

Lifting the Veil: The Righteousness of Christ in the Law

An Exposition of 2 Corinthians 3

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this work is to set forth insights into New Testament covenant theology from the third chapter of Paul's second letter to the Corinthians. Certain a priori assumptions are made with which this paper will not deal. Issues such pertaining to authorship, form, redaction, etc. lie outside the scope of this work. It is assumed that Paul wrote 2 Corinthians as one letter in the form in which we have it at present in our Bibles. Given this, there are some basic questions that must be resolved before this passage can be rightly understood. They are:

1. What issues was Paul addressing in this letter that impact this chapter?
2. What is the proper understanding of the terms "letter" and "Spirit"?
3. How should the "ministry of death" and the "ministry of the Spirit" be understood?
3. What is the meaning of the "veil" spoken of in verses 13-18?

Then, of course, the answers to these questions must be applied to the issue of the covenants. The ultimate question, again, is what does this passage teach about the law and the covenants?

CONTEXT OF 2 CORINTHIANS 3

This second letter to the Corinthian church is one which "reflects Paul's anxiety for news from Corinth, his relief and joy when Titus finally arrived, and his firm purpose to deal effectively with those who still troubled the church."¹ Paul refers to those who were still troubling the church as the *υπερλιαν αποστολων*, the "most eminent apostles,"² no doubt using the term with some sanctified satire. Paul treats much upon the theme of his apostolic ministry in this letter³, contrasting it throughout with the insufficient ministry of his opposers.

The apostle implies that those who have opposed his work in Corinth are insufficient in the following ways. First, they have insufficient *motivation*. They were "peddling the word of God." They had their own interests in mind when they preached, and thus did not, as had Paul and his associates, "renounced the hidden things of shame. They were "walking in craftiness" and "handling the word of God

¹ Nichol, Francis D., et. al., *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, Volume 6, pg. 824.

² 2 Corinthians 11:5

³ See for instance Dr. Ralph Martin, *2 Corinthians*, Word Biblical Commentary, Word Books, Publishing, Waco TX, 1986; page xxxvii. In Martin's outline of 2 Corinthians he refers to Paul's apostolic ministry as the main theme of the letter.

deceitfully.”⁴ By doing all this, they were preaching themselves, not Christ Jesus the Lord.⁵ Paul, on the other hand had “renounced the hidden things of shame,” and preached Christ “as of sincerity, but as from God, [speaking] in the sight of God in Christ.”⁶

The second issue with Paul’s opposers is one of insufficient *credentials*. These men, though they evidently claimed to be apostles of the first order still needed letters of commendation to recommend them to the brethren. Contrast this with Paul’s self-evident apostolic credentials! He had no need of any commendation letter since his ministry was well attested by such things as:

- In sufferings endured – 2 Cor. 6:4-10
- In spiritual fruits – 2 Cor. 8,9
- In personal stewardship – 2 Cor. 11:7-12
- In his own weakness in which God’s strength was made perfect – 2 Cor. 12:7-10
- In signs and wonders – 2 Cor. 12:11,12.

Thirdly, the opposing teachers in Corinth lacked sufficient *humility*. They boasted in appearances⁷ and compared themselves among themselves.⁸ They saw fit to “boast according to the flesh.”⁹ Paul gives evidence of a humble heart in these words – “Not that we are sufficient of ourselves to think of anything as being from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God. . . .”¹⁰ Paul’s humility is further demonstrated by his refusal to “class” himself or “compare” himself “with those who commend themselves.”¹¹

A fourth and perhaps most important lack in the “most eminent apostles,” Paul’s opposers at Corinth, was in the area of their *message*. They were preaching “another Jesus,” “a different gospel,”¹² and were “false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ.”¹³ Their ministry brought people into bondage,¹⁴ though they themselves tried to appear as “ministers of righteousness.”¹⁵ In

⁴ 2 Corinthians 4:2

⁵ 2 Corinthians 4:5

⁶ 2 Corinthians 2:17

⁷ 2 Corinthians 5:12

⁸ 2 Corinthians 10:12

⁹ 2 Corinthians 11:18

¹⁰ 2 Corinthians 3:5

¹¹ 2 Corinthians 10:12

¹² 2 Corinthians 11:4

¹³ 2 Corinthians 11:13

¹⁴ 2 Corinthians 11:20

¹⁵ 2 Corinthians 11:15

distinct contrast to this misleading and impotent message was Paul's preaching of "Christ's gospel."¹⁶ It was a message which constrained the heart by the love of God which was revealed at the cross.¹⁷ It was a message which produced a transformation of life in those who believed it and submitted to its claims.¹⁸ It was a message centered in the objective reality "that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them. . . ."¹⁹

The third chapter of this letter deals specifically with the issues of apostolic credentials viz. the discussion of commendation letters and the sufficiency of the New Covenant versus the weakness of the Old Covenant.

