John Owen's 17 Differences Between the Old and New Covenants

Published: Monday 18th of August 2025 22:02 by Simon Wartanian
URL: https://www.thecalvinist.net/post/John-Owens-17-Differences-Between-The-Old-And-New-Covenants



Here is a summary of Owen's 17 differences between the Old Covenant and New Covenant, taken from his Hebrews 8:6 commentary. Sometimes I have retained his wording, but other times I have formatted them differently. You can find an online version of the commentary at Study Light.

There is also a great collapsible outline made by Brandon Adams at http://www.1689federalism.com/owen/demo/owen.html.

Difference 1

- These two covenants differ in the circumstance of time as to their promulgation, declaration, and establishment. The first covenant was made at the time that God brought the children of Israel out of Egypt, and took its date from the third month after their coming up from thence, Ex 19:24. From the time of what is reported in the latter place, wherein the people give their actual consent unto the terms of it, it began its formal obligation as a covenant. The new covenant was declared and made known "in the latter days," Heb. 1:1-2; "in the dispensation of the fullness of times," Eph. 1:10. And it took date, as a covenant formally obliging the whole church, from the death, resurrection, ascension of Christ, and sending of the Holy Ghost.

Difference 2

- They differ in the circumstance of place as to their promulgation; which the Scripture also taketh notice of. The first was declared on mount Sinai; the manner whereof, and the station of the people in receiving the law Ex 19:18. The other was declared on mount Zion, and the law of it went forth from Jerusalem, Isa 2:3. This difference, with many remarkable instances from it, our apostle insists on, Gal 4:24-26. And it "answereth," or "is placed in the same series, rank, and order with Jerusalem," namely, in the opposition of the two covenants. For as the new covenant, the covenant of promise, giving freedom and liberty, was given at Jerusalem, in the death and resurrection of Christ, with the preaching of the gospel which ensued thereon; so the old covenant, that brought the people into bondage, was given at mount Sinai in Arabia.

Difference 3

They differ in the manner of their promulgation and establishment.

a. Of the Old Covenant:
    i. The dread and terror of the outward appearance on mount Sinai, which filled all the people, yea, Moses himself, with fear and trembling, Matt. 12:18-21; Ex. 19:16; 20:18-19. Together herewith was a spirit of fear and bondage administered unto all the people, so as that they chose to keep at a distance, and not draw nigh unto God, Deut. 5:23-27.
    ii. That it was given by the ministry and "disposition of angels," Acts 7:53; Gal. 3:19. Hence the people were in a sense "put in subjection unto angels," and they had an authoritative ministry in that covenant.
b. Of the New Covenant:
    i. The Son of God in his own person did declare it. This he "spake from heaven," as the apostle observes; in opposition unto the giving of the law "on the earth," Heb. 12:25. Yet did he speak on the earth also; the mystery whereof himself declares, John 3:13. And he did all things that belonged unto the establishment of this covenant in a spirit of meekness and condescension, with the highest evidence of love, grace, and compassion, encouraging and inviting the weary, the burdened, the heavy and laden to come unto him. And by his Spirit he makes his disciples to carry on the same work until the covenant was fully declared, Heb. 2:3. See John 1:17-18.
    ii. And the whole ministry of angels, in the giving of this covenant, was merely in a way of service and obedience unto Christ

Difference 4

- They differ in their mediators. The mediator of the first covenant was Moses. "It was ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator," Gal. 3:19. And this was no other but Moses, who was a servant in the house of God, Heb. 3:5. And he was a mediator, as designed of God, so chosen of the people, in that dread and consternation which befell them upon the terrible promulgation of the law. But the mediator of the new covenant is the Son of God himself 1 Tim. 2:5. He who is the Son, and the Lord over his own house, graciously undertook in his own person to be the mediator of this covenant; and herein it is unspeakably preferred before the old covenant.

Difference 5

- They differ in their subject-matter, both as unto precepts and promises
    - The Old Covenant absolutely considered:
        1. No promise of grace, to communicate spiritual strength, or to assist us in obedience; nor,
        2. Any of eternal life, no otherwise but as it was contained in the promise of the covenant of works, "The man that doeth these things shall live in them;" and,
        3. Had promises of temporal things in the land of Canaan inseparable from it.

Difference 6

- They differ, and that principally, in the manner of their dedication and sanction. This is that which gives any thing the formal nature of a covenant or testament. And this is by a sacrifice, wherein there is both bloodshed-ding and death ensuing thereon. Now this, in the confirmation of the old covenant, was only the sacrifice of beasts, whose blood was sprinkled on all the people, Ex. 24:5-8. But the new testament was solemnly confirmed by the sacrifice and blood of Christ himself, Zech. 9:11; Heb. 10:29; 13:20. And the Lord Christ dying as the mediator and surety of the covenant, he purchased all good things for the church; and as a testator bequeathed them unto it.

