Old or New Covenant

(By Iver Larsen, revised October 2026)

Introduction:

Let us first look at contrast between Law and Grace. We read in John 1:17 ("The law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."). As Christians we are called to live in the grace of Christ and not in the Law of the Old Covenant. Paul was very upset with the Christians in Galatia, because they had been misled to go back to slavery under the Law. Tere is always a certain struggle between tradition and revelation. It is natural for most people to live by tradition, but we are called to live by the revelation of the Holy Spirit. ***Living under Law is a relationship to rules – living under grace is a relationship to Jesus Christ.***

There is a big difference between a life in *defeat* and a life in *victory*. There are *two important foundations for a life in victory*. *The first is to live by faith* in God, and not by your own human efforts. Abraham and Sarah failed because of this, and the same did the Galatians. Living by human efforts includes living a life of trying to please God by keeping many religious rules and regulations. *The second is to invite grace to stop the tug-of-war between sin and law*. Law can never overcome sin, but grace overcomes sin and dismisses the law as being no longer needed. This applies to justification as well as sanctification. In Catholic tradition good works based on the Law was needed for both. In Protestant tradition the law was not needed for justification, but still needed for sanctification. In New Testament teaching, the law is not needed for either of these, but the grace of God and the Holy Spirit are very much needed. More and more Catholics and Protestants are experiencing this new life of the Spirit, where the Spirit fills us with the Love of God and the Grace of Christ.

The Old and the New Covenant

Let us now focus on the difference between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. *Andrew Murray* once said: *The problem with the Church is that it has one foot in the old covenant and one foot in the new covenant*. We need to plant both feet solidly in the new covenant.

One reason that most Christians live so much in the old covenant is that they misunderstand the inspiration of the Scriptures to mean that ALL Scripture applies to ALL times. They do not clearly see the development of the plan of God through the times. The focus of the old covenant was to choose one nation through which he could demonstrate his character and power to the world. He chose one nation to be his own people on earth on a physical piece of land with physical blessings and with physical sacrifices in a physical Temple. The focus of the new covenant is to draw out from ALL nations his own people through which he can demonstrate his character and power to the world in a much stronger way. He chose people from all nations to be his people with their home not on earth but in heaven, with spiritual blessings and spiritual sacrifices in a spiritual Temple. As Christians we need the Old Testament as background information, and we can learn object lessons about God's character through his dealings with the earthly people. We also need to listen to and understand the many prophecies, some of which are still to be fulfilled. But we must not take over the rules and regulations, which were spoken to His earthly nation as if they were written to us in the new covenant.

We are called to be renewed in our minds and habits. Rom 12:1-2.

Here are some differences between life under the old covenant, the covenant of the law, punishment and failure, and life under the new covenant, the covenant of the Holy Spirit, forgiveness and victory:

Old covenant	**New covenant**	**Reference**
Leads to death	Leads to life	2 Cor 3:6-7, Rom 5:20-21; 7:25; 8:2
Brings condemnation	Brings acceptance by the grace of God	2 Cor 3:9, Rom 8:1
Life under a curse	Redeemed from the curse	Gal 3:10, 13-25
Blaming others	Forgiveness, reconciliation	Acts 13:38, 2 Cor 2:5-11, Eph 4:29-32, Jas 5:15, Matt 5:24; 18:21-35, 2 Cor 5:17-19
Highlights our sins	Highlights Jesus' righteousness	Matt 6:33; Gal 3:19, Rom 5:20-21
Was in effect for a time	Is eternal from the time of Jesus	2 Cor 3:11, Gal 3:23
Fading glory	Growing glory	2 Cor 3:7-8,11,13,18
Slavery	Freedom	2 Cor 3:17, Gal 4:21-5:1
Demand for perfection	Room for mistakes	Gal 6:1, 1 John 1:8-9
Built on rules	Built on relationships	2 Cor 6:18, Rom 8:15-17, Gal 4:6, 1 Thess 2:7-12
Requires you to follow the law	Asks you to have faith	Gal 2:16,20; 3:9-14,22-25; 5:6
Many rules to follow	One principle of love	Rom 13:8-10
External control, follow rules	Internal control, follow H. Sp.	Col 3:23, 2 Cor 3:6, 18b

It is also very helpful to look at the difference between life under the old and new covenant from the perspective of motivation and daily life:

- Difference in motivation: duty *versus* love.
- Difference in enforcement: threats and punishment *versus* encouragement and grief.
- Difference in power: the power of the flesh *versus* the power of the Spirit.
- Difference in feelings: misery *versus* joy
- Difference in victory: defeated by evil and circumstances *versus* defeating the evil and the circumstances by the Spirit.

Conclusion:

Do you feel the freedom of life in the grace and love of God? *A Christian is only totally free if he or she is totally surrendered to the Lord.* Have you given everything to the Lord? Not just 10% - that is an old covenant principle - but 100%? Everything you have belongs to God, if you have given yourself as a sacrifice to Him. But once you have done that, you are qualified to use the resources He has given to you for His glory.