

What Does the Bible Say About The Old and New Covenants?



By Michael D. Morrison



GRACE COMMUNION
INTERNATIONAL

Living and Sharing the Gospel

What Does the Bible Say About The Old and New Covenants?

By Michael D. Morrison

Copyright 2012 Grace Communion International

All scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide. www.zondervan.com

The “NIV” and “New International Version” are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trademark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

Cover illustration by Ken Tunell. Copyright Grace Communion International

Table of Contents

[Covenants in the Bible](#)

[Appendix 1: Human covenants](#)

[Appendix 2: Various divine covenants](#)

[Appendix 3: The need to be faithful](#)

[The Old Covenant and the Law of Moses](#)

[The Role of the Decalogue in Christian Ethics](#)

[Is Tithing Required in the New Covenant?](#)

[About the Authors](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

[Grace Communion Seminary](#)

[Ambassador College of Christian Ministry](#)

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Covenants in the Bible

To understand the old and new covenants, we need to first understand what the word *covenant* means. In simple terms, it is a formal agreement. It may be an agreement between two people, a treaty between nations (for examples, see appendix 1 below), or a relationship between God and a human individual or nation. A covenant is more personal than a contract — it involves loyalty and allegiance, not just a financial exchange.

God has made several agreements or covenants with humans. He gives commands and makes promises. What does he command? What promises has he made?

This paper surveys every biblical covenant. In the conclusion, we will give special attention to passages in Romans, Galatians and Hebrews that clarify the difference between the old covenant made at Mt. Sinai and the new covenant mediated by Jesus Christ.

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob

Of greatest importance today are the covenants that God made with the patriarchs and the nation of Israel. God called Abram out of Mesopotamia and promised to give his offspring the land of Canaan (Genesis 12:1-7). Abram went to Egypt, returned to Canaan, was generous to Lot, rescued Lot and gave tithes to Melchizedek (Genesis 12-14).

God then reaffirmed his promise that Abram would have offspring (15:1-4). God promised that Abram's descendants would be as numerous as the stars (15:5). This was a phenomenal promise, but "Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness" (15:6). Paul develops this statement further in Romans 4 and Galatians 3.

God then repeated his promise to give Abram the land of Canaan, and Abram asked for evidence (Genesis 15:7-8). So God asked for some animals,

and Abram cut in half a heifer, a goat and a ram, and also offered a dove and a pigeon (15:9-10). He arranged the pieces, but did not burn them.

God caused Abram to fall into a deep sleep, and in a dream God affirmed that Abram himself would not possess the land, but his descendants would. A smoking firepot and a blazing torch then passed between the pieces of the sacrificed animals. In ancient custom, people making a covenant walked between the halves of a sacrificed animal as part of their oaths (Jeremiah 34:18-19 shows this ancient custom, as does the Hebrew idiom for making a covenant — literally, cutting a covenant).

In this dream and covenant, God was giving Abram evidence that his descendants would possess the land of Canaan. This covenant that God made with the father of the faithful is also referred to in Nehemiah 9:8 and Galatians 3:17.

Many years later, God confirmed his covenant, changing Abram's name to Abraham, since he would be the father of not just one nation, but of many nations (Genesis 17:1-6). He promised to renew the covenant with Abram's descendants — not only that they would be numerous, but also that he would be their God (17:7). This is more than the original covenant promised. God also required more from Abraham and his descendants: Circumcision was to be the sign of the covenant (17:9-14). The covenant was both renewed and expanded. Circumcision — cutting the foreskin — was a continuing reminder that God had cut a covenant with Abraham and his descendants. This covenant is referred to in Acts 7:8 and Romans 4:11.

God promised that Abraham would have children not only through Hagar but also through Sarah (Genesis 17:15-17), and God promised to renew the covenant with Isaac (17:19-21).

At Bethel, God gave similar promises to Jacob (28:10-15; 35:11-13). We are not specifically told that this was a covenant, but it apparently was.¹ God

referred to his covenant with Jacob and his covenant with Isaac and his covenant with Abraham, as if they were three distinct covenants (Leviticus 26:42), but he could also refer to them as one single covenant, since they contained the same promises (Exodus 2:24; 2 Kings 13:23). The same basic covenant was renewed with each generation. Peter mentioned the covenant that God made with the fathers (plural), characterized by the promise given to Abraham (Acts 3:25). This covenant is also referred to in Exodus 6:4-5.

The covenant at Mt. Sinai

God remembered the covenant he had made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and he brought their descendants out of slavery in Egypt. While they were on their way to the land of Canaan, God made a covenant with them at Mt. Sinai. As their ruler, he gave laws, and they agreed to keep them. “If you obey me fully and keep my covenant,” he told them through Moses, “then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession.... You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Exodus 19:5-6).

The people said they would do everything the Lord had said (19:8). After God spoke the Ten Commandments, the people asked Moses to be their mediator for the remainder of the covenant (20:1-19). Through Moses, God then gave regulations about altars (20:22-26), servants and slaves (21:1-11), murder and sins against others (21:12-32), sins against personal property (21:33-22:15) and other laws of social responsibility (22:16-27; 23:1-9). There were rules about blasphemy, cursing, offerings, firstlings (22:28-30), Sabbath years and days, Holy Days and offerings (23:10-19). God spoke all these laws, and then promised to give the people the land of Canaan (23:20-31).

The Abrahamic covenant, although it included obligations, stressed God’s promise. The Sinaitic covenant, although it included mercy and promises, stressed human responsibilities. Moses told the people the laws, and the

people said, “Everything the Lord has said we will do” (24:3). And Moses wrote it all down.

The next day, they had sacrifices, Moses read the book of the covenant,² and the people again agreed to obey (24:4-7). So Moses sprinkled blood on the people, saying, “This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words” (24:8). As Hebrews 9:18-20 says, the first covenant was put into effect with blood. An animal was cut, and the people came under the covenant by being sprinkled with its blood.

The Ten Commandments formed the core of this covenant. “The words of the covenant — the Ten Commandments” — were written on tablets of stone (Exodus 34:28). Although the covenant was equated with the Ten Commandments (Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 4:13), the covenant included all of Exodus 20-23. The Lord wrote “the law *and* commands I have written for their instruction” (Exodus 24:12).

The tablets of stone were called the “tablets of the covenant” (Deuteronomy 9:9, 11, 15; Hebrews 9:4). They were placed in the ark of the covenant (Exodus 25:16, 21; 31:18), thus giving a name to the ark, and the covenant was said to be inside the ark (1 Kings 8:21; 2 Chronicles 6:11).

In this covenant, the people agreed to be servants of God, and he agreed to protect them. The covenant was made not only with Israel as a nation, but also with Moses as its leader (Exodus 34:10, 27). Many of the laws in Exodus 34 are quoted from Exodus 23. It was a covenant renewal or restatement with some variations. Hebrews 9:1 says that original covenant also included regulations for worship and the sanctuary (Exodus 25-30). The covenant was developed as time went on.

Although the Sabbath was part of the Ten Commandments (20:8-11), and part of the larger covenant (23:12), it was made its own covenant in Exodus 31:16. Just as circumcision was an everlasting covenant and a sign of

Abraham's covenant (Genesis 17:10-11), the Sabbath was also called a sign and an everlasting covenant (31:12, 16-17). Just as circumcision was a covenant in conjunction with the Abrahamic covenant, the Sabbath was a covenant in conjunction with the Sinaitic covenant.

Also in conjunction with the Sinaitic covenant was the weekly showbread, which was also called an everlasting covenant (Leviticus 24:8). An everlasting covenant was made with the priesthood, too (Numbers 18:19; 25:13). Grain offerings were covenantized, too, since God commanded, "Do not leave the salt of the covenant of your God out of your grain offerings" (Leviticus 2:13).

Covenant renewals

When the Israelites were ready to enter the promised land, Moses repeated to them the laws of God (Deuteronomy 1:1-5). He rehearsed some history, reminded the Israelites to obey God and worship him only, and he repeated the Ten Commandments. Although the people he was talking to were either not yet born or only children at Horeb (Mt. Sinai), Moses said that God had made the Sinaitic covenant with them, not with their parents (5:2-3).³

Moses not only repeated the Ten Commandments, but gave numerous other laws as well (Deuteronomy 6–26). After he described blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience, he led the people to covenant anew with God to be his people. Most of the book of Deuteronomy then forms the "terms of the covenant the Lord commanded Moses to make with the Israelites in Moab, in addition to the covenant he had made with them at Horeb" (29:1). The covenant was renewed and expanded. This Deuteronomic covenant was built on the foundation of the Sinaitic covenant, the Ten Commandments.

Moses reminded the people that they were making a covenant with the

Lord not only for themselves but also for their descendants (29:12-14), and he exhorted them to be faithful to this covenant (29:9). This was a confirmation of the covenant God had made with the patriarchs (29:13) — it was a development from that patriarchal covenant. Moses wrote down the Deuteronomic law, and it was placed beside (not in) the ark of the covenant (31:9, 24-26).

The covenant was renewed in the days of Joshua (Joshua 24:1-24), Asa (2 Chronicles 15:12) and in the days of Joash (23:16). Hezekiah planned to make a covenant with God (29:10). Josiah and the Jews renewed the covenant, apparently the Deuteronomic law (2 Kings 23:3; 2 Chronicles 34:31-32). Jeremiah called the people to obey the terms of the covenant they had made when their forefathers came out of Egypt (Jeremiah 11:2-6).⁴ In Jeremiah's day, the people made a covenant with God (34:15), but they were going back on it, and God would treat them "like the calf they cut in two and then walked between its pieces" (34:18).

Yet another covenant was made in the days of Ezra, in which the people agreed to put away their foreign wives and children (Ezra 10:3).

Throughout Israel's history, covenant was an important concept. They were the "people of the covenant land" (Ezekiel 30:5); their ruler was "the prince of the covenant" (Daniel 11:22). An attack on the Jews was considered an attack "against the holy covenant" (11:28, 30). Paul noted that one of the advantages of the people of Israel is that they had the (plural) "covenants of the promise" (Romans 9:4; Ephesians 2:12).

A new covenant prophesied

However, something was seriously wrong with the Israelite covenant. The people did not have the heart to obey, and God knew it (Deuteronomy 31:16-21, 27-29). Unlike Abraham, they did not believe and were not faithful (Hebrews 3:19). The fault was with the people (Hebrews 8:7-8).

The Sinaitic covenant had regulations for worship, but it could not transform the heart or the conscience (Hebrews 9:9), and yet that is what people really need. The priests had to serve continually, but the high priest could approach God's throne only once a year. This indicated that the sacrificial rituals were not effective (Hebrews 9:7-9; 10:1-3). The people's minds were dull; they could not understand (Matthew 13:14-15; 19:8; 2 Corinthians 4:4), so they remained in the slavery of sin.

Therefore, God predicted a new covenant. He hinted at it even in the old — he said that, after his people had been sent into captivity because they had broken the covenant, he would gather them again and “circumcise your hearts” (Deuteronomy 4:25-31; 30:4-10).

The prophets predicted a *new* covenant between God and humans — a new basis of relationship. There would be no need for this new covenant, of course, unless the old were deficient.

In a messianic prophecy fulfilled by Jesus Christ, Isaiah noted that God would make the Servant “to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles” (Isaiah 42:6; 42:7 is similar to 61:1, which is quoted in Luke 4:18). The Servant himself would be the covenant — *he* would be the basis of the relationship for both Jews and Gentiles. This was fulfilled in Jesus, for he shed his blood, and it is only through him that we may enter God's holy nation. Malachi 3:1 predicted that the Lord would be the messenger of the new covenant.

Isaiah again predicted that God would make the Servant to be a covenant for the people in the day of salvation (Isaiah 49:8). Just as God had sworn to Noah that he would never again destroy the earth with a flood, he will never remove this “covenant of peace” (54:9-10). “Come to me, all you who are thirsty,” God calls (55:1), a scripture fulfilled in Jesus Christ (John 7:37). “Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live. I will make an

everlasting covenant with you” (Isaiah 55:3).

“The Redeemer will come to Zion,” Isaiah 59:20 prophesies, “to those in Jacob who repent of their sins.” God will make a covenant with these repentant people. His Spirit will be upon them, and his words will remain in them (59:21). They will keep the covenant because they will be changed on the inside.

Isaiah 61 was also fulfilled by Jesus. God’s Spirit was upon him, so he preached good news, freedom and comfort (61:1-2; Luke 4:18-21). Isaiah predicted a nation of priests (61:6) who will receive a great inheritance (61:7). God will “make an everlasting covenant with them” (61:8).

We are familiar with Jeremiah 31:31-33, since it is quoted in Hebrews. Jeremiah predicted a new covenant, which the people will not break, because God’s law will be in their minds and hearts. All the people will know the Lord, their sins will be forgiven (31:34), and God will never reject the people (31:35-37).

In other prophecies of regathering, Jeremiah predicted an everlasting covenant (32:40), in which the people will never turn away from fearing God (32:38-40; 50:5).

Ezekiel also foresaw that God would remember the covenant and regather the people; he will then “establish an everlasting covenant with you.” He will make atonement for the people, and they will be repentant (Ezekiel 16:60-62). After gathering them, he will make “a covenant of peace” with them, an everlasting covenant (34:25; 36:27; 37:26). Hosea 2:18 describes a similar covenant.

All these prophets predicted a new covenant, a new basis of relationship with God. This covenant will repair the defective hearts of the people, and will therefore not need to be replaced. It will be an everlasting covenant of peace, a covenant of reconciliation.

