

Hebrews 16:20-25

The Everlasting Covenant – A Primer on Covenant Theology

...through the blood of the everlasting covenant – v. 20

Covenant theology or Dispensationalism? That's a question that is often times raised in Bible conferences, Sunday School classes and seminaries. Each side will passionately argue their case and in some instances Christian charity may even evaporate in the midst of such discussions or disputes. I was reminded recently of this controversy when I read a newsletter that I receive from a Pastor in Middle East who use to be a neighbor to my family when we lived in the trailer court in Greenville.

This man has been instrumental in planting churches and establishing Bible training institutes in a number of Middle Eastern countries. He's planted churches in Lebanon. He's planted churches in Iraq. He's planted churches in Liberia etc. I've always known that this man was a dispensationalist but it has always been my hope that he would, nevertheless, be preaching the gospel and seeing souls saved. I learned to my dismay in his last newsletter that he had taken up the controversy of Dispensationalism vs. Covenant Theology in his Bible Conferences and there's no doubt on my mind that he's attacking Covenant Theology and articulating his Dispensational notions.

These are the kinds of things that make my heart sink because often times they are articulated from the vantage point of ignorance. But even more tragic than the ignorance is the sad case of the blessings that followers of Christ are robbed of in order for a teacher or preacher or evangelist to promote his prophetic notions.

The best way to approach such a debate, in my point of view, is to say *I yield the floor and my time to the author of the epistle to the Hebrews*. There can be little doubt that he believes in the covenant of grace. Indeed I think it could be fairly and accurately said that the thrust of this epistle has been to demonstrate that we are living in the final days of the administration of the covenant of grace.

And there can be little doubt about the validity of such a covenant when you read in the concluding benediction the phrase *the blood of the everlasting covenant*. Notice the mention of the everlasting covenant. And notice by the placement of this phrase in this final benediction that this everlasting covenant which has been ratified by blood is set forth as the grounds upon which God will work in you and work through you to bring you in increasing measure unto perfection in all the will of God.

You could read it this way *Now the God of peace...through the blood of the everlasting covenant make you perfect in every good work to do his will*. The word *through* is understood by some commentators to be a term of instrumentality. And so some versions translate it *by the blood of the everlasting covenant* which means *by means of* the blood of the everlasting covenant.

What this means, then, is that your understanding of this covenant plays a vital role in the way God works in you to equip and motivate you to perform every good work in his will.

The Holy Spirit, you see, works through our understanding. He does not bypass our heads in order to reach our hearts but he reaches our hearts through our heads – which means that your understanding of the blessings of the covenant of grace will have the effect of stirring your soul to serve Christ.

You begin to see why I would be passionate about the truth of covenant theology and why I would be grieved at the efforts of some well meaning but mistaken preachers and teachers about covenant theology. It's not simply a speculative and hair-splitting issue that only theologians get stirred up about. No – there's much more at stake than that. Your understanding of covenant theology acts as a basis of assurance regarding your salvation and it functions as a source to inspire and motivate your zeal. To see it lightly dismissed, therefore, by those who really have nothing to replace it with is to see the people of God deprived of a great source of assurance and motivation.

And so I think it's appropriate before we end our studies in this epistle to the Hebrews to devote a study to the meaning of the phrase we find in Heb. 13:20 *the everlasting covenant*. Simply put:

We Must be Convinced of the Truth of Covenant Theology

And in the remaining moments of this meeting I want to labor to convince you of that truth. You could call the sub-title to this message *A Primer on Covenant Theology*. Consider with me first of all that if you would be convinced of Covenant Theology:

I. You Must Know What It Means

What is Paul referring to when he uses the phrase *the everlasting covenant*. To understand the complete meaning of the phrase you need to revisit the Garden of Eden and see the dealings or the covenant that God enters into with Adam. Opponents of Covenant Theology will point out that there is no Scripture verse in the narrative of Genesis 2 in which you find the word *covenant*. And while that's true you do find, nevertheless, all the elements of a covenant.

A covenant, you see, is an agreement, or a contract. It may be entered into by men or as is the case in Genesis 2 it may be imposed upon man by a Sovereign Creator. In that original covenant between God and man in the Garden of Eden you find God setting before man the terms of the covenant in Gen. 2:16. Interestingly enough I have a note in my New Schofield Reference Bible which says *A covenant is a sovereign pronouncement of God by which He establishes a relationship of responsibility between Himself and an individual or between Himself and mankind in general*.

