

## Bill Clinton's 'New Covenant': Re-Visioning an Old Vision

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The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a *new covenant* with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more. (Jeremiah 31:31-34.)

With these words, according to Hebrew tradition, God entered a new relationship with the chosen people of Israel. The old covenant was a relationship of mutual fidelity between God and Israel. The Mosaic laws, symbolized by the tablets of stone given to Moses, which had guided Jewish life for generations was now supplanted by a new promise. Rather than relying on an external code of laws which defined the relationship between God and Israel, God promises the prophet Jeremiah that God's chosen people will be guided by an internal, experiential understanding—written on individual hearts—that provides assurance that God has secured their present and their future.

Historian Winthrop Hudson (1981) notes that it was a similar trust in God's new covenant with the chosen that motivated John Winthrop and followers to seek to establish America as a shining "city set on a hill" (p. 20). Ernest Bormann (1985) suggests that America's self-identification as the people of the new covenant serves as the thread which weaves together the tapestry of American political rhetoric. The latest strand introduced into this American cloth is the campaign rhetoric of Arkansas Governor Bill Clinton.

In his July 16, 1992 acceptance speech for the Democratic presidential nomination, delivered at New York's Madison Square Garden before the Democratic National Convention and millions of home viewers, Clinton articulated his vision for America in terms of a "new

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covenant."<sup>1</sup> Portraying himself as the clear center of the party's left wing, Clinton's new covenant calls for change in both the status quo, as defined by the incumbent Republican administration of George Bush, and the negative stigma of "liberal" which has been attached in recent years to the Democratic party. While the call for change is clear, a closer examination of text reveals that in accordance with the rhetorical form of the American understanding of covenant, the change is anchored by—and indeed gains power from—permanence. Advocacy for change is established in a base of accepted belief.

Clinton's vision for America is grounded in the permanence of the American tradition of a covenant people. His unique contribution is to validate the new covenant intrinsically by appealing to the heart felt needs of "people first" rather than emphasizing external demands of government. I will begin with a brief discussion of the Biblical notion of covenant and the rhetorical requisites of the form. I will use covenant discourse as a filter to critically analyze Clinton's rhetorical choices on July 16, 1992, and finally draw some evaluative conclusions concerning both Clinton's discourse and the rhetorical power of covenant language on an American audience.

### **Biblical Concept of Covenant**

The thirty-nine books comprising the Old Testament provide a rich account of a dialogue between God and humans in the form of covenant discourse. The term covenant, as defined *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (1973), refers to "an agreement or compact between God and individuals or people" (p. 116). Three specific covenants between God and individuals reveal key components of the rhetorical form.

The notion of covenant is first mentioned in Genesis 2:16 where God offers a nearly perfect Eden for Adam and Eve's use. Adam and Eve are promised all the bounty of the garden but are commanded not to eat from tree of knowledge lest they perish. Herein lies the most common Biblical use of the word "covenant," the basis of a relationship between God and humankind. In this particular case, God offers continued favor on condition of obedience. The covenant is extended from a source of power, God, who offers a desirable commodity in exchange for a desirable commodity. Two important characteristics, of covenants, then, are: 1) they originate from the more powerful of two parties, and 2) they are based on an assumption of exchanged goods.

Assurance of safety is the cornerstone of the covenant God offered Noah. Angered by human wickedness, God sent a flood to destroy the world which God created. Noah and his household, who had kept faith in God, were to be spared along with two of every living species. Because of God's assurance of Noah's faith, God promised never again

to destroy the earth by flood. Genesis 9:13 recounts a unique aspect of this covenant, the presence of a rainbow, offered as a symbol of God's pledge. This narrative reveals an additional characteristic of covenants: external verification is given for their existence.

