

The New Constitution

by Ray C. Stedman

A little boy came home from Sunday school and his mother said, "How was the Sunday School class?" He said, "Oh, we had a new teacher, and guess who it was." His mother said, "Who was it?" and he said, "It was Jesus' grandmother!" She said, "Why, what made you think that?" He answered, "Well, all she did was show us pictures of Jesus and tell us stories about him."

There is something of that flavor about the book of Hebrews. The author of Hebrews simply cannot take his eyes off Christ. He is writing to buffeted, often baffled, confused, harassed, and persecuted Christians of that 1st century who were tempted to coldness and dullness because of the glamour of the false all around them. We heard him say in our last study together in the seventh chapter, "It was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, blameless, unstained, separated from sinners, exalted above the heavens," {Heb 7:26 RSV} Christ was just what they needed! And because this is Scripture, and is thus written for all people of God in all ages, it is also true that he is just exactly what we need in these baffling, pressure-filled, bewildering days of the 20th century.

Now, between Verses 26 and 27 of Chapter 7 there is a major division in the letter. I have a continual quarrel with whomever put the chapter divisions in our Bible. They are seldom in the right place, from my point of view. They miss it by two verses this time. Between these two verses the writer turns from his discussion of the person of Jesus Christ, to that which occupies the next chapters, his work, his sacrifice. The next three chapters focus on the great altar of the cross and the bleeding sacrifice that hung there. You will never understand Jesus Christ except in connection with his cross, and you will never understand the cross apart from the person of Christ. These are indivisibly united.

In Chapter 8 we shall see that this transforming event opened up for Christ a new dimension of ministry, and results for us in a new arrangement for living. What do I mean when I say "a new dimension of ministry"? The answer is found in the last two verses of Chapter 7, and the first five verses of Chapter 8.

There is, first, **a perfect sacrifice:**

He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people; he did this once for all when he offered up himself. Indeed, the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever. {Heb 7:27-28 RSV}

Join two phrases of that passage together to get the main thought: "he offered up himself" and, he "was made perfect." As a priest, Jesus Christ could find no unblemished sacrifice that he could offer except himself, so he offered himself. As a sacrifice, there was found no other priest worthy of offering such a sacrifice, so Christ became both Priest and Victim.

On Good Friday many of us gathered to listen to the words of Christ from the cross. In uttering the first three words from the cross, Jesus is a priest:

- "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do," {Luke 23:34}. He is interceding for the bloody murderers who have nailed him to the tree.
- Then he turns to the thief at his side and says, "Today shalt thou be with me in paradise,"

{Luke 23:43 KJV}. He is ministering grace to this red-handed revolutionary who readily admitted his need.

- Then to his mother and the disciple John who were standing at the foot of the cross, he said, “Woman, behold, your son!” “Behold, your mother!” {John 19:26-27 RSV}. He is still a priest, ministering comfort to their hearts, giving one to the other to meet the need of life.

But at this moment a change occurred. The sun was hidden and a strange, unaccountable darkness fell across the face of the land for three hours.

- The first word from the cross out of the midst of that darkness is the terrible cry of dereliction – Immanuel’s orphaned cry – “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” {Matt 27:46, Mark 15:34}. Now he is no longer a priest; he is the victim, offered as a sacrifice on the altar of the cross.
- Then from the midst of that hot hell of pain, and even more excruciating anguish of spirit, come the words, “I thirst,” {John 19:28}.
- This is followed by the last two cries from the cross when with a loud voice at the end of the three hours, he shouted, “It is finished” {John 19:30}; and then, “Father, into thy hands I commit my spirit!” {Luke 23:46 RSV}. Immediately, he gave up the ghost. In those last words he is still a sacrifice, having completed the work that the Father gave him to do.

If you will join two more phrases of this passage together you will get the complete thought of the writer here. Not only did Christ offer up himself as the perfect sacrifice, but he did it “once for all” – forever. That means the cross is a timeless event. It is not simply an historic occurrence that we may look back upon and study as we would the Battle of Waterloo or Gettysburg. It is an intrusion of eternity into time. It is timeless. It is as though it is going on forever and had been going on since the foundation of the world. It is therefore eternally contemporary. Christians are quite accurate when they speak of a cross as “a contemporary experience.”

