

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

THE NEW TESTAMENT BELIEF IN AN OLD TESTAMENT CHURCH¹

I. THE STATE OF THE QUESTION

ARE the Old Testament and the New Testament Churches the same? Or, as others would prefer to have the question stated, was there a church in the Old Testament? This cannot be said to be an academic theological problem, but rather one which is of vital importance in the Christian's own personal spiritual life. It is a problem, however, which cannot be settled by philosophizing or by rationalization. Nor indeed can it be settled merely by historical research, for the Church is something which of itself can be truly discerned only by faith. Consequently it would seem that the one sure method of ascertaining whether or not the Church truly existed under the Old Testament dispensation, is to ascertain the teachings of the New Testament on this point.

Throughout the history of the Church since apostolic days, it has been generally held that the Church of the New Testament is identical with that of the Old. True, the Covenant of Grace was administered under different forms in the two dispensations, but the differences were only matters of form, not of essence. Basically the Gospel was preached by Noah, believed in by Abraham and obeyed by David, just as much as it was preached, accepted and obeyed by any New Testament saints. Perhaps the best evidence of the Church's view is to be found in the various Protestant creeds or confessions at the time of the Reformation. Article VII of *The Thirty-Nine Articles of the Church of England* (1571) states that;

The olde Testament is not contrary to the newe, for both in the olde and newe Testament everlasting lyfe is offered to mankynde by Christe, who is the only mediator between God and man. Wherefore they are not to be hearde which faigne that the olde fathers dyd look only for transitorie promises. . . .

The *Scots Confession* (1560) holds the same view (sec. IV), pointing out that the promise of salvation by grace was first made to Adam:

Quilk promise, as it was repeated, and made mair cleare from time to time; and so it was embraced with joy, and maist constantlie

¹ Professor Reid informs us that this paper "was read to a group of High Anglicans, Plymouth Brethren and a few Presbyterians in danger of becoming Baptists. That may explain some of my more direct references". We should like to have been present at the following discussion! Ed.

received of all the faithful from Adam to Noe, from Noe to Abraham, from Abraham to David and so forth to the incarnation of Christ Jesus, all (we mean the faithful Fathers under the Law) did see the joyful daie of Christ Jesus, and did rejoyce.

The Westminster Confession of Faith (1647) in chapter VII states the whole matter even more clearly and at more length, pointing out that by faith in the promises of the Messiah, the believers of Old Testament times “ had full remission of sins and eternal salvation ”.

This view of the relationship between the Old and New Testament dispensations was not something invented by the Reformers. It was inherent in the beliefs of the early church fathers. Augustine's little rhyme,

The New is in the Old contained,
The Old is by the New explained,

would seem to make this plain. Irenaeus, a disciple of Polycarp who in turn had known the apostle John, has this to say;

The Church, although scattered over the whole world even to its extremities, received from the apostles and their disciples the faith in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, the seas and all that in them is, and in one Christ Jesus, the Son of God, Who became incarnate for our salvation, and in the Holy Ghost, who *by the prophets* proclaimed the dispensations, the advents, the virgin birth, the passion and resurrection from the dead, the bodily ascension of the well-beloved Christ Jesus our Lord into heaven, and His Parousia from the heavens in the glory of the Father . . . that He should pronounce a just judgment upon all . . . but in His graciousness should confer life and the reward of incorruption and eternal glory upon those who have kept His commandments and have abided in His love. . . .¹

Justin Martyr, another of the apologists of the second century held the same position, adding, however, such men as Socrates and Heraclitus to the list of Christians who lived before Christ.² Thus from the earliest days of the Church it has been recognized that believers in the Old Testament dispensation were equally saved by grace, and so were in the Church along with New Testament believers.

¹ *Adversus Haereses*, I, x, nos. 1, 2, in B. J. Kidd, *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Church* (New York, 1933), I, 117. Italics ours.

² *Apology*, I, xlvi, nos. 1-4; *ibid.*, I, 74.

