The answer to these questions is that God is holy and His justice could only be satisfied at the cross of Christ. While He could temporarily deal with men in the light of the salvation that he knew He would provide for them, this had its limitations. It is only through the new covenant that God can receive sinners, and it is only the death of Christ, at God’s appointed time, that could implement that covenant and effectuate salvation.

The larger issue, however, is the way in which some covenantal theologians have dealt with this issue. The distortion of theological truth regarding salvation experience in the Old Testament by modern-day covenantalists is simply another attempt to hide the clearest of all dispensational dividing lines in redemptive history—the great divide between pre-cross and post-cross salvation experience. The fact is, it is the cross that is the stake in redemptive history from which dispensationalism emerges. Covenantalists clearly see the implication of acknowledging a distinction between pre-cross and post-cross salvation experience. Not only are many modern covenantalists intent on obscuring any distinction between pre-cross and post-cross salvation experience, which in years past, would have shocked even many of their covenantal predecessors, some even assert that the very distinction between Old Testament and New Testament, which long antedates modern dispensationalism, is artificial and unhelpful. Apparently they recognize that acknowledging such distinctions would lend great support to a dispensational view of redemptive history—something they feel they must avoid at all cost. In the course of coming to the logical end of their theological assumptions, covenantalists are themselves providing the clearest evidence of covenant theology’s inadequacy as a means of understanding biblical truth. The fact is, any system of theology that ignores the temporal aspects of redemptive history, and the progressive nature of God’s work, can never do more than distort the message of the Bible.

Notes

[Unless otherwise indicated all Scripture quotations are from the New American Standard Bible.]

¹The necessity of the new birth, as a future reality, certainly could be deduced from passages such as Isa. 53. However, since the work of Christ was from that perspective a future reality, so too was the new birth. Thus Jesus could say to Nicodemus, “You are the teacher of Israel and you do not know these things (in connection with the hope of Israel)?” Such certainly does not imply that regeneration was experienced in the Old Testament.

²The terminology “permanent indwelling” is somewhat of a misnomer. Since the Bible links indwelling with regeneration (1 Cor. 6:17-20 *cf.* v.11; Gal. 4:4-5), indwelling is by its very nature “permanent.” In other words, there is no such thing as “temporary indwelling.” (Temporary fillings of the Spirit in the Old Testament should not be confused with “indwelling;” filling conveys “power,” regeneration and indwelling conveys “life.”)

³Kaiser, Walter C. Jr., The Uses of the Old Testament in the New (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), pp. 94, 100.

⁴Wood, Leon J., The Holy Spirit in the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976), p. 69.

⁵Wood, p. 69.

⁶Wood, p. 64.

⁷Wood, p. 65.

⁸Kaiser, p. 94.

⁹Kaiser, p. 95.

¹⁰Kaiser, Walter C., Toward an Old Testament Theology (Grand Rapids: Academic Books, 1978).

¹¹Kaiser, The Uses of the Old Testament in the New, p. 94.

¹²Wood, p. 70.

¹³Wood, p. 64.

¹⁴John S. Feinberg, "Salvation in the Old Testament," Tradition and Testaments, eds. John S. and Paul D. Feinberg (Chicago: Moody press, 1981), p. 55.

¹⁵Feinberg, p. 54.

¹⁶One might ask why the previous objections raised against foreknowledge would not also apply to this second option. The answer is that this option does not involve an actual pre-cross application of the atonement.

¹⁷We know that 1 Jn. 1:9 is non-soteriological because if it were soteriological it would make continuance in salvation contingent upon continual confession—an obvious theological problem in the light of other Scripture.

¹⁸For instance, *aphiemi* is employed both in a soteriological sense (1 Jn. 2:12) and a non-soteriological sense (1 Jn.1:9).

¹⁹Lenski, R. C. H., The Interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1936), p. 261.

²⁰Ryrie, Charles C., Basic Theology (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1988), pp. 519-520. Also see: Harry Buis, The Doctrine of Eternal Punishment (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishers, 1957), p. 18.

²¹Ryrie, P. 520.

²²As an additional point, the Old Testament states that "Sheol"—the place of the dead (Job 10:21-22; Psa. 6:4-5; 16:8-11; Isa. 38:18-19), was also the abode of the righteous dead. It seems highly unlikely that any connection can be drawn between Sheol and Heaven, particularly in light of Ps. 16:8-11. The Hebrews certainly understood the idea of immortality (see, James Orr, "Immortality in the Old Testament," Classical Evangelical Essays in Old Testament Interpretation, ed. Walter C. Kaiser [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1982] pp. 253-265.). However, they seem to have had no concept of being immediately received into God's presence in Heaven at death. That Heaven is the home of the believer is a truth first taught by Christ in John 14:2-3, and even there, it is presented as a future reality.

²³Wood, p. 69.

²⁴The problem with using this passage as a proof against Old Testament indwelling is not, as commonly suggested, due to the lack of a clear distinction

between “with” [*para*] and “in” [*én*]. We have only to compare the locative use of these prepositions where a concrete object is employed. In such usages, the meanings are quite distinct. The real problem is in sustaining the distributive sense of *én humin*—“in you” [plural], for unless the distributive—“in *each* of you”—can be sustained, the translation “among you” (in the group—associatively—rather than the individuals) would certainly be permissible, though perhaps insensitive to the larger biblical context.

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