

The Church of the Firstborn

[Delivered to the Convention of the Western Wisconsin District of the
Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and Other States,
Zion Lutheran Church, Columbus, Wisconsin, June 16-19, 1952]

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Dear Brethren: The important topic which your president assigned me as the subject for the essay at this convention is “The Church of the Firstborn” (Hebrews 12:23). This topic can best be understood not by going at it with preconceived ideas, which however correct they may be in another connection can easily miss the meaning of the Holy Scriptures here, but this topic can best be understood by simply taking these words in the connection in which they stand in the Epistle to the Hebrews, specifically in this portion of the letter where we have a great description of the difference between the Old and the New Covenants, between that law-covenant under which the children of Israel lived up to the coming of Christ, the Old Covenant, or sometimes called the Sinaitic covenant and that covenant which was put into effect with the coming of our Lord Jesus and under which we live, the New Covenant, or the New Testament. And so if we go at this topic by first trying to get these things clear that are spoken of right here in this section of the Epistle to the Hebrews, then we will not only more readily understand what is meant by the church of the firstborn, but that will in turn also give us the basis for applying these truths to our life under the New Covenant today.

This Epistle to the Hebrews is thought by many to have been written by the Apostle Paul himself; in fact, the common English translation of the Bible, the Version authorized by King James, calls the letter “the Epistle of Paul the Apostle”, but the letter itself does not state that Paul is the author, and since the style of the letter is quite different from that in the other letters of the Apostle Paul, various other fascinating speculations have been made as to the probable author, some suggesting Barnabas, others Luke, others Silas, still others Apollos and some even suggesting Lady Priscilla. Be the authorship as it may, as to the readers for whom it was intended, however, the letter does give us a much better idea. It was written to Jewish Christians, and some scholars such as the Germans Bornhaeuser and Ritter even go so far as to say that it was pointed especially toward certain priests at the temple in Jerusalem, a great group of whom according to Acts 6:7 had already very early gone over from the Jewish synagogue to the Christian congregation, but who were now endangered in the steadfastness of their Christian faith both by a Jewish ban of excommunication, a ban which also deprived these priests of their allotted inheritance, and by oft-repeated attempts of the remaining Jewish priesthood to bring them back again to Judaism, attempts that are mentioned in the letter. Their former friends and relatives, we might say, used vinegar and sugar to try to lure them away from the Christian congregation. In any case then the letter to the Hebrews is an attempt to get these Jewish Christians who were in danger struggling with a real temptation to fall from the faith to stand fast unto the end as true companions of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Since the letter is addressed to such readers, a brief resume of its main line of argument will be helpful as background for our topic. After in the first four chapters earnestly warning the readers against falling away from the incomparable Christ, Who is higher than the angels, higher than Moses, higher than Joshua, the epistle then goes on in its main theme of showing that Jesus is the one Who fulfills all of the Old Testament by pointing out how Jesus is also higher than Aaron, the High Priest of the Old Covenant. We have a High Priest, the writer proclaims, a High Priest, Who has opened the way to the real Mercy Seat of God. Whereas the high priest, to whom

the opponents look, must sacrifice first for himself, before he can bring the sacrifice for the people, the High Priest of the Christian congregation is without sin. He had no need of first sacrificing for Himself. He sacrificed, but not for Himself. And more than that, His one, single, great Sacrifice was accepted, because He brought the perfect sacrifice of true obedience and perfect love unto God. Furthermore, Christ Jesus received His office of sacrificing and of being High Priest directly from God; His priesthood is not based upon the setup of the law-covenant, rather it has as its prototype the king-priest Melchisedek, and therefore His Royal Priesthood is higher than the priesthood of the Old Covenant, as the writer then explains not only by the lowly position which even the patriarch Abraham took over against Melchisedek, but also by the fact that God confirmed this high priesthood of Jesus with an oath (ch. 6), which was not the case with the Levitical priesthood.

And with the establishment of this New Testament priesthood of Christ, a priesthood which functions not by virtue of a temporary law imposed from the outside, but by virtue of indestructible Life within, the previous priestly order, which had proved too weak and unprofitable, has been cancelled out. Christ Jesus has therefore a unique priesthood, a priesthood confirmed and guaranteed by the oath of God. For that reason the writer says: He is able to save them to the uttermost that come to God by Him, for He ever lives to intercede on their behalf as the perfect High Priest. The sacrifices which the Levitical priesthood made day by day first for their own sins and then for the people's sins with the blood of animals have been replaced by the one Sacrifice which Jesus made once for all when He offered up Himself.

That is why the writer speaks of Christ's high priesthood in heaven in the real Tabernacle before the Father as a far better priesthood than that of the Aaronitic priesthood on earth (8:1-6). These Jewish Christians who were in danger of falling back again from their newly-won faith should know that in the Church of the New Testament the office of priesthood itself has not been done away with; on the contrary, the true priesthood has now first appeared, namely in Christ Jesus. In place of the old ineffective sacrificing the True Sacrifice has come. The writer summarizes at the beginning of chapter eight, saying: "Now of what we have been saying the main point is this: we have an ideal High Priest such as has been described above. He has taken His seat on the right hand of God's Majesty in the heavens, and serves in the Holy Place and in the real Tabernacle, that is, in the one built by God and not by man." (8:1-2). The next chapters then point out that the high-sacrificing of Christ goes on eternally in the heavenly Tabernacle, and this high-priestly sacrificing in the heavenly Tabernacle is not just a dim shadow of the True Sacrifice, as the Old Covenant sacrifices were, but it is the Actual Real Thing Itself, the Real Actual Sacrifice by which eternal salvation is wrought. The old arrangement of an earthly tent built with hands, a sanctuary bound to an earthly place and to an earthly time is contrasted with the greater and more perfect tabernacle which is "not of this creation", which belongs to the true, heavenly, real world. And the sacrificing in the real, heavenly temple re-establishes not a temporary, but an eternally effective relationship between us and the living God. And all repetition is impossible in this eternal Sacrifice, that is, this sacrifice which extends beyond all bounds of time and of space by which Christ entered heaven itself. The one sacrifice on Golgotha "in the end of the world" (9:26) with which Christ appeared to take away sin by sacrifice of Himself corresponds to the one eternal sacrifice in heaven which the risen and ascended Lord now eternally brings before the Father as our eternal High Priest. Bernard Ritter puts it paradoxically: "The cross stands on the earth, but nevertheless it extends up into heaven." There the living Christ is now our High Priest before God the Father. We can now sing with the poet:

My sin is very sore and great,
I mourn beneath its dreadful load,
O free me from this heavy weight,
My Savior, through Thy precious blood,
And with Thy Father for me plead
That Thou hast suffered in my stead;
From me the burden then is rolled.
Lord, I lay hold
On Thy dear promises of old.

In the 10th chapter of Hebrews we're then told that by this true and eternally valid Sacrifice we mean the sacrifice of Christ's Body (vs. 5-10). By the one sacrifice of His holy Body He has accomplished that which the sacrifices of the Old Covenant could not accomplish (vs. 15-16); that is, He cleanses from sin; He sanctifies and brings everything to perfection. All of which means that He had opened the way to the True Holy of Holies in heaven; He has opened the way to true eternal communion with GOD.

Now by what means are we believers connected to this great eternal Sacrifice? The writer of Hebrews is not satisfied with just urging his readers to an intellectual faith in the priesthood of Christ, as if this were a mere mental process, but he exhorts us to now go on that way into the Holy Place which Christ has opened by His blood. The way through the veiled curtain before the Holy of Holies is through Christ's flesh. By this identification of Christ's flesh and the veil before the Holy of Holies something real, deep and very important is suggested. Christ's flesh at one and the same time both conceals and reveals the heavenly Holy of Holies. It isn't as if the true Sanctuary were far off in the unapproachable distance for the Christian. No, the Christian already is, a citizen of the heavenly city; and as a citizen he may approach unto and live in God's house. That is why the writer exhorts his readers: "So let us draw near and with boldness enter into the holiest, that is, into the most holy place, the holy of holies. And if anyone asks, But where in all the world does the common ordinary Christian get this unheard-of right to enter the Heavenly Sanctuary, to pass through the veil into the Holy of Holies?" the writer now clearly answers: "We get the right to enter the Holy of Holies from our baptisms" he urges. "Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure waters". Yes, baptism is the prerequisite for participation in the Great Sacrifice of the Great High Priest that is spoken of here. Baptism bestows upon us the right to enter into the Holy of Holies. This also reminds us of the practice of the ancient church when those who were but newly baptized on Easter Eve went then on Easter Day for the first time to the altar for sacramental union with their Resurrected Lord in Holy Communion. And our passage then climaxes with the exhortation, "Let us not forsake the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some, but exhort one another, and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching."