Jesus and the new covenant

At the Last Supper, Jesus proclaimed that the wine-cup represented his own blood, which would be the blood of the new covenant (Matthew 26:28; Mark 14:24; Hebrews 10:29). The cup represented the “new covenant in my blood” (Luke 22:20; 1 Corinthians 11:25). Just as the Sinaitic covenant was sealed with blood, so also the new covenant was ratified when Jesus’ blood was poured out on the cross. We renew that covenant and reaffirm our commitment to it when we drink the wine and eat the bread, remembering the Lord’s death until he returns. The Lord’s Supper is a visible and tangible reminder of the covenant. But the wine is not sprinkled on the surface of the people — it is swallowed. The new covenant affects our innermost being.

The new covenant is superior to the old, for it has been founded on better promises (Hebrews 8:6). The old covenant could never make anyone perfect; no one could meet its righteous demands. It has now become “obsolete” (8:13); its laws are “set aside”⁵ (7:18; 10:9) — replaced by a better hope, better promises and an effective transformation of the heart, a transformation that begins with faith.

Jesus Christ is the Messenger and Mediator of the new covenant (Hebrews 8:6; 12:24). He is also the sacrifice — he himself *is* the new covenant. His teachings are the requirements of the covenant. Faith is required for participation in it. The Holy Spirit is given to transform the heart, and eternal life is the promised inheritance. It is an eternal covenant (13:20), guaranteed by Jesus (7:22). His blood has made us perfect, and he is making us holy (10:10, 14).

The new covenant has phenomenal promises, and all who believe them are counted as righteous. They are considered as faithful to the terms of the covenant. Their allegiance (loyalty and obedience) is given to Jesus Christ.

Our relationship with God is based on the new covenant. God takes away

our sins (Romans 11:27). Jesus “died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant” (Hebrews 9:15). God’s Spirit gives us life (2 Corinthians 3:6). He puts the terms of the covenant within our hearts and minds so we can be faithful to him (Hebrews 8:7-10; 10:16). We may therefore “receive the promised eternal inheritance” (Hebrews 9:15).

Terms of the new covenant

We now come to the most important part. The new covenant has been made, and the old covenant is obsolete (Hebrews 8:13). What then are the terms of the new covenant? Is it simply faith and Spirit added to the old rules? No. Some of the old rules are obsolete.

The book of Hebrews explains that the sacrifices, for example, are done away. Hebrews does not say that the sacrifices are obsolete because they were later additions to the covenant. Rather, it is the Sinaitic covenant itself that is obsolete. There has been a change of the law (Hebrews 7:12). Levites administered the old covenant; Christian ministers administer the new covenant, not the old.

When we compare the new covenant with the old, we see both similarities and differences. Some laws of the old covenant are continued into the new. The Tenth Commandment, for example, is quoted with approval in the New Testament. As another example, we should still obey Exodus 22:22: “Do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan.” Even though this commandment is not quoted in the New Testament, the principle is still valid.

Other laws are transformed in the way we apply them. Take Exodus 22:19, for example: “Anyone who has sexual relations with an animal must be put to death.” The prohibition is valid, but the church does not enforce the punishment. Part of the law is valid, and part is not.

Some laws are simply discontinued, such as Exodus 20:24: “Make an altar of earth for me.” And Exodus 22:29-30: “You must give me the

firstborn of your sons. Do the same with your cattle and your sheep.” The promises of the old covenant are also discontinued — Christians do not expect God to drive the Canaanites out of the land.

The old covenant was a package of laws and promises between God and his people. That package is now obsolete. Although some laws in the old covenant continue to be valid, others have ceased to be valid. We cannot assume that any particular law is valid simply on the basis of it being commanded in the old covenant.

This principle is taught in Galatians 3:17: “The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise.” Paul is not singling out ritualistic laws. He is talking about the entire package of laws that was given four centuries after Abraham. The Sinaitic laws cannot do away with the promises God gave to Abraham.

In other words, once a promise has been given, conditions cannot be added (3:15). God knew in advance that the Israelites could not obey the covenant he gave them, and he did not use their disobedience to abandon the promises he had given to Abraham. The old covenant was an addition, given for a temporary purpose. It is now expired, no longer in effect.

The Galatian Christians had received the Holy Spirit by believing the gospel (3:2, 5). By believing, they became children of Abraham (3:7, 29) and partakers of his blessing (3:9, 14). The Galatian believers had the same covenant with God that Abraham did, and so do Christians today. Paul is explaining that our inheritance depends on promise (3:18), not on the law of Moses. We are children of God by faith, not by law (3:26).

In other words, our relationship with God is based on faith and promise, just as Abraham’s was. We are justified by faith and saved by promise — by grace. Laws that were added at Sinai cannot change the promise given to

Abraham, nor can those laws change the promise given to us, since we are Abraham's children by faith. God gave his oath to Abraham, and he cannot break his promise by introducing new requirements (3:15). The promise still stands.

Even circumcision, which was given to Abraham as a sign of the covenant, cannot change the original promise, which was given on the basis of faith. Paul points out that Abraham was declared righteous, and therefore acceptable to God, while he was uncircumcised (Romans 4:9-11). The promise in Genesis 15 was given without conditions. Abraham is therefore the father of all who have faith, whether they are circumcised or not, and all who have faith can be heirs of the original promise (Romans 4:16). Circumcision, the sign of the covenant, is now a matter of the heart (Romans 2:29). Obedience should be in our hearts.

However, no one obeys perfectly. Everyone breaks the law. Law cannot give life (Galatians 3:21, 10-12). It was never meant to be a means of salvation. All it can do is condemn us. So what was its purpose? It was added because of transgressions and was to be in force only until Christ came (3:19). The law pointed out our need for forgiveness, our need for grace, our need for a Savior, and our need for faith.

“Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law” (3:25). The law — meaning the covenant added 430 years after Abraham — was temporary, added until the coming of the “Seed” the promise referred to — Christ (3:19). The old covenant was a temporary addition, and it is now obsolete.

By establishing the new covenant, Jesus set aside the first covenant (Hebrews 10:9). He did away with many laws, but he also reaffirmed various commands and stressed that obedience should begin in the heart. He also added commands not found in the old covenant at all. The new covenant has

behavioral guidance of its own.

Faith in Christ means allegiance to him. Faith leads us to obey God. All that the Lord has said to us, we should obey. We look to Jesus' teachings, and the teachings of his inspired apostles, to see the way that Christian faith should work in our lives. Since we always fall short of these New Testament commands, however, they remind us that we are saved only by grace through faith in our Savior.

Righteousness by faith

No one can be declared righteous by observing the law (Romans 3:20). The law cannot give eternal life (Galatians 3:21). But the gospel reveals a way in which we can be declared righteous — a way that was predicted by the Law and the Prophets (Romans 3:21; Acts 10:43). “This righteousness from God comes...to all who believe” (Romans 3:22). We can be “justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus” (3:24).

God gave his unique Son as a means of atonement for us, so God can declare believers justified — righteous (3:25-26). No one can boast about observing the law, since the only way anyone can be justified is “by faith apart from observing the law” (3:28). We are accounted as righteous on the basis of Jesus Christ, and we are given salvation by grace. If we are judged by our works, we will be found guilty. Salvation comes only by grace. God has forgiven us because Jesus died for us; it is because of his one great sacrifice that God forgives all our sins. We are counted as acceptable to God if we have faith in Jesus Christ.

“Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God” (Romans 5:1-2).

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in

Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order 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. (8:1-4).

Since the law could not transform us and could not give us eternal life, God did what the law could not do. He did it by sending his Son as a sacrifice on our behalf. Through faith, through Jesus Christ, we are declared righteous — and we are led by the Holy Spirit and changed in the heart. As we remain in Christ Jesus through faith in him, we are counted among the righteous, not among the condemned.

Christians today have a new relationship with God — a covenant based on faith, a faith that is willing to obey God. We do not obey according to the old letter or the old covenant, but according to the new, according to the Spirit (2 Corinthians 3:6). We are ministers of a new covenant, servants of God based on new terms of relationship. The old covenant, with laws that humans were unable to keep, brought condemnation and death. But the glorious new covenant brings life and righteousness (3:7-9). The law brings condemnation; the ministry of the Spirit brings justification and righteousness (3:8-9). In this passage, Paul is emphasizing the differences between the old covenant and the new.

“Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (3:17). We are forgiven and freed from old covenant regulations, and we now serve Christ by living according to the new covenant. That is the ministry Paul was committed to — preaching the gospel of the glory of Christ (4:1-5). With assurance of salvation, Paul was zealous to preach the gospel (4:13-18).

In Galatians 4:21-25, Paul drew an allegory based on Abraham's two sons. Hagar, the slave woman, represented the covenant made at Sinai, with its physical center in Jerusalem. Children of this covenant are slaves, under the law. In contrast, Sarah represents the new covenant, from above, because her child was the product of promise.

We are children of promise (4:28), and we are free (4:26, 31). Christ has set us free, and we are not to be enslaved by the yoke of the old covenant (5:1), not even by the circumcision that came before that covenant (5:2).⁶ But our freedom is not permission to sin — it is for service (5:13). We become slaves of righteousness, exhorted to be transformed in our innermost being, encouraged to conform to the pattern of Jesus Christ, exhorted to abide by New Testament commands.

Paul makes a contrast between freedom in Christ and “the whole law” (5:1-3). The whole Mosaic law, as a package regulating a people's relationship with God, is obsolete. “The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love” (5:6). We are declared righteous by faith apart from the works of the law. Although faith is accompanied by works (Romans 1:5; 6:17; 12:6-21; James 2:14-17), it is faith and not works that is the basis of our justification and the basis of our relationship with God — the basis of the new covenant in Jesus Christ.

Old and new in Hebrews

The book of Hebrews explains more about the old covenant and the new. Jesus is our eternal High Priest, but he is not a priest according to the old covenant, since he is not a Levite. But the priesthood of physical rites had been given to Levi as an everlasting covenant. Therefore, the change in priesthood implies the end of the old covenant and a change in the nature of sacrifices (Hebrews 7:12-14). The old no longer applies; the Israelites had been so consistently disobedient, even to point of crucifying the Son of God,

that the agreement was terminated, replaced with a new covenant.

The former regulation, the old covenant with its Levitical assignments, was “set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God” (7:18-19). The new covenant has better promises, and by it we are reconciled to God by the death of his Son. We have guaranteed access to God through our High Priest. Because Jesus lives forever, he is able to save us all (7:24-25).

We needed grace and salvation, and Jesus Christ meets that need (7:26). The book of Hebrews emphasizes that we have a new High Priest (8:1), and that implies a new covenant. Just as the Levites administered the old covenant, the terms of the old relationship between God and Israel, so also the ascended Jesus administers the terms of the new relationship for all who come to God through him (8:6).

The new covenant’s better promises include forgiveness, a cleansing of the conscience, which the old covenant could not do, and an internalization of the relationship between us and God. Each person will know God (8:6-12). There is therefore no longer any need for the old covenant (8:13). Why should we choose slavery when freedom is available?

The new covenant is not like the old covenant (8:5); the people are able to meet the conditions of the new covenant. That doesn’t mean that they will miraculously become able to obey all the old laws perfectly — rather, it means new terms of relationship. The external regulations applied only “until the time of the new order” (9:10). The worship rules were temporary. The animal sacrifices and regulations about ceremonial cleanness have been replaced by real forgiveness and cleansed consciences (9:13-14).

Christ set aside the first covenant when he established the second (10:9); the old is obsolete (8:13). There is continuity in that God requires faith and

allegiance, but there is discontinuity in regulations, mediation, and spiritual status. Grace is made much more evident.

The blood of Christ, the blood of the new covenant, is able to cleanse our consciences, so that we may serve God (9:14). We have direct access, and we receive a better inheritance — eternal life — which we already possess as a down payment guaranteeing our future. Christ was sacrificed once, bearing our sins. When he returns, he will bring salvation (9:28). He has made us perfect (10:14). He has declared us righteous.

Can we believe these promises of God? If we do, we have the faith of Abraham.

So what does the writer of Hebrews conclude: “Since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus...since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith” (10:19-22).

Our faith-based relationship with God also has practical consequences in our relationships with other people: “Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another — and all the more as you see the Day approaching” (10:24-25).

Forgiveness has ethical consequences. Because of who Jesus is and what he has done for us, we ought to do something in response. “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God — this is your spiritual act of worship” (Romans 12:1).

“You were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body” (1 Corinthians 6:20). “Thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know

that your labor in the Lord is not in vain” (1 Corinthians 15:57-58).

“It is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come. Therefore we are always confident.... So we make it our goal to please him” (2 Corinthians 5:5-9). “Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again” (5:14-15).

Numerous verses could be added, but 2 Corinthians 5:15 summarizes it nicely. We are to live for Jesus Christ, to his honor and glory. All our lives ought to be dedicated to his service, because his life was given to serve us. If we have faith, we will obey, and the righteousness of Christ will be attributed to us. That’s the new covenant, the terms of the new relationship God has with humans through his Son who died for us.

Endnotes

¹ As shown in Appendix 1, any agreement could be called a *berith* in Hebrew. Psalm 105:9-10 and 1 Chronicles 16:15-17 use *berith* as synonymous with *word* and *oath* and *decree*.

² The book of the covenant that Moses read apparently contained everything that the Lord had said (Exodus 24:4). This would mean everything the Lord told Moses while he was on the mountain; it may also include the Ten Commandments. The “book of the covenant” found in Josiah’s day (2 Chronicles 34:30; 2 Kings 23:2) was apparently something else (perhaps the book of Deuteronomy), since it had instructions for Passover (2 Kings 23:21), and Exodus 20-24 does not.

³ Taken literally, this is false, since their immediate fathers *were* the ones with whom God had made a covenant at Horeb. It may be a Hebrew figure of speech, giving emphasis to the second phrase: God made the covenant at

Sinai “not *only* with our fathers, but with all of us” (Today’s English Version). Or the “fathers” may mean the patriarchs, indicating that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob did not have this covenant with God.

⁴ This could be either the covenant made at Sinai or in Moab, since they both occurred as part of the Exodus from Egypt. Although differing in some details, the two covenants were essentially the same, requiring allegiance to the Lord.

