

DOES HEBREWS HAVE A COVENANT THEOLOGY?

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The federal covenant theology posits a heavenly pre-existent covenant of grace which differs from the biblical New Covenant as stated in Jer 31:31-34. To answer the question, “Does Hebrews have a Covenant Theology?,” four themes for evaluating the federal theological covenant of grace are (1) the use of Scripture and the one people of God, (2) the unity between the Old and New Covenants, (3) the discontinuity between the Old and New Covenants, and (4) the warning passages and the doctrine of predestination. The epistle does not support the replacement of the houses of Israel and Judah by another people. Nor does Hebrews equate the New Covenant with one theological covenant existing from eternity past. It does support a discontinuity in moving from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant. The federal theology model fails to allow for contingency found in the warning passages of the book. The federal covenant theology neglects Hebrews’ omission of any mention of a federal covenant established in eternity past, but the biblical covenant model does find textual support in four areas: (1) Scripture and the application of the New Covenant, being based on Hebrew’s extensive use of relevant OT texts; (2) covenant ratification and the coherent relationship between the first and the New Covenant, since the epistle bases the two covenants on different priesthoods; (3) discontinuity between the New Covenant and the last will and testament, since the last will and testament (9:16-17) is based on the death of Christ; (4) warning passages and the doctrine of inheritance, since there is contingency as well as predestination involved in receiving the promised blessings. The federal covenant theology model fails through a lack of textual support, but the biblical covenant model receives support because it recognizes distinct priests supported by distinct covenants for distinct services.

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“The most developed ‘new covenant theology’ in the NT is found in Hebrews.”¹ About that judgment there is little doubt. The question that remains is what is the New Covenant theology in Hebrews? Geerhardus Vos, an eminent federal covenant theologian at the beginning of the twentieth century, framed the parameters of the discussion that continues until today.² On one axis is what he called “the philosophy of the history of revelation.”³ By this he referred to the viewpoint taken about the historical sequence between the Old and New Covenants. The second axis he captured in the question, “what is the stable, the constant substance that underlies the ceaseless never-resting change”⁴ in history?

His answer to this question combined with the first axis posits his view of the covenant theology of Hebrews. “The bond that links the old and the new covenants together is not a purely evolutionary one, inasmuch as the one has grown out of the other; it is, if we may so call it, a *transcendental bond*: the New Covenant in its preexistent, heavenly state reaches back and stretches its *eternal* wings over the old and the Old Testament people of God were one with us in religious dignity and privilege; they were to speak in a Pauline figure, sons of the Jerusalem above, which is mother of all.”⁵ In other words, the stable element is a heavenly theological New Covenant of grace expressed in the essence of the historical New Covenant. The changeable elements are the historical expressions of the Mosaic and the New Covenant. It is this model of a pre-existent, eternal state of the New Covenant that covenant theologians find in Hebrews.

However, before examination of this claim in the literature, a definition of a biblical covenant⁶ will be considered. Hebrews does not define the term as Vos uses it, but Hebrews’ use is consistent with the following proposed definition.

¹ Paul R. Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2007) 201.

² Geerhardus Vos, “Hebrews, The Epistle of the Diathēkē,” *The Princeton Theological Review* XIII (1915): 587-632; idem, “Hebrews, The Epistle of the Diathēkē,” *The Princeton Theological Review* XIV (1916): 1-61.

³ Vos, “Hebrews, The Epistle of the Diathēkē,” *The Princeton Theological Review* XIV 1.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶ This definition is formulated based upon consultation of these sources: M. Weinfeld, “The Covenant of Grant in the Old Testament and in the Ancient Near East,” *JAOS* 90/2 (1970):194-203; G. Mendenhall, “Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition,” *Biblical Archaeology* 17 (1954); and D. J. McCarthy, “Treaty and Covenant,” *Analecta Biblica* 21 (1963).

A *biblical covenant* is an arrangement⁷ unilaterally revealed by God specifying the human party or partner⁸ participating in the arrangement. A formal ceremony ratifies⁹ the arrangement by oath and/or sacrifice.

Based on this definition, the new arrangement in Hebrews was enacted or established¹⁰ on better promises (8:6). This enactment is by divine decree and does not include the stated parties, the house of Israel and the house of Judah (8:8), according to Jer 31:31. The ratification rests on the establishment of only One Party, God. The other party is quoted (8:8) and further specified in the summary (10:16). It is a covenant *with them* rather than *with us* (10:16, 17). Thus Hebrews views the New Covenant blessings as applied to those who are called (3:1; 9:15) and who receive the benefits (9:15) as beneficiaries. But the called ones are not textually specified as covenant partners.

Further, the covenant is *not* ratified with Jesus Christ as the second party to the covenant, as though He needed the benefits. Rather He with God mediated the ratification (8:6; 9:15; 12:24). He assures the covenant function as the Surety of the better covenant (7:22). The stress in Hebrews is on Jesus' Melchizedekian priesthood (Hebrews 7), whose ministry assures the proper functioning of the New Covenant (Hebrews 8 and 10). The Epistle is more appropriately viewed as teaching a priestly theology which assures a New Covenant ministry.

The question of this article is: Does Hebrews have a covenant theology? Two models will be considered. The first model to be considered bases the theology

⁷"Arrangement" rather than "agreement" specifies the substance of a covenant because the terms are unilaterally revealed without any consultation with the participating partner. Even in Israel's acceptance of the terms: "all that the Lord has said we will do" (Exod 19:3 and 24:3, 7), there was no negotiated agreement. The existence of the arrangement was conditioned on Israel's acceptance, but substance of arrangement was not influenced.

⁸*Metechoi* (3:1, 14) described the participation in some common privilege rather than *koinōnos*, which describes a shared relationship. While it can be translated, "partners," as in Luke 5:7—"his partners' in the other boat"—most translations and commentaries view the verb in Hebrews as "partake" or "share." That partaking emphasizes benefiting in the privileges.

⁹*Ratify* means the endorsement involved in "cutting a covenant" as formulated in the Hebrew Scripture. Although *ratify* is commonly used as a synonym for *inaugurate*, distinguishing between the two terms is better. *Ratify* is accomplished in the ceremony which formalizes the arrangement as legal. *Inaugurate* originates the functioning of the arrangements in some sense. It is often associated with degrees of fulfillment. As an example, the Abrahamic covenant was *ratified* as Abram slept (Gen 15:9-21). The covenant was inaugurated with the birth of Isaac, the initial heir (Gen 21:1-7), or inaugurated more completely in the initial possessing of the land (Joshua 5-11).

¹⁰*Nenomothētai*—"The verb ('to fix by a law') makes no allusion to the *Torah*. 'Nomos' here has the wide sense of 'divine decree'" (Jean Hering, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* [London: Epworth, 1970] 67). The term emphasizes One Party who ratifies the arrangement by decree.

of Hebrews on the federal theological covenant of grace.¹¹ And this covenant of grace exists in a pre-existent form before it was revealed by Jeremiah as the New Covenant.

Four themes will facilitate an evaluation of the claim:

1. The use of Scripture and the one people of God
2. The unity between the Old and the New Covenants
3. The discontinuity between the Old and New Covenants
4. The warning passages and the doctrine of predestination

Three of the themes assume continuity and one discontinuity.

