

'Cana and the Covenants' Ch. 2

by Charles Alexander

The sermon explores the relationship between the Covenant of Works and the Covenant of Grace, and how Christ fulfills the promise of redemption and the new creation.

Scripture: Genesis 2:16

Topics: "Covenant Theology", "Redemption Through Christ"

Description

Charles Alexander preaches on the significance of the marriage at Cana in Galilee, symbolizing the establishment of a new covenant between God and man. The covenant of works, embodied in the Garden of Eden, regulated man's relationship with his Creator, leading to the breach of the covenant and the dire consequences of sin. The sermon delves into the terms of the covenant, the nature of sin, and the promised Seed who would bring redemption. It highlights the transition from the old covenant of works to the new covenant of grace through Christ's ministry, culminating in His cleansing of the temple and the prophecy of His resurrection.

Transcript

"And the third day there was a marriage in Cana of Galilee; and the mother of Jesus was there."

(John 2:1)

These words mark the close of that Second Week with which the ministry of Christ opened. The 'third day' (see chapter 1, verses 29, 35, 43 for the first four) corresponds to the sabbatic rest of Creation's first week, and this time it is marked by a marriage, for a marriage indicates the establishment of a covenant.

The creation of man in the image of God and for the purpose of the holy and divine communion of man with God, required a regulating and binding contract of relationship, established in that instrument which is known theologically as "the Covenant of Works." This instrument, the very existence of which was the crowning dignity and glory of human nature is embodied in the words of the Creator as He gave to man his task of dressing and keeping the Garden of God (Genesis 2:15).

The covenant regulated man's relationship with his Creator and was a necessary fact of man's moral creation in the image of the divine. All things were put "under the feet" of man (Psalm 8). Only in one visible object did God reserve anything from man's dominion. That prohibition related to the tree in the midst of the Garden, known because of its moral significance as "the tree of the knowledge of good and

evil."

This prohibition was not established as a snare to man, but as an essential part of man's education, worship, and moral dignity, It imposed upon him no handicap, and deprived him of nothing essential to his requirements. The apparent "triviality" of the prohibition (so ridiculed on that account by blind critics who have never conscientiously examined the facts of their own nature) - so far from making the subsequent breach of the covenant a thing out of all proportion to its consequences, made the offence immeasurably more heinous. Had man's moral nature been tested in some stupendous trial which stretched his moral capacity to the utmost limits God might have been held chargeable with the very offence which Satan subsequently leveled against Him - of exposing man to an impossible condition merely as a whim of His Own nature.

The less the temptation, the greater the sin. Make the act of disobedience ever so "trivial" and the guilt of man mounts proportionately for it throws in the face of God a contempt of His word and being, for the vainest of reasons.

THE TERMS OF THE COVENANT

So was the Covenant presented in these simple terms:

"Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Gen. 2:16-17).

The breach of this covenant entailed the direst of consequences and we must understand that these consequences were as inevitable as the nature of God and the moral implications of man's creation, the penalty could not be other than death, spiritual and physical. The severing of the lifeline between the soul of man and the Divine Spirit could not mean other than death in its total consequence to soul and body.

The nature of sin is to claim all things for itself and dash in pieces every restraint which the moral law imposes upon the conscience. The nature of every sin is as the nature of the first sin, and the nature of every temptation to sin is as the first temptation of Eve - namely, to nourish the thought that the restraints of the moral law are designed not to assist man to climb to immortality, but to deprive him of some good which God, for selfish reasons of His own, withholds from man.

Fully developed, the sin of man resolves itself into the last daring form of its rebellion expressed in the words of the Second Psalm:

"The kings of the earth have set themselves and the rulers take counsel together against the Lord and against his Christ, saying, Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us".

As the human race was tested in Adam, so the race fell in him, into the same curse and condemnation. Adam's offence was therefore the offence of the human race, in proof of which the penalty of death is exacted even upon those "who have not sinned after the similitude of Adam's transgression" (Rom. 5:14). That is, they have not sinned, as he sinned (as the progenitor of the human race, with the full equipment of innocence and perfection of nature with which Adam was endowed).

It should be perfectly clear that the human race could not otherwise be tested except by the abolition of each successive generation as it sinned, and a perpetual round of new creations of man, without hope of redemption for those who went before.

The human race is a homogeneous whole, and this fact underlines the doctrine of redemption in One who in Himself stood, as one for all and being qualified as both God and Man; as Lawgiver and Upholder of the Law first, and then as surety for all for whom He acted as spiritual head and spiritual progenitor of a new creation. Thus being qualified, His advocacy expected sin and brought in an everlasting righteousness.

