

THE NEW COVENANT (Part III)

“You are manifestly an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart. And we have such trust through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves but our sufficiency is from God, who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter, but of the spirit, for the letter kills, but the spirit gives life. (II Cor. 3:3-6)

Upon the conversion of Paul, Christ’s great Apostle to the Gentiles, and the abundance of revelation given him concerning the nature and character of the Kingdom of God in Christ, New Covenant/Old Covenant controversy exploded in the fledgling church. It has calmed down only for brief periods throughout twenty centuries of our Lord’s reign, changing only in the way it encountered the peculiar issues of each period. These peculiar issues which the New Covenant impacts become the focus of debate, and a healthy appreciation of the whole Covenant and its provisions are largely missed. In Paul’s day it mostly took the form of a Law/Grace controversy in respect to the setting aside of Jewish ceremonies and rituals. Circumcision was at the forefront, with sabbaths and foods not far behind. Paul’s writings, therefore, are heavily weighted to rid the church of Jewish ceremonial legalisms that intruded on the free grace of God. Those particular legalisms are largely irrelevant to the ecclesiastical scene today except in that the confidence and hope placed in current impotent religious activities is as misplaced as it was in them. We Gentiles have only the faintest idea of what it was like to be under the Old Covenant of Israel, and for that reason, fail to rightly apply the contrasts between the covenants then with those in our present circumstances. “Law” is not, nor ever has been a comforting and assuring word for us. But for the O.C. Jew, the word “Law” was filled with hope, confidence and expectation of good things. Not at all the sort of feeling we have when we see a police cruiser or get an envelope marked with the seal of a court or an aggressive law firm. So when we compare the love, adoration and joy in God’s law enjoined in the Bible, with the deprecation, contempt and anathema placed upon it by some “New Covenant theologian,” we are shocked and perplexed. When we are told that what our Lord said would abide until “heaven and earth pass away” (Matt. 5:18) has been abolished, we are understandably aghast.

How We Got To Where We Are

The sixteenth century magisterial Reformers found it necessary to retain the sword of the state lest the fledgling movement be over-run by Rome’s political powers. New Covenant principles could be permitted to go little further than a theological proclamation of a soteriology wrought by the sovereign grace of God in the inner man, but which was subject to various external sacraments at the hands of men who were authorized and empowered by the civil magistrate. Confessions and creeds of that time so bound the conscience of able Bible scholars that they could not interpret the New Testament as it should have been. Consequently, Reformed theology was fixed, and still stands, in the tradition of Old Covenant legalism. But the New Testament’s powerful and unwavering insistence on grace, not only in justification, but as the governing authority in the believer’s life, demanded some recognition. The Reformer’s war with Rome’s justification by infused righteousness on the one hand, and Anabaptist’s pursuit of an exemplary and godly life on the other hand, afforded an opportunity for such recognition. Rome was branded with worthless works righteousness, and the Anabaptists with hypocrisy (Their godliness could not possibly be real). Remaining sin in the members was endowed with invincibility even over the regenerate soul. Imputation of the righteousness of Christ in justification was expanded to imputed holiness. The only difference between the Christian and unbeliever is the first is a saved sinner and the latter is a lost one. Grace is thus magnified in the person who admittedly practices much worldliness, lewdness, dishonesty, greed, and self-indulgence yet is saved and sanctified by grace. The effect of grace in the believer is a perpetual wailing over a wicked heart. The New Covenant promise of a new heart, which loves God’s law as much as God loves it, is ignored. The real application of this New Covenant principle is systematically affirmed in Romans chapters 6 through 8, but Reformed dogma will not let those scriptures say what they say. This outrageous cheapening of the divine work of regeneration is one of the stoutest barriers to acknowledging and preaching the blessings of the New Covenant in all who follow the Reformed tradition today.

