

Clarifying the Covenants

This study includes a reply to the charge that GNU, by its loyalty to the principles of the Decalogue, has let the gospel slip.

by Desmond Ford

Over 330 times, we find the term “covenant” in Scripture. Every Christian needs to be intelligent regarding this topic which has provided the titles for the two chief sections of the Bible. (Old Testament means Old Covenant, and New Testament means New Covenant.)

Even among gospel believers, there is not only haziness but heresy as regards covenant theology.

Dispensationalism's Error

Dispensationalists, for example, abound among fundamentalist Christians but are much rarer among studious evangelicals. Dispensationalists have always held that God had more than one way of salvation—one for the Jew and another for the Gentile.

This school of thought—known as Dispensationalism, and popularized by the Scofield Bible—contrasts the dispensation of law (Sinai to the Cross) with the dispensation of grace (beyond the Cross).

Very few Bible scholars today hold such a position, but Dispensationalism surfaces whenever the issue of Christian obedience is under review.

Obedience to the Nine

In gospel ranks at the present time, there are some of our friends (we do not use that term loosely), offering an explanation of the covenants that, in practical terms, leads to obedience to nine commandments of the Decalogue, but not to that one which is central, the longest, and solely prefaced by “remember.”

It is an exaggeration to say that such are nine-tenths under law and one tenth under grace, but it's an understandable criticism.

Truth and Error Are Close

The issue is of great importance; and it must be remembered, as we consider it, that truth and error often lie close together. It is clear that the New Testament opposes legalism of all types, yet it is just as certainly supportive of the testing truth delivered by Jesus on his last night on earth. Love to him is always accompanied by obedience to his commandments. (John 14:15).

Scripture is neither legalistic nor antinomian. Legalism is perversion of the legal, but the legal element is prominent in both Testaments, and particularly so in the teachings of Jesus and Paul.

Without the legal aspect, the doctrine of the Cross becomes hollow. (See Romans 3:25. Especially study and compare Galatians 5:6; 6:15; and 1 Corinthians 7:19.)

Sinai, the Point of Controversy

Because the covenant of Sinai has most to say about law, it becomes the focal point of controversy. Galatians condemns in no uncertain terms all those who endeavor to earn salvation by slavish fulfillment of the precepts of the Sinaitic covenant; and 2 Corinthians 3 emphasizes that, without faith in Christ, both the Sinaitic covenant and the new (renewed) become a ministration of condemnation and death.

Hebrews 8 joyously announces that the old national covenant, with its necessary limitations, has been displaced by the new covenant sealed at the Cross.

Covenantal Agreement

Today, the majority of evangelical scholars teach, in essence, what the Reformers of the sixteenth century wrote regarding the covenants. Except for the divine-human encounter before the Fall (often called “the covenant of works” or “the covenant of Life”), all biblical covenants between God and man were revelations of grace and mirrored the plan of salvation. (Hebrews 13:8,20,21; Psalm 105:5-11.)

These scholars see the covenants (including that of Sinai) as merciful, unilateral arrangements whereby the promise might be offered and experienced:

I will be your God, and you shall be my people.

(See Jeremiah 11:4; 24:7; 30:22; 32:38; Ezekiel 11:20; 14:11; 36:28; 37:23; Zechariah 8:8; Leviticus 26:12; 2 Corinthians 6:16; Revelation 21:3).

Legal Versus Legalistic

Legal elements are found in the covenant (including the new covenant), but we must surely distinguish between what is legal and what is legalistic, as surely as we distinguish between what is rational and what is rationalistic.

In his book *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, Leon Morris writes:

The Old Testament consistently thinks of a God who works by the method of law. This is not the conception of one or two writers but is found everywhere in the

Old Testament, and is attested by a variety of conceptions, many being taken straight from forensic practices. Among the heathen, the deity was thought of as above the law, with nothing but the dictates of his own desires to limit him. According to his behavior, he was completely unpredictable, and while he made demands on his worshippers for obedience and service, there were few if any ethical implications of this service, and none of a logically necessary kind. Far otherwise was it with the God of the Hebrews.

... Yahweh and law went well together. ...

The Old Testament consistently thinks of a God who works by the method of law. ... Thus, as we approach the question of the use of justification in the Old Testament, we are dealing not with an isolated conception which appears briefly now and then, but with an idea of law which runs through and through the ancient Scriptures. (Page 258)

Condemnation or Correction?