Here the main line of thought in the Epistle to the Hebrews appears. What were these Jewish Christians doing that endangered them? They were doubting the Priesthood and Sacrifice of Christ, and His work of actually opening the way into the Holy of Holies. That is why they were beginning to forsake the assembling together of the Christian congregation around the New Testament means of grace, that is why they were forsaking the celebration of this sacrifice in the Divine Service, when the heavenly High Priest Himself comes to do His work through His Word and His Sacraments. No wonder then that in the following the warning not to abuse the great

Sacrifice is taken up again, and now in the strangest form (vs. 26, 31). To separate oneself from this communion, the writer tells us, would be willful sin, would be a renunciation of Christ's sacrifice. And for such as separate themselves from this communion there can be no further sacrifice for sins, there only remains a certain fearful looking for of judgement and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries. If he that despised Moses' law died without mercy, how much more dreadful a punishment must not he expect who "hath trodden under foot the Son of God" and hath counted "the blood of the Covenant" which once made him holy, and unholy thing? There is no other sacrifice, and there is also no returning to the Old Covenant sacrifice setup, to which some wanted to mislead the readers of this epistle.

To be sure, to not forsake the Christian services but to rather continue to gather around Christ's Sacrifice requires faith and perseverance on the part of the readers. But, it is written, the writer quotes, "The just shall live by faith", and then explains "we are not of them who shrink back and perish, but we are of those who believe unto the saving of their souls. Now faith means putting our full confidence in the things we hope for; it means being certain of things we cannot see." By it the saints of old obtained a good report; witness all the heroes of faith in the famous catalogue of chapter 11 from Abel, Enoch and Noah through Abraham, Isaac and Jacob to Moses and then all the other unnamed Old Testament heroes of faith. "Wherefore," the writer continues at the beginning of our chapter twelve, "seeing we also are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses (martyres), let us fling aside every encumbrance and the sin that so readily entangles our feet, and let us run with patient endurance the race that lies before us, simply fixing our gaze upon Jesus, the Source and the Goal of our faith. For He Himself endured the cross and thought nothing of its shame because of the joy He had in doing His Father's will; and He is now seated at the right hand of God's Throne, (the greatest of all the heroes of faith). Therefore if you would escape becoming weary and fainthearted compare your own sufferings with those of Him Who endured such hostility directed against Him by sinners. Then you will not lose your purpose and your courage. Look upon your sufferings only as a heavenly discipline, and, in these times of testing be on your guard against besetting sin.

And it is only after such a line of argument about the True High Priest, about True Sacrifice, about entering the True Holy of Holies that our writer then comes to the important part of the epistle which concerns us especially because our topic is found therein, Hebrews chapter 12, verses 18 to 29. Let us hear this passage first in its completeness: "For you have not come near to something tangible as in the old days; to a mountain all ablaze with flaming fire, and to black darkness and a shrieking storm and out of it a trumpet-blast, a Voice speaking human words. So terrible was that voice that those who heard it begged and prayed that it might stop speaking, for what it had already commanded was more than they could bear – namely, that if even a beast touch this mountain it must be stoned to death (Ex. 19:12,13). And so terrible was the scene that even Moses cried out, 'I am terrified and tremble at this sight.'

No, you have come to the true Mount Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem; you have drawn near to countless hosts of angels, The Great Assembly of Heaven, and to the Church of the First-born, whose names are written in heaven. You have drawn near to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus the Mediator of the New Covenant, and to the sprinkled blood which speaks in more gracious tones than that of Abel.

So be sure you do not refuse to listen to Him Who is speaking to you. For if they who refused to hear those who spoke to them on earth did not escape, how little chance of escape is there for us if we refuse to hear the One Who speaks from Heaven.

Then His voice shook the earth, but now we have His promise, 'Yet again, I will, once for all, shake not only the earth, but Heaven also.' (Hag. 2:6). Here the words "Yet again, once for all" denote the removal of the things which can be shaken - created things - in order that the things which cannot be shaken may remain.

Since then we have received a kingdom that is 'unshakable', let us serve God with thankfulness so that we may offer to God an acceptable service with godly reverence and holy fear. For our God is also a consuming fire (Deut. 4:24)."

When now after this reading we ask the question"

What is the Church of the First-born?

we can certainly answer:

- I. It is not God's people still living under the Old Sinaitic Covenants but
- II. It is the people of God living under Christ's New Covenants

What then is the difference between the two covenants? If we wish to understand this more fully, and if we want to understand what the writer means by the Old Covenant, we must, of course, go back to the Book of Exodus, which tells us of the origin and the inauguration of the Old Covenant. But before we go back to Exodus let us first get the idea of a covenant in general clear. A covenant is an agreement effected by a solemn rite that binds two or more parties closely together for a specific purpose. The first covenant mentioned in the Bible is the so-called Noahic covenant (Gen. 9:8ff), the solemn covenant which God made after the Flood with Noah and all living creatures. When Noah had come forth from the ark and sacrificed thank offerings which pointed to the True Lamb of God Which taketh away the sin of the world, the Lord smelled the sweet savor of Noah's sacrifice and promised that despite the fact that the flood hadn't washed away man's sins and that the imagination of man's heart was still evil from his youth, nevertheless God promised that He would not again punish the corrupt world by a flood as He had done; and God set up the rainbow as the sign or token of His covenant. It should guarantee to all men that while the earth remaineth, seedtime and harvests cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night should not cease. In spite of men's sins and all the corruption they would bring, the history of mankind would go on uninterrupted, so that God's salvation in Christ His Son might continue to work itself through the world until the fullness of all times. That is the so-called Noahic Covenant which God made with all living creatures after the Flood, under which we still live securely, which guarantees the gracious preservation of our sin-cursed world unto the end of the worlds And the token or sign of the Noahic Covenant is the rainbow.

Covenants are also otherwise often mentioned in the Scriptures. Sometimes we hear of just covenants between men, covenants in which men only are the partners. For instance, Abraham, when he lived at Beersheba, made a covenant with his neighbor Abimelech, the king of the Philistines, and sealed it by giving 7 ewe lambs to Abimelech as the sign of that covenant. In those days before reading and writing were general among the common people, this was the equivalent of our modern going to a notary and signing our names to a contract which is the outward sign of our agreement. In the case of this covenant of Abraham with Abimelech, Abraham's rights in the South Country were thereby established and according to common Semitic custom a personal relationship between him and Abimelech was effected. It was perhaps also sealed with a common meal.

But in the Scriptures we also hear of covenants in which GOD is one of the contracting partners. This is something that we never find in heathen religions, where the deity might perhaps be a witness to a covenant between man, but would never bind Himself as one of the partners; but in the Holy Scriptures we hear that the Lord actually binds Himself as a partner in covenants that He makes with men; God is then, of course, the leading partner in the covenant. We've seen that in the case of the Noahic covenant. But let's take also another example to get this big concept of the Scriptures clear. In Genesis 15 Abraham asked God for a guarantee that he and his descendants would possess that land of Canaan where they then were but property-less, wandering shepherds. God answered Abraham by bidding him prepare to make a covenant with Him. He should first sacrifice three 3-year-old animals, a heifer, a she-goat, and a ram, cutting them in two and placing the pieces opposite each other so that the two contrasting partners, God and Abraham, might then walk between the divided bloody sacrifices. Then, according to common Semitic custom, the two would sit down and eat the sacrificial meal of these sacrifices with one another and thus be bound to one another by that covenant. In Genesis 15 the Lord of the whole universe did come and did do the Extraordinary Thing of passing between the bloody sacrifices and thus binding Himself in a covenant with Abraham, a covenant which promised to give him and his seed the land of Canaan.

The most important of the covenants which God made with Abraham is the covenant which was concluded just before the 99-year-old Abraham beget the Promised Seed through Whom all the world was to be blessed. I refer to the covenant of circumcision mentioned in Genesis 16. Abraham received the command to cut off the filth of the foreskin that this Child, we might say, might be begotten not according to the lust of the flesh, but according to the will of God, and this circumcision was expressly designated as the outward sign or token of the so-called Abrahamitic Covenant whereby God promised to Abraham and to His Seed, or descendents, that from their very flesh and blood the Promised Savior would come. This Abrahamitic Covenant was a wonderful Gospel covenant, and was fulfilled when our Lord Jesus actually came in the flesh, and was born true man of the seed of Abraham, and when, on the 8th day after His birth, He was Himself circumcised, thereby fulfilling and completing that covenant. In the New Testament circumcision has been replaced by baptism. This Abrahamitic Covenant was an unconditional, Gospel covenant, and was the foundation, the basis for all the history of the Chosen People, and even the later Sinaitic Covenant, the Law Covenant which came 430 years later, was only added because of transgression and superimposed upon this original Abrahamitic Covenant. Many people forget this Abrahamitic covenants or confuse it with the Sinaitic Covenant, but we should keep them carefully apart, as the Scriptures do. We might represent all the covenants as concentric circles superimposed one upon the ether in such a way that they all center in Christ Jesus, who was fully revealed in the New Covenant. We might represent these covenants as being wider at the bottom; there we would have the Noahic Covenant covering all men, then the Abrahamitic covenant covering the descendants of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob, then the temporary Old or Sinaitic Covenant with the 12 tribes of Israel and finally in the fullness of time the New Covenant. So much for the general idea of covenants in the Scriptures.

