

## *The Two Ministries*

The ‘ministries’ in question are the ministry of the law and the ministry of the gospel, as set out by the apostle in 2 Corinthians 3. No passage in Scripture more clearly lays bare the contrast between these two ministries. And how needful is this today – when so many believers today are locked in some sort of hybrid between the two, a mixture of law and gospel, especially in the areas of assurance<sup>1</sup> and sanctification,<sup>2</sup> held there by the teaching of those I call ‘law mongers’.<sup>3</sup> If they wish to be released from the bondage and grief that this inevitably brings, they should take on board Paul’s teaching in 2 Corinthians 3. They could do no better. To this end, I publish this article.<sup>4</sup>

In seeking the resolution of the tension over the believer and the law, nobody could pretend that 2 Corinthians 3 carries the same weight as Galatians or Romans. No! But whatever decision we arrive at concerning the believer and the law, we must not fail to get to grips with the apostle’s teaching in this chapter, and make sure that our stance takes it fully into account. And more! Our view must thrive in face of 2 Corinthians 3. Indeed, it must arise directly from it.

As so often in New Testament times, Judaisers were, once again, on the attack; this time at Corinth. As always, Paul stood up to them:

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<sup>1</sup> See my *Assurance in the New Covenant*, Brachus, 2014.

<sup>2</sup> See my *Christ is All: No Sanctification by the Law*, Brachus, Wilstead, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> By ‘law monger’, I mean those who say that we must preach the law to sinners to bring them to Christ, stop preaching the law just as they are about to trust Christ alone for justification, and then immediately take them back under the law for sanctification. I also include those who do this in an incipient way. My short denial of it all can be found in 1 Cor. 2:2; 9:16; 2 Cor. 4:5. For a longer answer, see my *Christ (passim)*.

<sup>4</sup> In producing this article, I have very slightly edited chapter 11 of my *Christ* pp178-184.

For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ. And no wonder! For Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness, whose end will be according to their works. I say again, let no one think me a fool. If otherwise, at least receive me as a fool, that I also may boast a little. What I speak, I speak not according to the Lord, but as it were, foolishly, in this confidence of boasting. Seeing that many boast according to the flesh, I also will boast. For you put up with fools gladly, since you yourselves are wise! For you put up with it if one brings you into bondage, if one devours you, if one takes from you, if one exalts himself, if one strikes you on the face. To our shame, I say that we were too weak for that! But in whatever anyone is bold – I speak foolishly – I am bold also. Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they the seed of Abraham? So am I (2 Cor. 11:13-22).<sup>5</sup>

Note the apostle's emphasis upon boasting and boldness. Broadening this, note the word 'glory', 'glorious' or 'glorify', appearing, on my count, twenty-three times in the letter, mostly in the third chapter. 'Glory' is the theme of the entire letter; 'glory' is certainly the theme of 2 Corinthians 3. In particular, the apostle glories and boasts in connection with his ministry. This is the issue he focuses on when confronting the false teachers at Corinth, with their boasting and self-exaltation. See, in particular, 2 Corinthians 10 – 12.<sup>6</sup>

And that leads us directly to the central aspect of Paul's argument, the fundamental core of his case against the Judaisers. His ministry is more powerful and more glorious than theirs. That is his claim. They boast. Very well! He, too, can boast. What is more, he will boast! Further, he can outdo them in their boasting. And he does! How? Is it because he is a better preacher, and all the rest of it, than they? No! In some senses, he might be regarded as a poorer preacher (1 Cor. 1:17; 2:1,3-4,13; 2 Cor. 10:10; 11:6) –

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<sup>5</sup> There are hints of it in his first letter also (1 Cor. 4:14-21; 5:6-8). See immediately below. Do not forget the Judaisers' mistaken claim that the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants are one, and that if Gentiles want to become children of Abraham they must be circumcised – and that this, in turn, means coming under the law.

