

THE NEW COVENANT (Part IV)

“For it is written, that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondmaid, the other by a freewoman. But he who was of the freewoman was by promise. Which thing are an allegory: for these are the two covenants; the one from the mount Sinai, which gendereth to bondage, which is Agar...which answereth to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children. But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all...Cast out the bondwoman and her son: for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman...So then brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman, but of the free (Gal. 4:22-31).

The reader may find it profitable to review previous issues (Part I, II and III), and refresh his memory of those discussions of the New Covenant before reading this issue. If you do not have these issues, we will be happy to forward them to you, or they may be accessed on the G.A.T.E. website given on the last page.

The above scripture passage showcases the Judaistic bondage under Mosaic Law in the Old Covenant in contrast to Christian liberty under the New Covenant. This has inevitably led to all sorts of intemperate, often unscriptural, and nearly always unprofitable Law/Grace controversy and debate. This Law/Grace controversy has evolved over the past quarter century to a more wholesome airing of Old Covenant/New Covenant considerations. The last issue was devoted principally to a resolution of the problem of dealing with the inescapable fact of radical changes in law considerations between the Old and New Covenants. It will be helpful to restate some of the immutable principles and facts that must survive through this resolution.

1. God’s absolute goodness and sovereignty.
2. As Sovereign Ruler He must govern. As Governor He must give law, and man is never without that law.
3. His law is His will, and His will is a reflection of His Person, perfect in wisdom and moral goodness.
4. Since God is perfect in His Person, He is immutable, can never change, nor can the preceptive reflection of His Person found in the essence of law.
5. The essence of God’s will for the devotional and ethical behavior of men is found in the two “great commandments”; supreme love of God and equal love of fellow man. It is also expressed in Micah 6:8 *“He has shown you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God”*.

While the implications of God’s will have not been uniformly revealed to all men at all times, and have been expressed differently and in differing precepts, the

essence of His law or revealed will for the devotional and moral behavior of men can never change. This is what Jesus is saying in Matthew 5:17-19. This not only underscores the permanent endurance of God’s law, but its immutability. It cannot be expanded, diminished, or altered in any way. Abolition of the Old Covenant cannot mean abolition of God’s devotional and moral law. We have a new covenant, but nowhere are we told we have a new law or moral code. How, then, are we to account for the contrast between what is taught by Christ and the New Testament Apostles, and that which is taught by Moses? We cannot resolve this by modifying Moses. If we modify it in any way, then we have a new and different moral code, something Jesus disallowed in Matt. 5:17-18. Whatever difference may appear in Moses’ law and the teachings of Christ must be only in the implications and applications of the immutable spiritual essence of God’s law.

No New Covenant Legal Code

The New Testament does not give us a new canon in the teachings of Christ and the Apostles. Although we do have many specific commands and exhortations in the New Testament, these fall far short of a comprehensive set of objective standards covering all moral and devotional behavior. Nor are these commands and exhortations given in the format of a unit which can be taken as a code of conduct. They are simply part of the preaching and teaching which Jesus was giving to his audience, or what an apostle was writing to a church, many of which were quotations from the Old Testament, and many of which were repeated over and over. This preaching and writing was not given with the idea of setting forth a whole New Covenant objective standard of conduct, but to illustrate a New Covenant given to us, not of the letter, nor in the letter, but in the spirit, a spiritual covenant ministered in the Holy Spirit. Enough concrete examples are given to illustrate the spiritual nature of the Covenant, and the heart righteousness God requires. This is nothing like Moses coming down from Mt. Sinai with two tables of the complete law in his hands. We can now bring up hundreds of contemporary scenarios for which we have no objective command in the New Testament. But we are not without divine law for these. We are “in-lawed” to Christ (I Cor.9:21). There is no moral or devotional issue that supreme love to God and equal love to fellow-man does not firmly address. Christ indwelling the inner man by the Spirit (Eph. 3:14-21) powerfully and effectively causes us to know, not only know what is pleasing to God in every case, but also enables us to perform His good pleasure.

New Covenant Newness

Although God’s law cannot be changed, there is indeed a newness to it in the New Covenant. Its newness exists in a clearer... indeed, a full revelation of God’s

immutable law. Accompanying the brilliant light of that full revelation, sealed in the blood of Jesus Christ, is also a full enablement for compliance with God's perfect righteousness wrought in the believer's heart. For us, that deep groping darkness of Isaiah 59 is past! The Redeemer has come to Zion, and has turned ungodliness away from Jacob! (Isaiah 59:20, Romans 11:26-27) This is that "new commandment" declared by John, "*which thing is true in Him and in you because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining*" (I John 2:8).

