

THE NEW COVENANT AND UNITY

The late W. Carl Ketcherside was a remarkable combination of intellectual genius and commitment to Christ. He was a prodigious child advancing through the first four grades in a single year. He was so eager to learn that books borrowed from a traveling library were read twice in a single day. As an adult he continued to be a voracious reader and averaged reading a book a day for a period of seven years. Among his many accomplishments he was a preacher of considerable fame, and an internationally known editor who authored 34 books. His remarkable life and ministry were the subject of two Master Theses and three Doctoral Dissertations.

Carl became a Christian as a small boy and began preaching when only 12 years old. In 1951, at the prime of his life, he had a life changing encounter with Christ while preaching the Gospel in North Ireland. Among other things, his deepened relationship with Christ led him to champion the cause of Christian unity. One of his greatest contributions in this regard involves insight into the nature of the New Covenant. Some of these insights were printed in a book titled "The Death of the Custodian".

A brief summation of his thoughts points out that the Old Testament is not the first 39 books of the Bible, and the New Testament is not the last 27 books. While this shocking statement may seem like only an academic exercise, this critical insight can be a key that will help to unite estranged brethren all over the world.

It is hoped that this brief article will whet your appetite for further study. If these thoughts are true, as I believe they are, closer scrutiny will only enhance their impact upon your life. As you pursue this study, remember that the words "testament" and "covenant" are used interchangeably in the Bible. Here is why Carl concluded that the Old Testament is not the first 39 books of the Bible:

- Not one verse of Scripture ever refers to the first 39 books of the Bible as a Testament.
- The Old Testament was made when God took His people by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt (Heb. 8:9). The Hebrew Scriptures, however, were written later.
- God made the Old Covenant with His people in Horeb (Deut. 5:2) or in the language of Galatians 4:25, "Mt. Sinai in Arabia". The first 39 books of the Bible, however, were written in Palestine, Babylon, and Persia.
- The Old Testament was broken by the time of Jeremiah (Jer. 31:32). Some books of the Hebrew Bible, however, were not yet written at this time.
- The Scriptures state explicitly that Moses received a covenant while he was 40 days upon Mt. Sinai. This covenant (also called the Ten Commandments) was written on two tablets of stone and placed in a receptacle called the "Ark of the Covenant" (Nu. 10:33). Once this covenant was completed God "added nothing more" - Deut. 5:22. (See also Exodus 34:27 - 28; Deuteronomy 4:11 - 13; 5:1 - 3; 9:11, etc.)
- While there are many covenants mentioned in the Bible, Carl concluded that the Old Covenant, (or Testament) as mentioned in Hebrew 8:6-13, was in fact the Ten Commandments and not the first 39 books of the Bible.

With a little reflection you can easily see how the Old Covenant created controversy. Just as men today debate the meaning of modern law, so also men have continually debated the meaning of God's Law. Take, for example, the commandment to remember the Sabbath Day by keeping it holy (Ex. 20:8). When a man gathered sticks on the Sabbath it was "not clear what should be done to him" (Nu. 15:34). Solving this controversy involved direct revelation from heaven. Since God has chosen not to intervene in every specific case, Bible scholars do not always agree. Consequently Sabbath regulations have been debated for over 3,000 years without ending the controversy. Similar controversy is associated with interpreting every law, that's why court decisions are frequently "appealed" and often "reversed".

So God found fault with the Old Covenant and decided to write a new one (Heb. 8:8). The New Covenant, however, would be totally different from the old. Like new wine and old skins the two cannot be combined. The revolutionary New Covenant avoids controversy by being written inside of hearts and minds where others cannot read it (See Heb. 8:6 - 13).

Here is why Carl concluded that the New Testament is not the last 27 books of the Bible.

- Not once are the last 27 books of the Bible ever called the New Testament or Covenant.
- The Christian Scriptures were written with paper and ink (2 John 12, 3 John 13). The New Testament, however, is not written with ink but with the Spirit of the Living God (2 Cor. 3:3).
- The New Testament became a reality on the first Pentecost after our Lord's resurrection. Thousands were saved and became covenant people on that day, yet the New Testament Scriptures were not written for many years.
- The New Testament Scriptures came gradually as God guided inspired men into all truth. The canon of New Testament Scripture was not completed until near the end of the first century, and was not generally accepted until the fourth century. Many Christians died as martyrs before one word of the New Testament Scriptures was written.
- The Old Testament was written on tablets of stone. It was cold, rigid, inflexible, and without mercy. 3,000 died when the Old Testament was given. The New Testament is written upon the fleshly tables of the heart and mind (2 Cor. 3:3, Heb. 8:8 - 10). It was given by a merciful and faithful High Priest (Heb. 2:17). 3,000 were saved when the New Testament was given.
- The Old Testament was in the Holy of Holies in the temple. The New Testament transforms our bodies into temples of the Living God (1 Cor. 6:19). Just as the glory of God was associated with the Ten Commandments, so also we are to glorify God in our bodies.

