

Progressive Revelation and Dispensationalism

There are many who believe that Jesus Christ essentially taught *Old Testament* religion right up *until* the very end of His ministry, at which time He introduced His “New Commandment” to love one another ---and thereby *substituted* “love” **in place of** God’s law. Such an idea is totally unscriptural.

Others believe an equally false concept. They say that Christ preached Old Testament religion for His **entire** ministry, and that His teachings have *no relevance for Christians!* They have “no relevance,” because it’s said that *the way to salvation* became totally **changed!** They say it was “changed” either *by* Christ’s crucifixion---or, as some say, *by* the teachings of Paul.

In his book *Primitive Christianity in Crisis*, author Alan Knight states this: “...*dispensationalism* [is] the modern *justification* for rejecting Jesus’ earthly ministry [i.e., *rejecting Christ’s teachings*].”

What is “dispensationalism”? Basically, it is a religious teaching that the history of mankind is divided into a series of *divinely appointed eras*. It is said that God is testing mankind *in different ways*, according to which specific era God was (or is) dealing with. Some dispensationalists divide history into 3 or 4 eras, whereas many teach that there are 7 eras.

Yet, regardless of the number of eras, it seems that most all dispensationalists include some form of the following *two* eras: (1) The era of *the law* (which is generally said to have existed from the giving of the law at Mt. Sinai up until the time of Christ’s crucifixion), and (2) The era of *grace*.

Unger’s Bible Dictionary says this about the “era of grace”: “This period *began* with the death and resurrection of Christ...The point of testing [in this era] is *no longer* legal obedience to the law as a condition for salvation, but *acceptance or rejection of Christ...*” (1966, p. 269).

Now, if you think about it, this is an incredible teaching! It essentially says that for a period of about 1,500 years, mankind had to obey supposedly harsh *laws* as a means of attaining salvation; whereas ever *since then*, all that one has to do to gain salvation is to accept Christ! How could anyone believe in such an *unfair* God?!

Now, back to Alan Knight’s book. Speaking of “dispensationalism,” he says this: “This modern doctrine, espoused by *most* of Protestant evangelicalism, argues that **portions or all** of Jesus’ earthly ministry are part of the Old Testament and therefore have *no* relevance for Christians.”

Again, that is an incredible doctrine---that much or all of what Christ Himself taught was *done away* as soon as He was crucified! Doesn’t scripture tell us that “Jesus Christ is the **same** yesterday, today, and forever”?! (Heb. 13:8). Jesus Christ is *alive today*---living within true Christians. And He lives, within them, the *same* life of **obedience** to God’s spiritual law that He lived 2,000 years ago!

Continuing, Mr. Knight explains that “they use this [teaching of dispensationalism in order] **to reject** the many *lawful* teachings of Jesus’ earthly ministry.” Also, he refers to a “‘veritable explosion’ of antinomian [i.e., anti-law] teaching within evangelicalism beginning in the 1980s.”

Numerous Proofs

Let’s now consider numerous reasons and proofs why it is *false* to teach that “Christ taught Old Testament religion, whereas Paul and others in the New Testament taught a different way to salvation.”

First of all, there is no way to salvation except *through* Jesus Christ. Almost 30 years after Christ's crucifixion, Peter said this, concerning Christ: "Nor is there salvation in *any other*, for there is *no other name* under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

Furthermore, *after* Christ's crucifixion, Paul warned of those who would come preaching "*another* Jesus" (II Cor. 11:4). And that is exactly what professing Christianity does today---*they preach of a Christ who came to do away with His Father's commandments!*

Yet, the fact is that Jesus Christ was *obedient* to God's spiritual law---and He **taught** obedience to God's law! Did all that *end* at the crucifixion? No! More than a week *after* Christ's resurrection from the dead, Christ gave these parting **instructions** to His disciples---"that **repentance** and remission of sins should be *preached* in His name **to all nations**" (Luke 24: 47).

So, did the apostles follow Christ's instructions? Did they, in fact, go forth and preach a message of repentance?

Just weeks after Christ's crucifixion, on the annual day of Pentecost, notice what *Peter* preached: "Then Peter said to them, "**Repent**, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins..." (Acts 2:38). It was Peter, again, who said, "**Repent** therefore and be converted, **that** your sins may be blotted out..." (Acts 3:19). Peter also said that God gives His Holy Spirit "to those who **obey** Him" (Acts 5:32).

Yes, Peter taught the *same* message of repentance and obedience as did Christ. In fact, Peter said to "arm yourselves also with the **same mind**" as Christ (I Peter 4:1). He said that Christ is our "**example**, that you should *follow* His steps" (I Peter 2:21).

What about James? Did he, after Christ's crucifixion, teach a message of *obedience* to God's law? James said, "faith *without* works is dead" (James 2:20). He also said, "a man is justified by works, and *not* by faith *only*" (verse 24).

