

Scripture: Hebrews 8:3-13; 9:11-15

Subject: *Jesus is enthroned in heaven as the eternal High Priest...*

Complement: *... mediating the superior New Covenant, which abrogates the Old.*

Big Idea: Jesus Christ is the Mediator and Guarantor of the New Covenant, no longer laws carved in stone, but Love written in His blood upon our hearts.

Introduction

This past Tuesday the Toronto Maple Leafs announced that they had signed veteran defenceman Dion Phaneuf to a seven-year contract extension worth \$49 million US that begins next season. So, he agrees to play hockey for the club, and they agree to pay him an obscene amount of money. The contract is simply one for “services rendered” and can be re-negotiated, or even cancelled under certain conditions. We live in a “contract” world, and yet we need to understand what a covenant is, for that’s how Christ described our new relationship to God:

In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.” *1 Corinthians 11:25*

Theologian O. Palmer Robertson suggests that defining “covenant” is a little like defining the term “mother.” You could define mother as the person who brought you into the world, but that scarcely captures the whole meaning! So, how can we define “covenant”?

A covenant defines the relationship between persons, focusing on the particular obligations which each party agrees to undertake. Further, a covenant is “a commitment to responsibility and action.” A key word in Scripture to describe that commitment is “faithfulness,” acted out in a context of abiding friendship.¹

At its most basic level, a covenant is *that which binds people together*. It is **always about relationship**, either from person-to-person, or God-to-people. When God established the OT covenants, He was the author, mediator and guarantor of the agreement, and the specific terms of the covenant spelled out what God would do for His people. In the New Covenant, we see that *Jesus Christ is the Mediator and Guarantor of the New Covenant, no longer laws carved in stone, but Love written in His blood upon our hearts.*

I. The concept of covenant is dynamic and varied

In ancient biblical times, many cultures utilized the concept of “covenant” to define a wide range of inter-personal and social relationships. Simply put:

Covenant is thus an interpersonal framework of trust, responsibilities, and benefits, with broad application to almost every human relationship from personal friendship to international trade agreements.²

But one thing **remains** constant: a covenant is always about relationship, either from person-to-person, or God-to-people. Indeed, covenants are typically enacted between parties to create relationships that did not previously exist³.

1 Elwell, W. A., & Beitzel, B. J. (1988). *Baker encyclopedia of the Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House.

2 Elwell, W. A., & Beitzel, B. J. (1988). *Baker encyclopedia of the Bible*. (531). Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House.

3 Freedman, D. N. (1996, c1992). *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (1:1180). New York: Doubleday.

Between one nation and another, a covenant was a treaty (Genesis 31:44-45), such as that between **Laban** and **Jacob**. Among individuals a covenant expressed a pledge of friendship (1 Sam 18:3; 20:8), such as **Jonathan** made with **David**. A covenant could also serve as a business contract between two people, such as when **Jeremiah** was told by the Lord to purchase a field from his cousin **Hanamel** (Jer. 32:6-15). When a ruler and his subjects formed a covenant, it served as a national constitution and spelled out the responsibilities of the monarch and people alike, such as that between **King David** and his subjects, enacted at **Hebron** in 2 Samuel 5:3. And so God chose the familiar concept of covenant to define the relationship He established with His people. But when God established His covenant with His people, he did something unique with Israel. One scholar put it this way:

“Covenant expresses a novel element of the religion of ancient Israel: the people are bound in relationship to the one God, Yahweh, who makes an exclusive claim upon their loyalty in worship and social life. They express God’s gracious commitment and faithfulness and thus establish a continuing relationship.” **No other religion could claim a relationship with a god based on a covenant.**

*Taken from **Covenant** by Derek Melanson*

That still holds.

II. The Biblical expressions of covenant

The biblical expressions of covenant are very one-sided in the best sense. If it were a contract — where one party performs some action in return for compensation — what could we possibly do for God? God’s covenant is of Him from first to last, *independent of human reaction or performance, and with no guarantee of human response*. In each of the four major biblical covenants — **Abrahamic**, **Noahic**, **Davidic** and **New** — we see God as the Author, Mediator, and Guarantor of the promises He makes to His chosen people. All of the covenants show God’s unconditional commitment to His people. God’s covenants *indissolubly* binds and commits Him to His people and vice-versa.

The modern-day business contract doesn’t even come close to expressing God’s purposes:

In a contract, the underlying principle is individualistic. You make a contract with someone else so that your life will benefit. In other words, you form a contract out of such questions like: how will this benefit me? How will this improve my life? How can I get out of this if I need to? Contracts have exit clauses. A contract can be broken. The kind of relationship envisioned in a contract is completely utilitarian. It’s based on my needs, and the other person is a means to an end. A covenant is different. A covenant creates a new state of relationship. It’s not self-centered; it’s other-centered.

*Taken from **Covenant** by Derek Melanson*

Nowadays, in business as well as in personal relationships, we no longer feel the moral obligation to fulfil our promises or obligations. If we cannot gain a clear advantage, then we feel justified in not fulfilling what we promised to do. **But we worship a covenant God**, not a contract God! Once God has given His word, He is bound to keep it. He is incapable of going back on His word. This is one of the very reasons we have trouble with the concept of covenant: We cannot conceive of relationships built upon little more than “promises **reliably made and honora-**

bly kept" (ABD (1:1179). Covenants are rooted in God's character! **The promises that God makes are not dependent on human reaction to them;** God's gracious offer of love does not depend on our obedience. Listen how God describes His covenant with Abraham:

⁶ "... 'I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. ⁷ I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the LORD your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. ⁸ And I will bring you to the land I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. I will give it to you as a possession. I am the LORD.'" *Exodus 6:6-8 (NIV)*

Whenever God enters into covenant, He becomes the Author, Mediator, and Guarantor of the promises which He makes to His chosen people. God's covenants are expressions of what He alone will do.