A third covenant is revealed in the Abraham narratives. Abraham, a faithful servant of God, is frustrated because he has no heirs, a fate in Jewish culture which annihilated the purpose of one's existence. In Genesis 13:5, God rewards Abraham's trust and loyalty by promising to make him the father of generations that will number more than the stars in the heavens. Additionally, God promised Abraham's descendants land (15:18-21) and God's blessing (15:13-14). The story of Abraham reveals a fourth characteristic of Biblical covenants between God and humans: covenants are extended to a "chosen" group or individuals and contain a call of manifest destiny, directing the receiver to live out a life of service to God.

From these narratives, we can ascertain four characteristics of Biblical covenant rhetoric between God and humans: 1) it originates with the higher power of the parties engaged; 2) it holds an expectation for reciprocated goods; 3) it has an external verification; and 4) it implies a future directive for a chosen people. These four conditions comprise what we may term "the old covenant." What, then, are the defining qualities of the "new covenant"?

The description of the new covenant which shaped later prophetic tradition is found in Jeremiah 31:31-34. Noted Biblical scholar Bernhard Anderson (1975) claims that Jeremiah's "prophecy was stamped more indelibly upon later prophetic tradition than anything else [he] said" (p. 394). Anderson suggests that the new covenant offered in Jeremiah became, in retrospect, the basis of the canon of Christian writings known as the New Testament. Anderson maintains that Jeremiah intended both a break from the traditional covenant and a distinct message for his specific audience. Anderson identifies four facets of the *new* covenant discourse (p. 394). Two of his qualities (its origination with the higher power of the parties engaged and its expectation for reciprocated goods) correspond with characteristics of the covenant described in Mosaic law. The "newness" comes in a radical alteration of the third quality of the Mosaic covenant, and an expansion of the fourth.

In old covenant dialogue, the covenant was sealed with an external symbol: the parameters of a garden, a rainbow arching over the horizon, a tablet of etched stone. In contrast, the new covenant relies on internal rather than external verification of the articulated pledge. Anderson writes:

The new covenant will... fulfill the original intention of the Sinai covenant. The meaning of the original covenant had been eclipsed by religious ceremonies and written laws, as though God intended that the Law should be written on tablets of stone deposited in the Ark. In the new covenant, however, the Torah will be written upon the heart, the inward center of the being. It will find expression in a personal response to... God (p. 394).

In short, the new covenant promises a deeper, more intimate relationship between individuals and their God. As the assurance of God's promise moves from an external to internal position, an implied sense of personal experience deepens the gratitude and commitment on the part of God's followers.

While both the old and new covenants function to define a "chosen" people and provide them a mission, the old covenant left some room for speculation as to exactly who might be included among God's "elect." A desire for superiority allowed groups or individuals in power to exclude various persons or subgroups from sporting the mantle of "chosen" because they did not meet various human imposed expectations. Contrarily, the new covenant articulated by Jeremiah broadens the notion of "chosen" to include all members of the houses of Israel and Judah, "from the least of them to the greatest" (v. 34). Jeremiah scholar Howard Kuist (1968) suggests that extending an open invitation to all removes a burden of imposed guilt and replaces it with a sense of worth. Kuist writes:

And with this sense of worth comes the desire to be really worthy. In the whole human universe, what force has greater regenerative potency? What else has such power to stir the springs of ethical action? By being grounded in God's everlasting grace to forgive, both the potency and the permanence of the new covenant are assured (p. 96).

Such a move for inclusiveness clearly enhances the individual commitment to support the covenant. Who, after all, could be certain, under the terms of the prior covenant, of his or her election to the ranks of "chosen"? The new covenant afforded an ultimate assurance of God's intent to extend benevolent grace to all.

We may now modify the definitional components of covenant discourse to fulfill the requirements of new covenant as espoused by Jeremiah to include the following: 1) it originates with the higher power of the parties engaged; 2) it assumes reciprocated goods; 3) it has a locus of internal verification; and 4) it implies a future directive for a chosen people, in which "chosen" is inclusive of the total population. The rhetorical power of this altered form to gain popular support is that the "new" or change is an outgrowth of the accepted permanence of the

"old." We can now turn attention to Clinton's use of new covenant language to shape his vision for America.

