

TWO COVENANTS COMPARED & CONTRASTED

SERIES: THE NEW COVENANT AS A LIFESTYLE

by Doug Goins

This morning we sang Martin Smith's powerful worship song, *The Message of the Cross*. He writes, "this is the message of the Cross; that we can be free to live in the victory and turn from our sin."

The message of the cross of Jesus Christ is a declaration of our freedom. The good news is that as Christians we can live victoriously. In 2 Corinthians 2:14, the apostle Paul says, "But thanks be to God, who always leads us in his triumph in Christ..." He summarizes his hope of living triumphantly out of freedom in Jesus Christ in 2 Corinthians 3:4-6:

Such confidence we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant.

The new covenant has been ratified by the shed blood of Jesus Christ. Those of us who have repented of our sins have renounced our self-centeredness. If we believe in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, then the new covenant promise from Jeremiah is ours: "I will be their God, and they shall be my people...for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more" (Jer 31:33c, 34d).

Although it is wonderful to know that our sins are forgiven in Jesus, we can find it difficult to trust God with our lives. Learning to live in Jesus' victory, accepting the freedom of the gospel, and consistently living in the new covenant is a struggle. It is often easier said than done.

The church that Paul planted in Corinth dealt with the same issues. When Paul taught the gospel of freedom in Christ, they responded in saving faith. But soon after Paul left Corinth self-appointed spiritual leaders arrived and taught a counterfeit form of the gospel. These so-called Judaizers were not servants of a new covenant, but represented what Paul refers to as an old covenant approach to life and ministry.

The Judaizers taught that salvation was by faith in Jesus Christ *plus* keeping the Old Testament Law of Moses. In 2 Corinthians 2:17, Paul calls the Judaizers "peddlers" of God's Word. He says they preach "another Jesus," and encourage the church to receive "a different spirit" and "a different gospel" (2 Cor 11:4).

This "gospel of legalism" was attractive to the Corinthians, and it continues in popularity today, even among us. One reason we struggle with believing that our adequacy is based in God and not in our own natural resources and abilities is that our human nature enjoys achieving religious goals. It seems easier to measure religious activity than to simply trust Christ and allow the Holy Spirit to express himself through us. One lifestyle is quantitative while the other is qualitative.

Second Corinthians 3:6-11 is Paul's refutation of the false teachers and their gospel of legalism. He does this by comparing and contrasting the two different covenants. They really are two conflicting lifestyles. Beginning at 3:5b, he says

...but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. But if the ministry of death, in letters engraved on stones, came with glory, so that the sons of Israel could not look intently at the face of Moses because of the glory of his face, fading as it was, how will the ministry of the Spirit fail to be even more with glory? For if the ministry of condemnation has glory, much more does the ministry of righteousness abound in glory. For indeed what had glory, in this case has no glory because of the glory that surpasses it. For if that which fades away was with glory, much more that which remains is in glory.

Choosing life or death

The stark contrast in verse 6 makes it clear that there are only two options: We can choose life in the new covenant, or we will end up living out death under the old covenant. Paul says the new covenant is life-giving, but the old covenant kills.

A new covenant lifestyle is "of the Spirit." It is lived by the power of the Holy Spirit, who is the life-giver. It is his power that becomes our dynamic for living. A covenant that is of the Holy Spirit in character gives life because it starts inside of us, working internally to produce change of a spiritual nature. Our hearts are changed by this ministry of grace from God.

God promised through the prophet Jeremiah, "...I will put my law within them and on their heart I will write it..." (Jer 31:33b). The nature of the new covenant is trusting in God to receive life and ministry as a gift of grace. We must be willing to believe God when he says, "I will do it. I will give you the heart. I will give you the resources you need to respond to me in love." Paul describes the change of nature in Ephesians 4:24 as "...the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth." God gives us righteousness, and he promises to make us holy men and women. It is his doing, not ours.

In contrast, the old covenant is a lifestyle which ends in death. It is life lived in the power of our own efforts to be everything we think God wants us to be. The results are shattering: "The letter kills." A covenant that is letter in nature, the written code, crushes our spirit because it makes external demands for obedience, but it does not give us the internal power to obey. The nature of the old covenant is trusting in self-effort to please God by doing what his law commands.