Even the Prince of Dispensationalists sees the truth of this covenant between God and man. Listen to the words of Gen. 2:16,17 *And the LORD God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die*.

In this pronouncement by God the reward for Adam's obedience was life and the punishment for Adam's disobedience was death. And so you find in a covenant relationship the terms of the covenant, the promise of reward, and the warning of death. You, of course, know the story. Adam disobeyed and brought himself and the whole human race that he represented into sin.

This is why children are born sinners. They've had the guilt of Adam's sin imputed to them and they've had the sinful nature of Adam imparted to them. There are those that deeply resent the doctrine of original sin. They argue that there's no way they should be held accountable for Adam's sin. After all you weren't there. You weren't even born. Why, then, should I be guilty of a sin I had nothing to do with?

Even apart from Adam's sin, you would still be guilty of sin because when you come into this world you come having inherited Adam's sin nature. And it doesn't take long for child to demonstrate that he's a sinner does it? Sin is not something that you need to teach your child. It comes naturally to him. Being selfish comes naturally. Lying comes naturally.

Now with regard to Adam's first sin and the guilt of that sin being imputed to you – I have good news for you. If you are repulsed by the failure of the first representative of mankind, the good news of the gospel is that you don't have to have Adam as your Federal representative. There's another representative available and that representative is Christ. Listen very carefully, now to the words of Rom. 5:14 *Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over them that had not sinned after the similitude of Adam's transgression, who is the figure of him that was to come.*

Adam was a type of Christ. This truth is brought out again in 1Cor. 15:45 *And so it is written, The first man Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam [was made] a quickening spirit.* There can be no doubt but that the last Adam was Christ. Now this truth of the second Adam becomes a matter of the utmost importance to every child of God. It is, you see, your understanding of Christ as that second Adam that teaches you how salvation was wrought.

When you view Christ, as the second Adam, you see, you are viewing him as One who entered into a covenant with his Father. It's essentially the same covenant as the covenant that was settled with the first Adam. The requirement of the covenant is exactly the same. And what was the requirement that God had of Adam? It was the requirement of perfect obedience. It was the requirement, really, that Adam simply behave in a manner that was consistent with the righteous nature with which he had been created.

How a man created in righteousness could sin is a great mystery that we'll probably never comprehend. But at any rate – when we behold Christ, the second Adam, we find him, just like the first Adam, acting in the capacity of our representative. And we find him taking upon himself the obligation to fulfill all righteousness. We saw this some time ago when we studied the sermon on the mount. I made much of Mt. 5:17 because in that verse you find a very plain and clear statement of purpose as to why Christ came into this world.

Listen to the words of Mt 5:17 where Christ says in his sermon: *Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil.* Now keep in mind what Paul has said about Christ in Rom. 5:14 and in 1Cor. 15:45 – Adam was a figure of him that was to come – namely Christ. And Christ is that last Adam.

By comparing those statements with Christ's stated purpose in Mt. 5:17 it makes it very plain that Christ came to fulfill the law for those that he represented. The question that needs to be considered, then, is simply this – did he succeed? Did he do what Adam failed to do? Did he succeed in fulfilling the law? And the answer is, of course, that he did succeed. So John could write of him in 1Jn. 1:5 that *God is light and in him was no darkness at all.* The formula that is sometimes used to describe Christ goes like this – *He did no sin; He knew no sin; and in him there was no sin.* He did no sin – 1Pet. 2:22; He knew no sin – 2Cor. 5:21; In him was no sin – Heb. 7:26.

So we find in Christ, another representative and a different representative and successful representative. He fulfilled the law for us. We should note, however, that it was not enough for Christ to fulfill the law for us because we had already accrued a debt to that law. And so Christ not only fulfilled the law for us by his life but he then fulfilled the law for us by paying our debt to the broken law through the shedding of his blood on Calvary's cross. And as our text points out to us – this shedding of his blood was in keeping with the terms eternal covenant. So we read of *the blood of the everlasting covenant.*

There is so much more that could be said about the meaning of the everlasting covenant. Let me just give you some points of analysis that you can take and meditate upon as a follow up to our study today. This everlasting covenant is a gracious covenant. Christ secured the reward that Adam failed to secure and this reward is bestowed upon us as covenant breakers – so it's a gracious covenant. It's a durable covenant. It's called an everlasting covenant. It was formulated in eternity past and it will bring us into eternity future. We may also say of this covenant that it's a sure covenant. It's made sure by the shedding of Christ's blood. This is why nobody can be lost for whom that blood was shed. And in close connection to this we can say that this covenant is a costly covenant. Nothing short of the shedding of Christ's blood could ratify it.