### **Clinton's Use of "New Covenant" Rhetoric**

Clinton's official task, that of accepting the Democratic nomination for President of the United States, necessarily provided him with power differential distinct from any other person in the convention hall. Thus, the first element of new covenant discourse, that it originate with the higher of power of those parties engaged, was inherent in the context that Clinton faced in New York. Yet context alone was not enough, for Clinton needed to demonstrate that he possessed the power necessary to enact all the changes for which he called.

Clinton's rhetoric reinforces his ceremonial position of power through the use of the active voice and vows of "I can," "I do," and a resounding resolution sounded numerous times "I will." Clinton's pledges for action gain momentum particularly in the middle of the address where he juxtaposes his drive for action against the alleged inactivity of the Bush administration. Clinton claims:

George Bush talks a good game. But he has no game plan to compete and win in the world economy. *I do*. He won't take on the big insurance companies to lower costs and provide health care to all Americans. *I will* (emphasis mine)

Clinton repeatedly combines the active voice with short phrases which punctuate his commitment to action. This juxtaposition bolsters his perceived position of power at the convention to a level on par with the president himself. Clinton thus fosters the impression that he possesses the power to achieve the desired changes he calls for, and is therefore justified in inaugurating the new covenant.

Clinton deals with the second aspect of covenant, a held expectation of reciprocated goods, with another characteristic Clinton juxtaposition. A prominent rhetorical feature of Clinton's new covenant discourse is a dialectical tension between paired terms. Just as Kenneth Burke (1984) argued that purpose could be obtained through the dynamic balance between permanence and change, Clinton's rhetoric generates power from the juxtaposition of opposing concepts. Specifically, through the speech, Clinton juxtaposes the notions of "opportunity/responsibility" as central tenets of his new covenant.

Eleven times the term *new covenant* is invoked in the address and with each mention there is a promise for a better future, tempered by the realization that benefits won't merely be handed out, but rather must be achieved through responsible actions. Articulated in a variety of forms, (e.g., opportunity/responsibility; borrow/pay back; treatment/

prevention; affordable/saving; welfare/self-sufficiency; give to/give back) the common thread is a rhetoric of consensus.<sup>2</sup>

Consensus allows Clinton to maintain the support of the Democratic left while defining himself as a centrist and launching pitches toward the desperately needed moderate and independent voters he must win for election. Indeed, the "opportunity" descriptions of the new covenant are reminiscent of Roosevelt's New Deal, and designed to woo liberal Democrats. Jobs programs, educational opportunities, affordable health care, and a government that is "serving, caring, helping, and giving" are all issues and images that fueled the traditional Democratic machine. Yet he moderates the position with the repeated phrase, "but you must do your part." With the addition of this phrase even those with a traditionally conservative bent find assurance in Clinton's message. Clinton's vision is not an open palm without expectations but rather a program that demands commitment—a concept conservatives have traditionally cherished on both sides of the aisles. With appeals such as these, Clinton's pitch to the "army of patriots" who "rallied to Ross Perot" to "join us and revitalize America" had a greater chance of finding its intended audience than the more traditional line of past Democratic rhetoric would have had.

An additional observation should be made about this pairing of opposites. Burke (1984) suggests that change will result when it is articulated in a language of permanence. Posturing his desire for change in a language of accepted permanence is vital to Clinton on two levels. First, he must demonstrate that he has roots in the Democratic party so that the party faithful will imbue him with their trust to move the party in a different direction without fearing a loss of identity. Second, to moderate who are weary of traditionally liberal ideologies and programs, Clinton must develop a conservative language that will earn their confidence, assuring them that they need not fear Republican taunts of "tax and spend" and "radical liberals." Through consensus rhetoric, Clinton is able to meet both challenges.

The third defining trait of new covenant discourse is a shift from external to internal validation. For the Israelites, the Mosaic law provided verifiable proof of the validity of the God's plan for their lives. The prophecy of Jeremiah, however, provided the Israelites with a new form of validity, the movement of the locus of knowledge to an internal relationship, in which God's covenant is "written on their hearts." Such an internalization of knowledge implies an intimacy which assumes a deep level of both understanding and commitment to the cause.