Every age can know for itself the meaning of this cross. It reaches back to cover all history so that it can be said that Jesus is “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world,” {Rev 13:8 KJV}. Thus all those of the Old Testament who had not yet known of the historic presentation of Christ could be saved, just as we are saved today, for the cross reached backward into time as well as forward. The cross of Jesus Christ, from God’s point of view, is the central act of history, everything flows from that. From that great event all hope is flowing, all light is flaming, it is to it that all events must look for meaning.

This is what I mean when I say that Christ ministers in a new dimension, an eternal dimension, performing a contemporary act that is always meaningful. This gives point to what the author says next:

The results of this perfect sacrifice are being continually ministered to us **in the proper sanctuary**.

Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister in the sanctuary and the true tent which is set up not by man but by the Lord. For every high priest is appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices; hence it is necessary for this priest also to have something to offer. Now if he were on earth, he would not be a priest at all, since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law. They serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly sanctuary; for when Moses was about to erect the tent [the tabernacle], he was instructed by God, saying, “See that you make everything according to the pattern which was shown you on the mountain.” {Heb 8:1-5 RSV}

As the writer says, the point of emphasis in what he has been saying is not *duration* but *location!* The question is: Where is this kind of ministry of Jesus Christ available? Where do you find it? He answers that it comes from the risen Christ who is at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister of the true sanctuary which God made and not man.

Now if the picture you get from that is that we are poor struggling mortals left here on planet

Earth, and Christ is somewhere out in space in heaven, “out there,” then you miss the entire point of the argument of the writer here. I confess that for many years this was the concept I held, and, therefore, I greatly missed the whole point and blessing of what the writer says.

It is true, of course, that Jesus Christ is in heaven, but where is heaven? Well, heaven is not “out there” somewhere, remote in space. It is not some spatial location which can be pinpointed on some other planet in some distant galaxy in the great reaches of space. Heaven is within. Heaven is this new dimension which is as present on earth as it is anywhere else. “The kingdom of heaven,” Jesus said, “is within you,” {cf, Luke 17:21}. It will help us to understand this if we look at what he says about the pattern, for the tabernacle was a pattern of this.

We are told that Moses built the tabernacle according to a pattern which was shown him when he ascended Mount Sinai to receive the Law from the hands of God. He was given specific instructions, “See that you make everything according to the pattern which was shown you on the mountain,” {cf, Exod 25:9}. When the tabernacle took form and shape under the direction of Moses it was a copy of something else that Moses had already seen.

A copy of what? The tabernacle, you remember, was built in three parts. There was a great outer court into which the people could come, but no Gentiles. There was a structure in the center of this court divided into two sections. One part was called the Holy Place where were located certain articles of furniture; into that Holy Place only the priests and the Levites could enter. The third part of the tabernacle was the rear section of this structure, called the Holy of Holies, containing in it nothing but the Ark of the Covenant of God, where dwelt the Shekinah glory, the glowing light that indicated the presence of God. Into that Holy of Holies, hidden behind the veil, entrance was prohibited to all upon pain of death, with the exception of the high priest who could enter once a year and then only under the most rigid requirements involving the shedding of a sacrifice and the bearing in of a basin of blood.

All this was but a pattern, a shadow, it was a copy of the truth. The fascinating thing is that this is exactly the structure of the universe! We live in a universe made on three levels. There is, first of

all, the world of matter, the world of things, material or physical structure that we can touch, sense, see, taste, and smell. There is a great and varied area for discovery and exploration in this world. Science works in this field. Then, there is the world of mind, the world of ideas, of emotions, of the arts, of knowledge, and the interchange of human thought. It, too, is a rich world, inviting voyages of discovery. Beyond this is the world of spirit, a world of vast mystery to us. It is a world in which are hidden the secrets of life and light and love; the keys to living are all in that world of the spirit. But into that world we cannot enter – no man can. It is a world separated from us, shut away from us, we have no way of access in ourselves.

Now Moses was shown all this. He saw the invisible realities of the nature of God, the structure of the universe, and the need for man for a Mediator, a way of access, a way of entrance into this world where all the secrets of life are hidden. Man, in the uniqueness of his nature and structure, is designed to live in all three of these worlds, ultimately. It is God’s intention that he should have access to the inner world. We have no difficulty now with the worlds of mind and matter. We find our bodies to be keenly and wonderfully adapted to the world of matter. We can touch this world, taste it, sense it, feel it, examine it, explore it, analyze it, take it apart and put it together again, rearrange it. We are also adapted to enter the world of mind. We can explore it, we can weigh ideas, we can analyze them, we can entertain the various thoughts of men and we find wonderful delight in doing this. We can enjoy music and beauty of structure and form. But into the world of spirit we cannot enter. There is only One who can enter that realm – the Holy of Holies – the High Priest!

