

Of Covenants, Causes and Clarity

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Theological clarity on any issue is a desired goal not only for intellectual respectability but also to legitimize and deepen spiritual experience. Certainly, if any theological issue needed clarification, the subject of biblical covenants, particularly the relationship between the old and new covenants, belongs in the category of the ‘needing clarification.’ The point has been forcefully made in the Feb. 2004 issue of *Ministry*, and the appeal and effort made in that issue towards clarity on the subject is commendable for its timeliness and candidness. The goal of this article is not so much to bring any novelty to the discussion as to try to contribute to the ongoing clarification of the relationship between the old and new covenants.

At its core, the issue at stake is really one of getting to understand the essential nature of the old and new covenants as presented in Scripture. In my view, whether we look at the old and new covenants from the perspective of change, transition or development, the notion of *causality* commends itself as a good instrument to bring clarity to whatever distinctions or nuances may be at play with the covenants. The approach I adopt in this article, then, is a fairly simple one. After a brief explanation of Aristotelian *causes*, I will compare and contrast the Scriptural material on the old and new covenants on the basis of these causes.

The Four Causes

We do not have to agree with Aristotle’s philosophical teachings to recognise the formal, analytical value of his notion of *causes*. Commonly, the word ‘cause’ refers to an event that happens prior to an effect. For Aristotle, the word ‘cause’ meant an *explanation* in this sense. He figured that since in all processes of change entities take on a new form, we can ask certain questions of any change. Indeed, we can ask four basic questions of anything, namely, (1) what is it? (2) what is it made of? (3) by what is it made? and (4) for what end is it made? The responses to these questions correspond to Aristotle’s *four causes*, namely (1) the *formal* cause (2) the *material* cause (3) the *efficient* cause (4) the *final* cause. It is customary to illustrate the four causes with human art as follows (1) a statue (2) of marble (3) by a sculptor (4) for a decoration. Applying the four causes to *covenants* to clarify their relationship, we may ask the following questions of the old and new covenants: (1) *formal* cause—what are they? (2) *material* cause—what are they made of? (3) *efficient* cause—by what/who are they made? (4) *final* cause—for what purpose are they made?

Since it is generally agreed that some kind of change occurred in the movement from the old covenant to the new covenant, it is hoped that posing these questions to both covenants would lead to clarity by focussing the exact loci of change and/or continuity.

Old/New Covenants’ Formal Cause—What are they?

Asking about the formal cause of the covenants involves us in an obvious, yet significant tautology. The Old and New covenants are *covenants*, distinguished for example, from *contracts*. *Covenant* is their genus. They belong to the same class. At this level of analysis there is no difference between the covenants. The semantic range of *berit*

(covenant) brings under its purview the initial promise to Abraham in Genesis 12 and its subsequent restatements to him, as well its development in the Mosaic (Exodus 19:4-5; Deut. 26:16-19) and Davidic covenants (2 Sam. 7:16-19; cf 2 Sam. 23:5); the new covenant of Jeremiah (Jer. 31-34), and the everlasting covenants of Isaiah (Isa. 55:3) and Ezekiel (Eze. 16:60). In the New Testament, although Paul affirms the continuity of the Abrahamic promise without specifically designating it a *diatheke* (covenant), in Galatians 3:15, 17 he accords the promise the status of a *diatheke*. The significance of understanding the old and new covenants in the Old Testament as well as the New Testament usage of *diatheke* as *covenants*, lies in the fact that all of them share in the same essential reality.

Old/New Covenants' Material Cause—What are they made of?