Difference 7

- They differ in the priests that were to officiate before God in the behalf of the people. In the old covenant, Aaron and his posterity alone were to discharge that office; in the new, the Son of God himself is the only priest of the church.

Difference 8

- They differ in the sacrifices whereon the peace and reconciliation with God which is tendered in them doth depend.

Difference 9

- They differ in the way and manner of their solemn writing or enrolment. The old covenant, as to the principal, fundamental part of it, was "engraven in tables of stone," which were kept in the ark, Ex. 31:18; Deut. 9:10; 2 Cor 3:7. But the new covenant is written in the "fleshy tables of the hearts" of them that do believe 2 Cor. 3:3; Jer. 31:33.

Difference 10

- They differ in their ends.
    - Of the Old Covenant, the principal end of the first covenant was to discover sin, to condemn it, and to set bounds unto it.
        1. By conviction: for "by the law is the knowledge of sin;" it convinced sinners, and caused every mouth to be stopped before God.
        2. By condemning the sinner, in an application of the sanction of the law unto his conscience.
        3. By the judgments and punishments wherewith on all occasions it was accompanied. In all it manifested and represented the justice and severity of God.
    - The end of the new covenant is, to declare the love, grace, and mercy of God; and therewith to give repentance, remission of sin, and life eternal.

Difference 11

- They differed in their effects. For the first covenant being the "ministration of death" and "condemnation," it brought the minds and spirits of them that were under it into servitude and bondage; whereas spiritual liberty is the immediate effect of the new testament. See Rom. 8:15; 2 Cor. 3:17; Gal. 4:1-7, 24, 26, 30-31; Heb. 2:14-15. This, therefore, we must a little explain.
    - Wherefore the bondage which was the effect of the old covenant arose from several causes concurring unto the effecting of it: —
        1. The renovation of the terms and sanction of the covenant of works contributed much thereunto.
        2. It arose from the manner of the delivery of the law, and God's entering thereon into covenant with them. This was ordered on purpose to fill them with dread and fear.
        3. From the severity of the penalties annexed unto the transgression of the law. This kept them always anxious and solicitous, not knowing when they were safe or secure.
        4. From the nature of the whole ministry of the law, which was the "ministration of death" and "condemnation," 2 Cor. 3:7, 9; which declared the desert of every sin to be death, and denounced death unto every sinner, administering by itself no relief unto the minds and consciences of men. So was it the "letter that killed" them that were under its power.
        5. From the darkness of their own minds, in the means, ways, and causes of deliverance from all these things. It is true, they had a promise before of life and

salvation, which was not abolished by this covenant, even the promise made unto Abraham; but this belonged not unto this covenant, and the way of its accomplishment, by the incarnation and mediation of the Son of God, was much hidden from them, — yea, from the prophets themselves who yet foretold them. This left them under much bondage. For the principal cause and means of the liberty of believers under the gospel, ariseth from the clear light they have into the mystery of the love and grace of God in Christ.

6. It was increased by the yoke of a multitude of laws, rites, and ceremonies, imposed on them; which made the whole of their worship a burden unto them, and insupportable, Acts 15:10.

- On the other hand, the new covenant gives liberty and boldness, the liberty and boldness of children, unto all believers. It is the Spirit of the Son in it that makes us free, or gives us universally all that liberty which is any way needful for us or useful unto us. For "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty;" namely, to serve God, "not in the oldness of the letter, but in the newness of the spirit." And it is declared that this was the great end of bringing in the new covenant, in the accomplishment of the promise made unto Abraham, namely, "that we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies, might serve God without fear …… all the days of our life," Luke 1:72-75. And we may briefly consider wherein this deliverance and liberty by the new covenant doth consist, which it doth in the things ensuing: —
    1. In our freedom from the commanding power of the law, as to sinless, perfect obedience, in order unto righteousness and justification before God. Its commands we are still subject unto, but not in order unto life and salvation; for unto these ends it is fulfilled in and by the mediator of the new covenant, who is "the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth," Rom. 10:4.
    2. In our freedom from the condemning power of the law, and the sanction of it in the curse. This being undergone and answered by him who was "made a curse for us," we are freed from it, Rom. 7:6; Gal. 3:13-14. And therein also are we "delivered from the fear of death," Heb. 2:15, as it was penal and an entrance into judgment or condemnation, John 5:24.
    3. In our freedom from conscience of sin, Heb. 10:2, — that is, conscience disquieting, perplexing, and condemning our persons; the hearts of all that believe being "sprinkled from an evil conscience" by the blood of Christ.
    4. In our freedom from the whole system of Mosaic worship, in all the rites, and ceremonies, and ordinances of it; which what a burden it was the apostles do declare, Acts 15, and our apostle at large in his epistle to the Galatians.
    5. From all the laws of men in things appertaining unto the worship of God, 1 Cor. 7:23.
- It remains only that we point out the ways whereby this liberty is communicated unto us under the new covenant. And it is done,—
    1. Principally by the grant and communication of the Spirit of the Son as a Spirit of adoption, giving the freedom, boldness, and liberty of children, John 1:12; Rom. 8:15-17; Gal. 4:6-7. From hence the apostle lays it down as a certain rule, that "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty," 2 Cor. 3:17.
    2. It is obtained by the evidence of our justification before God, and the causes of it. This men were greatly in the dark unto under the first covenant, although all stable peace with God doth depend thereon; for it is in the gospel that "the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith," Rom. 1:17. Indeed "the righteousness of God without the law is witnessed by the law and the prophets," Rom. 3:21; that is, testimony is given to it in legal institutions and the promises recorded in the prophets. But these things were obscure unto them, who were to

