

Ellen White and the Covenants

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The question of the two covenants (the old and new) is one that is of great significance. An incorrect view of the covenants is guaranteed to lead to wrong conclusions in other areas of the Gospel. This subject, while apparently complex to many, is actually quite straightforward and simple. The difficulty arises from the multitude of opinions and views. Much confusion does exist on it, with differing and even contradictory positions being presented as the truth on the covenants. Naturally, everyone quotes Ellen White in support of their view. My purpose in this quest is simple; did Ellen White have anything to say about the Covenants, and if so what? How did Ellen White view them? Did she teach they were consecutive? Do they have markers in time? Did she understand there were two dispensations? Do the dispensations have different means of salvation? I was a little surprised to learn the answers to some of these questions as they went contrary to what many told me she believed. As always, it's best to read for oneself what she has stated in her own words. (*Italics supplied for emphasis*)

The Everlasting Covenant of Grace

How many covenants are presented in the Bible?

As the Bible presents two laws, one changeless and eternal, the other provisional and temporary, *so there are two covenants.* {PP 370.2}

By what other name is this eternal covenant known?

The covenant of grace was first made with man in Eden, when after the Fall there was given a divine promise that the seed of the woman should bruise the serpent's head. To all men this covenant offered pardon and the assisting grace of God for future obedience through faith in Christ. It also promised them eternal life on condition of fidelity to God's law. Thus the patriarchs received the hope of salvation. {PP 370.2}

Was there a point in time when this covenant would be ratified and made effective?

Though this covenant was made with Adam and renewed to Abraham, *it could not be ratified until the death of Christ.* {PP 370.4}

How did this eternal covenant exist before its ratification?

It had existed by the promise of God since the first intimation of redemption had been given; it had been accepted by faith; yet when ratified by Christ, it is called a *new covenant.* {PP 370.4}

How else is this new covenant referred to?

The *Abrahamic covenant* was ratified by the blood of Christ, and it is called the "second," or "new," covenant, because the blood by which it was sealed was shed after the blood of the first covenant. {PP 371.1}

The Abrahamic covenant is the covenant of grace. "By grace ye are saved." {1BC 1092.5}

Was this new covenant valid before it was ratified?

That the new covenant was valid in the days of Abraham is evident from the fact that it was then confirmed both by the promise and by the oath of God--the "two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie." Hebrews 6:18. {PP 371.1}

How was this covenant of grace, the covenant of salvation, valid prior to its ratification?

The kingdom of grace was instituted immediately after the fall of man, when a plan was devised for the redemption of the guilty race. *It then existed in the purpose and by the promise of God;* and through faith, men could become its subjects. Yet it was not actually established until the death of Christ. ... But when the Saviour yielded up his life, and with his expiring breath cried out, "It is finished," then the fulfillment of the plan of redemption was assured. The promise of salvation made to the sinful pair in Eden was ratified. *The kingdom of grace, which had before existed by the promise of God, was then established.* {GC88 347.2}

Was there a time when this covenant was incomplete? and when did it become complete?

Christ's death and resurrection completed His covenant. Before this time, it was revealed through types and shadows, which pointed to the great offering to be made by the world's Redeemer, offered in promise for the sins of the world. {1MR 111.3}

The Old Covenant

What is the common name given to the first Covenant at Mt. Sinai?

Another compact--called in Scripture *the "old" covenant*--was formed between God and Israel *at Sinai*, and was then ratified by the blood of a sacrifice. {PP 371.1}

Whose idea was the old Covenant? What were the terms proposed?

[Exodus 19:1-6 quoted] *Here are found the terms of a covenant that God desired to make with the children of Israel.* If they would fulfill the pledge He asked of them, He would greatly bless them. He promised to honor them, to manifest His love and power upon them, and constantly to care for them, if they would comply with the conditions He asked of them. They were not merely to profess to worship God, but were to obey His voice indeed. {1MR 104.4}

What's the difference between the Old and New Covenant?