Yet, while the Church generally has held this position, there have been from the earliest times those who denied it. They were usually accounted heretics and not true Christians. One of the early adherents of such views was the Gnostic Marcion (*ca.* A.D. 160), who was very certain that the Old Testament taught a type of theology and way of salvation very different from that of the New Testament.¹ It is also probable that somewhat the same position was adopted by the Albigensians in southern France during the Middle Ages. It is since the Reformation, however, that the idea of the fundamental principial division between the Old and New Testament has become important. Apparently the Anabaptists held that the promises in which the Old Testament saints trusted were merely temporary and passing. The benefits promised were carnal rather than spiritual. That this argument was common during the Reformation would seem clear both from its rejection by Calvin and by the section already quoted from the Thirty-Nine Articles.²

These views have persisted down to the present time, and are held by two very different groups to-day. On one hand there are those who hold to the Graf-Wellhausen developmental hypothesis of the Old Testament. While they may or may not accept the teachings of the New Testament, they rather generally reject the idea that there is any real vital relationship between it and the Old Testament. On the other hand there are those who accept the Scriptures to be the inspired word of God, but who make an absolute division between the Old and New Testament. These are usually known as "dispensationalists" and base their teachings largely on the notes contained in the Scofield edition of the Bible. The views expressed in such explanations usually go back to the teachings of J. N. Darby who wrote in the nineteenth century. Scofield says, for instance, on a note explaining the word "righteousness" in 1 John iii. 7: ". . . The righteous man under law became righteous by doing righteously; under grace he does righteously because he is made righteous". Similarly in a note on Matt. xvi. 18 he states very dogmatically that there was no church in the New Testament sense in Old Testament times.³ Of course there

¹ Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, I, xxvii, nos. 1-3; *ibid.*, I, 122.

² *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV, xvi, 10; *Thirty-Nine Articles*, sec. VII.

³ Cf. O. T. Allis, "Modern Dispensationalism and the Doctrine of the Unity of Scripture", *Evangelical Quarterly*, viii (1936), pp. 22 ff.

could not be, if man saved himself by fulfilling the works of the law.

Thus to-day the Protestant church is divided on this issue. On one side stand the dispensationalists in all denominations along with some of the higher critics. On the other side are those who hold to what has been the general point of view of the Church since the New Testament times, i.e. that although under different forms of administration in the two dispensations, nevertheless since the first promise of salvation to men there has been, and will always be only one Church. The latter group insist that man's salvation at any time in human history is dependent entirely upon the sovereign grace of God. To the former, however, only since the coming of Christ is divine grace needed for man's redemption. Before that time man could save himself.

II. THE ORGANIC UNITY OF THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

In order to take a comprehensive view of the New Testament's view of its relationship to the Old Testament dispensation, it is necessary to realize that fundamental to the whole question is the covenant-concept. The frequent use of the terms "testament" and "covenant" in both Testaments indicates this very clearly. In fact the word "testament", so often employed by the translators, particularly in the New Testament, should frequently be interpreted "covenant".¹ The covenant is primarily one between God and man, the latter being represented from all eternity by the Son, acting for all those who would believe on His name. The statement of Christ Himself in John xvii concerning those whom God had given Him, points to this covenant relationship, and it is specifically linked up with the Old Testament Church in Hebrews ii. 9-17. In Hebrews xiii. 20 there is also a reference to Christ making His people perfect "through the blood of the eternal covenant". Thus it would seem to be indicated that the New Testament holds to the existence of an eternal covenant of grace between God the Father and God the Son, the latter standing in the place of sinful men. This, to begin with, would place the whole matter

¹ J. Dick, *Lectures on Theology* (Philadelphia, 1844), I, p. 515; *W.C.F.*, *loc. cit.*

above and beyond the question of the old or new dispensations. The covenant of salvation is from all eternity.

That this is the proper interpretation of the New Testament would seem to be indicated by the Gospel and apostolic insistence upon the uniqueness of the way of salvation, namely through blood atonement. Moreover, it was not just a matter of the shedding of blood, for the sacrifices were effective only because they pointed to Christ. Paul would seem to indicate this when he says: "There is one God and one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. ii. 5). Lest, however, it be thought that it is assuming too much to apply this statement to the Old Testament dispensation it is necessary to glance at the New Testament view of the old sacrifices. As far as the New Testament writers are concerned the sacrifices were not of any value in themselves. Their whole importance was bound up in the fact that they pointed forward to a coming Redeemer. John the Baptist, no doubt with this in mind, refers to Christ as "the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world" (John i. 29). Paul, in writing to the Colossians (ii. 17), points out that Christ is the fulfilment of the Old Testament ceremonies which were but shadows of the future. This is stated even more clearly in Hebrews x, where it is pointed out that "He is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament, they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance" (v. 15). Christ Himself was apparently very conscious of this same thing, for more than once He claimed to be the fulfilment of the Old Testament ceremonial. In fact He was prepared to say that He was the true temple.¹ Thus it would seem to be clear that the New Testament held firmly to the fact that Christ was the Covenant-Redeemer of men both in the old and new dispensation, although in the former He was shown to them under types and symbols.

