

## THE NEW COVENANT (Part II)

*“God, who at various times and in different ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He has by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high”.* (Heb. 1:1-3)

There appears, to the unspiritual eye, to be great theological differences between the divine revelation given in the Old Testament and that in the New Testament. One of the reasons for this is the enormous contrasts between the Old Covenant that was made with ethnic and national Israel, and the New Covenant that is made with spiritual Israel. The unregenerate doctors of Hebrew law did not recognize Christ as their Messiah, nor understand His teaching. Nor did the Greek philosophers of that day have a clue to what God was unveiling through His Son. Therefore if we are to rightly understand the New Covenant we cannot look to traditional Old Covenant thought or to the wisdom and scholarship of this world. (I Cor. 2:7-8)

For the early church the received canon of the New Covenant was not the Mosaic law of the Old Covenant, but the teachings of Jesus and that of His early apostles. (Eph. 2:20, I Tim. 6:3, II Tim. 1:13). It is important, however, to observe that both Jesus and His apostles drew authority from Old Testament scriptures, interpreting and applying them in such manner as was suitable to the advanced revelation of the New Covenant.

After the death of the early apostles, the church’s canon began to be more patristic. Certain men, called church fathers, who for various reasons rose to preeminence in the church, were looked to for answers to thorny theological and ecclesiastical issues. Scriptures were interpreted according to their teachings and writings. From this Patristic period, Christian doctrine in the established church began to decline, hitting new lows in the fourth century with the Constantinian hybrid of Christianity, paganism, and state in which the “Papa” of all fathers, the Pope, emerged. Through the years however, absolute papal authority gradually gave way to synods. Theological issues were decided in church councils sanctioned by state powers, and handed down by political ecclesiastical authorities in the form of creeds and confessions. The mindset of such synodal creeds, overseen by state civil powers, was necessarily sacral. Sacralism has no place whatsoever in the New Covenant, but fits quite well in the Old Covenant; so the New Testament was interpreted largely in the light of the Old Testament. The Protestant Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century did nothing to purge this Old Covenant leaven out of Christendom. Instead, the magisterial reformers and their successors firmly reestablished it in their own confessions and creeds. It is yet with us today under the general nomenclature of Covenant Theology. Covenant Theology sees God dealing with His people according to two covenants. The first is a “Covenant of Grace”, a supra-historical agreement thought to have occurred between the three Persons of the Trinity in which the elect are to be saved by grace. The second is a “Covenant of Works” given to Adam at creation bearing the promise of eternal life or death on the basis of his obedience or disobedience. Adam, of course, failed, all men fell in him, and hope of redemption fell back on the Covenant of Grace. This Covenant of Grace is said to have two administrations: one to Israel, which has passed away, and the other to the church, which is now in effect. Instead of the Biblical terms, Old Covenant and New Covenant, Covenant Theology maintains one covenant, two administrations. God has always had only one eternal *purpose* of redemption, and He has employed various *covenants* at different times to execute that single purpose. But it is bad theology to confound God’s eternal *purpose* (purposed within Himself) with *covenants*, all of which were made in time with specific men. There is no scripture anywhere that articulates such a dual “administration” of one covenant. Nor is this an adequate description of Covenant Theology. It does not sufficiently account for the radical differences in Old Covenant and New Covenant life. This is only window dressing, and it will not even earn it the title “Covenant” theology. What receives less press but really drives the engine of Reformed ecclesiology is the cornerstone of Covenant Theology. That is the contention that God still deals with people, not individually, but with groups with whose heads He is in covenant. That is the way He dealt with ethnic and national Israel under the Old Covenant. This not only perpetuates church/state sacralism, puts unconverted covenant children in the church, but charges one person with the sins of another. It makes the New Covenant church merely an extension of Old Covenant Israel modified to include Gentiles. A plethora of other evils follow. Its eschatological hope includes a “Christianized” (not converted) world in which the church rules society with a sword of steel.

While creedal denominations descending from the Protestant Reformation generally are ordered by Covenant Theology, non-creedal assemblies such as Baptists, Bible churches and other independents have, in recent years fallen heavily under a relatively modern Dispensationalism. This theology attempts to resolve the perceived tension between the Old Testament writings and those of the New Testament by a series of succeeding dispensations during which God tries man’s obedience to new revelation of that particular time period. It carries within its hermeneutic, however, the same erroneous assumption of Covenant Theology, to wit, that New Testament revelation must be interpreted literally in light of the letter of the Old Testament. Since the Christian church is nowhere literally verbalized in the Old Testament, it is reduced to a mere “parenthesis” in the mainstream of divine revelation, one that the Old Testament Prophets did not even see! Is that not amazing? The realization of God’s supreme eternal purpose of gathering together all things in Christ (Eph. 1:10) is made a minor parenthesis, too small and insignificant for the Prophets to see! Further, dispensationalism is compelled by its Old Covenant literalism to have a restored Hebrew kingdom with a rebuilt Temple, and restoration of the abolished Aaronic priesthood together with animal sacrifices. Then He who is now King of kings, Lord of lords, exalted above every principality

and power in heaven and earth must undergo another humiliation to come down, sit on an earthly throne and reign over this political thing!