Federal Covenant Theology Model

1. Scripture and the one household of God

Hebrews uses Scripture in two distinct ways. One use applies Scripture to Jesus. Hebrews introduced the Son as the One through whom God now speaks in the last days (1:2). At least, this refers to the One who first announced salvation (2:3), none other than Christ Jesus (3:1). Following the prologue (1:1-4), Hebrews applies various Scriptures to Jesus which were originally addressed to or spoke about the Son (1:5-14).

An example is Ps 2:7 (1:5). Though Hebrews does not specify when this applied, Paul had applied the psalm at the climax of His first advent and at His ascension (Acts 13:33). This was not to say that Jesus did not bear the name of God's Son during the days of His humiliation (Luke 3:25; 9:25; Heb 5:8). As a father begets a son, so the process of begetting Jesus reached a climax when the Father resurrected Him from the dead and when the Father elevated Jesus into glory. And though Hebrews does not specify fulfillment, these applications imply fulfillment in reference to Jesus (1:5, "Today I have begotten You").

In the second use, Hebrews applies Scripture to its readers. The question is whether the Scriptures are also to be taken as fulfilled in the readers. Psalm 95, contained in the canonical Psalter, was originally used by or addressed to Israel in worship. Jeremiah 31:31 specifically states that the New Covenant was addressed "to the house of Israel and the house of Judah." Hebrews applies these passages that Jeremiah had promised to Israel to its readers as called ones (3:1 and 9:15).

However, the writer of Hebrews also viewed himself and his readers as "of

¹¹The reasoning of Covenant Theology is derived from theological covenants. It represents the whole of Scripture as being governed by two covenants: (1) The covenant of works between God and the first Adam, (2) The covenant of grace treated under two aspects, (a) the Godward aspect between God and Christ (covenant of redemption), and (b) the manward aspect between God and the believer (the promise of eternal life) (George N. M. Collins, "Covenant Theology," in *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, eds. Harrison and Bromiley [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1960] 144).

the same house” (3:6) as Israel. Does he mean the people of the same house replace the people of Israel? Does he further mean that since the Tabernacle of the first covenant is fulfilled in God’s heavenly dwelling, that the New Covenant now fulfills the first covenant, or that the New Covenant has always existed as God’s dwelling has always existed and just now has been revealed?

The image of “house” refers to both a building and to the people who use it (household).¹² In the original generation, God’s house referred to both the Tabernacle and to Israel who served God through it. Moses was featured as faithful in that generation of God’s people as a servant. Both in building the Tabernacle and in speaking, he was faithful “to testifying to the things that were to be spoken later” (3:5). In the Hebrews generation, God’s house refers both to the actual heavenly dwelling of God and to that new generation who now serves God.

So “we are the same house” means that we are God’s people today who serve God through a priesthood who represents us in God’s actual dwelling. But we must examine whether what is happening today is a fulfillment of what Moses and Israel experienced.

First, we are not a new Israel as the quotation by Hebrews of the New Covenant makes clear (8:8; 10:16).¹³ Second, the Melchizedekian priesthood is not a fulfillment of the Aaronic priesthood. And third, the New Covenant is not a fulfillment of the first covenant. Rather, Jeremiah says that the New Covenant is not according to the old (31:32). The old covenant Israel broke. And finally, the fact that God’s heavenly dwelling existed at the time of the original generation of Israel does not mean that the New Covenant also existed at the time of the revelation of the first covenant. The Tabernacle was a type of God’s heavenly dwelling. That does not imply that the Mosaic covenant was a type of a heavenly covenant.

Yet that is precisely what the literature supporting a covenant theology is claiming. The ambiguity of the image of “house” contributes to the confusion. Stanley’s proposal reflected in the title, “A New Covenant Hermeneutic: The Use of Scripture in Hebrews 8–10,” needs to be examined. He summarized the hermeneutic: “filtered through the grid of ‘fulfillment,’ God’s revelation in Scripture still has meaning, significance, and authority for the readers of Hebrews as New Covenant believers.”¹⁴ However, the relevance and authority of Scripture need not demand fulfillment. Authority rests on the fact that God has spoken. Relevance rests on the fact that what God did then in Israel is an *example* of what God is doing now. Thus,

¹²Ray C. Stedman, *Hebrews* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1992) 48-50.

¹³The statement of the New Covenant in Jeremiah is addressed to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. The author of Hebrews does not change this. It is quoted as a covenant whose partner remains the same.

¹⁴Steven K. Stanley, “A New Covenant Hermeneutic: The Use of Scripture in Hebrews 8–10,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 46 (1995):201.

the Scriptures may simply be applied to people of God in the church. But the New Covenant is not treated as fulfilled in the church.

Robertson similarly proposed “a multi-staged fulfillment based on the typical/actual contrast of Scripture.”¹⁵ He sketched the stages of fulfillment which began with the symbolically represented reestablishment of the people of God in the return from Persia. “A fuller realization of the provisions of the New Covenant is being experienced by the people of God in the present age. A new Israel of God has been constituted on the basis of the heart revitalization of Jews and Gentiles through the new covenant provisions. . . .”¹⁶ Based on the text of Hebrews, Robertson claims more than the text warrants. The text does not make a claim about a “new Israel of God,” nor does receiving some covenant benefits equal covenant fulfillment.

Williamson also adopted a similar hermeneutic and spoke of the final stage: “[W]hile the new covenant is fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus Christ, the ultimate eschatological reality awaits the ‘new heavens and new earth, where righteousness is at home.’”¹⁷ The irony of this proposal is that the prophecy speaking of Israel in history (Jer 31:31-34) is said to be ultimately fulfilled outside history, in a new earth; rather than in the climax of history with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.

So the passages of Scripture applied to the people of God are used differently than those applied to Jesus. They are not fulfilled. The application of New Covenant benefits to the people of God does not replace the expectation of inauguration with the houses of Israel and Judah (Jer 31:31, quoted in 8:8 and 10:16).

2. *Covenant Formula and the Coherence between Biblical Covenants*

Though the New Covenant is established on better promises, the old and the New Covenant shared one promise in common. In Exod 6:7, the text says, “I will take you to me for a people, and I will be to you a God,” which was God’s promise while Israelites were still in Egypt. After He had given them the law in the wilderness, He promised, “I . . . will be your God, and you will be my people” (Exod 29:45, 46). In substance, the covenant formula is the same (Jer 31:33). “But while the ‘formula’ of the covenant remains the same from age to age, it is capable of being filled with fresh meaning to a point where it can be described as a new covenant.”¹⁸ The New Covenant based on the better promises, implies the full sense of who God will be as their God and who His people will be as a fully blessed people.

¹⁵O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980) 298.

¹⁶Ibid., 299.

¹⁷Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath* 210.

¹⁸F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 173, 174.

