

NEW COVENANT I 2 CORINTHIANS 3:6 I 24 & 27 JANUARY 2019

When we enter the New Testament, we find the concept of covenant being retooled based on a re-centering of covenant. The shift is from the *old covenant* known by the description of covenant between God and man, centered in law and understood by the letter, placing emphasis on the human side of the relationship, one of obedience. The radical shift that takes place when the *new covenant* stems from God himself, his will and desire. This re-centering is clearly evident in how Jeremiah contrasts the old and the new in stating the five “I will” statements of God in 31:32 ff. Note the following summary:

Diatheke (covenant) is from first to last the “disposition” [meaning – the nature, root character of someone] of God, the mighty declaration of the sovereign will of God in history, by which He orders the relation between himself and men according to His own saving purpose, and which carries with it the authoritative divine ordering, the one order of things which is in accordance with it. TDNT, V. II, page 134

In 2 Corinthians 3:6 ff., Paul draws from the Jeremiah text in writing, “*You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all. And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts... we are ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.*” 2 Cor 3:2-6.

Paul also follows the traditional biblical understanding in 2 C 3:6, where the new covenant, whose mark is the Spirit, in contrast to an old which is characterized by the written letter, reminds us of Jer 31:31 ff., of which Paul now sees the fulfilment (in this case positively). His ministry relates to the divine order of salvation, to the Gospel, and to the ordering of the relation between God and man as thus determined, i.e., to the Christian religion, not to the Law and the Jewish religion... Judaism which enslaves on the one side and Christianity which brings the liberty of the sons of God on the other (Gal 5:1; 4:6 f.; Ro 8:15; 2 Cor 3:17). In the hands of Paul the OT **diatheke** [covenant] concept, understood even more sharply and consciously in terms of the sole operation of God and of absolute validity for the recipients, is used as a weapon in the battle for the superiority of Christianity over Judaism, and also as a foundation for the new theology of history. There are two covenants, but there is only one divine will which governs salvation history and which manifests itself definitively in Christ who is both the **telos nomou** [the end of the law] (Ro 10:4) and the fulfilment of every promise (2 Cor 1:20). TDNT, V. II page 130-131

The letter of the Hebrews is the bridge between the *old* and the *new*, so-to-speak. **Diatheke** is used 33 times in the NT, 17 of which are in Hebrews. The prominent theme of the author takes the major entities of God’s relationship with Israel, the law, the sacrificial system, and fuses them into the person and work of Jesus Christ. The author of the letter to the Hebrews is in sync with Paul in writing:

Diatheke is everywhere used in Hebrews [except possible 9:16 f.] in the sense of a “disposition” of God, which reveals to men His will, and especially His saving will, or it is the order thereby established as a divine institution. The source of this theology of the new covenant is—more plainly than in any other Jewish or early Christian writing—Jeremiah 31:31-34... The central thought is that of the new **diatheke** (9:15; 12:24). As the second (8:7), this is better than the first (7:22). It rests on better promises (8:6). It is more sure (8:7). It is eternal (13:20). It thus necessarily (8:7) replaces the old, which is now antiquated and ripe for destruction (8:13; 9:1, 15, 18)... God gave the first at Sinai (9:20; Ex 24:6 ff.). It was consecrated by Moses with a solemn blood ritual (9:18-22). The security for the second with its gifts of salvation (9:15) is the person of Jesus (7:22; 8:6; 9:15; 12:24). His death is its dedication (9:15, 18), accomplishing redemption for the sins committed under the first covenant (9:15)... The new covenant as the locus of the heavenly high-priesthood of Christ, who sacrifices Himself, is the true fulfilment of the first, whose earthbound priesthood and sacrifices remained imperfect (8:5). TNTT, V II pages 131-132

When we turn to the Gospels in relation to the new covenant, we are reminded of Christ's words that he came in obedience to his Father; he came to serve and not be served; he came as the suffering servant who was and is to be the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. In line with this we read, “The **diatheke** which He [Christ] has in view is not His covenant—neither in Paul nor Mark is there any reference to His, Christ's, covenant. As in the OT and Judaism, it is the disposition or institution of God. The task of Jesus as He sees it is to execute the new decree which God has published to settle the relation between Himself and man. It is to put into effect the eschatological saving will of God. His bloody death represented by the eucharistic cup, gives life to the new divine order. The new covenant is the correlative of the Kingdom of God.” TDNT, V. II page 133-134.

Is it our “task” to “execute the new decree which God has published;” and to “put into effect the saving will of God”? It is in fact our responsibility to “remember” the shed blood and broken body of our Lord Jesus as we partake of the wine and bread. In the TDNT it is noted, “The most important Synoptic passage [as it relates to covenant] is the saying of Jesus in relation to the cup at the institution of the Lord's Supper, Mk 14:24; Mat 26:28; cf. 1 Cor 11:25.

These thoughts help me reorient my focus away from myself toward Him in thankfulness, gratitude, surrender and worship.