It is generally agreed that G. E. Mendenhall's classic study of Hittite suzerainty treaties of the Bronze Age (1400-1200 B.C) throws a lot of light on the biblical idea of covenant. Mendenhall lists six¹ structural elements of Hittite treaty texts that although may not all be present in parallel form in any one place in the Old Testament, lies behind the latter's understanding of the covenant in a *material* sense. Therefore, when we ask the question about what the covenants are made of, we are basically addressing these elements of covenant. According to Mendenhall the following basic structure of Hittite treaties underlies biblical covenants: (i) preamble, where a suzerain identifies himself; (ii) historical prologue, where suzerain rehearses his trustworthiness and the call for future obedience, (iii) stipulations of obligations; (iv) provision for preservation of document in the temple and its periodic public reading to make people aware of obligations; (v) invocation of witnesses; and (vi) blessings and curses for obedience and neglect of covenant stipulations respectively.

At this level of analysis, we begin to see continuities and discontinuities in the old and new covenants. The preamble and historical prologues speak to the element of *grace* which is widely recognised as present in both the old and new covenants. Arguing on the premise of grace for the continuing validity of the Abrahamic promise to New Testament believers, Thomas E. McComiskey notes that "the unity of grace throughout redemptive history is a covenanted unity. It is the promise covenant, the force of which never fails....The unity of grace is expressed in the unfailing promise covenant. It is a continuing legal entity."²

Stipulations in the covenants are of the nature of demands, which is what makes sense of the elements of blessings or curses in covenants depending on one's response to the demands made under the covenant. It is important to keep in mind that stipulations are an essential and integral part of covenants *qua covenants*. Hence to speak of a covenant without stipulations is a contradiction in terms. However, stipulations are not the basis of the covenant but they express the character of life under the covenant. McComiskey is helpful here. Commenting on the new covenant he notes: "its mode of administration is of incomparably greater glory and grace than the mode of obedience in the old covenant, but it is a *torah* covenant."³

The nature of stipulations under the old and new covenants, however, reveals differences and discontinuities between the two. We may distinguish general policy stipulations from specific procedural stipulations. It is customary for some scholars to distinguish the following classes of laws in the Old Testament: the moral code (Ten

Commandments); The Book of Covenant (Ex. 21-23); the so-called priestly code (Lev. 1-7); and the Holiness code (Lev.17-26). Given the placement of the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:1-17) in the declaration of the covenant (Ex.19), they are understood as *the* stipulations of the covenant relationship,⁴ which have continuing validity for both the old and new covenants. We may broadly characterize the moral code as *policy* and the rest of the laws as *procedures*. Even though some aspects of the procedural laws may have come to an end with respect to specific application, the principles behind them may still be valid. This point will become clearer as we discuss the efficient cause of the covenants.

With regards to the status of blessings under the old and new covenants, each aspect of the promise in the Abrahamic covenant can be shown, scripturally, to have eternal validity and continuity both temporally and spiritually.⁵ For example, the promise of offspring to Abraham runs through Isaac to the scion of David who Jeremiah saw in the fulfillment of the “righteous Branch” (Jer. 33:20-21), and Isaiah developed in the servant concept (Isa. 41-53). The Christological application of these concepts to the new covenant are made explicitly by Paul (Rom. 4:13-18; 9:6-8; Gal. 3:7, 23-29), and Peter (Acts 3:25-26).

Old/New Covenants’ Efficient Cause—By what are they made?

At this level of our analysis, we are asking of both the old and new covenant what makes them do well what they are supposed to do. Colloquially we are asking, what makes them tick? Without getting ahead of ourselves to consider the final cause of covenants, we know from Mendenhall’s discussion that rudimentarily, covenants seek to promote a healthy relationship between a Lord and his vassal. In biblical covenants we have in view God-Man relations. How did the old covenant facilitate this relation? What administrative aspects of the old covenant, if any, endure in the new covenant? How may we evaluate the relative efficacy of both covenants? These are the pertinent questions for our consideration in this section.

We have seen that the principal difference between the old and new covenants lies neither in the preamble and prologue (both covenants are based on grace), nor in the blessings (they have continuing temporal and spiritual validity). The distinction between the old and new covenants *with regards to their efficacy* must be sought in the area of stipulations.

