

Sermon 41, What's New About the New Covenant?, Hebrews 8:5

Proposition: The old covenant is an earthly copy of the ongoing heavenly reality of the new covenant.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the question of the relationship between the two testaments in our Bible is one of the most vexed questions in theology. Many is the theologian who has either attempted to give a definitive answer to this question (and found his efforts defeated and ill-received) or, alternatively, has shied away from the question and pretended that it is not really necessary to answer it. We can just muddle through with an intuitive sense of what applies to us from each testament, and what doesn't.

With fear and trembling, I enter this fray. If you read our church's doctrinal standards, you will see that it describes one covenant of grace administered in two different ways — the Levitical way and the New Covenant way. I believe that that is a correct way of understanding the relationship between the covenants. But it leaves something to be desired, because it imports that non-Biblical category of "administration" into the heart of our understanding of how Scripture is put together. So I am going to propose a different way of understanding the relationship between the old and new covenant today, a way that preserves the Biblical language of two different covenants and is based on the biblical categories of original and copy. In brief, my proposal is this: the Hebrew writer is teaching that the New Covenant is the original, heavenly reality through which God saves us, and that the Old Covenant is that heavenly reality copied down into an earthly set of institutions we call the Levitical system. In other words, the category "copy" should be the master category with which we understand the old covenant; in turn, that implies that the New Covenant is the original, the thing which the old covenant copied. That means, further, that the new covenant actually existed before the old covenant, and the old covenant took the heavenly reality of the New and copied it into an earthly form. Let's look at this in more detail this morning. I trust you will see that there are some solid applications to us from these truths.

I. How the Two Covenants Differ

First of all, as an introduction to the topic of how the covenants differ and what is new about the new covenant, let's look at the biblical contrasts between the covenants. There are five of them, three of which appear right here in our Hebrews passage.

A. Old vs. New, v. 13

This contrast is especially apparent at the end of our text, where the writer says that by speaking of a New covenant, Jeremiah makes the first one Old and indicates that it is borderline obsolescent. Paul also uses this contrast in 2 Cor 3. This is a chronological way of speaking. One way is old, the other new. Simple.

B. First vs. Second, v. 7

The classic one, and the one that you probably think of first, is this chronological contrast between first and second. The "first" is the Mosaic covenant that established the Levitical system; the "second" is the New Covenant. Now, the obvious takeaway from these names is that God established the Mosaic covenant first in time, and then established the New Covenant later, probably at the death of Christ. That is partially correct. But the key idea here is simply that from

1446 B.C. to 30 A.D., God dealt with His people through the Mosaic Covenant, and from 70 A.D. onward He dealt with them through the New Covenant.

C. Copy vs. Original, v. 5

A third contrast drawn in our passage is between a copy and some unnamed point of contrast. We can call this the original, the word we use to describe a document that has been copied or a building that has been copied. Just as the leaning tower of Pisa is original and the leaning tower of Niles is not, so the heavenly worship is original and the earthly tabernacle with Levitical priests is not.

Now, I mentioned mechanical reproduction or copying a few minutes ago. We think of copying as being extremely accurate. Some of you are old enough to remember the days when some copy machines were pretty bad at reproducing photographs. You would copy something with a photo, and the photo on the copy would look pretty bad, indeed, sometimes almost unrecognizable.

The next metaphor leads me to think that when Scripture calls the old covenant a copy, it is not speaking of the kind of mechanically-made, extremely accurate copy that we have today. It's not talking about a copy that is indistinguishable from the original in every respect except that it is a copy rather than the original. When it says "copy," you should think more of hand reproduction, of what would happen if you took your easel and paints and set out to copy by hand one of Rubens' giant canvases. Which was original and which was copy would be painfully obvious as soon as anyone took the trouble to look. I say this because of the relationship between a body and the shadow it casts.

D. Shadow vs. Reality, v. 5

The old covenant is also described in Scripture as a shadow. Again, the Bible does not present the corresponding term. We could use "body," "substance," or "reality" to describe the thing which casts the shadow. A shadow, of course, is the dark area created when the light is blocked by some physical form. The old covenant is related to the true heavenly worship that Jesus is conducting now in the same way that a shadow is related to a three-dimensional object. The physical substance blocks the light and creates a two-dimensional outline. You can see something about what is casting the shadow by looking at the shadow, but you can't see much.