⁵ Christ came to fulfill the law, and he said that none of it would disappear until all is fulfilled (Matthew 5:17-19). Commandments like circumcision and sacrificial rituals have not disappeared. Nevertheless, they have been set aside and are not required today. These laws are instructive, even though they are no longer in force. The application has been changed. Matthew 5:17-19 does not tell us which laws have been changed and which have not.

⁶ Circumcision is permissible as a voluntary practice, but it does not improve anyone’s standing before God. It should not be done as a commitment to old covenant laws, which was the issue in Acts 15 and Galatians 5:2-3.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

[back to table of contents](#)

Appendix 1: Human covenants

Jacob and Laban made a covenant with each other, spelling out the terms of their relationship (Genesis 31:44). David and Jonathan made a covenant of friendship (1 Samuel 18:3; 20:8, 16; 22:8; 23:18). Abner made a covenant with David, pledging allegiance to King David (2 Samuel 3:12-13). Psalm 55:20 refers to a covenant between friends; Proverbs 2:17 and Malachi 2:14 refer to marriage covenants.

Business agreements seem to be the intent of Isaiah 33:8, Hosea 10:4 and Galatians 3:15. Hebrews 9:16-17 refers to what we call a will, which goes into effect only after a person dies.

Job uses the term figuratively, as an agreement with leviathan, or an agreement with nature, or a covenant with one's own eyes not to look lustfully at a girl (Job 5:23; 31:1; 41:4). Isaiah talks about a covenant with death (Isaiah 28:15, 18), and the heading of Psalms 60 and 80 refers to a song called "The Lily of the Covenant."

The word *berith* is often used for an agreement between one king and another. Eshcol and Aner were allied with or in covenant with Abraham (Genesis 14:13). Abraham made a treaty (*berith*) with Abimelech (21:27, 32). Abimelech proposed a treaty with Isaac, and they swore an oath to each other (26:26-31). Solomon and Hiram had a treaty (1 Kings 5:12). Asa made a treaty with Ben-Hadad, referring to a treaty their fathers had (15:19; 2 Chronicles 16:3). Ben-Hadad later made a treaty with Ahab, making concessions and agreements (1 Kings 20:34). Later, the king of Babylon made a *berith* with a ruler of Jerusalem, putting him under oath (Ezekiel 17:12-14). But the Jewish ruler broke the treaty, and Ezekiel predicted his punishment (17:15-18).

Covenants can also be made between one nation and another. God warned

the Israelites not to make treaties with the Canaanites (Exodus 23:32; 34:12, 15; Deuteronomy 7:2) — but the Gibeonites tricked them into doing it (Joshua 9:6-16), and God criticized them for it (Judges 2:2). The *berith* included mutual obligations: The Gibeonites became servants of Israel, and Israel had to protect them from their enemies (Joshua 9:19-10:7).

Israel made treaties with other nations (Hosea 12:1). Other nations conspired together or made covenant together against the Israelites, which the psalmist counted as being an alliance against God (Psalm 83:4-5). The prophets criticized Tyre for disregarding a treaty of brotherhood (Amos 1:9) and predicted that Edom's covenant partners would turn against them (Obadiah 7). Daniel predicted that a future ruler would confirm a covenant with many (Daniel 9:27).

Covenants can also be made between a ruler and his people. In one *berith*, Joshua made laws and decrees for his people (Joshua 24:25). The people of Jabesh Gilead made a covenant with the leader of the Ammonites, promising to obey him (1 Samuel 11:1). The Israelites made a covenant with David, accepting him as their king (2 Samuel 3:21; 5:3; 1 Chronicles 11:3).

Jehoiada made a covenant with army officers to protect King Joash (2 Kings 11:4), gave Joash a copy of the covenant (11:12) and make a covenant between all the people and the new king (11:17; also in 2 Chronicles 23:1-3, 11). Zedekiah made a covenant with the people of Jerusalem (Jeremiah 34:8-10).

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

[back to table of contents](#)

Appendix 2: Various Divine Covenants

Just as human kings made agreements with other kings or with their nations, God also has made agreements with individuals and with nations.

Hosea 6:7 may indicate that God had a covenant with Adam; the translation is not certain.

Genesis 6:18 and 9:9-17 tells us about God's covenant with Noah and all living creatures. It was a unilateral covenant, for God promised to do his part without any requirement that Noah do his. God established the rainbow as the sign of his covenant, a reminder of his promise not to destroy all life with a flood.

God made a covenant with the Levites that they would receive meat from sacrifices (Numbers 18:19). He made a covenant with Phineas, guaranteeing the priesthood for his family (25:12-13). The prophets referred to God's covenant with the priests and Levites (Nehemiah 13:29; Jeremiah 33:21; Malachi 2:4-5, 8).

God made a covenant with David, guaranteeing the kingship for his family (2 Samuel 23:5; 2 Chronicles 13:5; 21:7; Psalm 89:3, 28, 34). The covenant could be renewed with each descendant who ruled faithfully under God (Psalm 132:12). Jeremiah affirmed the permanence of the Davidic covenant (Jeremiah 33:20-25), but it was temporarily suspended during the captivity, and a psalmist wondered if the covenant had been renounced (Psalm 89:39, 49), but he concluded with a statement of faith in God (89:52). The promise is now fulfilled permanently in Jesus Christ, the Son of David who reigns forever.

Zechariah 11:10 refers to a "covenant I had with all nations."

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

[back to table of contents](#)

Appendix 3: The Need to Be Faithful

Agreements should be kept. God promised to keep his part of the covenant (Leviticus 26:9); he remembers it (26:45; 1 Chronicles 16:15-17; Psalms 105:8; 106:45; 111:5). He will not break the covenant (Leviticus 26:44; Judges 2:1) or forget it (Deuteronomy 4:31); he promised to keep his “covenant of love” (Deuteronomy 7:9, 12; 1 Kings 8:23; 2 Chronicles 6:14; Nehemiah 1:5; 9:32; Daniel 9:4). His covenant people are special to him (Psalm 50:5). His covenant will endure forever (111:9); he swears it with an oath (105:9-10; Ezekiel 16:8).

He confirms his covenant by giving blessings (Deuteronomy 8:18). He blesses those who obey (Psalm 25:10, 14). A psalmist, asking for intervention, asked God to have regard for the covenant (Psalm 74:20). Jeremiah asked him to remember the covenant (Jeremiah 14:21). And he intervened because of the covenant (Zechariah 9:11), and in the greatest remembrance, sent redemption through Jesus — a horn of salvation in the family of David (Luke 1:68-75).

The Israelites were exhorted, “Be careful not to forget the covenant” (Deuteronomy 4:23; 2 Kings 17:38). They were told to be monotheistic (2 Kings 17:35). And some Israelites did keep the covenant (Psalm 103:18). Levi was commended for guarding the covenant (Deuteronomy 33:9); a psalmist claimed to be true to the covenant (Psalm 44:17). God commended the eunuchs and the foreigners who held fast to the covenant (Isaiah 56:4, 6).

But Israel was for the most part unfaithful, just as God told Moses they would be (Deuteronomy 31:16, 20, 27). He pronounced curses on those who would violate the covenant (Leviticus 26:15, 25; Deuteronomy 17:2; 29:21), and the resulting national disasters would be a witness that the people had abandoned the covenant (29:25).

They violated the covenant soon after entering the promised land (Joshua 7:11, 15) and were again warned of the curses of rebellion (23:16). But they violated the covenant (Judges 2:20). Apostasy reigned throughout the period of the judges and again in the reign of Saul. David was faithful, and Solomon began that way, but he eventually stopped keeping the covenant (1 Kings 11:11).

The nation became so corrupt that Elijah thought he was the only faithful one left (1 Kings 19:10, 14). The history of the northern kingdom is summarized: “They rejected his decrees and the covenant” (2 Kings 17:15; 18:12; Hosea 6:7; 8:1). So they were sent into captivity; God was faithful to his promised curses.

The Jews were also criticized for unfaithfulness (Psalms 50:16; 78:10, 37; Isaiah 24:5; Jeremiah 11:3, 8, 10). They forsook the covenant, violated it, did not fulfill its terms, broke it, despised it (Jeremiah 22:9; 34:18; Ezekiel 16:59; 44:7). So God promised to punish the nation (20:37-38), fulfilling the covenantal curses. But the violations will continue even to the end (Daniel 11:30, 32).

God considers the breaking of human agreements as a breaking of his covenant, too (Ezekiel 17:18-19; Malachi 2:10). He requires his people to be faithful to the agreements they make with one another.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

[back to table of contents](#)

The Old Covenant and the Law of Moses

By Joseph Tkach

There are three major foundations for understanding the covenants and the Old Testament law. All three give the same conclusion. They are

- The old covenant is obsolete, and the new covenant has been established.
- Christians are not obligated to keep “the law of Moses.”
- When Paul discussed “the law,” he was often concerned with the entire law of Moses, and he wrote that Christians were not under the authority of that law. Our obligation to obey God is defined by a different law, a spiritual law, which in some cases overlaps Old Testament laws but in other cases supersedes them.

Let’s examine each of these points and show that they all support the same conclusion. The New Testament is consistent. First, the matter of covenants. They are discussed in detail in the book of Hebrews, especially chapter 8. There, the High Priesthood of Jesus Christ is contrasted with the Levitical high priesthood. The ministry Jesus received is far superior to the Levitical ministry, and his covenant is far superior to the old covenant (verse 6).

But there was a problem with the first covenant — the people were not faithful and were not able to obey (verses 7-9). God therefore promised a new covenant, and “by calling this covenant ‘new,’ he has made the first one obsolete” (verse 13). The old covenant is obsolete — ended. The agreement and its terms of relationship no longer have authority.

The writer of Hebrews says that the old covenant “will soon disappear,” and indeed most of its operations ceased in A.D. 70 when Roman armies destroyed the Temple. Even though elements of the old covenant system

continue to be observed in Judaism, the New Testament declares that the old covenant itself is obsolete.

Now, we must ask, just what was the old covenant? What laws are we talking about here? First, the *core* of the old covenant is the Ten Commandments (Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 4:13). As part of the old covenant, the people at Mt. Sinai also agreed to obey all the laws in Exodus 20, 21, 22 and 23. These additional laws became part of the covenant God made with Israel, and the covenant was then ratified with blood (Exodus 24:6-8).

This is the covenant that has been declared obsolete. It has no legal authority. Further, we cannot *assume* that any part of the contract is valid when the entire contract has been declared obsolete. We cannot *assume* that any particular group of laws must remain together.

The old covenant included much more than Exodus 20-23. Hebrews 9:1 tells us that it also included directions for the tabernacle. Instructions for the altar, Levitical priests and animal sacrifices were given in Exodus 25-31. These were part of God's original plan for Israel. He knew very well that the people would sin and would need a tabernacle and regular burnt offerings. It was all part of the plan, part of his relationship with his people, part of his covenant.

Added because of transgressions?

Some have said that the sacrificial laws were added "because of transgressions," as if sacrifices were not part of the original law. But this is not true. Moses told Pharaoh that the Israelites wanted to leave Egypt so they could offer sacrifices and burnt offerings in the wilderness (Exodus 10:25). Before the Israelites left Egypt, they sacrificed Passover lambs. Even within the old covenant, altars and burnt offerings were commanded (Exodus 20:24) — all this before the covenant was ratified and before it had a chance to be

transgressed.

When Galatians 3:19 says that the law was added because of transgressions, it is talking about the entire law — everything that was added 430 years after Abraham (verse 17). This law had a mediator (verse 19) — this law was the covenant. The entire covenant was added, becoming part of God’s relationship with his people, because of transgressions. The law is made for lawbreakers (1 Timothy 1:9). God gave rules for civil and religious behavior because the people, even before they got to Sinai, were disobedient — just as God knew that they would be. Sacrifices were not an afterthought — they were part of the original covenant.

The idea that sacrifices were not a part of the law as first given at Sinai was based on a misunderstanding of Jeremiah 7:22, which says that God did not at first speak to the Israelites about burnt offerings and sacrifices. If read literally, this flatly contradicts Exodus 10:25 and Exodus 20:24. But the phrase should not be read so literally. Jeremiah 7:22 is a Hebrew figure of speech indicating relative emphasis. When God brought the people out of Egypt, it was not because he wanted sacrifices and offerings. Rather, he wanted obedience, and the sacrifices were only a tool to help the people remember that they ought to obey. Obedience was the primary concern, even though the covenant also prescribed sacrifices for the inevitable transgressions.

(A similar figure of speech can be seen in John 12:47, where Jesus says he did not come to judge the world, but to save it. John 9:39, however, says that Jesus *did* come to judge the world. The “contradiction” is explained by understanding that John 12:47 gives a contrast in emphasis, not in fact. Although Jesus came to judge, his primary purpose was to save.)

The point of this digression is that the old covenant included not only Exodus 20-23, but other laws as well. When the Sinaitic covenant was

renewed with the next generation of Israelites, all the laws of Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers were included as part of the covenant. But these laws were still considered the same covenant (Deuteronomy 1:1-5; 5:2-3). The book of Deuteronomy contains many additional laws, all considered part of the same covenant, the same basic agreement or relationship between Israel and God.

The old is obsolete

When the book of Hebrews says that the old covenant is obsolete, it is referring to the whole package of Old Testament law. Some individual laws, of course, are still valid, but the package as a whole is not an authoritative package.

We see this again in 2 Corinthians 3. In verse 3, Paul makes a contrast between the “tablets of stone” — a clear reference to the Ten Commandments — and the writing of God’s Spirit on the hearts of Christians. In verse 6, he contrasts the new covenant with “the letter,” which in context means the letter of the old covenant. Verse 7 talks about the law engraved on stones and the shining of Moses’ face. It is clear that Paul is talking about the Ten Commandments, for those are the engraved stones Moses had when his face shone in glory and he had to put a veil over his face.