This common promise in the old covenant and in the New Covenant has contributed to both covenants being identified with an eternal covenant (13:20). Some have proposed that this eternal covenant is none other than the one theological covenant of grace. *The New Geneva Study Bible* makes that case: “God revealed His covenant of grace by promising a Savior (Gen 3:15). . . . The covenant of Sinai . . . was a continuation of the covenant of grace (Exod 3:15; Deut 7:7; 9:5, 6). . . . As Hebrews 7–10 explains, . . . God inaugurated a better version of His one eternal covenant with sinners (Heb 13:10).”¹⁹

Mayhue challenged this interpretation by raising the question whether the phrase *diathēkē aiōniou* in Heb 13:20 actually refers to “one eternal covenant” made in eternity past.²⁰ In doing so, he made a strong case that the everlasting covenant (13:20) is the historic New Covenant alone (8:4-12 and 10:16, 17). In addition, he argues that the everlasting covenant cannot be both the New Covenant and the covenant of grace. He advanced exegetical evidence to support his point. First, there is “no explicit, uncontested exegetical evidence in either the Old or New Testaments which refers to any covenant made in eternity past.” Second, the term “eternal” (*aiōnios*) in the NT does not necessarily mean “eternity past.” In fact, the common usage refers to an unending future, as in eternal life. He supported Kent’s interpretation: “It is eternal in the sense that it secures eternal life for its beneficiaries and will never be invalidated nor superseded.”²¹ Interpreted in this sense, the eternal covenant is identical with the New Covenant which promises a coming to know God eternally (Jer 31:34 and John 17:3).

This interpretation of “eternal” is also compatible with the use of the term in reference to a number of related uses in Hebrews. The Lord’s death “secured eternal redemption” (9:12). In this case eternal refers to the past history as well as the future. But it is not eternity past. His death is sufficient “for redemption of transgressions under the first covenant” (9:15). His death has unlimited value for sin committed in the past history, in the present, and in the future. Jesus Christ offered Himself to God through the “eternal Spirit” (9:14). At a minimum, the word “eternal” refers to the Spirit’s deity. In that case, “eternal” means without temporal constraint. Finally, there is “the promise of eternal inheritance” (9:15) which, as with the New Covenant’s eternity, “eternal” looks to the future. Thus, the word’s usage reinforces the longevity and benefit made possible by the eternal covenant (13:20). Old covenant rituals served for the ceremonially unclean and only made them outwardly clean. But the blood of Christ can do much more. Such a theological truth ought to

¹⁹R. C. Sproul, ed., *God’s Covenant of Grace*, New Geneva Study Bible (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995) 30.

²⁰Richard L. Mayhue, “Hebrews 13:20: Covenant or Grace of New Covenant?” *MSJ* 7/2 (Fall 1996):254-55.

²¹Homer A. Kent Jr., *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Winona Lake, Ind: BMH, 1972) 293.

lead to a believer's boldness in the presence of God's throne. Hebrews' exhortation is based on this eternal forgiveness (10:19-25).²²

Finally, the scope of influence of the eternal covenant (13:20) and the eternal redemption (9:12) needs attention. The benefactors are individually called (3:1; 9:15). They are not specified in the text as the party with whom the covenant was ratified, but are benefactors of God's last will and testament (9:15-17). "The phrase οἱ κληκνοι which occurs nowhere else in the epistles, is an echo of the Parables: Matt. xxii:3, 4, 8; Luke xiv:17, 24; compared to Apoc. xix:9."²³ Whereas in the Gospels the word is simply an invitation, in this context it is an effectual call.²⁴ Such a call, it might be inferred, is common throughout biblical history. However, ones who receive the call under the period of the Mosaic Covenant are called to different blessings than ones who receive the call after Christ's first advent and ratification of the New Covenant. An examination of these differences will help to clarify the scope of influence of the New Covenant.

Not only has *The New Geneva Study Bible* mistakenly equated the textual "eternal covenant" (13:20) with one theological covenant existing in eternity past, it has failed to consider the formal differences between the covenant at Sinai and the New Covenant. In the *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, the definition of *berith* (covenant) distinguishes between a promissory covenant (New Covenant) and an obligatory covenant (Sinai Covenant).²⁵ It is difficult to see how an obligatory and a promissory covenant are both expressions of the one theological covenant of grace, even though they share a common covenant formula.

3. *Discontinuity between the Old and the New Covenant*

Both Vos and Robertson interpret the discontinuity as the distinction

²²Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* 244-47.

²³B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (reprint; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989) 264.

²⁴The construction οἱ κληκνοι, when it means invitation, denotes an invitation that is not effectual. It is followed by another call which is determinative of a response. An effectual call wins a positive response. Paul uses καλέω as an effectual call which implements God's election (Rom 8:29, 30) in history. Hebrews reflects the same work of God that His Son "might be the first born among many brethren" (Rom 8:29). In Hebrews, when God's call was introduced (3:1), "the readers were addressed as holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling. This form of address gathered up the strands of truth which the author dealt with in chapter 2. They were indeed 'brothers' (cf. 3:12, 10:19) not only with one another but with the Captain (2:11-12), and they were 'holy' because He had made them so (2:11). They did 'share in the heavenly calling' because God was bringing' them 'to glory' (2:10)" (Zane C. Hodges, "Hebrews," in *Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament* [Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1983] 785.)

²⁵*berith* (Moise Winfeld, *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, vol. II, eds. Botterweck and Ringgren [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975] 265-75). "Abraham (Gen. 15:17) and the covenant with David (25.7, . . .) which are concerned with the gift. . . . In contradistinction to the Mosaic covenants, which are of an obligatory type . . ." (ibid., 270).

between a type and the reality. The fact that “two worlds exist and have existed side by side from the beginning, enables the author of Hebrews to solve the chief problem of the history of redemption and revelation.”²⁶ Then Vos develops his answer based on Augustine’s formula.²⁷ He explains the discontinuity: “[T]he latent existence of the verities and potencies of the Christian religion in the old dispensation are due to no other cause than that the Christian religion lived even at that time as redemptive truth and redemptive power in the heavenly world and from there created for itself an embryonic form of existence in the life of Israel.”²⁸ Again the inferred presence of a theological covenant of grace raises questions. What is the latent or the embryonic form in the life of Israel? Though the Tabernacle qualifies as an embryonic form of the heavenly reality, the remainder of the Mosaic Covenant raises a question. Can a covenant with obligations be embryonic in form of a promissory New Covenant? In addition, Gräbe recognizes that a trajectory in meaning beyond the text is required. Gräbe poses an explanation in an article, “Trajectories for a ‘theology of the new covenant.’”²⁹ He views discontinuity as “the reinterpetive dynamic expressed by both the Old Testament and New Testament authors.”³⁰ Thus Jeremiah reinterprets the old covenant in light of Judah’s pending captivity. Or Hebrews reinterprets Jeremiah in light of Jesus’ first advent. As he summarizes it, “The newness of the new covenant finds its locus in Christ. The Old Testament tradition of the new covenant is reinterpreted in light of the life and death of Christ.”³¹

As a result, new trajectories of meaning are posited. For instance, without any textual basis in Jeremiah, the partnership of Israel and Judah is reinterpreted as expanded to mean universal beneficiaries in a new sociological dimension.³² Or, not based on the text of Exodus but going beyond Exodus, the law is new with an internal circumcision of the heart.³³

Both conceptions of the discontinuity are instructive. Vos and Robertson have correctly recognized that Hebrews has interpreted the relationship between the *house* (tabernacle, 3:2, 6) and the *house* (heavenlies) as a type/reality relationship. God’s house in which Moses was faithful was a kind of miniature representation of “everything,” that is, of the greater house over which the Son presides at God’s right

²⁶Vos, “Hebrews, The Epistle of the Diathēkē,” *The Princeton Theological Review* XIV 11.

