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Reformation  
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# *Reformation & Revival Journal*

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A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership

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1. To encourage *reformation* in the local Christian churches worldwide,
2. To promote the cause of *revival* and spiritual awakening through prayer and the provision of resources to aid Christian leaders.

## Information

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**The conviction of the staff and editors** of the *Reformation & Revival Journal* is that awakening, of the kind seen in the First Great Awakening in America, wedded to the doctrinal concerns of the historic Protestant Reformation as expressed in the terms *sola scriptura*, *sola gratia*, and *sola fide*, is needed in our generation.

**The views expressed in this publication** should be considered as the personal opinions of the authors and are not to be taken as an official editorial perspective.

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Soon after beginning my formal study of theology in 1969 I took a required doctrine class for which the mandatory reading list introduced me to classical writings of the Christian tradition. I soon had a growing desire to understand more clearly the great sixteenth-century debates on grace and salvation. Several years later God was pleased to grant to me understanding to joyfully embrace the freeness of sovereign grace. My life would never be the same. I saw the entire Bible as an open revelation of God's free grace. Passages that had troubled me since my conversion in the 1950s now made sense to me. God was the central character of the canon, and grace was His primary gift. I shall forever remember the tears that freely flowed when I saw and understood that Jesus loved me, not for any imagined good in me, but out of unbounded mercy and grace. What amazed me more than everything else was that my Savior loved me from eternity past. I have never gotten over this revelation of divine truth to my heart!

I am so glad that our Father in heav'n  
Tells of His love in the Book He has giv'n;  
Wonderful things in the Bible I see—  
This is the dearest, that Jesus loves me.

Tho I forget Him and wander away,  
Still He doth love me wherever I stray;  
Back to His dear loving arms I would flee  
When I remember that Jesus loves me.

O if there's only one song I can sing  
When in His beauty I see the great King,  
This shall my song in eternity be:  
"O what a wonder that Jesus loves me!"

Shortly after this encounter with God's love and sovereign grace I realized that this truth was even more decisive than I could have ever realized. I soon saw that the doctrine of God's freeness in grace was at the heart of the sixteenth-century Protestant Reformation. I began to read the confessions, the creeds and the warm evangelical catechisms of the Reformers, the Puritans and their various heirs. I relished these aids as they helped me better understand Sacred Scripture. My appreciation for tradition and for the history of the church grew. I realized that *sola scriptura* did not mean the Bible *only*, as if evangelicals had no tradition or visible holy catholic church. It meant, as the Reformers properly taught, that all tradition, valuable as it is by degrees, must be judged by the Sacred Scripture, the final court of appeals. But tradition itself was both valuable and necessary. To come to the Scripture as if no one else had ever done so was unwise and dangerous. I further understood that the evangelicalism of my time, with its almost intentionally contracted amnesia, was weaker for knowing neither this important past nor its creeds.

It was not long until I began a study of the famous *Westminster Confession of Faith* and the *Shorter Catechism*. I fell in love with the straightforward biblical expressions of this tradition. I was, and remain, profoundly in debt to these seventeenth-century framers. I accepted the theological direction of this tradition without objection, even though I remained a Baptist minister in my view of the sacraments.

As I studied theology further, now several years into my pastoral labors, I resolved to preach the Bible expositorially at all costs. I was encouraged in this by several models, some modern and several ancient. I learned that the Reformers were regular expositors of the Word of God. I read their sermons and profited much by their preaching. Finally, in the late 1970s I preached through Matthew 5-7 in a series of seventy sermons. (Today I don't recommend that

anyone preach that long a series on such a short portion of the Scripture.) It wasn't long before I was forced to deal with Matthew 5:17-20. Here I came face-to-face with questions about the law, the covenants and how to use the Old Testament in the light of the New. My confessionally developed Reformed view of the law and the covenants was forced to undergo some serious rethinking in the light of a number of texts and issues that I saw clearly in the Word of God.