EXEGESIS OF 2 CORINTHIANS 3

1 A SUFFICIENT COMMENDATION

1.1 "Do we need, as some others, epistles of commendation. . . ?"

One of the tests of any ministry is that which Jesus Christ mentioned in Matthew 7:17,18,20. The fruit of a man's ministry demonstrates whether or not that man is a true servant of God or whether he is only a peddler with his own agenda. It is evident that Paul desired that the Corinthians reflect a bit on this question. No doubt there must have been some who claimed to be teachers who were bringing letters which flattered them, and requesting the same of the Corinthians. Believers moving to a new place often carried with them letters of commendation from the church with which they had formerly been united; but the leading workers, the founders of these churches, had no need of such commendation.²⁰ Certainly the greatest letter of recommendation is that which is written on the hearts of converted people by the Spirit of God, both on the heart of the minister of God, and on the hearts of the people to whom he ministers. The "letter of commendation" to the Corinthians was the fact that Paul carried this sometimes rebellious church on his heart at all times, showing the undying love which the Spirit of God was shedding abroad in the heart of the apostle towards them. The "letter of commendation" from the Corinthians concerning Paul was the visible fruit of their conversion, i. e. the righteousness of Christ which was being imparted to them.

¹⁶ 2 Corinthians 2:12

¹⁷ 2 Corinthians 5:14

¹⁸ 2 Corinthians 5:15-17

¹⁹ 2 Corinthians 5:19

²⁰ Ellen G. White.; *Acts of the Apostles*, pg. 327.

Through his preaching of the gospel to them something had been written upon their hearts so that Paul could say, “clearly you are an epistle of Christ. . . written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on the tablets of flesh, that is, of the heart.”²¹

1.2 “Written not with ink, but by the Spirit of the living God. . . .”

The question is, what was this thing that was written upon their hearts? We should see here an obvious reference to the language of Jeremiah 31:33. In contrast to the failure of the self-righteous promises of the people of the Exodus, the Lord promises that He will renew His everlasting covenant promise with His people. He says, “But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be My people.” That which is written on the heart of every believer is nothing less than the law of Yahweh. Paul is pointing out to the Corinthians that this very promise had been fulfilled through his preaching of the gospel to them. This demonstration of the righteousness of Christ testified to the truth of the gospel which Paul preached to them, and which they had believed.

1.3 “Known and read by all men. . . .”

Paul’s statement in verse 2 is one to which every church member should give careful consideration. The church is like a letter which is not only known, but also read by all men. God’s plan to preach the gospel to the world always includes a demonstration of the gospel’s power. Especially in these final days of earth’s history, given the checkered history of the church through the ages, there must be a clear manifestation of the righteousness of Christ in a people in order for the work of preaching the gospel to be finished. Thus it will be that all men will know and read of the gospel’s power by the changed lives of those who believe.

2 A SUFFICIENT COVENANT

2.1 The Letter vs. The Spirit

Paul has demonstrated that he and his fellow workers had entire sufficiency with reference to commendation of their work in that the fruits of their ministry in the churches constituted a more than sufficient commendation. He has also demonstrated the humility that every effective gospel worker must have in pointing to God as the Source of his sufficiency as a minister of the gospel.

²¹ 2 Corinthians 2:3

The implication of the fact that Christ was the One who called Paul to his ministry and gave him his message is, of course, that the message itself is as sufficient as the One who gave it. It was God, and specifically the Son of God who made Paul and his comrades “sufficient as ministers of the New Covenant.”²² Certainly God would not send out His ministers with a message that was not sufficient! And yet this was the very charge that was laid against the apostles by those who were being used by Satan in an attempt to drag the church into righteousness by works. Therefore it is likely that the contrast that Paul presents in verse 6 is a response to what these opposers of the gospel were preaching. In elaborating on the New Covenant, Paul exclaims that it is “not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.”²³ Clearly the gospel gives life, it does not kill. It is the gospel that has “brought life and immortality to light.”²⁴ It is sin that brings death, for “the wages of sin is death.”²⁵ Therefore, it seems clear that the essence of the “letter” message and experience is righteousness by works, since all man can do in his fallen state, using his own resources, is to bring forth fruit for death. This is part and parcel of the Old Covenant mindset, which does not allow those who believe and practice it to break free from sin. It is plainly evident from the parallelism in the sixth verse that the message and experience of the ministry of the Spirit is synonymous with the New Covenant, that is, with the gospel, and that it does give freedom from sin.