The old covenant was glorious, but it was “fading away,” replaced by a covenant much more glorious. Paul was already administering the new covenant. The old was obsolete, and was fading away. Although sacrifices continued to be administered in Jerusalem, they would cease soon after Paul wrote. The old covenant has ended, and we should live by the terms of the new covenant.

Some people object, saying that God’s covenants are compared to marriage agreements, and we are only betrothed to Christ and the marriage has not yet taken place. Some have reasoned from this analogy that the new

covenant has not yet been made. However, marriage is only an analogy, and we must not take it so far that it leads us astray from the facts!

Do we have an agreement with God? Has he promised to give us certain things through his Son? Yes, he has. We have an agreement, and an agreement with God is a covenant. We have a covenant with God, and it is the new covenant. Hebrews 8:6 tells us that Christ's covenant "is founded on better promises." It "was established," says the King James Version; the New American Standard says it "has been enacted." The verb is in the past tense, indicating that the new covenant *has been made*. An analogy cannot contradict the clear meaning of this verse. Blood has been shed, ratifying the new covenant (Luke 22:20; Hebrews 10:29).

We have not received all the promised blessings of the new covenant, of course, just as the Israelites didn't receive their physical promises until many years after their covenant had been made. The fact that the promises are still future does not mean that the covenant hasn't been made. In fact, the very existence of the promises shows that the agreement has been made. We do have a relationship with God. Paul was a minister of the Spirit, not of the letter. He was a minister of the new covenant, not of the old. One aspect of the new covenant is that we are forgiven (Hebrews 10:17-18).

To summarize this section:

- The old covenant was built around the core of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 34:28).
- The old covenant is obsolete (Hebrews 8:13).
- The new covenant has been established (Hebrews 8:6).

The law of Moses

Next, let's examine the way the New Testament uses the phrase "law of Moses." This term will also help us understand the difference between the Old Testament era and the New. The Jerusalem council (Acts 15) met to

discuss this very question. “Some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, ‘The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to obey the law of Moses’” (verse 5).

The council concluded that Gentiles did *not* have to obey the law of Moses. The New American Bible, for example, says this: “The Jerusalem ‘Council’ marks the official rejection of the rigid view that Gentile converts were obligated to observe the Mosaic law.... Paul’s refusal to impose the Mosaic law on the Gentile Christians is supported by Peter on the ground that within his own experience God bestowed the Holy Spirit upon Cornelius and his household without preconditions concerning the adoption of the Mosaic law.”

In verse 28, the apostles told the Gentiles that they did not require anything beyond four particular restrictions. This did not mean that they were free to murder and blaspheme. They were to avoid murder and blasphemy because of Christ, not because of the law of Moses.

Just what is the “law of Moses”? What is being discussed? The New Testament tells us what the law of Moses includes. This phrase is used six other times in the New Testament.

Luke 2:22: “When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took [Jesus] to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord.” So the law of Moses includes rituals regarding uncleanness after childbirth. It should be obvious already that it doesn’t make sense to claim that Christians ought to observe the law of Moses. Neither Jewish nor Gentile Christians have to observe these purification rituals today.

Luke 24:44: Jesus, after his resurrection, said to his disciples: “This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.” In this verse, the law of Moses includes prophecies about the Messiah. It’s not just

ritualistic laws — it's the five books of Moses, the Torah, the Pentateuch.

John 7:22-23: Jesus was talking to the Pharisees: “Yet, because Moses gave you circumcision (though actually it did not come from Moses, but from the patriarchs), you circumcise a child on the Sabbath. Now if a child can be circumcised on the Sabbath so that the law of Moses may not be broken, why are you angry with me for healing the whole man on the Sabbath?” Here, the law of Moses includes the law of circumcision. Moses didn't originate the practice, but he wrote about it. It is in his law.

Acts 28:23, where Paul is in Rome: “They arranged to meet Paul on a certain day, and came in even larger numbers to the place where he was staying. From morning till evening he explained and declared to them the kingdom of God and tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets.” Here again, the law of Moses includes prophecies about Jesus Christ. It is one section of the Old Testament.

1 Corinthians 9:9 — “It is written in the Law of Moses: ‘Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain.’” Here, the law of Moses includes civil laws. Paul could adapt the principle for the new covenant, but in the law of Moses it was a civil law.

Hebrews 10:28: “Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses.” This is also talking about a civil law, the administration of the death penalty in ancient Israel.

The law of Moses included civil laws, religious ceremonies and prophecies. It referred to everything that Moses wrote, the books of Moses, the Torah or the Law. The law of Moses includes everything in those books, and that's what the Jerusalem council was about. Some people claimed that the Gentile Christians had to be circumcised *and* to keep all the laws found in the five books of Moses. The council concluded that they did *not* have to keep all those laws. Instead, they gave only four prohibitions.

This is brought out again in chapter 21. Paul had returned to Jerusalem, and rumors swirled that he had been teaching Jews to abandon the law of Moses (verse 21). The rumors were false. Paul had not been teaching any such thing. Although the rituals were not required for Christians, neither were they forbidden. Jewish Christians were free to participate in their traditional customs. To make this point clear, the Jerusalem elders suggested that Paul participate in such a ritual himself (verses 23-24).

In chapter 21, the controversy centered on whether Paul taught Jews to abandon the law. There was no question about the Gentiles, since they had already been given the four prohibitions (verse 25). Everyone accepted the fact that they did not have to keep the law of Moses. This is made even more clear in the Greek text used by the King James translators. The elders wanted Paul to demonstrate “that you yourself also walk orderly and keep the law. But concerning the Gentiles who believe, we have written and decided that *they should observe no such thing,*” except for the four prohibitions they had already been given (verse 25, NKJ). Gentiles do not have to abide by the customs of Moses. They do not need to live like Jews in order to be Christians.

So, to summarize this section, we see that

- The law of Moses contains all the laws that Moses wrote.
- Some Pharisees thought that Gentile Christians ought to keep the law of Moses.
- The Jerusalem Council declared that they did not have to. The writings of Moses do not have legal authority over Christians. They are instructive, but obsolete in their legal authority.

Not under the law

Next, let us examine some of Paul’s statements about the law. Portions of his epistles are difficult to understand. One reason is that he uses the word

law with different meanings. That should caution us, but it should not prevent us from trying to see what he meant. We do not want to distort his writings to our own destruction by assigning meanings to his words that he didn't intend. We have to study the epistles to see what he meant.

Consider the phrase "under the law," for example. Does it mean under the penalty of the law, or does it mean under the authority of the law? Let's see how it is used:

Romans 2:12: "All who sin apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who sin *under the law* will be judged by the law." The contrast here is between Jew and Gentile. Jews are under the authority of the law, and Gentiles are not.

Romans 3:19: "Whatever the law says, it says to those who are *under the law*, so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God." The law speaks to those who are under its authority.

1 Corinthians 9:20-21: "To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those *under the law* I became like one under the law (though *I myself am not under the law*), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law), so as to win those not having the law."

Jews were under the law, so Paul, in an effort to win them, acted in accordance with the law, as we see in Acts 21. However, Paul did not consider *himself* under the law that Jews were under. He is talking about behavior, not his salvation status. He was free to act like a Gentile if he wanted to, and that's what he did when trying to win Gentiles to the faith. He acted like a person who did not have the law of Moses. However, he makes it clear that he was under the law of Christ, God's real law, the spiritual and eternal law. But Paul was not under the authority of the law that separated Jews from Gentiles.

Galatians 4:4-5: “When the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born *under law*, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.” Jesus Christ was born under the law — under its authority. He never broke the law, and did not deserve its penalty. By being born under the Jewish law, he was able to redeem Jews as well as those who do not have the law.

Galatians 4:21: “Tell me, you who want to be *under the law*, are you not aware of what the law says?” Paul is writing to Christians who were tempted to accept old covenant laws as requirements. They wanted to be under the authority of the old covenant – not its penalty. Which law is Paul talking about? The same “law” that says that Abraham had two sons (verse 22). It is the law that contains Genesis — the law of Moses, the books of Moses. Some of the Galatians wanted to be under that law, and Paul was arguing against it.

In the above passages, “under the law” means under the authority of the old covenant law. That is also its meaning in the only other occurrence in the New Testament: “Sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace. What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means!” (Romans 6:14-15). We are not under the authority of the law, but under the authority of grace — but grace does not mean that we are free to do our own thing. Rather, grace comes with obligation — we are under the law of Christ. We are to obey him.

Dead to the law

We see another revealing discussion of law in Romans 7:1-4. Paul speaks to the Jews:

Do you not know, brothers — for I am speaking to men who know the law — that the law has authority over a man only as long as he lives? For example, by law a married woman is bound to her husband as long as he is alive, but if her husband dies, she is released from the law of marriage.... So, my brothers, you also died

to the law through the body of Christ, that you might belong to another, to him who was raised from the dead, in order that we might bear fruit to God.

Paul says that we have died to the law — even the Jews have died to the law through identification with Jesus Christ. Therefore, the law no longer has authority over us, since we belong to Christ, not to the law. Christ is the one we obey, so that we can bear spiritual fruit. The law is contrasted with Christ, and it is the old covenant law that Paul is talking about — the Torah, the Law portion of the Scriptures. We can be under the law, or under Christ. Being under both is not an option.

Galatians 3 is also clear about the law. Verses 2 and 5 contrast faith with law. Paul is not talking about the eternal, spiritual law in this passage, nor is he talking about the sacrificial laws, which could not be kept in Galatia. He is talking about the Torah, “the Book of the Law” (verse 10). It is the law added 430 years after Abraham (verse 17), which includes all of Exodus and Leviticus.

Abraham’s covenant was based on faith (verses 6-7), and we are heirs of his promise (verse 29). The law was added to that covenant because of the transgressions of the Israelites (verse 19), but the law cannot alter the Abrahamic promises that we inherit. Rather, the law — the books of Moses — was a temporary measure until Christ, the Seed, came (verse 19). “Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law” (verse 25).

Here we see the same conclusion. The Scriptures are consistent. Christians are not required to obey the laws of Moses. They were glorious for a time, but their purpose has been superseded by Jesus Christ.

Paul was not against all law. He talks often of the obligations that Christians have. Even in the book of Galatians, he concludes with

exhortations about sins to avoid and righteousness to seek. These things are challenging — humanly impossible, in fact. We need to be led by God’s Spirit and transformed in inner character into the pattern of Jesus Christ. He is the standard; the old covenant law is not.

We see more in the next chapter, with Paul’s allegory of the covenants, Abraham, Hagar and Sarah. Hagar stands for the old covenant (verse 24), and Paul tells us to get rid of her (verse 30). Those who are under her covenant are slaves, whereas those under the authority of the new covenant have the full rights of children (verse 4).

In Galatians 5, Paul makes it clear again. Although the old covenant law enslaves those who are under it, we have been set free from that law (verse 1). But if we submit to the old covenant law of circumcision, then Christ is of no value to us (verse 2). We are either under the new covenant or the old; we cannot be under both. The basis of our relationship with God should be faith in Christ, not the law of Moses. But if we want to be under the old covenant, then we are “obligated to obey the whole law” (verse 3). Christians, however, are *not* obligated to obey the whole law. Paul is not talking about just sacrificial or ceremonial laws — he is talking about the entire law. The entire law of Moses is obsolete, and Christians are not under its authority.

Christians obey some of the laws of Moses, of course. We should not covet or lie to one another. But we obey these laws not because Moses wrote about them, *but because they are part of the Christ-like life*. We are under Christ, not Moses. Christ tells us to love our neighbors, and the New Testament explains that this means we do not lie or covet.

Live like a Gentile

As one more illustration of Paul’s use of the word *law*, let’s look at Ephesians 2:11-19. Paul is saying that Gentiles were once separated from the covenants, separated from Christ. But in Christ they have now been brought

near. How is this possible? Because Christ has destroyed the barrier that kept the Gentiles away. He has abolished the law. Which law? The law that had commandments and regulations separating Jews from Gentiles.

Because Jesus has destroyed the legal basis for discriminating against Gentiles, Gentiles have become part of God's people. Does this mean that Gentiles have to become like Jews, and obey laws pertaining to Jews? Certainly not. That was the conclusion of the Jerusalem council, and it is the conclusion of Paul, too, since he says that even Jews have died to the old covenant law and are not bound by it. Paul had the freedom to live like a Jew, or the freedom to live like someone who lived uprightly though that person did not have the Jewish law.

Peter also understood that he was permitted to live like a Gentile (Galatians 2:14). Which laws would a righteous Gentile be expected to keep? Which laws of Moses separated "living like a Gentile" from "living like a Jew"? Apparently rabbis did not require righteous Gentiles to be circumcised, to observe Jewish dietary restrictions or to observe the Sabbath. Those three laws, from both Jewish and Gentile perspectives, distinguished Jews from Gentiles. James Dunn writes this:

In the phrase...works of the law...Paul has in mind particularly circumcision, food laws and sabbath, as the characteristic marks of the faithful Jew, so recognized and affirmed by both Jew and Gentile.... Just these observances were widely regarded as characteristically and distinctively Jewish. Writers like Petronius, Plutarch, Tacitus and Juvenal took it for granted that, in particular, circumcision, abstention from pork, and the sabbath, were observances which marked out the practitioners as Jews, or as people who were very attracted to Jewish ways.... They were the peculiar rites which marked out the Jews as that peculiar people. (*Jesus, Paul and the Law*, pages 4, 191-192)

To summarize this section:

- To be under the law is to be under its authority.
- Christians are not under the law.
- We are not obligated to keep the Torah. Rather, we may live like righteous Gentiles who do not have the law of Moses.