NO RIGHTEOUSNESS FOR ANGELS

For angels who fell, there could be no redemption, for two reasons: first because angels are not a homogeneous species proceeding from one homogenitor, for they were all created individually at one time. Secondly, they were created in light, and not subject to the limitations of man's lowly estate. Therefore when they sinned, they sinned against total light and their offence was irrevocable. Men are not born devils, though they are born depraved. They turn themselves into devils in the process of progressive unbelief. Judas was a case in point - "Have not I chosen you twelve, and one of you is a devil?" "None of them is lost, but the son of perdition" (John 17:12) - that is, there comes a point in human experience when men sin totally against supreme light, and commit that offence against the Holy Spirit for which there is no forgiveness, either in this world, or in that which is to come.

"For verily he took not on him the nature of angels; but he took on him the seed of Abraham"

(Hebrews 2:16).

THE PROMISED SEED

Our whole race therefore lay under the curse of the broken Covenant of Works, but not without hope. Man went out from the presence of God with the promise ringing in his soul that what holiness, and justice could not grant grace would bring in. The seed of the woman would bruise the serpent's head". (That is, destroy Satan's kingdom of death, fear and guilt) even though in the doing of it the heel of that Seed's true humanity would be bruised in death by Satan.

This promise illumined the darkness of our race, kept a light burning in the gloom, formed a rallying point of worship and faith, turned Adam into a prophet, and Eve into a mother of hope. Adam taught his family to approach God by the lamb of sacrifice. Abel, the first martyr, perished for believing it, and the first man into the grave was the first Man into heaven; the first death in human history was the death of a saint, at the hands of a sinner.

Enoch's translation assured the elect and faithful remnant that immortality was assured, in the name of his son Methuselah, Enoch prophesied that in the year of that son's death 969 years later, judgment would close the first chapter of the history of our race (the name Methuselah, freely translated, means, "At his death it shall come").

The promises overstepped the waters of the universal Flood (in the year of which Methuselah died) and gleamed and glittered in the form of the new covenant bow in the clouds. There had never been a rainbow before, because of the state of natural creation before the Deluge.

The renewed corruption of the human race did not extinguish the promise of redemption, which found its embodiment in the Calling of Abraham and the creation of a people in whom the promise was deposited and preserved.

THE MOSAIC LAW

The Mosaic Law which was introduced as the nation took its complete form, was a transcript of the original Covenant of Works made with Adam. Its principle was, "The man which doeth those things shall live by them". But embodied in the same instrument was a provision of (typical) atonement and expiation by which the promise of redemption was specified and preserved and mediated, "until the seed should come to whom the promise was made" (Gal. 3:19).

The confusion which exists in the minds of many teachers as to the coexistence in the Mosaic statutes of both Law and Gospel, or the two covenants (of Works and of Grace) arises because of a mistaken view of the purpose of the Mosaic system. Because the Jews as a nation did not perceive the true nature of the Sinaitic instrument, they have ever since regarded that covenant as an end in itself, whereas "it was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made" (Gal. 3:19). The coming of that seed (Christ) abolished that former covenant and dismantled its structure of temple, priesthood, and sacrifice. Woe to him who sets up again that apparatus.

CROMWELL'S CLEAR VISION

Cromwell, a theologian of uncommon sagacity showed the grasp he had of the truth, when in a flash of jubilant inspiration during his last fatal illness, he cried to those about him "the covenants - the covenants! the two covenants are one."

He meant that the Covenant of Works becomes the Covenant of Grace in Christ. Christ died under the covenant of works being made a curse for us, and brought in for us through His satisfying of the Law, an everlasting righteousness imputed to us as an act of free grace and mercy. Hence, what to him was a covenant of works is to us who believe, a covenant of grace As our great poet George Herbert so wonderfully expressed it

"Love is that liquor, sweet and most divine which my Lord sees as blood, but I as wine."

The promise fulfilled in Christ does what the Law could not do of itself. That law, the covenant of works, has power only to condemn the guilty. The Law exhausts its demands in Christ's obedience unto death, for all for whom He acts as Mediator. A limited redemption we must have no matter what evangelical scheme we espouse - unless we fall into the snare of "universalism".

"The two covenants are one," as they meet in Christ, "the Second Man"

and the head of the new Creation which comes into being and is regulated by the eternal covenant of redemption, promulgated in the counsel of the Holy Trinity before the world was, and known in consequence as the "Covenant of Grace," or the "Eternal Covenant."