Given these things, how should the terms “letter” and “Spirit” be understood in relationship to the Ten Commandments? Some understand the term “letter” to refer to the Ten Commandments and the term “Spirit” to refer to the Holy Spirit’s production of a morality in believers that is above and beyond that of the Ten Commandments.²⁶ While this may sound noble in intention, it reeks of spiritualism which seeks to

²² 2 Corinthians 3:6a

²³ 2 Corinthians 3:6b

²⁴ 2 Timothy 1:10

²⁵ Romans 6:23

²⁶ This represents the published conclusions of former Seventh-day Adventist pastor Dale Ratzlaff. Ratzlaff even goes so far as to assert that Jesus deliberately undermined and/or broke both the Ten Commandments and the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament. He also asserts that Christ practiced situation ethics, thus implying that believers under the New Covenant should do likewise. These assumptions present countless exegetical and theological conundrums. For instance: If it is true that Jesus broke the law of Moses, then how can this be reconciled with Galatians 4:4 which clearly states that Christ was “born under the law?” The context of this verse clearly indicates that the law under which Christ was born was especially the moral law. If Christ had dealt thus with the law which he was “born under,” then He would have been a transgressor, and could not have been our Savior. The words from Deuteronomy 27:26 – “Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them” - certainly applied to Christ, though His righteousness was not by “the works of the law,” but was

do away with any kind of objective moral standards for behavior or worship. This concept places every believer above all law, or rather it makes the feelings and impressions of the individual believer the highest law. Those who take this position assume that the Hebrew church of Christ's day had a right understanding of the law, but that Jesus came to substitute a more moral and ethical righteousness than that of the Old Testament law. This assumption is shown to be faulty by many sayings of Jesus in which he rebuked the Jews, saying that they "knew not the Scriptures nor the power of God."²⁷ This would hardly be the case if they had a right understanding of the Law of Moses. The fact is that they did not have the first inkling as to the real breadth and depth of the Law, nor did they see that the law revealed the righteousness of Christ who came, "not to destroy but to fulfill"²⁸ that law. Jesus said, "I have kept My Father's commandments"²⁹, not "I have come to substitute a higher level of morality in place of My Father's commandments."

Thus the idea must be rejected that it is only the term "letter" that has to do with the law. Clearly both terms refer to the law. The term "letter" refers to the law as it is viewed by men do their best by their own resources to perform its requirements, while the other term "Spirit" refers to the shedding abroad of the love of God in the heart of the believer by the Holy Spirit, which is the fulfillment of the law.³⁰ The "letter" refer to an Old Covenant mindset toward the law contrasted with the "Spirit" which looks at the same law differently, that is, from the perspective of the New Covenant, seeing in it the righteousness of Christ. In order to answer this question, it will be necessary to thoroughly examine the remainder of the passage.

2.2 *The Ministry of Condemnation and the Ministry of Righteousness*

There are two ministries spoken of in the verses 7-11, and there are two glories that correspond to these two ministries. The first is described as the "ministry of death," or "ministry of condemnation." The second is referred to as the "ministry of the Spirit," or the "ministry of righteousness." The ministry of

instead the righteousness of faith, for "the just shall live by faith." Habakkuk 2:4. Had He offended the law set forth by Moses in a single particular, He would have failed in His mission to "redeem those who were under the law." Galatians 4:5. Thus do those who seek to throw out the law of God also throw out the gospel as well, thus ironically embracing the very righteousness by works against which they profess to fight.

²⁷ Matthew 22:29

²⁸ Matthew 5:17

²⁹ John 15:10

³⁰ See Romans 5:5 and Romans 13:10

death/condemnation is said to be “in letters having been engraved in stones.”³¹ Again, this language certainly points to the Decalogue. Two points are made here about the ministry of death. First, this ministry is said to have been glorious – so glorious that “the children of Israel could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of the glory of his countenance.”³² When Moses was up on Mount Sinai after the golden calf incident, the skin of his face began to shine as he spoke with God. This occurred in conjunction with the making of the new tablets of stone upon which the Ten Commandments were given again to the people. In connection with the law that ministered condemnation and death to those who transgress, Moses’ face shown with the glory of God.

The second point which is revealed about the ministry of condemnation is that although it was glorious in itself, it is not permanent. Though Moses’ face shown with the glory of God, that glory was not without end. And so it is with the law as it relates to its ministry of condemnation. The law will never cease to be, but it will one day cease forever to condemn, for the law only condemns sin. Therefore, because there will one day (soon!) be no sin left to condemn, the law will remain but the ministry of condemnation will pass away.

