

Embracing the New Covenant of the Spirit

Escaping Satan's Greatest Scheme

II Corinthians 3:1-6

Rick Peterson

Early into his second letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul defines he and his associates as “ministers of a new covenant of the Spirit, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (II Corinthians 3:6). This definition has the same meaning as simply “ministers of the gospel.” To say we preach the gospel means we as individuals and as a church participate in the apostolic ministry of the new covenant of the Spirit. Now, why is this important? It is important because it is *only* by the ministry of the Holy Spirit that we begin the Christian life and then mature into the glorious image of Christ (Romans 8:26-30; II Corinthians 3:7-4:6; I John 3:1-3). And the new covenant is by definition, the new covenant of the Spirit (Jeremiah 31:31-33; Ezekiel 36:24-27).

What is more, Jesus himself *is* the new covenant (see Isaiah 42:6-7; 49:8; Luke 2:32; Acts 13:47). The new covenant is a Person, Jesus Christ, and therefore not in any way like the previous covenants (Hebrews 8:6-13). This is our Lord's meaning, when on the night he was betrayed, he told his disciples, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you” (Luke 22:20). The new covenant was consecrated not by the sprinkling of the blood of goats and bulls, as was the old covenant, but by his own blood at the cross (Hebrews 9:11-28). The fact that it is consecrated by Christ's blood, makes the new covenant precious to all believers, and the source of power for the Christian life in that it was the new covenant that was affirmed and empowered by the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost (Acts 2:16-41). The new covenant is *the fulfillment* of all previous biblical covenants (Hebrews 8:11-15; 12:22; 13:20); “For no matter how many promises God has made, they are “Yes” in Christ” (II Corinthians 1:20).

In addressing his readers, Paul also defines a second, a more popular ministry during his day, and our day as well, that ministry of the “letter” that kills (3:6). Later, Paul reveals this ministry of the letter as that of his opponents at Corinth, those whom he refers to as the

“super-apostles” (II Corinthians 11:5;12:11, NIV, ESV). The apostle then goes on to exposes these super-apostles as those who shockingly preach, “a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the Spirit you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted” to which he adds, “you put up with it easily enough” (II Corinthians 11:4). This is stunning language. Two ministries competing for the minds and hearts of the Corinthian believers: The ministry of the new covenant of the Spirit and there is ministry of the super-apostles. And this remains true today as well. The Corinthians, and you as well, are in danger of falling prey to the greatest of Satan’s schemes, a counterfeit Jesus, a different spirit, and an alternative gospel! And the Corinthians, like so many believers today, put up with this easily enough. Why do most Christians put up with this stunning spiritual deceit? It is because they simply are not taught any different. “My people are destroyed from lack of knowledge,” cries the prophet Hosea (Hosea 4:6). And these men do not appear as horned devils, but as ministers of righteousness, well credentialed, eloquent, and worldly wise.

Satan’s Greatest Scheme

Paul writes at II Corinthians 2:5-11 of the necessity of the Corinthians to forgive and reaffirm their love for a man who had undergone church discipline, “In order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.” The image of Christ within the church is made evident by love for one another. And it is one of Satan’s greatest schemes, therefore, to advance a counterfeit gospel that redefines, alters, and perverts the ministry of the new covenant of the Spirit. For it is this ministry of the Spirit that produces a list of what Paul refers to in Galatians as the fruit of the Spirit, with “love” leading the list. It is Satan’s scheme therefore to subvert the ministry of the new covenant of the Spirit and pass off another gospel that subverts the love of Christ

And here is the effect of that Satanic scheme: *a counterfeit gospel cannot facilitate ever-increasing conformity to Christ*. Only the ministry of the new covenant of the Spirit will bring about what Paul describes as “being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (II Corinthians 4:18). We can say it this way: *Any ministry, theological system, or Christian leader who redefines, alters, or altogether dismisses*

the new covenant, is operating not as Paul did, by the Spirit, but by another spirit which cannot be from God.

This is a very sobering statement. For there are those today who do precisely that, they teach the new covenant doesn't belong to the church, but to national Israel in some future millennial kingdom.¹ You heard me correctly. And there are others who redefine the new covenant as simply an administration of a fabricated "Covenant of Grace."² Consequently, they fail to see the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost as the birth of the church in Christ under a new covenant, a covenant he consecrated in his own blood. No, for them the church began with Adam. And they redefine the new covenant to fit their system with its own man-made covenantal structure. Why do people do this? The apostle exposes the underlying influence to be none other than Satan himself, who appears as an angel of light, and he does so through the human agency of those in his service, though they represent themselves as "servants of Christ" (II Corinthians 11:12-15, 23). This, beloved in Christ, means that our time demand sober minds and serious discernment.