Now what was the specific nature of the Old Covenant of which our passage speaks? To get this clear let us recall to mind the origin of the Old Covenant on Mt. Sinai, as the Book of Exodus records it for us. Then we will understand much better what the writer is speaking about in our passage. When the LORD let His first-born, the people of Israel, out from the slavery of Egypt, He stripped all the idols and demons in Egypt of their power by means of the ten plagues;

He even killed the first-born of all the Egyptians, while He saved His “first-born”, Israel, by means of the Sacrifice of the Passover Lambs He did not however, then lead them directly up to the Promised Lands but He led them, strangely enough, into the wilderness with the express purpose of bringing them there unto Himself alone, He even led them about in the desert at first and exposed them to pharaoh’s final pursuit and to what seemed certain capture, so that, when the Devil had finally marshaled all of his forces on the battlefield, then first the LORD might win the glorious victory, and bring His people through the midst of the Red sea on dry land, whilst He drowned the Egyptians in the midst thereof. But we know how the Israelites had no more than finished the great song of thanksgiving on the other shore, when the trials of living in the wilderness unto God alone, the trials of trusting the Lord alone, of living by His grace alone, of receiving food and drink and defence from Him alone brought forth murmurings, strivings and even open rebellion against Moses and against the LORD. A rabble of former slaves like that needed some law and order. Their waywardness which showed itself throughout the journey to Mt. Sinai required a discipline which would make them realize their sin and the futility of all their own endeavors, and when they had thus learned to despair of their own righteousness, would make them realize the need for and the attractiveness of the Gospel which they possessed of old. Hedged in by the many and various laws, moral, political and ceremonial, kept apart from the idolatry and wickedness surrounding it and thus better fitted to carry forward the true worship of the Lord, and the Gospel, until the actual coming of the Savior.

When the Israelites then came to the wilderness of Sinai, the Lord broached the matter of making a special covenant now with them in the following manner. He spoke to Moses, saying. “Thus shall thou say to the house of Jacob, and tell the children of Israel: Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles’ wings and brought you unto myself.” The Israelites had experienced God’s gracious redemption and that is the reason why God could now call upon them to respond to His love. “Now therefore,” He continued, “if ye will obey My voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto Me above all people, for all the earth is mine.” This doesn’t mean that the other peoples in the world would no longer belong to God, as is clear from the words “for all the earth is mine.” God’s making a special covenant now with just one nation, with Israel, doesn’t mean that He was going to abandon the other peoples of the earth, Israel was not chosen to lord it over the other nations, as she later thought in unbelief, but she was chosen to serve the other nations. How was she to serve the other nations? That we hear in the following, when God says to them, “And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation,” As a priest was ordained to bring sacrifices and prayers not for himself but for the people, so Israel was set apart from the surrounding; heathen nations to worship God according to His will, and to be the cradle for the coming Promised Seed, Who would then spread salvation to all the nations. Note, that according to these introductory words of the Sinaitic Covenant, the Lord was about to make a covenant with this people which had been so rebellious, but note also that it was not to be a free, unconditional covenant, with no strings attached to it, rather the Sinaitic Covenant was to be a conditional covenant. God said, “If ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto Me.” The Sinaitic Covenant was not a free, unconditional covenant, like the Noachic Covenant, where the Lord promised that no matter what man did, yea, even in spite of man’s continual sin and corruption, He (the Lord) would nevertheless not again send such a universal flood to punish him. In contrast to such an unconditional Gospel covenant in Exodus we hear that Israel is going to become God’s special people on the basis of a law-covenant, a covenant that would be reciprocal, in which Israel was not just to receive blessings, but had real functions to perform.

What does this imply? Perhaps we can say it this way: God loved Israel, or, as the prophet Hosea pictures it, God wooed Israel to be His bride; He showered His love upon Israel and therefore He wanted Israel to respond to His love and love Him also, and do His will; Israel should so fear and love the Lord, her God, that in all the manifold conditions of life, moral, evil and ceremonial should do His will. That is why in making this covenant God Himself came to Mt. Sinai and revealed His holy will in the commandments.

And even the preparations for actually receiving the Law of God, for hearing the terms of this Sinaitic Covenant, make it clear what kind of a covenant we are dealing with here. The children of Israel were to purify themselves, and to set bounds round about the mount. God commanded, saying, in all earnestness: "Take heed to yourselves that ye go not up into the mount or touch the border of it; whosoever toucheth the mount shall be surely put to death; there shall not a hand touch it, but he shall surely be stoned, or shot through; whether it be beast or man, it shall not live." It was to be made clear to the people that they were standing over against Someone Who was entirely different from them, One Who was holy and Who remained holy, even when HE spoke to them and made a Covenant with them. They should realize that the words which God was going to speak to them would be coming not from men - something men had thought up by themselves, but from God, and from God alone. Therefore God's words were preceded and accompanied by lightnings and thunderings, by dark smoke and quaking of the earth, all so that Israel might know that God, who was now announcing the terms of His Covenant with them, wanted them to fear Him and do His will.

And when then God Himself proclaimed the Ten Commandments to the children of Israel from Mt. Sinai, He was revealing His holy will, He was revealing the terms of His covenant. God announced His claims upon their life. They were told now what they should do, and what they should not do. And when the people couldn't bear to hear the voice of GOD and the accompanying thunderings, and couldn't bear the frightening scene they saw, the lightning and the quaking of the very mountain, they called for Moses to be their mediator, their go-between, to receive in their stead all the Laws of God for all future cases.

And now the important thing: when Israel had answered the proclamation of the Lord, which went something like this: "I, the LORD, am thy God. Therefore thou shalt be mine. Thou shalt have no other gods before Me, and asked; "Wilt thou be mine?" - when Israel had answered unanimously: "Yes, all the words which the Lord hath said will we do. We accept your holy will. We accept the terms of your covenant," then the Old Covenant was actually put into operation - We might say using equivalent modern ideas, actually signed and sealed - by a sacramental act. That sacramental act was a twofold one and was performed in keeping with its nature first on earth and then in the heavens. First at the foot of Mt. Sinai there was erected an altar and then 12 pillars according to the twelve tribes of Israel. Then Moses, as the mediator of the covenant, as the go-between between God and Israel, sprinkled half of the blood of the sacrificial oxen upon the altar of the LORD and the other half upon the people, saying, "Behold the blood of the covenant, which the Lord hath made with you concerning all these words (24:8)." And thus Moses concluded the sacred union of the two partners of this Sinaitic covenant. For the sprinkling with blood is like the passing between the bloody halves of the sacrificial animals in Genesis 15, a sign for the binding of the two partners in an inseparable communion with one another. And when the earthly part of concluding the Sinaitic Covenant had been completed at the foot of Mt. Sinai, the heavenly part had to be accomplished, and so Moses climbed up together with Aaron, Nadab, Abihu and the 70 elders of Israel to Mt. Sinai, so to say into the heavens. And there we're told "they saw the God of Israel" or it is explained more precisely;

they saw “as it were the body of heaven in its clearness,” ...“there was under His feet as it were a paved work of sapphire.” In other words they must have experienced a foretaste of the bliss of heaven such as Peter James and John later experienced on the Mount of Transfiguration, when heaven settled down upon our Lord Jesus as He was praying. There on Mt. Sinai “the nobles of the children of Israel” were not annihilated by the nearness of God, rather at His feet they ate and drank the sacrificial meal and so God took them up as His table companions, as His commensals. They had communion with God. Thus they, we might say, signed and sealed the Sinaitic Covenant.

