

Does the Presence of History in the Gospels Mean that They are Old Testament Books?

by Caleb Colley, Ph.D.

Some have attempted to subvert the teachings of Christ by suggesting that the books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John belong in the Old Testament instead of in the New Testament (see Billingsley, n.d., p. 4; see also Brewer, 1941, pp. 85-90 for additional documentation of those who hold such a position). In doing so, they have promoted an erroneous theory that we can summarize in the following statement: "The books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John are history books, so they are Old Testament books. They contain a beneficial historical record of the life and times of Jesus Christ as He lived under Mosaic law, but no New Testament doctrine."

What about the Gospel accounts? They contain substantial history concerning the life of Christ, but they also contain certain of His teachings. If any of those teachings can be shown to be different from Old Testament material and applicable to New Testament Christians—obligatory for faith and practice—then the books themselves must be accepted as part of the New Testament canon, because they contain commandments that are obligatory for those living under Christ's covenant, as opposed to Moses' covenant. The Gospel accounts contain just such doctrine. Consider the following passages:

Matthew 3 (and Mark 1; Luke 7): Jesus was baptized with John's baptism "to fulfill all righteousness" (3:15). Jesus clearly endorsed John's baptism (Luke 7:29), and when the Pharisees declined to submit to that baptism, they rejected the "counsel of God" (7:30). In this instance, Jesus required certain people to do **more** than what the Law of Moses required. The baptism of John certainly was foreign to the rules of the Mosaic Law. It would have done Moses no good to command the children of Israel to submit to the baptism of John, for John was not yet born, so his baptism would **not** have washed their sins away—yet here, Christ encouraged it (Mark 1:2-11; Luke 7:29-30). One purpose of John's baptism was to prepare the hearts of people for the coming kingdom (Matthew 3:1-2; see Psalm 2). Baptism, as a religious ceremony, had been practiced, because of rabbinical tradition (Lindsay, 1994, 1:389; Moseley, n.d.). However, John's teaching was **distinct** from the Law of Moses, ushering in a new era of obligation, as again emphasized in Luke 16:16: "The law and the prophets were **until John**. Since that time the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is pressing into it" (emp. added).

Matthew 15 (and Mark 7): Christ taught something that, at the very least, sounded quite different from the then-operative Old Testament Law—the idea that foods which were considered unclean under the Old Testament Law did not defile a person, but rather the things that come from within (Matthew 15:11; cf. Mark 7:18-23). Jesus noted that foods do not go into people's hearts—they do not directly affect people spiritually—but only go into the digestive system and are eliminated. "All these evil things," Jesus said (specifically having mentioned adulteries, evil thoughts, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, and foolishness), "come from within and defile a man" (Mark 7:23). It appears that Christ taught a **new** doctrine here—one that would not become operative until after He took the Old Testament Law out of the way.

Matthew 18: In this similar circumstance, Jesus taught specific doctrine concerning how one should deal with an erring brother (18:15-20). The doctrine contained in Matthew 18:19-20 specifically addressed discipline in the church. Christ's teaching in this instance is not merely an attempt to call erring Jews back to faithful Judaism; rather, Christ taught something **new** in this case, and unique to the rest the Bible (see Elkins, 1978, p. 528).

Matthew 26 (and Mark 14; Luke 22): Jesus initiated the Lord's Supper (26:26-29), the practice of which is entirely different from any Mosaic ceremony. The fact that Christ initiated an ordinance that was not to be enforced immediately, but only after the church was established, is illustrative of the fact that Christ was within His rights when He gave legislation that would come into effect **after** the New Testament Law came into effect.

Matthew 28 (and Mark 16): Jesus gave to His apostles the command to take the Gospel to the whole world (a New Testament principle in itself). Notice that Jesus Himself stated that He had preached New Testament doctrine to His disciples. Christ told the apostles that, as they converted lost souls to Christ, they were to teach them "to observe all things that I have commanded you..." (28:20). Included in "all things that I have commanded you" was New Testament doctrine, because, in this instance, Christ was commanding His disciples to take the Gospel to "all the nations" for the purpose of baptizing people (28:19). If Christ had preached nothing but Old Testament doctrine, He surely would

not have commanded His disciples to spread "all things that I have commanded you" to the nations after the Old Testament law had been put away.

John 3: Jesus said, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:5). Jesus called this the act of being "born again" (verse 7). Though the particular requirement of new birth through baptism was, in a sense, administered by John and Jesus in their baptisms, there was no provision for baptism in the Old Covenant.

John 13: Jesus said, "A **new** commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another" (13:34, emp. added). In stating that the commandment was new, Jesus obviously intended to draw a distinction between His commandment and everything else that would have been familiar to His disciples concerning the topic they were discussing. Though the command to love one's neighbor was not new (Leviticus 19:18), Christ's command was new in that it demanded that we love not as we love ourselves, but as God loves us. This would be the sign to non-Christians that the disciples really were followers of Christ (13:35; see Pack, 1977, 5:54-55). The command itself is repeated in the record of John 15:12,17, and Christ emphasized it again in Luke 10:33-36 when He relayed the parable commonly called "The Good Samaritan," illustrating that followers of Christ are to have love for all people (Galatians 6:10).

We are assured that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John belong in the New Testament, for they contain teachings that are not contained in the Old Testament, but that are obligatory for the Christian's faith and practice. The gospels certainly are much more than just Old Testament history books.

REFERENCES

- Billingsly, Dan (no date), "Roy Deaver's Doctrinal Dilemma," *Fundamental Bible Studies*.
- Brewer, G.C. (1941), *Contending for the Faith* (Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate).
- Elkins, Garland (1978) "A Review of the 'No-Remarriage-for-Any-Reason' Theory," *Your Marriage Can Be Great*, ed. Thomas B. Warren (Jonesboro, AR: National Christian Press).
- Lindsay, T.M. (1994), *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia*, ed. James Orr (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson).
- Moseley, Ron (no date), "The Jewish Background of Christian Baptism," [On-line], URL: <http://www.haydid.org/ronimmer.htm>.
- Pack, Frank (1977), *The Living Word Commentary*, ed. Everett Ferguson (Austin, TX: Sweet).

Copyright © 2004 Apologetics Press, Inc. All rights reserved.

We are happy to grant permission for items in the "Inspiration of the Bible" section to be reproduced in part or in their entirety, as long as the following stipulations are observed: (1) Apologetics Press must be designated as the original publisher; (2) the specific Apologetics Press Web site URL must be noted; (3) the author's name must remain attached to the materials; (4) textual alterations of any kind are strictly forbidden; (5) Some illustrations (e.g., photographs, charts, graphics, etc.) are not the intellectual property of Apologetics Press and as such cannot be reproduced from our site without consent from the person or organization that maintains those intellectual rights; (6) serialization of written material (e.g., running an article in several parts) is permitted, as long as the whole of the material is made available, without editing, in a reasonable length of time; (7) articles, excepting brief quotations, may not be offered for sale or included in items offered for sale; and (8) articles may be reproduced in electronic form for posting on Web sites pending they are not edited or altered from their original content and that credit is given to Apologetics Press, including the web location from which the articles were taken.

For catalog, samples, or further information, contact:

Apologetics Press
230 Landmark Drive
Montgomery, Alabama 36117
U.S.A.
Phone (334) 272-8558

<http://www.apologeticspress.org>