

Covenant Christianity's Best Kept Secret?

When Jesus said "This cup is the new covenant in my blood," (1 Corinthians 11:25) to what was he referring? What is a covenant? What does it have to do with blood?

The *Catholic Encyclopedia* ¹ defines covenant as "A solemn promise, fortified by an oath, concerning future action." McKenzie's *Dictionary of the Bible* ² says: "In early Hebrew society written documents were employed little or not at all. In their place the spoken word was invested with ritual solemnity which gave it a kind of concrete reality. The spoken word thus uttered could not be annulled or retracted . . ." *Easton's Bible Dictionary* ³ says: "A contract or agreement between two parties." So far, we have a covenant being a solemn promise and/or a contract, nothing very exciting here.

Harper's Bible Dictionary ⁴ has an even drier definition: "A formal agreement or treaty between two parties with each assuming some obligation." Not the type of relationship one would envision having with a loving God. In fact, the cartoon *Calvin & Hobbes* ⁵ put it rather succinctly:

Calvin: "Here, Hobbes. I've drawn up a friendship contract for you to sign."
Hobbes: "A contract?"

Calvin: "Right. It codifies the terms of our friendship. You can renegotiate in 20 years."

Hobbes: "People are friends because they WANT to be, not because they HAVE to be!"

Calvin: "That's what this fixes."

Hobbes: "If your friends are contractual, you don't have any."

Looking in the *Dictionary of the Liturgy* ⁶ we find that "(t)he covenant is at the heart of God's loving design from all eternity: although He has no need of human beings, He freely desires to bind Himself to a people with the very intimacy of a marriage bond."

Bingo (now there's a good Catholic word)! A totally different definition! One which stresses God's love for His people and relates it to something that we should all be able to understand, marriage; a family bond that is to last a lifetime.

When we pick up the Bible and open it to the index, we find that Holy Scripture is divided into two parts; the Old Covenant (or Testament) and the New Covenant. Looking in the first part of Genesis, the first book of the Old Covenant, we find God

creating a family and providing for its necessities; something a loving father would do. Looking in the last part of Revelation, the last book in the New Covenant, we find that everyone is participating in the wedding feast of the Lamb; a new family is being created. From this very brief glimpse, we can deduce that the Bible is about marriage and the making and binding of families, especially the family of God .

As one reads through the covenants recorded in Holy Scripture and in historical texts we begin to learn that a covenant can be formed between equal or unequal parties such as between two kings, a husband and a wife, a king and his subjects, or between God and His people.

One interesting thing that does seem to be unique about a covenant is that money and/or goods do not necessarily exchange hands. Instead, it seems that people are exchanged; not necessarily physically, but in fidelity. As Hastings' *Dictionary of the Bible* ⁷ says of "covenant":

"(T)hey pledge themselves in loyalty to one another. It differs from the modern concept of contract in that there is not only an obligation to carry out some specific commitment externally, but a pledge of loyalty or community of soul."

In this respect, the act of forming a covenant enlarges, strengthens, and makes more secure the families of those involved rather than simply being a business transaction. This makes it a marriage or family bond instead of a simple promise or contractual arrangement. By making a covenant with a neighbor, whether they be an individual or a nation, what was once viewed as a potential for disruption of family unity becomes part of that family and is thus tamed because one does not make war against his own family.

The Hebrew word for swearing a covenant (oath) is the same as the Hebrew word for seven. In Genesis 21:31, where Abram makes a covenant with Abimelech for example, the footnotes in the New American Bible and New International Version of the Bible both contain the notation that "Beersheba" means "the well of the seven" or "the well of the oath." This becomes significant when one considers that in Hebrew numerology, the number seven signifies totality and perfection (covenant). Therefore, if one entered into a covenant (sevened oneself so to speak) it was something perfect and not to be profaned; just like the Sabbath, the seventh day. This also explains why Jesus gave His Church seven sacraments.

Covenants are instituted by a ritual, of which oath swearing is a part, and consist of obligations on the parties participating in the covenant with blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. Covenants are accompanied by signs. The Bible clearly makes the distinction between covenant and promise when we look at Genesis 12:2-3 where God makes a 3-fold promise of blessing to Abram (Abraham) "[1]I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; [2]I will make your name great, so

that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you. [3]All the communities of the earth shall find blessing in you."

The first promise, a great nation, is upgraded to a covenant in Genesis 15 by the rite of cut (divided) animals. In this covenant God swears to provide Abram with an heir and tells him that the sign of the covenant shall be the stars in the sky which represent how numerous his descendents shall be. This covenant was fulfilled in Moses who united the 12 tribes into a nation.

The second promise, of a great name (or dynasty, kingdom) is upgraded to a covenant in Genesis 17:1-19 by the rite of circumcision. The sign of this covenant becomes circumcision which places a physical mark on the body showing membership in the covenant family; and also in the name change from Abram (father who is exalted) to Abraham (father of the nations). This covenant was fulfilled in David who formed the 12 tribes into a single kingdom.

