

Confusing the Old Covenant and the Church

Because some churches feel the freedom to use Old Covenant material in their understanding of the church, they have an inherent tendency to incorporate Old Covenant structures into church life. Consider the following examples.

Tabernacle/Temple

Past Purpose: The tabernacle was a prophetic picture of God's intent to dwell in his people; his presence dwelt in the building in a unique way. The symbolic events conducted in the tabernacle explained why God could not indwell his people (because of their sins) and how he would one day overcome this problem (by making atonement for their sins through his chosen substitute).

Present Error: Now this prophetic picture has been fulfilled. God dwells in every Christian and in the church corporately; the church is the temple of God. (1 Cor. 3:16; Eph. 2:20-22; 1 Pet. 2:4,5) Thus, it is no longer proper to regard any building as the place where God dwells in a special way.

Discussion:

What effects would we expect from this error?

Possible Answers: Most people view the church as a building rather than the people indwelt by God.

Many people superstitiously believe the church building (or the sanctuary therein) is "God's house" in that his presence is localized there more so than anywhere else. For this reason, people often speak in hushed tones when entering a sanctuary, even when no one else is there! Parents tell children not to run or play in the sanctuary because "this is God's house." Not only does this suggest God is anti-fun; it also communicates that God is still unable to indwell us personally as we come to him through Christ.

Priesthood

Past Purpose: The high priest was a type of Christ. (Heb. 3:1; 4:14) For this reason, he alone was permitted to enter into God's presence with a sacrifice for the people's sins. The other priests were a type of Christians in that they could draw near to God and communicate the knowledge of God to the people. The rest of the people were essentially passive participants in the service of God.

Present Error: This clergy-laity distinction which was valid in the Old Covenant period is now invalid. Because of Jesus' sacrifice, all believers have equal access to God and equal privilege to communicate the knowledge of God to others. ((Heb. 10:19-22; 1 Pet. 2:9)

Discussion:

What effects would we expect from this error?

Possible Answers: The effect of the clergy-laity distinction has usually been to discourage unordained Christians from ministering in significant ways. Church members often think it is the minister's job to reach out to others, teach the Bible, give spiritual counsel, etc. With no significant ministry purpose to pursue, many church members by default become enmeshed in materialism, which offers a counterfeit significance. This is a tragic squandering of the resources of the church.

Sabbath and Festival Calendar

Past Purpose: God gave the Israelites a full calendar of "holy" days. The Sabbath and the prescribed festivals were largely prophetic pictures of the salvation which Jesus would accomplish. (Col. 2:16,17)

every day is holy in the sense that salvation has occurred once and for all. Paul makes it clear in Rom. 14:1-5 that only those Christians who are "weak in faith" ascribe intrinsic spiritual significance to the observance of the Sabbath. In Gal. 4:1-11, he says that Christians who go back to observing the festival calendar are regressing rather than progressing spiritually.

Discussion:

What effects would we expect from this error?

Possible Answers: Many people erroneously believe that what matters to God is that we go to church on Sundays, or at least on Christmas and Easter. The effect of this formalistic approach to God is to reinforce the impression that an impersonal relationship with God is what he desires.

Liturgical Worship Service

Past Purpose: The Old Covenant worship of God was highly ritualistic. This was because it was designed to be an elaborate predictive picture of the work of Christ. (Heb. 8:5) The content and order of this ritual observance was highly regulated because it taught that we must come to God in the way he prescribed - by faith in his Substitute.

Present Error: Now that these pictures have been fulfilled, they are obsolete. (Heb. 8:13) Not only does the New Testament not describe or command a worship service for the church; there is also a positive reinterpretation of this whole concept (see section on "Worship in the New Testament"). Also, the number of prescribed rituals has been drastically reduced (from hundreds to two) and the regulation of how to observe them has been minimized.

Discussion:

What effects would we expect from this error?