As I preached through Matthew 5-7 I was once asked, "Are you a dispensationalist or a covenant theologian?" I decided to teach an adult class on dispensationalism, both its history, primary figures and presuppositions. I knew clearly that my views did not line up with the *essential* elements of this rather recent hermeneutical system, rooted as it is in a *radical disjunction* between Israel and the church, and between the Old and New Testaments. I had assumed all along, having followed confessionally Reformed thought up to this point, that I was a covenant theologian with a Baptist view of the sacraments. Now I was not so sure. I knew that covenants framed much of the language of the Bible, and I understood that one could not read the Word without seeing that God saved believing people in both the Old and New Testament eras, by grace alone, on the basis of promise. But I also understood that covenant theology was much more extensive than this simple acknowledgment.

What troubled me most was the obvious *newness* of this covenant ratified with the death of Christ, called plainly the new covenant. Maybe my hermeneutical approach was rooted in covenants in a manner not consistent with the way the New Testament spoke of the covenant. The views of seventeenth-century Reformers, rather than the evidence of the New Testament, seemed to drive some of the things I was carefully pondering at this point. I wanted to pursue the text more carefully, and yet I had deep respect for post-

Reformation theology.

During this time I tried to engage in serious discussions with theologians from several sides of this historic hermeneutical divide. The response was often distressing. Labels were easy to come by in such discussions: dispensationalist, antinomian, Sabbath breaker, libertine, etc. And some from the side I came to see more clearly used names such as legalist, covenantalist, federalist, etc. The names of the living and the dead were often invoked to prove points. The atmosphere was anything but conducive to the earnest pursuit of truth with love for grace and God's covenants. But my desire for relating the covenants in a way that gave proper priority to the *newness* of the new covenant, and to the Lord Jesus Christ as the new Moses and as the mediator of a better covenant, all pushed me to study further. I cannot say that I have arrived, or that an adequate new covenant theology has yet been fully framed, but I can say that some matters are now much clearer for me than they were in 1978. My appeal in presenting this particular issue of *Reformation & Revival Journal* is that all brethren, especially those who value the great Reformed confessions and catechisms as I surely do, should lead the way in continually submitting everything, old and new, to the "law and to the testimony." Though the new covenant approach expressed in this issue is not the consistent historical testimony of several important documents, I do not believe this theological approach is particularly novel or so far removed from major Reformation gains exegetically that it might destroy their great value for those who are earnest students of the Word of God. For me these considerations merely add to my biblical understanding of God's grace and sovereignty. Doing serious theology should always be a task that helps to build the church upon her historical foundation, not destroy what has been gained over the centuries. Let me explain.

Some, in attempting to emphasize the new covenant,

seem to desire a "tearing down" of the older paths as if these had virtually destroyed the lives of the faithful over the years. I do not take this approach. I find, for example, almost complete agreement in the developments of new covenant thought in our day with the way Baptists have historically allowed significant differences regarding the matter of the new covenant and the Lord's Day, or the Christian Sabbath question.

Historically, Baptists, being heirs of the great Protestant Reformation, have held an evangelical view of the propriety of corporate worship. From their earliest confessional statements this approach is clear. What is not so clear, however, is their particular view of the Lord's Day and the relationship of this new day to the perpetuity of the Sabbath.

Chapter XXII, Articles Seven and Eight, of the *Second London Confession of Faith* (1689), demonstrated one approach, borrowing almost word for word from the earlier *Westminster Confession* by saying:

... he [i.e., God] hath particularly appointed one day in seven for a Sabbath to be kept holy unto him, which from the beginning of the world to the resurrection of Christ was the last day of the week; and from the resurrection of Christ was changed into the first day of the week which is called the Lord's Day; and is to be continued to the end of the world, as the Christian Sabbath; the observance of the last day of the week being abolished.

This same chapter goes even further, in article eight, to say that the Sabbath should be kept as "holy unto the Lord" through observing "holy rest" and using the day in "the public and private exercises of his worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy."