THE SCRIPTURES ARE INSPIRED - BUT NOT THE COVENANT

We must state emphatically that **“All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” (2 Tim 3:16-17)** Man does not live by bread alone but by every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God. We must study the Scriptures to show ourselves approved unto God. The Bible is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. We must never forget the importance of the Holy Bible. At the same time, however, we must face the fact that the Bible is not the covenant. It never has been and never will be. Recognizing this fact does not keep God from guiding us by means of His Holy Word.

ISHMAEL AND ISAAC REPRESENT THE COVENANTS

Hagar, Sarah, and their children are allegories of these two covenants (see Gal. 4:21 - 31). Ishmael and the Old Covenant represented bondage. Isaac and the New Covenant represent freedom.

God predicted that Ishmael, the son of a slave, would be like a wild animal (Gen. 16:12). He would always be in the midst of controversy. His name “Ishmael” means “God hears”. He was given that name because the Lord heard the afflictions of his mother (Gen. 16:11). The name is also appropriate, however, because he was constantly complaining to God about the inheritance he lost to his brother. Ishmael is like the Jewish people who perpetually debated the meaning of Scripture, and divided from those with whom they disagreed.

The name Isaac means “laughter”. He and his mother represent freedom. While Ishmael was complaining, Isaac was laughing. The birth of Isaac involved a miracle for his mother was past

the age of bearing. By human standards he should not have even been born, yet, not only was he born, he inherited everything that belonged to his father (Gen. 25:5). No wonder he was laughing! The joyful Isaac represents Christians who are known for loving one another, more than for argument and debate (John 13:35).

TEACHERS ARE KNOWN BY THEIR FRUITS

Since Ishmael and Isaac had the same father it is quite possible that they looked alike, and even wore the same type of clothing. They were, however, radically different. The word “radix”, as you know, means “root”. These two brothers had different roots. One was born after the flesh and the other after the Spirit. Their lives beautifully illustrate the contrast between a fleshly and a spiritual covenant.

While these two sons were not easy to distinguish by appearance, they were easily distinguished by their fruits. Ishmael produced the bitter fruit of controversy and division. Isaac produced the delicious fruit of laughter and love. Note this dichotomy between flesh and Spirit in the following passages. In Galatians 5:16 - 26 we read that the works of the flesh are obvious: hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy. By contrast the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control. In James 3:13 - 18 we are told that earthly wisdom does not come down from heaven but is unspiritual and characterized by envy, selfish ambition, and disorder. The wisdom from above, however, is pure, peace loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. In Ephesians 4:31 we are admonished to get rid of all bitterness, anger, brawling, slander, and malice, and to be kind, compassionate, and forgiving. Jesus taught that religious teachers would be known by their fruits, and not by how they appear (Matt. 7:16). Unfortunately there are many religious teachers today who are living B.C. lives in an A.D. world.

Our change from the works of the flesh to the fruit of the Spirit does not happen by “conformation” but by “transformation” (Rom. 12:2). We are not conformed by the outward pressure of the Old Covenant, but we are transformed by the inward pressure of the new. When Jesus comes into our hearts we become a new creation. We received our physical life from an earthly seed planted by our earthly father, and we receive our spiritual life from a spiritual seed planted by our Heavenly Father. Christians are born again, not of corruptible seed, but of the incorruptible (1 Pet. 1:23). As Jesus said to Nicodemus - flesh gives birth to flesh and Spirit give birth to spirit (John 3:6). You cannot get spiritual life from a carnal seed. Every seed reproduces after its own kind. Our physical DNA causes us to be like our earthly father. Our Spiritual DNA causes us to be like our heavenly Father. Just as we have borne the earthly “image” of our earthly father, we can also bear the spiritual “image” of our heavenly Father (1 Cor. 15:49).

If God has written His laws in your minds and hearts the transformation of your life will be obvious. Here are some of the ways the Apostle John describes those who are “born again”.

- **“If you know that he is righteous, you know that everyone who does what is right has been born of him” (1 Jn 2:29).**
- **“No-one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God” (1 Jn 3:9).**
- **“Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God.” (1 Jn 4:7).**
- **“Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well” (1 Jn 5:1).**
- **“for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith” (1 Jn 5:4).**

- **“We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the one who was born of God keeps him safe, and the evil one cannot harm him” (1 Jn 5:18).**

FRATERNITY IS BASED UPON PATERNITY

Carl liked to point out that he and his earthly brother disagreed all the time. This, however, did not mean that they were not brothers. Their “fraternity” depended upon their “paternity”. They were brothers because they had the same father. This is why Jesus is not ashamed to call us brethren. We are not as smart as Jesus, but we have a common Father (Heb. 2:11). When family members listen to the father, they invariably understand his words differently. It is not reasonable to expect a four year old and a fourteen year old to think alike about words from the father. Their failure to see things alike, however, does not mean that they are not brethren. Brethren invariably stand before the father with different intellectual abilities and different levels of maturity. These differences tend to disappear with maturity. Our goal, of course, is to attain full maturity in Christ. When this happens we will no longer be like infants tossed back and forth in our beliefs. Instead we will experience a new dimension of unity and knowledge of the Son of God (See Eph. 4:13 - 16). Remember that everyone who is born of God loves everyone else who is born of God (1 John 5:1).

