

A New Covenant

Exodus 31:12-18; 2 Corinthians 3:1-6

October 4, 1998

“You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on your hearts, to be known and read by all men; and you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.” With this, Paul says that if you want to know something about the gospel of Jesus Christ, look around the church. Look around at the men, women, and children who make up an actual congregation. Look deep into their hearts, and there you will find the reality of their faith, their lives, their convictions, their commitments, their spirit, their soul, and their salvation. There you will find evidence of the work of Jesus Christ. There you will find the Spirit of the living God.

On the face of it, this would appear to be an outrageously dangerous claim. You and I would not welcome such scrutiny. We might not think many congregations could stand up to it. But if Paul thinks the church at Corinth, with all of its problems, deserves such commendations, probably most of the ones we know would stand up, too.

What can this possibly mean? And what does it not mean? It does not mean that they were such good people to start with that they barely needed the grace of Jesus Christ. The whole thing is about grace. Presumably it does not mean that they have reached some state of perfection as Christian saints. If it did, much of the rest of the letter would be rendered unnecessary. But it does mean that Jesus Christ himself, through the outward preaching of the gospel and the inward working of the Holy Spirit, has touched their lives in real, true, deep, observable, and undeniable ways. Jesus Christ has claimed them as his own, and so they are his very own. Jesus Christ has fashioned them into a community of faith, worship, and obedience, for all the world to see. Dare we believe that this continues to be true today?

“Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God,” writes Paul. “Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant.” Now he has come to the heart of the matter: a new covenant. This is not something Paul has concocted. This is not something the Corinthians have made up. This is a gift from God. Yes, it is a gift from God, through Paul, to the Corinthians, but most of all, it is a gift from God, and from his Christ, by way of the Holy Spirit. And it is focused in a new covenant extending all the way to us.

This is something which the Corinthians and we have heard from Paul before. In the first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 11, Paul writes instructions about the Lord's Supper, and these have become the words of institution which we will use again in a few minutes: "For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, 'This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, 'This cup is *the new covenant* in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me' For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." They and now we have been bound together into a new community, called into existence by the self-sacrificial death of Jesus Christ, sealed by his blood, forgiven of our sin, and joined in the hope of his return as the promise of our own resurrection. Anyone who wanted to could see them joined in the new covenant. Anyone who wants to can see us joined in the new covenant. This is who we are. This is what we are about. We can do no other.

What does it mean that the covenant is new? What does it mean, not only to the Corinthians, now so long ago, but also and especially to us today? I submit to you that there are at least three ways in which this covenant of Jesus Christ is new to us.

First, and most obviously, it is new in contrast to the old. This is what Paul meant by a written code on tablets of stone. There was an old covenant of law, epitomized by the Ten Commandments. There are at least two dangers with this old covenant. One is the very real and profound danger that we cannot obey the law, which is to say that we cannot live up to the covenant. The other is the less likely possibility that we will fulfill the law but then, somehow, be so impressed with our own accomplishments that we no longer think we need God. There are times when Paul agonizes over his sin and over the ability of the law to encourage him to sin, and there are other times when he boasts that he has fulfilled the law. Either way, it seems, the law has cut him off from a living relationship with God. Thus he is grateful for the new covenant, a new relationship with God based not on Paul's accomplishment or lack thereof, but on the work and accomplishment of Jesus Christ on the cross. We, too, are grateful for this new covenant. However, unless some of us have converted to Christianity from Judaism, it is difficult to see how this contrast of the old and new covenants is of anything more than historical interest to us. It is important theologically to understand these, but it is scarcely gripping existentially.

Second, and perhaps more importantly to us, the new covenant is new to us not only in contrast to the old covenant but also new in the sense of being different and distinct from anything else the world has to offer, even today. This is much

more pertinent to our lives. Old Testament Judaism may not be a live option for us, but there are many other voices, many other options, many other claims being made today upon our hearts, souls, minds, loyalties, time, energy, and money. There are many other ways to live besides the new covenant of Jesus Christ.

What are some of these? You know them as well as I do. One says to look out for oneself, no matter what: no matter what the cost, no matter what the consequences, no matter what the damage to others. This, of course, is antithetical to the Christian faith. Christ teaches us to love our neighbor as ourselves, and to do unto others as we would have them do unto us. And yet, it is always a danger that we within the church, or even as the church, will fall into the worldly way of looking out for ourselves, so it is always good to be reminded of the new covenant.

Another voice in the world tries to convince us that we are what we do, that our lives and worth and value are defined totally by our work. Now we as much as anybody else want people to work hard and to be productive, but we want people to do so for the right reasons. And we know that finally work betrays us, in the sense that we can never finish, we can never do everything that we need to do, and we come to the end of the day and the end of our lives with work undone. Does this mean that we are not worth anything? No, it does not mean this at all. For we know, over and against this false voice, that we are not merely what we do but that we are, instead, the children of God, valued, loved, and cherished for the sake of Jesus Christ. This, too, is part of what it means to be a people of the new covenant.

Yet another voice in the world tries to tell us that life has value and meaning because of what racial ethnic group we happen to occupy. This, of course, is divisive, destructive, and wrong. God in Jesus Christ has gathered people of all races and ethnicities, of all continents and languages, around the one table of the new covenant and into the one family of the people of God.

The list could go on. There are many alternative proposals for giving meaning, value, and purpose to life. But part of what makes the new covenant new is that it is different and distinct from all these alternatives. For this we are grateful. If you are living your life under the influence and guidance of some other voice, some way of the world, we invite and encourage you to enter into the new covenant of Jesus Christ.

Third, and in addition to being new in contrast to being old, and in addition to being new in distinction from the alternatives, the new covenant is also new in the sense of being always new for us. It is ancient, and yet it is fresh every day. In a few moments, we will share in the Lord's Supper. When we do so, we realize that we join a meal that has been shared in a form that would be easily recognizable by us on every Sunday for almost two-thousand years. The new covenant now has a long history. And yet, we do not simply remember what has already been. We do not

simply recount what has already been done. Instead, we enter into a covenant still new in the sense that it is living, present, and current. Christ was not only raised two-thousand years ago, but is alive today, forgiving our sin, nurturing us in the faith, loving us that we might love each other. We come to the table not only to remember but to be made new and well and whole. And we join in this meal in anticipation of the great heavenly banquet yet to come. The ancient covenant is new for us every day because God's grace is new and fresh for us every day.

Are there reasons to doubt all of this? Of course there are. That is why it is called faith instead of knowledge. It is a matter of trust and confidence. And yet, it is not blind faith. There are reasons for believing. We believe because of the witness of the first disciples. We believe because of the testimony of the scripture. We believe because of the history and teachings of the church. And, perhaps most of all, we believe because of the faith of our parents, our friends, our neighbors— the witness of Jesus Christ, working through the Holy Spirit in the lives of those closest and dearest to us.

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To God be the glory, forever and ever! Amen.

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