But Baptists, and even other Reformed evangelicals for that matter, have not universally followed this way of apply-

ing the Decalogue to new covenant believers. In 1644 articles of faith were drafted by seven Baptist churches in London where one searches in vain for similar Sabbath-type statements. Further, when Baptists arrived in the American colonies changes were again in order. The Philadelphia Association, an early Baptist connection, followed the more Puritan approach to this issue while the *New Hampshire Confession* (1833) modified the longer statement with a briefer reference to “the first day of the week” as “the Lord’s Day, or Christian Sabbath.” Out of these developments came the Baptist Faith and Message (1925, 1963) which gave theological direction to the churches in the South. This tradition speaks of the Lord’s Day with no reference whatever to the Sabbath. The statement is insightful as much for what it doesn’t say as for what it does:

The first day of the week is the Lord’s Day. It is a Christian institution for regular observance. It commemorates the resurrection of Christ from the dead and should be employed in exercises of worship and spiritual devotion, both public and private, and by refraining from worldly amusements, and resting from secular employments, work of necessity and mercy only being excepted.

One can readily see the remainders of Sabbath language, even though this document has modified and “softened” it considerably. What is going on here? Was this simply a cultural slippage into bad practice? It could be, but the real answer seems too complicated for such a cavalier explanation. On both sides of the Atlantic, Baptists, and others along with them, had continued to do biblical theology, interacting with the text of the Word of God, praying that God might grant fuller light from the sacred text. The larger practical issue was to become: “How do we relate to those groups, even among Baptists, who insist on keeping the sev-

enth-day Sabbath as *the* day of worship?” With the insistence of some that Sabbath keeping was part and parcel of *abiding moral law* for all believers, these Baptists were asking, “How can we retain a high view of worship and life and use the best emphasis of our theology, and still relate it properly to the freedom that we see under the new covenant?” Other Baptist confessions omitted Sabbath language as well (e.g., *Swedish Baptist Confession* [1861], *The Confession of the Evangelical Association of the French-Speaking Baptist Churches* [1879, 1895] and the *Russian Baptist Confession* [1884]).

But many readers of this publication are not Baptists. This is irrelevant to the point I am trying to make because every tradition that is committed to *semper reformanda* (always reforming) should continually be interacting with Holy Scripture. Many of the same patterns we observe in Baptist faith and life can be seen in other traditions as well, though they develop differently because of the way in which these traditions use creeds. As most readers know, the *Heidelberg Catechism* is an equally helpful and Reformed document, along with the *Westminster*. It answers the question of the Sabbath and its relationship to the Decalogue quite differently than does the *Westminster*. When the *Heidelberg*, a wonderfully clear and helpful document, comes to address the fourth commandment it says:

103 Q. “What is God’s will for us in the fourth commandment?”

A. First, that the gospel ministry and education for it be maintained, and that, especially on the festive day of rest, I regularly attend the assembly of God’s people to learn what God’s Word teaches, to participate in the sacraments, to pray to God publicly, and to bring Christ offerings for the poor.

Second, that every day of my life I rest from my evil ways, let the Lord work in me through his Spirit, and so begin in this life the eternal Sabbath.

I find in these words an expression more akin to the actual theology and practice that I now see in new covenant theology than to the English Puritan approach, expressed ably in the Westminster tradition. Either way we all must ask, "Can we live together in the spirit of the apostle who writes, "Therefore let no one act as your judge in regard to food or drink or in respect to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath day—things which are a mere shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ" (Col. 2:16-17)?" I believe we can if we will observe several vital directives that every seriously reformational theologian ought to agree with, at least in principle.

First, any emphasis upon the new covenant must not drive a wedge between the two testaments. We are *one people* of God, with one Bible for the whole of the redeemed community. If ethnic Israel has a unique place in God's economy, then new covenant theology will agree that it is in Christ and in the church as we now know it, the mystery which has been made known in the last days (Eph. 2:11-21).