THIS TRUTH ABOUT THE COVENANTS DOES NOT DIMINISH RESPECT FOR THE WORD OF GOD

It was my privilege to know Bro. Ketcherside for over thirty years. His insights into the covenants did not diminish his respect for and obedience to the Word of God. He read it, believed it, and obeyed it. He was faithful until death. He even got rid of his home in suburbia and spent the last years of his life in a small inner city apartment ministering to the poor. To the day of his death he remained a sensitive and obedient child of our Heavenly Father.

The difference in the old Carl, and the new one, however, was quite dramatic. With an understanding smile he described his early days as those of a “piece maker”. He was an avid debater and used the Sword of the Spirit to slash at those who did not understand the Bible in the same way that he did. In the last years of his life he was a “peace maker”. He had the courage to never allow a denominational barrier to keep him from his brethren.

It is not by accident that Jesus connected “peacemakers” and “persecution” (See Matt. 5:9 - 10). When Carl shared his vision for unity with his wife Nell, she began to weep and said: “Carl, you are going to lose every friend you have on earth”. Carl was willing to pay that price for he had at least One Friend who promised to never leave him or forsake him.

IT IS NOT THE BIBLE THAT UNITES BELIEVERS

Please consider:

- The Jerusalem church was united in Christ before one word of the New Testament Scriptures was even written.
- Christian brethren had unity even though the canon of Scripture was not completed until the end of the first century and not accepted until the fourth century.
- Even after the invention of the printing press the majority of believers in the world today still do not have a Bible and millions do not even have a written language. This, however, does not keep us from being united in Christ.
- The majority of people who have Bibles have not read them. If you do not believe this I

challenge you to check at your own church and see how many have ever read the entire Bible.

- The majority of people who have read the whole Bible have not studied the whole Bible.
- Those who study the Bible are invariably guided by the preconceptions and prejudices of their own religious fellowship. Two brethren, for example, told me they had come to identically the same view of the millennium and the rapture simply by studying the Bible. This is quite remarkable, as the words “millennium” and “rapture” are not even found in the Bible.
- These and other considerations make it impossible for all of the brethren to understand all of the Bible in identically the same way.
- The Corinthians were divided because their unity was in men like Paul, Apollos, and Cephas. The only true foundation for Christian unity is Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 3:11). Paul faced death with confidence because he knew “Whom” he had believed (1Tim. 1:12). Our faith is “personal” not “propositional”. “Whom” we believe is far more important than “what” we believe. We can be wrong about a lot of things as long as we are right about Jesus. If we are wrong about Jesus it doesn’t matter what else we are right about!

THIS TRUTH CAN IMPACT YOUR LIFE AND MINISTRY

Something is obviously wrong! Jesus prayed that we would be “one” but we are not (Jn. 17:21). There are literally hundreds of divisions in the Body of Christ. Incredibly, it seems that those who study the Bible the most are often the most divided.

As you know, heaven and earth will pass away but the Bible will not! Its message is eternally the same. Our “understanding” of the Bible, however, does change. As we grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ we arrive at new insights and understanding. Peter, for example, once thought it was wrong for the Christ to suffer (Matt. 16:20 - 22). Later he realized that suffering is an integral part of God’s plan for all believers (1 Pet. 4:12 - 16). Most of us have also changed our minds on some Bible verse or teaching and Carl reminds us that it isn’t necessary to change churches every time we learn something new.

If you view the New Testament Scriptures as a legal document, or covenant, then the slightest perceived departure from that covenant can become grounds for separation. Such unfortunate divisions are happening every day. Remarkably, the devil often divides us over the very things that should bring us together. For example, baptism, the Lord’s Supper, the Holy Spirit, and the second coming of Christ should be cause for celebration. Instead these doctrines have become the subject of bitter debate and malignant division.

Once we gain new insight and understanding into some Bible doctrine, we often feel compelled to separate from others and start the “true church”. Carl would remind all who feel that way should remember the church in Thyatira. That church tolerated a “Jezebel” who misled God’s servants into sexual immorality and sin. Those at Thyatira, however, who did believe her lies did not have to leave. Jesus told them merely to “hold on to what you have until I come” (Rev. 2:25).

The New Testament Scriptures are not the New Covenant. They never have been, and they never will be. Legal documents invariably have to be interpreted and enforced. There is no mechanism in the church of our Lord Jesus for establishing “true interpretations” and “ultimate understandings” of the Bible. Every child of God has a right to “find” meaning in the Word of God. No child of God has a right to “give” it meaning.

“Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy, To the only wise God our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen.” (Jude 1:24-25 KJV)