

Two Covenants
The Fourth Sunday in Lent
(From the Epistle: Galatians iv. 21. ff)

(King James V.) *21 Tell me, ye that desire to be under the law, do ye not hear the law? 22 For it is written, that Abraham had two sons, the one by a bondmaid, the other by a freewoman. 23 But he who was of the bondwoman was born after the flesh; but he of the freewoman was by promise. 24 Which things are an allegory: for these are the two covenants; the one from the mount Sinai, which gendereth to bondage, which is Agar. 25 For this Agar is mount Sinai in Arabia, and answereth to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children. 26 But Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all. 27 For it is written, Rejoice, thou barren that bearest not; break forth and cry, thou that travailest not: for the desolate hath many more children than she which hath an husband. 28 Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise. 29 But as then he that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born after the Spirit, even so it is now. 30 Nevertheless what saith the scripture? Cast out the bondwoman and her son: for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman. 31 So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman, but of the free. [5:1 Stand fast therefore in the liberty wherewith Christ hath made us free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage.]*

(New Int'l V.) *21 Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says? 22 For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. 23 His son by the slave woman was born in the ordinary way; but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a promise. 24 These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. 25 Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. 26 But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother. 27 For it is written: "Be glad, O barren woman, who bears no children; break forth and cry aloud, you who have no labor pains; because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband." 28 Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. 29 At that time the son born in the ordinary way persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now. 30 But what does the Scripture say? "Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son." 31 Therefore, brothers, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman.*

The struggle between a religion of freedom and joy and liberty with one of strict, unpleasant, rule-mongering legalism is constant. These two extremes represent something that is very real in all of us: we long for structure, guidance, and reliable answers, because they provide security. But our hearts also long to soar free and unhindered. There is a paradoxical sense in which the Good News of the Gospel amounts to bad news for us, because it tells us to grow up. We cannot hide in spiritual bassinets, or toddle around smugly and safely in religious play-pens. At least, we're not supposed to, because the image presented to the world is a very poor one. They see believers as stuck on nitty-gritty little points of conformity of behavior that don't mean anything, while failing to demonstrate the mature love that is supposed to be the fruit of the Gospel. Consider these scriptures:

-Hebrews 6:1 *So let us go on to grown-up teaching. Let us not go back over the beginning lessons we learned about Christ.* (New Century Version)

-(The Message) *So come on, let's leave the preschool fingerpainting exercises on Christ and get on with the grand work of art. Grow up in Christ.*

-Ephesians 4:13: *...until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. 14 Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming.*

-1 Corinthians:11 *When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became a man, I put childish ways behind me.*

The purpose of the Old Testament Law system, St. Paul tells us, was in part to serve as spiritual training wheels for the infant nation of Israel until Messiah, the fulfillment of the Law, arrived. It has a similar function in the life of New Testament believers as a means of supporting us and guiding us in the right way as we learn to walk in the power of the Holy Spirit whom we receive at baptism. Not that the Law is to be completely and suddenly abandoned by us as if no longer necessary, for we are still in the process of growth until the day we meet Christ, and we still rely on God's will stated to us in clear, propositional forms. But we are NEVER to return to it with the faintest idea that we are justified before God by our skill and success in observing it. This was the sad state of the Galatian believers, who had been taken captive by legalizers who, far from preaching freedom in Christ, and encouraging their spiritual growth, were intent on *winning them over, but for no good, so that you may be zealous for them* (4:17). Having been freed by Christ from the prison of Law-observance, the Galatians were being led right back to prison.

Today's Epistle needs a bit of interpretation. It is part of the apostle's earnest argument attempting to persuade the church to return to its love for Christ that it had abandoned in favor of the Law. He uses the story of Abraham's two wives, Sarah and Hagar (*Agar*), and their sons, Isaac and Ishmael. Sarah, as you will recall, had borne Abraham no children, so she urged him to father a child by her handmaid Hagar, a foolish idea which was to cost all parties involved considerable distress. Abraham and Sarah should have been awaiting Isaac's birth in faith. He was to be a "spiritual" child, the result of God's promise, conceived long after Sarah's ability to have children. But their discouragement and faithlessness produced Ishmael, *born after the flesh*, in other words, not because of faith but because of sheer human manipulation and willfulness. When Isaac, whom God had promised, was finally born, Ishmael began to pick on him: *he that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born after the Spirit*. Doing so meant Hagar and Ishmael's expulsion from Abraham's family.