As a Pharisee, Paul's life had been devoted to keeping every aspect of the written code of the Old Testament law. But it eventually heightened his sense of inadequacy without any hope of meeting the law's demands. After his encounter with Jesus on the Damascus road, Paul spent the next 10 to 14 years struggling to learn what it means to live out of God's grace rather than his own religious self-effort. He was finally able to rejoice when he understood that the new covenant is written on our hearts by the Spirit of God. So when Paul writes, "...the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" it is an autobiographical statement. The old covenant was Paul trying to do his best for God; the new covenant is God doing his best through Paul.

Paul does not deny the glory of the old covenant law, but there certainly was glory in the giving of the law at Mount Sinai and in the establishment of Israel's worship life. There are two definitions of glory that are complimentary. One refers to attractiveness or beauty, like a glorious sunset that is overwhelming in its beauty. The other definition has to do with the weight of authority given to a person, a principle, or an idea. It is authoritative as well as beautiful.

Paul acknowledges that there was value and a certain splendor about the old covenant (verse 7):

But if the ministry of death, in letters engraved on stones, came with glory, so that the sons of Israel could not look intently at the face of Moses because the glory of his face, fading as it was...

Let's examine the four phrases in the verse that define the value of the old covenant.

First is the issue of the law being death-dealing, or bringing death. Paul calls it "the ministry of death." Like the Judaizers in Corinth, legalistic Christians today tend to magnify the glory of the law as a universal moral standard without acknowledging its limitations. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul summarizes the death-dealing effects of living based on keeping the law. He says that the Mosaic Law cannot justify a lost sinner (2:16) or give a sinner righteousness (2:21); it cannot give us the Holy Spirit (3:2) or a spiritual inheritance (3:18); it cannot give us spiritual life (3:25) or spiritual freedom (4:8-10).

Second, the law cannot fulfill these requirements because it was written externally "in letters engraved on stones." When God gave Moses the law at Mount Sinai he wrote it on two stone tablets which were placed into the Ark of the Covenant. Even if an Israelite had been able to read the law directly from the stone tablets, it would not have been able to change how that person lived. Since the law is external to us, our lives will not be transformed unless we have an internal power source. Old covenant Christianity can admonish us to do certain things, and it can tell us not to do certain things, but it cannot give us the power to obey. If we only obey in response to the demand instead of from our hearts, we end up worse than before in one of two ways. If we achieve a level of obedience in an area, the result can be a sense of pride or accomplishment in law keeping. We become spiritually arrogant: "I'm a good person because I did what the law said." Or, we can go to the other extreme and experience a sense of failure because of our inability to meet the law's requirements. We end up despondent, discouraged, feeling guilt, and struggling with spiritual self-pity. Either attempt at living by the external law produces an inaccurate self-perception. Whether it is an exalted or a condemning view of ourselves, it is not how God intends for us to feel.

The third phrase "...because of the glory of his face..." means that there is something good about the law. When Moses descended from Mount Sinai after the law was given, his face was shining. The shine was a reflection of the glory of God, an expression of his grace. Moses did not effect a spiritual glow about himself, but it certainly impressed the people of Israel. There was temporary value in the law for Israel. Not only was it their national constitution, but it also instructed them spiritually. Paul says that the law is like a tutor or a mentor in preparation for the coming of Christ (Galatians 3:24).

The greater value of the new covenant

But God made the glory fade from Moses' face. The old covenant, as a ministry of death, was never designed to last. Paul goes on to argue from the lesser to the greater in verses 7 and 8: If there was value or glory in the giving of the law, which brought death to people who tried to keep it by self-effort, how much more glory is there in a ministry that brings life to people who have learned to depend on God's effort at work in them?

Verses 8-11 summarize some of the splendor, the surpassing greatness and glory of the new covenant as a lifestyle. Paul says that we find eternal life in the Spirit of God, and it is life with a capital "L". He also says that righteousness-as acceptance and worth-is superior to the

guilt of condemnation by the old covenant. Finally, the new covenant is permanent and eternal. We can count on it. It is meant to replace that which was transient and temporary.

