



Hebrews 8:8

(8) But God found fault with the people and said:
"The time is coming, declares the Lord,
when I will make a new covenant
with the house of Israel
and with the house of Judah.

Hebrews 8:13

(13) By calling this covenant "new," he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear.

Hebrews 9:15

(15) For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.

New International Version

The word "new" is translated from the Greek word *kaine*. This is interesting because, while it does mean "new" in terms of time, the emphasis in the use of the word, when compared to something of the same kind, in this case, covenants, is on quality - not time. Hence, the emphasis in the use of *kaine* is on this covenant being better rather than being newer.

In Jesus' Parable of the Old and New Wineskins, *kaine* also appears. Using this understanding of *kaine*, the difference between the wineskins is not necessarily age (though that is implied) but *quality*. One wineskin is dried and cracked, while the other is supple and resilient. Though it may also be newer, it is decidedly *better*.

Putting this into a modern context, we can make a comparison between a 1910 automobile and a 1995 automobile. The 1995 automobile is a continuation of the same general kind as the 1910 automobile. Both have the same necessary parts: engine, wheels, steering wheel, seats, transmission, brakes, lights, and a nut behind the wheel. But the 1995 model has made the 1910 model *obsolete* as a viable mode of transportation.

So it is in the comparison between the Old Covenant and the New. Both have the same necessary parts, so that they may be considered of the same "kind," but the New Covenant is so much *better* and has so much more going for it that it has made the Old one obsolete.

Is there a difference between a *testament* and a *covenant*? The word "testament" does not even appear in English translations of the Old Testament, but it appears thirteen times in the New Testament. The Greek word is quite interesting because it does not even mean "covenant" as we think of it. In fact, researchers have been able to find only one usage outside of the Bible—in classical Greek—in which this word is used in the same way that the English and the Hebrew words are. The Greek word is *diatheke*, and it is the equivalent of our English word "testament" or "will"—not "covenant."

A *covenant* is an agreement between two parties. The emphasis is on the words "agreement" and "parties." However, a *diatheke* is a testament or will. As in English, it is a unilateral—a one-sided—declaration of the disposition of property that a person makes in anticipation of his death. Before we die, we usually draw up a declaration of what we want done with our property, and most people do not consult with the people they want to leave their possessions to. It is usually a private matter.

Paul used this singular word—*diatheke*—where two different words normally would have been used. The interesting thing is that the Greeks have a word for a covenant, *suntheke*, "a bilateral agreement," but the apostle did not use it.

The use of *diatheke*—which seemingly does not fit—has given the translators great difficulty trying to determine when Paul meant "covenant" and when he meant "will" or "testament." Why did he even do this when he could have used *suntheke*? The overall reason is encouraging. Paul wanted to emphasize how much [God](#) has done unilaterally—that is, that He took upon Himself to do without consulting with others involved in the covenant—to tip the scales drastically in our favor for the purpose of our keeping the covenant and making it into His Kingdom.

For instance, "God so loved [the world](#) that He *gave*" [Jesus Christ](#) in our stead! It was a completely voluntary act on His part. God *gives* us grace and forgives our sins, and we are justified on the basis of that sacrifice and on the declaration of our [faith](#) and [repentance](#). God *gives* us access to Him in prayer, again based on the work of Jesus Christ. God *gives* us the very faith that saves. God *gives* us His Spirit, which is a down-payment of eternal life and empowers us to keep His laws. God *gives* us gifts, by that same Spirit, to serve Him and the church. He *promises* never to give us a trial that is too great—which translates into His *giving* personal attention to each of His children! He *promises* never to forsake us and to complete the work that He has begun in us.

Some of these unilateral gifts—in a very limited form—appear in the Old Covenant. But it is no wonder that Paul wanted to emphasize *better* rather than "new." The Old Covenant (because of what God has unilaterally done) is but a pale shadow of the New in terms of what God is working out. It is nothing more than a pale shadow of the *promises* and the [hope](#) derived by those who understand the New Covenant's terms.

To the unconverted who study the Bible, these terms are so enticing that it lures them into concluding that the believer need do *nothing*. Some will go that far! They will declare that Jesus has done it *all* for us. They can read the terms, but they reach the wrong conclusion. It leads them to say such things as, "There is no law," and "You don't have to keep the [Sabbath](#). It's just ceremonial." However, the truth is that the covenant is so one-sided, so much to our benefit, that it leaves us *without excuse* for failure to keep the terms—and those terms include lawkeeping.

— John W. Ritenbaugh

To learn more, see:

[The Covenants, Grace, and Law \(Part Ten\)](#)



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