

THE MINISTRY OF THE NEW COVENANT
2 Corinthians 3:1-18

New Covenant ministry is the main theme of Second Corinthians. A covenant is a contract describing the terms of a relationship. Real estate transfers and marriages involve contracts or covenants.

Christians are involved in two biblical contracts, the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. The terms of the Old Covenant are in the Law of Moses and they governed Israel for 1500 years.

What most of the Jews did not understand, and, sad to say, many Christians today fail to see, is that the Old Covenant was not a way of being saved or justified. The Old Covenant saints, like the New Covenant saints are justified by faith. Justification was then, and always will be by grace through faith alone; faith in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Old Covenant saints did not have the details of Jesus of Nazareth but they had the essence of the gospel, viz. substitution. Jesus said Abraham saw His day and was glad. The message of the Old Covenant sacrifice was substitution.

The New Covenant is not bound up in rules, ceremonies, and ritual. The Holy Spirit, through the gospel, convicts the sinner of sin and grants repentance and faith to all who will put their faith in Jesus Christ.

While the church at Corinth was mostly Gentile, there were also Jewish believers [Cf. Acts 18:4]. The Judaizers from Jerusalem went about trying to convince Gentile believers that they must become Jews in order to be saved [Cf. Acts 15:1].

Here Paul explains the temporary role of the Old Covenant and the superiority of the New Covenant.

1. Letters from the Holy Spirit

a) Paul's Résumé

3:1-2

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you, or from you? ²You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all.

In 2:17, Paul contrasted his ministry with those who are “peddlers of God’s word.” The Greek word translated “peddlers” pictures merchants who used false weights of measure and watered down wine. Paul’s ministry was “sincere.” Genuine faith is “sincere.” The Greek word translated “sincere” is a word that describes a piece of pottery without beeswax to conceal a flaw.

As Paul expected, his opponents accused him of recommending himself. Some would say that if he were authentic he would have letters from the church at Jerusalem authorizing him as an apostle.

Paul’s answer is that he needs no such recommendation: “You yourselves are our letter of recommendation.”

Anyone can read the changed lives in the church at Corinth.

“When God saves a sinner, even the old dog in the yard knows it.” Rolfe Barnard

b) A Letter from Jesus in Flesh-and-Blood **3:3**

³ And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

The apostle John wrote that if everything Jesus did were recorded “the whole world would not have room for the book that would be written.” John 21:25

A disciple is an imitator. Disciples of Jesus Christ, genuine believers, are epistles [letters] from Christ; a letter not written with ink on paper, but written by the Holy Spirit on the heart.

Paul saw the Corinthian believers as a fulfillment of Jeremiah 31.

Jer 31:31-34

³¹ "Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, ³² not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. ³³ But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD : I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴ And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more." ESV

2. New Covenant Confidence

a) The Source of Our Confidence

3:4-5

⁴ Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. ⁵ Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God,

One of the results of the Holy Spirit's indwelling the heart of a believer is a willingness to put into practice the knowledge of God's will. As we read and hear the Word of God we are being drawn to loving obedience. The word "sufficiency" includes ability, fitness, qualification, and competence. And to whatever extent that sufficiency is true, it is from God.

b) New Covenant Service

3:6

⁶ who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

The Israelites failed under the Old Covenant due to a spirit of legalism. Do this and don't do that and God will receive you.

Someone said, "Legalism is a work that is never finished."

It wasn't that the Israelites didn't have the word from God to point them to faith.

Moses wrote concerning Abraham:

Gen 15:6

And he believed in the LORD, and He accounted it to him for righteousness.

Hab 2:4

"Behold the proud,
His soul is not upright in him;
But the just shall live by his faith.

But the vast majority of the Jews did not receive the message of faith because they followed the “letter” of the law. The idea is that if we do something in the prescribed way that it will give us merit before God. The law is an oppressive burden and impossible to satisfy if it is understood in terms of the “letter.”

The same spirit of the “letter” is seen in many ways under the New Covenant if salvation is offered as a result of “steps to be saved,” or doing something “in order to be saved.” This is no different from the way the Jews sought to be justified. Legalism did not go away with the passing of the Old Covenant.