The last part of the covenant rite at Mt. Sinai was the actual documentation of the Covenant. And again something Extraordinary and Unheard of came to pass, namely: God Himself wrote the constitution, if you will, of this His special people on two tables of stone. For that purpose we hear that He let the Glory of the Lord settle down upon Mt. Sinai and dwelt there in a mantle of clouds. And then significantly Moses had to wait for 6 days before He could enter into the cloud. These 6 days were in a way a repetition of the 6 days of creation. For what God was now doing was renewing and reestablishing His work of Creation. On the seventh day Moses was called upon to climb up into the cloud, to receive the documentary witness of the covenant on the stone tablets and also the plan for the Tabernacle. At this point we should especially note that the characteristic outward sign or token of the Sinaitic Covenant is expressly stated in Exodus to be the celebration of the sabbath (cf. Ex. 31,13). Why is that the sign? Well, in the beginning heaven and earth and all their host were called into being and shaped in six days, so that at the end of the week of creation, on the Great Sabbath, the entire universe might be perfect, as the Lord Himself said, it actually was very good; that is, its creation, was ready to serve the Lord in holiness and righteousness. But then, as we know so well, the foremost of God's creatures, man, ruined God's creation by his sin and rebellion; man destroyed the peace and perfection of Paradise and of the original Sabbath; man profaned himself and the world; he abandoned the freedom of a child of God, and became the slave of the devil and of his own sinful appetites. And because of man now the whole creation groaneth, and is subject to vanity. It is vainly running around in circles; time has lost its real meaning and the world would long since have gone to ruin, if the Creator had not kept His creation going, if He had not kept it going, as St. Paul says in Romans 8, “in hope”, that is, in the hope and expectation of the final restoration of all creation through His Son, our Lord Jesus. Accordingly since the Fall the Creator has always wanted to again bring His creation back from its own vain works to serve Him. And so it was to accomplish that all-encompassing objective that at Mt. Sinai God separated Israel for what we might call priestly duty, even as He Himself said “to be a nation of priests and a holy nation.” Even as the priests stood with their sacrifices and prayers not for themselves but for the people whom they served, so Israel was not chosen so that it might have outward advantages that could never be given to other nations, but Israel was chosen in order that through it Paradise, the original perfect Sabbath, might be regained. Here in Israel God was going to make a beginning of reclaiming His ruined creation. And so in token of this important origin and goal of all creation, God gave Israel the commandment to sanctify every seventh day as a Sabbath, as a rest. So the Sabbath days and the Sabbath years all pointed through to the eternal perfect Sabbath, when once at the end of days the pressure and disorder of the world would come to rest in God, even in Him, in Whom our rest remaineth, the Lord Jesus Christ, Who Himself said, “Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” The celebration of the Sabbath was then the outward sign or token of the Sinaitic Covenant.

That the goal of the Sinaitic Covenant was finally such a renewal of Creation, such a regaining of lost Paradise, of ruined Sabbath, is shown also in Exodus by this that Moses received on Mt. Sinai besides the stone covenant tablets also the original pattern of the tabernacle. For the tabernacle in the midst of Israel's camp was simply a reproduction of God's heavenly abode in the form of a miniature earthly model. The tabernacle showed that God Himself wanted to dwell on earth in the midst of His people. At the same time it showed that the world is the temple in which His glory dwells. This great truth had been lost to men; they had exchanged it for the lie about their own divinity. Thereby God had become a stranger in His own world, as the Prophet Jeremiah puts it (14:8), God had become a "wayfaring man that only now and then turneth aside to tarry for a night." But if now in consequence of the Sinaitic Covenant God bound himself to pitch His tent in the midst of the congregation of Israel, then His purpose was, clearly revealed, namely, that He wanted to bind Himself to His own on earth, and would once reveal His presence to all flesh.

There on Mount Sinai God gave the plan of the tabernacle to Moses. And what we must remember the most important part of that tabernacle was the Holy of Holies. There one found no idol as in the heathen temples of the day, but there was the ark of the covenant with its mercy-seat between the golden cherubim. There was throne upon which the Lord of hosts sat. There He came to meet His people. There the blood of the sacrifices was sprinkled on the great Day of Atonement to atone for the sins of the people. "There," the Lord told Moses, "I will meet thee, and I will come with thee from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim. And the tabernacle shall be sanctified with My Glory and I will sanctify the tabernacle of the congregation and the altar, also both Aaron and his sons to minister to Me in the priest's office and I will dwell among the children of Israel and will be their God and they shall know that I am the LORD, their God, that brought them out of the land of Egypt, that I may dwell among them. I am the LORD, their God,"

While up on the Mount God was thus showing Moses how He intended to live with His holy presence in Israel's midst and how He wanted Aaron and his sons to be prepared for drawing near to Him, the Holy One, as the representatives of the sinful people, below at the foot of Mt. Sinai the children of Israel were already breaking the covenant which they had just concluded with the Lord by worshipping the golden calf. This incident also teaches us something important about the Old Covenant. The gracious plan of the Lord to dwell in the midst of His people seemed ruined. For the Lord determined to destroy this stubborn people and it was only Moses, wrestling with God in prayer, his holding God to the Promise, his getting at God's weak-spot, His mercy and grace, that stayed the judgment and kept God from utterly annihilating this rebellious people. We know that even then when Moses descended from the mountain and heard the idolatrous Song, and saw the lewd dancing of the people, he hurled the two stone tablets of the Law to the ground so that they broke, to signify that the newly-made Sinaitic Covenant had been broken. But the thing that kept that Covenant still in force was this same Moses' continued pleading and wrestling with God; Moses used the age-old Promise of the Savior to overcome God's refusal to go up to the Promised Land with this people. And then, wonder of wonders, God was overcome by Moses' intercession. God was moved to forgive them their sin. He patched up the broken covenant again. He finally even promised to go up into the Promised Land with the children of Israel, He reestablished His covenant. He gave Moses two new tables of stone. Moses built the tabernacle, ordained the holy priesthood, and the Lord graciously came and entered the Tabernacle with His Glory, so that He might dwell with His people and lead them up into the Promised Land. So the Sinaitic Covenant was from the very

beginning a broken covenant, and still it was kept in force by God's faithfulness to it. Israel did not keep her part of the covenant; the Lord, however, did more than keep His part. He upheld it and even patched it up again and again, until it was finally actually fulfilled by the coming of His Son. When then the Jews in unbelief killed Him, Who alone gave meaning to the Covenant, that brought about both the fulfillment and the final end of the Old Covenant, and soon their temple was burned, and they were scattered to the four winds, as it is this day. The Old Covenant was no more. The day the New Covenant had dawned.

But that end of the Old Covenant and the advent of the New Covenant is just that the true believers in the Promise had always foreseen. Moses himself, though he was the mediator of the Old Covenant, longed for the advent of the New Covenant, of the New Testament. Once, when the Spirit of God was poured out not only upon the 68 elders who were gathered in front of the tabernacle to be ordained to aid Moses in his arduous duties, but also upon two elders who hadn't come to the tabernacle, but were still in the camp, Joshua reported their prophesying in the camp, saying: "My Lord Moses, forbid them. But Moses only sighed in longing, for the future New Testament period when the Holy Ghost would come upon all, for the coming of Pentecost, and answered, "Are you jealous on my account? Would God that all the Lord's people were prophets and that the Lord would put his Spirit upon all of them." Moses had given the law, but he couldn't give them "grace and truth." (John 1:17). But his heart nevertheless cried out for the New Covenant, for the free Gospel. And in his last sermon he turned the people from the Law to the Gospel, by saying, "The Lord thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thy brethren; unto Him ye shall hearken (Deut. 18:15)". And Moses prayed at the end of his life for the true successor to lead the people into the Promised Land, saying, "Let the Lord set a man over the congregation, which may go out before them and which may go in before them, and which may lead them out and which may bring them in; that the congregation of the Lord be not as sheep which have no shepherd. (Num. 27:16ff)". And so it was not only with Moses, but also with all the believers throughout the history of the chosen people of God. They looked beyond the Old Covenant with all of its law-arrangements to the ancient Promise of the Christ to come.

Yes, even the glorious temple which David planned but which only Solomon was permitted to build, was not the final reality at all. The Lord had told David, even before it was built, that rather than that he should build a house of wood and stone for the Lord, the Lord instead would build him a house, a house of flesh and blood, from which the Promised Savior would come. And David understood that that house of flesh and blood was much more important than the wood-stone temple. From the line of David the true Son of David, David's Son and yet David's Lord, would be born and He would fulfill the meaning of all the ceremonial laws and arrangements of the Old Covenant, including the old tabernacle and the later Temple. And in the New Testament it is John who tells of that fulfillment in the great words. "The Word was made flesh and dwelt (literally "tabernacles") among us and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the Only Begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth... For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ."

So the Old Covenant with its laws was only a sort of scaffolding encasing the Seed of Abraham until the fullness of time when it would be torn down. It did not annul or replace the erstwhile covenant of grace entered into by God with Abraham more than four centuries before (Gal. 3:10). The law was merely an adjunct added because of transgressions (Gal. 3:10); by the law is the knowledge of sin (Rom. 3:20); the law worketh wrath (4:15), the law entered that the offense might abound (3:20), by the law God concluded all under sin that the Promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe (Gal. 3:22), and thus the law was but the

schoolmaster (or pedagogue) to bring them unto Christ. The prophets also realized that the Sinaitic Covenant was not the ultimate reality. Jeremiah even lived to see the glorious temple of wood and stone which Solomon had built burned and destroyed; he lived to see the Jewish nation carried off to captivity in Babylonia, given up to the heathen Nebuchadnezzar because they had broken their covenant with the Lord, but then, when everyone else had lost hope, Jeremiah saw the real Promise of the Savior and the New Covenant shine forth in all their glory. And it was he that prophesied in a passage that is of key importance for the understanding of the relation between the Old and New Covenants as follows, Chapter 31 verse 31 and following: "Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah, not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers, in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, which covenant they brake, although I was a husband unto them, saith the Lord. But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel. After those days, saith the Lord, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts, and will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord, for they shall all know Me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the Lord: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more" Here Jeremiah is glorying in the New Covenant and its means of grace, even as the Apostle John does, when he writes to his readers: (1 John 2:20ff) And you on your part have anointment from the Holy One, and you all know I did not write you because you do not know the truth, but because you know it. . .and you have no need for anyone to be teaching you. On the contrary, as his anointment continues to teach you concerning everything. . .just as it did teach you, continue to remain in Him." The anointment of Christ bestowed upon us by the Holy Ghost in Word and Sacrament makes us taught directly of God. This does not exclude the giving of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers for the perfecting of the saints in true New Testament era. Yet these are only ministers and stewards of the mysteries of God - the Spirit of the living God does the work through their ministration. Ezra reestablished the Old Covenant in full force after the return of the Jews from the Babylonian captivity, but even then after such a severe judgement of God as the captivity was, the Covenant was not really kept by the Jews, as we hear from the prophets, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi. No, in the fullness of time it was finally God Who sent forth His Son, made of a woman, made under the law, that He might redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons (Gal. 4:4f). He both fulfilled and thus ended the Old Covenant.

