

***NEW COVENANT THEOLOGY: IS THERE STILL A ROLE FOR THE IMPERATIVES?***

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Providence Theological Seminary Doctrinal Conference, 2011

*“There is perhaps no part of divinity attended with so much intricacy, and wherein orthodox divines do so much differ, as the stating of the precise agreement and difference between the two dispensations of Moses and Christ.”* (Jonathan Edwards)

I begin this presentation with the acknowledgement that not much has changed in this regard since Edwards’ day. But I trust, that even in a small way, this study will help bring some clarity to the difficulties associated with this subject. Generally speaking, this message will fall to the side of continuity with respect to the New and Old Testaments. Last year at this conference I gave a message entitled “The New Covenant and the Implications for the Christian Life,” a perspective that I would place to the side of discontinuity. So let me suggest that at some point these two presentations be considered as a unit.

The doctrine of sanctification in the New Covenant is a dynamic relationship between the Spirit, Word, and conscience within the context of the local body, a relationship apparent in one of Paul’s first letters, *“because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit, and with full conviction.”* (1 Thess 1:5). In this paper I would like to focus predominantly on the relationship between the Spirit and the Word, especially with regard to the commandments and imperatives, and the role they play in the Christian life.

First, I believe it will be helpful to briefly put this issue into its contemporary theological context, especially as it applies to New Covenant Theology (NCT).

(1) With respect to soteriology in general, on one extreme is the New Perspective on Paul, a theology that I believe obscures or undermines the doctrine of justification by blurring or ignoring the distinction between it and sanctification. At the other end of the spectrum are those who confuse sanctification with justification – treating sanctification solely as an accomplished reality, or at least separating the believer from the process in terms of willful obedience to the written word.

(2) With respect to the concept of written word and commandment, on one extreme are those who hold to the classic reformed view of *tertius usus legis* (‘the third use of the law’), and those who take a highly reductionist approach, seeing the ethical imperatives as merely a description of the Spirit’s activity.

(3) And third, but not least, it is important to recognize the part that this issue plays in the broader discussion of the authority and the sufficiency of Scripture. It is part of our ‘battle for the Bible,’ a battle being fought not with traditional skeptics or higher critics but within the context of evangelicalism.

Unfortunately, part of the problem lies in our rhetoric. It seems that evangelicalism has developed a set of poignant summary phrases that may be partly true, but sometimes presented and increasingly accepted as the whole truth. Statements like these that fall into the category of ‘things that preach, but will not teach:’

“The Christian life is not about doing but being.”

“The Christian life is not about what you do, but what God has done for you and is doing in you.”

“The Christian life is not about obedience to rules and written commandments. For after all, didn’t Paul say, “when the commandment came I died,” and “the letter kills?”

Many will likely object to the way in which I am characterizing these contemporary statements, insisting that they refer to the doctrine of justification or to the fact that God is the ultimate cause of every aspect of our salvation. There is no doubt that what is meant by many is nothing more than the fact that *“salvation is of the Lord,”* or in the words of the Apostle John, *“But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God”* (John 1: 12, 13). Perhaps that is what is intended, but unfortunately, our rhetoric has produced a theological stepchild that is best reflected in the example from the contemporaneous Christian music scene:

*“Give me rules, I will break them  
Give me lines, I will cross them  
I need more than a truth to believe, I need truth that lives, moves, and breathes  
More like falling in love than something to believe in  
More like losing my heart than giving my allegiance  
Caught up, called out, Come take a look at me now  
Give me words, I’ll misuse them. Obligations, I’ll misplace them  
Cause all religion ever made of me, was just a sinner with a stone tied to my feet”*

I intentionally withheld the title and name of the songwriter, as typically the greater culpability lies with the teachers and theologians. For if these summary statements and lyrics are an accurate summary of the Christian life, then the reactions and statements of the biblical writers should sound strange to us. If the Christian life is not about ‘doing,’ it is hard to explain why some of the first words Paul hears after his conversion are, *“Rise, enter the city and you will be told what to do.”* Or why Jesus would characterize a spiritual brother and sister as, *“one who **does** the will of my father”?* Or why the first words we hope to hear upon entrance to heaven are, *“Well **done**, my good and faithful servant”?*

And if good works and obedience are not conducive to the Christian experience, why would Paul write in Titus 3:8, *“I want you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to **good works**”?* Or why

would the apostle refer to “good works” as something “which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them”? (Eph 2:10)

Does it not sound strange for many today to read what Paul wrote in 2 Thess 3:13, “As for you brothers, do not grow weary in **doing good**. If anyone does not **obey** what we say in this **letter**, have nothing to do with him”?