The effect of this newness in full revelation of God's law, together with spiritual enablement, is Christian liberty. In some cases Jesus' antithesis of Matthew 5 makes a far more stringent requirement than that spoken under the Mosaic code. It requires not only that we do no evil, but that we harbor no evil thoughts; that we must not avenge ourselves, but reward our persecutors! But far from putting us under a heavier bondage by requiring something beyond our ability, it is glorious liberty because God has given us a new heart which is in perfect accord with these supernatural requirements. His yoke is easy and His burden light. The Son has made us free. We are children, not of Hagar (fleshy unbelief), but of Sarah, the supernatural promise of the Almighty God! Our life is lived, not in defeat and failure of the impotent arm of the flesh, but in victorious triumph through the Spirit of the living God.

But there are also numerous cases where the light of Christ puts a far less severely rigid application of law than that found in the Mosaic code, indeed what might seem to be a liberalization of those written precepts. Paul speaks of our serving "*in the newness of the spirit and not in the oldness of the letter*" (Rom. 7: 6). Adulterous women are not stoned. We no longer stone our children to death when they are intransigently rebellious and wicked. Any kind of nutritious food may be eaten if prayerfully received with a grateful heart. We do not execute homosexuals or others who practice deviant sexual sins. Hungry people are allowed to reap grain, thresh and eat it on the Sabbath. People are not only healed on the Sabbath, but are told to pick up their beds and carry them.

Antinomianism and Licentiousness Excluded

Will not such seeming liberalization of these precepts lead to licentiousness and careless living? Does not this amount to a change in the law of God?

There is no change in the essence, or the spirit of God's law. Deviant sexual behavior, rebellion and disobedience is still sin, and the penalty of sin is still death. The difference in the application is made necessary because of the difference in the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. The Old Covenant was made

with a principally unregenerate outward people who were a nation, a state, a secular as well as a religious society. Without the spiritual restraint of a regenerate heart, the only way to keep such degenerate behavior from corrupting the whole society was to purge out the wicked by temporal death. The New Covenant, on the other hand, is made with a regenerated people endowed with a heart that loves God and righteousness, and which hates sin. Giving a Christian license to sin will not increase his sinning. He already sins more than he wants to. Furthermore, New Covenant people are a holy nation, not a secular political entity. Theirs is not the kingdoms of this world. Neither they, nor God, have any vested interest in cleaning up Sodom. Sinners of all sorts may be granted repentance, delivered from the power of their sins and made clean and holy in the blood of Christ. Those who do not believe the gospel and repent are already marked out for eternal death. So the New Covenant application of such laws as these, on the one hand, is to separate us from fellowship with such people, and on the other hand, to love them, preach the gospel to them, and warn them to flee to Christ and save themselves from wrath to come. In the case of our children or other loved ones, we are charged to "hate" them in order to love Christ. That is, we are to love God supremely, to the point of "losing" them if necessary to vindicate God and His righteousness. The soul-wrenching sorrow and grief of losing a loved one because of Christ and the gospel is hardly less severe than losing them in mortal death. We deal with our cherished fleshy sins in the same way. We mortify them by the Spirit. Mortifying some of them through the Spirit is like plucking out an eye or cutting off a hand or foot.

The Sabbath

The Sabbath, which has become the theological football being kicked back and forth in New Covenant debate, demands special attention. In contemporary Law/Grace controversy, this, the fourth commandment of the Decalogue, has garnered more infamous wrangling than all the rest of Mosaic Law put together. Some Grace men, wishing to rid the saints of all burdensome law, yet escape the accusation of removing moral restraint, postulate that all the moral law of Moses has been retained, but all the ceremonial law has been abolished. Some form of that position is also taken by Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism. But Grace men further note that nine of the Ten Commandments are moral, and should be retained; but the Sabbath, being strictly ceremonial, ought to be abolished with the abolition of the Old Covenant. This is simply not true. In the first place, the Sabbath cannot be arbitrarily separated from Jesus' unequivocal assurance of the permanence of the whole law of God as long as men are in their present state