To sum up our findings about the Old Covenant, we can say its partners were God and the children of Israel. It was a reciprocal covenant, depending upon two partners for its functioning. Its promise was conditional. If Israel did God's will and kept His commandments, then God would be Israel's special God and Israel would be His special people. The sign or token of the Old or Sinaitic Covenant was the celebration of the Sabbath, pointing back to the original perfection of all things and ahead to the final regaining of Lost Paradise and of the Real Sabbath. The Sinaitic covenant was a temporary covenant, and was to remain in effect only until the coming of Christ. And as we shall hear in greater detail in the following, its essential difference from the New Covenant is that it was a law-covenant, whereas the New Covenant is a Gospel-covenant. Such then is the fullness of ideas out of which the writer in our passage says to the Jewish Christians, "You have not come near to something tangible as in the old days; to a mountain all ablaze with flaming fire and to black darkness and a shrieking storm and out of it a trumpet-blast, a Voice speaking human words. So terrible was that voice that those who heard it

begged and prayed that it might stop speaking, for what it had already commanded was more than they could bear, namely, that if even a beast touch this mountain it must be stoned to death. And so terrible was the scene that even Moses cried out, 'I am terrified and tremble at this sight.'" That is not the experience of New Testament Christians. They have come to something quite different.

The forefathers in the times of the Old Covenant had such a terrifying experience. Their drawing near was really a standing afar off, the mount of revelation was unapproachable to them, the voice of God that came from it was unbearably frightful, even though it still was only a tangible creation in which God revealed Himself. True real communion with God had not thereby appeared; first the law had to make them painfully conscious of the fact that sin hinders such true communion with God, so that the believers among them would long for the new period of grace, the New Covenant, promised by Jeremiah and others. In the New Covenant a tangible mountain is not the place where God reveals Himself, but heaven has opened and the great heavenly world, the real world in which God has His throne, has been opened to our approach; it has been opened by Jesus the mediator of the New Covenant; it has been accessible by His atoning blood. "No, you have not come to frightful Mt. Sinai," our writer says to the Christians of the New Testament era, "but you have come to the true Mount Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem; you have drawn near to countless hosts of angels, the Great Assembly of Heaven, and to the Church of the First-born, whose names are written in heaven. You have drawn near to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, and to Jesus, the Mediator of the New Covenant, and to the sprinkled blood which speaks in more gracious tones than that of Abel." It is in the New Testament congregation that this transition into the realm of God's presence, into the true tabernacle, into the heavenly Sanctuary really takes place. Those Jewish Christians who were being tempted to go back to the Old Covenant, should not forsake the assembling together of the New Testament Christians around the true Sacrifice, that is, the Sacrifice of Christ. For in the Christian divine service we do not have just a kind of memorial day celebration of a 2000 year old event, but the living Christ is present in Word and Sacrament with all the realities of the true world. For when a Christian congregation gathers about the means of grace, about the baptismal font, about the lectern and pulpit, about the altar, then it comes to these heavenly realities. When, for instance, in its divine service the Christian congregation hears the Word of God, the Gospel of Christ, it isn't just listening to a certain preacher proclaiming a certain way of looking at things that he happens to have over against perhaps other ways of looking at things that others may happen to have, but in, with and through the inspired Word of God the living Lord, Christ Jesus, is speaking to His people. We are not accordingly to marvel or criticize the preacher's reading or the preacher's rhetoric, but we are to listen to what Christ is telling us. In our divine service when the Gospel for the day is announced we arise with the greeting "Glory be to Thee, O Lord!" and when we have heard the Gospel, we conclude "Thanks be to Thee, O Christ!" This is not a meaningless form that some liturgical scholars have foisted upon us, but it expresses most wonderfully our conviction that in the Holy Scriptures it is Christ Who is speaking to us. He is the Lord of the Scriptures; they testify of Him, and when they are read and expounded by the minister, Christ is really the One Who is present and Who is speaking to His congregation. Likewise, when the Christian congregation celebrates the Sacraments according to Christ's institution, it is the living Christ who is the real doer, and not the minister. When, for instance, a child is baptized, it is not the minister doing the real baptizing, but Christ Jesus is present with all of His grace, effecting the New Birth by Water and the Spirit. A hymn puts it this way: "The minister whom Christ has

sent. . . Is but His humble instrument.” Baptism is the washing of regeneration (rebirth) and the renewing effected by the Holy Ghost and it brings us into contact with the true heavenly realities of Christ’s New Covenant. And finally, when we gather to celebrate the Sacrament of the Altar according to Christ’s Institution and thereby show forth His death till He comes, the centuries of the past and the centuries of the future telescope into the mathematical point of Christ’s presence; and the tremendous gulf between heaven and earth disappears. Christ Jesus, so to say, breaks through all the bounds of time and space that still bind us and comes with His full divinity and His full humanity in His true Body and His true Blood, given and shed for us for the remission of sins. Our communion hymn correctly says: “High o’er all the heav’ns He reigneth, Yet to dwell with thee He deigneth.” (305, verse 1).” “We didn’t know whether we were in heaven or on the earth”, thus the ambassadors of the Russian prince of Kiev characterized the Christian divine service in Constantinople in contrast to the services of the Jews and Mohammedans, when they reported back to their pagan lord.

How are these great heavenly realities to which we have been brought in the New Testament described here in Hebrews? The writer says, “Ye have come near to the true Mount Zion.” Mt. Sinai represented the law; there it was winter with no sunshine, no flowers, no songs of birds. But Mt. Sinai and its law-covenant have passed away and now God has set His King on Mt. Zion, even His Son. Here is the City of God, where the real heavenly tabernacle with the real Holy of Holies is to be found. Here is “the heavenly Jerusalem.” Here God reveals Himself in His City. It is the City of David, the city of the true Son of David, of Whom David and Solomon and all the other kings of Judah who once lived in Jerusalem were but dim shadows. Here is the “city of the living God.”

And it is not an empty city to which we New Testament Christians have come. It is inhabited by men and angels. We have come as our writer says, “to countless hosts of angels,” to innumerable multitudes of angels, to the “Great Assembly of Heaven.” This description of the New Covenant city of God filled with all the angels reminds me of the heavenly divine service pictured in Revelation, chapters 4 and 5, where the hosts of heaven are gathered around the Lamb that was slain; and it also recalls our own liturgy at the point when we are about to celebrate the Sacrament of the Altar, when we, the Church still on earth, join with angels and archangels and all the host of heaven, and then we all, as the entire Church, the Church Militant and the Church Triumphant, man and angels, laud and magnify God’s Holy Name evermore praising Him and saying, “Holy, Holy, Holy is the LORD God of Hosts; heaven and earth are full of Thy glory!” Philip Nicolae had this City of God in mind when he wrote in the King of Chorales:

Now let all the heav’ns adore Thee,
Let men and angels sing before Thee,
With harp and cymbal's clearest tone.
Of one pearl each shining portal,
Where, dwelling with the choir immortal,
We gather round Thy radiant throne.
No vision ever brought,
No ear hath ever caught,
Such great glory,
Therefore will we Eternally
Sing hymns of praise and joy to Thee.

