
Two Covenants

“For it is written, that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondmaid, the other by a freewoman. But he who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the freewoman was by promise. Which things are an allegory: for these are two covenants . . .” (Galatians 4:22-24)

The Old Testament (Covenant)

The first thirty-nine books of our Bible are not the Old Testament. They never have been, and they never will be. How this popular misconception got started and why it is so widely held I do not presume to know. In the language of Scripture the Old Testament was the Ten Commandments. As proof of this I offer the following:

1. The Scriptures explicitly teach that Moses received a covenant while he was forty days upon Mount Sinai; the covenant was written upon two tablets of stone; the covenant was called “The Ten Commandments,” and once the covenant was completed God added no more to it. (See Exodus 34:27, 28; Deuteronomy 4:11-13; 5:1-3, 22, 9:11, etc.)

2. The receptacle where the ten commandments were kept was called “The Ark of the Covenant” (Numbers 10:33). This ark disappeared before some books of prophecy were even written.

3. The old covenant was made in Horeb (Deuteronomy 5:2) which is also Mt. Sinai in Arabia (Galatians 4:25), but the first thirty-nine books of our Bible were written in Palestine, Babylon and Persia.

4. The old covenant was made when God took His children by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt (Hebrews 8:9). The first thirty-nine books of the Bible were not written at that time.

5. The old covenant was broken by the time Jeremiah wrote (see Jeremiah 31:32), but a number of books in the Hebrew Bible had not yet been written.

The Old Covenant, or Testament was the Ten Commandments. The Old Testament:

- Did not give life (Galatians 3:21)
- Was a ministration of death (II Corinthians 3:7)
- Was a ministration of condemnation (II Corinthians 3:9)
- It was a shadow of good things to come (Hebrews 10:1)
- It was a schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ (Galatians 3:24)

The New Testament (Covenant)

The New Testament is not the twenty-seven books of Scripture which we have traditionally so named.

1. The new covenant is written upon men's minds and in their hearts (Hebrews 8:10).

2. The new covenant is not written with ink but by the Holy Spirit upon the fleshly tables of the heart (II Corinthians 3:3).

3. The Christian Scriptures were not completed until near the end of the first century but the new covenant was a complete reality from the time of the very first convert to Christianity. The fact that John was over sixty years removed from the visions which he would incorporate into the Book of Revelation did not alter or affect the covenant which God made with His people on the day of Pentecost following the resurrection of Christ (Acts 2).

Ishmael and Isaac

The Galatian letter is distinguished by the fact that it does not contain one word of commendation. Even to the Corinthians Paul had a few complimentary things to say before dealing with their many problems. To the Galatians, however, he states his credentials and then immediately launches into a

tirade against what he calls "another gospel." He then explains that it is really not another gospel but simply a perversion of the one true gospel (Galatians 1:1-8).

A study of the letter leaves little doubt about the nature of this perverted gospel. It was a gospel of legalism! To persist in this perversion would ultimately cause one to be severed from Christ and thus to fall from grace (Galatians 5:4).

The dramatic distinction between the two differing philosophies of religion in Galatia may not have been easily seen. Ishmael and Isaac were probably quite similar in their appearance. Because Abraham was the father of both they no doubt both inherited a physical likeness to him. They may have worn similar clothing, eaten similar food, and lived in similar houses. But they were different.

The teachers who came to Galatia may have used Bible terminology and professed the same loyalty to Jesus that Paul did. But they were different.

In order to focus on this difference Paul makes reference to Ishmael and Isaac. They represent two distinct philosophies of religion. They had a common father but different mothers. One was born of the flesh to a bondwoman. The other was born by promise to a freewoman. One brings bondage . . . the other freedom. One leads you to persecute those with whom you differ. The other has "many more children" in spite of unfavorable circumstances.

The name "Ishmael" means "God hears." He was so named by the angel of the Lord who heard the afflictions of his mother Hagar. God had promised Abram and Sarai a son but the fulfillment of that promise was delayed until Sarai was past the age of bearing. Because they conceived their present circumstances as "too hard for the Lord" (Genesis 18:14) they set about to improvise and manipulate their own fulfillment to the promise.

