

## THE NEW COVENANT (Part I)

*“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: ...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” (Jeremiah 31:31-34).*

One of the more wholesome and beneficial theological developments today is a robust interest, examination, debate, and airing of the New Covenant. It has been long in coming. Not that the theology of the New Covenant has been heretofore unknown in Christianity. It was the doctrine taught by the Lord Jesus in His earthly ministry. Not immediately comprehended by the twelve Apostles, the early church tried to mix in much of the old wine of Moses with the new wine of Christ. But when God called and separated Paul, He revealed through his preaching and epistles that the Old Covenant had been utterly abolished, its government and rituals rendered nothing and that the Christian church was an entirely new people. From those early confrontations with Judaism the fledgling church fervently pursued an entirely New Covenant until the appearance of the Constantinian hybrid of church and state, paganism and Christianity. It was not called or known as “New Covenant Theology” in those days, for “theology” was not yet an ecclesiastical word. It was simply the teachings of the Lord Jesus, the light of the Holy Spirit on Old Testament scripture. It still is. When Christ died on the Cross, rose from the dead, ascended on High, poured out the Holy Spirit, the Promise of the Father bringing in the hope of all Old Testament promises, the Old Covenant with its government and economy was abolished forever. The New Covenant became a living reality in the life and vitality of God’s elect people.

When Constantine became emperor of Rome, establishing Christianity as the State religion with himself at its head, the established church lapsed immediately back into Old Covenant sacralism. New Covenant church life survived, in bits and pieces, underground in the outlawed rival churches which were given various heretical labels. The Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century stopped far short of reestablishing New Covenant doctrine and life in the church. The Reformation failed because it was an attempt to reform a religious system that was hopelessly corrupt and apostate, and the reformers themselves were not yet free from Romanism and Old Covenant mentality. Nor have any of the myriads of Protestant denominations springing up since then been able to fully grasp and implement New Covenant truth, each being obsessed with formulating, prosecuting and propagating various doctrines and creeds aimed at distinguishing themselves from the erroneous herd from which each split. To do so they are constrained to employ legalistic measures in order to assure their purity. This, of course, from the outset, excludes such a church from the spirit and life of the New Covenant.

So it is little wonder that even in the best of churches today, precious few have more than a vague idea of what Jesus meant when He took the cup after supper saying *“This cup is the new covenant in My blood”*. We know, of course, that He was saying the cup represents the New Covenant, and that His blood speaks of His death (I Cor. 11:25-26), but what is this New Covenant, and how does it bear on sound Christian doctrine and church life?

Nearly fifty years of gospel labor in the pastorate, in evangelism, in Bible Conferences of all sorts, wrestling with principles and teachings employed in all sorts of gospel ministries, has persuaded me that an ignorance of the New Covenant, along with an unlawful imposition of the Old Covenant on the Christian church is responsible for more abuse, impotence, deadness, unbelief, joylessness, corruption, decay, and apostasy than any other deficiency in ecclesiastical disciplines. May the Holy Spirit help us extricate ourselves from this ruinous bog!

### Covenant

Our Bibles have been divided into two parts, commonly called the *Old Testament* and the *New Testament*, the former being a record of God’s divine revelation prior to the advent of Christ, and the latter being a record of that advent and the fulfillment of all that was prophesied of Him in the former. The terms Old and New “Testaments” can be misleading when we speak of an Old Covenant and a New Covenant. The Hebrew word for covenant is *berith*. Its Greek equivalent is *diatheke*, which in turn is translated, in our English Bible both “covenant” and “testament”. We commonly call the first section of our Bible the “Old Testament” and the last section the “New Testament”. But we must dismiss from our minds the idea that when we speak of the Old Covenant and the New Covenant we are speaking of that literary division of the Bible into two parts. We are speaking of two different *arrangements* called covenants, one by which God formerly governed ethnic Israel, and the other by which He now governs His elect people, the Christian church.

The Hebrew, *berith*, comes from a root meaning to fetter, or bind, and is intended to express an agreement between two parties, by which they bind themselves to certain commitments to each other. It is important to note that this does not necessarily imply equality between the two. It may be, as in the New Covenant, expressly unilateral, in that God undertakes to secure the obligations of both parties. In this sense the word “testimony” or “testament” can be equated with covenant, since we are now talking about what God has testified and declared, and is therefore immutable, invincible, and perpetually binding. We see this application in the Old Testament as well as in the New Testament where the ark of the covenant is also called the ark of the testimony, and the various times that law or the decalogue (God’s revealed will) is translated God’s covenant. This sometimes leads to the erroneous conclusion that abolition of the Old Covenant is equal to the abolition of God’s fixed immutable law, His revealed will and testimony, which is absurd.

