

Is God's Law Part of the "New Covenant"?

By Roy Gane

Many Christians today believe and teach that when the "old covenant" of the Old Testament gave way to the "new covenant"/New Testament of Christianity, the entire "old covenant" law became obsolete.¹ Since the seventh-day Sabbath was part of that law, they argue that literal Sabbath observance is no longer relevant or required of Christians. This approach has been adopted by many, from those (especially evangelicals) who hold that Christians are not bound to keep any particular day² to others (including Pope John Paul II) who slide aspects of the Old Testament Sabbath over to Sunday in order to make it a Christian "Sabbath."³ However, this conclusion assumes such a sharp break between "Old" and "New" Testament religion that no continuity remains between the covenants they represent. This assumption also leads many Christians to reject the divine authority and value of much if not all of the Old Testament.⁴ However, as we shall see in this first part of a two-part series, such a position fails to take all of the biblical evidence into account. A closer look at the law and the covenants reveals both continuity and discontinuity.

Unity of God's Covenant

In the Bible, the divine covenants are unified and function as phases in the cumulative development of God's overall plan.⁵ That is to say, they really form sub-covenants of one grand, overarching Covenant. It is clear that "each successive covenant builds on the previous relationship, continuing the basic emphasis which had been established earlier."⁶ For example, the covenant set up at Sinai fulfilled God's promises to Abraham regarding His Israelite descendants.⁷ At each covenant stage, the divine-human relationship could be summarized "I shall be your God, and you shall be my people."⁸

In the "new covenant" prophesied in Jeremiah 31:31-34, all of God's covenant purposes—including preservation, promise, and law—climax in Jesus Christ,⁹ who is Priest (Heb 7-10; like Phinehas) and King (Rev 19:11-16; like David). Christ can pull everything together to reintegrate divine-human relationships (John 17:20-23) because He is Immanuel, "God is with us" (Matt 1:23 quoting Isa 7:14), possessing both divine and human natures (e.g. Luke 1:35). To win the victory for us, He became a battleground in the Great Controversy between sin/selfishness and holiness/love (e.g. John 3:14-17; 2 Cor 5:21). He is the ultimate revelation of God's character (2 Cor 3). The "new covenant" established by the incarnate Christ, who is the Ladder between heaven and earth (John 1:51), is the ladder/bridge between the present sinful world and Eden restored (Rev 21-22).

While the Sinai covenant emphasized an externalized summation of God's will in the form of law as the condition for enjoyment of the covenant blessings, the "new covenant" emphasizes internalization of God's law on the basis of His forgiveness (Jer 31:31-34; compare Ezek 36:25-27). It is true that God offered His people an internalized, heart relationship with Him under the covenant with Israel at Sinai (Deut 6:5).¹⁰ But in the "new covenant" the overwhelming glory of God's love, as shown through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ Himself (2 Cor 3; cf. John 17:4-5), breaks through the hardness of human hearts.¹¹ Forgiveness was also possible under the Sinai covenant through faith in divine mercy¹² and the realities foreshadowed by animal sacrifices (Lev 4-5, etc.), but now the Forgiver has come in human form (John 1:14) and has offered Himself as the once-for-all sacrificial Victim (Heb 9:28). Human beings can better relate to a Person and a completed historical event than to a prophetic ritual system using token animals.

Contrary to common misconception, the difference between the Old Testament covenant phases and the "new covenant" is not the difference between salvation through law in the former and salvation through grace in the latter.

It is not a distinction between two different dispensations.¹³ Both of these states could characterize people within the Old Testament *or* New Testament eras. The fact that Jesus summarized the law in terms of love does not mean that He did away with the law: “a summary does not abrogate or discount what it summarizes.”¹⁴ Paul emphasizes that the law *equals* love (Rom 13:8-10), so a distinction between Old Testament law (= love) and New Testament love (= law) artificially introduces a false dichotomy. Paul’s distinction between “under law” and “under grace” in Romans 6:14-15 has to do with states of persons who are “under condemnation by the law” or “freed from condemnation through Christ.”¹⁵

Jesus’ command to love one another was not new in the sense that God had never before required His people to love each other. What was new was the degree/quality of love that He called for His followers to show one another: “just as I have loved you...” By requiring love in this way, Jesus by no means lowered the standard. Rather, He raised it to a remarkable level—that of His own example and life.