The third promise, that of worldwide blessing, is upgraded to a covenant in Genesis 22 on Mount Moriah where Abraham is prepared to offer his only son Isaac, but at the last minute Isaac is spared and a ram is offered instead. The signs of this covenant are the stars in the sky and the sands of the seashore, indicating how vast it will be. This covenant is fulfilled in Jesus the Christ who truly brings worldwide blessing to all people.

Notice that all these covenants were instituted by the shedding of blood and have as one of the obligations for Abraham and his descendants that they obey God.

Next, let's move along in time some 400 or 500 years to the time of Moses and take a look at the covenant that was instituted by the Passover meal:

Exodus 12

| Ritual | Obligations | | Signs |
|--|---|---|-----------------------------------|
| | God | People | |
| Unleavened bread, animal sacrifice, sprinkle blood on door post and lintel, eat the sacrifice. | Strike down first born of Egypt, pass over marked houses. | Obey God's instructions. Sacrifice an unblemished lamb, roast and eat it within a family, and burn the leftovers. | Circumcision, blood on door post. |

In making this covenant, if a family sacrificed an unblemished lamb, sprinkled the blood, and roasted the lamb but did not eat it, the first-born of the family would not have been passed over but instead would have died. The instructions on what they were to do were very explicit (see Exodus 12:7-9). Eating the sacrifice was and is an

integral part of the ritual that enacts the covenant. Burning the leftovers constitutes the offering to God which makes Him a party to the event.

This covenant is renewed. It is renewed every year at the Annual Passover Celebration (Exodus 13).

Exodus 13

| Ritual | Obligations | | Signs |
|--|---|--------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| | God | People | |
| Animal sacrifice and sacred meal celebrated within the family. | Will give protection, land and descendants. | Honor and obey God's commands. | Circumcision, unleavened bread. |

This is not an annual *representation* of the original Passover celebration. This is in actuality a *re*-presentation of that meal in which the participants are made present at the original event and all the mutual duties and obligations are renewed by participation in the ritual.

Although there are other covenants mentioned in the Old Covenant of Holy Scripture, the new covenant, instituted by Jesus the Christ, is the next covenant relationship we will discuss. This covenant is described from various aspects in all four Gospels and most of the Epistles; particularly 1st Corinthians and Hebrews. I say "various aspects" because although Matthew, Mark, and Luke all affirm that the institution of this covenant began at the Passover meal, John focuses his attention on the fact that Jesus, the Lamb of God, became the Passover sacrifice when He shed His blood and died on the altar of the cross. Let us now look at this:

New Covenant Instituted by Jesus the Christ

| Ritual | Obligations | | Signs |
|---------------------------|--|--|------------------------------------|
| | God | People | |
| Last supper, crucifixion. | Will give eternal life and the Kingdom of God. | Obey God's commandments, love God and neighbors as themselves. | Eucharistic meal, baptism, Church. |

God's obligations (which also constitute the blessings) under this covenant, for the first time, extend past the earthly life and into the life to come. Gone are the promises of earthly nationhood and kingdom and in their place are the promises of eternal life as members of God's family and the Kingdom of God. Here, the ritual that enacted the covenant extended over some 20 hours (two days as the Jews kept track of time). This period of time was necessary in order for the Apostles, the caretakers of Jesus' Church, to begin to understand that the Annual Passover Celebration, the holiest of all celebrations in the Jewish calendar, had been changed with Jesus

himself, the Lamb of God, becoming the unblemished sacrifice that provides the nourishment of the meal, and spilling His blood so that no longer would it be necessary for animals to be sacrificed to renew the covenant. No longer would the bloody ritual of circumcision be required for initiation into God's family, this sign having been changed to baptism. His death on the cross had to follow an interrupted Passover meal to complete the ritual and make this transition. Consider the following:

- Jesus says that those who do not believe His words will be condemned on the last day and that the words are not His but those of the Father who has commanded what is to be said and how it is to be said (John 12:48-50).
- During the Passover meal Jesus takes bread, blesses and breaks it saying "this is My Body (the Lamb of God) take it and eat" (Matthew 26:26). It is important to note here what is said in John 1:1 "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." When He speaks, He creates. ["And God said 'Let there be light': and there was light" (Genesis 1:3)] It is also interesting to note here that the blessing involved here involves a dual aspect; a God-ward action and a world-ward action. In the Hebrew way of thought, to bless anything and pronounce a thanksgiving over it are not two actions but one, which is summed up in a single word *barak*. This translates into a single Greek word *eucharisteo*, from which we get the name Eucharist.
- Jesus takes the cup of wine (the third cup in the Passover liturgy, the cup of blessing), gives thanks and says "drink from it, this is My Blood." He also says that this is "the blood of the covenant" [the only time Jesus ever uses the word "covenant" in Holy Scripture] (Matthew 26:27-28). Again, when He speaks, He creates. Giving thanks is *eucharisteo*.