Before Ishmael was ever born it was predicted that he would be a "wild man." "His hand would be against every man, and every man's hand against him" (Genesis 16:12).

This was the very nature of the legalists who came to Galatia. In the wake of their teaching came hatred and enmity, strife and jealousy, factions and divisions, heresies and envy (Galatians 5:20-21). A teacher is known by his fruit. Men do not gather grapes of thorns, nor figs of thistles.

Ishmael was a slave who was born of a slave. His bondage was also typical of that experienced by the Judaizers. Their every thought of the Master caused them to cringe in fear. They labored under a heavy yoke which neither they nor their ancestors were ever able to bear.

Ishmael was born after the flesh. His birth involved no special miracle or dispensation of grace. This too was characteristic of that legalistic perversion of truth which insisted that a man could be made perfect in the flesh (Galatians 3:3).

Issac corresponded to the ministry of Paul. His very name meant "laughter." With Paul there was no oppressive slave mentality but a Spirit of adoption which enabled him to be so familiar with the Father that he would call him "Abba" or "Papa."

With Isaac and Paul there was no spirit of contention and rivalry which would lead people to "bite and devour" one another. Instead there was the beautiful display of love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness and self control.

The teachings of Paul were more productive because people respond more readily to a love feast than a fight. ". . . the desolate hath many more children . . ." (Galatians 4:27) The church that thrives on debate is destined to be small.

The First Century

As we have said before, this basic dichotomy of covenants, once suggested, can be easily seen throughout virtually all of the Christian Scriptures.

James might well have been the first inspired book to be written since the close of the Old Testament Canon. One indication of an early date is the use of "synagogue" in James 2:2. The Jewish Christians of the Dispersion were still meeting in synagogues when James wrote. Note the contrasting philosophies at work in the church and the fruit which they would produce:

"Can the fig tree, my brethren, bear olive berries? either a vine, figs? so can no fountain both yield salt water and fresh. Who is a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? let him shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom. But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth. This wisdom descendeth not from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish. For where envying and strife is, there is confusion and every evil work.

But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace." (James 3:12-18)

Remember that the distinguishing mark of the Christian is love. By this shall all men know that we are His disciples.

The same type of distinction mentioned by James forms a basis for understanding the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15. The legalists who represented Ishmael came down from Judea and taught "except ye be circumcised after the manner of Moses, ye cannot be saved." These are, no doubt, the "false brethren" referred to by Paul in Galatians 2:4. They crept in privately to perpetrate their philosophy of bondage in the primitive church. Those personified by Isaac had to forbear such people in love, endeavoring to keep the unity which the Spirit had created.

The influence of these wicked teachers was not only felt at Antioch and Jerusalem, but throughout virtually all of the Mediterranean world. They were the gospel perverters of Galatians 1:6-9; the false apostles of II Corinthians 11:13; the grievous wolves of Acts 20:29; those judging about foods and holy days in Colossians 2:16; the arguers of I Timothy 1:4; and the heretics of Titus 3:10.

Though times and circumstances varied, their basic nature always reflected satanic influence:

- * They exalted their own righteousness (Romans 10:3).
- * They were more interested in money than people (I Corinthians 4:15; II Corinthians 11:12).
- * They used the unscrupulous methods of a huckster (II Corinthians 2:17).
- * They loved to argue (I Timothy 1:4; 6:4).
- * They loved to have the preeminence (III John 9).
- * They did not receive the brethren and cast out those who who did (III John 10).
- * They separated from other believers (Jude 19).

Jesus said "By their fruits ye shall know them" (Matthew 7:20). The most accurate way to determine the nature of a tree is not by examining the texture of its leaves or the grain of its wood, but by its fruit. The true nature of a teacher is best determined in the same way. God is not the author of

confusion, but of peace. As James wrote "The fruit of righteousness is sown in peace of them that make peace" (James 3:18). Those who reflect "love" reveal the nature of that Holy Spirit within them. Those who create anarchy and confusion among believers reflect an absence of that Spirit.