Clinton's new covenant presupposes no external validation. He claims, "There is no Arkansas miracle." But he continues to suggest that "there are a lot of miraculous people." The power of Clinton's

vision must come from within, and will come to fruition only if people are willing to believe in his cause. There is good reason to have faith, if not for oneself then for progeny. Clinton returns to personal narrative to illustrate the point. The hope he embodies for the future is attributed to the moment his daughter Chelsea was born. Clinton remembers:

As I stood in the delivery room, I was overcome with the thought that God had given me a blessing my own father never knew: the chance to hold my child in my arms.

The rhetoric gains universal identification as the personal once again transcends Clinton's individual experience with the claim that "at this very moment, another child is born in America." With this stroke, Chelsea symbolizes all American children for whom Clinton envisions a happy home, health, opportunity, strength, security, family, friends, and faith. With each listener's own child in mind—born or yet to be born—Clinton concludes with an invitation to unite in a commitment to attain the vision, and renewing one's belief in *Hope*?

The fourth requisite of the new covenant is that it is inclusive of all of God's people. Biblically the invitation is extended from "the least to the greatest." So it is with Clinton's vision. As with other portions of the vision, Clinton's sensitivity to the value of inclusiveness is deeply rooted in his personal experience. Recounting his past, Clinton remembers that even in the midst of a depressed economy his grandfather offered food from his country store to those in need. From his grandfather, Clinton learned "to look up to people other folks looked down on." Once commitment has been established, Clinton moves to address the oft-mentioned campaign issue of family. Avoiding controversial particulars (non-married couples living together, homosexual unions and adoptions, etc.), Clinton transcends specificity with generalities which demonstrate unity. His family "includes every family: every traditional family and every extended family, every two-parent family, every single-parent family and every foster family. Every family." Criticism is extended to those who would be exclusive. Clinton claims:

... for too long politicians told the most of us that are doing all right that what's really wrong with America is the rest of us. Them. Them, the minorities. Them, the liberals. Them, the poor. Them, the homeless. Them, the people with disabilities. Them, the gays. We got to where we really "them'ed" ourselves to death. Them and them and them. But this is America. There is no them. There is only us.

As God promised all Israelites forgiveness for their iniquities and assurance that their sins were forgiven, Clinton's vision offers a place for all disenfranchised individuals, arguing that "we need each other. We don't have a person to waste."

### Conclusions

Clinton's address achieved its aim of presenting a powerful Democratic contender to the American public, if not to American history. Press assessment of the speech itself was somewhat mixed. *The New York Times* (1992) heralded it as a "rousing acceptance speech" which already has proven to be a "pivotal moment in his campaign and career" (p. A1). *Newsweek* (1992) claimed, "The big speech was good, not great" (p. 32), and in a straight forward appraisal, Katharine Seelye (1992) of *The Philadelphia Inquirer* wrote:

Clinton's speech may not go down in history as a hugely memorable one. But it deftly accomplished many of the specific tasks Clinton faced. And by repeating his themes from the stump, it showed a consistency, an intent of purpose and a direction in Clinton that may not have been apparent to the skeptics (p. A15).

Regardless of the personal opinion, one certainty exists: the vision Clinton spun of his ideal America, woven tightly in the promise of people first, became a consistent thread that permeated campaign discourse from the convention forward.

From the vantage point of political communication, Clinton and his rhetorical vision were also a success. Kathleen Jamieson (1992) suggests that in every campaign since 1952 the party which eventually took the White House was the party whose campaign articulated the most concise and consistent theme throughout the period of the election. The permanence of Clinton's consistent message heightened both the trust American voters had in his leadership abilities and their acceptance of his call for change.