²⁷The NT is latent in the OT and the OT is open in the New.

²⁸Vos, “Hebrews, The Epistle of the Diathēkē,” *The Princeton Theological Review* XIV 12.

²⁹Petrus J. Gräbe, *New Covenant, New Community* (Waynesboro, U.K.: Paternoster, 2006) 206.

³⁰Ibid. “A vibrant church needs to be in touch with a living confession if it is to avoid having its message become only a ‘museum of truths.’”

³¹Ibid., 200.

³²Ibid., 210.

³³Ibid., 210-12.

hand in heaven (3:2-6 and 1:3 with 4:14). The “‘holy of holies’ in His earthly house was but a shadow of heaven itself where Christ has now gone ‘to appear for us in God’s presence’ (9:24).”³⁴ However, Gräbe posits that a trajectory in meaning beyond the text is also required to address the other aspects of discontinuity. This undermines any claim that a covenant of grace is based on the biblical text.

4. *Warning Passages: The Doctrine of Predestination*

Contingency found in the warning passages is perhaps the most puzzling aspect of the message of Hebrews. The interpretation of these warnings necessarily draws upon broader conclusions reached, based upon the meaning of the homily as a whole. This involves considering a broader context than simply a reading of the warning by itself. For that reason, perhaps the greatest influence that a presupposed federal covenant theology brings to a reading of the book features the meaning of contingency in the warning passages. Weir posits that the construction of a federal theology arose out of questions concerning predestination, for one of the great themes of sixteenth-century thought is that of theodicy.³⁵ Vos posits that in the federal theology system all things are of God. “His is the originality in conceiving, His the initiative in inaugurating, His the monergism in carrying out.”³⁶ And it is for the carrying out of God’s will that the warnings are addressed. Since His is the monergism in carrying out, then failure to keep the commands means God’s work is not present to accomplish His will.

Yet an examination of the text to discover whom the author is addressing challenges this perspective on the warning passages. The author says the warnings include an address to himself in whom the work of God is clearly present (2:1; 3:6; 6:1; 10:26; 12:9). Further, the warnings address those who had received blessings of salvation to some extent (3:1, 6; 6:4-5; 10:35-39). It is evident that a human author does not know the spiritual state of every recipient of “the word of exhortation” (13:22). But if he addresses them as called and as spiritually blessed, it follows that what he says appropriately applies to those called and blessed. The warnings are intended to encourage them to persevere by warning of the consequences if they do not persevere. The consequences are severe, but are not an indication that their original response was not genuine.

³⁴Hodges, “Hebrews” 786.

³⁵David Weir, *The Origins of Federal Theology in Sixteenth Century Reformation Thought* (Oxford, U.K.: Clarendon, 1990) 155.

³⁶Vos, “Hebrews, The Epistle of the Diathēkē,” *The Princeton Theological Review* XIV 58.

Biblical Covenant Model of Theology

The case presented for a federal covenant theology has one striking omission. Hebrews does not mention a federal covenant established in eternity past. Even Vos acknowledged that a federal form of the covenant of grace is not expressed in Hebrews,³⁷ even though some who follow him make that claim.³⁸

According to Vos, there must be a stable core of God's work in salvation history. That claim is correct. But rather than that work being related to a pre-existent covenant of grace, redemption is related to *promise*. In the OT, Israel was *promised* redemption (Exod 6:6), and redemption was provided through the Passover celebration and the sacrifice of the lamb (Exod 15:13). This all happened before the Mosaic Covenant (Exodus 19–24) was ratified. The death of the Passover lamb corresponded to Hebrews' announcement that by means of His own blood He secured eternal redemption (9:11, 12). This is what is monergistic in salvation in Hebrews. Thus what was promised through Moses of "the things to be spoken later" (3:5), was identified in Hebrews as Jesus' procuring of eternal redemption in His sacrifice.

As a result, the Mosaic Covenant was ratified with a redeemed people (Exodus 19–24). This collective redemption of the people by promise preceded the ratification of the national covenant with the people. In Hebrews, Jesus "is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant" (9:15). What was sequential in history (the promise of collective redemption and the corporate Mosaic covenant) now is combined in the death of Christ. Individual redemption is provided for beneficiaries of the New Covenant. Both now rest on the death of Christ through which the ratification of the New Covenant is mediated and redemption is provided in the gift of life.

Now that redemption and covenant ratification are provided jointly in Christ, the stage is set for both a present application and a future inauguration of fulfillment of the New Covenant (Jer 31:31-34). As already indicated in the quotation and summary of the covenant terms by Hebrews, the party is stated as "the house of Israel and the house of Judah" (Heb 8:8) and as "with them" (10:16). This invites a reader to anticipate a future fulfillment.

Next, this article will advance to support this viewpoint of salvation history as found in Hebrews. The case will be formulated using the same four themes. Hebrews views the biblical covenants each as framing a priestly ministry, a past operation of the Mosaic Covenant supporting the Aaronic ministry and a present

³⁷Ibid., 57. He sees a "covenantal concept of religion" undergirding the three stated themes in the epistle: faith, teaching on revelation, and on the priesthood.

³⁸Sproul, ed., *God's Covenant of Grace* 30.

application of the New Covenant and the Melchizedekian ministry. In each age, this ministry enabled God's people to serve God in a manner that would honor Him. But the Melchizedekian priesthood and the New Covenant blessings are far superior so that no one should consider returning to the past.

1. Scripture and the Application of the New Covenant

God has spoken. "This initial affirmation is basic to the whole argument of the epistle."³⁹ The Epistle makes extensive use of the Hebrew Scriptures (LXX), using an exegetical understanding which interprets God speaking directly to or concerning His Son (1:5-14). But it is by His Son that God has spoken to Christians in these last days (1:2). In the Epistle, His Son's words are not quoted. Rather the voice of the Son is heard through His role in fulfillment of Scripture. And that is the role of One who had the rank of Son,⁴⁰ that is, Heir (1:4-5). He was designated in advance as Heir but appointed as such only after His ascension.⁴¹ The appointment may well "echo the oracle of Ps 2:8, addressed to one who is both the Lord's Anointed and acclaimed by God as His Son: 'Ask of me, and I will give you the nations for your inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for Your possession.'"⁴²

His position as Heir of the creation (all things) is then substantiated in a series of quotations in which God addressed Him directly (1:4-15). He has the right to claim this position and role because He *inherited* the name Son (1:4-5). The fact that He inherited the name carries with it a number of implications. First, the angels in their superior created form did not inherit that name. Second, even though He was Son from eternity (implied in 1:2), and as Son, He learned obedience by the things He suffered (5:8), yet He inherited the name only after He completed the Father's will (1:13). He completed the Father's will because He was willing to receive the promised inheritance no matter what the cost under the Mosaic Covenant. And that cost was death. Thus, "only the revelation by the Son is complete and definitive."⁴³

A third implication concerns the status of the present world. Westcott claims, "The writer of the Epistle has already assumed the establishment of a new order corresponding with the fulfillment of the purpose of creation."⁴⁴ If Westcott claims that the purpose of creation is now fulfilled with Jesus in heaven, the author

³⁹Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* 1.