Non-Creedal churches, such as Baptists, Bible Churches and other Independents have done little, if any better. Revivalism, evangelistic zeal, accompanied by denominational promotion of “foreign missions”, much at the expense of doctrinal soundness and serious Bible study, threw the whole ecclesiastical scene from the 18th century forward into a theological decline. Many, of more liberal persuasions, slid off into the chasm of social and political action, for whom the Bible became valued for little more than its perceived usefulness as a guidebook for social reform. Pastors and churches that remained conservative, and were truly concerned about men’s souls became more and more alarmed with increasing ungodliness and immorality. This decline was evident among the church membership as well as the world. Neglect of serious doctrinal pursuits in order to facilitate rapid growth allowed the conversion of sinners to rest in the natural powers of fleshy men, rather than the gracious Spirit of God. Churches became filled with false professors who had no heart for God and were, at heart, lovers of sin and unrighteousness. This laxity of godliness was pastors’ cue to preach the moral law of God, to thunder out its threats, dangle its curses over sinners and drive the “saints” back to a more exemplary lifestyle. It was thought to be courageous, bold and daring to “name sins” and so confront, embarrass or frighten the wayward to repentance. The Ten Commandments were preached, to be sure, but neither they, nor the rest of the Mosaic law was specific enough for modern wickedness. New laws were set forth. Use of alcohol, tobacco, coffee, dancing, movies, television, gambling, profanity, Sunday work, length of hair, specific dress codes all made good grist for the preaching mill. Thus a whole new “legalism” was invented that is not

legalism at all since these things are not stated in the Mosaic code. These are simply “touch not, taste not.... according to the commandments and doctrines of men” (Col. 2:21-22). In addition to all this “law preaching”, pastors took on an authoritative stance, a ruling dominion in the personal lives of their charges not warranted by Scripture. Like the conservative Pharisees of the New Testament they “bound men with burdens grievous to be borne,” took away their liberties in Christ and made people bond slaves to a legalistic system far alien to the New Covenant!

While this unscriptural legalism was developing in Arminian and non-creedal churches, the purest successors of the Reformation were solidifying under the general description of “Theonomy,” or “Christian Reconstructionism.” Numerous able and scholarly men were rising and advocating serious and vigorous prosecution of Old Covenant sacralism. These would have the sword of the state put firmly in the hands of the church, which would literally enforce the Mosaic code, exacting every religious, civil and criminal penalty for every sin to the letter. The stage is now set for the modern Law/Grace controversies that began to rise in the last of the third quarter of the 20th century.

Early Grace Movements

The early “Grace” movements did not, at first, identify themselves as “New Covenant,” but simply preachers of grace as opposed to preachers of law. Freedom from law, at first, was freedom from the man-made legalisms mentioned above plus some other Biblical based items, such as tithing and strict Sabbath observances. Very soon, it became a test of grace to demonstrate one’s freedom from the law by social drinking, using tobacco in some form, flaunting flesh in provocatively immodest attire and generally ridiculing the sensitive-conscienced morally upright person. A person asserted his absolute faith in the imputed righteousness of Christ by raising a little hell now and then to demonstrate he was “only a sinner saved by grace” and had no righteousness of his own.

Alarmed somewhat over this crude and careless behavior, and in order to shake the antinomian tag, distance themselves from “libertines,” more godly and conscientious grace men began to make accommodations for some sort of continuing law in the New Covenant. Sophisticated scholarship determined the Decalogue to be abolished with the Old Covenant, but that commandments from the Decalogue which were specifically affirmed in the New Testament continued to be binding on Christians. Since the seventh day Sabbath is not specifically enjoined in the N. T. it amounts to the only thing abolished. So the whole law/grace controversy gets boiled down to a ridiculous scene of debate over the seventh day rest! (Just considering that absurdity should have shocked some folks to their senses.) Furthermore, since God’s law is now going to be given recognition and permanence in the scriptures, and they have already committed themselves irrevocably to abolition of Sinaitic law with the Old Covenant, New Covenant theologians (as “grace” men are now beginning to qualify themselves) must struggle with a way to institute a New Covenant law.

