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REALISING THE NEW COVENANT

Part 2:

LAW

Part 1 of this series asserted that the four essential components to the Old Covenant — Law, Temple, Priest, Sacrifice — each have their corresponding meaning and significance in the New Covenant, being shadows of a reality that was waiting to be revealed in Christ¹. But has the Church today fully realised the implications of the New Covenant? Particularly in relation to law? Or are we have drifted back to a previous mode where holiness is understood purely in terms of “do’s” and “don’ts”?

The First Believers

To explore this issue it is imperative that we remember that the earliest Christians were, in fact, Jews. They believed that their law was given to Moses by God on Mt Sinai and that law contained detailed instructions governing every aspect of life among God’s people. Christianity would not exist today if it were not for the faith and testimony of those first Jewish believers. After His resurrection, Jesus commanded them to “Go into all the world and... be my witnesses.”² Confronting a sometimes hostile gentile world with a new faith was not a task to be relished — especially for Jews who had been taught that their people were God’s chosen and that gentiles were, for the most part, to be considered unclean and rejected by God.

But as they went they were amazed that the gentiles actually did believe and were converted. When gentiles began to believe the gospel, the Jewish church was immediately confronted with a dilemma: What do we teach these gentile converts? Were they to obey the law of Moses? All of them or just some? If so which ones? Were

they completely exempt? Was it just enough for them to believe in the Messiah? What did the Old Testament prophets have to say about the matter? There was quite a bit of debate in the early church about these very things. Paul, for example, was constantly on the lookout for the “Judaizers”... legalistic Jewish believers who undermined the faith of new converts by insisting that all male converts should be circumcised according to the law of Moses. Others also insisted that gentile converts should comply with certain Jewish regulations concerning food.

Thankfully, Acts chapter 15 sheds light on this subject. The Apostles called a meeting in Jerusalem to discuss what to do. Paul and Barnabus gave a report of all that God had done through them among the gentiles and Simon Peter stood up and described the law as a “yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear.” He went on to assert that it is through grace alone, and not adherence to law, that people are saved and that gentile believers should not be expected to comply with Jewish laws. But it appears that James had the last say. After appearing to agree and quoting some verses from Amos which affirmed God’s plan for the gentiles, he then went on to recommend that the gentile churches be given at least a minimal set of instructions: To abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality. And so it was finalised — the recommendations were sent to the gentile churches along with a rather loose summary: “We think you will do well to avoid these things. Farewell.”

We are left to wonder why these directives were considered to be of primary importance when weighed against the backdrop of all 613 Judaic laws. Since food is central in Jewish faith to ritual cleanness, maybe they just couldn’t quite get over of all those years of cultural con-

ditioning. Jesus himself upset many teachers of the law by refuting common notions of ritual purity. He asserted that “...nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him ‘unclean’.”³ We also know from an earlier account that Peter would have been reluctant to go into the house of Cornelius (a gentile) had God not told him through a vision that he must not regard as unclean those things which God has declared clean⁴. Whatever the reasons for these instructions, it would appear that “men from James” continued their troublesome circumcision crusade⁵. It is also interesting that Paul, in apparent contradiction to James’ recommendation, later taught that “eating meat offered to idols” was a matter of individual conscience⁶.

What is clear, however, is that Jesus’ appeared to have little regard for rigid and narrow interpretations of law. He ate without washing his hands, he sat with outcasts and sinners, touched sick and dead people — he ministered on the Sabbath. But rather than having a blatant disregard for the law, Jesus had clear insight into its real purpose. By healing on the Sabbath Jesus was, in fact, upholding the spirit of the law and doing his Father’s work. Jesus was also keenly aware of how the Pharisees had imposed their own rigid interpretations over the law

in a way that actually nullified and shrouded it’s original intent. He rebuked them sharply, calling them a “brood of vipers” and nailed them with the accusation “You have let go of the commands of God and are holding onto the traditions of men!”