If we are to understand and live in the light of New Covenant truth, we must cut loose our moorings to both of these prevailing systems which hold a death grip on most modern churches. Elevating our eyes to the higher authority of the inspired word of God, the holy scriptures will yield their treasures when we are guided by the following givens of divine revelation:

### **Given Parameters of Biblical Interpretation**

1. God is immutable, unchanging in Person, Character and Will.
2. His word is truth, therefore also unchanging.
3. His law is His revealed will for rational creatures.
4. His law, which is intended to govern the devotion and behavior of men in their present state of existence, reflects His divine perfection, therefore cannot be changed or abolished.
5. Therefore, there must be continuity between that revelation in the Old Testament and that in the New Testament.
6. There is a progression in divine revelation from earlier to later times, always increasing in clarity, all finally culminating in Jesus Christ.
7. There is a corresponding increase in the blessedness of God's people from earlier to later times, culminating in eternal glory.
8. In time, God is always moving forward. He never reverts back to something that has once been abandoned or restores something ruined. He always creates something entirely new replacing the former.
9. The invisible eternal realities are revealed by representation in types and figures of temporal things and events. These are teaching tools intended to be made clear to us upon whom the ends of the world have come (I Cor. 10:1-11).
10. The earthly and temporal first appears, followed by the heavenly and eternal. The former gives way, passes away, for the latter. The figure is corruptible, and disappears, but the reality is incorruptible and endures forever.
11. Therefore, the Old Testament, the dimmer light, must be interpreted in the light of the New Testament, the brighter and clearer, not the other way around.
12. Christ is the end of the law. "End" is translated from the Greek *telos*, which indicates, not cessation, but the objective or fullness of purpose, as in I Tim. 1:5.

Christ Himself, not merely his teachings and his example, but His Person, is the brightest, clearest, perfect and final revelation of the Invisible God and His will for all rational creatures of all time. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, the ultimate of God's Revelation. His life, His death, typified in the Cup at the Supper, purchased and contains for us all the sum and substance and eternal blessedness of the New Covenant.

### **Who is Israel?**

The New Covenant is made with the "house of Israel" (Jer. 31:31), therefore it is of first importance to know who Israel is. It cannot be national Israel, since that nation ceased to exist after the fall of Samaria in 722 B.C. Nor can it be ethnic Israel. Paul thoroughly dismisses ethnic Israel as the elect of God in his discourse found in Romans 9-11. True elect Israel is not all Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob's children, but a remnant chosen by sovereign grace. Of all Abraham's descendants, the New Covenant extends only to them, for they are the only ones that shall all surely be saved. (Isaiah 59:20-21, Romans 11:26-27)

But this "house of Israel" with whom the New Covenant is made is not elect ethnic Israel only. Christ broke down the wall of division between ethnic Israel and gentiles, abolishing the alienation that was created by legal letter precept and reconciled both to God in the offering of His body on the Cross. (Ephesians 2:11-16) Further, Paul assures us that all who are Christ's by faith are Abraham's seed and heirs according to the promise. (Galatians 3:26) It might be helpful for us to note that "the promise" is the promise God made to Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3), sometimes called the Abrahamic Covenant, some elements of which are realized only in the New Covenant. It was given 430 years before the Old Covenant was made at Sinai, and preempts Sinaitic limitations. (Galatians 3:17) It has always been the eternal purpose of God to save a people for His glory by grace through faith in the perfect obedience of His Son. All who have ever been saved or shall ever be saved are saved by grace through faith. All who are saved by grace through faith were given this grace before time began (II Timothy 1:9). This eternal purpose of God qualifies the New Covenant to be described as the everlasting covenant in Hebrews 13:20.

### **"My Law"**

***"I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts"***. It is powerfully significant that God did not say, "I will abolish my law" or "I will change my law" or "I will give a new law". Nothing of the sort is even faintly suggested. There is never, in all the scriptures, any indication that God has reconsidered his law, found it wanting, inadequate, antiquated and in need of updating. From one end of the Book to the other, there is nothing but praise, wonder, adoration and vindication made for God's law. To deprecate God's law would be to slander Him, whose Person is reflected in it.

