

Text: Heb 9.16-17

Last week we talked about the mediator of the new covenant, especially the idea that he has made up for the sins committed under the first covenant, sins the first covenant couldn't really provide an adequate solution.

We will progress to the next two verses of our text, and we are going to consider:

The Validity of the New Covenant

The OED gives these as the first two definitions of validity:

1. The quality of being valid in law; legal authority, force, or strength.
2. The quality of being well-founded on fact, or established on sound principles, and thoroughly applicable to the case or circumstances; soundness and strength (of argument, proof, authority, etc.).¹

Although definition one focuses on the law, there is something to that in how I am using the term. The New Covenant is a kind of legal agreement between the believer and God. It is valid, has full legal authority and force.

But it is also well-founded, well established. The event that brings it into being is unlike the foundation of any other covenant of men and even unlike the first covenant made through Moses with Israel.

The New Covenant is firmly established by a confirming death — you can depend on it.

The validity, reliability, surety, legitimacy, soundness, authenticity, trustworthiness, and guarantee of the New Covenant undergirds the gospel message.

According to Wikipedia, the top religions in the world (in 2023) are:

Christianity	2.365 billion	30.74%
Islam	1.907 billion	24.9%
Secular/Nonreligious/Agnostic/Atheist	1.193 billion	15.58%
Hinduism	1.152 billion	15.1%
Buddhism	506 million	6.6%
Chinese traditional religion	394 million	5.6%

¹ Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "validity (n.), senses 1, 2," July 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1265938066>.

Ethnic religions excluding some in separate categories	300 million	3%
African traditional religions	100 million	1.2%
Sikhism	26 million	0.30%
Judaism	14.7 million	0.2%
Mormonism	17 million	0.2%
Spiritism	15 million	0.2%
Ayyavazhi	9 million	0.11%
Bahá'í	5.0 million	0.07%
Cao Dai	4.0 million	0.05%
Jainism	4.2 million	0.05%
Shinto	4.0 million	0.05%
Zoroastrianism	2.6 million	0.03%
Animism	1.9 million	0.02%
Tenrikyo	2.0 million	0.02%
Neo-Paganism	1.0 million	0.01%
Unitarian Universalism	0.8 million	0.01%
Rastafari	0.6 million	0.007%

I don't know what some of these religions are!

Of course, there are divisions within all groups and the number of real Christians included in Christianity is hard to know.

My point here is that every one of these groups makes claims for truth. They all claim to have the true path, the one that solves your spiritual needs more than all others.

What makes Christianity and the New Covenant more valid than any other truth claim?

Read Heb 9.11-17, text 16-17

Proposition: The death (and resurrection) of Jesus Christ validates the claims the New Covenant makes.

As we start, first this quote:

“Verses 16–17 contain one of the thorniest interpretative issues in the epistle.”²

² David Allen, *Hebrews*, The New American Commentary 35 (Nashville, Tenn: B & H Publ. Group, 2010), 477.

I. The first key to understanding: “covenant” (16, 17)

A. What does “covenant” mean here?

1. How does it sound in English, what words would you use to describe the way it is translated in these two verses? (will or testament)
2. Every English version translates it as “will” or “testament” – most use one of those two terms
3. Many very responsible commentators take it as a “will” or “testament” (F. F. Bruce for one)

Note: in the 1st century Gk usage, the word meant “will” or “testament” in very much the same way as we would use such words today.

B. If “covenant” means a “will” here, what does that mean

1. It means that this is the only place in the Bible where the word is translated “will/testament” instead of “covenant”
 - a. All through the LXX (Greek Old Testament)
 - b. All through the New Testament

That is a total of 391 uses throughout the Bible

2. It means that the author is making a play on words here
 - a. If so, he appears to play off “since a death has taken place” in v. 15
 - b. He is using these verses as an illustration of the benefit that comes to believers with salvation
 - 1) When a man has some property, and dies, it then goes (eventually) into the hands of the heirs
 - 2) Thus, Jesus has righteousness and eternal life, and when he dies his “heirs” inherit the benefits of the New Covenant

We have to say that this is a *possible* view – all the translators take this view

3. But: is the “eternal inheritance” (15) simply the benefit passed on to believers as heirs, or is something else going on here?