This is what we're talking about, then, when we speak of the covenant of grace. We're speaking of Christ. We're speaking of Christ as the second Adam. We're speaking of all that Christ accomplished by his life and by his death and the benefits of that accomplishment to our souls.

So we must know what we're talking about, then, when we speak of the covenant of grace. If you would be convinced of the truth of covenant theology you must know what that phrase is referring to. But consider with me next that if you would be convinced of covenant theology:

II. You Must Appreciate Its Value

I believe that the measure of the value of Covenant Theology is to be found in the value of Christ Himself. Or we may measure its value by the benefits it brings to our souls or the impact it has on our lives.

Let's begin with the value of Christ. And here I would have you look again at this phrase *the blood of the everlasting covenant*. There is a connection between Christ's blood and this everlasting covenant. Christ's coming into this world, you see, was no accident. And Christ taking to himself a body of flesh was no accident. His life and his death were planned before man was even created. He's referred to in the book of Revelation as *the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world* (Rev. 13:8).

What this means is that Christ's agony and suffering and crucifixion did not take him by surprise. This was all in accordance with a plan that was already in place – a plan devised by God and a covenant entered into by Christ. There's a verse in Luke's gospel that captures this very concisely. In Lk. 9:51 we read: *And it came to pass, when the time was come that he should be received up, he stedfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem*. Do you see how his final trip to Jerusalem was in accordance with a set time? And do you see how Christ, with complete knowledge of what awaited him at Jerusalem stedfastly set his face to go there. He was determined to see the issue through. He was determined, in other words, to be apprehended, and mocked, and whipped, and crucified, and buried. It was all in accordance with this predetermined plan.

How can we fail to see Christ in this capacity without bowing before him in solemn reverence and deep humility and to express our praise and thanksgiving for his willingness to enter into such a covenant and then see it through with steadfast determination? What love our Savior demonstrates to us. And what grace is found in that love. He was under no obligation to enter into such a covenant. He would not have been lacking in anything had he left us to the consequences of our sin and punished us in accordance with the first covenant of works.

But instead we see him willing to make that final journey to Jerusalem and allow there outside the city walls for his blood to be shed. And this covenant that he entered into required the shedding of his blood. He must not simply (I say it reverently) be mocked and abused and put to any death. The form was death was part of the plan or the covenant and in his death his blood must be shed. We saw this in an earlier study. In Heb. 9:22 we read *and without shedding of blood is no remission*. Why is that the case? Why must his blood be shed? A number of answers can be given to that question. The life of the flesh is in the blood. His life-blood contained the value and virtue of his perfect life. This is all true but in keeping with our study today we must answer the question by noting that his blood is the blood of the everlasting covenant. It was in accordance with that covenant that his blood had to be shed.

So we measure the value of Covenant Theology by the value of Christ Himself. And we measure the value of Covenant Theology by the benefits it teaches us that come to our souls as a result of Christ's life and death. You can never be lost – that's the value of the

blood of the everlasting covenant to your soul. When Christ shed his blood you became his purchased possession. He will never let you go. He's paid too high a price for you. That's the effect Covenant Theology has on your life. And what's more Covenant Theology teaches you that you will never face God's judgment. He will not demand of you payment that he's received from Christ. His blood, you see, in accordance with the terms of the covenant, appeased God's wrath against you. So God can never be angry with you as a judge.

He may be grieved with you as a Father and he may chastise you as a Father does his son, but his chastisements spring from his love and his desire for your well being. They do not spring from justice that hasn't been satisfied. His justice has been satisfied through the shedding of Christ's blood.

The everlasting covenant, then, executed by Christ and applied to your soul has brought and will bring to you all the blessings that were set in place in the covenant of redemption. Those blessings include the righteousness that qualifies you for heaven. It includes everlasting life and a nearness to God from which nothing can ever sever you. Those blessings include the sure hope of heaven and the sure deliverance from hell.

I tell you what – when I consider what Covenant Theology teaches me about my Savior and what it teaches me about all the benefits I gain from my Savior then I'm moved to feel sorry for those who attack Covenant Theology in order to promote their notions on prophecy. The words of Christ come readily to my mind – *Father forgive them for they know not what they do.*

Don't they know that the assurance of their salvation is grounded in the blood of the everlasting covenant? Don't they know that their motivation to pursue holiness and serve and worship Christ must spring from their knowledge of who Christ is and what Christ has accomplished? Whether they know it or not, I hope this morning that you know and that you are convinced of it.

