



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Christ and Covenant

Hebrews 9:15-24; 10:15-25

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Introduction

1. If “biblical religion is covenant religion,”¹ why hasn’t the church talked more about covenant?
2. However much the considered conclusion of a competent scholar might lead us to stop and ask what his statement says about the importance of covenant, we know that scholars sometimes get carried away with minutiae and a scholar saying it doesn’t make it so.
3. It’s easy to think this way about our statement about covenant religion, and just the way the words are used would seem to confirm the point.
 - a. The word “covenant” appears 266 times in the Old Testament, once every 87 verses.
 - b. But in the New Testament, the word is used only 33 times—once every 240 verses—seventeen of which are in the book of Hebrews, written to *Jewish* Christians.
 - c. If covenant is so important in the New Testament, shouldn’t we read more about it?
4. But do these numbers tell the whole story? Could Jesus have been such an overwhelming presence that he overshadowed all else, including a big idea like covenant? Could it also be that the early Christians understood the connection so well that they didn’t mention it as much as they lived it?²
5. That last point has much to commend it, especially when we look at how the word “covenant” is used and see its connection to the most important of Christian teachings. Having made that discovery, we will also see how vital covenant is for understanding what it means to live for Jesus.

Body

- I. Covenant at the Heart of Christian Faith.
 - A. As we would expect, several NT uses of “covenant” refer to the Mosaic covenant (Romans 9:4; 2 Corinthians 3:14; Galatians 4:24; Ephesians 2:12; Hebrews 8:9; 9:4) and the fulfillment of the

¹ Everett Ferguson, *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology for Today*, 2.

² These questions paraphrase the points offered to account for the “relative lack of usage” of the term covenant in the New Testament, in C. C. Newman, “Covenant, New Covenant,” *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, 246.

Abrahamic covenant promise in the work of Jesus (Luke 1:72; Acts 3:25; 7:8; Romans 11:27; Galatians 3:17; 4:24).

- B. Two texts teach that the prophecy of a new covenant in Jeremiah 31:31-34 was fulfilled in the work of Christ (2 Corinthians 3:1-18; Hebrews 8:6-13; 10:15-18).
- C. Without minimizing those texts, where covenant is concerned the more significant passages are easily overlooked, partly because they are so familiar, but mostly because we have emphasized something else more.
 1. Consider four texts.
 - a) At his last meal, Jesus said, "this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26:28 = Mark 14:24).
 - b) The phrasing in Luke's account is a little different: "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood" (Luke 22:20), phrasing that is repeated in 1 Corinthians 11:25.
 2. Do you see the emphasis and how it differs from what we have so often heard?
 - a) Jesus does not say, "my blood is shed for you." That's true, but not all the truth.
 - b) He does not even say merely that "my blood is shed for your forgiveness," though that too is true and the end result.
 - c) What he says is that his shed blood "*is the blood of the new covenant,*" the new arrangement for the relationship that we have with God through him.
 - d) Adding Paul's reference ties it to us in a vital way: when we partake of the cup at the Lord's supper, we are not just remembering the day he was crucified, but *the new covenant* in his blood (1 Corinthians 11:25).
 3. Think about that more: the notion of covenant is directly connected with what is generally seen as the most significant event for the beginning and continuation of the Christian religion. That hardly suggests a minor NT emphasis for the covenant idea.

II. The Explanation in Hebrews 9.

- A. Probably because he gives a more complete explanation of why Christ's way is superior to Moses' way, the Hebrews writer more completely explains the idea of the new covenant.
- B. It's part of a larger discussion of Jesus' role as the perfect priest and mediator (three of the six NT uses of "mediator" [μεσίτης, *mesitēs*] are in Hebrews 8:6; 9:15; 12:24).
 1. In fulfillment of Psalm 110:4, Jesus is an "eternal priest" [without beginning or end—see Hebrews 7:3] like Melchizedek, shown to be superior to the priesthood of Aaron (7:1-19).
 2. That means that Jesus is "the guarantor of a better covenant" than existed with the old priesthood (7:20-8:5; cf. esp 7:22).
 3. A new covenant had been predicted by Jeremiah (8:6-13).
 4. As the better priest, with access into the permanent, eternal realm, Jesus is capable of securing the forgiveness we need (9:1-14, esp. 11-14).
- C. But what guarantees his priestly work and the covenant agreement it secures (9:15-24)?
 1. To get at this, we must begin at the end of our text, where, in v 20, the writer cites Exodus 24:8 to explain the sacrifice that put the Sinai covenant into effect (see vv 18-24).
 2. That the writer intends to connect Jesus' sacrifice with the covenant sacrifice of Exodus 24:8 is evident from the connecting word ὅθεν (*hothen*) in v 18 ("therefore," ESV).
 3. He explains the significance of this connection in vv 15-17.