A New Testament authority is needed before any old practices are imposed or required. That's because the law of Moses, the old covenant, the Torah, is obsolete. We are not under that law; we are not obligated to keep laws that were given to the Israelites only.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

[back to table of contents](#)

The Role of the Decalogue in Christian Ethics

How are Christians to evaluate the laws of the Torah? How are we to use these writings, some of which the New Testament calls “obsolete” — and yet *all* Scripture is “useful for...training in righteousness”? (New Revised Standard used throughout this chapter).¹ Some Christians tend to emphasize the obsolescence of the OT; others stress continuity between the old covenant and the new, including continuity between the Ten Commandments and Christian behavioral expectations.² Some Christians take the permanence of the Decalogue so seriously that they keep the Sabbath on the seventh day of each week, as it commands.

The Sabbath, a worship regulation that includes ethical instructions, is a useful test case to help us clarify a Christian approach to the Decalogue, and thus to other Old Testament laws.³ Before we comment on the role of the Decalogue in Christian ethics, we must take the Sabbath command into consideration. An interpretive method that leads to an incorrect answer on the Sabbath question is thereby shown to be invalid, and such a method should not be used. Nevertheless, invalid arguments are common, and they create potential hazards for Christians who are unaware of the problems.

Prooftexts of continuity

Many Christians teach that the Decalogue was spoken by God himself, written in stone, the major expression of the moral law, based on the unchanging character of God and therefore permanent.⁴ Many teach that Christians should keep the Ten Commandments — yet often the same teachers say that the Sabbath command is changed or obsolete. But it makes no sense to say that we have an unchanging moral law that has a change in it. There is little to be gained by claiming to uphold Ten when only Nine are meant.

Continuity of the Decalogue may be stressed in two basic ways: 1) a proof⁵ approach that may be used in popular presentations, and 2) a more sophisticated approach that views the old and new covenants as two aspects of God's covenant of grace. The question of the Decalogue becomes intertwined with the larger question of covenantal continuity.

The proof approach may use these points: God himself spoke the Decalogue (Exodus 20:1-22). He wrote the words himself (Exodus 34:1), and commanded that they be stored in the ark in the holiest place (Deuteronomy 10:2). Jeremiah describes the new covenant not as a new law, but as the same law written in the heart (Jeremiah 31:33). Jesus said he did not come to abolish the law of God (Matthew 5:17), and all of it would remain as long as heaven and earth remain (v. 18). Jesus advocated righteousness (v. 20), quoted commandments as authoritative (Matthew 19:18-19), and obeyed Old Testament laws (Hebrews 4:15). Paul said the law was holy and good, and he quoted commandments as authoritative (Romans 7:12; 13:9). Old Testament scripture is God-breathed and a good source of Christian teaching (2 Timothy 3:16). James quoted commandments as authoritative for Christians (James 2:11), and Revelation tells us that the saints are commandment-keepers (Revelation 14:12).

Some draw this conclusion: "Our attitude must be that all Old Testament laws are presently our obligation unless further revelation from the Lawgiver shows that some change has been made."⁶ However, everyone agrees that *some Old Testament* laws are obsolete. Therefore, we cannot conclude that Jesus meant the continuing validity of all Old Testament laws, nor did Paul mean that *all Old Testament* laws are normative ethical standards. Since exceptions exist, even the most conservative person must ask *which* laws are normative today — and the verses of continuity do not answer the question. Since exceptions exist, all verses of continuity need careful qualification,

which is not easily done with a proof-text approach.

The proof-texts of continuity may be countered with another series of texts: Jesus argued that Old Testament ethical requirements were not strict enough (Matthew 5:21-32); the most important ethical principles are not even laws in the traditional sense (Matthew 23:23). Christians are not under the law that Moses brought (Acts 15; Galatians 3). The old covenant is obsolete, faded, and set aside (2 Corinthians 3:11; Hebrews 8:13). Old Testament laws are not the best laws, and some are no longer normative. They can be inspired and educational without being requirements today (Colossians 2:11; Hebrews 10:1). We cannot assume that every God-given law reflects God's character equally, or that every law is as eternal as he is. Some are concessive (an allowance for the people's hardness of heart) and temporary.

Because exceptions exist, we cannot make blanket statements about "the law" as if they applied to all Old Testament laws. We cannot assume that every law is still normative, nor that every law is obsolete. And since ethical, civil, and ceremonial laws are mixed together in the Torah, we cannot judge a verse by its neighbors. For example, we cannot assume that Leviticus 19:19 is normative even if we believe that all the other verses in the chapter are normative and based on God's holiness (v. 2). Each law must be judged on its own merits – by standards given in the New Testament.

Even in the Decalogue, we cannot *assume* that all the verses are equally permanent. Questions about the Sabbath in particular force us to examine this assumption. Further doubt may arise when we note that the Decalogue is equated with the old covenant (Exodus 34:28; Deuteronomy 4:13), a covenant that the New Testament calls temporary and obsolete. It is not just the sacrificial laws that are obsolete — the stone tablets themselves (a clear reference to the Decalogue) are contrasted with a covenant that is permanent (2 Corinthians 3:7-11). This suggests the possibility that at least *part* of the

Decalogue may have changed.

Covenant theology

A more thorough case for continuity is developed in covenant theology.⁷ O. Palmer Robertson argues that “the cumulative evidence of the Scriptures points definitely toward the unified character of the biblical covenants.”⁸ He notes that Scripture describes several covenants, but that each covenant builds on the previous ones rather than replacing the previous relationship. “The Abrahamic covenant continued to function actively after the institution of the Mosaic covenant.... The Davidic covenant in its turn did not annul or interrupt the Mosaic covenant.... The covenants of Abraham, Moses, and David actually are successive stages of a single covenant.”⁹ Robertson uses Jeremiah 31:31-34 to conclude that in the new covenant, “the substance of the law will be the same” as in the Sinaitic covenant.¹⁰

William J. Dumbrell also argues for continuity in his analysis of Jeremiah 31. He asks, “What is the place of ‘law’ in the New Covenant framework?” He answers by saying that v. 33 refers to the Sinai law — “specifically, one presumes, to the decalogue by which the Sinai covenant was primarily expressed.... God is returning to the original intent of the Sinai covenant.”¹¹ Thomas McComiskey notes that Jeremiah “spoke not of a change in the nature of *torah*, but of its localization. The covenant context of the passage would certainly lead Jeremiah’s hearers to think in terms of the Mosaic legislation.”¹²

Covenant theologians stress continuity between the covenants, and, as part of this continuity, they stress the validity of the Decalogue. Willem VanGemeren says, “The Ten Commandments...are the summary of the moral law.... Each one of the Ten Commandments expresses the moral law of God.”¹³ Robert Knudsen writes, “It is also inconceivable that there will be any changes in the meaning of God’s law as expressed in the Ten

Commandments.”¹⁴ Tremper Longman draws this conclusion:

Moral law states God’s principles for a right relationship with him and with others. The Ten Commandments are the most visible and powerful expression of God’s will for his people. As we read the New Testament and reflect on the Bible as a whole, we see that these commands are still operative. Thus Jesus heartily approved a legal expert’s summary of the Ten Commandments.¹⁵

However, if the Ten Commandments are eternally valid laws, what are we to make of the Sabbath command, which specifically states that God’s people should rest on the *seventh* day? An eternally valid law cannot be changed or abrogated, so if these theologians are consistent, they should keep the seventh day as a Sabbath, as a day of rest. Most covenant theologians do not, and a variety of explanations are given, all claiming that the New Testament changes the Sabbath command in some way:

1. The Sabbath is changed to the first day of the week, and is still a day of rest. The Westminster Confession 21.7 supported this view and cited some New Testament examples of believers meeting on the first day of the week. However, these examples do not show that *the day of rest* was changed. The Ten Commandments forbid work on the seventh day; the fact that believers did something else on the first day is logically irrelevant. It is quite possible to keep the seventh day as a Sabbath *and* to meet on Sunday. The New Testament does not give any imperative about the first day that could correspond to, counter, or change the imperative of the Decalogue about the seventh day. Nor can church tradition overrule a biblical command. The Westminster approach, by claiming the permanent validity of the Decalogue, yet claiming a change within it, creates an internal contradiction that Sabbatarians sometimes exploit.

2. Another alternative to Sabbatarianism is to argue that the day is changed to the first day, and its focus shifts from rest to worship. This

approach at least acknowledges that the New Testament verses are about something different than the Old Testament command,¹⁶ but it fails to show that the verses are relevant. It does not show that the command to rest is abrogated, nor that there is a command (not just an example) to gather for worship on a specific day of the week. The resurrection of Jesus on a Sunday does not in itself cancel a command regarding the seventh day.

3. A third approach is to argue that the Sabbath command was moral and eternal in requiring people to rest one day each week, but ceremonial in specifying that it must be the seventh day.¹⁷ This approach may note the ethical value of requiring rest for servants and animals, but it admits that part of the Decalogue is ceremonial and temporary.¹⁸

Whether these arguments are valid or not, they all involve a change in the Sabbath command and therefore imply that the Decalogue is not an unchanging moral law. It would then be misleading to call the Ten Commandments *the* moral law, as if the entire package were moral law. Individual commandments may well be moral and unchanging, but it is misleading to call the Ten *as a unit* “the moral law.”

It is therefore appropriate to explore the authority by which the Decalogue might be changed. Let us briefly examine the question of the Sabbath in the New Testament.

Has the Sabbath been changed?

The Gospels describe several incidents involving Jesus and the Sabbath. Although Sabbatarians often cite this as evidence that “Jesus kept the Sabbath,” the text never makes this point. It never uses the word “rest” or “keep” — instead, it describes Jesus’ *activity* on the Sabbath. Jesus’ example is always one of liberty, of breaking traditional restrictions. Jesus never affirms any Sabbath restrictions, and is never portrayed as supporting the focus of the Sabbath as found in the Old Testament, that is, the avoidance of

work.

Moreover, Jesus treated the Sabbath as a ceremonial law, not a moral law. In the grainfield incident, Jesus defended the activity of his disciples by pointing to David breaking a ceremonial law and the priests keeping a ceremonial law (Matthew 12:1-6). The priests are said to “*break* the Sabbath” by their ceremonial work. The text is not saying that the Sabbath command permitted such work; rather, it is saying that the Sabbath command was violated by the work, but that the ceremonial work was so important that the Sabbath could be broken in order to do it. I cannot imagine Jesus saying that a moral law could be broken because a ritual had to be performed! Rather, he is putting the Sabbath on the same (or lower) level as ceremonial laws. He does this also in John 7:22-23, saying that the requirement to circumcise was more important than the requirement to avoid work on the Sabbath.

Further evidence that the Sabbath law is ceremonial rather than moral: It is patterned after what God did only once, not on his eternal nature. God does not live by a six-one cycle of activity and rest, nor do the angels. The Sabbath command says that behavior that is good one day is forbidden the next, merely because it is a different day of the week. But God’s morality does not change with the rotation of the earth.

The apostles preached on the Sabbath, but they preached on other days, too. Their example is not a command. More important than the apostolic activity on the Sabbath is the apostolic teaching — and the Sabbath was not an important part of their teaching. The word “Sabbath” is found only once in the epistles — in Colossians 2:16. There, Paul puts the Sabbath into the same category as other ceremonial laws (food, drink, festivals and new moons) and says it is not a matter on which Christians should be judging one another. Allusions to the Sabbath may also be seen in Galatians 4:10, where Paul disapproves of the Galatians observing special days, and Romans 14:5, where

Paul seemed to be unconcerned about special days.¹⁹ These statements support the conclusion that the Sabbath command does not apply to Christians.

The evidence throughout the New Testament is that the Sabbath command was abrogated, without being replaced by any comparable commands. The day that the Decalogue had specified is now unimportant. The rest that the Decalogue commanded is no longer required. It is therefore misleading to call the Decalogue the moral law, as if all ten commandments were moral and permanent. Some are, but the Ten as a unit are not.²⁰ Indeed, because there are internal differences of applicability to Christianity, *it is misleading in Christian ethics to treat the Decalogue as a unit*. It is a unit within the old covenant, but it does not function as a unit in the New Testament.

Authority for change

If we focus on the Decalogue, we might wonder why a command would become obsolete. But if we view the Torah as a whole, we see *hundreds* of laws that are no longer in force. The Sabbath is not an isolated case, but a representative case. After we see that the New Testament sets aside hundreds of biblical commands, it is less of a surprise that the list of obsolete laws happens to include the Sabbath, too.

Early Christians may have been surprised that *any* biblical command (including the sacrifices and rituals) could become unnecessary. If God had given these laws, what human could say that they were done away? Only one authority could do away with canonical commands: God. So we look to the New Testament to see whether it has overturned Old Testament laws, and this will help us clarify the role of the Decalogue in Christian ethics.

The New Testament does not itemize all the valid Old Testament laws, nor all the obsolete ones. Some laws (unclean meats, sin sacrifices, washings)

are mentioned; others (tassels on garments, grain offerings) are not. The New Testament quotes some Old Testament commands (even ones that are now obsolete) with approval; others are quoted as being inadequate or in need of replacement (Matthew 5:31-37). Commands from the Decalogue, the Holiness Code, and Deuteronomy are quoted as valid; other commands from those same codes are treated as obsolete. Some are moral and eternal; others are not, and in this, the Decalogue is no different than other Old Testament laws. The Decalogue does not require a different method of interpretation and should not be given special treatment.²¹

Commands from the last half of the Decalogue may be quoted together, or they can be quoted with another law of similar authority (Matthew 19:18-19). Although the New Testament appropriates *most* of the Decalogue, it does not cite the Decalogue *as a whole* as a moral authority for Christians. It uses the last half several times, but never uses the whole. It never even refers to it by name. When the New Testament quotes the last half together, there is no reason to assume that it is endorsing any larger group, such as the Ten, the Book of the Covenant, or the old covenant as a whole. It would be arbitrary to assume any larger group.