As an aside, when Paul contrasts ‘the letter’ with the Spirit in 2 Cor 3, he is not denying the authority of God’s inspired written word, but is developing the salvation-history argument that contrasts the Mosaic code and the culture of law that defined the Old Covenant people of God (predominantly non-believers), with the reign of Christ and his Spirit that defines the New Covenant people of God (believers).

And finally, the concept of spiritual existence without rules is certainly one that must have escaped the awareness of the apostle Paul, for it would otherwise be hard to understand why he would write to Timothy in 1 Tim 5:21, “in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and the elect angels I charge you to **keep these rules** . . .”

And to some degree – again unwittingly in most cases – we have become complicit in a different form of ‘hyper-Calvinism.’ If we were discussing Pelagianism and the doctrine of justification we would recognize the problem more readily. In that scenario, we are dealing with an unbiblical focus on the decrees and sovereignty of God in election and regeneration, one that minimizes the responsibility of the sinner to repent and believe for fear of making faith a work. Similarly, it seems that in our reaction to the dangers of moralism we have forgotten that the Great Commission has two parts to it. New Covenant Theology seems to excel in the first part – “Go and make disciples.” But we are struggling with the second – “teaching them to do all that I have commanded you.” A warning from Thomas Schreiner is pertinent here, “It is imperative to avoid reductionism, as if justification were the only part of Pauline theology. At the same time, justification is not severed from the ethical life.”

## ***PRESUPPOSITIONS***

Before considering the doctrine of sanctification more specifically, a few comments on my general presuppositions are in order:

(1) The definition of ‘law.’ I make a distinction between *o nomos*, ‘the law,’ which typically in the NT refers to the Mosaic code, and the broader use or principle of law, commandment, or precept that refers to the revealed will of God more generally, either as it applies specifically to the New Covenant believer or for all men – the distinction between covenantal and trans-covenantal law or the ‘absolute’ law of God. We know that all men, everywhere, and at all times are under law, for all men die. For a complete discussion of this distinction let me suggest Dr. Gary Long’s book: Biblical Law and Ethics: Absolute and Covenantal.

(2) Second, while there may be distinguishing nuances, I consider the terms ‘circumcision of the heart,’ ‘regeneration,’ ‘God’s law in the heart,’ and what they represent as essentially synonymous. The new heart and the internalization of God’s law are not unique to the NC believer. Many OT texts allude to this reality, for example, Ps 119:11, *“Thy word have I hid in my heart that I might not sin against Thee.”* Isaiah spoke more directly to the issue in Isaiah 51: *“Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness, you who seek the LORD: look to the rock from which you were hewn (v.1) . . . Listen to me, you who know righteousness, the people in whose heart is my law” (v. 7).*

As B.B. Warfield wrote regarding the OT saints, “from the very beginning, in narrative, precept, and prophetic declaration alike, it is in trust in the unmerited love of Jehovah alone that the hearts of men are represented as finding peace.” However, what is unique to the New Covenant – and one of the central points of Jeremiah’s prophecy – is the reality that the new heart will no longer be confined to the believing remnant within the covenant community, but will be a characteristic of every member of the NC.

The Old Covenant stood in connection with a typological and geopolitical community; where God’s holy people were ruled in God’s holy land by God’s holy king - its sociologic “boundary markers” being the land and the Mosaic law. In the New Covenant the veil has been wrent, Jerusalem has fallen, and God now reigns in the hearts of His people. The New Covenant stands in connection with a community where all of its members have God’s law (*“my law”*) written on the heart in fulfillment of Jeremiah 31:34: *“for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.”* Jeremiah was not referring to a new law, but neither was he referring to the “Decalogue” as the classic covenant theologians assert. It is a picture or description of the submission of the human soul to its sovereign creator; a picture of a relationship rather than a legal document or codified list. It is noteworthy that the result of God’s action in the hearts of His people is framed in the words, *“they shall know me”* rather than *“they shall obey me”* – the latter of course being our Lord’s expected consequence: *“if you love me keep my commandments.”* It is a relationship revealed in the regenerate hearts of the Old and New Testament saints; one that gives a hearty “Amen” to the priorities of the Spirit and the word. It is the spiritual reality revealed by the words of the psalmist, *“Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth; unite my heart to fear your name. I give thanks to you, O Lord my God, with my whole heart, and I will glorify your name forever” (Ps. 86:11, 12).*

(3) Third, but not least, is the reality of the ‘indwelling Spirit’ – something unique to the experience of the NC believer. The precise difference between the work of the Spirit in regeneration and that of ‘indwelling’ is beyond the scope of this paper, but suffice it to say that in the OC, as a matter of general principle, God is represented as dwelling WITH his people as opposed to IN his people in the NC. Let me suggest the

treatment of this distinction in a work by James Hamilton, God's Indwelling Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Old and New Testaments.

