

## 2017 – We Covenant | Jeremiah 31:31-34 | January 2017

*Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new **covenant**... (31:31)*

**Covenant = *diatheke***

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In the LXX *diatheke* is the commonest rendering (270 times) for Hebrew *berit*, covenant. This is the common OT word for a wide variety of agreements. 365

The relationship of the partners in the covenant is expressed by *hesed*, God's covenant loyalty. 1 Sam 20:8 understands it as protective action. Man's remembrance of the covenant expresses itself in action (Ps 103:17 f.). Both partners – Yahweh and the covenant people, represented only by an individual – face one another in the *berit* (covenant). They are thus in an active and real partnership, and so they both share in the covenant meal (Gen 31:54; Exod 24:9 ff). It goes without saying that this strengthens the fellowship of those involved. This does not mean to say that the covenant and its renewal were purely cultic acts. It can hardly be denied that it had a place in the cultus [religions practices] Ps 50)... Yahweh alone, as founder of this covenant, could guarantee its continuance and with it the cultus in its true meaning. Only he could renew the covenant broken by human disobedience. 367

This explains why in many prophets the thought of the covenant virtually vanishes in favor of the call to obedience... There is, however, an essential continuity, for Jeremiah does not speak of the abolition of the law. Rather, he declares (Jer 31:31 ff.): “But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and you shall be my people” (cf. Exod 6:7; Lev 26:12; Jer 7:23; 11:4; 30:22; 32:38; 2 Cor 6:16; Heb 8:10; Rev 21:3). For Jeremiah, this relationship is to be realized not by setting aside the law but by a more personal application of it. 368

NT – It is noteworthy that while covenant is found almost 300 times in the OT, it occurs only 33 times in the NT. Almost half of these instances come in quotations from the OT, and another 5 clearly look back to OT statements... These statements are, however, misleading. The covenant question in the NT cannot be answered solely from the passages where the word is used. It involves a whole complex of theological ideas including covenant terminology... In all 4 NT passages dealing with the Lord's Supper *diatheke* plays an important part: 1 Cor 11:25; Mk 14:24; Matt 26:28; Lk 22:20. Each time it is in connection with the cup, and only there... The use of this formula together with “shed” or “poured out” makes clear beyond question the reference to the covenant blood of the OT (cf. Exod 24:5-8) and with it the covenant which Yahweh made with Israel. This means that, in the Christian *kerygma* [gospel message] and witness, the work of Jesus was, according to his own word, a taking up and fulfilling of the covenant statements of the OT. Schniewind is, therefore, fully justified in pointing out that “Jer. 31:31-34 can be heard in every variation of the words over the cup” and that the prophetic promise finds fulfillment here. 369

If the term covenant (*diatheke*) does not appear as often as one might expect, the reason is that the underlying thought has been taken over in the sayings about the kingdom of God... The new covenant and the kingdom of God are correlated concepts. 369

Miroslav Volf, After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity, (Eerdmans 1998).

According to the Free Church tradition, faith is a necessary but by no means sufficient condition for the emergence of a church. As in most English Separatists, so also in Smyth's *ecclesiology* [concept of the church] the idea of covenant plays a preeminent role. For him the church is "a visible communion of Saints . . . two, three, or more Saints joined together by covenant with God & themselves, freely to use the holy things of God, according to the word, and for their mutual edification, & God's glory." Two elements of this definition of the church are of significance here: "joining together" and "covenant". A church comes about only if people voluntarily unite, and it grows insofar as people voluntarily join it. A Christian congregation, however, also includes a covenant – "vow, promise, oath" – without which it has neither continuity nor stability. According to Smyth, the covenant between believers is merely the external side of the love uniting them (just as the human side of the covenant between God and believers is merely the external side of the faith connecting them with Christ). This covenant consists of "all the duties of love whatsoever." 175

**NOTE:** It is important to note After Our Likeness was published in 1998, where Volf believed – "The various Free Churches are growing most rapidly among Protestants, particularly among the Pentecostals and the charismatic groups, who are characterized not only by the notion of religious immediacy, but also by a high degree of participation and flexibility with respect to filling leadership roles... It seems to me that we are standing in the middle of a clear and irreversible "process of congregationalization" of all Christianity." 12-13

Esther Lightcap Meek, Loving To Know: Covenant Epistemology (Cascade Books 2011).

