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# REALISING THE NEW COVENANT

**INTRODUCTION**  
The introduction to a provocative five-part series which calls the Church to radically review its customs and traditions and return to a proper understanding of the New Covenant

Churches throughout the ages have demonstrated a propensity to gravitate back to a kind of religious life that is more reminiscent of the old covenant. Religious systems with laws, priests, temples and sacrifices. Contemporary equivalents of this phenomenon abound in the Church today - as we shall endeavour to illustrate throughout the course of this series. This is not just a problem confined to history.

Is this phenomenon a function of theological ignorance or some twisted propensity within sinful man to gravitate towards those things that will afford him the means of self-justification? Maybe a bit of both.

The new covenant of grace, as foretold by the prophets, brought many benefits - not the least of which is the ability for gentiles (non-Jews) to approach God without having to observe Jewish Law.<sup>1</sup> The new covenant was designed to redeem the poor in spirit and bring freedom from the oppression of law (which brings death) as well as freedom from the tyranny of sin (which also brings death).<sup>2</sup>

But law, despite its harshness, has a strange attraction: Law offers the proudly religious person the opportunity to sing their own praises. For them the notion free grace is too cheap - the self-made man wants to be able to atone for himself! The Pharisees in Jesus' day were an example of this.

To many the offer of grace seems just

too confronting - we don't want to be reminded of our own spiritual poverty and nakedness. Like Adam in the garden of Eden, we look for fig leaves to hide our shame from God. Religion often makes a very convenient fig leaf.

If it's true that these attitudes are observable on an individual level, it's not surprising that we will see them pervading man-made religious institutions as well. In fact, it is observable throughout Church history and it is observable in our day. Time and again when God's grace has visited the Church, the church institution has often either neglected it or sought to nullify it.

In this series of articles I assert that the covenant of grace - the new covenant - has never been fully realised widely by the Christian Church. Though shafts of light have periodically cut through history, the Church has remained, for the most part, in the shackles of law and unhelpful traditions. Bold souls who 'think outside the box' have often been dismissed as eccentric or burned as heretics. Even in our time the community of faith appears to have little tolerance for those who stray too far from tradition - no matter how Biblically sound their arguments are!

The Church today, perhaps more than ever, needs prophets - not just people who can see what is wrong, but those who can see what *needs* to be done! The Church needs brave people who are prepared to

stand out and put their reputations on the line. The Church needs people who are prepared to do this because they *love the bride of Christ!*

How do you recognise a true prophet? A true prophet must be an advocate of the new covenant. Everything they do and say will be Christ-centred, will testify to His authority and will be consistent with God's redemptive plan for the earth. The testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy<sup>3</sup>.

### A Historical Perspective

The early Church had its beginnings as a grassroots home-church system which met informally around the meal-table and mostly continued that way, at least in part, for three centuries. Early Jewish Christians sometimes struggled to fully *realise* what the new covenant meant, and were often disturbed by those who insisted on strict adherence to Jewish law<sup>4</sup>. Gentile believers, however, were not as encumbered<sup>5</sup>. The slow drift towards institutionalisation took on new dimensions in AD 313 when Christianity was adopted as the state religion by Roman Emperor Constantine<sup>6</sup>. The state-run church of Rome revived forms of old covenant religious life: *Priesthood*, the *Temple* as a place of worship, *Laws*, and even a *Sacrificial* system [of sorts]. The simple days of the early church appeared to be gone. The next thirteen centuries would see the development of question-

able traditions and dogmas amidst a backdrop of constantly declining spirituality - by the beginning of the 16th century the church as an institution had become manifestly corrupt<sup>7</sup>. The winds of social, political, economic and religious change were blowing and the time for reformation had arrived.

The German professor, Martin Luther, among other reformers, was instrumental in shifting the focus of the church back to the essential truths. He courageously exposed many heresies of the church, but is best remembered for the rediscovering the wonderful truth of 'justification by faith'. The political climate gave Luther the opportunity to form a church which was free from what had become corrupt papal authority.

The enemy of the true faith in Luther's time was clearly identifiable: the church institution. Luther would have had a more difficult task today. How do you bring a clear and distinctive message to the Church when it is fragmented across a broad spectrum of beliefs and traditions? His words would not be met with threats of persecution today - but with indifference!

But Luther faced a unique challenge. On one hand he had an unprecedented opportunity to bring change to church structure, and on the other hand was under immense pressure to fulfil political and cultural expectations. There were limits on

# Reformation

## Part 1

how far reform could go.