But does not the book of Galatians condemn the old covenant as leading to bondage? Yes, but as with all of Scripture, context, both literary and historical, is essential to correct understanding.

Galatians was written to people who believed that Gentiles had first to become Jews before they could be Christians, i.e., they had to be circumcised and be in harmony with contemporary Jewish life-style (unclean foods not permissible; to eat with the heathen not allowable, etc.). Paul opposed this with great vigor.

Law Is Not a Synonym for the Decalogue

There are other things which must be kept in mind when studying Galatians. The term "law" here usually means the entire Jewish system. (The word is NOT a synonym for the Decalogue.) It can also mean the writings of Moses (see Galatians 4:21,22).

Second, the reference to circumcision 13 times in this letter shows the location of the storm center. Circumcision was originally given by God to be a sign and seal of righteousness by faith. Paul says precisely that in Romans 4:11.

But the Jews turned the sign of the gospel into a badge of legalism—and they did likewise with the entire covenant. (See Romans 9:30 to 10:4.)

Galatians Is Often Misunderstood

The best commentators have pointed out that Galatians 4 is frequently misunderstood, and that any deprecation of the Old Covenant as God intended it is unjust.

See Luther's famous commentary, and Calvin's *Institutes*, book 2, chapters 10 and 11. Best of all, see Patrick Fairbairn's *Typology of Scripture*, volume 2, pages 154 ff.

Abraham Personifies the Problem

Galatians shows that when Abraham tried to fulfill the promises of God by relying on his own weak human nature, he personified the problem to be repeated by the bulk of his descendants. Let us never judge the divine intention by human weakness and perversion.

The devout John Flavel wrote on this topic as follows:

The law ... is excellently described, Gal. 4, in that allegory of Hagar and Sarah, the figures of the two

covenants. Hagar in her first and proper station was but a serviceable handmaid to Sarah, as the law is a schoolmaster to Christ; but when Hagar the handmaid is taken into Sarah's bed, and brings forth children that aspire to the inheritance, then saith the Scripture, Cast out the bond-woman, with her son. So it is here, take the law in its primary use, as God designed it, as a handmaid to Christ and the promise, so it is consistent with them; but if we marry this handmaid, and espouse it as a covenant of works, then we are bound to it for life, Rom. 7, and must have nothing to do with Christ. The believers of the Old Testament had true apprehensions of the true end and use of the law, which directed them to Christ, and so they became the children of the free-woman. The carnal Jews trusted to the works of the law for righteousness, and so became children of the bond-woman. *Whole Works*, 7th ed., 1772, vol. 2, p. 432 (cited by Roderick Campbell, *Israel and the New Covenant*, p. 49)

Not Under Law as a Covenant

The New Testament is emphatic that Christians are not "under law,"—any kind of law, including the laws of the Sermon on the Mount—as a covenant. To use law-keeping as a method of salvation is to fall from grace.

The law in its condemning power has been abolished.

Any commandment, including those of the New Testament, pursued diligently yet apart from faith in Christ, becomes a ministry of death. See Colossians 2:14 and 2 Corinthians 3; Ephesians 2:8,9; and Galatians 5:2-4.

WHAT WE NEED TO KNOW

What then, in essence, should we know about the covenants?

1. The words translated "covenant" in the Old and New Testaments, when applied to divine human relationships, mean an arrangement—a synonym for the plan of salvation.
2. The God-initiated covenants after the Fall were unilateral—they were NOT agreements between the people and God. God made the terms, the promises, the stipulations, the warnings. All the people had to do was accept and loyally respond.

All the Covenants Essentially the Same

3. All the Scriptural covenants between God and man, Genesis 3:15, the Noahic, the Abrahamic, the Sinaitic, the Davidic, the New—in essence were the same, though the emphases were different, according to the historical situation.

For example, all stressed grace, and all stressed that the natural response to grace was loyalty and obedience.

What is known as the "Old" Covenant was but an extension of the Abrahamic covenant which in principle is still in force. (See Exodus 2:24; 3:6-10; 6:5; 32:13, 14; Galatians 3:29; Romans 4:11,13,16; and Psalms 105:6-11.)