### ***THE DOCTRINE OF SANCTIFICATION: THE INDICATIVE – IMPERATIVE DYNAMIC***

When thinking about the doctrine of sanctification in a general sense, it is important to recognize that when Paul and the other NT writers contrast the New and Old Covenants, they do so primarily from the perspective of redemptive history – comparing the ‘in Christ’ experience of the NC believer with that of the unconverted Jew in Judaism. In most instances, when the issue is ‘discontinuity,’ Paul is not focusing on the distinctions between himself and David or Abraham, but between Paul of Tarsus and Saul of Tarsus.

However, when the comparison is made between the OT saint and NT saint, the framework of the doctrine of sanctification – especially with regard to the relationship between the indicative and the imperative – remains one of continuity. And that is one of the central points of this paper: the nature of obedience, and the relationship between the imperatives and the believer’s walk with God, is the same in both the Old and New Testaments.

Consider Ps 50:23, *“The one who offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice glorifies me; to one who orders his way rightly I will show the deliverance of God.”*

In this verse we have set out before us the two categories of the doctrine of sanctification. In the first phrase, *“the one who offers thanksgiving as his sacrifice glorifies me,”* we have the realm of the indicatives: the conscious awareness of who God is and what he has done, as well as the instinctive response of the regenerate heart – thankfulness. In the second phrase, *“one who orders his way rightly,”* we see the realm of ethics and the imperatives. The imperatives are always seen in the context of the outworking of the indicatives. And we can also see in this text something of the distinction between ‘being holy’ and ‘doing righteousness.’

In Numbers 16 there is a good example of this dynamic in the events surrounding Korah’s rebellion. After hearing of the sinful attitude of some of the Israelites, Moses responded, *“In the morning the LORD will show who is his, and who is holy, and will bring him near to him”* (v. 5). There is no question here that God is the ultimate cause, the one that chooses, and that the response of his people is based ultimately on who He is and what He has done. And yet, that does not preclude the necessity of the imperative. Notice v. 6, “Do!” God ordains the ‘means’ as well as the ‘ends.’ Again, we see something of the distinction between ‘being holy’ – based on God’s choosing and a relationship with him – and ‘doing righteousness’ – man’s response to that relationship.

What would you say about anyone who refused to obey at this point? Clearly, they have little concern for their own well-being or that of their family. And certainly

they show little concern for the privilege they have of serving the God of heaven – as evidenced in Moses statement in v. 9, *“is it too small a thing for you that the God of Israel has separated you from the congregation of Israel, to bring you near to himself, to do service in the tabernacle of the LORD?”* Note in this verse as well the emphasis on ‘separation,’ a principle central to the doctrine of sanctification in the Old and New Testaments.

One of the critical questions in our discussion, of course, is how a passage such as this would be interpreted and applied by the NT authors? Fortunately, we have an answer to that question in 2 Tim 2:19, *“The Lord knows those who are his,”* and *“Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity.”* In this verse, Paul uses the reference to Numbers 16 – *“The Lord knows those who are his”* – to reinforce the continuity of the indicative/imperative dynamic. Just as in Num 16, note how Paul here moves seamlessly from the indicatives to the imperatives and the realm of ethics. We will come back to this text, but I would first like to look at how this dynamic applies more specifically to the doctrine of sanctification, and especially the ministry of the Holy Spirit.

### ***THE DOCTRINE OF SANCTIFICATION – SUBCATEGORIES***

Classically, a clear distinction is made between the doctrines of justification and sanctification – and for good reason – justification being related to our forensic standing and sanctification being related to conduct and ethical process. However, what we have not emphasized enough are the categorical distinctives within sanctification. The categories I would like use are: (1) Positional Sanctification – or the realm of the sacred or holy, and (2) Progressive Sanctification, what I refer to as Representational or Reflective Sanctification – the realm of ethics.