It is also significant that God did not say, "I will write the Mosaic law in their hearts", or "the Ten Commandments" or "the law of the Old Covenant." Nor yet is it said, "I will write a new law in their hearts". The law written in the hearts of God's people is simply God's law, His revealed will for the devotional and moral behavior of rational creatures. When was such law given? It was given immediately at creation. "And the Lord God commanded the man..." (Genesis 2:16). John 1:17 no more means there was no law before Moses and the Sinaitic covenant than it means there was no truth before the Incarnation. Nor is Romans 5:12 intended to teach

there was no law before Moses. It, in fact, teaches the exact opposite. People were dying before Mt. Sinai. Death is caused by sin... any sin, not just an Adamic sin by which a whole race was ruined. There can be no sin apart from law; therefore law had been given. Man has never been, nor ever shall be without law to God. (Matt. 5:18, I Cor. 9:21) If God be God He must rule. He who rules must communicate, make His will known. He did, He has, and He forever will.

There is no new legal code whatsoever in the New Covenant. Even the “new commandment” which John records in his Gospel (13:34), he later admits in I John 2: 7-8 and II John 5 is no new one, but an old one that has been known from the beginning. How could the blood of slain Abel cry out to God for vengeance if the Royal Law of love had not been violated? Did not Jesus teach that the entire revelation of God, all the law and the prophets hang upon supreme love of God and equal love of neighbor? Again, the Apostle Paul tells us in I Timothy 1:5 that the “end” (purpose) of the commandment (law) is love from a pure heart and a pure conscience and sincere faith. With such a canon as this, what possible purpose would there be of its abolition and the giving of another?

### **Written in Their Hearts**

What is it for God to put His law in our inward parts, to write it in our hearts? This is the first hallmark of the New Covenant, and draws the sharpest contrast with the Old Covenant. Devotion, worship, communion, and moral behavior now become an inner, rather than an external thing. In the Old Covenant, the law was written in verbal words on tablets of stone. It was inscribed with pen and ink on rolls of parchment, thousands upon thousands of words particularizing detail after detail. These externally written precepts always required or forbade an outward performance. It was an alien thing, contrary to the nature of the people to whom it was addressed, something entirely beyond the scope of their identification. This is, of course, a matter of necessity since it proceeded from a holy God and was directed to a sinful people. But Jesus comes and tells us that the person who does not commit the external act of adultery, but yet desires to do so in his heart has broken the seventh Commandment. He tells us that murderers are not counted only on those who actually took another life, but all who malignantly hate. He tells us that one is not defiled by some outward unclean thing being touched or eaten, but by the wicked emotions of the heart. He tells us that the perfect performance of the Pharisees is counted worthless because their souls are full of abominable wickedness.

The writing of God’s law in our hearts is not a matter of information. The New Covenant is not merely more efficient and precise way of informing us of what is right and wrong. We are told in Romans 2:14-15 that God’s law works that knowledge in every person irrespective if he has been taught it by written precept or not. None can ever plead ignorance for their sins. Every sinner, sins against light, otherwise God could not justly judge him. The writing of God’s law in the hearts of His people is identical with regeneration, being born from above, the bringing forth of a new creation after (according to) God in righteousness and true holiness (Ephesians 4:24). The Israel of God feel in their hearts, their “inward parts” exactly the same way God does about His law. They love righteousness, purity, and godliness exactly as God does! They hate and abhor sin, duplicity and every false way exactly as God does! His seed abides in them and they cannot sin in their hearts (I John 3:9). While the saints live in an unredeemed body in which sin remains, they will struggle against sin, and often give in, but such sins are not “heart” sins because the inner man cannot enter into them (Romans 7:17-20). Sin will always be exceedingly grievous, a thing utterly alien to the life of God in the soul of man. Jesus marvels that Nicodemus could be a teacher of Israel and not understand these things.

### **A Real People of God**

The effect of the writing of God’s law in the hearts of His elect people is the creation of a real people of God. *I will be their God, and they shall be my people.* What the Old Covenant could not accomplish from the outside inwardly, the New Covenant does from the inside out. Every single one of them shall be real saints: not a hypocrite or false professor in the whole lot. Zephaniah writes of them in 3:12-13: *“I will leave in your midst a meek and humble people, and they shall trust in the name of the Lord. The remnant of Israel shall do no unrighteousness and speak no lies, Nor shall a deceitful tongue be found in their mouth...”* God will have a people who love Him supremely with all their hearts, minds and strength and their neighbors as themselves. He will be the same God to them as He was to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua: each and every one of that great cloud of witnesses who yet speaks to us from the sacred record.