How about Paul? Paul said, "Imitate me, *just as I also imitate Christ*" (I Cor. 11:1). Yes, Paul *imitated* Christ, and instructs us to do *likewise*. So, since we are to imitate Christ---and Christ lived in *obedience* to God's law---then **that clearly means that we too are to obey God's spiritual law.**

Paul likewise said, "Let this *mind* be in you which was also in Christ Jesus" (Philip. 2:5). And he continues, in verse 8, explaining what *kind* of mind Christ had---a mind that was "**obedient** to the point of death."

Yes, Paul *imitated* Christ's obedient life, and Paul **taught** adherence to God's law!

Yet, despite Paul's strong *endorsement* of God's spiritual law, many people insist that Paul was guided by God to "liberate" mankind *from* the law!

Notice the following excerpt from a modern Dispensationalist tract: "Apparently God allowed this system of Jewish ordinances to be practiced about thirty years after Christ fulfilled it because in His patience, God only *gradually* showed the Jews how it was that His program was *changing*... Thus it was that after God had *slowly* led the Christians out of Jewish religion He had **Paul** finally write these glorious, *liberating* truths" (Maurice Johnson, *Saved by 'Dry' Baptism!*, pp. 9-10).

Here we get a strong sense that, inherent in this dispensationalist mentality, is the idea of "progressive revelation." The idea that God, long ago, began dealing with the primitive Israelites---giving them *laws* to live by. As time passed, God moved in a more advanced fashion, by *first* giving us Jesus Christ, and then, as we progress *through* the New Testament, we come to the writings of *Paul*---who showed God's more perfect will---that we be *liberated* from law, and arrive at God's *ultimate* way of salvation---that of "grace **without** law."

Now, what are some things we can immediately see *wrong* with this concept of “progressive revelation”?

- (1) It *ignores* the many scriptures where Paul plainly taught **obedience** to God’s law.
- (2) It *ignores* the fact that Paul says we should *imitate* Christ---and that means that since Christ **obeyed** God’s law, *we should too!*
- (3) It *ignores* the fact that if one asserts that God’s will is “progressively” revealed in the Bible, then our *primary* teachings would come from *John’s* writings---*not* Paul’s---since John’s three epistles *and* the book of Revelation were all written *after* Paul died!

Having already looked at the *endorsement* of God’s law by Peter, James, and Paul, let’s now look at John’s writings---and we’ll look specifically at what he wrote *after* Paul’s death.

What did John say is the very *definition* of “sin”? “...sin **is** the transgression of the *law*” (I John 3:4, KJV). Does that sound like John thought that God’s law had been done away?

Consider I John 5:3---“For *this is* the **love** of God, that we *keep* His **commandments**. And His commandments are *not* burdensome.”

In Rev. 14:12 John describes the saints (i.e., Christians) as “those who *keep* the commandments of God.” In Rev. 12:17, John *again* refers to Christians as those “who *keep* the commandments of God” (Rev. 12:17).

Finally, notice that John says this: “He who says he abides in Him [in Christ] ought himself also to *walk just as* He [Christ] walked” (I John 2:6).

In conclusion, there are those who believe that Christ taught Old Testament religion for His entire ministry, and that **after** His crucifixion the New Testament shows that a “*new way*” is revealed. Yet, those who believe this should consider the following: **Peter** said that Christ is our “example,” and that we “should *follow* His steps.” **Paul** said that we should “imitate Christ,” and to “Let this *mind* be in you which was also in Christ Jesus”--- a mind that was “**obedient** to the point of death.” And it was **John** who said that we should “*walk just as* He [Christ] walked.” And *how* did Christ walk? He lived a life of **obedience** to God’s spiritual law!

Addendum:

The following question could be asked: Since the **Old Covenant** was not *completely* abolished until Christ’s crucifixion, does that mean that Jesus Christ, while on earth, preached an Old Covenant message? No! Jesus Christ came as “the Mediator of the **new** covenant”! (Heb.12:24). Christ is “Mediator of a **better** covenant” (Heb.8:6). The **final** book of the Old Testament records a promise of the coming of “the Messenger of the covenant” (Mal.3:1). This is obviously speaking of the NEW Covenant, which had already been prophesied back in Jeremiah Chap. 31---“Behold, the days are coming,’ says the Lord, ‘when I will make a **new** covenant ...’” (verse 31).

“Just as *Moses* was the mediator of the Old Covenant made at Mt. Sinai, so *Christ* is the mediator of the New Covenant. And just as His [Christ’s] marriage with Israel at Mt. Sinai set up the *physical* kingdom of Israel, so the marriage of the Church to Christ will set up the *spiritual* Kingdom of God. Thus, the good news of that coming marriage actually is the Gospel Jesus preached---the coming Kingdom of God [Mark 1:14]! The Gospel of the Kingdom of God [which Christ preached] contains the *terms and conditions* for entering into the **New Covenant** agreement with Jesus Christ...Keeping God’s spiritual law as defined in the Ten Commandments is one of the *conditions of the New Covenant* [the *other* condition being acceptance of Jesus Christ and His shed blood] ” (“The Plain Truth About the Old and New Covenants,” *Ambassador College Bible Correspondence Course*, Lesson 17, 1983).

References:

Primitive Christianity in Crisis, Alan Knight, pp. 321, 324, 340, 345-346