The problem with the Pharisees was that they believed that it was so imperative that people not break God’s commandments that they invented even more rigid instructions believing that they were “building a hedge around the law” to prevent people from breaking it. In reality they were just being religiously pious and muddying the water for God’s people. The result was a perversion of God’s original intent. When the law decreed that men “keep the Sabbath” the teachers of the law even came up with detailed descriptions of exactly how far it was permissible to walk on the Sabbath. Instead of the Sabbath being a day of rest, it became just another burdensome law to observe. There were many other examples like this.

This phenomenon is still apparent to this day. Whilst in Jerusalem in 1997 a friend of mine met an anxious devout Jewish man on the street one Friday night. This man begged my friend to return to his home with him where his family had inadvertently been distracted whilst preparing their meal. When the sun went down, marking the official beginning of the Sabbath, they faced a dilemma. They needed a gentile to turn off their oven and remove the food for them, which they felt the law prohibited them to do. My friend gladly complied and they were all very grateful. On another occasion whilst enjoying a kosher Pizza at a sidewalk cafe in Jerusalem, my friends and I were politely asked to leave. My friends were eating meat at the same table where I was eating cheese (apparently a no no). Other customers had complained to the management and so, not wanting to offend their religious convictions, we respectfully made our departure.

But this kind of legalistic thinking is certainly not limited to Jews. Many Christians today suffer under similar misunderstandings about what God requires and what constitutes “holiness.” Sadly, many churches actively de-

fine Christian living in terms of adherence to particular rules and regulations. Sometimes it’s a particular dress code, sometimes it’s about alcohol or smoking, sometimes it’s about a style of music or the length of one’s hair. It can be about tithing or submission to authority, about a particular Bible translation or a particular theological view on Christ’s return. It can be about anything. In some cases these rules are not so explicitly defined but are more subtly implied. I have recently been so confronted with examples of this that I began to wonder how much of the Church really understands the New Covenant at all! It seems one form of rigid narrow thinking eventually gives way only to be replaced by another one equally devoid of grace.

So should we just shrug our shoulders and accept this as an inevitable part of church life, or should we be more disturbed? The insidious thing about legalism is that it has the appearance of godliness whilst at the same time opposing the very heart of the gospel. When dealing with the circumcision issue the apostle Paul made this remarkable statement: “Mark my words! ...if you let yourself be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all.”⁷ At first glance this seems a bit extreme — after all, how can the removal of the foreskin negate the work of Christ? Legalists, whatever their particular bent, deceive their followers and bring them under condemnation by prescribing an *alternative* way of obtaining God’s approval — a false way that is *not* based on faith and trust but is based on compliance to law and works. In short, they preach a false gospel.

Justification by adherence to laws places the responsibility on the individual to save themselves and undermines the message of grace. It robs the believer of any understanding of God’s grace and love, and the joy that comes with salvation. These people can look like they are very godly — they can preach from the pulpit or sit alongside you in church and even attend prayer meetings — they can be zealous believers who simply don’t understand the message of grace. The legalists that Paul battled with in his day were not unbelieving Jews — they

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were deceived “Christians” on a crusade and who sincerely believed that they had a divine mandate to prescribe laws to new believers. Paul was not prepared to abandon the doctrine of Christian liberty, nor was he prepared to surrender his beloved sheep to the wolves. Instead, he contended for the faith and lovingly warned them of the dangers of such false teaching. Those letters sound a warning to us today.