Hagar and Ishmael represent the Law. Although God gave it, if it is misused as a means of justifying oneself before God it becomes a stumbling block, because faith in God's provision alone merits His acceptance of us. No human effort offered as a substitute will suffice. There are

two covenants, one of faith, the other of human effort, of Law. Hagar is also likened in our Gospel to *Mount Sinai*, where the Law was given by God in Exodus, and to *Jerusalem*, which remained perpetually under the bondage of that same Law, having rejected its Messiah who came to fulfill the Law, and set the city free. This Jerusalem is earthly, but the *Jerusalem which is above is free, which is the mother of us all*. This is the coming Kingdom of God on earth and in heaven. Just as Isaac was tormented by Ishmael, so those who claim freedom and liberty by faith in Christ are persecuted by those who love their bondage and self-righteousness. But in the end it will be different:

...what saith the scripture? Cast out the bondwoman and her son: for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman.

Although those enjoying their Christian liberty are often forced into living according to the terms dictated by those who are living by the flesh, simply because this attitude often very easily gains the upper hand, the tables will some day be completely turned.

Let's turn now to the observance of these two attitudes as we may encounter them today, even within ourselves, and contrast them. We'll begin with the Law attitude. The following are simply examples that I hope will prove relevant. There are many others.

The Law-attitude says do not befriend adulterers, fornicators, drug users, homosexuals, Democrats, atheists, and liberals, nor invite them to church because church is only for holy people. We are not to defile God's house.

The Law-attitude says don't help people who are suffering from problems that a little bit of common sense, or decency, or hard work, or good decisions would have prevented. After all, they got themselves into it, they should get themselves out of it. "God helps them who help themselves". "My circumstances were no better than theirs, and I didn't end up that way. Nobody helped me out."

The Law-attitude says do not reach out to people in other denominations, especially those who are in *that* group. They are apostates. Their worship practices are an abomination, and they approve of behavior we know is sinful and immoral. We should punish them by shunning them.

But what does liberty in Christ allow? What am I permitted to do by the Law of love, and even commanded to do?

The Law of love tells me that *there is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out all fear...* (1 John 4:18). This means that I am free to love everyone and anyone, including all of the categories mentioned above. In fact, I *must* love them, because how else will they know that God loves them? Love doesn't mean, however, that I must approve of their sin, as so many feel they must do in the name of Christianity, because that would be a sin against love. Sin is sin, and we cannot approve of it. But we cannot allow the spirit of the law to keep us from loving those who need our love. This is only an excuse to hide behind our fears:

Gal. 5:13 *You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. 14 The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."*

Love bids us break all manmade bounds that tend to restrict love. In these days when our Christian faith is held in such suspicion, when the church is viewed, rightly or wrongly, as having forfeited its right to preach the truth, when good believing men and women are slandered because they hold to the Scriptures, it is doubly, triply important that we be a people who are unbound by any law except the law of love.

As we walk about in Christian liberty, we will surely anger those who are convinced that the only good form of religion is that good-looking, freshly minted, just-off-the-assembly-line form of pharisaical religion that draws the admiration, respect, and even fear of the world. Generally, those whose religion is found in a list of do's and don'ts have erected an impressive fortress to protect themselves from the world, as well as draw attention, not realizing that what they are depending upon to keep others out is also keeping them in. But this is an ill picture of God. It is a misrepresentation of His character. We must work doubly hard, because of such things, to defend the real character of God, who walks among His opponents without fear.

We seem to be in a tight place these days. We dare not compromise our faith by lowering what we believe to be biblical standards in order to meet the tastes of others. This is accommodation. But it is very hard not to react to all of the anti-Christian influence either by insulating ourselves from it, or running away from it, or resenting and becoming very angry at those who promote it.

The Law is to be there, invisible, written on the tables of our hearts:

Jeremiah 31:31 "The time is coming," declares the LORD, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. 32 It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them," declares the LORD. 33 "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.

Written in our minds and hearts, it should be there for everybody around us to clearly read. It makes itself known both in the holiness of our conduct, which reveals our respect for the Law, but also in our Christian love, which should know no limits nor bounds.

Let us pray: *O God, Who makest all things profitable to them that love Thee, grant to our hearts an invincible power of love, that the desires which have been conceived by Thine inspiration may not be changed by any temptation; through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.* (from "Ancient Collects")

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.