The realm of the sacred or holy is positional or ‘definitive,’ as it is referred to by some authors. It involves standing and identity, a category referred to by Paul in 1 Cor 6:11, *“but you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.”* It is grounded in our justification but defined or characterized by God’s presence. This is the realm of the indicatives – ‘who God is,’ ‘what He has done,’ and ‘who we are in Christ.’ It is a state of being, or what I will refer to as the ontological aspect.

The second category is the realm of ethics and the imperatives, the teleological aspect. And while it is a process that effects a change in our character, its purpose is primarily reflective or representational – pointing to the attributes and work of Christ. A good example is 2 Cor 7:1, *“Since we have these promises (the indicatives), beloved (standing and identity), let us (the imperatives) cleanse ourselves from every defilement of body and spirit, bringing holiness to completion in the fear of God.”*

### ***THE REALM OF THE SACRED IN THE OLD AND NEW COVENANT***

In the OT, the ontological aspect – the reality of God’s presence – was experienced in the temple environment through activity proscribed in the Mosaic code. As James Hamilton notes, “The OC believers may be described as regenerate though not indwelt. They became believers when the Spirit of God enabled them to believe, and they were maintained (sanctified) in faith by God’s covenant presence with the nation in the temple.” The Mosaic code and the culture of law was taken as a whole, but had both an ontological and a teleological aspect – the sanctifying effect of the temple environment as well as the expression of the will of God in the realm of ethics. The law provided for and communicated ‘who they were’ as well as ‘what they should do’; it provided the structure for both ‘being holy’ and ‘doing righteousness.’

In the New Covenant, the believer is maintained in a state or realm of holiness, not by a culture of law – or ‘doing torah’ – but the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit – in Paul’s words, “*you are the temple of the living God.*” The proclivity of the NT Jewish converts to return to the Mosaic Law was not simply an inherent moralism or a desire to be justified by the law – although certainly a part of Paul’s argument – but a concern for this ontological aspect – they were used to experiencing their standing and identity in the temple environment. Part of Paul’s argument, in both Romans and Galatians, is that to return to the law to experience the presence of God – the temple experience – is not only unnecessary but also tantamount to idolatry, for they are now led by the indwelling Spirit of God. For Paul, the issue in many of these contexts is not primarily one of ethics, but an argument for the titanic shift in salvation history; a shift from the *Shekinah* glory to “*Christ in you the hope of glory.*” Commenting on Gal 5:18, “*But if you are led by the Spirit you are not under law,*” Thomas Schreiner notes, “Paul makes a salvation-historical argument here, for those who are led by the Spirit do not belong to the old era of redemptive history when the law reigned.”

### ***THE REALM OF ETHICS IN THE OLD AND NEW COVENANT***

David and the OC saints had their faith maintained and strengthened by the temple experience, an experience reflected in their obedient conduct or ethics. Like the OT saints, obedience from the heart is the natural and expected response to the state or realm of God’s presence. This understanding helps to explain Paul’s statement in Gal 5:25, “*If we live by the Spirit* (the ontological aspect and indwelling presence of God – the realm of the indicatives), *let us walk by the Spirit* (the teleological aspect and the revealed will of God – the realm of the imperatives). The word translated walk (from *parapateo*) is virtually always used in reference to our conduct or ethics.

But rather than the concept of ‘cooperation’ – God has done his part so now we do our part – for that typically connotes a co-meritorious arrangement, the appropriate

term for the relationship between the two phrases in this verse is ‘coordination,’ a term well suited to convey the idea of ‘walking’ or ‘keeping in step’ with the Spirit. God is always working and man is always working – both aspects dependent on the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps the relationship is best encapsulated by Paul in Phil 2:12-13, *“as you have always obeyed . . . work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God that works in you both to will and do of his good pleasure.”*

What then does it mean to *“walk in the Spirit”*? Perhaps John Reisinger, in his Studies in Galatians, put it most succinctly, *“Walking in the Spirit is nothing less than walking in obedience to the revealed will of God in Scripture.”* The reality of the indwelling Spirit does not preclude the instrumentality of the written word of God, any more than the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration precludes the instrumentality of the preached word – *“for faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God.”* Ethics cannot be reduced to the activity of the indwelling Spirit – no matter how vital – any more than ethical conduct in the OT could be reduced to the experience of the temple environment. This indicative/imperative or Spirit/Word dynamic explains why Paul writes in 1 Thess 4:9-11, *“Now about brotherly love we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. . . Yet we urge you, brothers, to do so more and more. Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you.”* He begins with the reality of the work of God in the heart of the believer – *“for you yourselves have been taught by God”* – but he doesn’t stop there. Although he says that *“we do not need to write you,”* note well that he continues to write, instruct, and ‘urge’ them to follow biblical principles of ethical conduct. Clearly, what Paul is communicating here is that the work of the God in the heart of the believer does not supplant the role of the written word in the realm of ethics.