By means of a cross, our High Priest, the only High Priest man will ever have, entered into the Holy of Holies. He broke through into the realm of the spirit so that he is able to set man free in the area where he has been held in greatest bondage. Through him we can enter into this wonderful realm where the secrets of life are held. The cross of Jesus is the gateway into the realm of the spirit, and we penetrate into this secret place of our own being only as we do so through Jesus Christ. The cross is made for the whole man, therefore the cross can be understood on three levels of life: There is the understanding of the cross on the

physical level, its pain, its anguish, the awful thirst of it. There is an understanding of the cross on the emotional level. It is a moving experience to contemplate what occurs in the minds and hearts of those connected with the cross, and especially in the Savior's mind. But the real meaning of the cross never comes to us except as we move into the realm of the spirit, where we are entirely shut up to revelation. Our minds or emotions are incapable of explaining it on this level, we are shut up to what God says it means. But, on that level, we discover there is marvelous meaning and insight on life granted to us in the cross, and in the next section the writer begins to unfold to us the results of this sacrifice. The first part reveals the provision, in the cross, of a new arrangement for living.

If there is a new arrangement, that suggests of course that there must have been an old arrangement. For a brief instant we must look at **the predicted failure of the Law**, the old arrangement.

But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry which is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion for a second.

For he finds fault with them when he says:

**“The days will come, says the Lord,
when I will establish a new covenant with
the house of Israel
and with the house of Judah;
not like the covenant that I made with
their fathers
on the day when I took them by the hand
to lead them out of the land of Egypt;
for they did not continue in my covenant,
and so I paid no heed to them, says the
Lord.” {Heb 8:6-9 RSV}**

The Law of Moses was the first covenant, the Ten Commandments. Now there was nothing wrong with the Ten Commandments and there is still nothing wrong with them. The fault was with the people. God did not find fault with the Law, but Verse 8 says, “he finds fault with them,” with the people, for they misunderstood the purpose of the Law, as men and women all over the world today misunderstand the purpose of the Ten Commandments.

The people of that day thought God wanted them to keep these Ten Commandments as the only way they could please him. They felt he demanded a rigid, careful, scrupulous observance of the Ten Commandments. But what they did not understand, though God pointed this out to them many times, was that God never expected them to keep it. He knew they could not. He did not give it to them to be kept, for he knew they could not keep it. He gave it to them *to show them they could not keep it* so they would then be ready to receive a Savior. But with presumptuous confidence they tried to keep it and when they could not, as of course God knew they could not, they *pretended* to keep it, just as we do today. We set up a standard for ourselves, or accept the standard of others around us, and we honestly try to keep it, but we cannot, for fallen man simply cannot keep moral law. But rather than admit it, we begin to cover up. We lower the requirements, or excuse our failure, by saying, “Well, everybody does it.” Or perhaps we argue that it is the intent to keep it that ought to be accepted, or we promise to try harder, and so on the excuses go. This is what happened with Israel.

They pretended to keep the Law and deceived themselves and so they sank lower and lower in the moral strata. At the moment of lowest ebb, when they had so sunk into the darkness of pagan ignorance around them that they were worshipping the filthy abominations of the heathen and were ready to be carried captive into Babylon, God sent a prophet to them, named Jeremiah.

Through Jeremiah he informed them of a **permanent program** that was yet to come. This program had always been available to them by faith but one day, God said, would be made evident to the nation by sight. It is that program we look at now.

**“This is the covenant that I will make with
the house of Israel
after those days, says the Lord:
I will put my laws into their minds,
and write them on their hearts,
and I will be their God,
and they shall be my people.
And they shall not teach every one his fellow
or every one his brother, saying, ‘Know
the Lord,’
for all shall know me,**

**from the least of them to the greatest.
For I will be merciful toward their iniquities,
and I will remember their sins no more.”
In speaking of a new covenant he treats the first as obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away. {Heb 8:10-13 RSV}**

In a few minutes, as a congregation, we shall gather about the Table of the Lord. During the course of this, the leader will take the bread and break it and distribute it among us. Then will follow the cup, and, using the words Jesus used as he instituted this supper, the leader will say, “This cup is the new covenant made in my blood.” Jesus speaks of this as the new arrangement, the new agreement, the new constitution, from which the life of all who know him will be lived. This is what we mean when we repeat those pregnant words.