The terms of the "old covenant" were, Obey and live: "If a man do, he shall even live in them" (Ezekiel 20:11; Leviticus 18:5); but "cursed be he that confirmeth not all the words of this law to do them." Deuteronomy 27:26. The "new covenant" was established upon "better promises"--the promise of forgiveness of sins and of the grace of God to renew the heart and bring it into harmony with the principles of God's law. "This shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the Lord, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts. . . . I will forgive their iniquity, and will remember their sin no more." Jeremiah 31:33, 34. {PP 372.1}

Is the Old Covenant (with its laws) eternal or temporary?

As the Bible presents two laws, one changeless and eternal, the other provisional and temporary, so there are two covenants. {PP 370.2}

What is the name of the temporary law associated with the covenant of Sinai?

Through long intercourse with idolaters the people of Israel had mingled many heathen customs with their worship; therefore the Lord gave them at Sinai definite instruction concerning the sacrificial service. After the completion of the tabernacle He communicated with Moses from the cloud of glory above the mercy seat, and gave him full directions concerning the system of offerings and the forms of worship to be maintained in the sanctuary. The ceremonial law was thus given to Moses, and by him written in a book. {PP 364.3}

At what time was this temporary law and covenant to expire?

The ceremonial system was made up of symbols pointing to Christ, to His sacrifice and His priesthood. This ritual law, with its sacrifices and ordinances, was to be performed by the Hebrews until type met antitype in the death of Christ, the Lamb of God that taketh away the sin of the world. Then all the sacrificial offerings were to cease. It is this law that Christ "took . . . out of the way, nailing it to His cross." Colossians 2:14. {PP 365.1}

There is a law which was abolished, which Christ "took out of the way, nailing it to His cross." Paul calls it "the law of commandments contained in ordinances." This ceremonial law, given by God through Moses, with its sacrifices and ordinances, was to be binding upon the Hebrews until type met antitype in the death of Christ as the Lamb of God to take away the sin of the world. Then all the sacrificial offerings and services were to be abolished. Paul and the other apostles laboured to show this, and resolutely withstood those Judaizing teachers who declared that Christians ought to observe the ceremonial law. {BEcho, April 16, 1894 par. 2}

Which covenant did the Jews choose to cling to?

The ceremonial institutions which Christ himself has established were to pass away when type met antitype in the death of the great sacrificial offering. But the Jewish leaders, selfish and corrupt, were blind to the love of God. *They were not prepared to receive the declaration of the new and better, covenant* they refused the greatest gift ever sent from heaven to earth. {GCB, April 24, 1901 par. 18}

The Two Dispensations

Did Ellen White believe in one or two dispensations?

This [Sabbath] commandment is the great truth which unites *the two dispensations, the Mosaic and the Christian*, and the light upon the sanctuary shows their relation to each other. {4MR 402.3}

Are these two dispensations related to the two covenants?

The sanctuary of the first covenant was pitched by man, built by Moses ... {GC 413.2}
The "true tabernacle" in heaven is *the sanctuary of the new covenant*. And as the prophecy of Daniel 8:14 is fulfilled *in this dispensation*, the sanctuary to which it refers must be *the sanctuary of the new covenant*. {GC 417.1}

By what other names are these two dispensations also known?

John, the beloved disciple, was the one chosen to receive this revelation. He was the last survivor of the first chosen disciples. Under *the New Testament dispensation* he was honored as the prophet Daniel was honored under *the Old Testament dispensation*. {7BC 953.8}

Do these two dispensations run parallel or consecutive?

The prophet John [the Baptist] was the connecting link *between the two dispensations*. {DA 220.2}

The Christ typified in the *former dispensation* is the Christ revealed in the gospel dispensation. {RH, March 2, 1886 par. 3}

Do the two dispensations have different plans of salvation?

The work of salvation in both the Old and the New Testament dispensation is the same. Christ was the foundation of the whole Jewish economy. The types and shadows under which the Jews worshipped all pointed forward to the world's Redeemer. It was by faith in a coming Saviour that sinners were saved then. It is through faith in Christ that they are justified today. {BEcho, February 8, 1897 par. 2}

God does not change his plans and devise new expedients to save man in different ages or dispensations. {ST, December 15, 1887 par. 4}

How were people saved in the old dispensation?

