

The Ministration Of Death

“But if the ministration of death, written and engraven on stones, came with glory, so that the children of Israel could not look stedfastly upon the face of Moses for the glory of his face; which glory was passing away: how shall not rather the ministration of the spirit be with glory? For if the ministration of condemnation hath glory, much rather doth the ministration of righteousness exceed in glory” (2 Cor. 3:7-9).

What is this “ministration of condemnation” of which Paul speaks in this passage? Many commentators give a rather nebulous, uncertainly response; the only certainty they express is that it is not the ten commandments! Their feverish denials seems to be stirred by the fact that the text, if left untampered by their explanations to the contrary, seem to indicate the very thought they which they deny.

Consider these undeniable facts. First, the circumstances the apostle refers to is the incident which occurred solely at the giving and receiving of the ten commandments, viz, Moses putting a veil upon his face to cover its brightness (Ex. 34:33-35). Paul’s reference to Moses and the veiling of his face is an exclusive reference to the events at Sinai in the reception of the two tables of stones. Second, what could be clearer about Paul’s subject than his identifying the “ministration of death” as that which was written and engraven on stones, or that the Corinthians were “epistles of Christ ... written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in tables that are hearts of flesh” (2 Cor. 3:7, 3).

Paul’s writing about the abrogation of the first covenant, including the ten commandments, is extensive and this Corinthian passage is not an isolated passage, capable of many explanations; it is one of many passages from the apostle on this same subject. In the Ephesian letter he said Christ “brake down the middle wall...even the law of commandments contained in ordinances” (Eph. 2:15). In his Colossian letter he wrote “having blotted out the bond written in ordinances that was against us,...and he hath taken it out of the way, nailing it to the cross ...” (Col. 2:14). In his Galatian letter he likens the law to a schoolmaster whose purpose was to bring us to Christ, but which was removed when faith came (Gal. 3:24f). In his Roman letter he tells Jewish brethren, “Wherefore, brethren, we are made dead to the law ...” (Rom. 7:4). The Hebrew writer tells that a new covenant has been given just as Jeremiah predicted (Jer. 31:31; Heb. 8:7-13) and that when Jeremiah predicted a new covenant, he made the first covenant old which then began to wax old, ready to vanish away. Contrary to what any scholar might otherwise say, the ministration of death was the ten commandments, which according to Paul, has passed away.

But why would Paul so describe the ten commandments (which stand as embodiment for the whole law) as the “ministration of death” and “ministration of condemnation”? The answer is simple. Without the means of ridding a soul from sin, law, any law, would produce death and condemnation. All have sinned (Rom. 3:23). Sin is transgression of law (1 Jn. 3:4) and where there is law without the remedial blood of Christ to remove sin’s guilt, any law will condemn and pronounce death to the offender. The New

Covenant (which includes nine of the ten commandments — the Sabbath is omitted) is a sufficient covenant, vastly superior to the first, because it offers to all sinners the all powerful blood of Christ. Under the ten commandment law, the Old Covenant, the only cleansing offered to offenders was the blood of animals. Yet, the blood of bulls and goats could not take away sin (Heb. 10:4). The New Covenant has the blood of God's sinless Son and "if we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another and the blood of Jesus his Son, cleanseth us from all sin" (1 John 1:7).

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