Although the New Testament cites many individual Old Testament laws as valid, it does not specify a general category as permanently valid.²² However, when it declares laws obsolete, it uses large categories. In Acts 15, it is “the law of Moses.” In 1 Corinthians 9:20, it is “the law.” In Galatians 3:17, it is “the law” that came 430 years after Abraham, that is, at the time of Moses. In Ephesians 2:15 it is “the law with its commandments and ordinances,” the law that separated Jews from Gentiles. In Hebrews 8:13 it is the Sinai covenant. Although various terms are used, there is a consistency in what is meant. A large category of law is being declared obsolete. That does not mean that every command within the category is obsolete, but the

package itself is.

What is the New Testament explanation for this significant change in divinely given laws? It is a change in covenants. The book of Hebrews makes this clear in chapters 7 to 10. Although the focus in Hebrews is on the ceremonial laws relevant to the priesthood, the conclusion is more broadly stated — it is the covenant itself that is obsolete (8:13). A new covenant has replaced the Sinai-Moses covenant. The Sabbath, which was a sign of the Mosaic covenant (Exodus 31:16-17), is obsolete, and so is the covenant itself. The new covenant has some similarities to the old, but it is a new covenant.

Hebrews uses strong terms: laws are set aside, changed, abrogated, abolished, because one covenant has ended and another has begun. Of course, since the old and the new covenants were given by the same God, we should expect *some* similarities. We should expect truly moral laws to be found in both covenants. It should be no surprise that laws against adultery, which predated Abraham, should also be included in Sinai, a later and larger package of laws. But we accept those laws as moral not because they were given to Moses (the fact that a law was given to Moses does not automatically make it moral), but for other reasons.

Paul tells us that the law of Moses was a temporary addition to the Abrahamic promises (Galatians 3:16-25). The Sinai covenant, which includes the Decalogue, civil laws and ceremonial laws, came 430 years after Abraham, and it was designed to come to an end when Christ came. John Goldingay puts it this way: “Paul does not mean that the Hebrew *scriptures* are annulled. Indeed, his argument that the law is annulled appeals to these scriptures. But he does assert that they are no longer binding *as law*.”²³ And the Bible makes no exception for the core of the Sinai covenant, the Decalogue.

Paul deals with the Decalogue directly in 2 Corinthians 3, where he

describes laws written on stone tablets and Moses' face shining with glory. It is clear that he is talking about the Ten Commandments, and he calls them "the ministry of death" (3:7). He is not talking about the *administration* of the Decalogue, as Walter Kaiser claims²⁴ — he is saying that the "ministry of death" itself was chiseled on the stone. The word "ministry" in this verse refers not to administration, but to the Ten Commandments themselves. That is what was chiseled on stone, and that is what was fading. Paul is talking about Moses' glory because it parallels the Mosaic covenant. It once had glory, but no longer does because it has been eclipsed by the new covenant. In verse 11, he says something that "came through glory" was "set aside." It is the stone tablets that came in glory, and it is these stone tablets that have been set aside, replaced by "the permanent" (the new covenant), which came in greater glory.

In other words, the Ten Commandments have been set aside, and we should expect at least some change in it. We do not look to the stone tablets as the standard of godly living. Every moral law within the Decalogue is also found outside of the Decalogue, and one of the Ten has specifically been annulled in the New Testament. The Decalogue is neither sufficient nor necessary for Christian ethics. Saying, "It's one of the Ten Commandments" is no more proof of current validity than saying, "It's in Deuteronomy."²⁵

An Old Testament law's validity cannot be assessed by its location — it must be assessed by new covenant criteria.²⁶ Theft is immoral not because God happened to forbid it in the Decalogue, but because by new covenant principles we can see that it was immoral long before God gave this law to Moses. Love is moral not because it was written on stone (it wasn't), but because it was moral long before the Torah was written. The Decalogue is not the standard of comparison we need; its role in Christian ethics is *ambiguous*. It proves nothing in itself.

Morality of nine commandments

In showing that the Sabbath command has been abrogated, in showing that the Decalogue as a package has been set aside and that it should not be our primary point of reference, we do not mean to say that Christians have no moral standards, no ethical duties. The New Testament has hundreds of commands, hundreds of behavioral expectations for how forgiven people should respond to their Savior. Some of these commands are also found in the Decalogue, but their validity does not rest on the fact that they were on the stone tablets. As shown by the Sabbath command, we cannot equate stone with permanence. The validity of such laws rests on moral principles that transcend the specific situation of Sinai.

Jesus affirmed the validity of the first commandment (Matthew 4:10), and of five more (Matthew 19:18-19). But the two most important commandments were not even in the Decalogue (Matthew 22:37-39; 23:23); Jesus also said that true morality went beyond the wording of the Decalogue (Matthew 5:21-28).²⁷ The Decalogue, when isolated from its historical context in Exodus (as it often is in Christian moralizing), easily becomes a mere list of rules, a legalism.

Jesus was not claiming to be simply a better interpreter of Moses — he claimed to have more authority than Moses. He allowed what the law of Moses did not (John 8:1-11) and forbade something that Moses allowed (Matthew 5:33-34). He was setting a new standard for right conduct. In Jesus' last instructions to his disciples, he told them to teach people to obey, but the standard he gave was not the Decalogue, but his own teaching. Jesus' teaching is a better basis for ethics than the Decalogue is, and *it is unethical for us to refer people to an inferior standard when a better one is available.*²⁸

Law as story

What then are we to do with the Decalogue? How are we to approach it as

Scripture inspired by God, “useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16)? We should approach it in the way it is written – as a report of what God gave his people in the time of Moses. We read it as a narrative first, before jumping to conclusions that we are supposed to obey every command within it.

The Decalogue, like other Old Testament laws, was given as a norm for Israelite behavior. That was its original intent. However, the New Testament tells us that *the Old Testament is informative but not normative*. If we approach the Torah as law, as command, then we quickly run into erroneous conclusions about what Christians are required to do — thus showing that this approach to the Bible is not valid. A different model for reading is needed, and the narrative model takes the text seriously yet without leading to erroneous conclusions.²⁹

Even the commands must be read as part of a narrative. When we read in Genesis 17 that the males among God’s people were to be circumcised, we do not assume that we should do so today. When we read in Exodus 13 that God’s people are to have a festival of flat bread, we do not assume that we should do so today. Those commands were given for a specific people. So also the commands we find in Exodus 20. They begin with this preface: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.” This gives a historical context to the situation: it was a multitude of just-escaped slaves, in a desert, surrounded by polytheistic nations. And God gave them laws that would compensate for their lack of civic experience, laws that would help them resist polytheism, laws that would help them become a distinct nation, laws that would help them structure society in a new land. These laws were good for their situation, but it is another question as to whether those same laws are good for us today in our situations. This is to be explored, not assumed.

Much of the Old Testament is narrative. Nevertheless, 2 Timothy 3 can say that this type of writing, since it is part of Scripture, is “useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.” Stories can help inform our ethics. They can illustrate consequences, misunderstandings, deficiencies and flexibilities. The story of Abraham and circumcision is useful for teaching and for training in righteousness without requiring us to practice circumcision. The commands about sacrifice are to be read as story, not as commands for us today. The details may be useful typologically, but they are read first in the context of a story, not as currently valid law. Even the civil laws of the Old Testament are useful illustrations of how moral principles may be fleshed out in a specific culture.³⁰

Genesis is a story, and in that story God gave certain commands and implied other commands. Some of them apply to us today and some do not. Exodus continues that story and gives more commands, commands about how people should worship, how to behave with one another and what to do when someone disobeys. Some of these commands apply to us today; others do not. So we must see them first in the context the books give them: a covenant or arrangement God made with a specific people at a specific time in history, a covenant God has now revealed to be obsolete. The commands that God gave them *are instructive but not necessarily imperative for us*. They may have exemplary value, and may be reinterpreted for different contexts. Their ethical value must be cautiously explored, not assumed,³¹ and in our evaluation we must give greater weight to the New Testament revelation, the part of the canon that has the authority to cancel and change the laws of the OT.

Christopher Wright explains a helpful “paradigmatic” approach:

I would regard “paradigm” as a useful category for ethically understanding and applying the Old Testament itself.... We do not think in terms of literal imitation of Israel. We cannot simply

transpose the social laws of an ancient people into the modern world and try to make them work as written.... On the other hand, the social system of Israel cannot be dismissed as...totally inapplicable to either the Christian church or the rest of mankind. If Israel was meant to be a light to the nations (cf. Is. 49:6), then that light must be allowed to illuminate.³²

Wright notes “the narrative framework in which they [the Old Testament laws] are set”³³ and provides a method for moving from narrative to principle and back to a modern situation. The goal is to see how the law functioned within Israelite society, and the general principle involved. The same law might function similarly in modern society, or significant modifications might be needed to achieve the same benefits today. The specificity of the Old Testament laws encourages us to seek practical specificity for the same principles today.³⁴

In summary, the New Testament says that 1) certain laws are moral, holy, just and good; 2) certain Old Testament laws are obsolete; 3) the Sinai covenant and the Sinai Decalogue are obsolete in their legal authority; 4) however, specific laws remain valid; and 5) we can learn something about righteousness even from laws that are no longer valid.

When we study Old Testament ethics, the Decalogue is an important law code. It tells us basic ethical rules of what God gave those people back then. This is a major statement of the ethic that the Old Testament presents. But that is *descriptive for ancient Israel, not prescriptive for Christian ethics*. Christians have been told to look to Jesus Christ as a greater authority, a better ethical example and a better teacher of righteous living.

Practical consequences

Since the Sabbath command has been rescinded in the New Testament, no one should preach or imply that the Decalogue is a valid ethical standard for Christians. It is not. It has an important exception in the middle of it, and it is

confusing to say Ten when only Nine are meant. It is inaccurate and misleading. Moreover, Christians have a better ethical standard in the New Testament — a bigger body of literature with better ethical balance. We have the teachings of Jesus and the apostles.

Of course, the Christian church has used the Decalogue for centuries, from the second century onwards. But it is also clear that affirmations about the Decalogue have been turned into Sabbatarianism and legalism, and this shows that the traditional veneration of the Decalogue is a theological mistake. We should point people to Christ, not to Moses, for instruction on how to live like a Christian.

Endnotes

1 Hebrews 8:13 and 2 Timothy 3:16. The New Testament does not say that the Old Testament *Scriptures* are obsolete. Rather, it says that the old *covenant* is obsolete. This distinction should be taken seriously, and intend to take both thoughts seriously.

2 For a survey of conservative views, see Wayne Strickland, ed. *Counterpoint: Five Views of Law and Gospel* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996). In general, Covenant theologians in the Calvinist tradition stress continuity; Lutherans and Dispensationalists give more emphasis to obsolescence.

3 Willard M. Swartley uses the Sabbath as one example in *Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women: Case Issues in Biblical Interpretation* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald, 1983), though without drawing conclusions about the Sabbath itself. This paper agrees with the majority Christian view that the seventh-day Sabbath is *not* required today. Some of the reasons will be given in this paper, but for a more detailed defense of this view, see “What Do the Scriptures Say About the Sabbath?” (<http://www.gci.org/law/sabbath1>, originally published in 1995 by the Worldwide Church of God, Pasadena,

California).

4 Such statements are found in the “Decalogue” articles of Carl F. H. Henry, ed., *Baker’s Dictionary of Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), Francesco Cardinal Roberti, comp., *Dictionary of Moral Theology* (London: Burns & Oates, 1962), and David J. Atkinson, ed., *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995).

5 I do not use “prooftext” here as a pejorative term. There *are* certain key verses on which claims are built.

6 Greg L. Bahnsen, *By This Standard: The Authority of God’s Law Today* (Tyler, Tx.: Institute for Christian Economics, 1985), p. 3. Bahnsen ignores many New Testament scriptures that weaken his view: Acts 15, 2 Corinthians 3:7-11, Galatians 3:15-4:31; Colossians 2:16; Hebrews 7:12, 18; 8:13. Some of these are not even in his index; others are dismissed in a single sentence or paragraph.

7 Mark W. Karlberg traces the history of this concept back to Zwingli, Bullinger, and Calvin (“Reformed Interpretation of the Mosaic Covenant,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 43 (1980) 1-57). Calvin wrote, “The covenant made with all the patriarchs is so much like ours in substance and reality that the two are actually one and the same. Yet they differ in mode of administration” (*Institutes* II.10.2, cited in Karlberg, p. 16). The Westminster Confession 7.6 describes the Mosaic and Christian administrations in this way: “There are not then two essentially different covenants of grace, but one and the same covenant under different dispensations.”

8 O. Palmer Robertson, *The Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), p. 28.

9 *Ibid.*, pp. 33, 41. I believe that “successive” is the wrong word here. The Davidic covenant came after the Mosaic covenant and was in continuity with

it, but was not its successor in the sense of replacing it. The Davidic covenant made promises to the line of David, but the Mosaic covenant remained, and was dominant. However, distinctions between various Old Testament covenants are only marginally relevant to this paper. We will focus on the distinction between the Sinaitic covenant and the new covenant brought by Jesus Christ.

10 Ibid., p. 41; similar phrases are on pp. 281-282 — “essentially the same law.” Robertson defends the continuing validity of the (Sunday) Sabbath on pp. 69-74. Space does not permit point-by-point refutation.

11 William J. Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker and Carlisle, U.K.: Paternoster, 1993), pp. 178, 180.

12 Thomas Edward McComiskey, *The Covenants of Promise: A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985), p. 84. Dennis E. Johnson, although in the Reformed tradition, says that Jeremiah 31 “clearly implied the obsolescence and inadequacy of the Mosaic covenant” in his article “The Epistle to the Hebrews and the Mosaic Penal Sanctions,” in William S. Barker and W. Robert Godfrey, eds., *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), p. 183. The text of Jeremiah 31 may be interpreted with either emphasis, and we must look to the New Testament to see whether the laws of the new covenant are identical to those of the old, and whether all Ten Commandments are valid.