But besides being in communion with these heavenly citizens in the City of God, we New Testament believers are in communion with all the saints in the Church on earth. We have come, our writer tells us, to “the Church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven.” This undoubtedly refers to the church on earth, for its members are enrolled in heaven, and are thus themselves not as yet there. They are called firstborn because of their being the heirs of the heavenly inheritance; the City of God belongs to them. The “Church of the Firstborn whose names are written in heaven” evidently means the New Testament congregation. Just as under the Old Covenant the tribe of Levi, the priests, represented the first-born, who were sacred unto the Lord (Ex. 13:2; Num. 3:12f), and just as Israel itself was called God’s firstborn (Ex. 4:22), and as such was the heir of the Promise, so the New Testament believers are also called in Christ to be the first-born sons and heirs of eternal inheritance (cf. Eph. 1:12; James 1:18), and so their names are enrolled as citizens of heaven. Christ Himself is the First-Born. In eternity He was the First-Born, the Only-Begotten One; with reference then to creation. He, Who is the express image, the visible expression, of the invisible God is the First-born of every creature (Col. 1:15; Rev. 3:14), that is, He existed before creation began. Being thus the true First-Born, His priesthood was perfect. After His death on the cross, He entered life as the First-Born from the dead (Rev. 1:5). And so Christians by virtue of their union with Him, possess the rights and privileges of the firstborn, the rights of primogeniture. Their names are enrolled on the lists of the heavenly city; they enjoy the privilege of access and the right of inheritance. So those Jewish Christians who had been banned and had lost their allotted portions of inheritance should not worry; in the Christian congregation they enjoy the real rights of primogeniture, as brothers of our Lord Jesus Christ in communion with the entire church of Christ on earth, with all the saints.

The writer then continues in his ascending enumeration of the heavenly realities of the New Covenant by saying “Ye have drawn near to God, the judge of all.” We Christians have come to God the supreme ruler and governor, Who is infallible in His judgment, and Who will therefore vindicate His people who have been falsely accused and unjustly oppressed, and He will give to each his true position. “We have come to the spirits of just men made perfect.” Those saints in bliss who have finished their course in the faith are another part of our company. They are called “spirits”, I suppose, because they are still waiting for the resurrection of the body. They are now with the Lord in Whom they trusted.

But all of these heavenly realities depend upon and are based upon the ~~7~~arson and the work of the New Testament Mediator, Jesus Christ. That is why the writer comes to Him in the last two most important phrases of his ascending enumeration, saying, “And ye have come to Jesus the Mediator of the New Covenant, and to the sprinkled blood which speaks in more gracious tones than that of Abel.” Here we hear the name “Jesus”, that means “Savior”, the sweetest name of our Lord, the human name of our exalted Lord! He is called “the mediator of the New Covenant.” Moses inaugurated the Old Covenant by sprinkling the blood of the sacrificial animals upon the people at the foot of Mt. Sinai, as he said. “Behold the blood of the covenant which the Lord hath made with you concerning all these words.” But Jesus inaugurated the New Covenant by sacrificing Himself and shedding His own precious blood. In fact, at the institution of the Lord’s Supper He called His blood the blood of the New Testament, saying, “This is the New Testament in My blood”, or “This is the Blood of the New Testament.” His blood speaks something better than Abel’s blood. “Abel’s blood for vengeance pleaded to the skies, but the Blood of Jesus for our pardon cries.” When our Lord Jesus came and entered human history as true God, begotten of the Father from eternity and also true man born of the Virgin Mary, He lived a perfect life and by that perfect life He fulfilled all the requirements of

the Old Covenant, and even His death was the sacrifice which not only initiated the New Covenant, but which completely fulfilled the Old Covenant. He died not as a religious hero for some principle He happened to have, but He died as God's Lamb, as the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world. No wonder then that the veil of the temple which had always separated the Holy of Holies where God dwelt from the people was rent slick and clean from the top to the bottom at the ninth hour on Good Friday, when Jesus died. The way to God was now opened and all could approach God through Jesus, for He had offered the True Sacrifice. There is no further need of more animal sacrifices according to the ceremonial laws of the Old Covenant; nor is there any need of any of the other provisions of that Old Law Covenant, as the seventh Day Adventists would have us believe, such as abstaining from pork, keeping the Sabbath Day, etc., for Jesus has fulfilled that Covenant with all of its provisions and thus ended it.

But our Lord Jesus not only died; He rose bodily from the dead. He ascended into heaven, and, as our eternal High Priest in heaven, He reigns at the right hand of the Father, and from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. But meanwhile from the time of His visible ascension until His final visible coming in glory He has not left His New Testament disciples orphans on earth. But He comes to us with all of His grace; He comes to us through those means of Grace to which He has bound Himself so that we can find Him; He comes to us through His Word and His Sacraments. We explained above that the heavenly realities of the New Covenant that have been mentioned here are conveyed to us by the means of grace, and, we can add here, by nothing else. Our Lutheran Church does not look for them in the outward visible organization that is subject to the Bishop of Rome as the Roman Catholics are taught to believe, nor do we look for them anywhere and everywhere where God's Spirit might become effective, as many sectarians do, but we look to those things which God Himself has ordained and instituted: His inspired Word, His Baptism and His Holy Supper. That is why our Augsburg Confession says of the Church, - and we can rightly apply it here to the Church of the Firstborn - "The Church is the congregation of saints in which the Gospel is rightly taught and the sacraments are rightly administered. (VII CA)"

When therefore the Christian congregation hears the Bible read and expounded, it is not just as if it were in a lecture hall listening to the reports of pious men about God and His doings, but it is hearing God's very own Word. By His Word God created heaven and earth; by His Word God still sustains all creation; by His Word God expresses His inmost thoughts, His inmost being. Scripture even tells us that God's Word is a Person, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity; God's eternal Son, the Word Who became flesh, and was born of the Virgin Mary as our brother. It is this Lord Jesus Who is the real content of the Holy Scriptures. They testify of Him and, when they are read and preached, He Himself is speaking. And therefore we, when we hear God's Word obtain either grace or wrath from it; we receive grace, if we take the Message to heart and trust it, but we receive wrath if we let the Good Seed fall upon unrepentant hearts of stones or upon hearts that will choke it with their thorns and thistles. When therefore the scriptures are read in church, we should learn to give earnest attention with both ears, not to the minister who reads, but to our gracious savior, Who is speaking to us. And also when the Word is explained and applied in the Sermon, we are not to marvel at, or criticize, the oratory or the wisdom of the preacher, but rather to listen to what GOD would say to us through His Word. For His Word brings us near to the heavenly realities of the Real World and of the New Covenant.

And now as to Baptism, it is not simple water only, but it is water used by God's command and connected with God's Word. It is Christ Jesus our Lord Who instituted baptism, saying, "Go ye and teach all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son,

and of the Holy Ghost;” and it is He Who has promised “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved.” And because it has therefore Christ’s Word behind it, the water of baptism effects the New Birth and entrance into the real heavenly world. The final stanza of Luther’s great baptismal hymn tells us of the great heavenly realities which actually take place when a person is baptized:

The eye of sense alone is dim
And nothing sees but water;
Faith sees Christ Jesus and in Him
The Lamb ordained for slaughter;
She sees the cleansing fountain red
With the dear blood of Jesus,
Which from the sins inherited
From fallen Adam frees us,
And from our own misdoings.

Baptism is the washing of regeneration, of rebirth, and the renewing effected by the Holy Ghost; it brings us into contact with Christ and all the heavenly realities of His New Covenant.

And the last means of grace that brings us to these heavenly realities is the Lord’s supper, which the Church of the New Testament celebrates in remembrance of Him until He shall come in glory. For the same night in which He was betrayed, our Lord Jesus Christ took bread, and when He had given thanks, He brake it and gave it to His disciples saying, “Take eat, this is My Body which is given for you. This do in remembrance of Me.” After the same manner also He took the cup, when He had supped, gave thanks and gave it them, saying, “Take, drink, ye all, of it; this cup is the New Testament in My blood which is shed for you for the remission of sins; this do, as oft as ye drink it in remembrance of Me.” Everything that Jesus is and everything that He has won by His Great Sacrifice - His entire person and work - is bound up in His Body and His Blood. And now when we celebrate Holy Communion, in, with, and under the humble earthly elements of bread and wine He gives us these precious heavenly elements, His true Body and His true Blood, the very same body and blood which He once offered up in the One Great, Sacrifice on the cross as the “High Priest forever” (Hebrews 6:20) and as the Lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world (John 1:29). The Lord’s Supper is the sacrificial meal of the New Covenant. The Sacrifice of the New Covenant was made once and for all on Calvary, but the sacrificial meal is celebrated in remembrance of Him until He comes. And in this connection our sainted father, Dr. Hoenecke (Dogmatik IV, 109) writes: “There is a definite parallelism between the Lord’s Supper and the Law Covenant. There in the Law Covenant the Covenant Relationship was established by the sprinkling of blood and in addition, to make the parallelism even more striking, by the eating and drinking, by the partaking of the sacrificial meal on the mountain (Ex. 21:11); here in the Lord’s Supper the blood is distributed for our partaking and drinking. Here in the Old Covenant the words were “Behold the blood of the covenant”; here in the New Covenant the words are: “This is My blood of the New Testament.” And Dr. Peters, who quotes this passage QS’ 42p. 269f), concludes, “And now since the New Covenant is the better testament with the better promises, surely the Sacrament cannot culminate in a mere symbolical or allegorical (or make-believe) act; certainly it must give us infinitely more than the Old Covenant, namely, the Body and the Blood of Christ. Christ by giving us the communion of His body and blood in the Sacrament, makes us commensals of God (to use the technical covenant term, that is, God’s table-companions, ones who are in communion with God by virtue

of His New Covenant). “Yes,” Dr. Peters continues, “we can say that everything that God’s gracious New Covenant stands for is to be found in the Lord’s Supper.” And he concludes, “Therefore the interpretation of Roman Catholics (that the celebration of the Lord’s Supper is a repetition of the very sacrifice of Calvary now repeated by a New Testament continuation of the Old Testament priesthood) and the interpretation of Reformed theologians (that the celebration of the Lord’s Supper is nothing but a sort of a symbolical memorial-banquet) – these interpretations are altogether out of place, and over against such misinterpretations of the words of our Lord we are not to do anything else but, as our Lutheran confessions tell us, “to rest in the simple and proper sense of the Sacramental words” which become very concrete when comparing the Old and the New Covenants with one another. It is then that we know that Christ is not using “allegorical, but entirely proper, simple, indubitable and clear words” (Trig. 989, Formula of Concord VII Of the Holy Supper).”