Life in the Spirit

Verse 8 addresses life in the Spirit:

...how will the ministry of the Spirit fail to be even more with glory?

The Holy Spirit's function is to give life. The Lord Jesus said, "I came that they may have life; and have it abundantly" (John 10:10b). Paul writes, "and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty" (2 Cor 3:17b). The New Testament proclaims a gospel of liberation, so a new covenant lifestyle is essentially freedom in Christ. Those of us who are "in Christ" are free from the penalty and power of sin in our lives, and we will ultimately be free from its presence.

On Easter we celebrated the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the good news that we, as Christians, are now free from the fear of death because we will spend eternity with God. Part of this good news is that God is our protector. We are eternally safe in the love of God and secure from the things that frighten us the most. As the church, we are a liberating community. We have been created by the Spirit of God, and are freed to love people sacrificially and unconditionally. We are free to celebrate our unique spiritual gifting by serving one another in unselfish ways. Those who are captured by this sense a tremendous joy and celebration. Love is unleashed and it captures the attention of those around them. This was impressed upon me recently when a visitor to our church commented, "I like how you people treat each other." After visiting a few Sundays he had observed the quality of interaction among us and how we serve one another. Because of our freedom in Christ, Jesus' life is manifested through us.

Acceptance and worth are superior to guilt

Verse 9 gives a second aspect of the greater value of the new covenant in contrast to the old. It says that acceptance and worth are superior to guilt:

For if the ministry of condemnation has glory, much more does the ministry of righteousness abound in glory.

It makes two important points. First, self-effort produces condemnation. If we live as Christians under a sense of condemnation it is because we are trying to live up to the ideals of the law. It is as if God's standards speak accusingly, constantly reminding us of failure, so we feel guilty most of the time. Living under the old covenant will always make us feel insecure about our standing with God. The question always lurks, "Have we done enough to please him?" If our Christian activity defines us then we will be driven by the fear of not measuring up, and there will be pressure to perform or compete. From personal experience, I can tell you it is an exhausting way to live. God is gradually freeing me from the traps of perfectionism and competition that mark a spiritual performer. As I said, it is easier said than done, but the promise is that we are in the process of being liberated, and God will accomplish it.

The gospel tells us, "Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom 8:1). This speaks to the wonderful contrast in the second half of verse 9 that dependence on the Lord results in our righteousness. The new covenant is living out of grace. In contrast to accusation, God speaks his acceptance and affirmation to us as his beloved sons and daughters. In *Authentic Christianity*, Ray Stedman explains righteousness in our experience:

Righteousness is one of those great biblical words which is little understood today. Most of us think of it as "doing" what is right and certainly that's part of its meaning. But the essence of the term goes much deeper. Its basic idea is "being" what is right. One does what is right because one is right. That's the biblical idea of righteousness. Righteousness is the quality of being acceptable to God and being accepted by him, fully, and without reserve. Perhaps we will get a better sense of it if we substitute the word "worth." The righteous man is the man who is valued. All his internal struggles are resolved, he's no longer troubled with guilt, inadequacy or hostility, and he doesn't struggle with himself to produce anything. Knowing he stands fully accepted before God, pleasing to God, therefore he is free to act with respect to the situation in which he finds himself. He is able to reach out to others who hurt, or are fearful, or feel condemned, because he himself is free from those things to depend on everything coming from God, nothing from me, which produces that sense of worth. That is righteousness. (1)

The permanent replaces the transient

A final important contrast is found in verses 10 and 11. The new covenant is permanent and eternal, and it replaces the old covenant, which was temporary and transient:

For indeed what had glory, in this case has no glory because of the glory that surpasses it. For if that which fades away was with glory, much more that which remains is in glory.