In the old dispensation believers were saved through the grace of Christ, as presented in the gospel, as we are saved today. The only means of salvation is provided under the Abrahamic covenant. {ST, September 5, 1892 par. 4}

Anciently believers were saved by the same Saviour as now, but it was a God veiled. They saw God's mercy in figures. The promise given to Adam and Eve in Eden was the gospel to a fallen race. The promise was made that the Seed of the woman should bruise the serpent's head, and it should bruise His heel. Christ's sacrifice is the glorious fulfillment of the whole Jewish economy. The Sun of Righteousness has risen. Christ our Righteousness is shining in brightness upon us. {1MR 111.3}

Are the two dispensations the same age or is one newer than the other?

In the life and death of Christ, a light flashes back upon the past, giving significance to the whole Jewish economy, and making of *the old and the new dispensations* a complete whole. {RH, March 2, 1886 par. 4}

Is the old dispensation still current or has its time ended?

The Christ typified in the *former dispensation* is the Christ revealed in the gospel dispensation. {RH, March 2, 1886 par. 3}

Christ is the substance, or body, which casts its shadow back *into former dispensations*. When Christ died, the shadow ceased. {BEcho, July 15, 1893 par. 8}

The Favoured Dispensation

Is God's power manifested equally in every age?

God's work is the same in all time, *although there are different degrees of development and different manifestations of His power,* to meet the wants of men in the different ages. Beginning with the first gospel promise, and coming down through the patriarchal and Jewish ages, and even to the present time, there has been a gradual unfolding of the purposes of God in the plan of redemption. {PP 373.2}

Is there more light and privilege in one dispensation than the other?

If God's people *who lived in the Old Testament dispensation* were to shine out brightly upon a world of idolaters, his people who live *in this age, having so many more privileges and so much greater light,* should shine forth still more brightly, diffusing light everywhere. {RH, July 7, 1903 par. 1}

Does that mean that one dispensation is more favored than the other?

The people of this dispensation are favored with greater light and blessing than were the Jews; therefore they are placed under even greater obligation to honor God and to advance his cause. {ST, January 10, 1884 par. 19}

"Of all that Thou shalt give me," said Jacob, "I will surely give the tenth unto Thee." Shall we who enjoy *the full light and privileges of the gospel* be content to give less to God than was given by those who lived in *the former, less favored dispensation*? Nay, as the blessings we enjoy are *greater*, are not our obligations correspondingly increased? {PP 188.1}

Was there a barrier that hindered God from bestowing more in the previous dispensation?

The atonement of Christ sealed forever the everlasting covenant of grace. It was the fulfilling of every condition upon which God suspended the free communication of grace to the human family. Every barrier was then broken down which intercepted the freest exercise of grace, mercy, peace, and love to the most guilty of Adam's race (MS 92, 1899). {7BC 933.6} (Note: Up till the death of Christ, the everlasting covenant was yet unsealed. With the sealing of the everlasting covenant there came an abundant outpouring of grace that was previously suspended and intercepted.)

The Dispensation of the Holy Spirit

When did this gospel dispensation begin?

The Saviour of mankind was born of humble parentage in a sin-cursed, wicked world. He was brought up in obscurity at Nazareth, a small town of Galilee. He began his work in poverty and without worldly rank. He sought not the admiration or the applause of the world. He dwelt among the lowly. To all appearance he was merely a humble man, with few friends. *Thus God introduced the gospel in a way altogether different from the way in which many deem it wise to proclaim the same gospel in this age. At the very beginning of the gospel dispensation* he taught his church to rely, not on worldly rank and splendor, but on the power of faith and obedience. {RH, January 18, 1906 par. 5}

Is there any other dispensation to follow the current gospel dispensation?

The gospel dispensation is the last period of probation that will ever be granted to men. Those who live under this dispensation of test and trial and yet are not led to repent and obey will perish with the disloyal. There is no second trial. (MS 40, 1900). {7BC 971.9}

Was this gospel dispensation a present reality to people in the Old Testament?

The prophet Isaiah, looking forward to the gospel dispensation, sets forth in the most impressive manner the obligation of the Sabbath, and the blessings attending its observance {ST, February 28, 1884 par. 5}

By what other name is this current dispensation to be known?