At Sinai, because the people had their moral consciousness darkened by the centuries of idolatry in Egypt, God particularly stressed the aspect of law. See Galatians 3:19-25. Furthermore, the promise of the New Covenant in Jeremiah 31 is emphatic that the experience of the forgiveness of sins results in the writing of God's law in the hearts of the faithful.

4. The promise is the same in all the covenants: "I will be your God, and you shall be my people." And the response of believers is the same—willing, glad obedience.
5. The New Covenant is the flower of which all preceding post-Fall covenants are the seed. Here grace and the gift of the indwelling Spirit are fully unveiled in the God-man mediator, showing the one way of salvation for all.

Different Signs and Seals

6. The sign and seal of the Adamic covenant was the seventh-day Sabbath; that of the Noahic covenant was the rainbow; and that of the Abrahamic and Sinaitic covenants circumcision (without ignoring the previous signs and seals).

The added signs and seals of the New Covenant are baptism (which has replaced circumcision as a more adequate parable of the gospel), and the Lord's Supper, but again without rejecting the signs and seals of the earlier covenants.

Thus our Lord's sufferings begin in a garden towards the close of the sixth day of the week, and his work of re-creation is declared complete by the cry, "It is finished," at the very moment synagogues throughout the land were reading Genesis 2:1-3 and echoing the same victorious cry of accomplishment. He then rested through the whole of the Sabbath day.

See also the use of the rainbow in the Bible's closing book.

Not Essential for Salvation

These signs and seals of the covenants are not essential for salvation but they are important aids to faith. Each of them is a sensory parable pointing to the heart of the gospel.

The rainbow reminds us that the Cross and all God's dealings combine justice and mercy as the rainbow unites sunshine and rain.

The Sabbath points to our constant rest of conscience in Christ as we trust in his finished work of redemption which is actually a re-creation.

Circumcision points to the cutting away of the flesh, accomplished by the moving of the Holy Spirit.

Baptism replaces the national symbol and acts out the death and resurrection, not only of Christ, but of each believer.

As for the Lord's Supper, its meaning is explained in John 6:47-51.

Does the Sabbath Seal Have Lasting Relevance for Christians?

There has been continuing controversy in all ages over the signs and seals of the covenants.

Denominations have disagreed on the mode of baptism (triune, sprinkling, or immersion).

There has also been disagreement in the manner of observing the Lord's Supper. The cup has been withheld for centuries from the laity in the largest section of Christendom. Argument has continued over the words of the institution—"This is my body," and "This is my blood of the covenant." Are the words to be taken literally or are they symbolic? (This argumentation has lasted for centuries.)

And the rest day has had no rest, although until the birth

of the industrial age almost all Christians agreed that one day in seven should be kept holy.

Disagreement over the Day

Most of the Church's leaders in all ages have agreed on the necessity of a day of Sabbath rest and worship each week, though not all have agreed on which day.²

Moody said, "When the Sabbath goes, the church goes. When the Church goes, the family goes. When the family goes, the nation goes."

And Calvin wrote, "... if it [the rest day] were abolished, the Church would be in imminent danger of immediate convulsion and ruin" (*Institutes*, II: viii).

Karl Barth, who gives much space in his *Church Dogmatics* to the fourth commandment, and who wrote of its "decisive material significance," "radical importance," and the "almost monstrous range of this law," quoted de Quervain approvingly, "Where the holy day becomes a day of man, society and humanity wither away and the demons rule ..." (*Church Dogmatics*, III: p. 53).

Why Not Keep Every Day Holy?

A tiny minority have dropped the seals and signs altogether. The Salvation Army does not practice the Lord's Supper, and the Society of Friends (Quakers) see no value in outward forms. Some take the same attitude to the fourth commandment, though claiming they keep every day holy. Such a claim, of course, is utter nonsense, for how can every day be kept separate (when "to sanctify" means "keep distinct or separate").

Almost everybody works at secular employment most days of the week. God planned such human occupation from the beginning of time. Work and rest are the appointed rhythm for humans, and God appointed us rest in order for us to worship.

The group that sees all days as equal believes it honors Christ by ignoring the day of which He declared himself Lord—that day which he said "was made for man," thus decking it with undying freshness.

Such a stand has not recommended itself to most Christians.