Furthermore, and contrary to much of the teaching that wants to pit relationship against word and obedience, the inspiration and application of the written word is no less a work of God and the Spirit than the expression of his indwelling presence. In the OT, relationship with God and obedience to his word were distinguished but inseparable. The psalmist wrote in Ps 119:14, *“You O LORD are my hiding place and my shield; I hope in your word.”* And certainly in the NT one has to look no further than Jesus’ relationship with his father, where even within the highest expression of love and communion Jesus could say, *“as it is written, man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God”* (Matt 4:4). The life of Christ can be characterized by submission to the will of his father: *“I come (in the volume of the book it is written of me,) to do thy will, O God”* (Heb 10:7). And in fact, Jesus had such a high view of Scripture that he could attribute to it the same power and authority that he did when he was referring to himself. Jesus said, *“If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and **the truth will set you free**”* (John 8:31, 32). And yet a few verses later he could say, *“**So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed**”* (John 8:36).



The apostle Paul, as we have seen, did not have difficulty integrating the ontological aspect with the ethical realm. For example, in Rom 15:15 he wrote, *“because of the grace given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit.”* This is more of Paul’s ‘temple talk,’ referring to the fact that their holy or righteous status is confirmed through the acceptance and indwelling presence of the Spirit. The phrase *“the offering of the gentiles”* refers not to something the gentiles offer, but that they are in a sense Paul’s offering. I like the reading offered by the editors of the ESV: *“the offering he (Paul) presents to God is gentile converts. This offering is pleasing to God since it is set apart into the realm of the holy (sanctified) by the Holy Spirit.”* Paul then moves seamlessly into the teleological aspect of their sanctification in v. 18, *“for I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me to bring the Gentiles to obedience – by word and deed.”* The term obedience here, in the words of Douglas Moo, *“denoting comprehensively the believer’s response to the Lord Jesus Christ, including, but not limited to faith.”*

But we could ask at this point, is there an objective standard for this obedience? And Paul answers that in Roman 6:17, *“But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed . . . v. 19, so now present your members as slaves of righteousness leading to sanctification.”* Again, I appreciate Moo’s perspective: *“Paul wants to make clear that becoming a Christian means being placed under the authority of Christian ‘teaching,’ that expression of God’s will for NT believers . . . Paul would then imply that Christians, while no longer ‘under the Mosaic law,’ are nevertheless bound by an authoritative code of teaching.”*

And where do we find this *“teaching”* or that ‘expression of God’s will for New Testament believers’? For that answer we really need look no further than 2 Tim 3:16, 17, *“all Scripture is inspired by God (theopneustos) and profitable for teaching (didaskalia), for reproof (elegmos), for correction (epanorthōsis), for training (paideia) in righteousness.* There is no question in this verse that teaching (*didaskalia*) refers to “all Scripture,” especially the OT Scripture. If anything, Paul’s burden of proof is that the apostolic writings are included in what is “God-breathed.”

Note that reproof (*elegmos*) is used only here in the NT, yet it occurs in the LXX, for example, in Leviticus 19:17 where it refers to “reproving” one’s neighbor and doing so in the immediate context of the absolute (unchanging) law of God – the second greatest commandment: *“you shall love your neighbor as yourself”* (v. 18). Similarly, the word the apostle uses for correction (*epanorthōsis*) is used only here in the NT. It is used in the LXX to mean “make straight” or “raise up” or “restore.” Why would Paul have chosen two words used only in the OT if he were not emphasizing the essential continuity of *“all Scripture”* with respect to correction and reproof? Must he not be assuming an ethical standard that still exists in *“all Scripture?”*

Lastly, training or discipline (*paideia*) is a word that has a strong association with the Old Testament. The only other uses of this word in the New Testament (Eph 6:4; Heb 12: 5, 7, 8, 11) point to a connection with Prov. 3:11,12: *“My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline or be weary of his reproof, for the Lord reproves him whom he loves, as a father the son in whom he delights.”* Note here as well, that this is one of the passages where reproof (*elegmos*) is found in the LXX. Again, if Paul did not want to imply an essential ethical continuity and abiding relevance of the OT, or if he wanted to imply or reinforce a radical discontinuity between the Old and New Testaments, why would he choose terminology and references that reflect such a clear association between the two?