The new covenant with its new obligations, instituted by Jesus the Christ, is also new because of its unique renewal practice. No longer is it necessary to sacrifice an animal every time the covenant is renewed; the ritual now joins us with the original sacrifice that began in the Upper Room and was completed on Calvary and is continually being presented to God the Father by His Son, the New High Priest and Sacrificial Lamb. In keeping with covenant ritual, the sacrifice is now eaten by the family of Jesus; his Church. This renewal is known as the Liturgy of the Eucharist.

Liturgy of the Eucharist

| Ritual | Obligations | | Signs |
|--|-------------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------|
| | God | People | |
| Eucharistic meal within the Church family. | Will love, honor and cherish. | Will love, honor and obey. | 7 Sacraments, Church. |

How do we know that Jesus' sacrifice is continually being presented to God the Father? Hebrews 9:1-5 (we could also use Exodus 26 but it's a little more concise

here) gives us a very good description of the tabernacle (not the one behind the altar in the church today but the one of the time of Moses). The tabernacle is divided into two sections (the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies) separated by a veil. In the outer section (the Holy Place) we find the menorah, the table, and the bread of offering. In Revelation 1, we find that John, in his vision into Heaven, is seeing into the Holy Place as he describes seven gold lamp stands (the temple menorah, which was seven-branched) and the risen Christ (the Bread of Life). Moving along to Revelation 4, we find the open door to Heaven [the veil which was rent from top to bottom at the moment Jesus died on the cross (Matthew 27:51)] and a throne. The inner portion of the tabernacle of Moses (and the temple of David) contained the cherubim throne (Ark of the Covenant). So, John must now be looking into the Holy of Holies. Going back now to Hebrews 9:6-10, we are given a description of the priestly tabernacle duties; especially those of the High Priest. What does the High Priest do in the Holy of Holies? He offers sacrifice, not without blood, for the sins of the people. Revelation 5 tells us of a lamb that looks as if it has been slain standing on the throne in the Holy of Holies. Scholars all agree that this is the Lamb of God, the new High Priest. What sacrifice does the new High Priest offer? Himself; He entered the Holy of Holies through the shedding of His own blood on the altar of the cross and has never left. He does not continue to suffer, bleed, and die; He did that once for all persons for all times so that He could enter heaven and present His offering. What John is witnessing and relating to us all is that Jesus, in the Eternal Now of Heaven, is continually offering His most perfect sacrifice in our behalf (Romans 9:24); this is the perfect offering to God which only He can make. It is an eternal offering because in heaven there is no past or future, only an eternal now.

In order for us to gain the eternal life and Kingdom of God which are the blessings promised by the covenant, we must individually accept and renew God's covenant with us; we must accept His invitation to join His family. Just like the original Passover meal, if we don't eat the Lamb, death will result. For the original Passover this was a physical death and in this New Covenant it is the curse of the loss of the Kingdom of God and everlasting life; spiritual death.

When Jesus told the Apostles "do this in remembrance of me" (1 Corinthians 11:24), He was not only telling them to carry out the ritual that will renew the covenant, He was granting them and their successors the power to transform the bread and wine into His Body and Blood so that all generations may join in the sacrificial meal. He was showing the Apostles how to offer His sacrifice. If they had only bread and wine, but not the sacrificial Lamb to eat, the ritual meal that renews the covenant would be a meaningless representation. This was recognized by the Apostles as is shown when Saint Paul tells us that if anyone eats and drinks without recognizing the Body of the Lord eats and drinks judgment upon himself (1 Corinthians 11:29). They will be guilty of sinning against the Body and Blood of the Lord (1 Corinthians 11:27). In other words, anyone who takes Holy Communion without believing and affirming that it truly is the Real Presence (Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity) of Jesus that they are receiving, makes Jesus' sacrifice on the cross meaningless for them because they are excluding themselves from the renewal of the covenant. These are very strong

words and are not to be taken lightly. Remember what happened to Judas whom Holy Scripture tells us did this very act!

The beautiful aspect of this covenant is that we can renew it any time we wish or need to (provided of course, a priest has consecrated the offering); we can re-present, as opposed to represent, the sacrifice that ritually and actually seals our covenant with God the Father. A sacrifice that does not involve the shedding of blood; Jesus died once for all persons for all times on Calvary. He does not suffer, bleed and die again; he simply continually offers His sacrifice in Heaven. It is through His love for us that He has given His priests the gift of making Him present; Body, Blood, Soul and Divinity, under the appearance of bread and wine so we may renew the covenant and thus gain the grace of God that is so necessary to enable us to keep this covenant.

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