Covenants of Grace

Just as law is integral both to the Old Testament covenants and to the “new covenant,” the same is true of grace: Like the “new covenant,” the Old Testament covenants were based on grace rather than law. To begin with, God gave Adam and Eve a perfect world *before* He warned them not to eat the fruit of one tree (Gen 1-2). When they fell into sin, the Lord pointed out the dire consequences and promised the “seed” of the woman, rather than law, as the remedy (Gen 3). Before the great Flood, God promised Noah a covenant of deliverance (Gen 6:18). Then He delivered him, and only *after* Noah and his family were saved did the Lord formalize/ratify the covenant, in the process of which He stated some stipulations/laws (Gen 8:20-9:17). So the laws were for people who were *already* saved by grace, after God had delivered on His promise.

God began the ratification of His covenant with Abram through a ritual (Gen 15:18) after reminding him, “Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you” (v. 1). This was a promise for the future, but it was based on what had happened in the previous chapter (Gen 14). To reinforce the idea that divine law is for saved people, the Lord introduced His Ten Commandments with the words, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (20:2; cf. 19:3-6). It is clear that ever since the Fall, the only way to salvation has been by grace through faith (Eph 2:8) in the “seed”/posterity of Eve (Gen. 3:15), i.e. Jesus Christ (Gal 3:16). Christ has been at the center of all the covenants.¹⁶ The “new covenant” builds on the earlier covenant phases, but it does not supersede them in terms of introducing a different way of salvation. The “new covenant” is an everlasting covenant (compare Jer 50:5), but so were the earlier covenants, which continue, merge into, and are continued by the “new covenant” within one overall divine Covenant. A similar point is made by O. Palmer Robertson:

Essential to a full appreciation of the distinctiveness of the new covenant is an awareness of its everlasting character. Indeed, this characteristic had been assigned to previous divine administrations. The Abrahamic covenant is characterized as everlasting (Gen. 17:7; Ps. 105:10), as is the Mosaic (Exod. 40:15; Lev. 16:34; 24:8; Isa. 24:5) and Davidic (II Sam. 7:13, 16; Ps. 89:3, 4; 132:11, 12). But the everlasting character of the new covenant seems to imply an eschatological dimension. It is not only the new covenant; it is the last covenant. Because it shall bring to full fruition that which God intends in redemption, it never shall be superseded by a subsequent covenant.¹⁷

Forgiveness, which enables us to receive eternal life, comes only by grace through faith (Eph 2:8-9). This does not mean that there is anything wrong with God’s law (cf. Rom 3:31; 7:7-12). To the contrary, His law, especially the Ten Commandments, plays a crucial role in revealing the divine standard to which all are accountable. It thereby convicts people of sin and brings them to a realization of their need for salvation.

However, it cannot achieve the purpose of justification from sin, for which it was never intended (3:19-20; Gal 3:19-25).¹⁸

Then what is the defective “old covenant” in Jeremiah 31, which must be replaced by a “new covenant”? It is true that Jeremiah connects the “old covenant” to the Israelites at Sinai, when the Lord “took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt” (v. 32), but the “old covenant” was not the relationship as God offered it. Rather, it was “‘My covenant which they broke, although I was a husband to them,’ declares the LORD.” So although God did His part, His people were unfaithful and therefore the covenant relationship was faulty. As in a human marriage, it only takes failure on the part of one or the other partner to spoil a relationship. The spoiled relationship constituted the “old covenant,” which God wanted to replace with the *new* covenant, i.e. really a *renewed* covenant of fresh commitment to the God of Sinai.¹⁹ The latter would restore the kind of internalized heart relationship He had offered at Sinai, but on an even stronger basis of forgiveness (v. 34).

Summary

We have found that the successive phases of the unified divine covenant that form the skeletal structure of the entire Bible are cumulative, building on earlier phases rather than nullifying them. True, there are differences of emphasis as salvation history progresses, but God has only ever offered salvation by grace through faith. So while the “new covenant” ratified by Christ’s own blood culminates God’s initiative to restore an intimate relationship with human beings, it fulfills God’s long-range plan rather than radically repealing everything that had gone before. The “old covenant” involved a faulty response of faithlessness and disobedience that marred the divine-human relationship because it departed from the internalized “new covenant” heart experience offered by God all along. Not only does the “new covenant” represent a covenant phase ratified by the only sacrifice that has offered real salvation to those living during all of the covenant phases; it also represents the only kind of divine-human dynamic through which human beings under any covenant phase can be saved. So the “new covenant” is not only *a* covenant, one among several reaffirmations of the overall divine covenant; it is *the* covenant. Divine law is for the benefit and protection of all parties involved in relationships. It has never had the purpose of salvation by works, as shown by the fact that the Bible always places it within the covenant framework of grace.

