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Old and New Testament Views of God's Law

(Part IV)

by Greg L. Bahnsen, Th.M., Ph.D.

(Discontinuity ~~Between the~~ Covenants, continued)

The old covenant law commanded good things, but only the gospel could fully confer them; the righteousness demanded by the law was only supplied with the redemptive work of Christ. Thus the new covenant has a greater glory than the old. The old declared the law and thereby condemned. The new satisfies the law and makes us right with God. The leading and far greater glory of the new covenant is that it secures the righteousness of God's people through God's Son and Spirit, rather than serving primarily to condemn sinfulness. The latter function required only the glory, genuine though it be, of stone tablets; the former required God to manifest the glory of His only-begotten Son, full of grace and truth (John 1:14). Hence Calvin said, "the law, however glorious in itself, has no glory in the face of the gospel's grandeur" (Commentary at 2 Cor. 3:10). As such the approach of the new covenant believer to God's law is significantly different from that of the old covenant believer. Since the threat of the law has now been decisively removed through Christ's expiation and the Holy Spirit's indwelling, the law can be more fully a delight to the believer today.

(B) The New Covenant provides the believer with a greater confidence in approaching God.

The old covenant law promised forgiveness to the sinner on the basis of animal sacrifices, but the tentativeness of this arrangement was evident from the fact that mere animals were offered up and from the fact that sacrifices were repeated over and over again (Heb. 10:4ff.). There was still some distance between the believer and God, for only the High Priest could come before the very presence of God in the Holy of Holies once a year. A veil separated the people from their God. But with the sacrificial work of Christ which cleanses new covenant believers the veil has been torn in two (Mark 15:38; cf. Heb. 10:20). Through Christ, the mediator of the new covenant, we can have bold access to the throne of grace. The way into the holy place was not manifest under the old covenant (Heb. 9:8), but under the new covenant we have "boldness to enter into the holy place by the blood of Jesus" (Heb. 10:19; cf. 4:15-16; 6:18-20). The assurance of forgiveness, the purity of the believer, and the nearness of God are far greater in the new covenant than anything the old covenant law could secure. So Calvin rightly remarks: "The person

who still holds to or wishes to restore the shadows of the law not only obscures the glory of Christ but also deprives us of a tremendous blessing, in that he puts a distance between us and God, to approach whom freedom has been granted us by the gospel." (Commentary at Heb. 7:19).

(C) Unlike the Old Covenant, the New Covenant has a permanent and unfading glory.

In 2 Corinthians 3 Paul likens the glory of the old covenant with its law to the glory which shone in Moses' face after receiving that law (w. 7, 13). What Paul repeats over and over again is that this glory was "passing away" (vv. 7, 11, 13) and had to be veiled (w. 7, 13-16). But the new covenant has a transforming glory seen in the face of Christ (3:18, 4:4,6); this glory is beheld with unveiled face, permanently and progressively making us over into the same image "from glory to glory." Moses mirrored the glory of God only intermittently with a fading glory—such was the excellence of the old covenant law. We constantly mirror the unfading glory of Christ who is the very image of God. Indeed, "we rejoice in our hope of sharing the glory of God" (Rom. 5:2). Distinctive to the new covenant is a glory surpassing the law, a glory which can be gazed upon, as well as mirrored, without interruption.

What we have found, then, is that the New Testament writers can set the new covenant over against the old covenant by taking the law as their point of departure. Believers today have greater benefits than old covenant believers could have in their relationship to the law. The law stood for the threat of death, God at some distance, and a fading glory. In the new covenant the threat is removed, God draws nearer, and the glory is permanent. This provides us with a different context within which to use the law of God and determines the attitude with which we must approach the law. To be content with the law itself or to emphasize it over and above the gospel would evidences terribly perverted sense of judgment. The New Covenant puts the law into proper perspective by showing us a far greater glory than the law possessed.

II. The New Covenant Surpasses the Old Covenant in Power

(A) The New Covenant provides us with further and stronger motivations to obey the law.

Everything found in the Scripture is for our instruction in righteousness and our spiritual discipline (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16-

17), and thus we cannot be perfectly furnished unto all good works without paying attention to all aspects of scriptural revelation—its history (e.g., 1 Cor. 10:6, 11), its promises (e.g., John 14:16-18), its wisdom (e.g., Jas. 3:13-18), its prayers (e.g., Acts 4:24-31), its praise (e.g., Rev. 5:9-14), etc. Each of these functions to equip us better for righteous living. The new covenant provides us with further Scripture that tells us of God's redemptive work, its accomplishment and application. It should serve to make us ever more grateful for what God has done. Redemption, new creation, indwelling of the Spirit, unity of the body—these and many more themes in the new covenant's revelation are motivations for godliness which go beyond the motivations available to old covenant saints. Ethical exhortations in the New Testament are commonly founded on consideration of these new covenant benefits.

(B) Unlike the Old Covenant law, the New Covenant empowers obediences to the revealed pattern of righteousness.

Looking again at 2 Corinthians 3, where Paul contrasts the old covenant with the new, we read that Paul's new covenant ministry had the effect of changing the hearts of his hearers—as though Christ himself had written upon their hearts (v. 3). God had written the law with His own finger upon two tables of stone at Mount Sinai, but Jeremiah looked forward to the day of the new covenant when God's law would be written upon men's hearts (Jer. 31:33)—hearts made of responsive flesh rather than stone (Ezek. 11:19-20; 36:26). Proverbs teaches that "out of the heart are the issues of life." With the law written upon man's heart he would finally be able to walk in God's commandments and do them. Although the Spirit worked in the lives of old covenant believers to help them obey the law of God, He did so in a way which was both limited and provisional—looking ahead to the great day of Pentecostal power. Paul in 2 Corinthians 3 notes that the Spirit is the agent of the writing done upon the new covenant believer's heart (v. 3).

The letter of the old covenant brought death, but the Spirit of the new covenant communicates life and righteousness (v. 6:8-9, 18). What was once external and accusing (the law written on tables of stone) is now internal and activating (the law written on tables of the heart). "The law made nothing perfect" (Heb. 7:19), but the new and "better covenant" has "better promises"—in particular the internalization of the law by means of Christ's sacrificial and priestly work so that the law is kept (Heb. 8:6-10). The "eternal covenant" makes us perfect in every good work to do God's will (Heb. 13:20-21).

We find here one of the most dramatic differences between the old covenant law and the new covenant gospel. The new covenant accomplishes what the law required but gave no ability to perform. P. E. Hughes expresses the point well: "The 'fault' of the old covenant lay, not in its essence, which, as we have said, presented God's standard of righteousness and was propounded as an instrument of life to those who should keep it, but in its inability to justify and renew those who failed to keep it, namely, the totality of fallen mankind. The new covenant went literally to the heart of the matter, promising man, as it did, a new and obedient heart and the grace truly to love God and his fellow man (Ezek. 11:19f.)." (**A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews**, pp. 297-298).

In the preceding outline we already find highly significant discontinuities between the old and new covenants regarding the law of God. The new covenant surpasses the old covenant law, according to the New Testament scriptures, both in glory and power. The new covenant puts the law into perspective and puts it into practice—overcoming its basic threatening character, insecurity, and fading glory by providing further motivations to obedience as well as the power to comply with the law's demands.

(For further reading along these lines see **Theonomy in Christian Ethics**, Craig Press, 1977. The book may be ordered from me for \$9.50 at 2244 East Grove Ave., Orange, CA 92667; include check and address.)

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