Along with this, the New Testament knows of only one way, whether before or after Christ, of men appropriating the blessing of the covenant of grace. Paul was never tired of ringing the changes on the fact that "by the works of the Law shall no flesh be justified in His sight" (Rom. iii. 9-20; Gal. ii. 16). That this was applied to the Old Testament saints as

¹ Matt. v. 17, 18; John xii. 34 ff.; v. 39; ii. 19; Matt. xii. 6.

well as to the New Testament ones is very clear and evident. Man is justified by faith alone. If he is justified prior to the Incarnation, it is through faith in the promises of God signified to him in all the Old Testament ceremonies. If he is justified after the Incarnation, it is through faith in the Christ who has come as a result of God's covenant promises and who has fulfilled all righteousness. Romans iii. 2 to v. 21 stresses this very point. In Galatians iii much the same argument is set forth, but Paul ends, not by pointing out that Abraham was really a Christian, but rather that Christians are really Abraham's seed. The culmination of the New Testament teaching would seem to come in Hebrews xi where repeatedly faith in the promises of God is stated to be the condition of God's acceptance of men. The grand summary is made in the words: "These all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise; God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect" (vv. 39, 40). To this point of view Christ gave His hearty adherence in many instances, but nowhere more eloquently than in John iii. 14-16 and in John vi. 31-59. In the first case He likened Himself to the brazen serpent of Moses, and in the second to the manna given to wandering Israel. In each case faith was necessary if one was to obtain the blessing of God, exactly as one in the New Testament dispensation has to trust in Christ. Thus B. B. Warfield's characterization of Old Testament faith is identical with that of the New Testament: "it consists in an utter commitment of oneself to Jehovah, with confident trust in Him as guide and saviour, and assured expectation of His promise of salvation".¹

The unity of the two dispensations is shown also by the nature of the "covenant people". Few will deny that the Old Testament held a very low view of the righteousness of men. Paul's quotations from the Old Testament statements on this matter in Romans i. 18-iii. 20 not only show his attitude, but indicate its oneness with the Old Testament theology. Because of man's unwillingness to turn to God under any dispensation, if any were to believe God's promises, conversion would be only by virtue of the sovereign action of God. Christ Himself stated this very clearly when He said "no man can come unto Me

¹ *Biblical Doctrines* (N.Y., 1929), p. 489; *Biblical and Theological Studies* (Philadelphia, 1952), p. 410.

except it were given him of My Father" (John vi. 65). John i. 12, 13 points in the same direction. The clearest statement of the situation is set forth in the latter part of the Epistle to the Romans, in Ephesians i and in 2 Peter i. There it is explained that men come to Christ by faith because they have been "chosen in Him before the foundation of the world". They are those who, as Christ said in John xvii. 9-11, were given to Him by the Father. They are the elect who were chosen both from the Old and the New Testament people. This, indeed, is the whole summit of the argument of the letter to the Romans. Isaac and Jacob both believed God because God had chosen them. Thus faith is God's gift to His elect. "For by grace are ye saved through faith: and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God" (Eph. ii. 7).

At the same time it is necessary to keep in mind that throughout the Old Testament the promises are not merely made to adults but also to children. Circumcision was given to Abraham as a sign and seal of his receiving the promise of God's covenant, but it was administered to his children and his servants also because they were to be included in the covenant relationship (Gen. xvii. 10-14). Paul in Romans iv. 9-12 refers to this promise to back up his argument on justification by faith, but he never makes any demand that children should now be excluded. Nor is there anywhere in the New Testament any attempt to exclude children from the covenant relationship. Instead they are to be regarded as "holy", which would seem to mean that they are within the covenant circle (I Cor. vii. 14). Moreover, since Paul equates New Testament baptism with Old Testament circumcision (Col. ii. 11, 12), it would seem that in both Old Testament and New Testament the children of believers are to be regarded as within the Covenant, and to receive its sign. When they come to the age of responsibility they are then to assume its obligations by public profession of faith.

Yet all those who were Israel according to the flesh, were not truly Israel. Christ pointed out to the religious leaders of His own day that, while within the "visible" covenant circle, they were not truly God's people but rather the children of Satan (John viii. 44). He also stressed the fact that many who claimed to be Abraham's seed were not truly so, because of their lack of faith (John viii. 39 ff.). Paul said the same thing using Isaac

and Ishmael, Jacob and Esau as examples. There were many who had been circumcised, many who made a great profession of faith, who yet were not truly God's people, Abraham's seed. This again was similar to the situation in the New Testament Church. It was recognized that there was the "visible" and "invisible" church, the difference being based upon God's election, resulting in the true faith of His elect.