It is easy to see the connection between the term “letter,” which refers to the law as viewed from the mindset of the Old Covenant, and the ministry of condemnation. Whenever man looks at the law only as a set of commands which he must obey in order to be saved, it is certain that he will never obey those commands. Make no mistake, the result of the Old Covenant, “letter” mindset is not righteousness, but sin. As long as one stays under this Old Covenant mindset, he assures that the ministry of condemnation will one day be exercised upon him.

The ministry of righteousness is synonymous with the ministry of the Spirit according to the parallel use in verses 8 and 9. It is plainly stated that this ministry “exceeds much more in glory,” so that the ministry of death “had no glory” by comparison. Clearly this is so on at least two accounts. It is true, first, because of the fact that the ministry of righteousness remains. God is going to create “new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells.”³³ The law of God will continue to define righteousness throughout eternity for the simple reason that God lives forever, and that law is a transcript of His

³¹ Author’s translation of 2 Corinthians 3:7b from UBS 4 Greek Text. No variants are listed.

³² 2 Corinthians 3:7

³³ 2 Peter 3:13

character. The Great Controversy has been settled by the righteousness of Christ which is the fulfillment of the law and thus the righteousness of Christ will have its effect upon this universe throughout the ceaseless ages of eternity.

The glory of the ministry of righteousness far exceeds that of the ministry of condemnation for a second reason as well, for the glory of God revealed in His justifying the ungodly by the ministry of righteousness as it operated in the person of Christ far exceeded the glory revealed in His condemnation of the sinful race.³⁴ God's character is revealed in contrast to that of sinful humanity by the ministry of condemnation. It is true that "our unrighteousness demonstrates the righteousness of God."³⁵ But the fullness of God's character is revealed in that He took unrighteous mankind and made us righteous in the person of His Jesus Christ. Therefore, at the present time, because of the person and work of Christ, the ministry of condemnation has been temporarily suspended because that condemnation fell upon humanity in Christ. "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them."³⁶ "Through one Man's righteous act, the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life."³⁷ The judgment executed at the cross upon human nature set us free from the curse of the law³⁸ and those who respond in faith and remain in Christ will remain free from the ministry of condemnation. Paul says, "there is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit."³⁹

Today the ministry of righteousness is at work in all who believe the gospel. The Holy Spirit indwells believers, writing upon their hearts the principles of the law. As was noted above, this is the very essence of the New Covenant promise. "'For this is the covenant'", God says, "'that I will make with the house of Israel after those days', says the LORD: 'I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.'"⁴⁰ A little thought will reveal the fact that the ministry of righteousness, since it remains, necessarily makes the ministry of condemnation temporary. As has been stated previously, the law only condemns sin, so that if by the ministry of righteousness sin is

³⁴ And yet it could be said that the ministry of condemnation operated upon humanity in Christ, and that this act was the crowning one in our salvation. God justified humanity by condemning humanity in Christ.

³⁵ Romans 3:5

³⁶ 2 Corinthians 5:19

³⁷ Romans 5:18b

³⁸ The curse of the law is the result of the ministry of condemnation.

³⁹ Romans 8:3

⁴⁰ Hebrews 8:10

eliminated, then nothing remains that is worthy of condemnation. Given this, then it is obvious that the full New Covenant experience, the ministry of righteousness, is to ultimately eliminate the ministry of condemnation.

It is easy to see the connection between the term “Spirit,” which refers to the law as viewed from the mindset of the New Covenant, and the ministry of righteousness. For one thing, it is called, as has been noted, the “ministry of the Spirit.”⁴¹ Those who look at the law from the perspective of the New Covenant see in it the righteousness of Christ, which God has given to them as a free gift. They view it from the promisory perspective, that is, they see that God has promised to write it upon their hearts and thus work it out in their lives. They see Christ in His humanity as the basis for the fulfillment of this promise in them. The effects of the ministry of righteousness will certainly be seen in the transformed character of the person who appreciates and submits to this New Covenant experience. It will ultimately set them free from the bondage of sin, and thus render unnecessary any further operation of the ministry of condemnation upon them.

This concept forms the basis for the Seventh-day Adventist concept of the cleansing of the sanctuary in heaven with its corresponding cleansing of the character of the believers. This cleansing is nothing more and nothing less than the full experience of the ministry of righteousness, perfected in a generation of believers as it was perfected in the person of Christ. Thus the cleansing of the sanctuary truly is “to finish the transgression, to make an end of sins, to make reconciliation for iniquity, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy, and to anoint the Most Holy”⁴² for all this is a result of the ministry of righteousness.⁴³

3 “THEREFORE, SINCE WE HAVE SUCH HOPE. . . .”