In the second part of this two-part series,²⁰ we will look at the modern categorization of biblical law and application of these categories within the context of Christianity, including the place of the Seventh-day Sabbath. We will also look at some objections that have been raised to the idea that keeping the weekly Sabbath is required of “new covenant” Christians.

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¹See e.g. the views of Wayne Strickland and Douglas Moo in a multi-authored volume: Greg Bahnsen, Walter Kaiser, Douglas Moo, Wayne Strickland, and Willem VanGemeren, *Five Views on Law and Gospel (Counterpoints; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1996)*, 276-9, 343, 375-6. *I am grateful to Jan Sigvartsen, my research assistant, for these references and many others cited in the course of this paper.*

²See e.g. Andrew Lincoln, “From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical and Theological Perspective,” in *From Sabbath to Lord’s Day: A Biblical, Historical, and Theological Investigation* (ed. D. A. Carson; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1982), 400, 403-4; Marvin R. Wilson, *Our Father Abraham: Jewish Roots of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1989), 81; Dale Ratzlaff, *Sabbath in Crisis* (rev. ed.; Glendale, Ariz.: Life Assurance Ministries, 1995).

³See e.g. Gary G. Cohen, “The Doctrine of the Sabbath in the Old and New Testaments,” *Grace Journal* 6 (1965): 13-14; Geoffrey W. Bromiley, “Lord’s Day,” *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (ed. G. W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1986), 3:159; Pope John Paul II, “Apostolic Letter *Dies Domini* of the Holy Father John Paul II to the

Bishops, Clergy and Faithful of the Catholic Church on Keeping the Lord's Day Holy"

([www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/; July 5, 1998](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/July_5_1998)).

⁴For Samuele Bacchiocchi's critique of the "New Covenant" theology published by Joseph Tkach, Jr., Pastor General of the World Council of Churches (*The Pastor General Report*, "The New Covenant and the Sabbath"), and by Dale Razlaff (*Sabbath in Crisis*), see Bacchiocchi's *The Sabbath Under Crossfire: A Biblical Analysis of Recent Sabbath/Sunday Developments* (Biblical Perspectives 14; Berrien Springs, Mich.: Biblical Perspectives, 1998), 104-20.

⁵O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: P & R Publishing, 1980), 28; Skip MacCarty, *In Granite or Ingrained? What the Old and New Covenants Reveal about the Gospel, the Law, and the Sabbath* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 2007).

⁶Robertson, 28.

⁷Ibid., 29.

⁸See e.g. Lev 26:12; Jer 7:23; 31:33; Ezek 36:28. Robertson calls this the "Immanuel" ("God is with us") principle of the covenant (45-6). The formula "I shall be your God, and you shall be my people" follows the pattern of an ancient declaration of marriage or parental acceptance (cf. Hos 2:16; 1:10; 2:23), the opposite of a formula of divorce or parental rejection (cf. 1:9).

⁹Robertson, 63.

¹⁰Cf. Fredrick Holmgren, *The Old Testament and the Significance of Jesus: Embracing Change—Maintaining Christian Identity* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1999), 86: "'Heart religion' has always been at the center of Israelite faith."

¹¹Cf. Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1995), 204-5.

¹²Cf. Holmgren, 88-9.

¹³Against e.g. Cohen, 13-14, who is off target when he criticizes Seventh-day Adventists and others for claiming that Rom 6:14 "means that the believer is not *under* the ceremonial law but still *under* the moral law (i.e., the Decalogue including the Fourth Commandment—according to the Adventists)."

¹⁴Bacchiocchi, *The Sabbath Under Crossfire*, 120.

¹⁵Cf. Bacchiocchi, *The Sabbath Under Crossfire*, 199-201; J. H. Gerstner, "Law in the NT," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 3:88 on John 1:17.

¹⁶As implied by Robertson's title: *The Christ of the Covenants*.

¹⁷Robertson, 277. God also gave Noah an everlasting covenant (Gen 9:16).

¹⁸On the law in Gal 3:19-25 as including especially the moral law, see Willmore Eva, "Why the Seventh Day? Part 2," *Ministry* (September, 1999): 5.

¹⁹Cf. Holmgren, 73-81, 86-95. Note that the Hebrew word *khadash*, "new" (as in "new covenant"; Jer 31:31) can also mean "renewed" (e.g. Lam 3:23; cf. the Hithp. verb of the same root *khdsh* in Ps 103:5).

²⁰This two-part series is condensed and updated from Roy Gane, "The Role of God's Moral Law, Including Sabbath, in the "New Covenant"; online: http://www.adventistbiblicalresearch.org/documents/Gane_Gods_moral_law.pdf.

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