It is under this Covenant that God pledges Himself to the task of bringing all creation to its appointed end. By an act of perfect obedience Christ sanctifies eternally, and places beyond the possibility of a second fall, that new Creation of which He is the spiritual Head and Surety and Mediator. Because He lives, we shall live also. Because He is righteous, so are we - by grace through faith.

THE COVENANTS IN THE GOSPEL OF JOHN

Armed thus with the knowledge of the inner constitution of all creation in terms of its being bound by covenant to the throne of God, we are not surprised to find in John's account of the earthly mission and mediatorship of Christ, the Son of God, a priority given to this covenantal economy of the holy wisdom of

God.

It appears first in John the Baptist's cry, "the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth come by Jesus Christ" (John 1:17). The excellence of this Person of Christ in which the promise of redemption was enclosed is the special care of the Baptist who first names Christ as "the only begotten Son which is in the bosom of the Father" (John 1:8). The Baptist was in a position to know, not only because he was the greatest of all the prophets, but because he heard the voice of God proclaiming "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17). This exalted rank of Christ as the Second. Person of the Godhead, and the express image of the Father, constituted His right (which He only possessed in the entire universe of being) to be the Mediator of our race.

For this cause, "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory - the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth."

Christ begins His ministry, after His baptism and His return from the temptation in the wilderness, by calling the first of His disciples. In the case of Nathanael (Bartholomew) He proclaims His own mediatorship under the new covenant of grace in the words, "Hereafter ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man".

(John 1:51)

In this remarkable statement Christ compares His office with that which Jacob saw in vision at Bethel. Jacob sees a ladder set up from earth to heaven and the angels ascending and descending upon it. That ladder is the temporal ladder of the Mosaic Covenant, with its "-ministry of angels" (Acts 7:53), and is contrasted in Christ's words with the fulfillment of the promise in Himself, when He, by His own mediatorship, becomes the ladder communicating between heaven and earth. In short, He informs Nathanael that in "the kingdom of God" (the gospel state) shortly to be established, the old covenant would be moved out of the way by His own mediatorship and the new covenant of grace would reign in Him.

Now comes that great "third day" of John 2, verse 1, typical alike of His own resurrection when "death in death is laid low," and of the great sabbath of divine rest on the Seventh Day, which becomes the first day of the new creation week when God cries, "Let there be light!"

Here then is the new creation and the new covenant proclaimed by Christ at Cana. The circumstances are carefully assembled by divine and holy predestination. It must be a marriage, because that is what the new covenant is. God and man were divorced under the old covenant. Now comes the eternal marriage, consummated at the last in the vision of John, "the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready" (Rev. 19:7).

"The mother of Jesus" must be there to represent Israel (the Church) under the Old Covenant (see Song of Solomon 3:11), handing on to the children of the New Covenant the instruction in prophetic words, "Whatsoever he saith unto you, do it" (John 2:5).

There had to be assembled there the "six waterpots of water after the manner of the purifying of the Jews, because six is the number of creation (He made the heavens and the earth in six days) and six therefore denotes in this place the inauguration of the new creation.

The pots filled with water represented the typical requirements of the old covenant which could not give life or purity of heart. Commentators should have been on their guard to perceive this as the obvious indication that the water was for "the purifying of the Jews" and therefore had a legalistic, covenantal significance.

The changing of the water into wine shows the change of the covenants, from that of Moses to that of Christ and of grace. The wine is the symbol of life and salvation, and is so ordained of Christ in the symbol of the cup at the Last Supper - "This is my blood of the new covenant shed for many for the remission of sins." Rome's error lies in regarding the wine as the thing typified, just as she regards the water of baptism as of heavenly virtue in itself, whereas both ordinances are memorials and pledges of that new covenant of grace which is the Kingdom of Christ set up spiritually and invisibly in the heart, and not in the flesh.

MARY'S INTRUSION REBUKED

The mother is rebuked for her intrusion into the new covenant mystery - "Woman, what have I to do with thee? Mine hour is not yet come." All efforts to temper the apparent harshness of this saying fail in their purpose. The Lord's words are prophetic (as are all His words) and must be given their concealed meaning. In this case He is setting aside the voice of the old covenant and pointing to the fact that when "His hour" came all this would be abolished and law would give way to grace.