While it is valuable to render assessment on Clinton's specific address, it is also pertinent to comment on the utility of new covenant rhetoric for an American audience. Two observations are noteworthy. First, because of its visionary quality and because of rich tradition in American culture, new covenant rhetoric is an aptly chosen form of discourse for the political arena. Particularly due to its demand for an internal locus of validation, new covenant rhetoric has the power both to engage members of an audience, and to deepen and unify their commitment to a particular cause.

Second, like any effective communicator, the rhetor who elects to use the new covenant form needs to be sensitive to the audience and their comfort level with religious images. While Clinton's themes remain fairly consistent from the Democratic Convention until election day, one change in his rhetoric during the course of the campaign is of note. While the tenets of the new covenant discourse remained, the label itself began to fade from Clinton's public vocabulary until it had totally disappeared by election eve. At this juncture, one can only spec-



ulate about its removal. One explanation may have been the cries of outrage from the religious right who assumed Clinton's new covenant rhetoric identified him to the figure of Christ. The fire from the right can be illustrated by Pat Robertson's charge the next day before the televised 700 Club that Clinton was guilty of blasphemy. My reading of Clinton's address indicates a clearer association between his use of new covenant and the new covenant language of the Old Testament. Yet since Christian theology traditionally views Christ as the fulfillment of the new covenant, the ire of Christian conservatives could be expected towards a political figure who seemed to adopt the persona of Christ who, said the night he was betrayed, "This cup *is* the new covenant in my blood, which is shed for you" (Luke 22:20).

Another possibility is that the religious overtones may have made the left wing of Clinton's own party uncomfortable. A campaign worker in the state of Maryland suggested that Clinton was urged to drop the new covenant label because its ambiguity, combined with its religious overtones, made it a liability which could be lampooned, much as "liberal" was for Dukakis and "a thousand points of light" was for Bush.

A third hypothesis combines the previous two and rests with the Biblical literacy, or lack thereof, in current American vocabulary. Joe Klein (1992) of *Newsweek* retorted, "Leave it to Bill Clinton to come up with the most complicated synonym imaginable for a simple old lunch-bucket Democrat word: *Deal*" (p. 34). Perhaps it was former Republican speech writer, Peggy Noonan (1992), who said it best, "The new covenant sounds both Biblical and, well, new. If it catches on it will be because people understand it, which so far they don't. Repetition alone won't do it" (p. 33). It is quite plausible to assume that Clinton, a Southern Baptist, accustomed to stumping in the traditional American "bible belt," would clearly understand new covenant rhetoric as articulated in the Old Testament. As Clinton's public broadened, however, and his need to identify with non-southerners increased, the level of comfort and familiarity with Biblical images decreased. The effort it would take to explain the discourse would have exacted a price too great to merit its continuation.

Whether Clinton can make his vision a reality is, of course, unknown. Whether he represents a new breed of Democrat or is merely an old prophet in new covenant garb is yet to be tested. What is certain is that Clinton's rhetoric at the Democratic convention was masterfully able to re-vision an old idea that served as the basis justifying his request for public support of his candidacy.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>The text of Clinton's address used in this study is taken from the Reuter text and reprinted in: Nominee Clinton describes vision of 'new covenant' (1992, July 18). *Congressional Quarterly*, pp. 2128-2130.

<sup>2</sup>Elsewhere (Dean, 1991) I have argued the significance of distinguishing between consensus and transcendence:

Through transcendence, a divided audience is unified by the use of a term or concept that supersedes the points of contention existing within differing factions. Through transcendence both sides necessarily recognize that they must compromise their stance for the larger good of the whole. Alternatively, consensus does not require the introduction of a transcendent concept but relies on the position of issues as they exist in the status quo. If handled effectively, individuals supporting either side of an issue can feel that their needs/concerns have been met without compromising their position. Consensus rhetoric is an effective tactic with heterogeneous groups, since individuals on either side of a given rhetorical issue are granted something they desire (p. 536).

<sup>3</sup>Clinton was able to make an effective literary play with the use of the word hope. Not only does the term hold positive connotations for the future, it also is the surname of the Arkansas town in which Clinton was born.

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