Opinions vary as to the number and names of covenants, which God has made with various men or peoples in the Bible. It will not be helpful to our present discussion to examine each of these, although some of them may be referred to when profitable. Rather, we will confine our thoughts to what is called in Scripture an Old Covenant, and what is called a New Covenant. The Bible knows nothing of a so-called Covenant of Works or a Covenant of Grace. These are creedal inventions of Reformed theology, and are useful only to facilitate said creeds.

### **The Old Covenant**

The Old Covenant is identical with what is sometimes called the Mosaic covenant, after its administrator, or the Sinaitic covenant after the region in which it was delivered to the Israelites in their sojourn from Egyptian bondage. (Ex. 19:1-6; 24:7-8). This covenant was reaffirmed in Deut. 29: 1-15, following the graphic catalog of blessings or cursings contained in chapter 28 which God promised to visit upon the nation Israel conditioned in the event of their obedience or disobedience to the terms of the covenant. This is the heart and soul of the Old Covenant: Do these things and live. Disobey these words and perish (Romans 10:5). It was a legal covenant, and by nature required ability in will and performance to maintain a righteousness which fallen men were utterly unable to fulfil. That is why it failed and why it was abolished (Jer. 31:32). There was nothing defective or imperfect in the law. The fault lay entirely in the ability of an unregenerate people with wicked hearts to obey a holy law.

The Old Covenant was made with an ethnic nation, Israel, the natural descendants of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob. Its promises derive from those made to Abraham and to his designated descendants and no other. These ethnic people became a national political entity with a geographical possession. This Hebrew nation was sacralistic in its religion and government. That is, all its citizens were members of its religion. To be born into the nation was to be born into its “church”. Its magistrate was subject to its priests, and had the power and responsibility to enforce religious law. This, of course, was not a new arrangement, but the common one in the world. Until the advent of Christ and the New Covenant there was no such thing as “separation of church and state”. Christ’s is an inward spiritual kingdom of the heart, and co-exists peaceably with, though entirely separate from, the political entities of this world. This is a vital, though often overlooked, characteristic of the New Covenant. It is this break with the sacralistic societies of the world that Jesus was pointing to when He told Nicodemus one must be born again to see the kingdom of God. The world still cannot comprehend that, nor does a Christendom that includes unregenerate people in its covenant and communion, and which is aggressively active in shaping and controlling civil government by political process. Irrespective of the lofty sounding Christian names given such churches and denominations, its people still live under the Old Covenant, having only the restraint and constraint of outward law. They are coerced into compliance with outwardly written laws by a magistrate or ecclesiastical authority of some sort.

### **Deficiencies in Contemporary N.C. Debate**

Unhappily, much of the polemics around the New Covenant today is not wholesome. Perhaps the fact that it can be classified as “debate” is indicative that a Christian spirit is either missing or has been rendered so weak by hot, intemperate, dogmatic and uncharitable rhetoric that precious little is set forth edifying to the soul. Even now, as I approach the subject, I feel that I cannot fully explore all the arguments on each side of the issues without entering into that debilitating spirit myself. The last thing I wish to do in these brief essays is to pour fuel on this sort of divisive and fruitless wrangling. I will, however, rehearse some of these distractions from the blessed realities of the New Covenant, and illustrate why they are false issues.

1. The law vs. grace issue. This is by far the oldest, most enduring and varied of all. John 1:17 is taken to have covenantal reference, declaring no grace to be in the Old Covenant and no Law in the New Covenant. Law is set in opposition to grace, and Moses to Christ. This is absurd. Was there also no truth in what Moses taught? Was Christ’s teaching unlawful? God’s law is always gracious and His grace is always lawful. The same gracious and righteous God is the Author of both covenants. Moses declared Christ to be a prophet “like me” (Deut. 18:15). It is true, of course, that law is more in focus under the Old Covenant, and grace more prominently displayed in the New Covenant. That is only necessarily true because unregenerate Israel, being unable to meet the law’s requirements, fell under its condemnation. And spiritual Israel under the New Covenant, on the other hand, having a Surety to make up their shortfall, exult in the grace brought us in Christ. So far from opposing the law of God, the grace of Christ magnifies its righteousness by fulfilling all its spiritual purpose in His people. Nothing is said in Jeremiah’s prophecy of abolishing the law and replacing it with grace, but a re-writing of the law in the

hearts of the people rather than in tablets of stone. Nothing is said here of an “old law” and a “new law”. Nor is anything said in the New Testament of an old law or new law. There is a new *commandment* (not an entire legal code) given by Christ to love one another as He has loved us, and there is a “newness of the spirit” and an “oldness of the letter”, (Rom. 7:6) but the same immutable divine law is in view.