These verses point out two realities. First, self-effort always ebbs away to nothing. The phrase "in this case" is an oblique reference to Paul's experience of trusting in his religious self-effort for a sense of confidence. He learned that living under the old covenant always produces something that doesn't last, that fades away, like the glow on Moses' face. Paul remembers when he trusted in his own religious self-effort for a sense of competence. From our study of 2 Corinthians 3:1-6 ([Discovery Paper #4634](#)) we know that Paul had taken prideful pleasure in his Jewish ancestry, his orthodoxy, his religious activism, and his morality. However, he learned through repeated failure in his early Christian life that his best efforts were worthless, and he eventually quit relying on his own resources. After several years of obscurity in his home town of Tarsus Paul was able to say with conviction, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me" (Gal 2:20).

Paul's early years of trying to be a Christian under the old covenant confront us with our own fleshly dependence on moral muscle. When we try to do our best for Jesus, we end up discouraged and demoralized. We constantly need people to encourage us, books and classes to give us new vision, and programs and activities to motivate us.

However, the good news is that we do not have to live that way. Like Paul, we can experience the secret of Galatians 2:20 and discover that dependence on the Lord will keep us fresh and strong in life. People who live like that are exciting to be with. They have learned to trust God at work in them, and they do not need the reinforcement of external religious props to guarantee their enthusiasm and energy. It does not mean that they are super-human or that they do not struggle with discouragement. But it means that they have learned to trust the God who lives inside of them, believing that he is greater than the discouraging circumstances that pressure them.

Exodus 4 recounts Moses' struggle with this issue of spiritual adequacy. God commanded Moses to leave Midian and return to Egypt, the place of his greatest humiliation and public failure. As God's spokesman, he was to confront the powerful despot Pharaoh to demand Israel's release from slavery. Moses responds to the Lord, "Please, Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither recently nor in time past, nor since Thou has spoken to Thy servant; for I am slow of speech and slow of tongue" (Exod 4:10). I can identify with Moses; I have the same conversation with God almost every Saturday night before I have to preach on Sunday morning! God's response is not very empathic, sympathetic, or therapeutic: "The Lord said to him, 'Who has made man's mouth? Or who makes him mute or deaf, or seeing or blind? Is it not I, the Lord? Now then go, and I, even I, will be with your mouth, and teach you what you are to say'" (Exod 4:11, 12). Twice God says that he will accomplish his purposes. He will be Moses' mouth, and will give him the words. "I will" in this passage echoes Jeremiah 31:33b: "I will put my law within them and on their heart I will write it..." In other words, "I will give you a new heart. I will internalize truth for you." That is the nature of the new covenant. Whatever God asks us to do, *He* will accomplish it through us. It is a promise.

People who know this reality are delightful to be around. They have claimed the promise of the Lord Jesus in John 7:38: "He who believes in me, as the Scripture said, 'From his innermost being shall flow rivers of living water.'" This does not refer only to those who have believed in Christ for salvation, but to those who have also believed in him to be everything they need in life. Out of the person who has chosen to believe will flow rivers of living water. That internal spiritual life is the source of spiritual refreshment and vitality for new covenant living.

At PBC, we have recently had a thrilling season of spiritual adventure. Last week our pastoral staff and elders reviewed the exciting things God has done among us as a church body. Beginning with our Palm Sunday celebration and throughout the course of Easter week, people have come to faith in Jesus. We had a powerful time of worship on Good Friday, an Easter sunrise service led by our college and university students on the Stanford campus, a morning of worship celebration at PBC on Sunday, and a public baptism in the afternoon. In addition, the high school group shared stories of God's faithfulness on their ministry trip to Mexico during Easter week. They are growing in confidence through Christ toward God because of their experiences there, and many of them have come home with a new understanding of what it means to be servants of a new covenant.

It is exciting to hear from brothers and sisters who are learning what it means to live in the reality of the new covenant. They are learning that God is their adequacy. They see him at work meeting their needs physically, materially, relationally, spiritually, and it is stretching their faith tremendously. As our students told stories of the difficulties and struggles of the week in Mexico a recurring theme was the joy of their dependence on the Lord for everything. The truth of 2 Corinthians 3:4-6a is being internalized and lived: "And such confidence we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant,"

NOTES:

1. Ray C. Stedman, *Authentic Christianity*. © 1996. Discovery House Publishers, Grand Rapids, MI. P. 70.

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