New Covenant Theology

The big hurdle for the New Covenant theologian is the words of our Lord in Matthew 5:17-19. A recent book on New Covenant Theology devoted four full chapters to this passage attempting, but failing, to reconcile these clear and straightforward words of Jesus to the faulted idea of the law given in the O. T. being set aside and replaced with a revised, or entirely new, moral code. The passage is not couched in obscure or difficult language: Realizing some of His teachings may have given the impression that He was abolishing, changing, modifying or updating the law, He emphatically denies any such thing: “*Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.*” Jesus not only denies any intent to overthrow, change or replace the law, but also diminishes anyone who ever shall, and commends those who continue to keep and teach the least of its commandments.

Fulfil is translated from the Greek *pleroo*, which simply means to fully fill up. This is **not** an eschatological term intending to mean that Christ, in his Incarnation and obedient life and death, has satisfied the law’s demands on our behalf. He indeed did that. But His subsequent discourse demonstrates that He is not talking about what He did for us as our Substitute, but a moral behavior, a real righteousness that will mark His people. That this is not an imputed righteousness is clear from verse 20 in which He declares it to be a righteousness superior to that practiced by the Pharisees. Righteousness is defined by God’s law, and is nothing more or less than conformity to that law. The same *pleroo* of the law is declared by Paul in Romans 8:4 “*that the righteousness requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit*”. The duration of the law is unequivocally declared to be “*till heaven and earth pass away*”...so long as men shall be in their present state of existence.

Jesus demonstrates this “fulfillment” immediately by a number of concrete illustrations: “*You have heard...But I say unto you*”. In verses 21-24 He tells us that the law against murder goes much further than the literal taking of a life. It is intended to abolish all hostility, ill feelings and disrespect of fellow man; and that acts of worship will not be accepted by God when the worshipper is alienated from his brother. He tells us in verses 27-30 that the sin of adultery is something that is done in the heart irrespective if it has been consummated literally or not. And that if we would be pure in heart it will require our wresting from our souls evil things that are as dear to us as an eye or bodily member. In verses 31-32 Jesus tells us that divorce does not nullify adultery, but that adultery is committed by any way in which men or women may facilitate the breaking up of a marriage union. In verses 33-37 the Lord corrects the notion that one may do sanctified swearing. Swearing is utterly inconsistent with the spiritual life of a person who has no confidence in himself, and his sole hope is placed in God alone. God is all he has, and God is enough. In verses 38-48 Jesus corrects the idea that God would merely have us exact no more vengeance than that equal to our damages, that we are to get even, and be content with that. But God’s purpose in the redemption that is in Christ is to create a race of people that bear the divine stamp, that are like Him. These will be people who take no vengeance at all. Yea, more than that, they will reward evil with good, and love those

who hate them. He has written His law (which is the reflection of His goodness and perfections) in their hearts. They have His kind of heart and His kind of Spirit, and will behave like Him. That is the *pleroo*, the fulfillment of God's law for which Christ came.

So let us be done with any idea that the law has been abolished, modified, enhanced, broadened, narrowed or changed in any way whatsoever. It is true, of course, that some Mosaic laws were related strictly to the Hebrew theocracy and the Aaronic priesthood. Those regulations are no longer of any concern to us because the institutions which they governed no longer exist. But even in these, we shall find spiritual principle that survives in the New Covenant.

God's Law Under the New Covenant

What shall we say, then, of the antithesis found in Matthew 5:21-48, the remainder of the Sermon on the Mount, and the many other passages where it seems Jesus is saying something different than that which is found in the Mosaic code? If He is not setting aside the former legal code and giving us a new one, and if He is not modifying the former, what is He doing?

If Jesus is abolishing Mosaic law simply to give us another law in its place, if we are released from slavish obedience to the letter of the Old only to be just as slavishly bound to the letter of the New, then all the talk about liberty is nonsense. We are not living as divinely regenerated and liberated sons, but as merely a new class of slaves who are just as bound to the letter of the New as the Jews were to the letter of the Old.