This is a covenant or agreement made between the Father and the Son. It is not made between us and God, nor between Israel and God; it is wholly between the Father and the Son. But if any man be “in Christ,” everything in this covenant is available to him. Some day Israel, as a nation, will be “in Christ.” When they are, these words will be fulfilled for Israel, as Jeremiah predicted. But right now, to Jew and Gentile alike, to any individual on the face of the earth who is willing to be “in Christ,” to let Christ live in him, this agreement is valid.

Notice there are four provisions of the new constitution:

1. God says, “I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts.” Right there is the answer to the problem of human motivation.

Have you discovered that the problem in your life is not uncertainty as to what is right; you have known that a long time. The problem is not wanting to do it! It is a problem of motivation.

Someone has well said, “Our difficulty today is not that we are over-strained; we are simply under-motivated.”

So the new arrangement, this new constitution, makes provision for that. We are to look to Christ when we are confronted with the thing we do not want to do. When we need a shove, an impetus, we are to say, “Lord Jesus,

you have promised to write your laws in my mind and on my heart, that I may will to do what you want me to do.” Then for his dear sake, we do it. Those who have tried it have discovered this works! There is a new motive, a motor (these come from the same word), a new power to do what ought to be done.

2. Then he says, “I will be their God, and they shall be my people.” What an answer to the search for identification, to the hunger to belong to someone. Here is the answer to the aching question of the human heart: Who am I, anyway? What can I identify with? God says, “You will be identified with me, forever. I will be your God, and you will be my people.”
3. Then there is the promise, “They shall not teach everyone his fellow or everyone his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for all shall know me, from the least of them to the greatest.” Here is the answer to the sigh of humanity for a hero.

This is what explains this strange phenomenon we have seen so recently called “Beatlemania,” when a few mop-headed youngsters from England coming over here are met with swarms of screaming, fainting teenagers. It is rather harmless, if ridiculous, but what is back of it?

There is in the human heart a desperate hunger for a hero. We want to look up to someone, we want to know some great one personally. God says, “I will satisfy that in your life. You shall know me!” Do you know the one thing that one true Christian can never say to another Christian, anywhere in the world is, “Know the Lord,” for this is the one thing that is always true of even the youngest Christian – he knows the Lord. That is where we start in Christian living. It is the least common denominator.

4. Then the last thing, “For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more.” This is the answer to the universal sense of condemnation.

At a Men’s Conference recently one of the men said, “You know, I have a most difficult boss. I never know where I stand with him.”

Do we not often feel that way about God? We say, "I never know where I stand with God." But God says if you are looking to the great high priest who is ministering to you all the effects of his sacrifice, this is never a problem. For he has written it down in no uncertain words, "There is therefore now *no condemnation* to those who are in Christ Jesus," {cf, Rom 8:1}. None! He says he is always for you, he is never against you. It does not mean he ignores iniquity but he says, "I will be merciful toward it." When you acknowledge it there is no reproach – and no rehash! He never gets historical, dredging up the past. God never does this!

Now, all of this is continuously available. That is the joy of it – always available from within, ministered to us constantly, if we will have it.

Someone said at the close of our Men's Conference that he was going back home to help a group there that needed a shot in the arm. I understood what he meant, but I must confess to you, I am awfully weary of shots in the arm! What a hideous figure that is of Christian inspiration! Are we some kind of religious dope addicts with nothing to show for thirty years of Christian life but an armful of needle marks?

I much prefer the Scriptural figure, "rivers of living water," from which I can drink and in which I can bathe any time I need it. Listen to the way Horatius Bonar puts it:

I heard the voice of Jesus say,
"Behold, I freely give
The living water; thirsty one,
Stoop down and drink, and live."

I came to Jesus, and I drank
Of that life-giving stream;
My thirst was quenched, my soul revived,
And now I live in Him.

Prayer:

Our Father, thank you for this look at the ministry of our great High Priest, a ministry that so many times we have simply ignored, never taken at face value, never taken seriously, but rather looked about in all the broken cisterns of earth to try to find something as a substitute. God forgive us, and help us to claim our heritage in him, this new agreement for living. We pray in His name, Amen.