The Twentieth Century

There has never been a time in the history of Christianity when believers in Jesus were more divided. Because every way of a man seems right in his own eyes we continue to compound our problems with the insane idea that if everyone would just listen to us, unity would miraculously appear. As I have previously stated this is not a part of the solution, it is a part of the problem. It is not a time for us to police the brotherhood in search of divisive people, it is a time for us to examine our own hearts.

"Examine yourselves whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobate." (II Corinthians 13:5)

If Jesus Christ is within us, we will reflect His nature, and bear His fruit. We will love our enemies and bless them that curse us. We will do good to them that hate us and pray for them which despitefully use us and persecute us. By so doing we will demonstrate our royal birth in the family of God. By this shall all men know that we are his disciples, because we love one another.

How Many Times?

Peter once asked Jesus, "Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?"

Jesus said, "I say not unto thee, until seven times: but, until seventy times seven." (Matthew 18:22)

The legalist bases his understanding and actions upon some concept of law. Let us suppose, for the sake of illustration, that Jesus agreed with Peter that one should forgive his brother seven times. This is not the end of the problem, it is the beginning. Next we are thrown into a controversy as to what actually constitutes a "sin" against you. What about a verbal insult which did not result in either bodily harm or financial loss? What about a business venture which infringed upon my income? What about failing to inform me of an opportunity

which would have brought happiness and prosperity to my family? etc., etc., etc. Then you face the very practical matter as "who" will judge what and how many offenses actually occurred. What I deem to be one legitimate offense, the man whom I offend may consider as two or three.

The whole legalistic concept is fraught with controversy. It drives you from the quiet domestic atmosphere to the wind swept plains where, like Ishmael, you will always be embroiled in conflict.

Love transcends all of these difficulties by sweeping away personal rights to anything. Jesus was more concerned about saving His enemies than condemning them. For this reason He abased Himself that they might be exalted. He became sin that they might be delivered from sin. It is in this very context that the Scriptures enjoin, "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 2:5)

Such a mentality is so utterly supernatural that like Isaac it can only come from God. No unregenerate person can develop such love without the Holy Spirit anymore than Sarah could conceive a child in a dead womb.

When the first covenant was ratified at Sinai 3,000 died as a result of their rebellion (Exodus 32:28). It was and is a covenant of death. When the new covenant became a reality at Pentecost 3,000 were saved because of their submission (Acts 2:41). It was and is a covenant of life. It is paradoxical, but true, that men will sometimes choose death rather than life, and slavery before freedom.

The first covenant began with holy words engraved on stone and holy places erected by man. It sought to make men conform to a divine standard by external pressure and threats of punishment. It did not work! The new covenant began with the Word of God made flesh and His only temple is the humble and contrite heart of those who have received Him by faith. Praise God, it works! What the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, has now been accomplished by those who walk in the Spirit. We are not conformed . . . we are transformed!

When faced with the frustrations of life, however, we still have the very real temptation to plan for the birth of Ishmael. Human rules and legal regulations tend to make us feel secure. Though a long list of touch nots, taste nots, and handle nots, may have an appearance of wisdom in promoting rigor of

devotion and self abasement, the Scriptures categorically affirm that they are of no value in checking the indulgence of the flesh (Colossians 2:23). The solution of the problems of worldliness is not to be found in law . . . but in love.

The "works" of the flesh are manifest . . . the "fruit" of the Spirit is love. "Works" result from human effort . . . "fruit" comes from the power of God.

By this shall all men know that we are His disciples, if we have love one for another!

Questions for Discussion — Lesson Four

1. If the first thirty-nine books of the Bible are not the Old Testament, what are they?
2. If the twenty-seven books of the Bible which we call the New Testament are not the New Testament, what are they?
3. Why is understanding the nature of the covenants important?
4. Is it possible for two people to ever come to an identical understanding of all Scripture?
5. Is the Christian living under the Ten Commandments?
6. If the New Testament is a testament of peace, why did Jesus and the apostles have so much trouble?
7. Why did Ishmael persecute Isaac?
8. Why do people born of the flesh persecute people who are born of the Spirit?
9. Is denominationalism good for Christianity?
10. Why do we sometimes reject love and insist on law?