seek for what was intended under the veils and shadows of priests and sacrifices, atonements and expiations. But our justification before God, in all the causes of it, being now fully revealed and made manifest, it hath a great influence into spiritual liberty and boldness.

3. By the spiritual light which is given to believers into the mystery of God in Christ. This the apostle affirms to have been "hid in God from the beginning of the world," Eph. 3:9. It was contrived and prepared in the counsel and wisdom of God from all eternity.
4. We obtain this liberty by the opening of the way into the holiest, and the entrance we have thereby with boldness unto the throne of grace.
5. By all the ordinances of gospel-worship, How the ordinances of worship under the old testament did lead the people into bondage hath been declared; but those of the new testament, through their plainness in signification, their immediate respect unto the Lord Christ, with their use and efficacy to guide believers in their communion with God, do all conduce unto our evangelical liberty.

Difference 12

- They differ greatly with respect unto the dispensation and grant of the Holy Ghost. It is certain that God did grant the gift of the Holy Spirit under the old testament, and his operations during that season, but it is no less certain, that there was always a promise of his more signal effusion upon the confirmation and establishment of the new covenant. See in particular that great promise to this purpose, Joel 2:28-29, as applied and expounded by the apostle Peter, Acts 2:16-18. "the Comforter would not come; but if he so went away, he would send him from the Father," John 16:7.

Difference 13

- They differ in the declaration made in them of the kingdom of God. It is the observation of Augustine, that the very name of "the kingdom of heaven" is peculiar unto the new testament. It is true, God reigned in and over the church under the old testament; but his rule was such, and had such a relation unto secular things, especially with respect unto the land of Canaan, and the flourishing condition of the people therein, as that it had an appearance of a kingdom of this world. But now in the gospel, the nature of the kingdom of God, where it is, and wherein it consists, is plainly and evidently declared, unto the unspeakable consolation of believers. For whereas it is now known and experienced to be internal, spiritual, and heavenly, they have no less assured interest in it and advantage by it, in all the troubles which they may undergo in this world, than they could have in the fullest possession of all earthly enjoyments.

Difference 14

- They differ in their substance and end. The old covenant was typical, shadowy, and removable, Heb. 10:1. The new covenant is substantial and permanent, as containing the body, which is Christ.

Difference 15

- They differ in the extent of their administration, according unto the will of God. The first was confined unto the posterity of Abraham according to the flesh, and unto them especially in the land of Canaan, Deut. 5:3, with some few proselytes that were joined unto them, excluding all others from the participation of the benefits of it. But the administration of the new covenant is extended unto all nations under heaven; none being excluded, on the account of tongue, language, family, nation, or place of habitation. All have an equal interest in the rising Sun. The partition wall is broken down, and the gates of the new Jerusalem are set open unto all

comers upon the gospel invitation. This is frequently taken notice of in the Scripture. See Matt. 28:19; Mark 16:15; John 11:51-52; 12:32; Acts 17:30; 11:18, Gal. 5:6; Eph. 2:11-16; Gen. 3:8-10; Col. 3:10-11; 1 John 2:2; Rev. 5:9.

Difference 16

- They differ in their efficacy; for the old covenant “made nothing perfect,” it could effect none of the things it did represent, nor introduce that perfect or complete state which God had designed for the church.

Difference 17

- They differ in their duration: for the one was to be removed, and the other to abide for ever; which must be declared on the ensuing verses.