of existence (Matt. 5:18). In the second place, only the last six Commandments are moral. There is nothing immoral about polytheism, or the making and worshiping of images. It is certainly stupid and sacrilegious, but it does no immediate evil to fellowman. In the third place, none of the first four Commandments are either moral or ceremonial: they are devotional, and apply to the first of the two Great Commandments: supreme love of God. The last six are moral and apply to the second of the two Great Commandments: equal love of fellow-man. The first four enjoin holiness; the second six have to do with our righteousness. Practicing the first four (ceremonially in the letter) may lead to morality, but not necessarily. One may observe five of the last six outwardly in the letter (the tenth can be practiced only inwardly in spirit), and be a God hater. In the fourth place, all ceremony has not been abolished in the New Covenant. Water baptism and the Lord's Supper are certainly ceremonies. One may call them "ordinances" or "sacraments" or whatever term one may wish to dignify them, but they are still ceremonies. Indeed the Lord tied the memorial supper to the New Covenant in His very institution of it (I Cor. 11:25). Other ceremonies practiced by New Covenant Christians are the laying on of hands, anointing with oil, the right hand of fellowship, the lifting up of hands, kneeling, or the prostrating of the body in prayer, and the kiss of brotherly love, to name a few. These need not, and should not be, lifeless rote ritual, but very real expressions, "body English" testimonies, declarations, communications of holy, exuberant, and earnest love and devotion!

Nor should the Seventh Day Rest be utterly abolished on the basis that it was the sign of the Old Covenant. Circumcision was the outward sign of the Abrahamic Covenant. And although outward circumcision has given way to inward spiritual circumcision in the fulfillment of the inward Abrahamic Covenant (Phil. 3:3, Gal. 3-9), physical circumcision is still practiced as effective hygienic therapy. The rainbow was given as a sign of the Noahic covenant. It still appears in the skies when atmospheric moisture refracts the spectrum of the sun's light. If it be objected that the promises of these covenants are still in force, we assert that the promises of the Old Covenant are still in force. The Old Covenant promises life and blessedness on the condition of a life lived in perfect obedience to the holy law of God. We receive all the promises given to Abraham, and all the blessings promised in the Mosaic law, on the basis of Christ's perfect obedience to God's law imputed to us by faith!

Perhaps the strongest argument for abolition of the Sabbath is that it was merely a ceremonial type of our real rest in the finished work of Christ, that Christ is the Christian's Sabbath, and that we rest seven days a week

rather than only one. "*We who have believed do enter into that rest*" (Heb. 4:3). "*For he who has entered His rest has himself also ceased from his works as God did from His*". There can be no doubt that the O.C. Sabbath is a ceremonial type of the coming reality of true spiritual rest, just as the blood sacrifices of animals (which have now ceased) were foreshadows of the sacrifice of Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away our sins. The bloodless sacrifices (heave offerings, peace offerings, thanksgiving offerings) were also ceremonial types of the coming "*spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ*" (I Pet. 2:5). But sacrifices per se have not ceased in the New Covenant (Rom. 12:1, Phil. 2:17; 4:18, Heb. 13:15, 16). Even the one efficacious sacrifice of the blood of Christ continues to be offered, not in the blasphemous Roman Mass, but in the coming of a sinner to God in repentance and faith (I John 1:7).

What relevance or bearing does all this have to resolution of the sabbatarian/antisabbatarian debate? There are two significant considerations that will help us here. The first is this: Just as there were surely occasions wherein true saints under the Old Covenant observed these ceremonies in spirit as well as letter, there are New Covenant saints who, practicing the New Covenant in spirit, employ some form of the letter, not slavishly, but in full Christian liberty, heartily doing outwardly what is true inwardly. They enter the baptismal waters, and come to the memorial supper table with reverent, grateful, joyful hearts. They freely pay tithes, open their hands wide to the needy, and rejoice in the privilege of doing so. They bow the knee before the Lord, lift up holy hands toward heaven, and sing aloud from the bottoms of their souls! And they heartily look forward to the close of the work week when they will have a whole day to come apart from the world, lay aside all daily cares, rest in body, soul and spirit in worship, thanksgiving and adoration to the God who redeems us and fills our lives with goodness.

The second consideration is that, although Sabbath observance did not enter as a legal requirement before the Sinaitic Covenant, the basis for its devotional observation came out of the creation in the beginning. (Heb. 4:3-10, Gen. 2:2-3, Ex. 20: 8-11). Although we have no record of God's people observing the Sabbath before Sinai, it does not follow that devout men did not acknowledge it in some way. We have scant account of any of their devotions other than prayer and sacrifice. It is hardly likely that they would have utterly ignored a day which God "hallowed and sanctified". When God designated the Sabbath as a sign of the Old Covenant, He did not invent a strange new custom, but chose one with which His people were familiar! Just as surely as the devotional function of the first, second, and third Commandments did not begin at Sinai and did not end at Calvary, neither

does that of the seventh day rest! The created world into which Adam was brought was one of rest. God had finished all things, they were good, and He was pleased and at peace with it. Everything the man needed was provided. There was no enemy to fight, no disease or pestilence to fear, and no sweat to obtain food. So long as he was content with what **God** had done, willed, and commanded, he **rested**, and in that rest was worship and adoration of His God. He lost that rest only when he sought to tamper with what God had done and ordered.

