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# Covenant

Still More Words of Life for the Church and for the World  
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## **PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE**

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## FOCUS

The word *testament* is rarely found in the most widely used Bible translations. It doesn't appear in the text of the ESV, the NASB or the original NIV. It appears just three times in the NKJV, in 2 Cor. 3:14; Heb. 9:16–17 (The Greek word *diatheke*, translated as *testament* by the NKJV, is most frequently translated as *covenant*). We'll consider this more closely later in the study.

The word *covenant* in English Bibles is a translation of the Hebrew word *berith* or the Greek word *diatheke*. The theological content of the Hebrew *berith* is carried by the Greek *diatheke*, since the translators of the Septuagint (LXX), with only two exceptions, used *diatheke* to translate *berith*.

What is this theological content? Using what you know of the parallelism of Hebrew poetry, consider briefly Ps. 89:28, 33–34; Is. 54:10. With what word do they parallel *berith*?

## SCRIPTURAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORD

The word *covenant* appears nearly 300 times in the Old Testament, and is used at least once in 26 of the 39 Old Testament books. It is to be found nearly 80 times in the Pentateuch and some 90 times from Joshua through Nehemiah. The word *covenant* appears at least 10 times in the Psalms, Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, as well as in the twelve Minor Prophets taken as one book.

*Covenant* is not, however, unique to the Old Testament or God's chosen people. Scholars have noted that ancient suzerainty treaties parallel the form of the covenant the LORD made with His people. In its basic usage, however, *berith* refers to any agreement that defines the relationship between two parties, whether individuals or groups.

Read the illustration of this in Gen. 21:22–32; 26:26–31; 31:43–50; Joshua 9:6–16.<sup>1</sup>

More significant than these interpersonal covenants for Old Testament theology is the LORD's appropriation of *berith* for use concerning His relationship to His creation generally, and people specifically.

Read the first use of *berith* in Scripture, which occurs before the flood in Gen. 6:17–20.

Read the next occurrence of *berith*, which is after the flood in Gen. 8:20–9:17.

Read the next use of the word *covenant* in Gen. 15:1–21, God's covenant with Abram. This covenant is foundational to all biblical theology,<sup>2</sup> not least because of what is

revealed concerning justification through faith (v. 6). The term *covenant* appears only in verse 18, but as with God's covenant with Noah in Genesis 9, the terms of the covenant *per se* should not be divorced from the context, including the call of Abram in Genesis 12. Another feature in this account, which appeared in the accounts of covenants reviewed above, is a formal ceremony to make — Hebrew “cut”, *karath* — the covenant.

Read Gen. 17:1–21. The LORD again makes a covenant with Abram, now 99 years old. Years have gone by, Abram has had a son by Hagar, but Sarai is still barren.

The next covenant of the LORD recorded in Scripture is the covenant he cut with Israel at Mount Sinai. Before that, however, Exodus records that it was remembering His covenant with Abraham that moved the LORD to intercede on behalf of the descendants of Israel (Ex. 2:24; 6:4–5).

Read the recounting of these events at Sinai, as Moses uses the word *covenant* in Ex. 19:4–6; 24:3–11.

In defining this covenant, see also Ex. 34:28; Deut. 4:13; 7:9.

There's much more in the Pentateuch concerning covenants, including Moses' words in Deuteronomy after the generation who had refused to go into Canaan had all died: “Not with our fathers did the LORD make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today,” (5:3) and the covenant renewal beginning in Deuteronomy 29.<sup>3</sup>

1 Other examples from the period of the monarchy include 1 Kings 15:19 and 20:34 as well as the lengthy account of David and Jonathan, whose covenant is noted in 1 Sam. 18:1–5; 20:4–9, 12–17; 22:6–8; 23:15–18.

2 For example, consider Lev. 26:42–45 along with 1 Chron. 16:15–18 (paralleled in Ps. 105:8–11). Although Genesis does not use the word *covenant* in recording

the LORD's interaction with Isaac or Jacob/Israel, the holy authors clearly understood the LORD to be in a covenant relationship with them and their descendants.

3 See also the renewals at Mounts Ebal and Gerezim and at Shechem, Joshua 8:30ff; 24:1–28.

We will briefly look at another covenant which the LORD made with David in 2 Sam. 7:16, “Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.” (The word covenant doesn’t appear in 2 Samuel 7, but in Ps. 89:3–4 we read, “I have made a covenant with my chosen one; I have sworn to David my servant: ‘I will establish your offspring forever, and build your throne for all generations’ ”).<sup>4</sup>

Read the final instance of *covenant* in the Old Testament in Jer. 31:31–37. Jeremiah writes of a new covenant the LORD will cut with the house of Israel and the house of Judah in the coming days. Why is a new covenant necessary?

Which former covenant will it supersede?

What are the terms of the new covenant?

By what does the LORD swear to affirm His promises?