- a) His sacrifice makes it possible for him to offer forgiveness as the new covenant mediator (9:15).
- b) That was only to be expected because covenants like the one at Sinai (with which the new covenant is being compared) never took effect without a ratification sacrifice brought forward and offered by the ruler who was extending the offer of a covenant,³ a point the writer makes clear in 9:16-17 (NASB).⁴

III. The Application from Hebrews 10.

- A. As is evident from 10:19 onward, the writer's interest in this crucial doctrine of Jesus' priesthood and its attendant sacrifice and covenant is not merely theoretical.
 - 1. Completing his exposition in 10:1-14, he emphasizes the significance of the sacrifice Jesus offered (by which the new covenant was ratified).
 - 2. He especially focuses on two vitally important things.
 - a) Its internalization into its participants' hearts and minds making it possible for its tenets to flow naturally into life (vv 15-16).
 - b) The fact that ultimate forgiveness is accomplished (vv 17-18).
- B. In a general way, 10:19-25 show what living in the new covenant relationship means, revolving around the purpose of continuing to follow the way of Jesus.
 - 1. We have a basis for trust (19-21).
 - a) Continuing with the issue of forgiveness (see v 18), the writer emphasizes that we have and will continue to have the one thing we need most (19-20).
 - b) The reference to Jesus as priest in v 21 reminds us that this was paid for by the mediator himself, and can be counted on when other things fail.
 - 2. We have a purpose for living.
 - a) Verse 22 points to the life of God, the life the writer says twice (2:10-11; 12:10, 14) that we are to share; we aren't called to just "be good," but to "draw near to God."
 - b) Verse 23 reminds us that we have a mission that goes beyond ourselves (as seen in the word "confession" [ὁμολογία, *homologia*]), no matter what challenges and obstacles we face; be faithful and God will sustain us.

³ The point is powerful. The animal sacrificed stood for the ratifying party who, in offering the sacrifice, was "invok[ing] a curse upon himself in which he swore commitment to comply with the terms of the covenant. . . . The bloody dismemberment of representative animals signified the violent death of the ratifying party if he proved faithless to his oath (e.g., Gen 15:9-21; Exod 24:3-8; Ps 50:5; Jer 34:17-20)" (William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, Word Biblical Commentary 47B, 242).

In Hebrews, the point is not about an animal, but that the Son was the representative sacrifice guaranteeing the covenant. In light of the writer's repeated use of the word "better," we can express his point as follows: if animals had guaranteed loyalty before, how much more would the Son's sacrifice guarantee loyalty now?

⁴ The reference to the NASB is important here, for it consistently translates διαθήκη (*diathēkē*) with the word "covenant" in vv 16-17 rather than "will." The latter reflects Hellenistic usage, and is one possible meaning for the word. But, the many translations notwithstanding, "covenant" is the better translation in Hebrews 9:16-17. (1) It fits the Jewish emphasis in the writing. (2) It fits the point in chapter 9; though some contend that the word "inheritance" (v 15) justifies taking διαθήκη in vv 16, 17 as "will" or "testament," it is better explained in light of the citation of Exodus 24:8 in v 20. (3) Translating "covenant" in 16-17 also avoids the need to explain why the writer would use one meaning for the word in v 15, change the meaning in vv 16, 17, and then return to the first meaning in verses 18 (where the word is implied) and 20. For a more extended defense of this view, see Lane, pp. 241ff.

The use of φέρω (*pherō*) in v 16 lends support to this position. Translated "established" (ESV) or "made" (NASB), the word means "to bring forward" (see Lane's translation) and was used in the LXX to refer to the act of bringing forward the animal to be sacrificed. This fits with the LXX echo of Exodus 24:8 in v 20. Again, see Lane for a more complete defense of this idea.

3. A community for involvement.
 - a) Verses 24-25 remind us that “individualized” salvation/Christianity is an oxymoron; covenant is always about community.
 - b) These verses focus on support for the community (and thus imply that we should never see the community mainly in terms of being “there for us”; having our needs met is a by-product).
 - (1) The object of the verb “consider” is “one another” (see ASV).
 - (2) “Love and good works” are what we are to be encouraging in one another; they are the things of God, evidence of the way of God.
 - c) Our covenant identity implies involvement with that community (v 25).

Conclusion

1. Christ is about covenant; to re-phrase Ferguson’s point, the Christian religion is covenant religion. The word may not be used often, but the way it is used shows this clearly.
2. His sacrifice guarantees that covenant and all that goes with it. Are you trusting him confidently, living for him purposefully, contributing to his covenant community fully?

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