E. Letter vs. Spirit, 2 Cor. 3

A fifth contrast may be the most illuminating of all. This is the contrast between the letter and the Spirit that Paul draws in 2 Cor. 3. We use this contrast all the time, right down to this day, because it is so helpful for understanding how written laws and codes can sometimes betray the things they're trying to protect. The letter of the law can be contrary to the spirit of the law.

Well, there is a very great deal to say on this chapter in general and the letter-Spirit contrast in particular. I will only draw your attention to a couple of things. First of all, Paul uses the exact contrast that appears in Jer 31 and is quoted again here in Heb 8 — the contrast between the law written on stone and the law written on the heart. Brothers and sisters, this image is absolutely key for understanding the difference between the two covenants. The old covenant writes the law on stone; the new covenant writes the law on the fleshy tablet of the

heart. Thus, Paul calls the Corinthians his letter of commendation. Their very hearts, on which was written the law of God, showed that Paul was a genuine apostle.

I've been speaking to you about the category of "copy." The heavenly reality is the original, and it was copied down into material objects and institutions in the old covenant. In the new covenant, it is present instead in the heart of the believer by the work of the Holy Spirit.

That leads to a second observation: the contrast of letter vs. Spirit is this same contrast between material objects and institutions, on the one side, and human persons on the other. The Spirit is not present in the stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments were graven. He is not there. He is the finger of God who made the markings on the stone, but He does not indwell or empower that stone in any way. It is simply letters, and it brings condemnation. But when the Spirit writes the words of the law on the human heart, He stays. He is still there. The presence of the Spirit is the key thing. Where He is, liberty is. Where only the letter is, bondage is. "But now we have been released from the law, for we died to it and are no longer captive to its power. Now we can serve God, not in the old way of obeying the letter of the law, but in the new way of living in the Spirit" (Rom 7:6 NLT).

The difference between letter and spirit is the difference between life and death. The letter is important, and we know that without the written Bible the church would die. But the Spirit is equally important, and without His illumination of the word and His empowering of the believer, the letter would have no effect. At best, it can bring only bondage and death, as Paul testifies so eloquently.

Well, of these things we cannot now speak in detail. Let me just say that I lined up these five categories this way deliberately. On the one side is the covenant which is old, first, copy, shadow, and letter. On the other is the covenant which is new, second, original, reality, and Spirit.

When you put it like that, it becomes obvious: the Hebrews had no business abandoning the reality of the Spirit to go back to the old way of the letter.

II. When the Two Covenants Were Established

Well, let's look at another aspect of these two covenants as we continue our quest to discover exactly what's new about the new covenant. That aspect is the time of their establishment.

A. First Covenant at the Exodus, v. 9

The first covenant is simple. In the Jer 31 passage God says that He established the first covenant with Israel at the Exodus. That is clearly documented in Ex 19-24. The last of those chapters tells how God established the covenant with the sprinkling of the blood. All of this took place within a few months after the departure from Egypt.

B. Second Covenant

But when was the second covenant made? I think this question is incredibly important. We have already seen indications that it was the original from which the first covenant was copied. But let's look at some other time indications in the text.

1. "Now," Heb. 8:6, i.e., "These last days," Heb. 1:2

If we simply look right here, we see that Jesus has obtained a more excellent ministry as mediator of the new covenant "now," which is "these last days" according to ch. 1. Now, if you

just went around asking the Christian in the street “Quick! When did God establish the New Covenant?” most of them would probably say “At the death and resurrection of Jesus? I guess?” And that is certainly what this text seems to imply.

2. At the Death of Christ, Heb. 9:15-17

And indeed, if you turn to the next chapter the writer unambiguously says that when you consider the new covenant as a last will and testament, such a thing takes effect only on the death of the testator. Thus, clearly, he regards the new covenant as having been established at the death of Jesus.