It was this mixture of true and false "Christians", if we may use the term, which constituted the "visible" Church in both dispensations. But at the same time it was this same Church under both periods of the covenant to which was committed God's revelation. As Paul said, it was the Israelites "to whom pertained the adoption, and the glory, and the covenants, and the giving of the law and the service of God, and the promises; whose are the fathers, and of whom as concerning the flesh Christ came, Who is over all, God blessed for ever" (Rom. ix. 4, 5). At the same time he was prepared to speak of the Church of the New Testament as "the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Tim. iii. 15). Thus the Church's work at all times has been the same—the preservation and the proclamation of the God's word to man.

God's saving power and activity was not, however, set forth by preaching only, but also by visible signs which are to-day called sacraments. The two most fundamental in the Old Testament dispensation were circumcision and the Passover. The former was applied to all male children who reached the age of eight days. In their flesh was placed the "sign and seal of the covenant". It was the sign that they were God's people. They reached full maturity in the Covenant people, however, only when they partook of the Passover. As has already been pointed out, it would seem to have been taken for granted that the children in the New Testament Covenant were in the same position as those in the Old, baptism being substituted for circumcision. If this is not so, then the covenant was restricted rather than broadened in the New Testament, for children of the covenant people would then be excluded from the Church. The other sacrament of the New Testament dispensation is the Lord's Supper, established on the night of Christ's last Passover on earth. Both by implication and by direct statement He made it plain to the apostles that this feast of communion was to take the place of the great feast of the Old Covenant. That had been

but a shadow of what was to come. The Lord's Supper points back to the true reality. Superseding the Passover lamb, the bread signifies Christ's "body given for" us; and the cup "the new covenant in My blood which is shed for you" (Luke xxii. 19, 20). Thus there is the closest relationship between the principal ceremonies of the Old Testament covenant and the sacraments of the New Testament.

Finally, there is the question of the position of the law under both dispensations. According to Paul, even in the Old Testament there was no idea that a man could be justified by the works of the Law (Rom. iii). As he points out in Eph. iii. 10-12, no one has ever been saved by the law. Even when men in the Old Testament economy obeyed the laws of sacrifice and of national organization, it was their faith which counted. This the prophets had repeatedly emphasized. The moral law, however, had the purpose of convicting men of their sinfulness, their total inability to justify themselves before God and their absolute need of His grace and mercy (Gal. iii. 10 ff.). It is interesting to note that in concluding his statement on the place of the law, Paul points out that those who are justified by faith, and not by the law, are the true seed of Abraham. At the same time the law is to be obeyed even by the Christian as his guide and directory of conduct in life. When the rich young ruler said that he had kept the law Christ indicated His approval. He also said that obedience to the law of tithing was proper, and said generally that it was good to keep the law (Luke x. 25; xviii. 18; xi. 42). The apostles also are forever pointing out the need of a righteous life. Paul was never backward in rebuking sin, while James declared that one's righteous life manifested his justification by faith (1 Cor. v; James ii. 14 ff.). The law in its moral aspects was not abrogated by the New Covenant. In fact it was made more effective, for now by the giving of the Holy Spirit the Christian receives greater power to perform it than did the Old Testament saint.

Thus, as one glances over the New Testament teaching concerning the unity of the Old and New Covenant economies, he cannot but be impressed with the fact that Christ and the apostolic writers were thoroughly convinced that they were fulfilling, not destroying. There was a basic covenant unity between the two dispensations.

III. THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE OLD AND THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCHES

No doubt by this time, those who have read the argument for the unity of the Church in both dispensations are asking: "But surely there is some difference? The New Testament itself recognizes that fact." It is true that there were very great differences, but they were not based upon fundamental principles. Rather, the differences were caused by differences of dispensation and administration of economy. The dominant characteristic of the Old Testament dispensation was that it was partial. The promises and the law were both given largely under the cover of ceremonies, types and symbols. That is why the Old Testament dispensation is sometimes referred to in the New Testament as being under the law, while the New Testament dispensation is under grace (John i. 17). By the very nature of its incompleteness it had to be a dispensation of law and of shadows. It was for this reason that Paul continually emphasized the importance of Christians realizing that they were free from Old Testament ceremonial ordinances (Col. ii. 15, 16; Gal. iv. 5).

