

THE NEW TESTAMENT AND THE NEW COVENANT

This article follows on from THE COVENANTS, which should be read first.

The Old and the New Testaments, and the Old and the new Covenants

As a new Christian, we are all normally told about the Old Testament and the New Testament, and the Old Covenant and the New Covenant, and either told, or led to believe, that the Old Testament and the Old Covenant are the same, and that the New Testament and the New Covenant are the same. But is this correct?

No, it is not. The Old Testament commences with Genesis 1:1 while the Old Covenant was first mentioned in Exodus 19:5 where we read that God met with Moses on Mount Sinai and gave him the 10 Commandments and later all the laws. The New Testament starts at Matthew 1:1, but the New Covenant only started with the death of Jesus on the cross, which is only recorded towards the end of each of the four gospels. Hence everything said and done in the four gospels until then was still under the Old Covenant and the whole system of the Mosaic law.

What does it matter?

The significance is that in the four Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John Jesus taught under the laws of the Old Covenant, so we need to read and to understand His teachings in this context. So everything said and done in the gospels up to then, including by Jesus, must be read with this in mind – the requirement of strict obedience to all the laws for justification was only replaced by that of faith in and commitment to Jesus when He died as the perfect sacrifice for all our sins, Jew and Gentile alike. Please keep this in mind when you read your Bible!

For instance, when Jesus healed a man with leprosy He instructed Him to go to the priest to confirm his healing and to pay the Priest the amount set in the law of Moses (Matthew 8:4). We, of course, do not have to do this today, or to comply with any of the other laws of the Old Covenant !

The Old Covenant

The Mosaic Covenant is called the 'Old Covenant' - it is 'old' since it was superseded by the New Covenant, which had been promised by God from the time of Jeremiah the prophet (Jeremiah 31:31, 33) and made effective by the death of Jesus on the cross. This was clearly illustrated when the massive curtain in the temple, behind which was the Most Holy Place and the Ark of the Covenant, was symbolically split in two, showing that access to the presence of God was now available to everyone (Luke 22:20, Matthew 27:50-52, Hebrews 10:19-20). Up until then only the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies, once a year, while officiating during the service on Yom Kippur - the Day of Atonement. For the significance of the curtain see Hebrews Chapters 6, 9 and 10.

God never intended the law of the Old Testament to apply to everyone (Exodus 19:3-6) or even to apply to the Israelites indefinitely (Galatians 3:24-26). It even specified how Jews were to treat foreigners differently from their fellow Israelites (Deuteronomy 14:21; 15:3; 17:15; 23:20).

Excluded from Israel and the covenant God made with them, Gentiles remained separated from God (Ephesians 2:11-12) until Jesus opened the way for all nations to come to Him (Ephesians 2:13). The Jewish believers in Jesus were amazed when the Holy Spirit was also poured out on the Gentiles (everyone who was not Jewish) as well (Acts 10:44-48).

The purpose of the Old Testament law was to convict the nation of Israel of their inability to keep the law, and to point to their need for Jesus Christ as their Saviour. This also illustrates our need today for Jesus as our personal saviour (Romans 3:19-22).

The laws under the Old Covenant were given specifically to the nation of Israel, and not to any of the other nations at that time, and hence also cannot apply to Christians today (Romans 2:12). Let me say it again; none of the 613 or so Old Testament laws are binding on Christians today. Furthermore, when Jesus died on the cross, He put an end to ALL the Old Testament laws for the

people of Israel (Galatians 2:16, Hebrews 10:8-9). The Old Covenant was cancelled in order to put the New Covenant in to effect.

To break one of the laws of the Old Testament was regarded as breaking them all (James 2:10, Galatians 5:3). The sacrificial death of Jesus freed the Israelites from all condemnation under the law. When Jesus died He fulfilled the law, and from then onwards, through faith in Him, no-one has to rely on obedience to the law for their justification (Galatians 2:16).

The New Covenant

The New Covenant is a covenant between God and each of us personally, and has replaced the Old Covenant which was between God and the nation of Israel. The first Christians were all Jews. The Church combines Israel with all other nations through Christ, and we are all now 'one' and equal before God - whether Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female (Galatians 3:28).

Furthermore, we have been 'grafted in' to become heirs of the Abrahamic covenant (Romans 11:17-18) and so we should have a deep respect for the Jewish nation because doing so will bring the blessings of God on our lives. Genesis 12:3 *I will bless those who bless you and curse those who treat you with contempt. All the families on earth will be blessed through you.*

Under the New Covenant the Law given by Moses was set aside for everyone who accepts Jesus as their Lord and Saviour, which means we may now all receive the same blessings He promised to Abraham. As Jesus confirmed at the commencement of His ministry, He came to set us free from the law and from all bondages and curses (Luke 4:18-19, Galatians 3:13).