Of those first four, the devotional commandments in the Decalogue, only the fourth is a **positive act of worship!** The first three commandments are all negations. God's people were forbidden to have any other God. They are forbidden to make and worship idols. They are forbidden to vainly take the Name of the Lord. Then they are commanded to come aside out of their daily pursuits of bread, clothing and shelter to rest, remember, meditate, reflect and adore their Creator Who brought all this into existence. If there is a high spiritual point in the whole of the Mosaic code, the seventh day rest is it!

If the seventh day Sabbath is not to be abolished, then how is it to be observed by New Covenant saints? It must be readily admitted that it is certainly not kept strictly in the letter according to Mosaic code. Not even the most severe legalists, including Seventh Day Adventists, do that. Much is made by antisabbarians of Numbers 15:32-36 as if any infraction of strict Sabbath observance were a capital crime. This is simply not true. If death were the penalty for breaking the Sabbath in any way the Israelites would have stoned the man immediately. That they had to seek the Lord and wait for an answer on what to do with him is proof that no such law existed. If every minor violation of strict Sabbath observance were punished by death, they would have had stoning parties going on night and day! In all likelihood this man acted in deliberate rebellion, demonstrating his defiance of God's law by making an open show of his contempt. Only God knows the heart. The same God who said, "The man shall surely be put to death", also said, "I desired mercy and not sacrifice", and, "neither do I condemn you. Go and sin no more". The God of the Bible has never exhibited a nit-picking, legalistic intolerance of His frail creatures. "*As a father pities his children so the Lord pities those who fear Him. For He knows our frame: He remembers that we are dust.*" (Psalm 103:13-14). It is deliberate, open eyed, wicked rebellion that God hates.

But do we have only one of two choices: to either observe the O.C. Sabbath to the letter, or abolish any seventh day rest whatsoever? I think not. I have asked some of my worthy antisabbarian friends how much it would benefit the saints and the Christian scene at large if

they should succeed in eliminating any day of rest whatsoever. How much better off would everyone be if all worked seven days a week endlessly with no respite and no time reserved for the saints to gather regularly for worship, instruction in the word of God and mutual edification? None have given me a straight answer yet, and the truth of the matter is whether they admit it or not, Sunday is not just another day of the week to most of them, and they would sorely miss it if it were abolished!

New Covenant antisabbarians are correct in decrying an Old Covenant Sabbath observance; that is, a Sabbath day that is part of a legal code to which letter compliance is demanded. When it is incorporated in the sect's Confession or "church covenant", or in an instrument to which prospective church members must subscribe forbidding particular activities on Sunday, and demanding strict attendance at all appointed times of worship, it is letter-law legalism. This is the sort of thing that is necessary for unregenerate people who walk after the flesh, whose hearts are still in the world, and who must be coerced into that for which they have no heart. It is Hagar's bondage. "We **cannot** do that" or "We **must** do this" because of the Sabbath. This sort of thing is contrary to the whole spirit of the New Covenant.

But New Covenant Christianity's observance of a weekly worship period (which has come to be called "The Lord's Day") is something else entirely. This is a New Covenant Sabbath which is in harmony with the Lord's qualification: "The Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath". It is one in which there is liberty. One may observe it as different and more holy than any other day or he may observe it as just another day. The scriptures tell us that God has received both of these persons who do what they do **devoutly to Him!** (Rom. 14:1-6) A New Covenant Christian does not see Sunday as a day in which he **cannot** work or engage in secular matters, but one in which he does not **have to**. He is happily free from those things for a day. He does not **have** to go to church: he delights and joys in it. He looks forward to the time of worship and communion with the saints, prayers, songs and edification from the word of God. This is not Hagar's bondage. It is Sarah's glorious liberty. A Sabbath denied and deprived is every bit as much bondage as a coerced one.

The New Covenant mediated in the merit and power of the Lord Jesus Christ has broken the chains of sin, and thereby all legal bondage. A heart after God, all His perfections and mercies, has flung open the gates of liberty. There is no devotional injunction for which the love of God in the saints does not yearn, and no immoral deed or attitude which they do not abhor. The New Covenant is altogether in spirit, not letter; and where the Spirit of the Lord is there is liberty.

- C. M.