<sup>6</sup> On my count, the words 'boast' or 'boasting' come 28 times in the letter, 18 of which occur in these three chapters.

though, in these letters to Corinth<sup>7</sup> (see for instance, 1 Cor. 4:10; 2 Cor. 11:19,21), it must not be forgotten, irony is never far below the surface with the apostle. No! What makes the difference between him and the law mongers is ‘commendation’, that pet theme of the Judaisers. They are forever on about it! They demand letters of commendation. That is why Paul speaks of commendation so frequently in this letter (2 Cor. 3:1; 4:2; 5:12; 6:4; 10:12,18), and stands up to his detractors on the issue: ‘Letters of commendation? Well, I’ve got them!’ Really? ‘Oh yes!’ He addresses the Corinthians plainly: ‘You are my letters! You believers! Every one of you at Corinth! Bits of paper? I don’t need bits of paper! My gospel success, my spiritual power, my sufferings, and God’s evident approval of my ministry, as revealed in the lives of others, you Corinthians in particular – there’s my “commendation”’ (2 Cor. 3:1-3; 4:2; 5:11 – 6:4; 10:13-18; 12:11-12; see also 1 Cor. 3:6; 9:1-2). ‘Now then, the Judaisers – what’s theirs? Let’s hear it!’ (2 Cor. 10:12-18). As he had told them in his first letter: ‘I do not write these things to shame you, but as my beloved children I warn you. For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel... Now some are puffed up, as though I were not coming to you. But I will come to you shortly, if the Lord wills, and I will know, not the word of those who are puffed up, but the power. For the kingdom of God is not in word but in power. What do you want? Shall I come to you with a rod, or in love and a spirit of gentleness?’ (1 Cor. 4:14-21).<sup>8</sup>

But even this fails to get to the root of the apostle’s argument. The fundamental difference between his ministry and that of the Judaisers lies in something much more radical than its evident power, as compared to theirs.

The truth is, the Judaisers’ ministry is in a totally different realm, a different age, a different system to the apostle’s. They are really living in the age and ambience of the law, and their ministry

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<sup>7</sup> And elsewhere.

<sup>8</sup> He is not contradicting 1 Cor. 4:1-5. Remember, he calls himself ‘a fool’ for boasting, explaining that he was forced into it (2 Cor. 11:16-23; 12:6,11).

shows it. Theirs is an old-covenant ministry. Paul, however, lives in the realm of the Spirit, and his ministry is that of the new covenant. *This* is what makes all the difference. His boasting, power and commendation come from his being in the realm of the Spirit, and not in the realm of the law. Paul's power does not come from himself (2 Cor. 2:16; 3:5; 4:7-12,16-18; 6:3-10). Not at all! He can boast, yes, but only because God in Christ has made him competent, 'sufficient', as a minister (1 Cor. 15:10; 2 Cor. 3:5-6). And this sufficiency derives directly and inevitably from his being in the new covenant, his labouring in the realm of the Spirit, and his use of spiritual weapons appropriate to that covenant (2 Cor. 6:7; 10:3-5):

Do we begin again to commend ourselves? Or do we need, as some others, letters of commendation to you or letters of commendation from you? You are our letter written in our hearts, known and read by all men; clearly you are a letter of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of flesh; that is, of the heart. And we have such trust through Christ towards God. Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God, who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life... We do not war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 3:1-6; 10:3-5).

And *this* is the heart of the matter – the new covenant. *This* is what makes the difference between the Judaisers and the apostle. They labour in the letter, the law; he labours in the Spirit, in the gospel. And it is not only, as it were, the message that is different. The power, the boasting, the glory of the apostolic ministry, its very ethos, lies in that it is a ministry of the new covenant, not the old. With the change of covenant, the entire ministry has changed.

Let me stress this. Remember the chicken and the egg? Which comes first – the change of covenant, or the evident power? There is no doubt about it. It is as plain as a pikestaff. Paul does *not* argue that since he possesses power and glory, there must have been a change of covenant. No! What he says is, since the old covenant

had a glory, the new covenant must have even greater glory – which it has – and, as a consequence, he has that power and glory, and the Judaisers do not. It is all a result of the change of covenant. He is in the new covenant; they are in the old. And it shows.

The Judaisers, locked in the old covenant, preaching the law, are using thrash and slap<sup>9</sup> to enforce their doctrine, hitting the Corinthians into line. So much so, the apostle can rebuke the Corinthians: ‘You put up with it if one brings you into bondage... if one strikes you on the face’. Paul will have none of it: ‘To our shame, I say that we were too weak for that!’ (2 Cor. 11:20-21). Taking this line, Paul, of course, is being ironical. It is not a question of weakness. He is not weak! Not at all! He is in a different covenant to the Judaisers! He has no intention whatsoever of hitting the Corinthians. Severity might be required, as a last resort. If so, he will not shirk it: ‘Being ready’, he says, ‘to punish all disobedience when your obedience is fulfilled’ (2 Cor. 10:6). But that is not his forte: ‘Therefore I write these things being absent, lest being present I should use sharpness, according to the authority which the Lord has given me for edification and not for destruction’ (2 Cor. 13:10).<sup>10</sup> Read again the above-extract from his first letter.