Moving into the New Testament and its use of *diatheke*, verses from Jeremiah 31 are quoted in Rom. 11:27; Heb. 8:6–9:5; 10:16–17. In addition, the adjective “new” is connected with *diatheke* in 2 Cor. 3:6; Heb. 9:11–20; 12:18–24. There is also “the new *diatheke* in [Jesus’] blood” of Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25. What do the passages from Heb. 8:1–9:28; 12:18–24 add to the understanding of the new covenant prophesied in Jeremiah 31?

Hebrews 9:15–20 shows why *covenant* is not a uniformly satisfactory translation of *diatheke*, since, unlike a testament, the death of the one making a covenant is not required for it to become effective. Unfortunately, shifting to *testament* or *will* as the translation for *diatheke* obscures the connection to the covenants with Abraham and at Sinai, thus obscuring the significance of *new*. How might we best deal with this?

Consider other uses of *diatheke* in the New Testament, for example by Zechariah in Luke 1:72–73, Peter in Acts 3:25–26 and Paul in Gal. 3:15–18.

Taken together, the synoptic and Pauline recounting of the Words of Our Lord on the night he was betrayed, (Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25), provide the ultimate explanation and fulfilling of the promised new covenant. Luke and Paul both have, “the new covenant in my blood,” clearly connecting the new covenant with the Lord’s Supper. Matthew alone includes the purpose and power of our Lord’s blood, “for the forgiveness of sins.”

Where and when was the new covenant “cut”?

How does the Lord’s Supper serve as a ceremony establishing the covenant and/or renewing the covenant?

## CONFESSIONAL USAGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE WORD

The vast majority of the times *covenant* or *testament* occur in the *Book of Concord*, they are used either in quotation of the Words of Institution or to distinguish the Old Testament era from the New. A number of passages, however, are helpful to illustrate a Lutheran understanding and usage of the terms.<sup>5</sup>

From the Apology, Article XIII, The Number and Use of the Sacraments, paragraph 20:

“A promise is useless unless it is received by faith. But the sacraments are the signs of the promises. Therefore, in their use faith needs to be present, so that anyone making use of the Lord’s Supper uses it in this way. Because this is a sacrament of the New Testament, as Christ clearly says [cf. 1 Cor. 11:25], communicants

therefore ought to be confident that they are being offered what is promised in the New Testament, namely, the free forgiveness of sins. Moreover, they should receive it by faith, comfort their troubled conscience, and believe that these testimonies are not false ...”

From the Apology, Article XXVII, Monastic Vows, paragraph 20:

“... it is also an intolerable blasphemy when Thomas says that “the monastic profession is equal to baptism.” It is madness to put a human tradition, which has neither a command nor a promise of God, on the same level with an ordinance of Christ, which has both a command and a promise of God, and which contains a covenant of grace and eternal life.”

From the Formula of Concord Solid Declaration, Article VII, Concerning the Holy Supper, paragraphs 50–53:

<sup>4</sup> See also 2 Sam. 23:5 and 2 Chron. 21:7.

<sup>5</sup> Quotations are from Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert, ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. Charles Arand et al. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

“Here, in the institution of *his last will and testament and this enduring covenant and agreement*, [Christ] did not use flowery language but rather the most appropriate, simple, unambiguous, and plain words. He also did so in all articles of faith and in every other institution of the *signs of his covenant and grace, or sacraments*, such as circumcision, the various sacrifices in the Old Testament, and Holy Baptism.

... the words of Luke and Paul, “This cup is the New Testament in my blood,” can have no other meaning than that which St. Matthew and Mark give [Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24], ‘This (namely, what you are drinking through the mouth from this cup) is my blood of the New Testament, through which *I am establishing, sealing, and confirming this testament of mine, this new covenant of the forgiveness of sins, with you people.*’” (italics added)

## TEACHING/PREACHING USAGE OF THE TERMS

The theological concept of covenant/testament provides rich ground for the proper application of Law and Gospel. On the Law side, the warnings of Gen. 17:14; Lev. 26:14–16; Joshua 7:11–12 make clear the LORD’s wrath toward all who break His covenant. The thunder of God’s Law toward those who disobey His word echoes clearly again and again.

The Gospel, however, is also clearly intrinsic to His covenants. For starters, the LORD’s covenants are based on His mercy and grace, not on any merits of the people. Steadfast love and faithfulness, as opposed to a legalistic and unforgiving demand for adherence to every minutia of the covenant stipulations, characterizes the LORD’s covenant relationships. See Deut. 7:7–9.

