

The Discontinuity of the Covenants

Though there is a measure of continuity between the covenants, old and new, they are radically discontinuous.

I start with the key text; that is, Christ's words:

No one sews a piece of un-shrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the patch tears away from it, the new from the old, and a worse tear is made. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins – and the wine is destroyed, and so are the skins. But new wine is for fresh wineskins (Matt. 9:16-17; Mark 2:21-22; Luke 5:36-38).¹

In saying this, Jesus was not telling a pretty story. Nothing could be further from the truth. His words were spiritual dynamite at the time, radical to the nth degree; they remain so. Let me paraphrase them. Christ was speaking of what he had come to do; namely, in his overall purpose to save sinners (Matt. 1:21; John 3:16-17; 1 Tim. 1:15) he would fulfil the prophecies and shadows of the old covenant, thus rendering the old covenant obsolete and establish the new. The old covenant was worn out; so much so, it could not contain the life, vigour and power – the sheer newness – of the new.

John put it this way:

The law was given through Moses; [but]² grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (John 1:17).

Combining these statements – and, of course, the letter to the Hebrews – gives us the key to unlock the New Testament, and, consequently, how to read the entire Bible.

And how is that? To see it centred and summed up in Christ. The Old Testament – the old covenant, in particular – foretold and foreshadowed Christ in his coming and his work, and the New

¹ For more on the essence of this chapter, see my *Christ*; see also my 'Watershed of the Ages' on my sermonaudio.com page.

² See my *Christ*.

The Discontinuity of the Covenants

Testament reveals the incarnation of Christ under the old covenant and its law in order to fulfil that covenant, thus rendering it obsolete by establishing, in himself, the reality of all the old-covenant shadows. As Christ explained:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished (Matt. 5:17-18).

In accordance with Christ's promise (John 14:25-26; 15:26; 16:12-15), the writer of the letter to the Hebrews set it out in the fullest detail:

If perfection had been attainable through the levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need would there have been for another priest to arise after the order of Melchizedek, rather than one named after the order of Aaron? For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well...

On the one hand, a former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness (for the law made nothing perfect); but on the other hand, a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God...

In speaking of a new covenant, [God] makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away...

Therefore [Christ] is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant...

He does away with the first in order to establish the second...

Consequently, speaking of and to believers:

You have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. For they could not endure the order that was given: 'If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned'. Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said: 'I tremble with fear'. But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to

The Discontinuity of the Covenants

innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel (Heb. 7:11-12,18-22; 8:13; 9:15; 10:9; 12:18-24).

As for the old covenant shadows, as Paul declared:

These [a Jewish festival or a new moon or a sabbath] are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ (Col. 2:17).

Consequently, believers can rejoice that:

...when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive the adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying: ‘Abba! Father!’ So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God (Gal. 4:4-7).

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There is a great deal more that could be said at this juncture – and in my *Christ Is All: No Sanctification by the Law* I have said a fair bit of it – but all I want to do here is to make this vital point: Christ has rendered the old covenant obsolete and abolished its shadows by fulfilling them, bringing in the new covenant with himself as the reality of all those shadows, whether Passover, circumcision, sabbath, altar, sacrifice, priest or temple. The old covenant (and Old Testament) pointed to him, revealing him in prophecies and shadows; the new covenant (and New Testament) reveals him as the fulfiller of those prophecies (Luke 24:27; John 5:46; 1 Pet. 1:10-12; *etc.*), the reality of the shadows (Col. 2:17; Hebrews *passim*).

Philip’s interview with the eunuch travelling back to Ethiopia gives us a graphic illustration of how we are to apply this:

An Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure... He had come to Jerusalem to ‘worship’ [*proskunēsōn*] and was

The Discontinuity of the Covenants

returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. And the Spirit said to Philip: 'Go over and join this chariot'. So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked: 'Do you understand what you are reading?' And he said: 'How can I, unless someone guides me?' And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this: 'Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth. In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth' [Isa. 53:7-8]. And the eunuch said to Philip: 'About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?' Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus (Acts 8:27-35).

The eunuch, governed by old-covenant thinking and practice, had travelled to Jerusalem to 'worship'. Philip, using the old covenant, savingly preached Christ to him.

It is the same for us today: when we read the Bible, we should be looking for Christ, and reading everything through Christ who, in his person and work, is the unifying factor of Scripture.

So, while there is continuity between the covenants, there is also discontinuity. The debate really hinges on where the *emphasis* should fall. Should it be on the continuity or the discontinuity of the covenants?

Scripture puts the weight on the newness (the new-ness) of the new covenant – and when it says 'new' it does not mean something which was old but is now renewed, amended or buffed up. It really does mean a *new* covenant; it accentuates the distinction between the age of the law and the age of the Spirit. Although it is an over-simplification to put it like this, in moving from the age of the Old Testament to the age of the New there was a fundamental change of covenant; the old gave way to the new (Heb. 7:11-12,18-22; 8:13; 9:15; 10:9; 12:18-24). 'For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well' (Heb. 7:12). Do not miss the 'necessarily', or 'of necessity' (KJV)!

