

Chapter 9: Old vs. New Covenant

The word “covenant” means a contract between two parties in which it is specified what each party promises to do for the other. God established the first, or “old,” covenant with the Jews. This was recorded in the first five books of the Bible (the Pentateuch) and is often referred to as Mosaic Law since God dictated it to Moses.

- This covenant prescribed the commandments, ceremonies, rules and regulations that the Jews needed to obey if they were to receive the promises of God. Deuteronomy 28:1-14 recounts some of the promised blessings; the rest of Deuteronomy 28 spells out the curses that would befall Israel if they did not keep the law.

When Jesus sacrificed His life on the cross and shed His blood for us, He “fulfilled” the Old Covenant which required blood sacrifices for the atonement of sin. More importantly, He established a New Covenant which supercedes the previous or “old” covenant.

- ***“For this is My blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins.”***
(Matthew 26:28)

There is a great deal of confusion in the Christian community today about what “laws” we are to follow. For example, many point to Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13 to show that God considers homosexuality to be an “abomination” (instead, we need to reference Romans 1:26-27 and 1Corinthians 6:9).

- However, the gay rights folks then point to many other Leviticus “abominations” such as wearing garments of “mixed linen and wool” and not eating shellfish. They rightfully ask if we are also supposed to follow these laws as well. And what about men having to marry their brother’s widow?

Are we supposed to pick and choose which “abominations” we’ll follow or ignore? Of course not. So what’s the answer to this dilemma?

- Jesus said he did not come to destroy the law but rather to fulfill it (Matthew 5:17). But what does this really mean to us?
- Colossians 2:14 explains that Jesus “wiped out the **handwriting of requirements** that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having **nailed it to the cross.**”
 - The handwritten requirements of the law refers to all the so-called Mosaic law as well as the thousands of rules and regulations that Jewish priests have handed down over the ages. All of these were written down by the hands of men. These Jesus “nailed to the cross” and took them “out of the way” for us in this age of grace.
 - However, only the Ten Commandments were written by the “finger of God” (Exodus 31:18) and these remain in effect.

Colossians 2:16-17 further explains: “*So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ.*”

- These “shadows of things to come” were largely ceremonial or cultural. They foreshadowed Christ. For example, lambs were sacrificed to atone for sin in the Old Testament under the “old” covenant.
- But Jesus became the “Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). As the Apostle Paul explains, “*For the death that He died, He died to sin once for all.*” Now there is no further need for the animal sacrifices that preceded Christ.
 - So, in the above verses we are told that we no longer are judged (by God or man) according to the Old Covenant laws regarding food, drink, festivals, sabbaths, etc.
- Some argue that the reference to “sabbaths” is not referring to the Sabbath (i.e. Friday evening to Saturday evening as originally defined by God).

- The Hebrew word used here, “sabbaton,” can refer to the Sabbath “shabbath” of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:8) or the interval between two Sabbaths or multiple Sabbaths
- Since the Sabbath (shabbath) was part of the Ten Commandments written by the finger of God, we must assume that it is still in effect. As we explained in the previous chapter, it was the Roman emperor Constantine who changed the Sabbath to Sunday when he combined pagan worship of the sun god with Christian worship.

The issue of following Jewish laws and traditions was raised early on in the spread of Christianity to the Gentile nations. After much debate, the Jerusalem church led by James, the brother of Jesus, issued the so-called Jerusalem Letter which stated:

- *“Since we have heard that some who went out from us have troubled you with words, unsettling your souls, saying, ‘You must be circumcised and **keep the law**’—to whom we gave no such commandment—it seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, to send chosen men to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who will also report the same things by word of mouth. For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you **no greater burden** than these necessary things: that you **abstain from things offered to idols, from blood, from things strangled, and from sexual immorality.** If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well.”* (Acts 15:24-29)
- Thus, there is no requirement to keep all the Jewish laws and traditions.

Messianic Jews might wish to do so, but they must avoid the tendency to become legalistic about it. The Apostle Paul states:

- *“There is therefore now **no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.**”* (Romans 8:1-4)
- *“...our sufficiency is from God, who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the **letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.**”* (2Corinthians 3:5-6)

Under the New Covenant, as expounded in the New Testament, we have a “mediator” who shed His blood so that we might have the forgiveness of sins through Him (1John 1:9) instead of animal sacrifices.

- However, Jesus, the “righteous Judge” (2Timothy 4:8) does not necessarily make things easier for us:
 - ***“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the judgment.’ But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment.”*** (Matthew 5:21-22)
 - ***“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.”*** (Matthew 5:27-28)

Ultimately, Jesus says:

- ***“If you love Me, keep My commandments. And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever... He who has My commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves Me. And he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and manifest Myself to him... If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love.”*** (John 14:15,21 & 15:10)

It was Jesus' finger that wrote the Ten Commandments and throughout the New Testament He tells us Himself or through others what is required of us in the age of grace under the New Covenant, established by His sacrifice on the cross.

- *“And when He had given thanks, He broke it and said, **“Take, eat; this is My body which is broken for you; do this in remembrance of Me.”** In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, **“This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me.”** (1Corinthians 11:24-25)*