Possible Answers: Those who subscribe to the necessity of liturgical worship invariably communicate an impersonal relationship with God when the way is now open to have an intensely personal relationship with him. Also, it is all too easy to continue to observe ritual even when the reality of the relationship is not there. This is why we have so many ritualistic churches today where the members do not know God personally. This ritualism is a turn-off to those who long for personal contact with God.

Infant Circumcision

Past Purpose: Infant circumcision was a ritual given by God to Abraham and his physical descendants. (Gen. 17:9-14) Circumcision was to be the sign that Israel was God's people. It was also a symbol of their need to be liberated from the bondage of their sin-natures. (Deut. 10:16; Jer. 4:4) God predicted that when Messiah came, he would "circumcise your heart . . . to love the Lord your God." (Deut. 30:6)

Present Error: The symbolism of physical circumcision was fulfilled in the death of Christ through which he disarmed the authority of our sin natures. (Col. 2:11) In spite of the fact that all clear examples of baptism in the New Testament are adult believers, many churches see infant baptism as the church's counterpart to infant circumcision. Roman Catholic doctrine states that it removes the guilt of original sin, thus teaching that spiritual regeneration comes through baptism. Many Protestant denominations erroneously believe that passages like Rom. 6:4 and Col. 2:11 refer to water baptism, and thus almost seem to teach baptismal regeneration.

Discussion:

What effects would we expect from this error?

Possible Answers: When asked if they will go to heaven, people commonly answer "yes" because they

were baptized as infants. Infant baptism has the effect of de-emphasizing the necessity of personal conversion to Christ. Instead, it communicates that salvation is something entered into on the basis of parental decision or ritual observance. This is a formalistic definition of Christianity which leads to whole churches full of nominal Christians (in name only).

Emphasis on the Law

Past Purpose: The Old Testament law code was a national contract with Israel which stipulated the conditions by which they could enjoy the land of Canaan. (see Deut. 28) It also had a spiritual value in that it showed them their need for God's grace which would be given when Messiah came. (Gal. 3:22-25) For both of these reasons, it was entirely proper for Israel to have a "law emphasis."

Present Error: The church is not a national entity living in Canaan, but an international community. Furthermore, now that Christ has come, we have access to new ministries of the Holy Spirit, making it possible for us to serve "in the newness of the Spirit rather than the oldness of the letter." (Rom. 7:6) The emphasis of the church should therefore be on the good news of God's grace, not on the Law and the threat of God's judgment.

Discussion:

What effects would we expect from this error?

Answers: Many denominations emphasize the Ten Commandments more than the grace of God. The effect is that many people grow up with the view that God is primarily a God of judgment rather than a God of love who has provided a way to forever escape his judgment. Some respond to this emphasis by running from God altogether; others become self-righteous. In either case, the unchurched person does not get the impression that Christianity is about the grace of God.

Outreach Strategy

Past Purpose: God's strategy for reaching Gentiles in the Old Testament period was centripetal. As the Israelites stayed in the land and followed the Law, God granted them national security and material prosperity. Foreigners would notice this, and some would thus adopt YHWH as their God. (Deut. 28:7-14; 1 Kings 10:1-12) The main reason for this "stay in the land" strategy was that the Holy Spirit was not operative in the same way he is today, so the Israelites needed to be a separate culture to prevent complete apostasy.

Present Error: Since the coming of the Holy Spirit, the God's outreach strategy has changed from centripetal ("stay in the land") to centrifugal ("go into all the world" - see Mt. 28:18; Acts 1:8). God's people are no longer to be a distinct culture, but rather are commanded identify culturally with those that they seek to reach (1 Cor. 9:19-23). Also, whereas material blessing was at times a legitimate national indication of Israel's obedience to God (although see Deut. 8:11-14;31:20; Prov. 30:8,9; Neh. 9:25,26; Hos. 13:6), this is not the case in the church (see 1 Cor. 4:9-16; Rev. 3:14-19).

Discussion:

What effects would we expect from this error?

