

Three Contrasts Of Two Covenants

“God ... also made us sufficient as ministers of a new covenant; not of the letter, but of the spirit for the letter killeth but the spirit giveth life. 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 be with glory, much rather doth the ministration of righteousness exceed in glory” (2 Cor. 3:6-9).

There are several contrasts between the two covenants made in this third chapter of Second Corinthians and we will examine three of them. First, there is the contrast of a new covenant with an old covenant. It is true that the words “old covenant” are not found in the text but it is necessarily implied as such. Paul identifies himself (and the other apostles) as sufficient ministers of a new covenant and his comparison is with something which came before the New Covenant, obviously the old. And, while the Corinthian text does not specifically identify the tables of stone as the Old Covenant at this point, further in the text it will. “For until this very day at the reading of the old covenant the same veil remaineth, it not being revealed to them that it is done away in Christ” (2 Cor. 3:14). The Hebrew writer also identifies the first covenant as “old”. He wrote, “In that he saith a new covenant, he hath made the first old” (Heb. 8:13). In that Hebrew passage the writer shows that if the first covenant had been “faultless” then would no place have been sought for a second (Heb. 8:7). Some counter this statement, arguing that the fault was with the people, not the covenant. It is evident the people were at fault. But, having said that, it must be added that the covenant also had fault: fault in that it lacked the power to make the spiritual transgressor alive (Rom. 8:1-3). The contrast between the Old Covenant and New Covenant is that the new remains while the old has passed away. “In that he saith a new covenant he hath made the first old and that which is old and waxeth aged is nigh unto vanishing away” (Heb. 8:13).

A second contrast is that identified as the “ministration of death” versus the “ministration of the spirit”. This “ministration of death” written and engraven on stones is a clear reference to the two tables of stone upon which Moses wrote the ten commandments. It is called the “ministration of death” because each of the ten commandments called for the stoning to death of those who violated that commandment. In contrast to that is the “ministration of the spirit,” and while “spirit” may refer to the Holy Spirit who gave the new law, “ministration of spirit” is not a reference to the second covenant as being the revelation of the Holy Spirit. It is a second contrast for just as “new” is opposite to “old,” so “ministration of death” is opposite to “ministration of spirit”. Violation of the Old Covenant brought spiritual death; obedience to the new brings spiritual life. Jesus spoke of the thief who “cometh not, but that he may steal and kill, and destroy: I came that they may have life, and may have it abundantly” (Jn. 10:10). John said, “In him was life and the life was the light of men” (Jn. 1:4). Jesus promised that “whosoever believeth in him might not perish but have eternal life” (Jn. 3:16). Remember Paul said, “I was alive apart from the law once; but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died” (Rom. 7:9).

The third contrast seen is between the “ministration of condemnation” and the “ministration of righteousness”. The first covenant is the “ministration of condemnation” because it concluded (condemned) all as transgressors of it. Thus Paul said, “All have sinned and come short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). On the other hand, the New Covenant is the “ministration of righteousness”: it is only through the second that sinful man can be pronounced “righteous.” In Romans 1:16 Paul wrote that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation, adding, “for therein is revealed a righteousness of God from faith unto faith” (Rom. 1:17). This “righteousness of God” revealed in the gospel is not a revelation of God’s righteous character (that was always known); the righteousness of God revealed in the gospel is a way that sinful man can be pronounced just and righteous. This is all possible because the guilty sinner, washed in the blood of the Lamb, becomes clean and white as snow. It is true that this pronouncement is not of our own doing, “not of works,” because it is God’s gift (Eph. 2:8-10). But man must act in this cleansing; we must come to Christ, we must open the door!

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