The key to understanding the change of divine government from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant is found in the contrast between the outward, the fleshy, the letter of law, versus the inward, the heart, and the spirit or spirituality of the law. It is that righteous principle aimed at by the verbalized letter. This is vividly illustrated in Romans 2: 26-29. Paul goes to the very heart of Jewish law keeping. Of all the enjoined duty in the Old Covenant nothing is more important than circumcision. The very word is synonymous with Judaism. Paul tells us that a man who breaks the letter of the law by not being circumcised outwardly and literally, yet who keeps the righteous intent, the heart and spirit of what circumcision represents, is truly circumcised, and a law keeper. In contrast, the man who is literally, outwardly circumcised, yet whose heart and spirit is unchanged is counted uncircumcised and a law-breaker! Here is the heart and soul of the New Covenant. It does not have to do with externals or letterisms, but internals, with the spiritual righteousness that the written code can only express by letter. Letter alone is always inadequate, and lifeless.

Exactly what is meant by letter versus spirit? By "letter" it is meant what is literally said, spoken or written, no less, no more. The "spirit" of the thing written or spoken is the spiritual principle, the inward righteousness which is aimed at by the letter and expressed by the action enjoined or prohibited. Human laws are supposed to reflect, govern, and employ the spirit of the government's constitution. They rarely do that. There is a constant conflict raging in litigation over the spirit of the law and the letter. "Black Letter Law" is strict letter application with no spirit factor considered. In all other cases good magistrates always try to consider the spirit intended by the law as well as the letter. Letter vs spirit in human laws, however, is inadequate to illustrate the idea in God's law. This law is not merely ethical but *spiritual* (Rom. 7:14) in the same sense the literal words of Jesus are *spirit* (Jn.6:63). We serve and worship not by rote, lifeless letter acts, but in spirit (Jn. 4:23-24, Rom. 1:9). And performance of law's precepts in the wrong spirit can be blasphemous (Is. 66:2-3). Old Covenant prophets writings are filled blistering condemnation of meticulous letter legalisms bereft of heart righteousness. Paul circumcised Timothy in a gracious spirit in order to avoid offence to devout Jews. But he stoutly refused false brethren's unspiritual insistence that Titus be circumcised. The New Covenant is ministered not merely in the spirit of the law but in and by the Holy Spirit Himself. The enormous volume of laws literally spelled out under the Old Covenant hang on two spiritual objectives: supreme love of God and equal love of others (Matt. 22:36-40). They come up short in letter, and are vulnerable to misinterpretation and abuse. But God is able, and does, infallibly communicate and impart exactly what He desires when He speaks to us by His Spirit in the inner man (I Cor. 2:9-16). This is a wonderful mystery, and it is a pivotal element of the New Covenant: "*They shall all be taught of the Lord*".

Old Covenant Israel, for the most part, was unregenerate, did not have the Spirit, and could only receive and employ the outward letter of the law. The Pharisees tithed mint, anise and cummin, but were blind to the weightier matters of the law (Matt. 23:23-28). They were literalists, externalists, knowing nothing of judgment, mercy and faith, inward spiritual righteousness in the law. That is the righteousness of the law that is fulfilled in those who walk not after the flesh, but the spirit (Rom. 8:4). The meritorious requirement of the law was satisfied when Jesus died on the cross. But experiential fulfillment of that spiritual righteousness, that which is sought in Rom. 7:14-22, is wrought in New Covenant saints who now walk in the Spirit, not in the flesh.

That the spirit, not the letter of the law is its righteousness, and God's objective, can be demonstrated no more powerfully and unequivocally than in the person of the Lord Jesus Himself. He was born under the law, lived under the law and obeyed it fully. If He had broken one of the least of its precepts He would still be dead and in the grave. But the Lord repeatedly set aside the letter of the law in order to keep it in spirit. He refused to sanction the stoning of a woman guilty of adultery as the law clearly commanded. He deliberately healed on the Sabbath, knowing it would provoke outrage from the Pharisees. He and His disciples passed through the fields on the Sabbath, plucking grain and rubbing off the husk in violation of the letter of the law which forbid reaping and threshing on the Sabbath. These provocations were not a referendum on the Sabbath as alleged by antisabbatarians, but a referendum on mercy and love (Matt. 12:7), the spirit of all the law.