Second, new covenant theology must be extremely careful regarding how it speaks of using the Old Testament. It must avoid the ancient errors of Marcion as well as the modern errors that treat the Old Testament as a book of moral maxims which have little to do with God's new covenant people and their ethical and social responsibility before Him. The sober and wise warning of one commentator needs to be heard by all advocates of new covenant thinking:

It is inadequate to say either that none of the Old Testament applies unless it is explicitly reaffirmed in the

New or that all of the Old Testament applies, unless it is explicitly revoked in the New. Rather, all of the Old Testament remains normative and relevant for Jesus' followers (2 Tim. 3:16), but none of it can rightly be interpreted until one understands how it has been fulfilled in Christ.<sup>2</sup>

Martin Luther wrestled with this very matter when he wrote a treatise in 1525 on "How Christians Should Regard Moses." Listen to his counsel:

I have stated that all Christians, and especially those who handle the word of God and attempt to teach others, should take heed and learn Moses aright. Thus where he gives commandment, we are not to follow him except so far as he agrees with the natural law. Moses is a teacher and doctor of the Jews. We have our own master, Christ, and he has set before us what we are to know, observe, do, and leave undone. However it is true Moses sets down, in addition to the laws, fine examples of faith and unfaith—punishment of the godless, elevation of the righteous and believing—and also the dear and comforting promises concerning Christ which we should accept. The same is true also in the gospel. For example in the account of the ten lepers, that Christ bids them go to the priest and make sacrifice (Luke 17:14) does not pertain to us. The example of their faith, however, does pertain to me; I should believe Christ, as did they.

Enough has now been said of this, and it is to be noted well for it is really crucial. Many great and outstanding people have missed it, while even today many great preachers still stumble over it. They do not know how to preach Moses or how to regard his books.<sup>3</sup>

Third, new covenant theology must guard carefully

against any kind of ethical disjunction between the Holy Spirit and the law. As this publication has recently addressed the theme of ethics from a Reformation viewpoint we need to be reminded that this issue of the new covenant is ultimately one which profoundly touches upon this same subject. We cannot speak of the work of the Spirit in a way separated from the law and the Word of God.

In a real sense the Sabbath/Lord's Day issue, which is in miniature a reflection of the whole new covenant theme, is a kind of test case. It becomes, in a certain sense, a paradigm for the wider issues that need to be addressed far beyond this present journal. One cannot consider these matters of theology and hermeneutics without asking, "Why, or upon what basis, should Christians accept or reject Old Testament laws regarding slavery?" D. A. Carson adds further, "On what basis should one applaud the insistence on justice in Deuteronomy and Amos, but declare invalid the racial segregation of Nehemiah and Malachi?"<sup>4</sup>

Yes, indeed, I reply, "On what basis?" The issue of the covenant and of hermeneutics will remain a big concern for all serious students of the Bible who believe in one Bible with two testaments. D. A. Carson's comments should humble anyone who comes to this subject with a teachable mind when he adds:

Small wonder, then, that the Sabbath/Sunday question continues to attract attention. It is one of the most difficult areas in the study of the relationship between the Testaments, and in the history of the development of doctrine. If it is handled rightly, however, our further study of this question ought to provide a synthesis that will at least offer a basic model for theological and ethical reflections.<sup>5</sup>

Yes, this is indeed a difficult area! We enter into it, not wishing to disturb the minds of God's people unduly, but

rather to open Christian thinking progressively to a reconsideration of the text of the New Testament. Where writers in this particular issue may have missed the mark, challenge them as you read. Where they strike gold, go further and search for more solid exegetical treasure. Either way, I urge you to come as a disciple, as a true learner, to the theme of the new covenant.

#### Endnotes

- 1 Philip P. Bliss, "Jesus Loves Even Me," n.d.
- 2 Craig Blomberg. *Matthew, The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1992), 103-104.
- 3 E. Theodore Bachmann, ed., *Luther's Works*, (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960), 35; 173-74.
- 4 D. A. Carson, ed., *From Sabbath to Lord's Day: A Biblical, Historical and Theological Investigation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 17.
- 5 Ibid.