As it is used in Scripture it becomes apparent that covenant, specifically the covenant between Yahweh, the sovereign Lord, and his sovereignly chosen people, is no mere economic contract. What Scripture indicates is that covenant is nothing less than a historical relationship between persons . . . God works in history, which is to say that he works covenantally. God enters into relationship with his people, which is to say that he calls them into covenant. To enter into relationship is to call into covenant. Covenants could only exist between persons. 195

When Williams thinks of covenant, he generally pictures, as a prime analogy, a marriage relationship. Indeed Scripture appropriates the metaphor first: it calls God's people his bride. He makes the point that such a relationship is constituted by a pledge and also unfolds over time. Frame's usage also evidenced understanding of covenant describing an intimate familial relationship. Also, Williams argues that the concept is justifiably and helpfully employed to describe the entire biblical story: "the Christian religion is . . . the historical unfolding of God's covenantal involvement in the world, the acme [highest point, summit] of which is God's coming into the world in the person of Jesus Christ." 195-196

Scripture, taken as a whole, can be seen as itself God's unfolding and covenantal self-disclosure to his loved people. A covenant, as an interpersonal relationship, is characterized by mutuality. There is interplay of personal initiative, answered by personal response. This back and forth interplay is the pattern of covenant. In the covenant God initiates with humankind, his initiative is sovereign and gracious (not earned)... God's initiative precedes and thereby creates relationship. Parity covenants, by contrast, occur between partners of comparable status. But sovereignty in the case of Yahweh, the covenant Lord, does not efface the mutuality of relationship expressed in initiative and response. 196

Covenantal self-binding consists of commitment to the as-yet-undiscovered reality. Belief, as described in John and in Hebrews, just is the epistemic act: personal and risky submission to the reality of the known... This is covenantal behavior that invites the real, as we will say later. Knowing takes a form not unlike trust and obedience, the language of relational surrender. Allegiance and obligation are prior to understanding and to justification. Obedience is lived truly; obedience precedes knowing/accessing truth. The truths we hold are reflected in our behavior. Williams adds that in the knowing relationship of humans to God, the opposite of knowing is not ignorance, but rebellion. 207

***We should think of human knowing as an unfolding covenant relationship.*** It is highly appropriate to cast human knowing as "being on the way." In our knowing we are, as some have put it, in the middle of the story. We are on the near side of knowing. That means that knowing involves risk and hope. All knowing is a coming to know, an act in process over time. Its impetus is longing, desire, for future insight, and his/her anticipation of it. It is the apprenticeship it takes to make us trained and properly positioned knowers, and the time it takes for characterized centers to unfold themselves to us. It is the knower's reaching beyond his/her current situation, vectoring from herself/himself toward the world. It is moving from situated roots in space and time toward the world... It involves us in what I call surprising recognition: reality's self-disclosures continually surprise us, yet we often feel that we recognize them. 207-208

As I hinted once before, the default mode we have inherited in the western tradition is actually not our most fundamental default setting. Being human is—knowing humanly... Understanding that aspiring knowers are to invite the real will make us better knowers. No longer fixated deadeningly on information, we will know what it is to move through it [i.e. information] and beyond it, in hope of being met by grace, to wisdom, to discovery, to insight, to innovation, to artistry, to healing, to communion—and to see the face of God. We will be better knowers; we will also be better at living as we live this practice.... My mode of presentation itself models inviting the real, as opposed to reflective critique. While I have waited to write this chapter, I have indwelt and savored the array of quotations that I present here [her book contains multiple chapters in dialogue with other scholars writing on certain aspects of her thesis]. I continue to listen to them, not holding them at a distance to scrutinize them so much as trying to insert myself inside them and try on their phrases... Such listening, such indwelling, invites the real. 426-427