Possible Answers: Churches commonly emphasize "witnessing by your lifestyle" instead of teaching that every Christian is to actively reach out to the lost through verbal evangelism as well as through an attractive lifestyle. Many churches also have developed their own sub-culture which effectively isolates them from non-Christians. In addition, many churches affirm the Old Covenant view of wealth and thus

passively (or even actively) condone materialism. These features are clearly at odds with God's present strategy.

Relationship Between Church and State

Past Purpose: In the Old Testament the nation of Israel was both a spiritual and national entity. The government of Israel was originally a theocracy, eventually replaced by a theocratic-chosen king. God needed a nation where he could preserve the witness he was accumulating about himself. It was entirely in order for God to call on the government of ancient Israel to operate the nation in a just and godly way.

Present Error: In the New Testament, the church is not expected to function as a nation state. On the contrary, the program is clearly different as witnessed by the call to submit to, and obey the Roman government--one of the most godless and brutal governments in history. (Rom. 13:1) The New Testament is devoid of any call to take over society or to run society God's way. Unfortunately, many Bible interpreters continue to read the Covenantal promises and warnings addressed to Israel in the Old Testament as though they apply either to the church, or to the United States (or other countries).

A very common example of this confusion is the often quoted passage in 2 Chronicles 7:13 "If I shut up the heavens so that there is no rain, or if I command the locust to devour the land, or if I send pestilence among My people, and My people who are called by My name humble themselves and pray, and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, will forgive their sin, and will heal their land." It is a mistake to apply this passage to the United States? It refers to the cursing/blessing section in the book of Deuteronomy. The people who are called by God's name are Israel. There is in fact no such promise extended to other countries.

One qualification is needed on this point. In the ancient world, there was no opportunity to vote on government issues or candidates. We do not know what God would have said if there was. Probably, a good ethical case can be made for Christian activism in politics as long as it falls short of attempts to establish a Christian state.

Discussion:

What effects would we expect from this error?

Possible Answers: History is full of examples of catastrophic results when the church has concluded that it is to run the state. A nation state often has to operate in the area of compulsion, punishment and even war. All of these things are inappropriate for the church. The church needs to keep crystal clear loyalties, excluding any non-biblical insertion into Christian doctrine.

Manipulators use values similar or even identical to those in the Bible to get Christians to back their agendas. For instance, no two themes are more universal in world religions than the sanctity of the family and the sacredness of the given cultural-national heritage. Oriental religion often actually worships parents and ancestors. Islam views the state as expressly a religious entity. Most oral religions are one and the same as the government of the tribe. This has tended to be true of Christianity as well in Europe. The medieval church was convinced that the state was to operate under the spiritual authority of the church.

Linking the universal appeal of blood and soil values with patriotic values and religion leads to the formation of a civil religion which is sometimes only nominally Christian. For instance, the implication of a prominent evangelical leading whole football stadiums in prayer before games is clear- -all or most of

those present must be Christians. It is easy to see why people begin to believe that Christianity is synonymous with American citizenship or church membership.

This nominal Christianity is one of the most deadly threats to real Christianity for two reasons. In the first place, it causes people to believe that they are Christians when they are not, and secondly, it misrepresents Christianity to the secular world. Instead of seeing real vibrant spiritual living on the part of the church, society sees a Christianity that is plagued by confusion and mediocrity.

Francis Schaeffer has argued, "If there are no absolutes by which to judge society, then society is absolute." Francis Schaeffer, How Shall We Then Live? (Old Tappan NJ: Fleming H Revell Company, 1976), p. 224. What does this statement mean, and do you agree with it? What absolute should judge the state, and what if the majority does not agree with that absolute? Should the Bible dictate morality even to non-Christians?

Conclusion

From these examples we can see why it matters what biblical material we use in constructing our understanding of the church! If we answer this question wrongly, we are far more likely to go astray in setting the whole tone for what Christianity is like.