3. At God’s Oath Making Jesus a Priest, Heb. 7:22

However, that is not the only evidence in the text. We must also go back to ch. 7, which says that God’s oath to make Jesus a Melchizedekian priest also makes Him surety of a better covenant. It seems, then, that we are looking at two different establishments of the covenant. There is one somewhere in eternity past, whenever God swore this oath to Jesus to make Him a priest. That is the moment when the new covenant began. But its full legal establishment as the only way in which God would deal with His people did not take place until the death of Christ — that is, until He had finished the priestly work to which He had been appointed by the New Covenant.

III. Can the Two Covenants Coexist? We Distinguish

Bear with me; about this we have much to say, and hard to explain. But I want to build for you the case that the new covenant preexisted the old, not in the sense of being fully established, but in the sense of being inaugurated by the Father’s oath to the Son about priesthood. The inaugurated new covenant was copied down into physical forms in the old covenant, and then the two covenants existed simultaneously until the death of Christ fully established the new covenant by the Spirit and so abolished the physical copy (the old covenant).

A. The New Must Displace the Old, v. 13

Once established, the new covenant must displace the old. By simply announcing a new covenant, God has rendered the old basically obsolete.

B. The Old Cannot Displace the New (the Promise), Gal. 3:17, Heb. 11:39

But on the other hand, the old cannot displace the new. God’s promise to Abraham, and (we could add) before that to Adam, could not be rendered obsolete by His covenant with Moses. The law does not overcome the promise. Why do I say that the inaugurated new covenant and the promise are one and the same? Because the Hebrew writer refers to receiving the promise in the same way that Paul refers to God’s word to Abraham as “the promise.” The OT saints were given the promise verbally, but they did not receive its fulfillment. That had to wait for the death of Christ. In other words, the OT saints received the promise of the inaugurated new covenant, which already existed in their day. But the new covenant was not fully established until the death of the testator.

They were told what they would be receiving in Jesus’ last will and testament. But of course they didn’t get it until after His death.

C. Therefore, the Old and New Were Once Simultaneous

In short, brothers and sisters, the Hebrew writer and Paul are telling us that the old and new covenants were simultaneous. The old covenant coexisted for centuries with the inaugurated new covenant. Jesus had already received God's oath that He would be a Melchizedekian priest while the Levitical priests hacked away at sacrifices and kept the tabernacle and temple operating. The two covenants overlapped in time. They had to — for, as the Hebrew writer keeps pointing out, the very fact that God describes His Son as a priest after Melchizedek's order while the Levitical system is still functioning indicates that Jesus' priesthood and Levi's overlapped.

D. Since Jesus' Death, the Simultaneity Has Ended

However, the death of Jesus fully established the new covenant. And the two ways in their fullness cannot coexist. That is the overall point of the book of Hebrews. Before Jesus' death, you could participate in the Levitical system to find salvation through the priesthood of Jesus. But now that He has died and fully established the new covenant, you cannot get any benefits from His death through the Levitical priesthood.

E. Now the New Covenant Lives and the Old Covenant Has Vanished

The new covenant lives, but the old covenant was ready to vanish away in the Hebrew writer's day and did vanish away shortly afterwards, when the Roman legions destroyed the temple and obliterated all trace of the Levitical institutions.

IV. Conclusion

So let me spell out clearly what we have found in our investigations this morning.

A. The Old Covenant Is a Copy of the New Covenant

First of all, the old covenant is a copy of the new. The best way to understand the old covenant is through this category of "copy."

B. God Copied the New Covenant into Earthly Forms at Sinai

Put simply, God copied the new covenant into earthly forms at Sinai. Thus, there really are two covenants — the original and the copy. The new covenant is the original, and the Sinai covenant is the copy. It was always intended to be a temporary copy.

C. The New Covenant Existed Since God's Oath to David's Lord

The new covenant has existed at least since God's oath to David's Lord. But really, the promise of salvation through the woman's seed that is at the heart of the new covenant can be traced all the way back to Eden and the LORD's promise in Gen 3:15 that the woman's seed would crush the serpent's head. That is the beginning of the new covenant; that is the promise of salvation through Jesus, expressed and administered in the form of a covenant. But that new covenant was not yet fully established, in its true form as original, reality, and Spirit. That establishment had to wait for the death of Christ.