Well would it have been if the rulership of Israel, represented in the governor of the feast, had been able to say with that functionary at the marriage feast, "The best wine has been kept to, the last," and thus have learned that with Christ there came the change of the covenants, and with the coming of reality, the old and the typical on which they rested (and still do rest) has been abolished, along with all exclusive Jewish privileges and prerogatives. The new creation takes form and the promise to Eve and to Abraham is fulfilled in a new nation and kingdom, of Jew and Gentile, bringing forth the fruits of divine grace.

It is of high significance that John records as a fact of history, that this which took place at Cana was "the beginning of miracles," and therefore in the understanding of it we may learn to understand all miracles, each one of which as recorded in the gospels, is designed to teach. In the case of John's gospel, most of the recorded miracles are in fact sermon texts and are so used by the Saviour (see chapters 5, 6, 9 and 11). The fact that John records exactly seven miracles between Cana and the Cross is of high significance, giving a sacred character to them all.

After Cana, Capernaum (John 2, verse 12), for a short interlude before the Lord returns to Judea, where most of the history recorded by John is set. He goes up to Jerusalem for the purpose of attending the first of those Passovers by which we measure the period of the Lord's earthly ministry - three and a half years.

THE TWO TEMPLES

He goes to Jerusalem purposefully and prophetically, and John records the first of those two cleansings of the temple which marked the opening and the close of the Saviour's ministry. Christ drives out the merchants who bought and sold. The whip of cords is contrary to the idea of this oh! So delicate age. The critics are against any display of "force". So let it be. This is our God cleansing His temple and He will deal with sinners at the judgment seat, along with, all critics and all liars, and send all these barking dogs, with terrible strokes of holy indignation, into everlasting shame and contempt.

"Make not my Fathers house an house of merchandise." Oh! That Israel had listened to that word. It would have opened to them the prophetic scriptures. And oh! That many of our present day evangelical teachers, bookwriters and preachers would bring their literature to the same testing ground and learn wisdom. For all of Christ's words and acts are rooted in the prophecies.

And what prophecy is the source of this statement of Christ? Can any of our readers discover it in commentaries, ancient and modern? Very few give the answer, but it is plain to be seen that Christ is acting according to the last verse of Zechariah (14:21);

"There shall be no more the Canaanite in the house of the Lord of Hosts."

And there the entire secret is revealed and once more we have a great rebuke to nationalistic and superficial interpretation of the prophetic word.

The word "Canaanite" means "a merchant" as everybody acquainted with the Hebrew knows. There never was a Canaanite as such tolerated in the temple precincts. See what happened when Paul was falsely accused of bringing a gentile into the temple courts. (Acts 21:27-32). If there never was and never could be a Canaanite in the house of the Lord what can the prophecy mean? Only this, that the Canaanite of Zechariah's prophecy was a Jew, not a gentile. He was a Jew who turned the temple of God into, a place of buying and selling, not just doves and sheep and oxen, but the bodies and souls of men. The Pharisee was a merchant who dealt in the bad coin of human merit, for which payment he expected to purchase the divine favor. The whole of Judaism at that time (and ever since) was given over to Canaaniticism. The Prophecy is spiritual and not "natural".

If the Canaanite was not literal but only a concealment of the spiritual state of the nation of Israel, then the horsebells of verse 20 (Zech. 14) on which "holiness unto the Lord" is inscribed are not horsebells at all, and the pots in the common dwellings of Jerusalem, (exalted in status to the dignity of the, holy vessels of the sanctuary) are figuratively too - thank God! What we are seeing in Zechariah's prophecy, are not holy pots and pans and the jingling sanctity of horsebells, but the abolition of the distinction between holy and profane in the Kingdom of God (the gospel). If it does not mean that, it means nothing.

And if the terminal verses of Zechariah's prophecy are meaningless unless they are to be spiritually understood, then the proceeding verses of chapter 14 are likewise to be understood spiritually, of the gospel kingdom of Christ. This being so, the standing on the Mount of Olives (14:4) was fulfilled in the first coming of Christ and is not an event of the second coming. How could it be otherwise if at His coming the second time, the heaven and earth will flee away at the sight of Him, and there can then be no Mount of Olives or any other mountain for Him to stand upon, and no planet earth to receive Him, seeing all creation will in one awful moment of universal dissolution, pass away?

Let our expositors consider the implications of this in the light of our Lord's statement, "Make not my Father's house a house of merchandise," and thus perceive that Christ's kingdom is spiritual and not temporal.