The Sabbath in a Sense Brought the Cross

Campbell Morgan pointed out that Christ risked his life and ministry to reform Sabbath observance. Who cleans the barnacles from a sinking ship or cleans up an old shed before burning it? From a human point of view, Christ went to the Cross because he opposed the pharisaical traditions which made the Sabbath (called "a delight," or "a luxury," in Isaiah 58), a burden. See Matthew 12:14 and Luke 6:7,11.

Two Honorable Institutions

Only two institutions in the Bible are called "honorable"—the sabbath and marriage. See Isaiah 58:13 and Hebrews 13:4. Strange that now many would dishonor the Sabbath. What greater blessing, apart from the Gospel, could there be than the gift of 52 Spring days, 52 mini-Edens, every year, during which all secular duties and cares are relinquished.

It will be of interest to some to learn that the most recent scholarly discussion on these themes, representing a variety of denominations, admits that Christ observed the seventh-

day Sabbath—and so did the early Church. See *From Sabbath to Lord's Day*, edited by D. A. Carson, pp. 345-346, 365. This volume denies there was ever any transfer from the seventh day to the first. See pp. 346-347.

The Issue Is Worship

We would emphasize that this matter is viewed in a false light when it is set forth as an issue of days only. Rather, the issue is worship. Worship is the primary duty of all rational creatures, and the declared will of God in this regard is sacrosanct. There is nothing more important than giving God his place.

Perhaps it is not without significance that the first time the Sabbath is referred to by name in Scripture (Exodus 16), it is set forth as a test. See Exodus 16:4 ff (NIV and other versions).

Reality Never Displaces Observance

Let it be carefully observed that the reality in experience never displaces or makes void the necessity for observing the symbol, sign or seal, any more than the bending of our wills in submission ends our kneeling to pray.

Marriage, according to Paul, symbolizes the relationship between Christ and his church, but this does not abolish marriage now the reality symbolized has come.

It should never be forgotten by men and women who live in the body that spirit without form dies, while form without spirit is already dead.

Is the Gospel the True Center?

What charges are then being made against those who take the views here set forth? It is said, and I quote:

... the gospel is not the only true CENTER of their working agenda ... it is a false gospel—creating a wall that keeps them divided/separated from other genuine Biblical Christians.

The position is declared to be a “false Christ,” looming much larger than the true Christ.

Are These Accusations Fair?

Strong accusations indeed, and not really reflective of the true Christian quality of those who utter them.

So we are compelled to ask rhetorically, “Did Adam and Eve in their sinless days deny the grace of God because they kept in mind His will concerning the Tree of Knowledge? Did David reject the grace of God when he took seriously the divine commandment against touching the sacred ark?

Was Joshua guilty of legalism because he took seriously the command against touching the things of Babylon and Jericho?

When Paul in the second half of most of his epistles stresses obedience, has he lapsed and fallen from grace?

Most of all, did Christ in the Sermon on the Mount, which has much more admonition than promise, forget his own gospel?

Let the reader decide.

Promise AND Law

As for us, we will remember what most Christians since the Reformation have believed: in the law of God we find his will, and in the promises, we find his gospel.

This “New” Commandment Is Very Old

Critics of our position are quick to say that love has replaced law, and that the only commandment now to be kept in mind as a guide is Christ's new commandment.

We will take the last first and, in doing so, discover that the apostle John declares that the “new” commandment is really an old one and existed from the beginning. First John 2:3-11; 4:19-5:3; Leviticus 19:18; and Deuteronomy 6:5 enshrine the “new” commandment, and some of these verses are about three and a half thousand years old.

Love Is a Motive Not a Rule

As for the other contention that love is now the Christian's only rule, we would remind our friends of the wise words of Horatius Bonar:

Love is not a rule, but a motive. Love does not tell me what to do; it tells me how to do it. Love constrains me to do the will of the Beloved One; but to know what the will is, I must go elsewhere. The law of our God is the will of the Beloved One, and were that expression of his will withdrawn, love would be utterly in the dark; it would not know what to do. It might say, I love my Master, and I love his service, and I want to do his bidding, but I must know the rules of his house, that I may know how to serve him.

Love without law to guide its impulses would be the parent of will-worship and confusion, as surely as terror and self-righteousness, unless upon the supposition of an inward miraculous illumination, as an equivalent for law. Love goes to the law to learn the divine will, and love delights in the law, as the exponent of that will; and he who says that a believing man has nothing more to do with law, save to shun it as an old enemy, might as well say that he has nothing to do with the will of God. For the divine law and the divine will are substantially one, the former being the outward manifestation of the latter.