There is one more very important question that we must consider to be convinced of Covenant Theology. We've considered what it means and we've considered its value. These points, if they accomplish nothing else, I would think would lead you to say – this is certainly the theology I want to believe in. But our desire to believe is not what establishes it. And so we must consider finally that if you would be convinced of Covenant Theology:

III. You Must Know the Scriptural Basis for It

As impressive as this theology may seem, we need to know that it's what the Bible teaches. Is this what the Bible teaches?

You heard earlier this morning Jn. 17 read in your hearing. This is the chapter that contains Christ's high priestly prayer. A number of times in that chapter you find Christ referring to a people that was given to him.

Jn. 17:1,2 These words spake Jesus, and lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, Father, the hour is come; glorify thy Son, that thy Son also may glorify thee: As thou hast given him power over all flesh, that he should give eternal life to as many as thou hast given him.

Verses 9,10 I pray for them: I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me; for they are thine. And all mine are thine, and thine are mine; and I am glorified in them.

Verse 11 And now I am no more in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to thee. Holy Father, keep through thine own name those whom thou hast given me, that they may be one, as we are.

Do you see these references to a people given to Christ? They all point us to the everlasting covenant of grace. It would make for a separate study just to know how these people are identified. They are the ones who believe in Christ. They were the ones who receive the word of Christ. They are the ones who do not identify with the world but who identify with Christ.

The point I'm making now, however, is that the Covenant of Grace (or Redemption) is Scriptural. And of course most, if not all, of our studies in this epistle to the Hebrews have demonstrated that the Covenant of Grace is Scriptural. The Calling of Christ to his superior Priesthood after the order of Melchizedek points us to this covenant. The incarnation of Christ points us to this covenant. Listen again to the words of Heb. 10:5-7

Wherefore when he cometh into the world, he saith, Sacrifice and offering thou wouldst not, but a body hast thou prepared me: 6 In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin thou hast had no pleasure. Then said I, Lo, I come (in the volume of the book it is written of me,) to do thy will, O God. You see how his incarnation was in accordance with a plan or a covenant? Do you see how his purpose in coming was in accordance with the will of God?

The position of Christ at the right hand of God points us to the everlasting covenant. Heb 1:3 *Who being the brightness of [his] glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high.* This was the exaltation that Christ earned by his part in executing the everlasting covenant.

His intercessory work as our high priest points us to that everlasting covenant. Basically when it comes to Christ's intercession I believe it's fair and accurate to say that he pleads the blood of the everlasting covenant before his Father petitioning his Father for all the purchased blessings of the blood to be applied to his people.

If there are two verses worth memorizing in Hebrews that are Heb. 7:24,25 *But this man, because he continueth ever, hath an unchangeable priesthood. Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them.*

I hope, then, that you are convinced of the truth of Covenant Theology this morning. It's a Scriptural doctrine that is based on the truth of God's word especially when your

attention in that word is focused on the person and work of Christ. This is the theology of our sub-standards – the Westminster Confession of Faith as well as our larger and shorter catechisms. Study those questions and answers and note especially the Scriptural proofs that permeate the answers and you'll see the truth of Covenant Theology.

But know this morning, that my aim to convince you of this theology is not merely that I may prevail over you in an argument, so to speak. I know the value of this theology because I've experienced the benefits of it. This is really is the way to establish beyond all doubt a Scriptural basis for your assurance of sins forgiven and everlasting life.

It's been a popular thing in our day and age for preachers or evangelists to try to minister assurance to their hearers by calling on those hearers to remember something they've done. Remember, they say, that on such and such a date you called on Christ to save you. Write that date on the inside cover of your Bible so that you'll never forget it and so when the devil tempts you to doubt you can point him to that date.

I'm not against writing the date of your conversion if you can remember it on the inside cover of your Bible but the thing you need to remember is that you're the one who wrote it. I much prefer to draw my assurance for salvation from what God has written. And when God in his Word makes reference to the everlasting covenant and to the blood of the everlasting covenant then I prefer to draw my assurance on something that is as rock solid as Christ's person and Christ's work.

And so I hope you're convinced of the truth of God's word this morning, not that I may glory over you in some kind of theological debate but that you may glory in your Savior and draw the assurance you need from him that will light the fire of devotion in your soul and then fan that fire to a blaze of service to the One who loved you and shed His blood for your salvation.