3.1 Veiled Hearts

Those who are imbued with the message of the New Covenant, which is all-sufficient to meet the needs of sinners are constrained by that message to speak with boldness. “Therefore,” Paul says, “we use great boldness of speech – unlike Moses who put a veil over his face so that the children of Israel could not

⁴¹ 2 Corinthians 3:8

⁴² Daniel 9:24

⁴³ For an excellent discussion of this concept, see A. T. Jones, *The Consecrated Way*, pg. 81-85.

look steadily at the end of what was passing away.”⁴⁴ Moses veiled the glory that shone from his countenance for the sake of the Hebrews, lest they be terrified by his presence. The people of the Exodus did not wish to behold the τέλος, the end of what was passing away. That which was passing away, as has already been shown, is the ministry of condemnation; that which brings an end to it is the ministry of righteousness; and the Person whose righteousness is ministered is Christ. In the hardened mind, the understanding is darkened by the veil of unbelief which does not allow the veiled one to see the righteousness of Christ in the law. “For until this day the same veil remains unlifted in the reading of the Old Testament, because the veil is taken away in Christ.”⁴⁵ Even to this day the majority close their eyes to the gospel, not wishing to behold Christ our righteousness. We too can say with the apostle, “But even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them.”⁴⁶ How ironic that those who desire to do away with the moral law (supposedly to uphold the gospel) commit the same error as did the Hebrews of the Exodus. For “even to this day, when Moses is read a veil lies upon their heart.”⁴⁷ They fail to see the righteousness of Christ in the law. They see only commands when it is their privilege to see promises. Therefore the “light” in which they walk is not the “light of the gospel of the glory of Christ,” but the darkness in which the god of this age seeks to keep them. It is the sincere prayer of the writer that all such might “turn to the Lord” in order that the veil might be “taken away.”⁴⁸

3.2 *Unveiled Faces*

“But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as by the Spirit of the Lord.”⁴⁹ The one who turns to the Lord, embraces the ministry of the Spirit, which is the ministry of righteousness. Therefore Paul connects embracing the gospel with the ministry of righteousness when he says that “the Lord is the Spirit”⁵⁰ to whom we turn. A person cannot turn to Christ without embracing the ministry of the Spirit,

⁴⁴ 2 Corinthians 3:12

⁴⁵ 2 Corinthians 3:14

⁴⁶ 2 Corinthians 4: 3,4

⁴⁷ 2 Corinthians 3:15

⁴⁸ 2 Corinthians 3:15

⁴⁹ 2 Corinthians 3:18

⁵⁰ 2 Corinthians 3:17

who writes the law upon the heart, thus bringing liberty from the bondage of sin through a transformation of the character. It is by beholding that people are changed, but what is that they behold? Clearly they must behold Christ in His humanity, which is, in a sense, like looking in a mirror. In taking on humanity in its fallen condition Christ became us – He became we – for this is the meaning of the name Immanuel. Therefore when we behold Christ, it is like looking in a mirror; we see ourselves, not as we are in ourselves, but as part of His humanity. As we see what God made us in Him, it leads us to believe the promise that He will transform us “into the same image from glory [the ministry of condemnation] to glory [the ministry of righteousness], just as by the Spirit of the Lord.”⁵¹

CONCLUSION

Though 2 Corinthians 3 has often been used to devalue moral law, it is clear that Inspiration intended no such devaluation. The effort to link the Ten Commandments only with the Old Covenant does not stand the test of the exegesis of this chapter, for they are the foundation of the New Covenant as well. The difference, therefore between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant is not that one is based upon the law, and the other on grace without law. What makes one either Old Covenant or New Covenant is how one views the law. The question for all of us is, how do we look at the law? It is our privilege to look upon it with unveiled faces and see in it the righteousness of Christ. It should be the joy of every believer to look at the moral law as ten promises that God will fulfill in us through the ministry of the Spirit.

⁵¹ 2 Corinthians 3:18

APPENDIX:

Contrast between the Paul's message and the message of the false apostles

OLD COVENANT

- A. Ministry of death
- B. Ministry of condemnation
- C. Made glorious
- D. Passing away
- E. Preached and believed by veiled hearts
- F. Understanding of hardened minds
- G. Leaves one in sin's bondage
- H. Produces no transformation of character

NEW COVENANT

- A. Ministry of the Spirit (life)
- B. Ministry of justification (righteousness)
- C. Exceeds much more in glory
- D. Remains
- E. Preached and believed by unveiled hearts
- F. Understanding of teachable minds
- G. Gives liberty from sin's bondage
- H. Transforms into Christ's image