13 Willem A. VanGemenen, “The Law Is the Perfection of Righteousness in Jesus Christ: A Reformed Perspective,” in Wayne G. Strickland, ed., *The Law, the Gospel, and the Modern Christian: Five Views* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), pp. 29-30. The Westminster Confession 19.2-3 also equated the Ten Commandments with the moral law.

14 “May We Use the Term Theonomy...?” in William S. Barker and W.

Robert Godfrey, eds., *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), p. 35. Knudsen would probably phrase this differently if he were arguing against Sabbatarians instead of theonomists. It illustrates the Calvinist emphasis on continuity.

15 Tremper Longman III, *Making Sense of the Old Testament: Three Crucial Questions* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), p. 110.

16 The Sabbath command focuses almost exclusively on the avoidance of work as the essence of keeping the Sabbath. Worship is not the focus. Leviticus 23:3 says that the seventh day is a day of “holy convocation,” but this involved only a portion of the Israelites. Most lived too far from the sanctuary to assemble there each Sabbath. After synagogues were developed, the Sabbath was used for worship, but this was a later development.

17 Walter C. Kaiser expresses this view: “This command is mixed: it is both moral and ceremonial: moral in that it requires of men and women a due portion of their time set aside for rest, for worship, and service of God; ceremonial in that it fixed that day as the seventh day” (*Toward Old Testament Ethics* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991], p. 89). However, the Decalogue says nothing about the Sabbath being a day for worship.

18 This approach also appears to make arbitrary distinctions between moral and ceremonial. If the day of the week is a ceremonial matter, why not the length of the cycle? Would one *hour* out of every seven be sufficient? Would it be more moral to rest one day out of every six, and less moral to rest one day out of every eight?

19 Some exegetes deny that these verses have anything to do with the weekly Sabbath. Space does not permit a more detailed defense.

20 Douglas Moo makes a similar point when he writes, “I am not denying that the Mosaic law, especially the Ten Commandments, contains principles and requirements that reflect God’s eternal moral will. My point, rather, is

that the Mosaic law is not identical with this eternal moral law” (“Response to Willem A. VanGemeren,” in Wayne G. Strickland, ed., *The Law, the Gospel, and the Modern Christian*, p. 84).

21 “There is no evidence that Jesus isolated the Ten Commandments from the rest of the Mosaic law and put them in a separate category” (Moo, p. 87).

22 As discussed above, scriptures proclaiming continuity in sweeping terms — Matthew 5:17, Romans 7:12, etc. — are so sweeping that they do not help us understand the critical question of *which* laws are valid and which are not. They do not describe a valid category in distinction from an obsolete category.

23 *Approaches to Old Testament Interpretation*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1990), p. 44. Similarly, he writes, “the New Testament writers utilize such law for theological purposes, even though they see its legal function as over; it is still the word of God, even if it is no longer the command of God” (*Theological Diversity and the Authority of the Old Testament* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987], pp. 108-109).

24 Kaiser, *Toward*, p. 313. Kaiser notes that the gospel may also be called a smell of death, but then in a *non sequitur* he concludes from this, “Thus it is not the Ten Commandments per se that are a ministration of death” (ibid.).

25 The logic of such statements is false for the Sabbath command, and the logic is therefore false. Saying “It’s in the Ten Commandments” proves nothing. It is only after that we learn which command is being discussed that we can ascertain whether the command is valid today, and we ascertain that by principles outside of and more authoritative than the Decalogue, most particularly the New Testament. So, why point to an inconclusive and secondary standard? It is better to point to the more authoritative principles from the beginning.

26 “It is only as we look at the way that Jesus and the writers of the New

Testament treat the commandments of the Mosaic law that we can know which ones continue to apply directly to us and which ones no longer do. The Mosaic commandments, then, are not directly applicable to us, but only as they are passed on to us by Christ” (Moo, pp. 87-88). Moo then cites the Sabbath command to illustrate his point (p. 88).

27 It is true that Jesus referred to oral law (“You have heard that it was said...”), but in these cases the oral law was a direct quote of the written law. Jesus did not argue that the written law actually meant what he was teaching. Rather, he based his teachings on his own authority (“But I say unto you...”). See Douglas Moo for further discussion (“The Law of Christ as the Fulfillment of the Law of Moses,” in Strickland, pp. 347-356). However, even *if* Jesus merely interpreted Moses correctly, it would be poor practice to point people to the enigmatic original instead of the more complete interpretation.

28 John G. Reisinger rightly asks, “If the Sermon on the Mount and the new covenant epistles do indeed teach a higher and more spiritual standard of holy living than the Law of Moses, do we not...lower the actual standard of holiness under which a Christian is to live when we send him back to Moses to learn ethics and morality?” (*Christ: Lord and Lawgiver Over the Church* [Frederick, MD: New Covenant Media, 1998], p. 16).

29 John Goldingay points out additional respectful ways for Christians to read the Old Testament: as a description of faith in God, a story of salvation, and a witness to Christ (*Approaches to Old Testament Interpretation*). For ethics, his chapter 2 is most appropriate: “The Old Testament as a Way of Life” (pp. 38-65).

30 Moo notes that “the detailed stipulations of the Mosaic law *often* reveal principles that are part of God’s word to his people in both covenants, and believers continue to profit from what the law teaches in this respect” (p.

376, emphasis added). But this validity is to be argued on New Testament principles, not assumed in advance.

31 In viewing Old Testament laws “neutrally,” we are beginning with a bias toward discontinuity. We do not begin by assuming the law to be valid, but by saying that we do not consider it valid until it is proven to be valid. Thus, even though the New Testament does not specifically repeal the laws of tassels and mezzuzim, we do not consider them required. Bestiality provides an opposite illustration. Even though the New Testament does not reaffirm this particular Old Testament law, we believe the prohibition to be valid — not simply because the Old Testament says so, but because we believe that principles within the New Testament itself lead to this conclusion.

32 Christopher J. H. Wright, *God’s People in God’s Land: Family, Land and Property in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), pp. 43-44; see also pp. 175-180. He also describes a typological approach, which is similar, for application within the church.

33 Wright, *Eye*, p. 21.

34 “At the very least it will keep us earthed, by showing that general principles must have particular outworking and affect the local, culture-bound specifics of human life.... If our ethics are all vague generalities, then we have not listened to Old Testament law” (ibid., p. 159). Wright shows the importance of seeking principles behind the laws: “You will not find a section of ‘moral law’ denouncing slavery, not even in the Ten Commandments. But you do find a moral *principle* operative within the civil law, which, when put alongside other Old Testament passages on the subject...questions and undermines the whole institution” (p. 154).

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

[back to table of contents](#)

Is Tithing Required in the New Covenant?

Does the Bible tell us to pay at least 10 percent of our incomes to the church? This paper examines the biblical evidence.

Abraham and Jacob

The first biblical mention of tithing is in Genesis 14. After four Mesopotamian kings had taken Lot captive, Abraham attacked them and recovered all the booty. After his victory, the king of Sodom came out to meet him, and so did Melchizedek, a priest of God. Melchizedek blessed Abraham, and then Abraham “gave him a tenth of everything” (Genesis 14:20).

The text does not tell us whether Abraham had ever tithed before, or ever tithed afterwards. Perhaps it was a custom of his culture. Abraham was generous, and gave the rest of his booty to the king of Sodom (verses 23-24). Abraham kept all of God’s laws that were relevant in his day (Genesis 26:5), but Genesis does not tell us whether tithing was a law in Abraham’s day. Many of God’s decrees and requirements were built around the nation of Israel and the Levitical priesthood and tabernacle. Abraham could not have kept such decrees and laws. He may have tithed regularly, but we cannot prove it.

The next mention of tithing is in Genesis 28:20-22. Jacob had a miraculous dream at Bethel. In the morning, Jacob vowed to tithe if God helped him during his journey. He was trying to make a bargain with God. He wanted special help, and in return for that help, he was willing to worship God, and to tithe as a part of that worship. Tithing may have been part of the common worship practices of that time and culture, or it may have been an extra-special vow for those who desperately desired divine help.

Firstlings

Biblical commands about tithing are generally about grain, wine and oil.¹ A different system of giving was required for some animals. In the last plague on Egypt, God killed the firstborn male of every animal and human, but he spared the Israelites and their animals. Therefore, God claimed ownership of every Israelite firstborn and firstling male animal (Exodus 13:2; Numbers 3:13).

This applied not only to the generation that left Egypt,² but every future generation as well. Firstlings of clean animals were to be given to the priests and sacrificed (Numbers 18:15-17); priests and people ate them during the festivals (Deuteronomy 15:19-20; 12:6, 17; 14:23). Unclean animals and humans were to be redeemed (Exodus 13:12-15; 34:19-20). This continued to be the law in Nehemiah's day (Nehemiah 10:36) and in Jesus' day (Luke 2:23).

The people also gave firstfruits of their harvest (Exodus 23:19; 34:26; Leviticus 2:14), but these firstfruits do not seem to be a fixed percentage.

Tithes

Tithing was required on flocks: "every tenth animal that passes under the shepherd's rod"³ (Leviticus 27:32). Was this in addition to the firstlings, or was it instead of firstlings? We do not know exactly how these laws would be administered. It is not necessary for us to take a position on these details.

"A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the Lord; it is holy to the Lord" (Leviticus 27:30).⁴ The tithes and firstfruits belonged to God, and he assigned the Levites to receive them on his behalf (Numbers 18:12-13, 21, 24). They could keep 90 percent of what they were given, but had to give 10 percent as an offering (verses 26-32).

Tithing was done in the days of Hezekiah (2 Chr. 31:5-6), Nehemiah (Nehemiah 10:35-39; 12:44) and Jesus (Matthew 23:23; Luke 11:42). In

Malachi's day, tithing was required (Malachi 3:8-10), and physical blessings were promised for obedience, just as physical blessings were promised for obedience to the old covenant.

Additional tithes?

God gave the tithes to the Levites, but the people could eat their tithes during festivals (Deuteronomy 12:5-7, 17-19; 14:23). Some have concluded that Deuteronomy is talking about an additional tithe, a festival tithe. It is possible to have two tithes, but it is not possible to have two sets of firstborn animals. The firstlings were holy to the Lord, and given to the Levites (Numbers 18:15-17), but Deuteronomy 15:19-20 says that they were eaten by the people. Apparently the firstlings were shared between the original owners and the Levites. It is possible that the same is true of the tithe.⁵

The people needed a tithe for the festivals, since the festivals constituted about 5 percent of the year, plus travel time. During sabbatical years, farmers would not have their regular income, so they may not have been able to go to every festival in every year. Or perhaps they saved the festival tithe from year to year.

At the end of every three years of farming, the Israelites were to set aside a tithe for the Levites, resident aliens, orphans and widows (Deuteronomy 14:28-29; 26:12-15). It is not clear whether this was an alternative use of a previous tithe, or an additional tithe.⁶

Tithing in the new covenant

Now let us consider whether tithing is required in the new covenant. Tithing is mentioned only three or four times in the New Testament. Jesus acknowledged that the Pharisees were very careful about tithing (Luke 18:12), and he said that they should not leave it undone (Matthew 23:23; Luke 11:42). Tithing, like other old covenant rules and rituals, was a law at the time Jesus spoke. Jesus criticized the Pharisees not for tithing, but for

treating tithing as more important than mercy, love, justice and faithfulness.

The only other New Testament mention of tithing is in Hebrews. The fact that Abraham was blessed by and gave tithes to Melchizedek illustrates the superiority of Melchizedek and Jesus Christ over the Levitical priesthood (Hebrews 7:1-10). The passage then goes on to note that “when the priesthood is changed, the law must be changed also” (verse 12).

There was a change of the priesthood from the Levites to Jesus Christ, and this implies a change in the law that assigned the Levites to be priests. How much has been changed? Hebrews says that the old covenant is obsolete. The package of laws that commanded tithes to be given to the Levites is obsolete.

Humans should honor God by voluntarily returning some of the blessings he gives them — this is still a valid principle. The only place that a percentage is required is within the old covenant. There is good *precedent* for tithing before Sinai, but no proof that it was *required*.

Responding to the better covenant

Under the old covenant, tithing was required for the support of the old covenant ministers. The Israelites were required to give 10 percent — and their blessing was only a physical one! Christians in the new covenant have much better blessings — spiritual ones. How much more willingly ought we to give in thankfulness for the eternal blessings we have in Christ Jesus?

The Israelites were commanded to give 10 percent under a covenant that could not make them perfect (Hebrews 7:19; 9:9). How much more joyfully should we give to God under the new covenant? We have the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, which *does* cleanse our conscience (9:14). And yet it seems that in America today, even though we have so much more than the Israelites did, people give on average a much smaller percentage. Many people give less to the church than they spend on luxury items. Some people cannot give very

much, but many people could if they wanted to. God calls on us to examine ourselves, to examine our priorities, and to be generous.

The old covenant gave us condemnation; the new covenant gives us justification and peace with God. How much more should we be willing to give freely and generously so God's work can be done in the world — to proclaim the gospel, to declare the new covenant ministry that gives us true life, and gives that message of life to others?

People who entrust their lives to Jesus Christ do not worry about whether tithing is commanded in the New Testament. People who are being transformed by Christ to be more like Christ are *generous*. They want to give as much as possible to support the gospel and to support the poor. Christians should give generously — but giving is a *result* of their relationship with God, not a way to earn it. We are given grace through *faith*, not through tithing.

Some people act as if Christ liberates us from the law so that we can keep more physical blessings for ourselves. That is false — Christ liberates us so that we can be free to serve him *more*, as loving children and not merely as slaves. He frees us so we can have faith instead of selfishness.

When it comes to money, the real question is, Is our heart in the gospel of Jesus Christ? Are we putting our money where our heart is? We can tell where our heart is by seeing where we are putting our money. “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also,” Jesus said (Matthew 6:21).

