



THE NEW COVENANT

SERIES : HOW WE FUNCTION – FOUR KEY VALUES

Catalog No. 7209
2 Corinthians 3:1-6
Second Message
Gary Vanderet
June 20th, 2004

In this series we are looking at four key values that define our philosophy of ministry and how we function as a church. These four principles, the Ministry of the Saints, the New Covenant, Expository Preaching, and Servant Leadership, lie at the core of everything we do here at PBCC.

The truth that we come to this morning may be the most important in all of Scripture, apart from the deity of Christ. We are speaking of the new covenant which our Lord introduced to his disciples when he passed the cup at the Last Supper and said, "This is the blood of the new covenant which is shed for many for the forgiveness of sins."

I want to say at the outset that last week was one of the most difficult and draining weeks I have ever experienced. In fact, I'm still a little numb even as I speak. On Tuesday morning last I got a phone message saying that the son of two of our closest friends, Scott and Bonnie Bosler, had drowned while trying to save his friend. Kathy and I cleared our calendars and drove to Visalia to be with them. Were it not for the truth that we are going to talk about today, I don't think I would be able to deliver this message. The Boslers are a godly family. Scott is pastor of a church in Porterville. Their son, Brad, loved the Lord. Our time together was a sweet, holy interlude. It was hard to leave. The service on Thursday, though filled with tears, was a celebration of life. Scott and Bonnie's deepest desire was for God to be glorified. There were more than a thousand people present. We worshipped and sang. One of the hymns was Matt Redman's *Blessed Be Your Name*:

Blessed be your name
On the road marked with suffering
Though there's pain in the offering
Blessed be your name
You give and take away
You give and take away
My heart will choose to say
Blessed be your name.

The service was all about God. The love of Christ was present in the midst of overwhelming pain. We had a taste of heaven.

We tend to get confused at times about the message of the gospel. We imagine that God promises to provide us with enough material or spiritual blessings to keep the journey to heaven reasonably enjoyable until we get there. We think it's God's job to see that we feel pretty

good here until we feel good forever there. But last week I was struck again by the truth that God saved us not merely so that we can feel good about ourselves and lead exciting lives. Christ shed his blood so that as forgiven disciples we might trust God when life falls apart. Life isn't only about our hopes and plans and dreams, our quality of life, our relationships, our health, our bank accounts, our time. It's all about God. God is the star of the show. He has chosen us to be in the drama, but we play a supporting role. And sometimes our role in that drama is to suffer.

In God's new arrangement with people, the new covenant that he initiated at Pentecost, replacing the old one begun at Mt. Sinai, he has done more than we think. Not only have we been forgiven so completely that the Father sings joyfully over us every moment from our conversion on, he has changed us deeply, profoundly and permanently. Under this new arrangement we are not merely commanded to glorify God, we want to glorify him. And we are empowered and equipped to do so. It actually becomes possible. In fact, we see it as our highest privilege and joy to center our lives around God. We can lead changed though still imperfect lives that reveal a new power that is puzzling to the watching world.

Our text comes at the beginning of an autobiographical section in the apostle Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. Defending his apostleship, Paul shares the secret of both his confidence and competence in ministry. The apostle takes almost four chapters to explain his phenomenal ministry. In his preface to his book *Authentic Christianity*, an exposition of these four chapters, Ray Stedman says, "To understand the full implications of that new covenant is to discover the most liberating secret in the word of God."¹

Our text is the first six verses of 2 Corinthians 3, but we will focus on the last couple of verses.

Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some, letters of commendation to you or from you? You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men; being manifested that you are a letter of Christ, cared for by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts. And such confidence we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming

from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. (2 Cor 3:1-6 NASB)

A covenant is an agreement or arrangement between people. When two people want to go into business together, they draw up a contract or partnership, a covenant that defines how they will operate. Marriage is a covenant, an agreement between a man and a woman to remain together against all odds, to work out their problems and share their resources. The word covenant is used often in the Scriptures for God's agreements or arrangements with men.

According to Paul, two covenants are at work in life. The new covenant is based on the principle of divine enablement, summarized by Paul in verse 5, "Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God." Ray Stedman used to put it this way: "nothing coming from me, everything coming from God." Paul contrasts that with the old covenant, enacted with Moses on Mt Sinai, based on human achievement. God said, "Do this and you will live." This could be summarized as just the opposite of the new covenant: "everything coming from me, nothing coming from God."

These two covenants have always been in operation from the beginning of creation. Adam was a perfect man, created by God as he intended man to be. The first man acted and lived by the power of God. Everything he did was accomplished by the indwelling Spirit of power. When he tended the garden, he did so by the energy and power of God. When he named the animals, he did so by the wisdom and power of God. Adam brought to each task the fullness of divine resources, available to whatever degree required by the task itself. This is why we were created to function, to be the dwelling place of God.