⁴⁰Jean Hering, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, trans. A. W. Heathcote and P. J. Allcock (London: Epworth, 1970) 3.

⁴¹Ibid.

⁴²Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* 4.

⁴³Hering, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* 1.

⁴⁴Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* 41.

of Hebrews had a greater expectation. Based on Psalm 8, the author concludes that “we do not yet see everything in subjection to him” (2:8b). So at best, the new order has been established in the status of Christ, but it has not yet been shared by a redeemed mankind on earth.

That leads to a final implication: “We see Jesus who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor” (2:9). “It was fitting that the Son, for whom and by whom all things exist, brings many sons with Him to glory” (2:10). And it was fitting to make this Captain of their salvation perfect for service as High Priest through suffering (2:10, 17). This implication indicates that God’s purposes for the present creation are not yet fulfilled.

Jesus’ service as High Priest constitutes the core teaching of this Epistle (Hebrews 7–10). In anticipating the effectiveness of this service, the author had already quoted the Scripture which envisioned the outcome (2:12-13, quoting Ps 22:22 and Isa 8:17, 18). Jesus will not be ashamed to call the sons, brothers, and to present them along with Himself as God’s children. How can those who are called achieve such a status?

That status is promised in both the Old and the New covenants: “I will be their God and they shall be My people” (8:10). Jesus received this promise living under the Mosaic covenant. Called ones today have this promise applied to them based on the better promises of the New Covenant (9:7-13; 10:16-17). The promise is applied but not fulfilled. The better promises may be appropriated through the High Priestly ministry of Jesus.

However, on what grounds does the author to the Hebrews *apply* promises from this covenant to those who are not designated in the text as party to the covenant? It is not as a covenant inaugurated in fulfillment. While that question is not answered directly, the answer is implied in a traditional *crux interpretum* of NT exegesis concerning the use of *diathēkē*.⁴⁵ The featured text is Hebrews 9:15-17. However, to appreciate better the thought development, the whole context (9:11-28) is in order. The broad context features the cross of Christ which is the basis for the ratification of the New Covenant (9:15) and for the inauguration of the last will and testament arrangements (9:16-17).

2. *Covenant Ratification and the Coherent Relationship Between the First and the New Covenant*

The High Priestly service based on Christ’s personal blood sacrifice (9:11-14)

The covenant functions based on the priesthood. The priest specifies the

⁴⁵Scott W. Hahn, “A Broken Covenant and the Curse of Death: A Study of Hebrews 9:15-22,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 66 (2004):416-36.

place where the worshiper meets God and blood-sacrifice provides the right for that meeting. Unlike the old covenant's earthly sanctuary, Christ's tabernacle is not man-made; it is not part of the earthly creation (9:11). Christ ministers in the greater and more perfect tabernacle (9:11), the real thing. The good things to come involved entering into very presence of God. So He entered the Most Holy Place in heaven once and for all (9:12). His sufficient sacrifice obtained eternal redemption.

Israel's animal sacrifices, insofar as they did any good, provided priests and worshipers with ceremonial cleansing for their bodies (9:13). They were educational, teaching the concepts of defilement and cleansing. In addition, they included God's implied commitment to provide someday the sufficient sacrifice. Again, this is what is monergistic in salvation in this Epistle. Thus, Israel's faith in God also involved faith in God's commitment to forgive, left at that time unrevealed in complete expression. Now, the blood of Christ (9:14) has provided that sacrifice. This revelation was introduced in Isaiah's revelation of the Servant when God said, "I will put my Spirit upon him" (Isa 42:1). "It is in the power of the Divine Spirit, accordingly, that the Servant accomplishes every phase of his ministry, including the crowning phase in which he accepts death for transgression of his people, filling the twofold role of priest and victim, as Christ does in this epistle."⁴⁶

This service of Christ as High Priest and as sacrifice enables believers to have a conscience clear of any guilt, free from any sense that they would somehow have to work or contribute to acceptance before God. Further, it enables them to serve the living God within the benefits of a New Covenant ministry.

The ratification of the New Covenant based on Christ's mediation (9:15)

Westcott clarifies the connection between 9:14 and 15: "And for this reason, even that the Blood of Christ purifies the soul with a view to divine service, *He is mediator of a new covenant.*"⁴⁷ As a worshiper served according to the arrangements of the first covenant, so the called ones may serve according to the new arrangement. But how did the written New Covenant (Jer 31:31-34) receive ratification?⁴⁸ God as one party wrote the terms of the covenant, and the houses of Israel and Judah were specified as the other party. However, as with the Abrahamic Covenant, the terms consisted of a series of promises, so the arrangement that was ratified was unconditional with respect to Israel. That means that ratification was conditioned only on the

⁴⁶Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* 205.

⁴⁷Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* 263.

⁴⁸Ratification is the approval and sanction especially in a formal sense. The Abrahamic covenant was ratified with pieces of the sacrificed animals forming a path through which a smoking oven and a burning torch passed, even with Abraham asleep (Gen 15:9-21). It too was ratified without Abraham assuming a condition for the covenant's existence.

Party who wrote the terms and made the commitments stated in the promises. There was no condition placed upon Israel for ratification. And it is clear the Jews in Judaism of that day had not accepted any condition as they continued to offer animal sacrifices, relying on an Aaronic priesthood.

By means of Christ's death, the New Covenant was formally ratified.⁴⁹ The role that Jesus had was that of Mediator, which "describes his function as the one who was used by God to enact a New Covenant which established a new relationship between God and his people, but entirely on God's terms; it was not a negotiated settlement."⁵⁰ The New Covenant had been introduced in 8:8-12 in a complete quotation from Jer 31:31-34. Jesus Christ is identified as Mediator in three passages: 8:6, 9:15, and 12:24, a role in which He enacted the covenant.

The Lord's death also freed those called from all guilt derived from transgressions committed under the first covenant. "Thus, the death of Christ appears under a twofold aspect. His blood is the means of atonement (redemption) and the ratification of the Covenant which followed upon it."⁵¹ The transgressions of the first covenant which had been brought to light could not be ignored if a New Covenant arrangement was ratified. So Christ's death was both a substitute for the penalty of transgressions and, in the same death, a mediation of the New Covenant.

The ratification of the New Covenant arrangement had the purpose that those who would be called might receive "the promise of eternal inheritance."⁵² The fact that the full purpose remains something promised indicates that the inheritance is yet future. Though a promise involves a commitment on the part of the Speaker to act and to accomplish what was promised, the recipient is responsible to receive what had been promised. In an evil world, that responsibility to receive would be challenged. So the author of Hebrews had already written: "[W]e desire that each one of you show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope until the end, that you do not become sluggish, but imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises" (6:11-12).