3. New Covenant Difference

a) Covenant Glory

3:7-10

⁷ Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, ⁸ will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? ⁹ For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. ¹⁰ Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it.

The Greek word “*doxa*” translated “glory” is used 15 times in chapters 3 and 4. The root of the word means “**opinion**”! Other connotations include reputation, honor, praise, dignity, majesty, magnificence, radiance, and dazzling luster.

The greater your opinion of something is the more glory you see in it.

The Hebrew word translated “glory” is from a root word that means “weight, or “heavy.”

The history of God’s self-revelation is a story of increasing disclosure. From the earliest accounts of God’s will: Adam and Eve, Cain and Abel, Noah’s flood, Abraham’s testing, the giving of the Law in written form to Moses; each event progressively revealed God’s holiness.

The Old Covenant was glorious because it was God who revealed it; it was sinful man that made it a burden.

The glory of the New Covenant exceeds that of the Old Covenant because it brings the fulfillment of all of the types of Christ in the Old Covenant in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. The ministry of the Holy Spirit is to reveal the glory of Jesus Christ. Cf. John 16.

John 16:13-15

¹³ When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. ¹⁴ He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. ¹⁵ All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you. ESV

b) Faded Glory

3:11-15

¹¹ For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory.

¹² Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, ¹³ not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end. ¹⁴ But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. ¹⁵ Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts.

How could a group of people who argued over their favorite preacher, tolerated sexual immorality, who took each other to court before unbelieving judges, and cause divisions over matters of personal preference, and abused tender consciences; how could they be a “letter from Christ?”

The answer is seen in an incident from the life of Moses, who is a symbol of the Old Covenant. Paul compared the glory of God visible in the face of Moses with the glory visible in the New Testament believer. The glory visible in Moses was “fading” glory [7, 11, 13], just as the Old Covenant was a fading covenant.

After 40 days in the presence of the Lord, Moses came down from Mount Sinai, carrying the stone tablets; his face was radiant with God's glory.

Ex 34:29-35

²⁹ When Moses came down from Mount Sinai, with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand as he came down from the mountain, Moses did not know that the skin of his face shone because he had been talking with God. ³⁰ Aaron and all the people of Israel saw Moses, and behold, the skin of his face shone, and they were afraid to come near him. ³¹ But Moses called to them, and Aaron and all the leaders of the congregation returned to him, and Moses talked with them. ³² Afterward all the people of Israel came near, and he commanded them all that the LORD had spoken with him in Mount Sinai. ³³ And when Moses had finished speaking with them, he put a veil over his face.

³⁴ Whenever Moses went in before the LORD to speak with him, he would remove the veil, until he came out. And when he came out and told the people of Israel what he was commanded, ³⁵ the people of Israel would see the face of Moses, that the skin of Moses' face was shining. And Moses would put the veil over his face again, until he went in to speak with him.

The people were terrified of him but Moses was not at first aware of his shining face. When he became aware he veiled his face. When he went into the Lord's presence he removed the veil. When he came from the presence of the Lord his face was radiant again.

Paul writes that the glory of Moses' face was fading symbolized what would happen to the Old Covenant; it was temporary and was to be done away with through Christ.

Paul says that a veil remains over the hearts of the Jews in his time; and we can add that it still remains when the Scriptures are read every Sabbath and they do not see Jesus as the Christ.

c) Increasing Glory

3:16-18

¹⁶ But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. ¹⁷ Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. ¹⁸ And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

We are bold! We need not veil God's glory [12]. We come boldly into God's presence:

Heb 4:14-16

¹⁴ Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. ¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

James 4:8

Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.....

Our boldness and confidence is in what Jesus has done.

We are free! [17] We are no longer under bondage to sin.

Rom 6:14

For sin will have no dominion over you,
since you are not under law but under grace.

The letter of the Law [6] was a ministry of condemnation [9].

The Spirit of Christ, writing God's laws on our hearts, calls forth a freely chosen response to God's revealed will in His Word.