Under the Old Covenant, the law prescribed that the blessings of God were dependant on fully obeying and carefully keeping all of the laws (Deuteronomy 28:1,), and if anyone did not obey all the commands and the decrees, then a whole list of curses would result (Deuteronomy 28:15). James, in his letter to the 12 tribes of Israel, used this very point to reprimand his readers - see especially James 2:8-11.

In the New Covenant righteousness (acceptability before God) is attributed to those who repent of their sins and accept Jesus as both their Lord and Saviour (Romans 10:9-10) and not by obeying the law (Galatians 2:16). We all need to realise that from the day of Jesus' crucifixion, the Old Covenant that required strict obedience to the Law of Moses was replaced by the New Covenant of grace, and our justification before God by obedience to all the laws was replaced by faith in Jesus and the commitment of our lives to follow and to obey Him.

The 'Laws' of the New Testament

What are the laws of the New Covenant? Unlike with the Mosaic Law, we are not given a comprehensive list of specific laws that were then to apply. 2 Corinthians 3:6 '... *This is a covenant not of written laws, but of the Spirit.*

Jesus, in replying to the Pharisees' question of which is the most important commandment in the law of Moses, told them that the first was to love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind, and the second was to love your neighbour as yourself, and that the entire law and all the demands of the prophets were based on these two commandments. This shows what the heart of God has always been, and continues to be.

Matthew 22:37-40 *Jesus replied, "You must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, and all your mind." This is the first and greatest commandment. A second is equally important: "Love your neighbour as yourself." The entire law and all the demands of the prophets are based on these two commandments.*

Jesus repeated the commandment to love one another in speaking to his disciples at the last supper (John 13:34) and this is repeated in several places by different writers. These are the only 'laws' we are given under the New Covenant. If we keep these, we will fulfil everything that the Lord asks of us.

John 13:34 *So now I am giving you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, you should love each other.*

Hebrews 10:16 *“This is the new covenant I will make with my people on that day, says the LORD: I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds.”*

John 15:17 *This is my command: Love each other.*

Galatians 5:14 *For the whole law can be summed up in this one command: “Love your neighbour as yourself.”*

1 John 4:21 *And he has given us this command: Those who love God must also love their fellow believers.*

From these two laws, and with the guidance of the Holy Spirit and all the instructions in the rest of the New Testament, we can understand what is good and pleasing to God.

Note that James says that we need to ‘*listen to the word*’ and to ‘*look carefully into the perfect law*’ and that we must ‘*do what it says*’ (James 1:22-25). Hence the laws, including the 10 Commandments, still provides a good indication of what is on God’s heart. All of the laws in the 10 commandments, with the exception only of the requirement of observing the Sabbath, are repeated in one form or another in the New Testament.

James 1:23 *For if you listen to the word and don’t obey, it is like glancing at your face in a mirror.*

James 1:25 *But if you look carefully into the perfect law that sets you free, and if you do what it says and don’t forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it.*

Understanding the ‘Laws’ of the New Covenant

The New Covenant replaced the Old Covenant, and with it all its laws (Hebrews 8:13 and 10:8-9). The entire thinking of the Jews nation needed to change – they had relied on being descendants of Abraham (which Jesus corrected them on in Matthew 3:9) and on their obedience to the 10 Commandments and all the laws Moses had given them, and the interpretation of these laws by their religious leaders.

In contrast to all the laws of the Old Covenant, the New Covenant is not of written laws, but of the Spirit. When we are led by the Spirit, we do not need a list of laws to follow. Galatians 5:18 *But when you are directed by the Spirit, you are not under obligation to the law of Moses.*

This was a whole new concept to the apostles, and of course to the new converts. There was in consequence some disagreement as to what instructions should be given to the Gentiles who had accepted Jesus. The apostles and elders in the church at Jerusalem finally agreed on just four instructions to be given to the new Gentile believers; to abstain from eating food offered to idols, from sexual immorality, from eating the meat of strangled animals, and from consuming blood (Acts 15:20). These were the very early days in the life of the church, and I surmise that even the apostles felt obliged to set some ‘rules’ in place. Hence this instruction may be of more historical interest than strict doctrinal relevance.

Legalism – reverting to obedience to the laws of the Old Covenant, or having a judgemental attitude.

Despite the best teaching by Paul and the other apostles, ‘legalism’ (focusing more on God’s laws than a relationship with God; the belief that one must obey God and his laws, e.g. the 10 Commandments and /or any of the other laws, as a prerequisite to receiving His grace and salvation) soon crept back into the early church – and still arises today. We have several examples of this in the Bible – in each instance there was an attempt to require obedience to one (or more) of the Mosaic laws. Here are four examples:

1. Sunday observance:

The 4th Commandments was to ‘remember to observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy’ – not to do any work on the sabbath (Exodus 20:8). As discussed above, the 10 Commandments exclusively applied to the nation of Israel as part of the Law of Moses, and this law was never repeated or in any referred to in the New Testament as forming part of the New Covenant. To the

contrary Paul in his letter to the Romans clearly showed that no specific law or rule applied – it was entirely up to each person individually to treat one day of the week as different and special, or all of them as the same. Hence, I think we can say that we are all free to follow our own convictions or preferences, but should not try and impose these on anyone else, and should certainly not in exercising our choice regard ourselves as more spiritual than anyone else.