We need to have an understanding that we are living under *the dispensation of the Spirit*. {RH, June 28, 1898 par. 13}

The dispensation in which we are now living is to be, to those that ask, *the dispensation of the Holy Spirit*. Ask for His blessing. {TM 511.3}

Did the former dispensation possess the fullness of the gift & power of the Spirit?

During the patriarchal age the influence of the Holy Spirit had often been revealed in a marked manner, *but never in its fullness*. {AA 37.3}

In times past holy men of old spake as they were moved by the Holy Spirit. In ancient times the prophets searched what the Spirit of God which was in them signified. *The Spirit was not then given in power because Jesus was not yet glorified*. {RH, February 7, 1957 par. 2}

At what point in time, and what event, enabled the full bestowal of the Spirit?

When Christ gave His disciples the promise of the Spirit, He was nearing the close of His earthly ministry. He was standing in the shadow of the cross, with a full realization of the load of guilt that was to rest upon Him as the Sin Bearer. Before offering Himself as the sacrificial victim, *He instructed His disciples regarding a most essential and complete gift which He was to bestow upon His followers--the gift that would bring within their reach the boundless resources of His grace*. {AA 47.1}

He [Christ] died on the cross as a sacrifice for the world, *and through this sacrifice comes the greatest blessing that God could bestow--the gift of the Holy Spirit*. {LHU 253.2}

What is God seeking to restore to mankind through the covenant of grace?

Yes; in giving the Holy Spirit, it was impossible for God to give more. *To this gift nothing could be added*. By it all needs are supplied. The Holy Spirit is the vital presence of God, and if appreciated will call forth praise and thanksgiving, and will ever be springing up unto everlasting life. *The restoration of the Spirit is the covenant of grace*. {ST, August 7, 1901 par. 4}

Summary

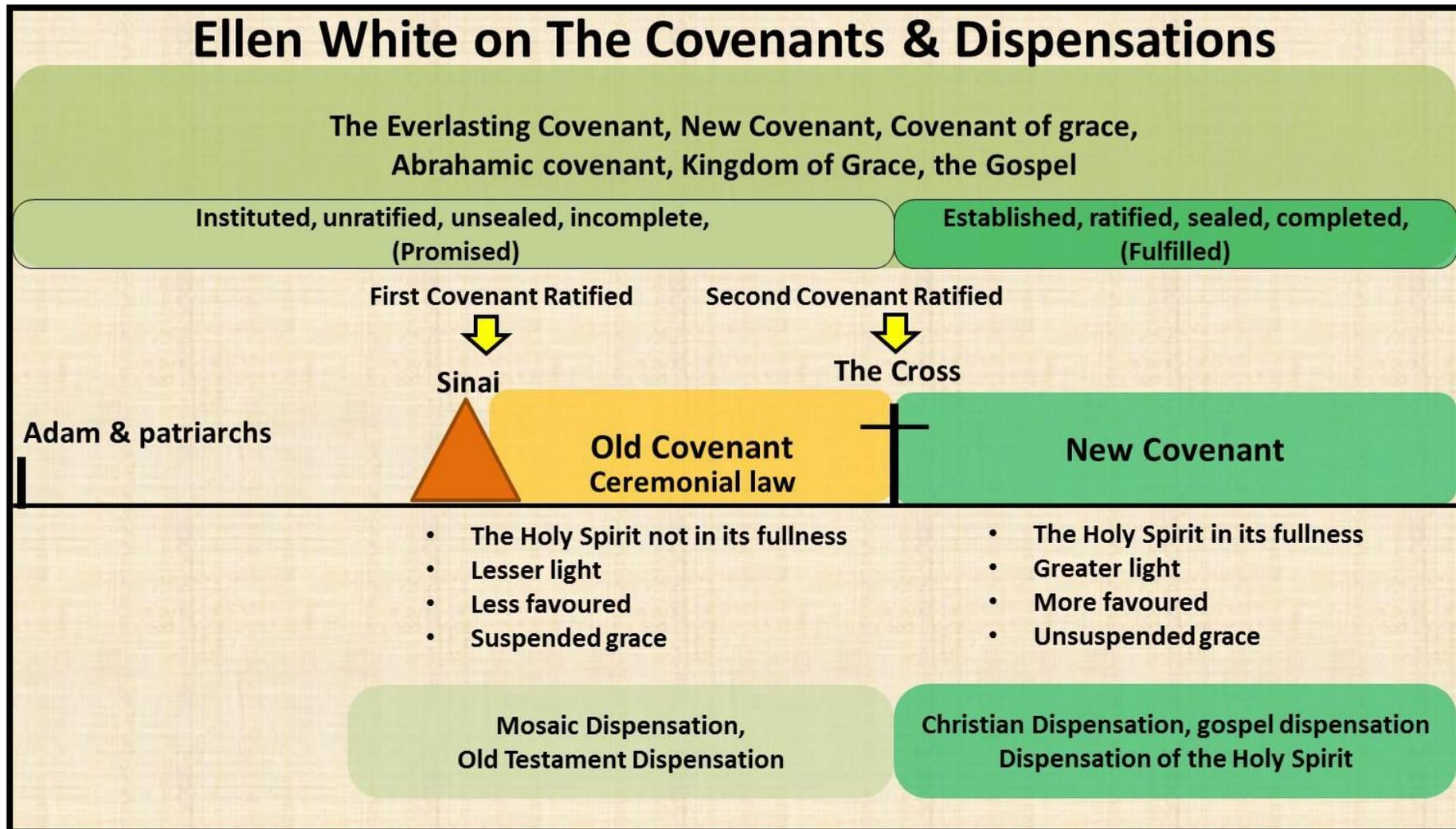
Let us briefly summarize the relevant outstanding points that Ellen White expressed when it comes to the covenants and dispensations:

- There are two covenants, an eternal and temporary one.
- The eternal covenant is also known as the covenant of grace.
- It could not be ratified till Christ died.
- Prior to being ratified it existed by promise.

- This covenant is also known as the new, second or Abrahamic covenant.
- This covenant of grace was valid in patriarchal days by God's promise.
- Prior to establishment, the kingdom of Grace existed by promise.
- It was not established until the death of Christ.
- The death of Christ completed the new covenant.
- The old covenant was formed between God and Israel at Sinai.
- It was God's desire to make this covenant with Israel.
- This covenant with its law was temporary and provisional.
- With the old covenant, God instituted the ceremonial law at Sinai.
- This law of ceremonies and types expired at the cross.
- There are two dispensations; Mosaic and Christian.
- This current dispensation is that of the new covenant.
- The two dispensations are the old and new testament.
- The dispensations are consecutive, one following the other.
- The former dispensation gave way to the gospel dispensation.
- There is one plan of salvation across both dispensations.
- Salvation is always only through the grace of Christ, the only saviour.
- The two dispensations are made up of an old and new, together making a whole.
- The manifestation of God's power is not the same in every age.
- In our dispensation we have greater light than those of the Old Testament dispensation.
- The former dispensation was less favoured compared to our gospel privileges.
- We enjoy greater blessings in our dispensation than those of the former dispensation.
- The everlasting covenant was not sealed till Christ died.
- Prior to the cross God suspended the free communication of grace to mankind.
- The cross removed every barrier that had intercepted the free exercise of grace.
- The first advent of Christ marks the beginning of the gospel dispensation.
- The gospel dispensation is the final dispensation.
- Prophets of the Old Testament dispensation looked forward to the gospel dispensation.
- The gospel dispensation is also known as the dispensation of the Holy Spirit.
- During the patriarchal age the Holy Spirit was never revealed in its fullness.
- In ancient times the spirit was not given in power till the glorification of Christ.
- Only after the cross was the full and complete gift of the spirit given.
- The greatest of God's blessings, the gift of the spirit, came only through Christ's sacrifice.
- The purpose of the covenant of grace is to restore to mankind the fullness of the Spirit.

Illustrated Summary

If we were to illustrate these points in a visual way, it would look something like this:



Conclusion

This brief collection of quotes on this subject provides a clear and decisive insight into how Ellen White viewed the covenants and dispensations. Not much comment is required as the statements speak for themselves. Other applications of the covenants, such as the allegorical view, can by no means discount or do away with the clear statements that are available to us.