3. *Discontinuity Between the New Covenant and the Last Will and Testament (9:16-28)*

⁴⁹Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* 264; Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* 209.

⁵⁰Michael D. Morrison, *Who Needs a New Covenant? Rhetorical Function of the Covenant Motif in the Argument of Hebrews*, Princeton Theological Monograph Series, eds. K. C. Hanson, Charles M. Collier, and Christopher D. Spinks, vol. 85 (Eugene, Ore.: Pickwick, 2008), 575.

⁵¹Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* 264.

⁵²The eternal inheritance is only implied in the New Covenant. The stated promises are received once the covenant was ratified at the time of faith. The eternal inheritance is what was promised to Israel about her full future possession. At the time of the writing of Hebrews, this was still future and awaited the age to come. Some of this inheritance will be shared by these believers.

Vos has acknowledged discontinuity between the priestly ministry under the first covenant and the priestly ministry under the New Covenant. Discontinuity exists also in the application of the New Covenant benefits. The discontinuity is present because the party to the New Covenant is specified as the house of Israel and the house of Judah (8:8 and 10:16). And Judaism had not accepted a partnership in the New Covenant since they continued to practice their worship under the terms set by the first covenant. Hebrews views the recipients (3:1 and 9:15) as merely beneficiaries. Benefits promised in the New Covenant have now been applied to called ones because of the death and ministry of Jesus Christ.

A Covenant Theology model sees the New Covenant as fulfilled in the Hebrews text. Thus it describes the discontinuity as supersession or replacement. Those in the church who are called supersede Israel or replace the house of Israel and the house of Judah as party to the covenant. But what is inaugurated is not the New Covenant, but the last will and testament.

*The application of the last will and testament
based on the death of the Testator, Christ (9:16, 17)*

The transition from 9:15 to 9:16-17 introduces a strange anomaly in the use of *diathēkē*. The term is translated as “covenant” in 9:15 as it is in the remainder of the book. But in 9:16-17, and only there in Hebrews, it has the sense of last “will” or “testament” according to the majority of translations and interpreters.⁵³

Strong contextual reasons necessitate the change in translation.⁵⁴ In 9:15 the

⁵³See NEB, JB, TEV, NIV, NAB, and NKJ (only the NASB translates “covenant” in vv. 16, 17). Many of the commentaries: Geerhardus Vos, *The Teaching of the Epistle to Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956) 27-48; G. W. Buchanan, ed., *To the Hebrews*, AB 36 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1972) 151; Thomas C. Long, *Hebrews*, IBC (Louisville: John Knox, 1997) 99; Harold W. Attridge, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1993) 253-56; Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, NITC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 462-63; Victor C. Pfitzner, *Hebrews* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997) 131; Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews*, AB 36 (New York: Doubleday, 2001) 418; Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* 209-14.

⁵⁴A minority of interpreters reject the change in translation: B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* 264-66; George Milligan, *The Theology of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Edinburgh, U.K.: James Family, 1978) 166-70; John Brown, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Edinburgh, U.K.: Oliphant, 1899) 407-19; John Hughes, “Hebrews ix 15 ff. and Galatians iii 15 ff.,” *Nov T21* (1976-1977):28-66; William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, vol. 478, WBC (Dallas: Word, 1991) 226-52; Darrell Pursiful, *The Cultic Motif in the Spirituality of the Book of Hebrews* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Mellen, 1993) 77-79; Scott W. Hahn, “A Broken Covenant and the Curse of Death: A Study of Hebrews 9:15-22,” *CBQ* 66 (2004):416-36. The clarity of the description of *diathēkē* as “testament” in 9:16, 17 is not overridden by the arguments advanced for the translation of “covenant”: (1) the attribution of the translation of “testament” to the Vulgate is not persuasive in the argument for “covenant”; (2) the coherence of thought derived from a consistent biblical-theological model is not dismissed by recognizing a Hellenistic model used to

context warrants the sense of “covenant,” since only covenants have mediators and the writer refers to the first *diathēkē*, which the author clearly regards as a covenant. However, in 9:16 the “death of the one who made it” most naturally requires a sense of “last will” or “testament,” since covenants did not involve the death of their makers before being inaugurated. Likewise, in 9:17 the statement that a *diathēkē* takes effect at death and is not in force while the maker is alive applies only to a testament. In 9:18, however, the topic returns again to the first *diathēkē*, that is, the Sinai arrangement, which is clearly regarded as a covenant.

Accepting such a change in translation suggests profound implications in the hermeneutics of Hebrews. It is not a change in arrangement but a change in perspective in looking at the same arrangement. Jeremiah 31:31-34 is presented as an unconditional covenant because the terms of the arrangement were exclusively promises from God. Thus, the second party, the house of Israel and the house of Judah did not assume any condition by oath in its ratification. That does not mean that the second party is unnecessary, or subject to change,⁵⁵ or that the New Covenant had only one party.

Rather, the houses of Israel and Judah are the second party by divine promise, and a future realization will not divest them of their role or ethnic identity. The ones who propose a change in ethnicity often do so on the basis of Paul’s claim that “not all Israel is Israel” (Rom 9:6).⁵⁶ But Paul also makes the point that not all natural descendants of Abraham are called (Rom 9:7ff.). This is the same point Hebrews makes (Heb 9:15) in addressing those who are beneficiaries as those who are called. And Hebrews’ quotation of the passage from Jeremiah (8:8:12 and 10:16-17) leaves open the expectation, as the quotations claim, that the houses of Israel and Judah will be called in the future. That would then involve a fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophecy of the covenant at some future time, in the same terms as prophesied. This correlates with the expectation of “the world to come” (2:5) as the time and place of consummation.

For the time being, Hebrews applies the prophesied arrangement from a different perspective. A covenant named unconditional means that the covenant is

communicate a point in 9:16, 17; (3) Christ’s death may be described by various metaphors in relation to the *diathēkē*; mediator, testator, or surety without one contradicting another. Christ is also both the High Priest and the sacrificial victim; (4) Hebrews directly states that Christ’s death was presented to God as a sacrifice for sin (9:14). This is clearly expressed rather than the theory that God “identified with the victim by whose representative death the covenant is ordinarily ratified” (Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* 267). The symbolism in covenant ratification is a death to be invoked as the penalty for possible future violation. Though death may be associated with both covenant ceremony and testament, death means something different in either context; (5) yet Christ’s death remains a mystery: Christ as the Divine-human person died.

⁵⁵Williamson, *Sealed with an Oath* 146.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 189-91.

ratified, conditioned on only one party. A last will and testament is also ratified and conditioned on only one party. The one party or testator writes the will or testament. It does not come into force until that party dies. When he dies, the will takes force and the beneficiaries receive what was promised them. In the case of the biblical New Covenant, Christ as the Word authored the covenant and as Son died to offer Himself to God.⁵⁷ Hebrews 9:14 indicates how the three Persons in the Godhead are all involved in the blood sacrifice of Christ presented to God.