The Discontinuity of the Covenants

Take the phrase ‘but now’ (Rom. 3:21-22. 5:9,11; 6:22; 7:6; 8:1; 11:30; 11:31 (second ‘now’ in NIV, NASB); 16:26; along with John 15:22,24; Acts 17:30; 1 Cor. 15:20; Gal. 4:9; Eph. 2:12-13; 5:8; Col. 1:26; Heb. 8:6; 9:26; 12:26; 1 Pet. 2:10). Note the contrast between the two ages, the two systems, in Romans 4:13-17. The biblical contrast between the ‘old’ covenant and the ‘new’ must be given its full weight. There must be no talk of an ‘old’ covenant being ‘renewed’.³ Nor must talk of ‘different administrations of one covenant of grace’ be allowed to obliterate the radical newness of the new covenant compared with the old.⁴

So what? What effect does this have on our understanding and practice of ‘worship’? Much! We cannot simply slide to and fro, back and forth, between the covenants – the old and the new – as it suits our theological or ecclesiastical purpose; well, we can, of course, and many do!⁵ What we must do, however, is nuance our reading of the old covenant by the teaching of the new; in other words, we must read the covenants scripturally and not

³ We must stick to Scripture, and speak of the ‘old covenant’ and the ‘new covenant’. Speaking and thinking in terms of an ‘older covenant’ leads to all sorts of damage. Yes, the new covenant is a *better* covenant than the old covenant (Heb. 7:22), but the Bible never says it is a *newer* covenant. Nor should we! These are not trivialities.

⁴ Think of all the *new* things found in Christ: *new* cloth (Matt. 9:16; Mark 2:21; Luke 5:36); *new* wine (Matt. 9:17; Mark 2:22; Luke 5:38; compare Acts 2:13 and Eph. 5:18); *new* doctrine (Acts 17:19); a *new* lump (1 Cor. 5:7); a *new* covenant (Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25, 2 Cor. 3:6; Heb. 8:8,13; 9:15; 12:24) or *new* testament (Heb. 9:15, AV); the believer is a *new* creation (2 Cor. 5:17; Gal. 6:15), a *newborn* babe (1 Pet. 2:2), a *new* man (Eph. 2:15; 4:24; Col. 3:10); he comes to God in a *new* and living way (Heb. 10:20), keeping a *new* commandment (John 13:34; 1 John 2:8) in *newness* of life (Rom. 6:4) and *newness* of heart and spirit or Spirit (Ezek. 11:19; 36:26; Rom. 7:6), having a *new* name (Isa. 62:2; Rev. 2:17; 3:12), singing a *new* song (Rev. 5:9; 14:3); Christ has now made all things *new* (2 Cor. 5:17; Rev. 21:5), and will do so especially in eternity, where the saints will dwell in the *new* heavens and the *new* earth in the *new* Jerusalem (2 Pet. 3:13; Rev. 3:12; 21:1-2,5).

⁵ See the extracts in ‘Introduction’.

The Discontinuity of the Covenants

theologically,⁶ ecclesiastically or based on Christendom presuppositions. This means that we have to apply the abiding principles of the old to the new *as they are set out in the post-Pentecost Scriptures*. In particular, for my purpose in this book, this is how we must arrive at our understanding of ‘worship’.

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There is one issue in particular that needs heavy underlining before we move on – and it is something we must not forget; quite the opposite – we have to act upon it. I will not argue the case in detail at this point – having done so repeatedly in several of my books⁷ – but it is essential to remember that the overwhelming number of Israelites were unregenerate. Consequently, Israel as a nation was always a mixed community: a tiny minority of regenerate men and women living among an unregenerate people. So much for the old covenant. What about the new?

Those who confuse the covenants, who blur the discontinuity between them, latch onto this idea of a mixed community in Israel, and bring it over into the *ekklēsia*, with inevitable consequences which have proved – and continue to prove – dire. To cope with these grim effects, the theologians of this approach have, down the centuries, devised a series of ploys to try to mitigate them. Naturally, since the theology behind all this is unscriptural, these ploys have proved – and still prove – utterly ineffective;⁸ indeed, they have only added to the problem. As to the issue in hand, these inventions serve to encourage the concept of ‘public worship’ and the attracting of pagans into ‘church attendance’. Moreover, when they are given full reign, the outcome is a complete breakdown of the biblical principle that the *ekklēsia* is a body of the regenerate, separate from the world.

⁶ That is, we must not force Scripture into the mould of a pre-conceived doctrinal system.

⁷ See, for instance, my *Battle*.

⁸ See my *Christ; Infant*.

The Discontinuity of the Covenants

So I say it once again, the discontinuity in the covenants must be constantly borne in mind. Whereas Israel was a mixed (unregenerate and regenerate) society, the *ekklēsia* is to be a regenerate-only society.⁹

⁹ In my *Infant*, I deal with the fact that unbelievers ‘sneaked’ or ‘crept’ into the early church (Gal. 2:4; Jude 4), and what the believers in those days thought and did about it. They certainly did not tolerate, welcome or justify such *ekklēsia*-destroying behaviour, let alone encourage it.