Nor is this violation of the letter in order to keep the spirit of the law peculiar to the New Testament alone. Solomon's temple was adorned with molten and graven images in violation of the letter in the second Commandment. The letter of sixth commandment is broken in wars. Jesus made reference to David's eating of the showbread in violation of the letter of the law, and of the priest's guiltlessly profaning the Sabbath by their labors on that day in order to perform the duties of their ministry. The midwives in Egypt violated the letter of the law by lying about the birth of Jewish boys. Rahab committed law-letter treason and lying when she hid the spies and deceived the agents of Jericho's king. But this letter-law violation was her most glorious hour. Had she done otherwise, she would have sealed the death of the spies, she and all her family would have perished, and the human descendency of Jesus would have

failed. The *spirit* of the whole matter was this: She owed Jericho nothing. Her faith had made her an Israelite, and her allegiance was to the spies, not the King of Jericho. This, her act of faith, won her equal status with Abraham, the father of all who believe (James 2:23-25). This is a most vivid and powerful illustration of the righteousness of the law being in its spirit, not its letter.

So we see that Jesus in His antithesis of Matthew 5: 21-48 is not changing the law, or giving new laws, but merely unveiling the full spiritual requirement of the one immutable law of God. By the “least of these commandments” (Matt. 5:19) He surely had in mind such precepts as not muzzling an ox when he was used to thresh grain. Paul tells us this is the basis for paying gospel ministers for their labors. Here is the Apostle to the Gentiles, the champion of the New Covenant, the fiery writer of the letter to the Galatians taking an Old Covenant “ceremonial” law and applying it to the Christian church! Its full spiritual focus is that neither man nor beast should be denied partaking of the fruits of their labors. That is the spirit contained in the letter. The same would be true of the injunction against plowing an ass and ox together. One is a clean beast, the other an unclean. The spirit of this law? Christians should not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. Even the injunction against “seething a kid in his mother’s milk” has spiritual content. Are we told by this that we should not use dairy products in cooking meat, as the letter would seem? Hardly. More likely it a spiritual curb on wantonly dulling our compassion and sensibilities. Cruelties that begin with beasts soon dull our compassion and kindness to fellow-men alike. We cannot be too careful in guarding a tender conscience.

A major problem with regarding the teachings of Jesus and those of the early apostles in the letter is a dearth of specifics. Thousands of detailed ethical matters can be brought up now that did not even exist then. Many moral problems that did exist then were not specifically addressed by Jesus or the Apostles. The commandments of Jesus Himself are especially few and brief. Nor would a super abundance of them solve the problem. Governments pass hundreds of thousands of laws attempting to cover everything under the heading of “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Every time one evil is singled out, meticulously forbade with the most thorough language that can be mustered, smart crooks (lawyers at the top) will find a way to abuse or get around the verbalized law. Nor is a new legal code needed. The spirit of the law already given is enough: supreme love of God and equal love of fellowman.

To draw the string a little tighter, I am ready to affirm that the canon of the New Covenant is not a verbalized law at all but a Person. “*God, who at various times and in different ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophet, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son...*” Paul in I Corinthians 9:21 declares himself to be *ennomous* (literally in-lawed) to Christ! Christ Himself is his law! He is not bound merely to a verbal legal code which the Lord gave, but the Lord Himself!

The teachings of Christ and the Apostles certainly give us a better revelation of God’s law, but they are not enough. Nor will the example set by Jesus in His life be sufficient. A canon for the New Covenant saint includes all the above, but nothing short of Christ dwelling in the inner man by faith (Eph. 3:17) will be an all sufficient moral and devotional guide. If this seems a bit too mystical for us, let us be reminded that it is solidly scriptural (John 14:15-23). If Christ in the inner man, by the Holy Spirit seems not quite substantial enough, John did not think so (John 14:26, I John 2:20, 27). Is this not the promise of the New Covenant? How much more powerfully and fully could the will of God be written in our hearts than by God Himself dwelling there daily, immediately teaching us all things, giving us of His very heart and soul and mind in every matter we face? Or how better could all of God’s people all know Him and all be taught of Him? More next issue.

- C. M.