The Lord Jesus, whom the Scripture calls the Second Adam, lived his life on earth in the new covenant: "everything coming from God, nothing coming from me." Jesus said, "The Son can do nothing by himself" (John 5:19). He repeatedly said that whatever he did or said was not done out of any energy or might of his own but, as he plainly put it, "the Father, living in me, who is doing his work" (John 14:10).

That was how Adam lived before the fall. One day, in collaboration with his wife, Eve, Adam made that fatal choice. The instant he did so the new covenant ceased to be active in his life, and the old covenant sprang into existence. Of course, the new covenant wasn't called "new" then, for at the time it was the only arrangement for living that Adam knew. And, of course, the old covenant was not "old" to him, but something brand new, which he experienced only after he had chosen to disobey God. The terms "new" and "old" have meaning only in relation to us.

Because everyone who has ever lived since that first man was made in the image of fallen Adam, we can understand something of what happened when he ate the forbidden fruit: the Spirit of God was immediately removed from his human spirit. He retained a memory of the relationship he once enjoyed, but inside he was left darkened and restless, filled with guilt and fear. This is why Adam and Eve immediately hid themselves. They realized they were naked and had no defense against attack. Every person is born into this same condition. The human spirit longs for God but is afraid to find him. It is restless and unhappy without him, but fearful and guilty before him.

Fallen humanity needs the law. The old covenant has a legitimate purpose: to show us how sinful we really are. It was never meant to save us. It never saved anyone. Whenever we try to be good through self-effort we see how bad we really are. Father Brown, in one of Chesterton's books, says that no one knows how bad he is until he tries to be good. That is the purpose of the law: it appeals to our self-will. When we fail miserably, and realize how ugly and selfish we are, we are driven back to God, back to his grace. In Galatians, Paul calls the law a schoolmaster. It isn't a mentor, a gentle teacher, but a harsh schoolmaster that lays it on us and says that if we want to be good, we've got to be as good as God. That is what Paul means by "the letter kills." It drives us to the end of ourselves, forcing us to flee God's goodness, forgiveness and enablement.

This new covenant is revealed throughout the Scriptures. Jeremiah said that a day was coming when God would write his laws in people's hearts, not on tablets of stone. It is the same law, but written in the heart instead of on some external demand. God would live with them. They would be his people, he would be their God. They could draw upon his wisdom, his energy, his power and strength for any demand. He would instruct them by his Spirit and their eyes would be opened to see the real meaning of the things they had learned. He would settle once and for all the question of their guilt. He would forgive their sins right at the beginning, and they could rest upon that constant washing and cleansing and forgiveness all through their lives.

That is what happened at our conversion. God came to dwell inside us through the person of the Holy Spirit and began to make everything new. We have a *new purity* that makes us clean in God's sight even when we roll in the mud. We have a *new identity*. We are now his beloved children, rather than slaves to the law. We have a *new desire* emerging that prefers holiness to sin. And we have a *new power* that allows us to draw near to God as forgiven heirs who long to behold the beauty of the Lord.

All of that is ours because the Holy Spirit now dwells in us. Normative Christianity is a blatantly supernatural experience, a life utterly dependent upon indwelling resurrection power from beginning to end. The normal

Christian life is nothing more or less than the outflowing of the indwelling Christ. The old covenant is man demonstrating what he can do for God; the new covenant is God demonstrating what he can do for and through man. Dwight Edwards summarizes it this way in his excellent book, *Revolution Within*: “The new covenant is a radically different and radically better arrangement between God and his people, one that allows him to accomplish in and through us what we are fundamentally incapable of doing under the law. It is God’s ‘I will’ overcoming our own ‘I can’t.’”²

Believers have been delivered out of the arms of the law into the arms of Christ. We “died to the law” (Rom 7:4) so that we may be married to him who was raised from the dead. We don’t live life according to a code anymore. We live through a person, the Sovereign Lord of the universe and the supreme lover of our souls, who infuses us with resurrection power.

God’s supreme calling for our life is to a passionate and deepening love affair with his Son. When that is in place, the externals take care of themselves.

Being married to the law is like living with a ruthless perfectionist who never makes a mistake, never has a bad day, and never indulges himself. And moreover, he expects exactly the same from you. Perfection is the only acceptable standard. He will let you know every time you slip up. It’s not enough to do it most of the time; you’re still a failure. And don’t ask him for help. He will give you the cold shoulder and tell you to try harder. It’s all up to you.

Being married to our Lord is so very different. He assures you that there is nothing you can do to lose his love. He actually delights in you. Though he is grieved when you sin, that can never cause him to reject you. He sympathizes with your weaknesses. He picks you up when you fall.

That ought to be good news. But believers in every age find it difficult to move from the old to the new covenant. It’s hard to let go of a law-based approach to spirituality. We naturally gravitate toward legalistic approaches to holiness that encourage at least some reliance on self. That enables us to partially share credit with God for any spiritual success. It keeps our pride intact. We know we can’t pay the entire bill, but at least we can leave a tip.