So, in 2 Corinthians 3, having made his point about the two covenants, in order to make sure that the Corinthians really do take it on board – since it is so easily and so often forgotten or whittled away (never more so than today!) – the apostle then launches into a comparison of the two. A comparison? He *contrasts* them, irrefutably spelling out the contrast in a series of devastating terms, deliberately polarising the two covenants as starkly as he can.

Before we glance at these contrasts, however, we must bear in mind that although Paul uses neither of the phrases, ‘the old covenant’, or ‘the law’, what else could he be talking about? And he certainly does use ‘Old Testament’ – which might easily be translated ‘old testament’. In fact, he uses *palaias diathēkēs*, literally ‘old covenant’ (verse 14). And when he refers to ‘tablets

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<sup>9</sup> How about ‘whip’? I ask this, of course, because Calvin used this term when setting out his third use of the law. It is this which has led to so much bondage and sorrow for believers. See my *Christ (passim)*.

<sup>10</sup> For more on this, see chapter 16 of my *Christ* p264.

of stone... the letter... the letter... the ministry of death, written and engraved on stones... the ministry of condemnation' (verses 3,6,7,9) and speaks of Moses (verses 13,15), there is no doubt whatsoever that he is speaking of the old covenant, the entire Mosaic economy, the law, including the ten commandments, which he contrasts with 'the new covenant' (verse 6), the work and realm of 'the Spirit' (verses 6,8,17-18).

I say it again, there can be no doubt. Paul *is* contrasting the old and new covenants. He is not contrasting certain aspects of the two covenants, certain man-made and artificial segments of the covenants (none of which exist in Scripture). No! He is, root and branch, contrasting the old and new covenants.

And what a devastating series of contrasts he draws between the two! But, yet again, even that is not quite right. Although I will now list the contrasts, they do not actually form a list; they make one continuous line of reasoning. Do not miss the apostle's use of 'but... for... but... but if... so that... for if... for even... for if... therefore...' (verses 6-12) – all of which, I grant, are small Greek words in themselves, yet all of them are mighty words of reasoned argument. And when they follow hard, one after another, what an argument it is! What reasoning! So let us get away from a proof-text and bullet-point mentality, let us get away from a 'list-driven' Christianity, and let us get a firm grip on the apostle's argument. Indeed, let his argument grip us!

Nevertheless, in contradiction of what I have just said, in order to make things as clear as I can, I will now list the various contrasts the apostle draws.

Each of these, on its own, would constitute a powerful-enough statement of contrast between the old and new covenants. Gathered together, in one small section of Scripture, they form an invincible catalogue, demonstrating beyond all fear of contradiction that the old and new covenants, far from being one covenant, are chalk and cheese. Not only that. As these statements make plain, the old covenant was, in comparison with the new, outward, weak, fading, useless and is now, with the completion of the redeeming work of Christ, and his resurrection, obsolete.

And that is not all:

**The old covenant was to do with the flesh; the new covenant is the covenant of the Holy Spirit (verses 3,6,8).**

**The old covenant was an outward covenant, written on stones; the new covenant is an inward covenant, written on the heart (verses 2-3,7).**

**The old covenant killed; it spelled death; the new covenant is life (verses 3,6-7).**

**The old covenant was deliberately temporary, designed by God to be so; the new covenant is permanent; it remains (verses 11,13).**

**The old covenant had glory, but its glory was lesser and fading; the new covenant has a glory which exceeds, excels, being so much greater than the glory of the old covenant (verses 7-11).<sup>11</sup>**

**The old covenant condemned; the new covenant is saving (verse 9).<sup>12</sup>**

**The old covenant spelled bondage; the new covenant brings liberty (verses 12,17).**

What a phenomenal series of statements! Breathtaking! But even so, we still have not reached the apostle's ultimate point! No! We have not yet got to the fundamental conclusion and application of his words in this chapter. So let us do it now.

Let me remind you, reader, of what I argued in my *The Priesthood of All Believers*, when looking at this passage. I have two things in mind: 'Ministry' goes far wider than 'pulpit work'. What is more, we must not confine the 'ministry' in question to that of the apostle:

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<sup>11</sup> Note the apostle's 'deliberate tautology' – without redundancy, of course.

<sup>12</sup> 'Righteousness', *dikaioṣunē*, 'justification'. But this does not mean that the apostle is speaking only about the law for justification. 'Righteousness' here includes the whole of salvation, not excluding sanctification. The context proves it.