They all “know the Lord” from the least to the greatest of them. In the Old Covenant a relatively few of God’s outward covenant people knew God personally, were regenerate and soundly converted. Most of national and ethnic Israel remained unconverted, did not know God, had no communion with Him, and were obliged to seek out a prophet or a priest to inform and guide them in any spiritual question. The New Covenant brings in what is popularly called the “Priesthood of The Believer”, or “Soul Competence Before God”. These terms are intended to express the truth that Christians need no other mediator between them and God other than the Lord Jesus Christ. We all approach Him directly and have immediate access to Him through the Name and Person of Christ. (Hebrews 4:15-16).

But this provision goes further than mere legal access and acceptability in Christ. To “know God” is to have first-hand acquaintance and intimate personal communion with Him. They are all personally tutored, taught by God Himself as a loving father. This is the basis of their overwhelming peace and joy in all circumstances. (Isaiah 54:13). We all have personal communion with God as any child with his father. We speak to Him and He speaks to us by His Spirit (I Cor. 2:9-12, Romans 8:14, John 10:3-4).

This, God’s dealing with His children personally and individually, is in stark contrast to the central premise in Covenant Theology which is God’s dealing with His people corporately rather than individually. The righteousness or the sins of covenant heads were imputed to the whole mass, and their descendants. (Deuteronomy 5:9-10; 7:9) This O. C. provision is at the heart of infant baptism, sacralism, Christian political activism, family and other corporate “curses or blessings”. It is expressly overthrown at the beginning of the New Covenant promise in Jeremiah 31:29-30: *“In those days they shall say no more: ‘The fathers have eaten sour grape, and the*

*children's teeth are set on edge' But every one shall die for his own iniquity; every man who eats the sour grapes, his teeth shall be set on edge."* See also Ezekiel 18:2-4.

Further enlargement on this provision is found in Jeremiah 32:38-40. Not only will God write His law in their hearts, but also they shall no longer be double-hearted or half-hearted, torn between allegiance to God and allegiance to the world, the flesh and the devil. They will no longer have an evil heart of unbelief, a heart that is "deceitful above all things and desperately wicked." They will have one heart, a "pure" heart (Matt. 5:8, I Tim. 1:5, II Tim. 2:22, I Pet. 1:22). They will have only one way open to them. All other options have been closed forever. They have nowhere else to go. They will serve God forever. There will be no possibility whatsoever of apostasy or "backsliding" in the sense which this word is used in the Old Testament. There will never be any need for reformation or revival in the New Covenant church. God has made His people invincible against the world, the flesh and the devil.

### **Abolition of Sin and Condemnation**

*"I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more"*. The Old Covenant was inadequate. The weakness lay not in the covenant itself or in the unfaithfulness of its Giver, but in the inability of the people to keep their obligation. A sinful people cannot keep a holy law. This, the final provision of the New Covenant, abolishes that weakness by abolishing the sin that mandated the failure of the first. God does not forgive their sins by fiat, but by paying its penalty in full in the Person of His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ. *"once, in the end of the world He hath appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself"* (Hebrews 9:26). *"For by one offering He hath perfected forever them that are sanctified"*. (Hebrews 10:14) The New Covenant cannot be nullified by the saint's sins, simply because God refuses to charge them with sin. *"Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? It is God that justifieth!"* (Romans 8:33) It is not that we have not sinned. We have and do. It is in the full glare of our unutterable wickedness, the undeniable guilt of our souls, and the full knowledge of our inability to do better that we hear the sweet sound of grace. So far from charging us with the guilt of our sins, God refuses to even take note of them, to even acknowledge they exist! Otherwise none could stand (Psalm 130:3). God has not only abolished them from His sight, but from our very conscience. The astounding truth of this is that a Christian cannot be made to feel guilty! It is not that he does not have a sense of right and wrong. Far from it, he has the keenest of moral senses. But he cannot be brought under condemnation even when he sins. He knows he yet has unshadowed acceptance before God. We are enabled to *"draw near in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience"* (Hebrews 10:22). The legal minded person who does not understand grace is horrified by all of this. He thinks such liberty will inculcate a spirit of licentiousness. In fact it does just the opposite. Grace has made our hearts in perfect tune with the spirit of God's righteous commandment. Deliberate willful sin is now alien, and cannot find root in our souls.

The reign of the righteousness of God's law in our hearts, the light of the teachings of Christ and the Apostles on the Old Testament, and a conscience that cannot be brought under guilt and condemnation, renders legal government of Christians contrary to the New Covenant. God has broken the chains of bondage. They cannot be intimidated by fear, and have no need of outward letter-law constraint or restraint. It is at this point that all the misguided wrangling about law and grace emerges. We will take that up in the next issue.

- C. M.