Luther did, however, prescribe a type of meeting for 'those who want to be Christians in earnest'. Perhaps this quote gives us some clues as to his personal hopes for the reformed church:

*"Those who want to be Christians in earnest and who profess the gospel with hand and mouth should sign their names and meet alone in a house somewhere to pray, to read, to baptise, to receive the sacrament and centre everything on the Word, prayer and love..." - Martin Luther<sup>8</sup>*

We might hope from this statement that Luther may have favoured a home-based model for the reformed church - one which was separated from the state. But whatever the case, history would not allow it. For the most part, the reformed churches of Europe continued to fulfil the political agenda of the state on a regional basis in a similar way that the church of Rome had done in earlier years. Protestantism became the religion of Western Europe and identified closely with rising nationalism (Eg: Lutheran in Germany and Scandinavia, Reformed in Geneva and Scotland, Anglican in England)<sup>9</sup>. This compromise meant that the post-reformation church never moved far [in its modes and expression] from the church of Rome. Looking from today's historical perspective, one could strongly argue that the Reformation did not go far enough and that the church was never completely reformed.

### A Contemporary Problem

This much is clear: The Reformation failed to deliver a radically reformed way for believers to gather together and never fully realised the ideal of the priesthood of

all believers. More recent evangelical and pentecostal movements which have grown out of those reformation churches have found some freedom, but likewise tend to perpetuate many of the old traditions from which they came. We still see today an emphasis on *ordained ministry* (priests by another name), *church edifices* (temples by another name), *legislated conduct* (law and legalism by another name) and *tithes & offerings* (sacrifice by another name). But there are exceptions: China, Korea, Russia and South America have given birth to churches of a different kind - usually against the backdrop of persecution and economic hardship. These movements have often produced examples of devotion and growth which are embarrassingly rare in western churches. There have been many attempts to analyse and systematise 'keys to revival' based on these churches (prayer, unity, cell-groups, etc). But whilst systems can be formulated, it is not possible to replicate those factors which produce genuine spiritual hunger on a nation level. God has His own ways of doing that.

The reluctance of the contemporary church in the west to move away from the reformation model and embrace radically Biblical alternatives has little to do with political pressure. Our current social climate is completely devoid of any persecution whatsoever. Even without these pressures the western church capitulates to western society's cultural expectations. In an era where the traditional church is becoming more and more irrelevant, the church has failed to provide leadership or demonstrate any desirable alternative in the spiritual vacuum of to-

day's society. In other words, whilst the world 'sleeps in the dark', western Christians have been 'asleep in the light'<sup>10</sup>. In an attempt to renew itself the church has responded in many cases by recruiting charismatic personalities and worship leaders. Others have employed various church growth methods to get more people in on a Sunday. Some of these approaches do address issues of cultural relevance, but they often fail to express kingdom-of-God values or build convincingly authentic Christian communities. Perhaps what is worse is that we have, through well-intentioned missionary efforts abroad, planted an equally unhelpful model of church life throughout much of the developing world. Those we have evangelised often struggle with the inappropriateness of our traditions even more than we do. I've seen examples of churches in poor African communities which struggle hard to maintain even simple church buildings (with pews and visitors books) which are way too expensive and altogether inappropriate in their cultural and economic context. Why? Because a western missionary decided on their behalf that 'this is the way we do church'.

There seems to be few examples of any serious attempt to explore radically Biblical alternatives to the traditional church model. The home church movement and what is commonly called 'the emerging church' is an exception. Unfortunately in an era where success is very narrowly defined, there is little to commend these groups for serious consideration. We live in an age where 'big is better' and material wealth, power and success is equated

with godliness. What is going to stop this trend and where will it lead if it doesn't?

Some questions need to be asked:

- Do we love our traditions so much (especially the contemporary ones) that we will resist change at all costs?
- Are we so immersed in our activities that some simple things - the most important things - escape our attention?
- Is our belief in 'justification by faith' just a stated adherence or a living reality?
- Is the contemporary Church mature enough to see where we have departed from the foundational principles of the New Covenant, or are we destined to repeat the errors of history?

In coming issues this series attempts to examine each of these issues in turn: Priesthood/ Temple/ Law/ Sacrifice [shadows of things to come] - and see how the contemporary church has failed to fully realise the New Covenant.

### Bibliography

<sup>1</sup>Jeremiah 31:31; Isaiah 42:6; Gal 3:7

<sup>2</sup>Rom 7:5; 8:2

<sup>3</sup>Rev 19:10; 2 Pet 1:19-21

<sup>4</sup>Titus 1:10,11; Gal 5:1-12; Acts 15:1-5

<sup>5</sup>Acts 15:19,20

<sup>6</sup>Handbook of Christian Belief, p270

<sup>7 & 9</sup>Funk & Wagnall's New Encyclopedia - History of the Christian Church. Vol 6, p95

<sup>8</sup>Luther's Works Vol53 Preface to the German Mass and Order of Service; Fortress Press p63-64