Needs in the new covenant ministry

In the new covenant church, there are financial needs — to support the poor, and to support the gospel by supporting those who preach it. Christians are obligated to give financial support for these needs. Let's see how Paul explained this obligation in his second letter to the Corinthians.

Paul describes himself as a minister of the new covenant (2 Corinthians

3:6), which has much greater glory than the old (verse 8). Because of what Christ did for him in the new covenant, Christ's love compelled Paul to preach the gospel, the message of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:11-21).

Paul exhorted the Corinthians "not to receive God's grace in vain" (6:1). How were they in danger of doing this? Paul had gone out of his way to serve them, but they were withholding their affections from him (6:3-12). He asked them for a fair exchange, for them to open their hearts to him (6:13).

Paul told the Corinthians that they had a duty to give something in response to what they had been given. This response comes in terms of morality (6:14-7:1), which the Corinthians had done (7:8-13), and in terms of affection, which the Corinthians had also done (7:2-7), and in financial generosity, which Paul addresses in chapter 8. This is the way in which the Corinthians had closed their hearts to Paul and withheld their affections.

Paul cited the example of the Macedonian churches, who had given generously, even to the point of self-sacrifice (8:1-5). The example is powerful; the implications are strong that the Corinthians needed to respond to Paul's sacrifices by making sacrifices themselves. But Paul did not make a command (8:8). Instead, he asked first for a turning of the heart. He wanted the Corinthians to give themselves to the Lord first, and then to support Paul. He wanted their gift to be done in sincere love, not from compulsion (8:5, 8). Paul reminded them that Christ had become poor for their sakes; the implication is that the Corinthians should make financial sacrifices in return.

But then Paul reminded the Corinthians that they could not give more than they had (8:12). Nor did they have to impoverish themselves to enrich others; Paul was only aiming for equity (8:13-14). Paul again expressed confidence in their willingness to give, and added the peer pressure of the Macedonian example and the boasting he had done in Macedonia about the generosity of the Corinthians (8:24-9:5).

Paul again noted that the offering must be done willingly, not from compulsion or given grudgingly (9:5, 7). He reminded them that God rewards generosity (9:6-11) and that a good example causes people to praise God and puts the gospel in a favorable setting (9:12-14).

This was a collection for the poor in Judea. But Paul said nothing about tithing. Rather, he appealed to the new covenant environment: Christ had made many sacrifices for them, so they ought to be willing to make a few sacrifices to help one another.

In asking for this offering, Paul was also making a financial sacrifice. He had a right to receive financial support himself, but instead of that, he was asking that the offering be given to others. Paul had not asked for *any* financial support from Corinth (11:7-11; 12:13-16). Instead, he had been supported by Macedonians (11:9).

Paul had a right to be supported by the Corinthians, but he did not use it (1 Corinthians 9:3-15). This passage tells us more about our Christian duty to give financial support to the gospel. Workers should be able to receive benefits of their work (9:7). The old covenant even made provision for oxen to be given benefits of their work (9:9).

Throughout his appeal, Paul does not cite any laws of tithing. He says that priests received benefits from their work in the temple (9:13), but he does not cite any percentage. Their example is cited in the same way as the example of soldiers, vineyard workers, herdsmen, oxen, plowers and threshers. It is simply a general principle. As Jesus said, “The worker deserves his wages” (Luke 10:7). Paul cited the oxen and wages scriptures again in 1 Timothy 5:17-18. Elders, especially those who preach and teach, should be honored financially as well as with respect.

Jesus also commanded, “those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel” (1 Corinthians 9:14). This implies that those who

believe should provide a living for some who preach. There is a financial duty, and there is a promised reward for generosity (though that reward may not necessarily be physical or financial).

A need to be generous

Christians have received riches of God's grace, and are to respond with generosity and giving. Christians are called to a life of service, sharing and stewardship. We have an obligation to do good. When we give ourselves to the Lord, we will give generously.

Jesus often taught about money. "Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me," said Jesus to a rich man (Luke 18:22). He said the same thing to his disciples (12:33). The new covenant demands all that we have, and that is fair, since Jesus gave all he had for us. He praised a widow who put two coins into the temple treasury, because she gave "all she had" (21:4).

Wealth is often an enemy of faith. It can "choke" people and cause them to be spiritually unfruitful (8:14). "Woe to you who are rich," Jesus warned (6:24). He warned us about the dangers of greed (12:15) and warned about the danger of storing up wealth for self without being "rich toward God" (12:16-21). When we use wealth to help others, we gain "treasure in heaven" (12:33). This helps us have our heart in heavenly things instead of earthly, temporary things (12:34).

"No servant can serve two masters.... You cannot serve both God and money" (16:13). But money competes for our allegiance; it tempts us to seek our own desires rather than the needs of the kingdom. After the rich man went away sad, Jesus exclaimed: "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God" (18:24-25).

Conclusion

Christians need to give, to share their resources and blessings with others. They have a duty to support the preaching of the gospel, to give financial support to their spiritual leaders, and the church needs this support. If disciples of Jesus Christ can give, but do not, they are falling short.

The old covenant required 10 percent. The new covenant does not specify a percentage, nor do we. However, the new covenant admonishes people to give what they can, and tithing still provides an instructive point of comparison. For some people, 10 percent may be too much. But some will be able to give more, and some are doing so. Christians should examine their own circumstances and the better blessings they have been given in the new covenant through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ for us and the gift of the Holy Spirit to us. Contributions should be given to the church for its collective work of preaching the gospel and the expenses involved in the local ministry and congregational needs.

Likewise, the new covenant does not specify any particular percentage for assisting the poor. Instead, it asks for equity — and we certainly have room for improvement in this.

The old covenant required simple percentages. Everyone knew how much was required. The new covenant has no set percentages. Instead, it requires more soul-searching, more training for the conscience, more selfless love for others, more faith, more voluntary sacrifice and less compulsion. It tests our values, what we treasure most, and where our hearts are.

Endnotes

¹ The Bible describes tithing in an agricultural economy. It does not tell us whether, or how, potters, carpenters, merchants, etc. calculated tithes.

² For the generation that left Egypt, God made a grand substitution: Instead of the firstborn male of each family and flock, God accepted the tribe

of Levi and all its animals (Numbers 3:40-50; 8:16-18).

³ It is not clear how this worked. Was the entire flock counted, or only the lambs? In bad years, the flock would come back no larger than it had been the previous year, so it wouldn't make sense to tithe on all the adults again, since there would have been no increase. Perhaps the "rod" served in some way to separate lambs from adults.

⁴ It might be argued that the tithes were holy and therefore had always been holy, even before the old covenant was made. That is possible, but it cannot be proven. The firstlings were also holy to the Lord, but this was based on events of the Exodus, not on creation. "Once holy, always holy" is not a valid principle.

⁵ A separate tithe for festival use is described in the apocryphal book of Tobit 1:6-8, Josephus' *Antiquities* 4.4.3; 4.8.8; 4.8.22, and the second-century B.C. book *Jubilees* 32:10-14. Some sources suggest that this second tithe was calculated on the basis of the 90 percent left after the first tithe, not the original 100 percent (Sanders, *Judaism: Practice and Belief 63 BCE–66 CE*, p. 167; *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, "Tithe," vol. 4, p. 863, citing the Mishnah *Maaser sheni* 2.1.)

⁶ As noted above, Tobit, Josephus and Jubilees give evidence for three tithes. The Mishnah, however, combines the festival tithe and the poor tithe: the second tithe being used for the festival in years 1, 2, 4 and 5, and being used for the poor in years 3 and 6 out of the seven-year farming cycle (Sanders, p. 149). Since farmers had an increase in only six out of every seven years, they gave on average 3.3 percent of their increase to the poor. If tradesmen tithed (and no biblical law required them to) they would give about 2.8 percent on average, since they had income even during sabbatical and jubilee years.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

[back to table of contents](#)

About the Authors

Michael Morrison received a PhD from Fuller Theological Seminary in 2006. He is Dean of Faculty and Professor of New Testament for [Grace Communion Seminary](#). He is the author of:

Print:

Who Needs a New Covenant? The Rhetorical Function of the Covenant Motif in the Argument of Hebrews. (print only)

Sabbath, Circumcision and Tithing (available in print and as an e-book)

E-books (available at several sites):

The Bible: A Guided Tour (co-author)

Discipleship 101: Basic Christian Teachings

Exploring the Word of God: Studies in Matthew

Exploring the Word of God: Studies in Luke

Exploring the Word of God: Acts of the Apostles (co-author of volumes 1 and 4)

Exploring the Word of God: The Letters of Paul

Exploring the Word of God: The Letter to the Hebrews

Inspiration, Authority, and Reliability of Scripture

The Proverbs 31 Woman and Other Biblical Women (co-author)

The Purpose for Human Life: Learning to Be Like Jesus Christ

What Does the Bible Say About Speaking in Tongues?

What Does the Bible Say About the Kingdom of God?

What Does the Bible Say About the Sabbath?

What Does the Bible Say About Women in Church Leadership?

Joseph Tkach is president of Grace Communion International. He received his D.Min. degree from Azusa Pacific Seminary in 2000. He is the author of *Transformed by Truth* (Multnomah, 1997), now available as an e-book.

About the Publisher...

Grace Communion International is a Christian denomination with about 50,000 members, worshipping in about 900 congregations in almost 100 nations and territories. We began in 1934 and our main office is in North Carolina. In the United States, we are members of the National Association of Evangelicals and similar organizations in other nations. We welcome you to visit our website at www.gci.org.

If you want to know more about the gospel of Jesus Christ, we offer help. First, we offer weekly worship services in hundreds of congregations worldwide. Perhaps you'd like to visit us. A typical worship service includes songs of praise, a message based on the Bible, and opportunity to meet people who have found Jesus Christ to be the answer to their spiritual quest. We try to be friendly, but without putting you on the spot. We do not expect visitors to give offerings—there's no obligation. You are a guest.

To find a congregation, write to one of our offices, phone us or visit our website. If we do not have a congregation near you, we encourage you to find another Christian church that teaches the gospel of grace.

We also offer personal counsel. If you have questions about the Bible, salvation or Christian living, we are happy to talk. If you want to discuss faith, baptism or other matters, a pastor near you can discuss these on the phone or set up an appointment for a longer discussion. We are convinced that Jesus offers what people need most, and we are happy to share the good news of what he has done for all humanity. We like to help people find new life in Christ, and to grow in that life. Come and see why we believe it's the best news there could be!

Our work is funded by members of the church who donate part of their income to support the gospel. Jesus told his disciples to share the good news,

and that is what we strive to do in our literature, in our worship services, and in our day-to-day lives.

If this e-book has helped you and you want to pay some expenses, all donations are gratefully welcomed, and in several nations, are tax-deductible. If you can't afford to give anything, don't worry about it. It is our gift to you. To make a donation online, go to www.gci.org/participate/donate.

Thank you for letting us share what we value most — Jesus Christ. The good news is too good to keep it to ourselves.

See our website for hundreds of articles, locations of our churches, addresses in various nations, audio and video messages, and much more.

Grace Communion International
3129 Whitehall Park Dr.
Charlotte, NC 28273-3335

1-800-423-4444
www.gci.org

You're Included...

We talk with leading Trinitarian theologians about the good news that God loves you, wants you, and includes you in Jesus Christ. Most programs are about 28 minutes long. Our guests have included:

Ray Anderson, Fuller Theological Seminary
Douglas A. Campbell, Duke Divinity School
Elmer Colyer, U. of Dubuque Theological Seminary
Gordon Fee, Regent College
Trevor Hart, University of St. Andrews
George Hunsinger, Princeton Theological Seminary
Jeff McSwain, Reality Ministries
Paul Louis Metzger, Multnomah University
Paul Molnar, St. John's University

Cherith Fee Nordling, Antioch Leadership Network
Andrew Root, Luther Seminary
Alan Torrance, University of St. Andrews
Robert T. Walker, Edinburgh University
N.T. Wright, University of St. Andrews
William P. Young, author of *The Shack*

Programs are available free for viewing and downloading at
www.youreincluded.org.

Speaking of Life...

Dr. Joseph Tkach, president of Grace Communion International, comments each week, giving a biblical perspective on how we live in the light of God's love. Most programs are about three minutes long – available in video, audio, and text. Go to www.speakingoflife.org.

[back to table of contents](#)



Grace Communion Seminary

Ministry based on the life and love of the Father, Son, and Spirit.

Grace Communion Seminary serves the needs of people engaged in Christian service who want to grow deeper in relationship with our Triune God and to be able to more effectively serve in the church.

Why study at Grace Communion Seminary?

Worship: to love God with all your mind.

Service: to help others apply truth to life.

Practical: a balanced range of useful topics for ministry.

Trinitarian theology: a survey of theology with the merits of a Trinitarian perspective. We begin with the question, "Who is God?" Then, "Who are we in relationship to God?" In this context, "How then do we serve?"

Part-time study: designed to help people who are already serving in local congregations. There is no need to leave your current ministry.

Full-time students are also welcome.

Flexibility: your choice of master's level continuing education courses or pursuit of a degree: Master of Pastoral Studies or Master of Theological Studies.

Affordable, accredited study: Everything can be done online.

For more information, go to www.gcs.edu. Grace Communion Seminary is accredited by the Distance Education Accrediting Commission, www.deac.org. The Accrediting Commission is listed by the U.S.

Department of Education as a nationally recognized accrediting agency.

[back to table of contents](#)

Ambassador College of Christian Ministry

Want to better understand God's Word? Want to know the Triune God more deeply? Want to share more joyously in the life of the Father, Son and Spirit? Want to be better equipped to serve others?

Among the many resources that Grace Communion International offers are the training and learning opportunities provided by ACCM. This quality, well-structured Christian Ministry curriculum has the advantage of being very practical and flexible. Students may study at their own pace, without having to leave home to undertake full-time study.

Visit: <http://www.smashwords.com/books/view/255700> to purchase this book to continue reading. Show the author you appreciate their work!