But given the clear message of grace in the gospels, why do we have this trend in the church? Has the significance of the reformation been lost in history? Why in times of spiritual decline does the Christian church gravitate back to law as if we are somehow still under legalistic governance? Is the message of free grace considered too good to be true? Or is there some perverted desire within us all to want to try and justify ourselves with laws? Clearly one of the greatest dangers in religious life comes from the fact that we deal in the business of “righteousness.” We advocate righteousness, we applaud it, and we try to emulate it. But if we lose sight of the fact that we are not, humanly speaking, capable of living up to God’s standard of righteousness then we run the very real risk of manufacturing a more attainable counterfeit. ie: Self righteousness. It is profoundly true that self righteousness

has great appeal to human pride. Our consciences are aware that we should be holy because we know that God is holy. We feel a little bit better about ourselves if we try to excel in self-improvement—and human nature is such that we like to have someone else to look down our noses at! This kind of self-elevation is perennial in religious life because humans tend to be proud and sinful at heart. Perhaps this is why Jesus told the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector who went up to pray. We are told that the Pharisee stood and reminded God of all his good deeds but the tax collector was penitent and, being overwhelmingly aware of his unworthiness, pleaded with God for mercy. Jesus said it was he who went home forgiven — and not the Pharisee⁸. A sobering lesson to us all.

Holiness

The manifestation of rigid legalism is sometimes an attempt to legislate for holy conduct. Disturbed by prayerlessness in the church some well-meaning and no-doubt sincere person invented the tradition of the one-hour morning “quiet time.” Now prayer is a good thing — but after seven years of unsuccessfully trying to regularly “have a quiet time” my prayer life dramatically improved when I decided to give up! For me, I realised that I could not successfully fit God into a rigid program any more than I could systematise any of my other important relationships in life. I found it necessary for me to have a more fluid and spontaneous prayer life and only when I realised that did my prayer life develop naturally. I applaud those that do keep to such an agenda, but for me it was a noose around my neck until I learned that my faith was an ongoing relationship with God, not something that I “did.” I acknowledge that there are times when the flesh resists prayer and that we do need discipline to persist. But I discovered that the more one prays, the more one *wants* to pray! The desire for intimacy with God compels you to seek Him. Love for others compels one to pray for them, etc.

I only cite this as an example because it can even be

“good things” that can become burdensome to us when we approach them legalistically. The scriptures say that “the joy of the Lord is our strength.” Rigid legalism — even regarding “good things” can poison our joy and rob us of our strength and motivation. Instead of serving God in a spirit of devotion we can become heavy-hearted and despondent. Galatians 5:1 tells us *“It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery”*

Freedom

But how much freedom is a good thing? Do we think that unless we legislate what is right and what is wrong that Christians will just run off and do their own thing? When speaking of the new covenant God told Jeremiah *“I will put my laws in their minds and write it on their hearts.”* And *“No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother, saying ‘know the Lord’ for they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest”* and *“I will forgive their wickedness and remember their sins no more.”*⁹

The new covenant is clearly about inner transformation, not adherence to external rules. The book of Romans tells us that Christ died for our sins so that *“the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature, but according to the Spirit.”* In numerous places there are also references to “the Law of the Spirit” and Galatians 5:18 tells us *“if you are led by the Spirit you are not under law.”*

So is our freedom only limited by what the Spirit expressly prohibits? Can we just do what we like? In a fallen world where believers are constantly being bombarded with worldly philosophies and seductive temptations, a libertine attitude can become a convenient excuse to cast off restraint and follow sinful urges. But the doctrine of Christian liberty cannot be divorced from the imperative that we walk by faith. If we walk by faith, then we are not under law. Christians are still subject to the principle of sowing and reaping¹⁰. If we sow to the flesh (ie: feed

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our mind on worldliness and cultivate carnal habits) then we are in danger of reaping a hardened heart which is unresponsive to God. Unless the human heart is softened by repentance and communion with God, it eventually grows unresponsive to the point where it will no longer desire God's company. If allowed to go unchecked, sin can overtake a person's life. Whilst legalism is a cruel bondage, sin can be an even more cruel task master! Jesus said, *"He who sins is a slave to sin, but if the son sets you free you will be free indeed."*¹¹

When this principle is understood, any argument about what is 'allowed' and what is not becomes fruitless. The scripture plainly says *"everything is permissible, but not everything is beneficial"*¹². The freedom that Jesus spoke of is freedom from both the tyranny of law and from the tyranny of sin. The moral imperatives of the epistles are not legalistic directives, but pastoral warnings against the danger of being overtaken by the deceitfulness of sin. The distinction between a pastoral warning and a legalistic directive is an important one to make.