Romans 14:5-6 One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind. Whoever regards one day as special does so to the Lord. Whoever eats meat does so to the Lord, for they give thanks to God; and whoever abstains does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God.

2. Exclusion of certain foods

The law contained various instructions on which animals and foods may be eaten, and which may not. In Leviticus 11 the people of Israel were prohibited from eating various animals (including pigs, camels and rabbits), certain sea creatures (anything without fins and scales), birds that eat flesh or carrion, or most winged insects except those that swarm and jump.

In Acts 10 and 11 Peter had a vision of a sheet being let down from heaven with all kinds of unclean animals, reptiles and birds, and told to kill and eat them. This vision illustrates the radical differences between the old and new covenants – the change in the laws regarding the acceptability of previously prohibited foods and the inclusion of all Gentiles, who were previously excluded from the covenants and a personal knowledge of God, and were now able to join in the good news of salvation.

Paul in his letter to the Romans made it clear that all food could now be eaten – it was each person's choice.

Romans 14:1-3 Accept other believers who are weak in faith, and don't argue with them about what they think is right or wrong. For instance, one person believes it's all right to eat anything. But another believer with a sensitive conscience will eat only vegetables. Those who feel free to eat anything must not look down on those who don't. And those who don't eat certain foods must not condemn those who do, for God has accepted them.

This is stated even more plainly in Mark 7:18-19, where we read, ' ... *By saying this, he declared that every kind of food is acceptable in God's eyes.*'

In 2 Timothy 4:1-5 Paul warns Timothy that in the latter days there will be people who forbid marriage and eating certain foods, who he classifies as coming from those who follow deceptive spirits and teachings that come from demons, and who are hypocrites and liars, and whose consciences are dead. This passage clearly shows that the laws of the Old Covenant relating to foods have been cancelled.

3. Circumcision

Paul and Barnabas had to correct the believers who were saying the Gentile converts had to be circumcised and required to follow the law of Moses (Acts 15:1-11) and to reassure them that salvation was by faith through the undeserved grace of the Lord Jesus – i.e. not earned or the result of by obedience to the law.

Acts 15:1 While Paul and Barnabas were at Antioch of Syria, some men from Judea arrived and began to teach the believers: "Unless you are circumcised as required by the law of Moses, you cannot be saved."

Evidently some Galatians had slipped back into insisting on obedience to this law as a prerequisite to receiving God's favour. Paul needed to make it very clear that salvation, and receiving God's favour in any way, had nothing to do with the requirement for male circumcision, (or any other law) as found in the Mosaic law. Paul started out by reminding them that the law, even when it was in force, required obedience to every aspect to it – i.e. one cannot cherry-pick one or more laws to obey – one had to obey all of them, just as God told Joshua. See Joshua 1:7, Galatians 3:1-14, and Galatians 5:1-4.

Joshua 1:7 *Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the instructions Moses gave you. Do not deviate from them, turning either to the right or to the left. Then you will be successful in everything you do.*

Galatians 5:1-4 *So Christ has truly set us free. Now make sure that you stay free, and don't get tied up again in slavery to the law. Listen! I, Paul, tell you this: If you are counting on circumcision to make you right with God, then Christ will be of no benefit to you. I'll say it again. If you are trying to find favour with God by being circumcised, you must obey every regulation in the whole law of Moses. For if you are trying to make yourselves right with God by keeping the law, you have been cut off from Christ! You have fallen away from God's grace.*

4. Tithing:

Paying the 'tithe' was part of the Mosaic law which, as we have seen above, from the time of Christ's crucifixion no longer applied to the Jewish nation and never applied to any other nation, and was never mentioned in the New Testament in the context of the New Covenant.

Malachi 3:8-10 is typically quoted by those who hold that Christians should tithe to their local church. However the book of Malachi was written around 430 BC to Israel after the temple had been rebuilt, and consists in the main of a reprimand for their failure to fully and diligently obey the law in several respects, inclusive of failing to 'bring all the tithes into the storehouse so there will be enough food in my Temple' (Malachi 3:10.)

Tithing, like other old covenant rules and rituals, was a law at the time Jesus spoke. Jesus criticized the Pharisees not for whether they tithed or not, but for treating tithing as more important than mercy, love, justice and faithfulness. The Old Covenant is in any event obsolete (Hebrews 8:13), and has been replaced by the New Covenant of grace (Romans 6:14).

We should also not forget that the Old Covenant was all about the strict keeping of all the laws, while the New Covenant is all about the attitude of our hearts. Paul refers to the 'gracious act of giving' in 2 Corinthians 8:7, and repeats this in chapter 9 (verses 6-11) where he says that we should not give reluctantly or in response to pressure, and that God loves a cheerful giver.

A more detailed discussion on Tithing will follow later.

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