The profound implication is that Hebrews presents the New Covenant as ratified in the death of Christ and applied to the beneficiaries based on the death of Christ. The beneficiaries are not written into the will and testament, but are called in history to receive the benefits (3:1; 9:15). This applies the promises of the Hebrew Scripture, not at the level of their textual address with the stated parties but at the level of God's election and call of individuals to be beneficiaries. The promises within the covenant are applied without commenting on the scriptural form of the address in the Hebrew texts. This form of hermeneutics does not argue for a fulfillment of the New Covenant, nor does the text of Hebrews claim such a fulfillment. Rather it recognizes, in the church age, that believers who are recipients of God's mercy are called. It is the testament that is inaugurated or takes effect⁵⁸ at the death of Christ (9:17).

The acceptance of Israel's obligation based on eternal redemption (9:18-22)

Since Christ's death redeemed them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant (9:15), Hebrews clarifies that all the people of Israel had originally accepted that obligation (Exod 24:3, 7) when the Mosaic Covenant was ratified (9:18). This was the case because the Mosaic Covenant was a conditional covenant with obligations of fulfillment for both God ("the book itself") and Israel ("all the people," 9:19-20). Through the symbolism of animal sacrifices, the two parties of the covenant assumed the obligation of death for covenant violation. Thus, Christ's procuring of an eternal redemption even addressed the original obligation assumed by the people of Israel and the obligation for fulfillment.

The necessity of Christ's sacrifice in order to complete God's plan (9:23-28)

The key word in this subunit (9:16-28) is "necessary" (*anagkē*, 9:16, 23). Christ's death was necessary. Judaism had stubbornly refused to leave the covenant

⁵⁷Bruce quotes E. K. Simpson, *EQ* xviii (1946):212-13 n. 126: "His 'obedience unto death' fills up the breach with heaven as nothing else could . . . accruing to His brethren through death of the Testator, who in this unique transaction lives again to be the Administrator of His own mediatorial work."

⁵⁸*Bebaia*, "take effect, (becomes) valid or certain" (9:17).

that was growing old and ready to vanish (8:13). Therefore, the New Covenant was ratified in His death (9:15) and this last testament was necessarily put in force or inaugurated by His death (9:16-17).

Since a sacrifice was necessary (9:23), what kind of sacrifice would address issues raised by heaven? The answer was that Christ could offer nothing less than Himself which alone would “do away” with sin (9:26). Because of the finality of His sacrifice, it did not need to be offered repeatedly throughout history, but once at the end of the age. Now “He appears eternally in heaven for His people on the basis of the ‘sacrifice of Himself,’ presented and accepted once for all.”⁵⁹

Next the author moves in thought to the completion of God’s purpose. Vos recognizes that the New Covenant connects with eschatology.⁶⁰ Men die once, by divine appointment, and in their case death is followed by judgment. Christ died once, by divine appointment, and His death was followed by salvation to those who wait eagerly for Him. The salvation reaches a climax in this fallen world. It will be discussed more fully below.

4. *Warning Passages: the Doctrine of Inheritance*

“Inheritance” (*klēronomia, klēronomeō*) is used in a range of ways in Hebrews. Inheritance refers to what fathers give to eligible heirs. One limit to eligibility is that the recipient be an actual son. Another limit that a father may impose is that the heir be faithful to the father’s will. So what a son would inherit would be contingent on continuation in doing what the father wants. Support for this distinction rests on Israel’s experience in possessing the land. In applying the image to Israel, the land was promised as an inheritance (Gen 15:7-8). Israel had to claim their inheritance by faithful obedience (Josh 1:2-9). They had failed at Kadesh Barnea (Numbers 13–14). The promised inheritance is also described in Hebrews 11:8-16, but the final realization remained unfulfilled in the lives of OT believers.

The term “Son” is used first in reference to Jesus. He obtained the name Son by inheritance (1:4). The Son had been appointed heir of all things (1:2). Yet following the first advent, He obtained what had been appointed when He completed the Father’s will (1:3-4).

The term is used secondarily in reference to recipients of New Covenant life. They received the promise of eternal inheritance (9:15). And that promise relates to the fact that they will inherit salvation (1:14). The salvation inherited is contingent on persevering in faith and patience (6:12). What does this contingency mean?

The answer relates to the *salvation* sons will inherit in all its dimensions. As the Son’s role and inheritance was found in the Hebrew Scripture, so the sense of

⁵⁹Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* 221.

⁶⁰Vos, “Hebrews, The Epistle of the Diathēkē,” *The Princeton Theological Review* XIV:3.

salvation would likely be found there as well. Hebrew worshipers repeatedly acknowledged that God would save His people from their enemies and then bless them (Pss 3:2, 8; 18:2, 35, 46, 50; 35:3; 37:39; 71:15; 118:14, 15, 21; 132:16).

This *salvation* will be inherited, meaning that the deliverance will be completed in the future. However, it is possible to neglect *salvation* in the present (2:3). Thus this salvation involves both the fact of the deliverance from the penalty of sin and the present potential to be delivered from the power of sin. This potential needs to be appropriated through Jesus' present high priestly ministry. It involves entering the Holiest to find help (10:19), drawing near to God with a true heart in full assurance (10:22), holding fast the confession of hope (10:23), and considering each other to stir up love (10:24). Then the extent of the present appropriation of salvation will influence the future inheritance of salvation. Therefore, the warning is not to neglect salvation because of a dynamic relationship between the present and the future salvation. Both aspects will be examined.

- **Sons as benefactors of New Covenant life (8:7-13)**

The message in Hebrews is that New Covenant benefits are now for the believers to have individually and that the Mosaic Covenant is now obsolete (8:7-13). The benefits as they were first promised to Jeremiah are as follows.

My laws are put in their mind and are written on their heart (8:10)

The mention of the law provides continuity between the two covenants. However, the law is not to be understood in the particularity of the Mosaic national system, but in the essence of Christ's own interpretation (Matt 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-34). This is evident in light of reading the text in light of Christ, the mediator of the New Covenant. Though this provides continuity, the role of law in each of God's provisions is distinct. The law in the first covenant with its penalties faced Israel, demanding that each law be obeyed. Then those which were not applied and obeyed stood against Israel, pronouncing condemnation for failure.

Now the believer is redeemed from every transgression committed under the first covenant (9:14). They are now free from the condemnation of law. Nevertheless, the law is now in their heart providing a predisposition to obey. That predisposition is a desire to conform, but not a self-causation to do so. Hence, the warning sections in Hebrews (2:1-4; 3:7-4:13; 6:1-8: 10:26-39; 12:3-11) provide a means (of grace) to induce obedience. Theologians describe this desire which expresses a human partnership (3:1, 8) and responsibility as *compatible* with divine sovereignty. "According to this view, people perform free acts when they do what they want to do, not when they have power to self causation, or some other version of indeterminism. That is, they are not constrained or compelled in their actions, but what they do flows

unimpeded from their wants, desires, preferences, goals and the like.”⁶¹ Thus the presence of the law does not exclude a continuing conflict brought by sin, but does provide wants and desires.

