

THE COVENANTS COMPARED

⇒CHRIST BETWEEN THE COVENANTS⇐

We have seen in previous chapters how the Old Covenant applied to the Nation of Israel as a nation and was established at the time of Moses. We have also seen how the New Covenant applies to any person of any nation who accepts it and how it was established by Christ at his death. So what of Christ himself? He was born a member of the tribe of Judah under the Old Covenant, but he came to teach and establish the New Covenant. In a sense, then, he was “Between the Covenants”. How was this situation reflected in his actions and teaching?

A good example comes from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew’s gospel. Remember first what we have seen in a previous chapter that the Old Covenant laid down “national” laws of all types for the Nation of Israel. These laws included what we would call criminal laws, civil laws and religious laws. Punishments were laid down to be implemented by the rulers and they were summarised in the ten commandments. Christ said, speaking to a Jewish audience: “Do not suppose that I have come to abolish the Law and the prophets; I did not come to abolish, but to complete.” (Matthew 5:17).

He also gave some examples of what he meant. In one of these he said: “You have learnt that they were told, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But what I tell you is this: If a man looks on a woman with a lustful eye, he has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” (Matthew 5:27-28). The Old Covenant law stated: “If a man commits adultery with his neighbour’s wife, both adulterer and adulteress shall be put to death.” (Leviticus 20:10). So the command which Jesus quoted from the ten commandments, “Do not commit adultery”, was part of the national law of the nation of Israel, with a penalty to be carried out by the state. Lustful thoughts cannot be punished by the state, because they cannot be proved satisfactorily in a court of law. Jesus is therefore taking a moral position, which is the New Covenant position.

In another example Jesus quoted the law: “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth”. (Matthew 5:38). This comes from the Old Covenant law which says: “When a man injures and disfigures his fellow-countryman, it shall be done to him as he has done; fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth.” (Leviticus 24:19-20). This was the national law. But Jesus taught: “Do not set yourself against the man who wrongs you.” (Matthew 5:39). This level of forgiveness is moral. It cannot be imposed by the state.

In both these examples Jesus is teaching something quite different from the national law. He is teaching a way in which individuals should behave. This is in keeping with the different way of the New Covenant.

The Sabbath was, as we have seen, the sign of the Old Covenant. The penalty for breaking it was death. So what did Jesus have to say about the Sabbath? One issue was the way in which the Jews interpreted the Sabbath law. Jesus was highly critical of their interpretation. In one example, when he healed a man with a paralysed arm on the Sabbath he asked: “Is it permitted to do good or to do evil on the Sabbath, to save life or to kill?” (Mark 3:1-6). The official Jewish answer of the day is given in the Mishnah, the ancient Jewish law book: “If a man stored seed as a means of healing and took it out on the Sabbath he is culpable” (Mishnah: Shabbath 10:1). In the Mishnah, then, the Sabbath was more important than healing sick people. So here Jesus is not disagreeing with the Sabbath law of the Old Testament, but interpreting it differently, with different priorities from those of the Jewish religious leadership. On another occasion when the Sabbath law arose he stated: “The Son of Man is Lord over the Sabbath.” (Mark 2:28). This was more ominous, and suggested something different to come in relation to the Sabbath. I shall deal with the Sabbath in more detail in a later chapter.

Quite apart from the law of Israel, there are other areas in which Jesus showed an awareness of something new to come. At a moment of conflict with some of the Jewish leaders of his day he said: “No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on to an old coat; for then the patch tears away from the coat, and leaves a bigger hole. Neither do you put new wine into old wine-skins; if you do, the skins burst, and then the wine runs out and the skins are spoilt. No, you put new wine into fresh skins; then both are preserved.” (Matthew 9:16-17). The new cloth and the new wine could be taken to mean new teachings, or it could be taken to mean a new system with new leaders. It probably includes these and many other things. In the context, it certainly implied that the teaching and ways of the existing religious leaders would be discarded.

As to the new leaders, Jesus selected his own group of twelve. None of them were leaders in the old system. None of them were priests under the Old Covenant, just as Jesus himself had no official position under the old system. Most of them or perhaps all of them, came from Galilee, far from Jerusalem with the influences of the priestly system. When Jesus came to the temple and found it being used as a market place, he did not go to the chief priests to suggest a change in their rules and regulations. He did not ask them politely to consider reform. He took what we would now call “direct action” and chased out the animals with a whip, no doubt with their salesmen running after them to round them up! (Mark 11:15-19 & John 2:12-22). So he ignored and rejected the leaders of Israel, and they were afraid of him and decided to kill him.

Perhaps the greatest indication from Jesus’s teaching that a new era was about to begin is seen in his teaching on the kingdom of heaven. This is a continual theme in his teaching, occurring in many parables. But let us take one saying which emphasises that a new era is beginning. Jesus said of John the Baptist: “Never has there appeared on earth a mother’s son greater than John the Baptist, and yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.” (Matthew 11:11). So John belonged to the old system, preceding the kingdom of heaven.

We have seen some examples of Jesus looking at the Old Covenant. What about the New? He did not go round Galilee establishing Christian churches with their distinctive membership, leadership, and forms of worship centred round the communion and the gifts of the Spirit. Why? Because the covenant which forms the basis of all these things was not yet made. The founding of churches was left to the apostles after the making of the covenant. Christ Himself said that he would found his church through Peter, the senior apostle. (Matthew 16:18 quotes Jesus as saying: “You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church”.)

The events of Jerusalem from Passover to Pentecost were the beginnings of the New Covenant, with the death and resurrection of Christ and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the new church. Only then did the New Covenant really begin. So Jesus really was “Between the Covenants” in what he taught, and did, or did not do.