To promote healthy covenant life, the old covenant had as its instruments laws (both policy and procedural), priests and sacrifices. Under the complex administration of these instruments, the spiritual and temporal health of the covenant relation was to be preserved based on the free motivation and response of the individual in obedience. *The complex administration of these instruments was the efficient cause of the old covenant.* It is of critical importance to keep in correct perspective the place and ‘ministry of law’ in the administration of the old covenant. As Dyrness correctly observes, “the law shows the people what conduct accords with its place as God’s particular possession. The giving of the law initially with the covenant is a revelation before it is an instruction...Israel does not keep the law in order to become God’s people, but because they already are.”⁶

The old covenant, however, has given way to the new. It is a better covenant (Heb. 8:6); it is new, making the old obsolete (Heb. 8:13). So what is new? Does the

newness consist in doing away with law *per se*? If so, then it ceases to be a biblical covenant. Does the newness consist in the abrogation of the moral law, the Ten Commandments? Certainly not (Rom.7:12, 14). Does the newness consist in the annulment of procedural laws? Yes, such as ritual and levirate marriage laws, but definitely not the aspects of those laws, such as dietary laws, that in *principle* are consistent with the preservation of a healthy spiritual and temporal covenantal relation between God and man (final cause). So what is the efficient cause of the new covenant in promoting a newer, better and ultimate temporal and spiritual covenantal health between God and man? What is new and better and ultimate about the new covenant is *the new provision for the obedience of God's people*.

“The newness manifests itself in the perfect realization of God's plan,”⁷ that is, the obedience that preserves the covenant relation. In this connection, it is important to keep in mind that the new covenant was given against the background of the peoples' failure to obey under the old covenant (Jer. 31:32-33). But how is the *new provision for obedience* administered? Again, McComiskey is helpful: “The administration of obedience is effected by the placing of the law within the heart and by the gracious work of the Holy Spirit.”⁸ *The role of the Spirit in the heart is the essential efficient cause of the new covenant*. The Spirit now gives the enablement necessary for obedience; He internalises, universalizes and immediately mediates the knowledge and obedience of God (Jer. 31:33-34). 1 Pet. 1:2 is instructive. Peter writes concerning believers that they are “chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood.” The same point receives pivotal emphasis in Paul's theology (Rom. 8:1-4; 2 Cor. 3:4-18).

Old/New Covenants' Final Cause—For what purpose are they made?

At this final stage in our analysis we wish to understand why God extends blessings to man through His grace, and within the framework of stipulations. We are looking for the underlying reason for everything we have discussed so far. Is there any difference on this point between the old and new covenants? It is significant that on this issue both covenants share the same goal, namely, God's express desire to have an intimate and relationship with man. This goal is recognised as the *heart and soul* of the covenant.⁹ Earlier the promise was that God would be a God to Abraham's offspring (Gen. 17:7-8; Exod. 29:45), but in other occurrences the element *you will be my people* is added (Exod. 6:7; Lev. 26:12; Jer. 31:33; Ezek. 36:28). The significance of the commonality of the final cause for both covenants underlines the point made earlier about the eternal and universal nature of biblical covenants.

Conclusion

Our analysis of the old and new covenants from the perspective of Aristotle's four causes reveals the following. First, both covenants are similar than usually thought. Second, the critical difference between them is not fundamentally in their juridical demands; rather, the difference is in the administration of essentially similar demands under the aegis of the Holy Spirit in the new covenant. Finally, the analysis helps us to see the role of stipulations as subservient to the overriding goal of covenants without denying their validity.

¹ See William Dyrness, *Themes in Old Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 114-115.

² Thomas E. McComiskey, *The Covenants of Promise: A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 141-142.

³ *Ibid.*, 165.

⁴ Dyrness, 131.

⁵ McComiskey, 15-93.

⁶ Dyrness, 130.

⁷ McComiskey, 168.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 163.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 57.