[In] 2 Corinthians chapters 2 to 4, without question Paul *is* speaking of his own ministry, and that of his fellow-apostles and fellow-workers, yes... But notice how the apostle uses ‘we’ in these three chapters. Sometimes by ‘we’ he does mean, perhaps, just himself, maybe with other apostles and fellow-workers in mind (2 Cor. 2:17; 3:1; 4:7-15), although it is not absolutely certain in all these cases. But notice how he quickly moves into ‘you’ (2 Cor. 3:1-3). So what should we make of the ‘we’ and ‘ours’ in the next verse, leading on to the words I quoted above? And it is, I think, unlikely that the ‘we’ in 2 Corinthians 3:12-18; 4:16-18; leave alone 5:1 and on, should be limited to Paul himself, or to Paul and his fellow-apostles. In any case, it is undeniable that *all* Christ’s people are kings, priests and prophets by reason of their union with Christ. The prophets foretold it, and Christ established it. Not in a literal sense, of course, but in a spiritual sense. Believers, therefore, are ministers. I think we may justly argue that they are ‘competent’; all of them are ‘competent as ministers’. Each believer has God’s Spirit and can, to a measure, teach others. The point can be broadened. God equips all his people to fulfil that particular ministry which he has for each of them. To deny it is to fly in the face of the provisions of the new covenant (Isa. 54:13; 61:6; Jer. 31:31-34; 33:14-22; Zeph. 3:9-10; John 6:45; 2 Cor. 1:21-22; 1 Thess. 4:9; 5:11; Heb. 8:8-12; 10:15-18; 1 Pet. 4:10-11; 1 John 2:20-21,27; 5:20).

Why do I reiterate that here? I do so for this reason. Although the apostle is dealing primarily with his ministry as opposed to the ministry of the Judaisers, the principles he sets out apply to all believers. All believers are, from the moment of their conversion, in the new covenant; indeed, they are ministers of the new covenant – all of them, without exception, both men and women. So what Paul says about himself, he actually says about all believers. And that which lies behind his power and glory, and brings about that power and glory, lies behind every believer, and produces that same power and glory in them. Yes, I know it sounds staggering, but it is the truth! ‘Ministry’ is far more than ‘preaching’, and new-covenant ministry is something every believer engages in. When a sinner is converted, when he ‘turns to the Lord’ (verse 16), all is changed (2 Cor. 5:17). From that moment, he (or she) has the Spirit of God, and now lives under the new covenant, in the realm of the Spirit – with all that entails in terms of life and liberty and glory:



In Christ... When one turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord (2 Cor. 3:14-18).

And the upshot of all this? How can any new-covenant person think of going back to the old covenant? How can any new-covenant teacher think of instructing believers to submit to the old covenant? In light of 2 Corinthians 3 it ought to be utterly out of the question. But, sadly, as is all too evident, Reformed teachers persist in trying to mix the old and new covenants. They think they are doing the saints a service when they pick up – to use Calvin’s words – the whip of the law to smite lazy asses. The truth is, in so doing, they risk (to put it no higher) coming under the apostle’s reproof so pointedly set out in this chapter.

If I may use an illustration. Reader, what would you think of a man who insisted on lighting a candle for illumination when he was sitting in the glare of the full mid-day sun at the height of summer? What would you think of him putting on his thermals at such a time? You would think him mad or, at the very least, ill!

Well, this is the age of the Spirit. Do not go back to the flesh! Keep to the gospel. Do not allow yourself to be taken back to the law. The law is the flickering candle; the gospel is the meridian sun.

Can this be right? Is this really what the apostle is saying? We have a way of finding out. Bearing in mind what we have seen so far in this chapter, along with material I have not dealt with – that is, Moses’ veil, the blindness of the natural man’s heart, the removal of the veil in Christ – all of which leads up to the triumphant conclusion of the chapter with its exuberant declaration of life, liberty and joy of believers, let us glance at the way the apostle goes on in chapter 4:

Therefore, since we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we do not lose heart. But we have renounced the hidden things of shame, not walking in craftiness nor handling the word of God deceitfully, but by manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God. But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, whose minds the god of this age has

blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them. For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your bondservants for Jesus' sake. For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the excellence of the power may be of God and not of us. We are hard pressed on every side, yet not crushed; we are perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed – always carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. For we who live are always delivered to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So then death is working in us, but life in you. And since we have the same spirit of faith, according to what is written: 'I believed and therefore I spoke', we also believe and therefore speak, knowing that he who raised up the Lord Jesus will also raise us up with Jesus, and will present us with you. For all things are for your sakes, that grace, having spread through the many, may cause thanksgiving to abound to the glory of God (2 Cor. 4:1-15).<sup>13</sup>