The passages listed above, as applications of the Law, make clear that God’s ultimate purpose in proclaiming doom and destruction is that His people would return to Him so that he may have mercy on them (e.g. in Leviticus 26 compare vv. 14–39 with 40–45). Lutherans, in particular, should remember that it was Abram’s trust in the LORD’s covenant promises that were counted to him as righteousness (Gen. 15:6). The righteousness of faith, relying and depending on God’s promises fulfilled in Christ, is the covenant response He desires. The description of God being one “who keeps covenant and steadfast love (Hebrew *hesed*),” underlines the Gospel application of covenant, (c.f. Deut. 7:9; Neh. 1:5; 9:32; Dan. 9:4). The Servant Song of Isaiah 42 identifies the Servant of the LORD, our Lord Jesus, as the covenant: “I am the LORD; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations” (v. 6).

The use of *covenant* or *testament* in legal contexts in our society doesn’t seem to create significant problems for our use of these words in preaching and teaching. The Covenant Theology embraced by various Reformed churches,

however, is worth noting. In this theological framework, God entered into a *covenant of works* with Adam. By his sin Adam broke that covenant for himself and all his descendants. On the basis of an eternal *covenant of redemption* between God the Father and the Son concerning the salvation of mankind, a *covenant of grace* is available for the elect.<sup>6,7</sup> *The Greater Westminster Catechism* reflects a slightly different formulation of this teaching.<sup>8</sup> At least some expressions of this teaching tend toward legalism, displacing grace and mercy with the sovereignty of God and faith as an obligation rather than a divinely created response. Defining or understanding the covenants of Scripture as contracts tends toward the same result. Contracts can exist without mercy, grace and love; biblical covenants cannot.

As a biblical way of expressing the relationship between God and sinners on whom He has had mercy, *covenant*

6 Summarized from the article on Covenant Theology in Elwell, Walter A., ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 279–80.

7 For more on the covenant of redemption see the article by R.C. Sproul at [ligonier.org/blog/what-covenant-redemption](http://ligonier.org/blog/what-covenant-redemption). He writes: “The covenant of redemption is a corollary to the doctrine of the Trinity. Like the word *trinity*, the Bible nowhere explicitly mentions it. ... but the concept is heralded throughout. ... The Son entered into a sacred agreement with the Father. He submitted Himself to the obligations of that covenantal agreement. An obligation was likewise assumed by the Father — to give His Son a reward for doing the work of redemption. In his systematic theology, Charles Hodge lists eight promises the Father gave to the Son in this pact made in eternity. Briefly they are: that God would form a purified Church for His Son; that the Son would receive the Spirit without measure; that He would be ever-present to support Him; that He would deliver Him from death and exalt Him to His right hand; that He would have the Holy Spirit to send to whom He willed; that all the Father gave to Him would come to Him and none of these be lost; that multitudes would partake of His redemption and His messianic kingdom; that He would see the travail of His soul and be satisfied

8 “Q. 30. Does God leave the whole human race to die in sin and misery? A. God does not leave the whole human race to die in the sin and misery that resulted from breaking the first covenant, ordinarily called the covenant of works. Merely from his love and mercy, God delivers his elect from sin and misery and brings them into salvation by means of the second covenant, ordinarily called the covenant of grace.” (The Larger Westminster Catechism, [epc.org/file/main-menu/resources/download-epc-doc/WCF-LC-ModernEnglish2011wChapters.pdf](http://epc.org/file/main-menu/resources/download-epc-doc/WCF-LC-ModernEnglish2011wChapters.pdf))

and *testament* are words that can enrich our preaching and teaching of the mercy and grace of God in Jesus Christ. The LORD's covenants in the Old Testament as well as the promised New Covenant of Jeremiah 31, all fulfilled in Christ, highlight the LORD as "a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,

keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin" (Ex. 34:6–7). God bless you as you proclaim the LORD as a God who keeps covenant and steadfast love even when His people have earned His wrath.

## DISCUSSION

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1. What is the continuity or discontinuity between the covenants with Abraham or David and the New Covenant? What about the covenant of Sinai?
2. There has sometimes been disagreement in our Synod over the use of *covenant* versus *testament*, particularly with reference to the Lord's Supper. How might we best engage such disagreement, reflecting the usage of the Scriptures and our confessional documents as we seek to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace?
3. With regard to the proper distinction between Law and Gospel, which of these do you think the members of your congregation would consider the terms *covenant* and *testament* as most strongly conveying? Explain.
4. American Evangelicalism has long spoken of the necessity of having a personal *relationship* with Christ. Lutherans have often noted that relationship isn't a Scriptural term. Since a covenant lays out the relationship between two parties, how might the biblical theology of covenant provide an opportunity for gentle and respectful connection with and correction to the personal relationship theology common in American Christianity?

## SUMMARY

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From the covenant God made with Noah never again to strike down every living creature as he had done (Gen. 8:21), through the covenants with Abram and the children of Israel and David, to the New Covenant established in Jesus, the covenants of the LORD only ever had one ultimate goal and purpose: the redemption of the world. Even the warnings and threats of punishment for those breaking the covenant served the purpose of bringing sinners to turn again to the Lord for mercy in the Lamb of God who has taken away the sin of the world.