C. What if “covenant’ means “covenant”?

1. This makes the meaning consistent with every other use in the Bible
2. It means that the author is talking about something else, other than the death of a testator
3. Key questions:
 - a. When it comes to the Abrahamic covenant, did either party have to die for that covenant to be valid? No
 - b. How about the Mosaic covenant?
 - 1) Did God die?
 - 2) Did Moses or Israel die?

Answer, No

- c. Or the Davidic covenant? Who died? No one

Yet all three covenants are considered valid covenants.

4. Translation issues: the way this reads in our English translations, it is hard to grasp a different meaning

So, stay with me... we aren't finished yet

II. The second key to understanding: “be” (16)

A. The word in the Gk dictionaries

1. To carry (a burden)
2. To bear a trial (endure)
3. To bring, to bring forward
4. To bring along (“**upholds** all things” Heb 1.3)
5. To bring to attention, to announce, to establish – some lexicons assign this meaning for our verse

The basic idea is of carrying something forward, in the OT it often has the idea of carrying or presenting a sacrificial offering

B. Note the generic language: not specific

1. “where a covenant is” (16)

2. "of the one who made it" (16)
3. "a covenant is valid" (17)
4. "only when men are dead" (17)
5. "the one who made it" (17)

The author is stating a principle, not directly talking about Christ and what he did

C. A translation from Westcott:

*For where there is a covenant the death of him that made it must needs be **presented**.*

1. Presented = "carried in, brought forward"
2. Compare the inauguration of the Abrahamic covenant (Gen 15.7-21)
 - a. What does Abram want of God in v. 8? — Proof of the covenant (ratification)
 - b. God calls for a sacrifice (9-11)
 - c. What does God say in v. 13? "Know for certain"
 - d. Explain the ancient ratification of such a covenant: both parties walk through the divided sacrifices
 - 1) Their feet together are blood stained
 - 2) Symbolically, I present my life as forfeit if the covenant is not kept
 - e. In this case, only God passes between the pieces of the sacrifice (17)
 - f. God alone makes the covenant, it all depends on him (18)
3. In the Abrahamic covenant, the "potential" death of God is presented by the sacrifice, validating the covenant

III. The reason Christ's death (and resurrection) validate the New Covenant (17)

A. The translators, following the "will/testament" idea, say that the covenant is valid only when men are dead

ESV for a will takes effect only at death, since it is not in force as long as the one who made it is alive.

NIV because a will is in force only when somebody has died; it never takes effect while the one who made it is living.

KJV For a testament *is* of force after men are dead: otherwise it is of no strength at all while the testator liveth.

Note: remember, I have said this is a possible view, and many hold it, but note:

1. The text doesn't say "men" or "someone"
2. Lit. "For a covenant *is* valid upon deaths"
 - a. The word for deaths is plural
 - b. Perhaps a reference to the many old covenant deaths

"The argument continues to be based on general covenant practice. Until the oath of allegiance had been sworn and validated by the action of cutting the animal in two and walking between the pieces (cf. Gen 15:10, 17; Jer 34:18), the covenant remained merely tentative. It was legally confirmed (βεβαία) on the basis of the dismembered bodies of the sacrificial victims."³

B. The second part of the verse makes the point: this is about validation not inheritance

NAU for it is never in force while the one who made it lives

lit. since not ever *is it* strong when the covenanter lives

1. Death validates the covenant
 - a. When God covenanted with Abram, he put his life on the line as the validation of the covenant

³ William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, vol. 47B, Word Biblical Commentary (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1991), 243.

- b. God “deprived himself of all further power of movement in this respect”⁴ — that is, he obligated himself to keep the covenant
2. Applying this to Christ, we need to identify the parties of the Covenant
 - a. God
 - b. Man (represented by Christ)
 - 1) Any other man could not represent all men
 - 2) Every other man would not have an innocent life to offer
3. Thus, the covenant between God and man comes into effect when our Lord Jesus ratified it with his own blood

“Christ’s death was the means of providing the blood of the new covenant. His sacrificial death ratified or ‘made legally valid’ the new covenant promised in Jer 31:31–34. Because he died a representative death (see on v 15b), those whom he represents may receive the blessings mediated through the new covenant.”⁵

Conclusion:

Proposition: The death (and resurrection) of Jesus Christ validates the claims the New Covenant makes.

No other religion can make this offer – you can only try, try, try to follow the example of the founders of other religions.

In Christ, you rest on him. Instead of try, you rely. You rely on his sacrifice on your behalf which confirms the covenant.

⁴ Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 3rd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1903), 267.

⁵ Lane, 47B:243.