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# The New Covenant Theology

2 Corinthians 3:7-4:6

*Russ Kennedy*

Illustration: a medical practice – theory, training, person and then the reality of the practice of the ministry.

Paul locates all ministry in the church as a ministry of the New Covenant. The following key features show the heart-orientation embedded in that ministry.

<sup>4</sup> Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. <sup>5</sup> Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, <sup>6</sup> who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

## What is New Covenant Theology?

For some of you, this idea is new. So, let me take a moment to outline some differences...

### Commonly held theologies...

#### Dispensationalism

Uses a historic-grammatic literal way of interpreting the Bible.

Primarily sees redemptive history as ages of time with covenants framing those ages. Would teach a Covenant with Adam and sees the Old Testament promises to Israel as largely fulfilled in a future 1,000 year reign of Christ.

Teaches a two-fold purpose in God's redemption, one focused on Israel and one focused on the church, primarily with Gentiles.

Teaches we are not under the Mosaic Law but are subject to the Ten Commandments as understood by the teaching of Christ and the New Testament

## **Reformed Covenant Theology**

Uses a historic-grammatical, redemptive -theological way of interpreting the Bible with tendencies to allegorism.

Believes in two primary covenants, a covenant of works and a covenant of grace with all the covenants of the Bible either a part of the covenant of grace or sub-covenants within it.

Teaches that the church replaces Israel and was the center of God's redemptive purposes.

Teaches that Ten Commandments are the eternal moral will of God and are binding on Christians. Most Reformed teachers would also see aspects of the civil Mosaic Law as also binding.

The Chapel does not hold to either of those theological, hermeneutical frameworks. Our own study of the Scriptures and led us to what is known as New Covenant Theology. My own personal journey has taken me through all of these, starting with dispensationalism to traditional Reformed Covenantal Theology. I am thankful for the grace of God through John Reisinger, D.A. Carson, Gerardus Vos, John Bunyan, Lee Irons, David Gay, and the collaboration with Pastor Dale.

## **Summary and Distinctives of New Covenant Theology**

We affirm that the Lord Jesus Christ is the sum and center of God's revelation, the Word of God.

We affirm that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament, and particularly the Covenants.

We affirm the use of a grammatical, historical, literary, redemptive-historical method of interpreting the Bible.

We affirm that Christians are not under the Mosaic Law including the Ten Commandments. The Mosaic Law was for a period of time, for a particular people and ended with the death and resurrection of Jesus and the inauguration of the New Covenant.

We affirm that God's people in the Old Testament, and Israel in particular, were types, models, pictures, forerunners of the church, which is the full expression of the elect redeemed.

We affirm the sovereignty of God in salvation and over all of existence including what are commonly called the doctrines of grace.

And others, but these are enough to see how what we confess is different from the two other major systems.

How does New Covenant Theology make our ministry distinctive? It is not only in what we believe, but also in how we serve.

## **We Serve with a Spiritual Sufficiency (v. 4-6)**

*The Spirit makes us sufficient for the work of the ministry.*

<sup>4</sup> Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. <sup>5</sup> Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, <sup>6</sup> who has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

## **With Godward Confidence (v. 4)**

That they are God's spiritual letter written on the heart by the Spirit is Paul's confidence. Likewise, our confidence in ministry is through Christ towards God. The fact that God has saved people through the ministry gives us confidence in serving the people God has saved.

## **With Divine Provision (v. 5)**

Paul's confidence is not merely human arrogance, self-importance, or self-reliance. His confidence in God's work in him and in them is grounded in God. Therefore, our confidence, our ability to do what we are supposed to do in ministry – what Paul calls, *sufficiency* – is not in ourselves.

Because the church is a mess does not mean that Paul is incompetent or not qualified to deal with their issues. Ministry competency is not always challenged by the difficulties in the church. The failure of believers cannot always be laid at the door of leaders. The results in believers' lives is the work of God through the work of the servant of God. God may make the ministry very competent while granting the transforming grace on God's own agenda and timing.

## **With Life-giving Spirit (v. 6)**

By the life-giving, grace-enabling work of the Spirit, the ministry is sufficient for the work. This is because we are in the New Covenant. God's people come into existence through the regenerating work of the Spirit. God's people are transformed by the on-going inward work of the Spirit. Therefore, the Law and any form of legalism is not competent or sufficient to transform God's people. Only the inward life of the Spirit changing and growing God's people makes the competent work of ministry effective.

## **We Serve in New Covenant Glory (v. 7-11)**

*The Spirit is working doing the work of the ministry.*

<sup>7</sup> Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, <sup>8</sup> will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? <sup>9</sup> For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness

must far exceed it in glory. <sup>10</sup> Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. <sup>11</sup> For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory.

Paul then shows, in a series of contrast, why the ministry in the New Covenant is superior to that of the Old Covenant.