I leave you, reader, to judge whether or not what I have said here really has caught the spirit of 2 Corinthians 3. If it has, then it should signal the end of the debate about the believer and the law. The believer is in the new covenant; every believer (whether man or woman) is a minister of the new covenant. The new covenant is the air we breathe, the kingdom in which we live, the governance under which we thrive. The notion that we – the children of the new covenant – should mix law and gospel, old covenant and new, let alone elevate law over gospel, ought to be utterly out of the question.

Reader, if you are a believer who is locked into the law for assurance and sanctification, kept there by a preacher who dispenses a law-and-grace 'gospel', one who is backed-up by a Confession (such as the Westminster or the 1689 Particular Baptist) that advocates Calvin's uses of the law, I urge you to read, ponder and pray over 2 Corinthians 3. I encourage you to read the chapter out loud, using different versions to the one you are used to

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<sup>13</sup> For more on this, see my *The Glorious New-Covenant Ministry: Its Basis and Practice*, Brachus, 2014.

(as well as your preferred version, of course). Repeat the prescription for Romans 6:14 – 7:6; 8:1-4,9-17. Let the apostle’s teaching soak into your soul.

More. Take off the manacles and shackles of the law. You have the apostle’s key to unlock the Reformed law-system. Use it! Enjoy your heritage, your freedom, in Christ. You are a child of the new covenant. You have been released from the killing letter. You have died to the law. You have been set ‘free from the law of sin and death’ by ‘the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus’ (Rom. 8:2). You have the witness of the Spirit (Rom. 8:16). Listen to him. He will take you to Christ, not the law. And Christ is all (Col. 3:11). Set your mind and heart on the Lord Jesus (Col. 3:1-4; Heb. 3:1; 12:1-3). Obadiah predicted that ‘the house of Jacob shall possess their possessions’ (Obad. 1:17). Make sure you do. Remember that ‘the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ’ (John 1:17). Start enjoying the liberty you have in Christ: ‘Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we... are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit’ (2 Cor. 3:17-18). Begin to experience the power of these words: ‘Though you have not seen [Christ], you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your’ soul (1 Pet. 1:8-9).

I say it again: Give up trying to live the Christian life in the way of the old covenant, even in part. You are a child of the new covenant. Enjoy your privileges in Christ. ‘And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free... Therefore if the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed’ (John 8:32,36).

All this goes, also, for those of you who are under a preacher who, though he does not overtly preach the law, nevertheless preaches a mixture of gospel and law. Does he urge sanctification and assurance by works, rule and regulation, trying your best, trying harder and all the rest of it?<sup>14</sup> And does he teach you that

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<sup>14</sup> Of course there are works for the believer to do, and commandments for him to keep. All who trust Christ, who love Christ, will keep his commandments (John 13:34-35; 14:15,21,23-24; 15:10; Jas. 1:25; 2:12; 1 John 5:2-3; 2 John 6). But in the new covenant, these commandments are

assurance comes only by searching your sanctification, but, even so, few of you will ever get it? Then take the above prescription, I plead with you. As I said, quoting the apostle: Christ is all (Col. 3:11). I assure you of it.

Finally, if any unbeliever is reading this, then you need to understand that you do not need works, law, sacraments (so-called), priest, church or pastor. You need Christ. Repent, turn from your sin, turn to Christ and trust him, and you will be saved (Acts 16:31). Look anywhere else, and you will be damned. So look to Christ, trust him, call upon him now. For everyone who calls on him will be saved (Rom. 10:13).

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August 2014

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part of the law of Christ (1 Cor. 9:21; Gal. 6:2; 2 Pet. 3:2) for his new Israel (Gal. 6:16; Phil. 3:3), not the law of Moses (John 1:17). Not, I hasten to add, that the law of Christ is a mere set of rules. I will not expand on this vital point here (see my *Christ* pp211-278,481-527), but the law of Christ is an entirely new system, regime, principle, one which is radically different to the ambience of the law of Moses. It is, as I say, the law of 'the Spirit' as opposed to the killing 'letter' of Moses (Rom. 7:4-6; 2 Cor. 3:6-9; Gal. 2:19; 5:18). As for assurance and sanctification, these are by grace, by the Spirit, not law.