D. Look at the Metaphors: All Four Can Coexist

Notice the metaphors. The Hebrews were thinking that all of these could coexist. You can have the first and second, the old and new, the copy and original, the shadow and reality, the letter and spirit, at the same time. And during the days of the Levitical system, Israel did!

1. **First with Second, v. 7**
2. **Copy with Original, v. 5**
3. **Shadow with Reality, v. 5**
4. **Letter with Spirit, 2 Cor. 3**

E. But the Earthly Copy Has Been Destroyed; Only the Heavenly Reality Remains

But the Hebrew writer's point, even before the physical destruction of the old covenant as an earthly copy, is that now that the new covenant has been fully established through the death of Christ, there is no more use in the old, first, copy, shadow, and letter. They no longer lead to Christ, but away from Him.

V. Application

A. The OT Accounts of the Copy, Letter, and Shadow Are Teaching Aids

Is there really no use at all? Well, let me put it this way: The OT accounts of the copy, letter, and shadow are teaching aids. The reason so much of the Bible is taken up with describing the copy is because the copy really does accurately show us much about the heavenly, spiritual reality of our Savior and His Salvation. These accounts are teaching aids. Though literally enacting them would now lead us away from Christ, they are nonetheless faithful earthly, physical, institutional copies of what is going on in heaven. We can't see the heavenly worship and salvation; we can't see Jesus sitting at the Father's right hand. But we can easily picture the tabernacle, temple, Levites, and rituals in which Israel engaged. These things were written for our learning so that we could know more about the heavenly reality which we now enjoy.

B. The "New" Covenant Is the Original, Spiritual Reality

But at the same time, don't think for a single second that the new covenant is truly new in the sense that it did not exist before the death of Christ. It most certainly did exist, ever since God promised the seed of the woman and promised that David's son would be David's Lord and God's true priest. So — looking at you, dispensationalists — don't think that the old covenant is the original and the substance and the Spirit. It isn't. It's not the reality; it's the copy. All kinds of theological and even moral errors flow from thinking that the old covenant sets the terms for God's engagement with the human race. That's not true. It was a physicalized, institutionalized, material-world version of the heavenly reality that has been the true reality and the actual point all along. So don't read promises of a physical land and say "That's the real point!" No, the real point is heaven. Heaven copied into earthly terms looks like land. Christ copied into earthly terms looks like Aaron. Heaven, the dwelling place of God, looks in earthly terms like a small portable tent shrine. The moral-spiritual law of God that reaches the heart and commands the mind looks in earthly terms like static letters engraved on obsidian. The prophetic ministry of Jesus, who reveals the Father, looks in earthly terms like Baruch taking dictation from Jeremiah. And the kingly ministry of Jesus looks like David sitting in a palace in Jerusalem and ruling a few thousand square miles.

C. Don't Go Looking for an Earthly Copy of God's Promises

In other words, brothers and sisters, don't go looking for an earthly copy of God's promises. He only made one earthly copy, and it was destroyed by the ruthless hands of Titus and Vespasian a decade or so after this book was penned. He never said He would make another earthly copy. Or, rather, all of the eschatological stuff in the OT is to be understood as spoken to those living in the earthly copy of the heavenly reality. The promises are phrased in earthly terms, but they have a spiritual meaning that refers to heaven just as the tabernacle had a spiritual meaning that referred to heaven. When Ezekiel and Hosea say that David will return and rule God's people, we don't take that "literally." We know that's a reference to Jesus. And in the same way, when they say that Israel will possess the land, they are saying that all God's people of all ethnicities will possess heaven.

Don't look for an earthly copy. The earthly copy was destroyed.

D. You Are Among Heavenly Realities, Heb. 12:18-24

You are among heavenly realities and that's where you belong. You have come to Zion — clearly not the physical Zion, for the writer tells us immediately that we are in the heavenly Jerusalem. The New covenant is here, and it brings the heavenly reality to us. Praise God! Because you are in the new covenant heavenly reality, listen to the voice of Christ. What's new about the new covenant? It is the original, the Spirit, the body, for it is how we receive Jesus Christ, the Son of God, King of Kings, and Mediator of the New Covenant. Amen.