The celebration of the Lord’s Supper in the Christian Church also guards and preserves the interpretation of the death of Christ as a sacrifice, in that it always recalls to Christendom that it has been redeemed by a real sacrifice in the real sense of the Scriptural doctrine that “without shedding of blood is no remission. (Hebrews 9:22)” Thus it is a great bulwark against the modernistic false doctrine that the death of Christ is to be understood as a sacrifice only figuratively, as, for instance, when we call the heroic death of a soldier for his fatherland a sacrifice. The Lord’s Supper is too deeply embedded in real sacrificial concepts and ideas as to permit such superficial misinterpretation.

So in summary we can say we live under the New Covenant, which God has made with us; the New Covenant also has its sacrifice, and it is the Real Sacrifice, the perfect Sacrifice of Christ Himself for the sins of the whole world. It also has its sacrificial meal; the Lord’s Supper, whereby we have real communion with Christ, the Lamb of God. In it He gives us the very sacrificial means by which He won our salvation, His body and His blood. The New Covenant is an unconditional covenant, a Gospel-covenant, which does not ask man to fulfill certain terms, but which depends entirely upon God for its functioning. The promise of the New Covenant is not: “There’ll be no universal flood again”; nor is it “The land of Canaan will be yours”; nor is it “The Promised Seed will be begotten from your seed”; nor is it, “Through you the original Sabbath will be restored”; but the promise of the New Covenant is “You have the forgiveness of your sins because of the sacrifice of Christ; in token of which receive His true Body given for you and His true Blood. of the New Testament shed for your sins.”

Even though in our description of the two covenants we have already touched upon it often, it is important that we now specially emphasize the Gospel character of the New Covenant and in summary contrast it with the Old Covenant. Dr. Peters, to whom I’m greatly indebted in this section, states in an October, 1942 Quartalschrift article that “the essential difference between the Old and the New Covenant is that of the law and the Gospel. . . Although the Old Covenant was full of promises and patterns of a better covenant, yet these promises were conditioned promises and these patterns were encased and concealed in legal regulations and statutes. The Old Covenant was therefore characterized by the law and by the law alone; the New Covenant, on the other hand, received its characterization from the Gospel and from the Gospel alone. The Old Covenant remains a covenant of the law, a ministration of death and condemnation (2 Cor. 3:7ff), over against which the New Covenant is a covenant of grace, a ministration of the Spirit and of righteousness (3:8f), and therefore it is “a new covenant” not just as to time (that is, “more recent”) but it is new as to its quality and character, “of a different nature.” Our sainted Professor Pieper wrote (QS '41 p. 236): “There are indeed many glorious

promises in that Sinaitic covenant which God made with the wayward seed of Abraham (Ex 19:6), but the Lord made them all dependent upon the people's obedience and their keeping of the covenant (verse 5) . . . So by way of the Sinaitic covenant no sinner can be saved, because no one can keep it." The Sinaitic covenant was a law covenant.

It is at this point, however, that we must avoid a number of wrong deductions or conclusions. The one is that the only way of salvation open to the Jews under the Old Covenant was the perfect keeping of the law. Such a conclusion forgets the Gospel promises of the foregoing Abrahamitic covenant and the age-old Gospel of the Promised Savior which the believers had ever since the Fall; to these promises the Jews themselves had constant recourse when transgressing the Old Covenant. Moses himself preached and taught the Gospel truths of the Abrahamitic Covenant, directing the gaze of his people back to the promises given to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as well as forward to the fulfillment of those promises in Christ Jesus (Deut. 18:15f). Yet we must always keep in mind that, when Moses preached the Gospel, he abandoned his own peculiar office as law-giver, and took over the more excellent ministry of the New Testament; his own office and calling was and remained the ministration of the law, for "the law was given by Moses." The Law, not the Gospel, was given by Moses. The Gospel with all its "grace and truth came by Jesus Christ" (John 1:17).

The second wrong conclusion carried us to the opposite extreme. Realizing that Israel actually did have the Gospel promises and the figures of a better covenant all the time, and that the Gospel promises were preached by Moses and the prophets throughout Israel's history, we too readily overlook the fact that the Israelite lived and died under the Old Covenant, which gendered to bondage, that is, gave birth into slavery (Gal. 4:24) and placed a yoke upon the neck of every Israelite (which he was unable to bear) (Acts 15:10). Israel under the Old Covenant is to be compared with a nation in arms, drilled by Moses its drillmaster and hearing the commands of the law day in and day out. Luther puts it drastically. "Whoever wants to have command of a law-people, has got to be always at them; he's got to be always forcing and beating them, as if they were dumb donkeys. For no work of the law is done with joy and love; it is all forced and compelled. Because Moses is a teacher of the law, he must show by his compulsion how that the deeds of the law are forced deeds and he must tire the people out, until finally because of such compulsion they recognize their disease and their inbred dislike far God's law and look around for grace (St. XIV, 9)". We never realize fully enough that the imposition of the moral, ceremonial and civil code of laws was a very heavy burden on Israel, and that Israel was in slavery and consequently in fear. The Scriptures stress this by telling us that God thus proved His people that His fear might be before their faces (Ex. 20:20), that they should receive the spirit of bondage under the elements of the world and differ in nothing from slaves, - while under the New Covenant all believers receive the spirit of adoption whereby we cry, Abba, Father (Rom. 8:15), and serve God without fear (Luke 1:74), dwelling in love, in which there is no fear, which even casteth out fear (1 John 4:16f).

In the New Covenant then, there are no commandments and ordinances, no legal requirements and restrictions. All that was an essential part of the Old Covenant, but all that is now gone. "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth." The Christian is not under the law. The new man is in no need of the law. To be sure, those who are sharers in the New Covenant fulfill the law, it being written according to Jeremiah in their hearts, implanted by the Spirit and Word of God in the inward parts of the believers, whereby sanctification as the fruit of justification is worked, "without which no man shall see the Lord" (Heb. 12:14) . Because just as Israel was once hedged in by the Law, we New Testament

Christians are now hedged in by the love of Christ (2 Cor. 5:14.), wherewith He has loved us (John 13:34), i.e. we continue in His love (15:9) even as the love of Christ constraineth, controls us. "In this manner" our Lutheran forefathers confess in the Formula of Concord, "the children of God live in the Law and walk according to the Law of God, which St. Paul in his epistles calls the Law of Christ and the Law of mind . . . But this is done as though we knew of no command, threat or reward (Trig. 807)".

So only by faith in Christ can we do justice to God's law. Yet faith in Christ does not signify that our faith lays hold on both Christ and the Law, that besides having Christ we still have the Law as our taskmaster, that after having known God and after being known of God we turn back again to the weak and beggarly elements. Such a faith is not faith. No, since the Old Covenant has vanished, we cannot claim to be sharers in both the New and the Old Covenants. We can only be sharers in the New Covenant. And, if we are not heirs of the New Covenant, we cannot comfort ourselves by claiming to at least possess the promises of the Old Covenant. The Jews, who still claim to have the Old Testament and the Law, have neither the one nor the other because their unbelief doesn't see the Christ-centeredness of the Old Covenant.

We should also finally note that the New Covenant is not given to just one nation, but the sharers in the New Covenant are gathered from all nations, Gentiles and Jews alike. It is contrary to God's Word when New Testament preachers promise nations that in due time they will be God's nation or when they tell them that they are God's people. Israel was a theocracy, that is a state ruled directly by God, and so there was no separation of Church and State in Israel. The civil power in Israel had jurisdiction over the ecclesiastical affairs, even as the ecclesiastical powers had jurisdiction over the civil affairs of the nation. Under the New Covenant the Church is without these powers. Christ alone rules over the Church and the Church of Christ is subject to Christ and to Him alone. The Church of Christ is not in addition subject also to the bishop of Rome and his decretals, as the Roman Catholics are taught to believe. No, Christ alone rules over His Church by the Gospel through the means of grace. There is no special form of outward unity, such as the Pope demands, or as many sectarians demand with their claims for the congregational form, or the episcopal form or the presbyterian form of church government. There is, of course, unity and order in the New Testament church, but it is of a spiritual nature. Laws are not to consolidate this communion of brethren. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the only means and the love of Christ, which constrains us to serve one another. Christians should therefore not usurp either ecclesiastical or civil power to rule over their brethren. On the contrary, in the Church of God under the New Covenant the impossible should become possible, namely, He that is greatest among you shall be your servant (Mt. 23:11)." So much for the Gospel character of the New Covenant.