(*God's Way of Holiness*, pp. 77-78.)

The Law Is Holy, Just, and Good

The New Testament is emphatic that faith does not make void the law (Romans 3:31). It is equally emphatic that the moral law, rightly used in the light of Christ and his apostles, is “holy, just, and good,” and “spiritual,” and to be fulfilled by every believer. (See Romans 7:12, 14; 8:4.)

The first verses of Ephesians 6 take it for granted that all Christians, not only knew the Decalogue as a guide for conduct, but also knew the order of its commands. First Timothy 1:8-10 refers to both tables of the law from Sinai, and declares them “good.”

Whenever the Hebrew and Greek words for “testimony” are used in connection with the sanctuary, they always refer to the Decalogue. And in the Bible's last book, they are seen again in glory as the foundation of the divine government. (See Revelation 15:5.)

Two-Law Error

It is true that many have erred in affirming that the New Testament teaches that the Old had two laws—one moral and the other ceremonial. Such a statement would be false, but the intent is true—the one law of Israel contained both moral and ceremonial elements, the former being distinguished by God himself in speaking and writing it.

Almost all church creeds have affirmed this reality, and so have the majority of Christian theologians over the centuries. It should be remembered that one can destroy a house without destroying the sunshine that has illuminated it.

Likewise, the house of the Torah has gone, but not the light which illumined it—the light of pure morality.

Thus Jesus could quote both Leviticus 19:18 and Deuteronomy 6:5 as mandatory.

The Hinges of the Law

The Decalogue gives us a clue by putting its only two positive commandments at its center—the hinges of the two tables. These, the fourth and fifth commandments, point back to the two institutions that preceded sin—the Sabbath and marriage. Whatever was human duty before the Fall remains so in principle for all ages.

On the other hand, whatever came in by law to typify the remedy for the Fall came to its end when that remedy—Christ and his Cross—appeared, just as a shadow of a tree ceases at the root of the tree.

Must we cringe if these age-long convictions of the everlasting gospel threaten to create a barrier between us and other Christians? Must we therefore hasten to teach infant sprinkling instead of baptism by immersion, eternal torture in hell fire, rather than the destruction of the willfully wicked, and the secret rapture with all its oddities?

Absence of the Moral Law Brings Chaos

We believe the warning of Roderick Campbell rings true. See if you think so too.

The absence of the basic Moral law would bring chaos, anarchy, or death, into every realm of rational being. On the other hand, if there were no law there would be no sin, hence no sinners, and no room for Grace. If there were no sin, there would be no Saviour, no redemption, and no gospel message.

Thus we read, “But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound; that as sin hath reigned unto death, even so might grace reign through righteousness unto eternal death by Jesus Christ our Lord” (Romans 5:20,21).

Grace is that golden stream, that river of the water of life, which always flows in the channel of Law, out from the fountain of the immeasurable love of God.

Without a conscience within and an objective Moral Law without, mankind would revert to a condition lower than the brute creation. The earth becomes a garden or a desert, a paradise or a hell, according as men perform, or fail to perform, the just demands of the righteous Moral Law. A stable order among men can be maintained only when it is based upon a conviction that, above the level of life on earth, and above the physical creation, there exists a supreme Moral Governor of the world. ...

Israel and the New Covenant, pp. 42, 43

A Heresy That Luther Never Thought to See

Martin Luther was amazed how some responded to his gospel message, and commented:

But Satan, the god of all dissension, stirreth up daily new sects, and last of all (which of all other I should never have foreseen or once suspected), he hath raised up a sect of such as teach that the Ten Commandments ought to be taken out of the church, and that men should not be terrified by the law, but gently exhorted by the preaching of the grace of Christ. (Preface to Luther's *Commentary on Galatians*.)

Footnotes

1. Daniel 9:26 says the Messiah's death would confirm or seal (ratify) the covenant—the same covenant mentioned in verse 4 and in 11:22—the covenant of Sinai, which itself was identical with the Abrahamic covenant.
2. A close study of the covenants solves this issue also. Galatians 3:15 and Hebrews 9:16, 17 stress that nothing can be added to a covenant after the sacrificial death which seals it. Thus Sunday was three days too late to become part of the New Covenant. For this reason also, baptism was included by Christ's own example prior to Calvary.