Some would suggest, however, that the OT merely ‘informs’ us. But Paul said *“all scripture is profitable for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness.”* All Scripture is God’s self-revelation and can never merely ‘inform’ us. Even God’s general revelation in creation obligates all who interact with it. All Scripture obligates us, whether by specific commandment, general principal, or by insight into God’s attributes. The specific application of a given passage will depend on its covenantal context as well as the New Covenant dynamic of Spirit, word, and conscience.

Furthermore, the significance of the word inspired or God-breathed (*theopneustos*) – used only here in the Scriptures – can’t be minimized. Paul here is thinking not only in terms of the origin or authority of the Scriptures – already referred to as *“the sacred scriptures”* in v. 15 – but the role of the Holy Spirit in their application to the individual believer. This may well be a Pauline parallel to the words of Jesus, *“man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God”* (Matt. 4:4). The picture painted by the words, *“proceeds from the mouth of God”* certainly conveys a concept similar to the unique word (*God-breathed*) Paul uses in 2 Tim 3:16. The use of this term may well be a reference as well to Jesus’ words in John 6:63, *“It is the Spirit that gives life; the flesh profits nothing. The words that I speak to you are spirit, and they are life.”*

The importance of the role of the Holy Spirit in the application of *“all Scripture”* can’t be underestimated. Paul wrote to the Colossian believers, *“We have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God”* (Col 1:9, 10). To walk *“worthy of the Lord”* means to *“walk in the Spirit”* (Gal 5:25). To walk in the Spirit is to be taught by the Spirit. A true leading of the Holy Spirit cannot be assumed when there is no legitimate appeal to Scriptural authority, and the teachings of the Spirit are in *“all Scripture”* – so asserts the Apostle Paul in 2 Timothy 3:16. If it is the indwelling Spirit who defines the covenant people of God, and *“all Scripture”* is Spirit produced (God-breathed) and the direct expression of the will of God for his people, then is it not consistent with the harmonious working

of the triune God to see “*all Scripture*” – interpreted within its covenantal context – as authoritative in the life of the believer?

The New Covenant stands in contrast to the Old Covenant taken as a whole, but the “*law of Christ*” stands in continuity with “*my law*” of Jeremiah 31 and is expressed and summarized in the two great commandments. The “*law of Christ*” is the highest expression of God’s law because it is ultimately fulfilled in Christ. The ethical requirement that a husband love his wife is *trans-covenantal* – revealed in the creation ordinances, Yahweh’s relationship with the nation of Israel, and ultimately in the New Covenant commandments. But in the New Covenant, by virtue of Christ’s redemptive work, it reaches its highest expression: “*Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.*”

### ***THE REFLECTIVE OR REPRESENTATIONAL ASPECT OF SANCTIFICATION – ETHICS***

In the context of 2 Tim 2:19 we see the primary role of the ethical category, one that represents or reflects the Master himself,

*“But God’s firm foundation stands, bearing this seal: “The Lord knows those who are his,” and, “Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity.” Now in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver but also of wood and clay, some for honorable use, some for dishonorable. Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work.”*

The ethical process changes us, protects us, blesses us, and affects our moment-by-moment relationship with Christ (a study for another time), but it is not first and foremost about us. It is about Christ, who He is and what he has done. And a discussion of the process can be structured in light of his role as prophet, priest, and king.

### ***REFLECTIVE SANCTIFICATION: LORDSHIP AND CHRIST’S ROLE AS KING***

One of the likely sources for the second phrase in 2 Tim 2:19, “*Let everyone who names the name of the Lord depart from iniquity,*” is Isa 26: 13, “*O Lord our God, other lords besides you have ruled over us, but your name alone we bring to remembrance.*” Paramount in the discussion of ethics is the issue of authority. That is why Jesus asked the Pharisees, “*Why do you call me Lord, Lord and do not do what I say?*” The issue for every human being is not whether we obey rules, but whose rules?