Our passage in Hebrews also emphasizes another aspect of the New Covenant in the admonition which follows the words we have already considered. Here the writer speaks of the enduring, the permanent character of the New Covenant. He warns those who were tempted to forsake the Christian congregation and those to whom he had just pictured all the glorious realities of the New Covenant over against those of the Old Covenants "So be sure you do not refuse to listen to Him Who is speaking to you! For if they who refuse to hear those who spoke to them on earth did not escape, how little chance of escape is there for us if we refuse to hear the One Who speaks from heaven? Then His voice shook the earth, but now we have His promise "Yet again, I will, once for all, shake not only the earth, but Heaven also" (Hag. 2:6). Here the words "Yet again, once for all" denote the removal of the things which can be shaken - created things - in order that the things which cannot be shaken may remain. Let no reader now think

that just because God now in the New Covenant speaks pure grace, he may refuse to listen in humble faith. If those who refused to listen to God when He spoke His will to them at Mt. Sinai did not escape, how little chance of escape is there for us if we refuse to hear the One Who speaks to us from heaven! Then at Mt. Sinai His voice shook the earth, but now we have His express promise through the Prophet Haggai (2:6), "Yet again I will once for all shake not only the earth but heaven also." So what happened when God spoke at Mt. Sinai (the quaking of the earth) is only an advance sign of what is going to happen again, namely, that not only the whole earth, but also the very heaven above the earth shall be shaken. The Sinaitic Covenant was only temporary, and still when God established it, the earth shook; but God has promised that the day is coming when both the earth and the heavens which now seem so stable and permanent will be shaken when the world of created things will disintegrate. And then, when Time ceases, when only Eternity, timelessness exists, no shakable thing, no created thing, will remain - only the Real World, the Unshakable Realities of Christ's New Covenant will remain. "Since then we have received a kingdom that is 'unshakable', let us serve God with thankfulness, so that we may offer to God an acceptable service with godly reverence and holy fear. For our God is indeed a consuming fire. (Deut. 4:24)."

We, the Church of the First-born, the congregation of the New Covenant, have received such an unshakable kingdom and have come to such heavenly realities; therefore we are admonished to serve God with thankfulness, so that we may offer to God an acceptable service. We are not expected to serve God in accordance with the Laws of Moses, by bringing animal sacrifices for our sins or by keeping certain days and certain festivals, or by refraining from certain kinds of meats' but we are to serve God with thankfulness for what He has done for us, and we are to offer an acceptable service with godly reverence and holy fear for God in the New Testament era no less than in the Old Testament era is a consuming fire. Notice how the words "serve" and "service" are stressed here; but when we ask, With what works shall we serve God? the writer answers, "With thankfulness". For, after all, the greatest service that we can do God is to receive His gracious gifts. He is the Giver and we can only stretch out our empty hands and prayerfully receive what He gives, and then, after we've received His gifts, we lift up the same hands in praise and thanksgiving.

And the greatest gifts which God gives us are the ones we receive in what we correctly call our Divine Service, the gifts of His Word and of His Sacraments. And that is why it is in the divine service that we enter the holy of holies of our congregational life. There may be many kinds of courts that surround the sanctuary of the Christian congregation, such as meetings of various groups, deeds of charity, social get-togethers, etc., but the holy of holies is and remains the congregation's divine services. It certainly is desirable, that there be a vital congregational life with one another socially, but the most necessary of necessities is that the hearts of our congregations beat again mightily in the divine service. Martha was careful and troubled about many things; but Jesus said only one thing was needful and Mary, who sat at Jesus' feet and heard His Word had chosen that good part which could not be taken away from her. It is not to be denied that the real trouble with the Church today and with our congregations is their neglect of and their disregard for the means of grace, for God's Word and His Sacraments, and consequently for the divine service. How low is the actual percentage of our churchgoers on any given Sunday; and how much smaller is the percentage of our actual communicants! It should be clear to everyone where this weakening of the heart-muscles of our congregations will necessarily lead; for when the heart stops beatings the body dies; when we neglect our divine service, our congregations will die. And so if we would live as congregations, if we would live in

the real, the new life in Christ, then we must concentrate on the divine service, not in the superficial sense of introducing all sorts of ill-advised innovations to make things snappy to the flesh or to ape our neighbors, but in the sense of using the Word and Sacraments aright. That means that we as pastors realize our great callings as ministers of the New Testament and concentrate our greatest efforts toward bringing God's Word and His Sacraments to the people, and it means that we who sit in the pew look upon our pastors as ministers of Christ, and stewards of God's mysteries. This calls for faith and continual repentance on the part of pastors and congregations. But the fruit of such concentration on the means of grace will be that the Divine Service will not degenerate into a sort of a pastoral monologue, but it will bring both pastor and congregation to receive God's grace.

And that is the essential part of serving God in the New Testament. First God comes to us; He begins the conversation with us; He comes with baptism; He comes with His Word; He comes with His Supper. Only then can we answer Him in prayer and praise. What does this mean practically speaking? Let us illustrate from the path which we travel in a full Sunday communion service.

In our Lutheran Divine Service everything that goes on centers in two all important happenings: first, God speaks to us through His Word, and then God comes to us in His Holy Supper. For that reason these two gracious gifts of God are the High points of the liturgy and everything else in the divine service revolves about them. The hymns, the prayers, the responses, the arrangements of altar, pulpits lectern, etc., could all be omitted from our worship, but God's Word and God's Sacrament would have to remain if it is to be Christian worship. They are the two centers of concentration toward which we travel in our Lutheran Divine Service.

After we have prepared ourselves to enter the gracious presence of the Lord by first confessing our sins and then hearing the announcement of forgiveness, we set out upon a path that leads us, first of all to that point where God speaks to us through His Word. As we move forward to this important event, we pour out our heart to Him in prayer. First we are mindful of our own wretchedness, and so we cry out in our helplessness, "Lords Have Mercy Upon us, Christ have mercy upon us, Lord have mercy upon us," but then, immediately thereafter, as we call to mind the rich lovingkindness of Him Who became our Brother and Who now is coming to meet us with all of His grace, we join the Christmas angels in the great hymn of praises "Glory Be to God on High", and finally just before we enter into the Holy Place to hear God's Word, we ask for that special spiritual gift which we want to receive from the Gospel of the Day in the short and concise prayer galled the Collect. Then comes the high-point when our GOD speaks to us in the Holy Scriptures and in the Sermon. Let him that hath ears to hear, listen with both of them, for Christ Jesus is the Word that speaks here!

And after we've heard the Word, we continue on our path now toward the second high-point of the service. Our Lord comes to us with His true Body and His true Blood. And as we approach our gracious Lord, we lift up our hearts in praise and rejoicing; we sing now not just with the angels, our servants who come down to earth to serve us, but we sing with those cherubim and seraphim who stand in heaven before God and serve none other but Him alone. We join them in singing, "Holy Holy, Holy is the Lord God of Sabaoth. Heaven and earth are full of Thy glory;" and with the Palm-Sunday shouts of Hosanna we greet that Blessed One Who comes in the Name of the Lord, and finally just before entering the Holy of Holies, we pray that all-inclusive prayer which our Lord Jesus Himself taught us to pray, the Lord's prayer. Then the Holy supper is celebrated; our risen and living Lord Jesus Christ Himself, true God and true man,

breaks through time and space and comes to us in his Holy Sacrament with all the blessings He has won for us: forgiveness of sins, life and salvation.

After Holy Communion we give thanks unto our Lord with the song of old Simeon: “Lord, Now Lettest Thou Thy Servant Depart In Peace.” We have been with our Lord; He has come to us with all of His gifts in the Word and the Sacrament. That is why we can go back into the world again renewed and refreshed for a continued life of faith in Him. Such then is the path we travel in the Divine Service. It brings us to all the great realities of the New Covenant. It brings us to “the true Mount Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, countless hosts of angels, the Great Assembly of Heaven, and the Church of the Firstborn, whose names are written in heaven, to God the Judge of all, to the spirits of just men made perfect, to Jesus, the Mediator of the New Covenant, and to the sprinkled blood which speaks in more gracious tones than that of Abel...Since, then, brethren, we have received a kingdom that is “unshakable”, let us serve God with thankfulness so that we may offer to God an acceptable service with godly reverence and holy fear. “For our God is indeed a consuming fire!” Amen!