And here is the sobering point: Most what passes as Christian ministry in America has far more in common with the super-apostles than they with Paul and his associates. Let's take a look: Paul refers to his opponents as "the many who peddle the word of God for profit" (2:17); as ministers "of the letter" (3:6); and those who employ "secret and shameful ways . . . deception" and those who "distort the word of God" (4:1-2). We will meet these men over and over again throughout this letter. And we will meet men and women just like them today, as well. So this study has very important application for you to protect or extract yourself from ministries such as these, and they are prominent.

¹ I refer here to the wildly popular but error laden system called *Dispensationalism* (aka Darbyism) in all its forms both Classical and Progressive. This system arose within the 19th century along with Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Seventh Day Adventism, but unlike those cults, Dispensationalism made its way into mainstream evangelical circles largely in reaction to and as the alternative to the advent of theological liberalism.

² And I refer here to Presbyterian and Reformed *Covenant Theology* which originated with Ulrich Zwingli in order to justify a return to infant baptism and was later refined by John Calvin. *Covenant Theology*, together with John Nelson Darby's *Dispensational* system, which was refined by C.I. Scofield (Study Bible), Lewis Sperry Chafer, and Charles Ryrie, make up the teaching of over 90% of Protestant and Evangelical churches, including Pentecostalism.

Now, I am not saying that modern super-apostles are consciously aware of the Satanic scheme in which they are participating; some may be aware, and they will meet the end their conduct deserves. But most today who oppose the new covenant of the Spirit do so unwittingly, they are often merely teaching what they were taught. They have not bothered to search the Scriptures for themselves and put their tradition/system to the test. But ignorance does not relieve anyone of accountability to that truth, so they too will be held accountable for their teaching. Sobering words, I know, but what is the alternative?

So, let's be clear. Satan's chief scheme is to subvert what Paul refers to as the ministry of the new covenant of the Spirit of life (II Corinthians 3:6). Satan was a liar from the beginning, and remains a seducer and counterfeiter in our day. He hangs out in the best evangelical seminaries and churches, and therefore, in many Christian homes. Anyone, anywhere who alters, redefines, or altogether dismisses the ministry of the new covenant of the Spirit has fallen prey to Satan's scheme.

How can you know if you are under the influence of a modern super-apostle?

It is a simple test: How do your pastor and leaders view the new covenant? I have already told you how 90% of Protestant-Evangelicalism does so within the two leading, most popular theological systems. Ask your teachers, "How do you view the new covenant?" If it is according to one of these two systems, you will know you must either object and appeal for them to repent and embrace the ministry of the new covenant of the Spirit, or you must leave that church. Would you remain in a church that announced they do not preach the gospel?

This exhortation reminds us of the need to become biblical Christians; those who heed the Protestant principle of "Reformed and always reforming" (Semper Reformanda) in order to better align with the inspired text. But we must be biblical in the sense that we listen to the Spirit within the text, and not just the "letter" itself. The Bible is the means by which the Spirit works in us, and never apart from the Spirit. Therefore, let us become willing to examine our system, tradition, and current ministry as to whether it is found within the context of the Scripture and avoid finding ourselves simply just proof texting our presuppositions. And once

convinced of what Paul is telling us in this text, our obligation will be to contend for the truth, but to follow Paul's instruction to Timothy:

And the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome, but must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, and that they will come to their senses and escape the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will" (II Timothy 2:24-26).

So, we are now aware that *only* the ministry of the new covenant of the Spirit will produce in us the glorious image of Christ, "with ever-increasing glory." And, we are also aware of one of Satan's chief schemes: *To advance a gospel that alters, redefines, or altogether dismisses the new covenant of the Spirit in favor of worldly wisdom with an emphasis on the letter of the Bible and not the voice of the Spirit within the text.*

Let's pause here, and next time we will consider again how we can become better aware of Satan and his schemes, and thus avoid the destruction these schemes wreak on unsuspecting believers. Ignorance is an option, of course, but it is an option for which the Lord will hold us accountable. I beg you, therefore, don't remain ignorant of Satan's schemes. Please come back to our next lesson. **AMEN.**

© Rick Peterson, 2023.