2. The antinomian/legalism debates. Intemperate zealots for the grace of God hurl accusations of legalism against those who are jealous for a righteous compliance with God’s written precepts. Those who hold a high view of moral rectitude in the people of God are horrified when those reveling in the liberties in Christ declare themselves free of legal obligation, railing against them as antinomian (against law). While Christendom certainly does include within its pale true antinomians who assert justification apart from repentance and faith, as well as legalists who trust in outward legal compliance with law letter, no true Christian can be either of these.
3. Abolition of the law. On the “grace” side of the debate it is commonly argued that the advent of Christ fulfilled all that the law prophesied and required, and rendered it obsolete and unnecessary. These usually see the Old Covenant either identical with, or inseparable from, the Decalogue. Since this covenant was made with a Hebrew nation its laws were only relevant to that particular people. They have no universal value to people in general. These hold that the law was abolished, not only in its governmental function, but its didactic purpose also. It is impotent to justify us, and of no use to instruct us in grace. Since we have Christ in the heart, it is argued, the externally written precept is superfluous, and therefore abolished from the believer’s vision. God’s law is His revealed will, intended to reflect His ineffable Person. Since God is unchanging and eternal, His law is also immutable and everlasting.
4. Moral, Civil and Ceremonial law. Those who hold a high view of the word of God in the Old Testament as authoritative for all time are obliged to confess that some parts of that law seem to have been set aside. Civil laws which applied to civil order among the citizens of that Israel would not apply to people who are neither Israelites nor living in that time. Also some laws seem to serve no moral or governmental purpose at all, and seemed to be strictly ceremonial, prophesying spiritual realities to be fulfilled in Christ. These laws also seem to have been abolished. So a division has been determined in the one entire legal code handed down by the Almighty. “Moral” law is retained. “Civil and Ceremonial” law abolished. These divisions are unscriptural and arbitrary. As reasonable as they may seem to human logic there is no Biblical authority for them.
5. Sabbatarian and Antisabbatarinism. The above unscriptural division of the law makes for difficulties with the Decalogue for those who wish to yet hold what God wrote in stone with the Divine Finger as holy, good and permanent. The Sabbatarian holds a high view of the Fourth Commandment but does not wish to enforce it in the harsh and strict way it was applied in the Old Testament. The Sabbatarian has devised arguments for converting the Old Testament Sabbath to a New Testament “Lord’s Day”, changing it from Saturday to Sunday, and modifying to a day worship, combined with a refraining from overt domestic and commercial enterprise. Quite an undertaking with no Biblical authority. The Antisabbatarian consistently abolishes the Fourth Commandment with the other nine. He then avoids accusation of abolishing moral restraint by inventing another unscriptural principal: All the Old Covenant law is abolished except that which is reinstated in the New Testament. Since there is no positive command in the New Testament to keep the Sabbath, the same is abolished. This makes the pro-law/anti-law debate narrow down to endless wrangling over the Fourth Commandment! Astounding! How can it be that otherwise intelligent and devout men could abandon the gospel and squander their precious time, energies and resources to quarrel over how one observes a day?
6. Defending the Decalogue. Still others have very nearly made an idol, or at least a whole Bible, from the Decalogue, and feel the word of God is rendered of no effect if those ten words are not held up as the heart of divine revelation and the sole banner of rectitude. The teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ leave those ten words graven in stone far behind in His “You have heard it said...but I say unto you” sermon on the mount. The Decalogue needs no defense, but we will need far more than those letter-words to know and live New Covenant Christianity.

One of the ironies of all this is that those devoting their preaching and writing to these controversies, on both sides, draw heavily on the writings of Reformed and Puritan writers who rejected the whole Biblical doctrine of two covenants. Rejecting the Biblical terminology of an Old Covenant and a New Covenant these worthies held to “Covenant Theology” which contends for only one “Covenant of Grace” having two administrations, one to Israel and the other to the Church. This will do very well for those holding a strong outward law ministry, but no place for the New Covenant theologian to prove the reign of grace. Rich as the legacy left us by the Puritans was, it is still principally an Old Covenant one. Using their writings to shine light on the New Covenant is to pile darkness upon darkness. The New Covenant may be discovered nowhere but in the inspired word of God.

Happily, most of the New Covenant/Old Covenant debate has been confined to conferences and writings addressed to, and appealing to those of a contentious demeanor, theologians and ministers with an itch for debate and wrestling over fine theological points. It has captured very little interest by the “man in the pew”. Up to this point that is good, because very little of it has been practically profitable to the normal and usual Christian seeking lay hold of the riches of Christ and to walk in the Spirit. But that is the very person whom I wish to help with the realities of the New Covenant.

I cannot attempt to debunk all the above piecemeal without entering into the very rhetoric I wish to silence. I would have to write volumes, and after having done so, would have done nothing but weary the saints, enflame my brethren to more fierce polemics, and accomplish nothing. Nor do I wish to cast any shadow on the sincerity and godliness of those who (in my view) have sacrificed their excellent and wholesome ministries to some of these side issues. They are some of God’s finest. Rather, I hope to simply take the scriptures and expound the glories and riches of New Covenant life in Christ. In so doing, every one of the distractions above, along with a host of others, will evaporate. This, we will begin to undertake in the next issue.