But law and grace cannot be mixed. We can’t have a little flesh and a little Spirit. True spirituality requires a clean break with our old way of doing things. Jesus explained it this way to his disciples: “No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment. If he does, the new piece will pull away from the old, making the tear worse. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. If he does, the wine will burst the skins, and both the wine and the wineskins will be ruined. No, he pours new wine into new wineskins” (Mark 2:21-22). Jesus did not come to earth to patch up the old covenant. The

new covenant is a brand new garment. He didn’t come to fit into the old system, but to completely replace it. Like new wine, he is too potent and vital to be restricted by the old.

We find it difficult to not rely on ourselves because we have always trusted certain tangible assets: our personalities, education, pedigree, humor, money. We can use those things, but they have no real power. Trusting the Spirit of God and not our flesh is like withdrawing from a drug we have depended on all our lives.

This is radical truth to me. I grew up in a dysfunctional home. My father died of a stroke when I was 11 months old. My mother had to go to work. Things were difficult financially; she had to borrow money all the time. I remember hiding in closets when the bill collectors came calling. For years I responded to God in the same way. I viewed him as the moral bill collector of the universe. He was knocking on the door of my life to demand the obedience that was due. Knowing that I had no resources within myself to comply with his demands, I was always filled with guilt and fear. As a result, when I heard his voice my first instinct was to hide, to run away from his voice rather than toward it. I am learning that my Heavenly Father longs to give, and that he never requires anything from me that he hasn’t already placed within me.

Since the purpose of preaching on these core values is to help you understand how we function as a church, I want to close by sharing three ministry implications of this new covenant.

Ministry cannot be evaluated by outward results alone.

There is a profound difference between a new covenant and an old covenant ministry. The essence of genuine Christianity is not outward but inward. True Christianity is not a religion of external symbols and ceremonies. It is something that happens inwardly, spiritually, in the heart. Church leadership can easily become confused and focus on externals. At conferences, someone will invariably ask me, “How big is your church?” – as if that had any direct correlation with the success of the ministry. People focus on numbers, programs and the size of the building or the budget. While these things aren’t necessarily bad in themselves, they are merely externals that can’t be equated with the work of God.

The signs of God’s presence in a church are evident in what God is doing inside us, our dependence on him, and the love we have for each other. Sent by the apostles to the church at Antioch, Barnabas said that he perceived the grace of God there. That is what to look for in a church, not the external signs of God’s presence but the inward evidence of his dwelling. Paul says of the church at Thessalonica: “We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor

of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father" (1 Thess 1:2-3). He saw their utter dependence on God and the love that they had for one another. These are the things that ought to mark a church, not external factors.

We trust the Lord, not external pressure, to work in people's lives.

Authentic Christianity can't be measured by externals; it is concerned with internals. And those can't be produced on demand. We can't make fruit "happen." In fact, with authentic Christianity there is no need for that outer compulsion. We now have an inner compulsion: the Spirit of God who comes to live inside us. There is no need to push, because it is Jesus who pulls. It is his wonderful attraction. The more you hang out with Jesus, the more he rubs off on you. The more you look into his loving eyes, the more you want. The compulsion comes from within rather than from pressure from without. There is an inward desire to please him because he loves us so much. We no longer obey because we have to or somebody is making us, but because we want to. Old covenant ministries are forever pushing, coercing, insisting and demanding. People feel like they have never done enough. They feel guilty if they don't feel guilty!

Since failure is often the place where one begins a new covenant lifestyle, people are encouraged to face what is going on inside them.

Where does one learn to live the new covenant? Not in a classroom usually. We learn to live by divine ena-

blement when human achievement doesn't work anymore. That usually occurs when God brings us to a difficult place where we have to trust him, because all our normal arenas of dependence have been taken away. We often think at that moment that life is over, but frequently it is just beginning, because we are learning to live in dependence for the first time.

Preoccupation with externals takes all the focus off what God is doing. But that is what matters. We can't be good by trying harder. That is counter-productive. It makes us more ungodly. The only thing that legalism produces is hypocrisy. If we have to look good on the outside, we can't be honest and admit what is really going on at home and in our marriages. We can't admit struggles. We can't admit that we make mistakes. We can't look weak, because that would be unspiritual. But we don't have to live that way.

I have always admired the honesty of AA meetings. That is what ought to be true of us. The church should be a place where we can talk freely and openly about the areas where we are struggling and the mistakes we have made. Then we don't have to prove anything, because our acceptance is not based on performance. What matters is what God is doing inside, and every one of us is a work in process.

1. Ray C. Stedman, *Authentic Christianity* (Waco, Tex.: Word, 1975).
2. Dwight Edwards, *Revolution Within* (Colorado Springs: Water Brook, 2001), 14.

© 2004 Peninsula Bible Church Cupertino