### **A ministry of the Spirit, not the letter of the Old (v.6)**

True New Covenant ministry understands that growth and change is now a matter of the Word and Spirit in a new and transforming way. It is not a matter of the Law, even the Ten Commandments. We are not serving the Law or under Law, but in life and under grace. The New Covenant ministry is one of the Spirit and the Word.

### **A ministry full of greater glory than the Old (v.7-11)**

True New Covenant ministry has a distinct glory about it. As it works to help people grow and change, it will be God-centered and God-magnifying. It will depend on the power of the Spirit and enabling grace to bring about what Biblical ministry aims to produce.

The Old Covenant ministry...

...was of the Law.

...had a fading glory.

...was to condemn.

...came to an end.

The New Covenant ministry...

...is of the Spirit.

...has a greater glory.

...brought true righteousness.

...has a permanent service.

## **We Serve with Transforming Power (v. 12-18)**

*The Spirit is transforming people through the work of the ministry.*

<sup>12</sup> Since we have such a hope, we are very bold, <sup>13</sup> not like Moses, who would put a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not gaze at the outcome of what was being brought to an end. <sup>14</sup> But their minds were hardened. For to this day, when they read the old covenant, that same veil remains unlifted, because only through Christ is it taken away. <sup>15</sup> Yes, to this day whenever Moses is read a veil lies over their hearts. <sup>16</sup> But when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. <sup>17</sup> Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. <sup>18</sup> And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit.

What marks a Biblically New Covenant ministry?

## **In a ministry that unveils the fading glory of the Old (v.12-16)**

New Covenant ministry will help people to live by and in the New Covenant and not to return to the Old as a way of life.

## **In a ministry that transforms in a Christ-centered way (v.17-18)**

New Covenant ministry affirms the transforming power of beholding Christ and therefore will hold him up to people's gaze and will rest in that transforming work. Our hearts will become like what the gaze at.

## **In a ministry that gives freedom from the slavery of the old (v.17-18)**

New Covenant ministry will free people from heart and behavior slavery both to the Old and to what the Old could never set us free from.

Without the work of the Spirit, people will not see the reality of the Old Covenant's fading away (v. 12-15). But, through the work of the Spirit, people see the greater glory of the New Covenant as they are able to see the Lord (v. 16-18).

## **We Serve with Hope (4:1)**

*The Spirit encourages us in the work of the ministry.*

<sup>1</sup> Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart.

## **By God's Mercy**

Paul does not have a right to his ministry. He has been chosen and appointed by the mercy of God. Why does he say it this way? He speaks of ministry by God's mercy because the church at Corinth has extended little mercy to him. They

have judged him based on worldly standards. Their understanding is one of ownership and rights. Paul is humbled in realizing that he serves only by God's mercy. Could the church then not extend him some grace and mercy as well?

Elders and leaders here serve in this same, New Covenant way. We are leaders only by the mercy of God. We are leaders only because of the grace and gifts from God.

## **In Deep Hardship**

Losing heart and becoming discouraged and thinking of quitting are what we do when things seem unbearably hard. Sometimes we are ready to quit because it seems that nothing will change. No matter what good and wise thing we do to help others, they continue in sin and folly. That is when we are tempted to want to give up.

## **With Lasting Encouragement**

But like Paul we will not give up. We repent of our false beliefs and worldly desires in ministry. We embrace with humility the sufficiency God gives through the work of the Spirit. We declare with faith that we are sufficient for the work God has given us.

I am going to say this as kindly and clearly as possible. If you are discouraged, if you are losing heart, you want to quit it may largely be because your view of ministry is wrong. God has set you in it by His deep mercy. God has equipped you for it by his Holy Spirit. God has brought you hardship and trouble in it by His wise providences. All may not be well. All may not be successful. People may not be changing. But that is up to God. Do not lost heart. Stay faithful. Serve will. Why? Because you believe what God says about the New Covenant ministry. And because you desire it above all things.

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## **Reflect and Respond**

How we do ministry and the way we go about it are profoundly affected by the glory of the ministry of the New Covenant.

As a Commissioned, New Covenant church we must rely on the work of the Spirit in the doing of all our ministries. We must not allow the errors and excesses of Charismatics to lessen our affirmation of and dependence on the work of the Spirit.

We learn then why we must be Spirit-enabled and Spirit-dependent:  
***The Spirit makes us sufficient for the work of the ministry.***

***The Spirit is working doing the work of the ministry.***

***The Spirit is transforming people through the work of the ministry.***

***The Spirit encourages us in the work of the ministry.***

Therefore, no matter how small, how difficult, how painful, how challenging ministry is, we will not – we will not – lose heart. We will not be discouraged. We will not quit. We will persevere in serving the Lord and serving God's people. So here it is. The glory is great. The blindness is perverse and pervasive. But Jesus is supreme and God is sovereign and the good news is glorious.

But here is the root of so much discouragement. "We have this glorious treasure of light and life in earthen vessels, in frail and failing jars of clay" (v.7). So we must not lose heart...