As we have explained elsewhere in our writings, modern eschatology has confused the first coming of Christ with His second advent. The last verse of Zechariah determines that the entire chapter is descriptive of the mystical kingdom of God which Christ came to establish in His first advent. The dividing of the Mount of Olives to open up a way of escape for His people is a picture of the gospel deliverance of the people of God.

John, tells us in John 2:17 of another Prophecy which was related to that cleansing of the temple:

"The zeal of thine house has eaten me up" Psalm 69:9

If the Jews had attended to these things they would not have asked the Lord for proof of His authority. (Verse 18)

The Lord's answer was not calculated to satisfy their demand, for He who knows the heart of man knows how much to reveal and how much to conceal:

"Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up". (19)

In these words He identifies with Himself the cleansed temple in which there should be no more the Canaanite. It is the temple of His body raised in power from death and the grave, but showing forth also that, mystical body of His, the Church. The temple was the symbol of the Old Covenant. Its destruction and raising again in Himself indicate the passing away of the old order and the establishment of the new, in a glorious spiritual temple in which the distinction hitherto existing between Jew and Gentile is abolished, He having in Himself made of the twain, one new man (Ephesians 2:15).

Always, everywhere, at Cana, or in the temple, He is introducing the new covenant of grace and abolishing the old, and He is doing this in accordance with the prophetic scriptures of the Old Testament.

If some of our teachers had attended to this fact they would not have fallen into the errors as the rabbis with their Jewish interpretations and forecasts of a future Jewish kingdom of this earth to displace the mystic kingdom of Christ, and render obsolete the New Covenant.

Verses 23 - 25, summarising the ministry of Christ in this brief but eventful visit to Jerusalem, conclude this vital chapter. We see the Lord engaged in a number of unspecified miracles which excite in the people a temporary faith. His all-seeing eye penetrates, so that He does not commit Himself to them. Well He knows what is in man (as only one who is God can know). These people would in three years' time cry for His blood and would not be satisfied until they had destroyed "this temple."

SUMMARY OF CHAPTERS 1 and 2

As Christ moves through these pages it is as the Sovereign who is in absolute control. He calls whom He will (whom He has known from the foundation of the world) to do His will and be princes in the kingdom of grace (John 1). He declares that He is the great "Come and see," the omnipotent Jehovah of Psalm 45. He shows to Nathaniel that He is the discernor and revealer of all secret things; He is the One who opens heaven and restores the communication between God and man by His own atoning and reconciling work. He abolishes the ladder of the law and fulfills in Himself the righteousness and truth which God requires of man, so that upon Him the angels of God ascend and descend.

He changes the covenants when He changes the water into wine, abolishing Moses and requiring that all obedience should be rendered to Himself (Whatsoever He saith unto you, do it) All history and all redemption and creation hinge upon alone.

He shows by His purging of the temple that He is the fulfillment of all prophecy and the Fulfiler of the Word of God as He drives the merchants and robbers of false Judaism from the temple. At the same time, for those who will receive it, He is the temple.

All is measured and prepared by Him and for Him. John, the Apostle, is guided unerringly even as to where he should begin his narrative - which is more than a history: it is an action sermon; an exposition in itself, of prophecy and of the transition of the Covenants.

Johns account of the earthly life and ministry of Christ is enclosed within two specific periods of seven days each, two sacred weeks, the first of which, terminates at Cana, figuring the changing of the Covenants, and the second at Calvary in the finishing of the work of our redemption by the sealing in His own blood of the Covenant of Grace.

The two sacred weeks show that all Christ's earthly ministry was carefully planned and fixed from all eternity in the wisdom, providence and holy, glorious, predestinating sovereignty of God.

After Cana, and after a considerable interval of possibly as much as six months, Christ returns to Judea for the first of that succession of Passovers which determines the length of His ministry (three and a half years). He must needs observe these significant feasts because on the last of them He must give Himself to death as the Passover Lamb of God whose blood secures our redemptive deliverance and establishes the new and eternal Covenant of Grace.

The Scripture afterward remembered by the disciples in relation to the cleansing of the temple - "the zeal of thine house has eaten me up" - shows:

1. His whole life and purpose was the glory of God;
2. That glory was fulfilled in redemption, of which the temple was the pattern and the symbol
3. Judgment as well as mercy lay within His commission as He issued forth from the bosom of the Father with the declaration,

"Lo, I come: in the volume of the book it is written of me, I delight to do thy will, O my God- yea thy law is written in my heart" (Psalm 40:7 - 8).

"By the which will we are sanctified, through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Hebrews 10:10).

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