In Col 1:13 Paul wrote, “*He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son.*” The word translated ‘transferred’ was often used in the context of the transfer of authority from a conquered king to the conquering king, an apt description of what has happened to God’s people.

Referring to the role of missions and the second phrase in the Great Commission John Piper wrote, "The aim of Christian missions is to cause people to obey a new commander. Sanctification is happening when the words of Jesus are being obeyed." One of the tragic consequences of the misconception that biblical obedience is opposed to grace and a relationship with Christ – pitting Christ against his word – is the number of discouraged and frustrated believers that it has left in its wake. Now there is no denying that legalism and moralism too produces frustration and discouragement, but loving obedience is not to be equated with legalism. For as someone has said, "grace is not opposed to righteousness, just self-righteousness." Legalism is either replacing God's commands with those of men, or keeping legitimate commandments with the motivation of justifying oneself – the imperatives without the indicatives. No longer in many of our churches is there an understanding of the joy that comes from faithful obedience to God's word. I have often wondered whether it might not be profitable to interleave our sermons in Galatians with those from John's gospel. Note the words of our Lord in John 15, "*As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.*"

### ***REFLECTIVE SANCTIFICATION: HOLINESS AND CHRIST'S ROLE AS PRIEST***

Inherent in the doctrine of sanctification is not only moral and ethical purity but 'separation,' a concept reflected in the phrase, 'in the world but not of the world.' The national, geographic, and ceremonial boundary markers of God's Old Covenant people have been fulfilled, but continuity is seen in the ethical categories that include love for neighbor, sexual purity, and freedom from idolatry. And these 'boundary markers' figure prominently in the identity of the New Testament church. Yahweh told Israel, "*I am the Lord your God who has marked you off from all the Gentiles . . . You shall be holy to me, for I the Lord your God am holy, and I have distinguished from all the Gentiles to be mine*" (Lev 20: 24, 26 LXX). The theme of ethical purity and separation remains a central focus for Israel's prophets, not only as they point to the pending national exile, but ultimately to the new exodus and the origin of God's New Covenant people. In Isa 52:7-11 we read,

*"How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace . . . The LORD has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God. Depart, depart, go out from there; touch no unclean thing; go out from the midst of her; purify yourselves, you who bear the vessels of the LORD."*

Ezekiel gives the same emphasis in anticipation of the New Covenant,

*And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put*

*my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules (Ezek 36:26-27) . . . They shall not defile themselves anymore with their idols and their detestable things, or with any of their transgressions . . . they shall be my people, and I will be their God . . . They shall walk in my rules and be careful to obey my statutes . . . and David my servant shall be their prince forever. I will make a covenant of peace with them. It shall be an everlasting covenant with them . . . Then the nations will know that I am the LORD who sanctifies Israel, when my sanctuary is in their midst forevermore. (Ezek 37:23-28).*

It is not surprising then that the NT authors take up this theme in the founding documents of the NT church. Peter quotes from Lev 19 when he writes in I Pet 1:15-16, *“but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, “You shall be holy, for I am holy.”* Paul too incorporates wording from both Leviticus and Ezekiel in this first letter to the Gentile church:

*Finally, then, brothers, we ask and urge you in the Lord Jesus, that as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God . . . For you know what instructions we gave you through the Lord Jesus. For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality . . . For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness. Therefore whoever disregards this, disregards not man but God, who gives his Holy Spirit to you . . . so that you may walk properly before outsiders” (I Thess 4:1-12).*

Frank Thielman ([Paul and the Law](#)) summarizes Paul’s thinking where he notes, *“Just as the people of Israel were the chosen people of God and were required to demonstrate their special status by observances that set them apart from ‘the Gentiles,’ so the Thessalonians are chosen by God and are therefore required to live sanctified lives, distinguished from ‘the Gentiles’ by their sexual purity . . . The close parallel between Paul’s language in Ezek 36:27 shows clearly that the eschatological restoration of Israel as Ezekiel describes it is the source of Paul’s ethical admonitions in this passage.”*

Much of the contemporary emphasis on the New Covenant has missed the larger picture because of its focus on the believer’s experience. It is as if they take the promise of the Spirit in Ezek 36 and link it to freedom in Christ – and that is the end of story. But for the apostle Paul, freedom in Christ meant being *“crucified with Christ.”* God is the only being that can at the same time be self-centered and holy. He expects his name to be honored above all names, and his word to be honored above all other words or wisdom. The popular presentation of the New Covenant has ignored the OT context and the ultimate purpose for its fulfillment. These are the words of Ezek which precede the well known promise of the Spirit:

*“Thus says the Lord GOD: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. . . And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Lord GOD, when through you I*

*vindicate my holiness before their eyes” (Ezek 36:22-23).*

As believers in union with Christ, the ethical imperatives and our obedience to them not only reflect the character of our high priest, but clearly establish the boundary markers of God’s New Covenant People: *“when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes.”*

### **REFLECTIVE SANCTIFICATION: WISDOM AND CHRIST’S ROLE AS PROPHET**

In 2 Tim 3:16, Paul points us to the enduring wisdom found in *“all Scripture.”* In the OT scriptures we read:

*My son, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments, for length of days and years of life and peace they will add to you. Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you; bind them around your neck; write them on the tablet of your heart. So you will find favor and good success in the sight of God and man. Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths. Be not wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD, and turn away from evil. It will be healing to your flesh and refreshment to your bones. (Prov 3:1-8)*

As New Covenant believers we now read these words through the person and finished work of Christ. These words were ultimately from him and point back to Him. In Prov 3:14, Solomon refers to wisdom as the personified word: *“for the gain from her is better than gain from silver and her profit better than gold. She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her.”* The personified word has now become the Word incarnate, and the wisdom of the prophets finds its full expression in the person, work, and words of Christ. When we read Proverbs, we read it not as from Solomon, but from Christ himself in the context of NT revelation and fulfillment. And when we read Matt 7:24, *“Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock,”* we don’t hear them as isolated statements of wisdom from the Sermon on the Mount, but as the encapsulation and full expression of all that has come before.

Obedience to the commands of Christ leads us on a path of spiritual blessing and stability, one that causes us to *“find favor and good success in the sight of God and man.”* The fruit of our walk with him points to his knowledge and wisdom. It is for that reason that Jesus told his disciples in Matt 5:16, *“In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.* In the same vein, Paul urged the believers in Thessalonica to pay attention to their walk *“so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders”* (1 Thess 4:12).

## **CONCLUSION**

As the Scriptures begin, we find Adam – in the temple environment of the garden – walking with God in the context of commandment. David too walked with God in the context of commandment, and God said he *“was a man after his own heart.”* Those commandments were embodied in a culture of law, but they were integral to his sanctification. And of course, it was the loving obedience of our Lord – the 2<sup>nd</sup> Adam – to the commandments of His father that provides us with the greatest example of how we are to walk. At the culmination of God’s written revelation, the last words we hear reinforce the relationship between obedience and God’s presence. Prior to the unfolding of the final vision of the New Jerusalem, the angel – as if to stress to John that the full expression of the ‘not-yet’ is not here yet – says emphatically, *“write these things down”* (Rev 21:5). And with the final words of the angel, history ends the way it began: with an emphasis on the authoritative word of God, and the distinction between ‘being holy’ and ‘doing righteousness:’

*“Blessed is the one who keeps the words of the prophecy of this book . . . I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers the prophets, and with those who keep the words of this book. Worship God . . . Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy”* (Rev 22:7-11).

It has been said that progress in sanctification is measured by the growth in true humility. Is that what we see in the church today? One of the phrases in the contemporary song that I referred to at the beginning of this paper reads, *“Come take a look at me now.”* While not intending to make a personal reference to the songwriter, these words do say something about the perspective of the current church scene. In spite of a desire to magnify the work of Christ and our freedom in Christ, much of today’s theology – by minimizing the importance of the word of God – leads to a man-centered ‘Christianity.’ In essence, we have done what Israel did, and their attitude and actions prompted a penetrating response from God back in the same chapter where we started, *“you cast my words behind you . . . you thought that I was one like yourself,”* (Ps 50:18, 21). But contrast the contemporary message – *“come look at me now”* – with that of the word of God: *“But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite of spirit and trembles at my word.”* (Isa 66:2)

In the late 1800’s, a young convert rose to make a comment during a meeting conducted by D. L. Moody. Although he had little theological training, his last comment was memorable: *“I’m not quite sure, but I’m going to trust, and I’m going to obey.”* Also sitting in the audience that night was a minister named Daniel Towner. And while the style of the music may be dated, the words of the hymn that he wrote are timeless:

*“When we walk with the Lord in the light of His word,  
What a glory He sheds on our way!*

*While we do His good will He abides with us still,  
And with all who will trust and obey."*