III. The Old Testament and the New Testament expressions of Covenant

The **Mosaic** covenant — the **Law** — is what we refer to when we talk of the Old Testament, or *Old Covenant*. This covenant described how God would react to His chosen people, *based on their response to His laws*. This Old Covenant grabs our attention, because it contains **blessings** for the obedient, **curses** for those who choose ignore God's will:

²⁶ See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse— ²⁷ the blessing if you obey the commands of the LORD your God that I am giving you today; ²⁸ the curse if you disobey the commands of the LORD your God and turn from the way that I command you today by following other gods, which you have not known. *Deuteronomy 11:26-28 (NIV)*

Like every covenant God makes, He promises to fulfil the conditions exactly both by caring for His people when they listen to Him, and also by driving them into exile when their sin invokes the punishment He promised. This He must do, for God is bound by His word and nature to fulfil every term of the covenant, but the *choice* to either obey or disobey remains ours.

We also need to understand that this Old covenant was *never meant to be permanent*. In fact, God announced that there would come a day when a New covenant would replace the Law He had given on Sinai:

"The time is coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. "It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. *Jeremiah 31:31-32 NIV*

The reason was simple: the Law was **unable to produce righteousness** — a right standing before God — because our response to God's covenant will always fall short because of sin. Like our modern laws, it can always point out where we have failed, but is powerless to help us fulfil it. Once again, God declares what He will do in this New covenant:

"This is the covenant I will make... declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' because they will all know me, from the

least of them to the greatest," declares the LORD. "For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." *v.v. 31:33-34*

Our regular celebration of The Lord's Table remind us that it is Jesus Christ who initiates, mediates and perfectly fulfills God's New Covenant. This new relationship with God was initiated upon Calvary, confirmed at the Empty Tomb, and sealed upon the Day of Pentecost. Jesus gave His disciples their first clue at the Last Supper:

This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.

Mat 26:28 NIV

And just as the most solemn of OT covenants were *confirmed by an oath* and sealed by a **blood sacrifice**, so was the New Covenant. Only this time, the Priest and the sacrifice were one, and the blood that sealed the New Covenant was his own! The author of Hebrews writes:

¹¹ When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation. ¹² He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all **by his own blood**, having obtained eternal redemption. *Hebrews 9:11-12*

God promised on oath that forgiveness is assured by Jesus' blood, and **God cannot go back on His Word**. Indeed, the Greek word for covenant was used in the sense of a "will," as in "last will and testament." Once a will is written and witnessed, it cannot be annulled or changed by another. Of course, a will only comes into effect *after the person making it dies*. And so this New Covenant is Jesus' last will and testament, which can never be annulled, changed or broken. As Hebrews says:

For this reason Christ is **the mediator of a new covenant**, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance – now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant. In the case of a will, *it is necessary to prove the death of the one who made it*, because a will is in force only when somebody has died; it never takes effect while the one who made it is living. *Hebrews 9:15-17 NIV*

The New Covenant, Christ's will, now **demand a response on our part**. And as we consider Jesus' *last will and testament*, there is only one possible response to the promises that God makes to us: FAITH. There is no other condition to fulfil, and no other way to appropriate the blessings of what God has promised us other than *our active believing in Him*.

Faith is the *only* way to enter into the New Covenant. But true faith always expresses itself in action. Those Israelites who heard and believed God's covenant promises to **Abraham** were circumcised. Those who loved God in the age of law followed the law's commands. Paul talks about how Believers gain access to God's gracious covenant:

Therefore, since we have been *justified through* faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, **through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand**. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. *Romans 5:1-2 NIV*

Remember, *Jesus Christ is the Mediator and Guarantor of the New Covenant, no longer laws carved in stone, but Love written in His blood upon our hearts.*

Conclusion

The fact is, whether or not we accept or reject Christ's offer of salvation, His **covenant promises** stand. God will accomplish His purposes *without our permission or participation*, for He alone is Sovereign. But as disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ who stand under this New Covenant, I believe that **we are called to respond** to what He offers us. Therefore, in a few moments, we will renew our Church Covenant, and the obligations and responsibilities we have accepted as members of this body.

Our covenant here at Stanley Park has as its foundation the Covenant of faith that Christ has established with us through His death and resurrection, and is an explicit acknowledgement of our relationship to one another through our consanguinity to Christ. Remember, covenant is always about relationship. You cannot on the one hand say that you are a part of the body of Christ, and at the same time refuse to commit to covenant with a local body of believers. That position holds no water.

One final word of caution: a covenant is a *bond of blood* that will be irrevocable on your part. *Do not say these words unless you have every intention of keeping them.* Better to remain silent than speak words you have no intention of keeping. But if you speak these words, you are acknowledging that these are "promises **reliably made**" and are to be **honorably kept.**"

If you have accepted Jesus Christ as your Forgiver and Leader, if you are willing to serve Him **in this church fellowship**, if you are willing to enter fully into fellowship here, then I urge you to participate in this ceremony of renewal. However you respond, remember this: *Jesus Christ is the Mediator and Guarantor of the New Covenant, no longer laws carved in stone, but Love written in His blood upon our hearts.*