A secondary application

A popular application of the covenants is the allegorical and personal application. This is derived from Paul's passage in Galatians 4:21-31. Paul uses the covenants as an allegory to illustrate a personal spiritual application. This application was made popular in Adventism by the 1888 messengers (Jones & Waggoner). This view uses the covenants as illustrative of a personal mindset or heart condition. It is summarized as the old covenant representing the works based approach to God (bondage) and the new covenant representing the faith approach to God (freedom). This allegorical and personal application is true. No one can doubt or question that such heart conditions have existed from the days of Cain and Able and will till the end of time. Just because the covenants can represent a personal heart condition it does not negate the understanding of the two covenants explored in this study. Both positions are true, but we must note that the secondary application (the allegory) can by no means be used to contradict and eradicate the primary application of the covenants.

The primary application

God's covenants were not designed to be subject to the fickle heart of man. God established his covenants with clear and fixed markers in time (Sinai & the cross), illustrating the genius of His salvation plan throughout all time. The covenants are an integral component of His eternal plan of salvation. They are anchored in the very place God has placed them to aid us in understanding and appreciating what He has done for us in giving His only begotten Son. There is no part or component of the plan of salvation that is dependant or reliant on man. Our part is to either accept God's plan (as He has set it up) or to refuse it. We can by no means alter it.

The danger

It seems that in the hope of emphasizing the allegorical application of the covenants some have gone to an extreme position as to deny their existence in time altogether. Such a conclusion denies plain inspiration and is not supported by the Bible or the writings of Ellen White. As we saw, Ellen White clearly understood the covenants to have a consecutive existence in time, falling in two successive dispensations.

When the covenants are removed from their anchors in time it can result in some very confusing conclusions. It opens us up to mix and match things between the two. Elements and ceremonies of the old covenant become incorporated in the new covenant. The end result is a sad mixture where the faith and practice of professed new covenant Christians resembles that of the Judaizers in Paul's day.

God has sought to save us from this danger by clearly revealing that his covenants are anchored in time. The old was ratified at Sinai, and the new was ratified at the cross. These events that occurred in specific locations at specific times are unchangeable. We ignore these facts to our peril. If nothing is fixed in time, then anything can apply at any time. One current illustration of this problem today is the promotion of feast keeping. The typical feasts of the old covenant are promoted as part of the new covenant. It's only when we ignore God's time markers for the covenants that such a faulty conclusion can be reached.

When we abide by God's markers we are safeguarded against adopting a hybrid covenant, made up of pieces of the old and new. The extent of the problem is aptly illustrated by the fact there is no consensus as to what constitutes this hybrid covenant. There is a smorgasbord approach where some want to incorporate more old covenant ceremonies in the new, while others settle for only a few. Feasts, tassels, beards or shawls are available like multiple choice. Each man and party promotes their favourite view, and long and loud are the debates that ensue. Yet this fact remains irrevocably true: Sinai is not Calvary; and Calvary is not at Sinai.

Interestingly enough, it is no wonder then that Ellen White never practiced or promoted such behaviours since she clearly understood the existence of the covenants in dispensations of time. The former Mosaic dispensation, with its typical feasts, has no room in the dispensation of the Holy Spirit as far as she was concerned.

Another danger of denying the dispensational nature of the covenants is that it makes the ratification of the new covenant a meaningless and empty form. The death of Christ on the cross changed nothing since all things continue as they were from the start. If the death and resurrection of Christ failed to bring anything new and substantial to make the New Covenant of force then His death was sadly and shamefully in vain. This is what a denial of the dispensational nature of the covenants amounts to. It is a serious thing to consider.

The death and resurrection of Christ stand as the great centre of God's eternal covenant of salvation. It is the only means whereby the covenant of grace was sealed and completed, allowing God's full gift of the spirit to be given. Let us truly appreciate this dispensation of the Holy Spirit that has been procured to us at such an infinite price – the very life of the Son of God. ✍

*Nader Mansour
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