But not only was there the difference between the completeness of the two dispensations. There was also the prophetic character of the Old Testament economy as contrasted with the historical character of the New Testament. As the writer to the Hebrews points out in the eleventh chapter, all those Old Testament saints who died in the faith were looking forward. Christ Himself stressed the fact that the Old Testament had Him as its central theme (John v. 39). What is more, the New Testament Church continually regarded Old Testament prophecies concerning the kingdom as being fulfilled in the New Testament Church. The best example of this is to be found in Acts xv. 16, 17. There the first general assembly of the church interpreted Old Testament prophecies concerning the revival of the kingdom of David as referring to the expansion of the Church unto all nations (Hosea iii. 5; Amos ix. 11). Paul follows very much the same line of argument in the latter part of Romans x. And finally the writer of Hebrews declares that the New Testament church is the completion of the Old Testament church (Heb. xi. 40). Thus the Old Testament economy pointed forward to the New Testament economy as its summation.

Another difference between the two dispensations was that the Old Covenant was largely, although not exclusively, limited to national Israel, while the New Covenant is to go to all men and races. Although it took the New Testament church some time to realize this fully, nevertheless under the influence and writings of Paul this quickly became clear. The Book of Acts gives us the story of the whole process through which the Church went in arriving at its decision (Acts x, xi, xv). In Galatians i. and ii Paul gives us his experiences in this matter: how he came to be the apostle to the Gentiles. In fact the whole epistle deals with the problem of Judaizers who failed to realize the difference between Old Testament nationalism and New Testament universalism. All this change was founded upon Christ's last great command: "Go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel to every creature" (Mark xvi. 15).

Another difference between the two dispensations appears at Pentecost. In the Old Testament economy the Spirit of God came upon God's people, upon the elect and in special ways upon such men as David and the prophets (John vii. 39; 1 Peter i. 10, 11). With the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost the Church became the mystical body of Christ. This it could not be until He was glorified. Once, however, that had taken place, then the Spirit came upon the Church as a whole, forming it into one body. Moreover He came upon the Church to remain with it permanently and to dwell within it. Thus the New Testament Church is possessed of a spiritual power unknown to Old Testament saints. God's Spirit, it is true, dwelt within them also, but only as individuals, not as the body of Christ.¹

Yet when all is said and done, these differences are not of very great importance. All the fundamental characteristics of covenant people were common to both dispensations. Therefore, to the New Testament the Old Testament people were just as much in the church as were the apostles.

IV. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE UNITY AND DIVERSITY OF THE CHURCH IN THE TWO ECONOMIES

This discussion is by no means merely academic. Indeed, it is of the very greatest practical import. It drives home the fact that God's dealings with man are always on the same basis: namely grace. Never has any man succeeded in making himself

¹ Cf. A. Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit* (N.Y., 1900), chap. XXV.

acceptable to God by means of the law. Righteousness does not come in any dispensation, as Scofield would have it, "by doing righteously". Instead, "there is no other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved" but the name of Jesus Christ, the "only mediator between God and man". What is more, this salvation is based not upon the will of man but upon the sovereign and eternal covenant of God. Thus the foundations stand sure "for He knoweth them that are His".

When one has come to grasp this fact, then the Old Testament really comes to mean something. It is not an old book which has no real vital importance for our day. Instead its stories, its prophecies and its teachings are given to us not only as examples but also as God's revelation for our own hearts. In this day and age when the whole of our civilization seems to be breaking up before us, what is more appropriate than that we should turn back to the story of Judah and Israel before their being carried away into captivity? Do we not there possess a picture of our own day and age? Can we not from them glean many lessons as to the one and only way of salvation, whether spiritual or national? Only as we realize the unity of the Old and New Testaments can we really see the Old Testament in its true light.

At the same time this understanding gives us a better appreciation of the New Testament. While recognizing the unity of the two economies, we are the more able to see how God has preserved something better for us. He has given unto us the knowledge of the fullness of the Gospel, so that we might enjoy a freedom and a confidence impossible to the Old Testament saints. He has liberated us from ceremonies, from sacrifice, from asceticism and from legalism. We have been ordered to keep ourselves from being entangled again with any yoke of bondage. Our services of worship are to be free from imposed ceremonial and our lives are not to consist in the "touch not, taste not, handle not" pattern of conduct. Instead we are to stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free. We know the fullness of God's grace in Christ Jesus, therefore we should the more serve Him and glorify His name in all that we do.

*McGill University,
Montreal, Canada.*

W. STANFORD REID.