Each one shall know Me (8:11)

This is a promise of a personal relationship with God which involves shared life as sons in knowing God. But as distinct from Jeremiah, the promise of “all shall know” has no collective application in the discussion of the Book of Hebrews. The warnings, although given in the confidence that the author believes that everyone to whom he writes knows the Lord (6:9-12 and 10:39), provide no guarantee that “all” do. The promise in Jer 31:33 has that force, but Hebrews does not apply that meaning to the church. Rather, the “shall know” refers to an individual relationship and refers to those who are called. Each individual who believes that Jesus’ death on the cross satisfies God’s judgment against his sin knows the Lord. This individual application, rather than a collective application of the promise to the church as a whole, indicates the presence of a “testamentary will” providing individual beneficiaries with life. It is not the collective unity involved in covenant partnership as prescribed in Jeremiah with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.

Their sins. . . I will remember no more (8:12)

This forgiveness is the fact of salvation from the penalty of sin. Many come to realize that the promise of forgiveness “is the basis upon which all of the other provisions of the new covenant are to be realized.”⁶² Ronald Diprose summarizes, “[T]he real possibility of forgiveness distinguishes the new covenant from every other proposal that attempts to counter the existential anxiety so prevalent in our time. Eternal forgiveness frees a person from what alienates him or her from God and from what causes his or her best intentions to fail (Mark 7:14-23).”⁶³

• **Sons as heirs of eternal inheritance**

The promise of eternal inheritance includes the ultimate promise of deliverance from an eternal presence of sin. This promise starts with a promise of life which involves becoming a son. As the Son’s inheritance of His name was contingent on His obedience (2:10), so is the son’s inheritance of salvation in its fullness (1:14). The contingency is related to the warnings. To take the warning personally in obedience brings an increasing deliverance from the power of sin. To disregard the warning opens oneself to an increasing influence of the power of sin. When one

⁶¹Paul Helm, *The Providence of God* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1994) 67.

⁶²Mark Saucy, “The Matrix of the New Covenant for contextualizing the Gospel among the Slavic Peoples,” *Theological Reflects* 1 (2006):98.

⁶³Donald E. Diprose, “A Theology of the New Covenant,” *EMJ* 15 (2006):75.

finally inherits salvation, what one receives is related to the grip that the power of sin had maintained in the individual. If sin still has a powerful hold on the individual, the final deliverance of the remaining presence of sin leaves an individual fully redeemed but not mature. He will be completely free from sin eternally, but as a spiritual midget. The reverse would be true of the one who has grown to maturity in the present age. At the point of glorification, a difference in glory would prevail as there is a difference between a rosebud and a fully developed rose.

In order to stimulate appropriate responses to the power of sin, the author to the Hebrews presents a series of warnings.

1. The peril of ignoring the word of salvation (2:1-4)

The world's rushing currents press individuals to disobey and threaten to persuade them to ignore the word. The word of salvation is reliable and was forcefully presented with divine confirmation.

2. The peril of refusing to believe God's promise of rest in spite of an opportune time (3:6-4:13)

As a functioning house, believers need to participate actively in approaching God. Otherwise, they are in danger of being hardened by the deceitfulness of sin and of failing to participate fully in God's future Sabbath rest.

3. The peril of failing to persevere to maturity (5:12-6:8)

Seeing that Jesus has passed into the heavenlies as High Priest, believers have His promised help to grow, if they come boldly to the throne of grace. Ordained according to the pattern of Melchizedek, He ministers as those he represents are blessed by the New Covenant. This covenant was ratified in Christ's death and following His death, inaugurated as testamentary disposition.

4. The peril of abandoning the sacrifice of Christ (10:26-39)

Having reflected on the Old and New Covenants, the writer has detailed the sacrifices of ratification and inauguration. In the discussion, the absolute necessity and glorious superiority of Christ's death shines forth. Therefore, the tragic temptation for the readers to abandon His sacrifice is featured.

5. The peril of refusing God's chastening (12:3-17)

A historic trail of witnesses repeatedly testify to their faith in spite of not receiving their inheritance while they waited on earth. To the recipients of the letter, they must first consider their Lord who suffered at the hands of sinners and compare that with their struggle against sin. God uses this struggle as a chastening of His sons.

These warnings had been preceded by an assurance that Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers (2:10-18). "For sanctification is glory begun, and glory is sanctification completed. And since those who are sanctified to God through His death are sons of God, the Son of God is not ashamed to acknowledge them as His

brothers.”⁶⁴

CONCLUSION

The case for a federal covenant theology in Hebrews lacks consistent textual support. The case rests either on the presupposition of a unified pre-existent New Covenant or on a reinterpretation of textual claims to fit a theological model. Rather the case for biblical covenants has been made which naturally rests on the textual contrast between two priestly ministries supported by two different covenants. The preference between the two falls conclusively in favor of the Melchizedekian priesthood based on Christ’s sacrifice of Himself. The spiritual benefits derive from an application of the New Covenant as a will and testament benefiting those who are called. That ministry supports the growth of sons whom the Son leads to glory. Nevertheless, evidence seemed to support one unified theological covenant that will be accessed in conclusion.

First, there is one people of God (household) throughout the history of salvation (3:6). It is this people among whom Moses was faithful (3:2). Believers today as called ones are also in that household (3:6). Yet in quoting the New Covenant, the author acknowledges that the house of Israel and the house of Judah remain as the stated party of the New Covenant (8:10; 10:16). The assembly to whom the author wrote is, by distinction, the church (12:23). Thus, the church is distinguished from the people of God who will be party to the New Covenant (3:1-6).

Second, there is one actual house as the people serve God. But there are distinct priests supported by distinct covenants for distinct services. Aaronic priests were pressed into service by transgressions exposed by the Mosaic Covenant. On the other hand, the Melchizedekian Priest was vaulted into service by the value of His own personal sacrifice. His death on the cross redeemed believers from the transgressions committed under the old covenant (9:12). This sacrificial death also ratified the New Covenant before God (9:15). As author of the covenant, Christ’s death inaugurated the last will and testament to provide benefits to those who are called (9:16-17). These historic distinctions influenced the way Scripture is used in Hebrews. The Scriptures taken as referring to Jesus are fulfilled in His first advent ministry. His present ministry as high priest, represents believers in that actual house. Again, that is distinct from the Aaronic ministry in the type-house, the Tabernacle.

Finally, salvation is a repeated theme in Hebrews (1:14; 2:3, 10; 5:9; 6:9; 9:28), which adds to the consideration of unity in salvation history. Vos acknowledges that “the writer entertains a firm belief in the effectiveness of doctrinal enlightenment which features the theme of salvation.”⁶⁵ Yet the salvation under the

⁶⁴Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* 45.

⁶⁵Vos, “Hebrews, The Epistle of the Diathēkē,” *The Princeton Theological Review* XIV:1.4.

old covenant (i.e., for Israel) is not identical in every respect with that under the New Covenant (i.e., for Israel and the church). According to Vos, both stem from a pre-existent covenant of grace, but the truth is that neither does so. The New Covenant which bases salvation on God's promise is the basis for both. The distinctions between the benefits provided under the Mosaic covenant ministry and the better benefits under the New Covenant indicate that they are different. One relates to the present only, but the other relates to both the present and the future. Although believers in both ages are redeemed, salvation in the full sense is not the same. Thus no basis remains to infer a theological covenant of grace that determines an identical salvation in both ages.