The New Testament doesn't negate the notion of law but introduces a different understanding of it: The law of liberty, sometimes called the law of love, the law of the Spirit or the law of Christ.... these terms refer to that of which Jeremiah spoke: The law which God writes on the

hearts of those that believe. Christians are not bound or obligated to adhere to Jewish law. The ethic that now governs their lives is no longer written on tablets of stone, but resonates within them through the indwelling and abiding Spirit of Yeshua (Jesus) the Messiah. Through Christ, God introduced a New Covenant — a new way of putting people right with himself — a way that is founded on His own mercy and unmerited favour.

Jesus' said, *"If you love me you will obey what I command"*¹³. His direct commandments were few but are binding on those who wish to be His followers: Be baptised; love God and your neighbour (for in this all of Mosaic law is summarised); forgive; be His witnesses throughout the world; teach others to obey all that He has commanded. Herein the issue of law and it's application to our lives is settled. Even so, Jesus was quick to assert that He did not come to abolish the Law, but to fulfil it. In fact, He said it would have an ongoing purpose until such as *"heaven and earth disappear"*¹⁴. If Old Testament law has an ongoing purpose, what is it's application today?

The Ongoing Purpose of Law

There are those that assert that the appropriate use of law today is in preaching the gospel to the unsaved. It is to be sure that doing so would get a reaction! How can people come to Christ in repentance unless they are convicted of sin? *"Indeed, I would not have known what sin was, except through the law..."* - Rom 7:7 How can they even know they are sinners unless the moral law of God awakens them to the fact? Especially in this pluralistic and permissive age.

"Therefore no one will be declared righteous in His sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin" - Rom 3:20

Preaching the gospel used to be about inducing conviction of sin in order to lead a person to repentance and salvation through faith in Christ. Today the gospel message is all too often reduced to an invitation to a life of prosperity, health, happiness and success. In society today all

manner of conduct is now widely accepted and the distinction between right and wrong has become blurred. In the absence of clear absolutes the best the world can emulate is some kind of situation ethics which change with time and trends in political correctness. The commandments of God, however, are not so arbitrary. They are not a set of rules that God made up one day as if he had nothing better to do! They are, in fact, a distillation of His values — a description of His very nature. They describe His character, His righteousness, His social agenda, His compassion and justice. In short, they describe the universal values upon which creation was founded.

For the Christian the law is a means for us to grow in our knowledge and understanding of God. Since the law is a distillation of His values we can get to know him more by studying and meditating on them. Psalm 1 declares: *"...his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on His law he meditates day and night..."* Psalm 19 says, *"The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul"* If we believe that the Spirit which resides within us is the same Spirit which raised Jesus from the dead¹⁵, then the Spirit which resides within us is also the same Spirit which inspired the prophets and the writing of the law. Observation of law is no longer the means for our justification before God — we no longer have to fear setting foot wrong in relation to law — our justification has been secured. For those of us who are sons and daughters of God, the revelation of Christ in and through the law is to us a sacred pool of living truth to which we can go, to renew our minds and grow in our knowledge and understanding of God.

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Bibliography

¹Heb 10:1; ²Acts 1:8; ³Mark 7:18; ⁴Acts 10:15;

⁵Galatians 2:12; ⁶1 Cor 10:25-27; ⁷Gal 5:2;

⁸Luke 18:10-14; ⁹Jer 31:31-34; ¹⁰Gal 6:8; ¹¹John 8:36;

¹²1 Cor 6:12; ¹³John 14:15; ¹⁴Matt 5:18; ¹⁵Rom 8:11