

Born to Win

Israel & the Covenant #2

by Ronald L. Dart

If you are a Christian, and a thoughtful person, somewhere along the way you have probably wondered about the relationship of the Jewish people to God. You know that there is no salvation in any other name than Jesus, and yet you also know that God made a covenant with Israel, and that he's not through with them yet. At least Paul certainly thought so. And I was kind of surprised, not long ago, to realize the Catholic Church does as well. Avery Cardinal Dulles, writing in the November 2005 issue of *First Things*, said this, referring to something Paul wrote:

In a passage of great importance, Paul asserts in Romans that the Jews have only stumbled. They are branches broken off from the good olive tree, but are capable of being grafted on again, since they are still beloved by God for the sake of their forefathers, whose gifts and call are irrevocable. This seems to imply that the Jewish people, notwithstanding their failure as a group to accept Christ as the Messiah, still remain in some sort of covenant relationship with God.

Avery Cardinal Dulles - The Covenant with Israel

Now, I think this is true. I think he has picked exactly the right things out of Paul's 11th chapter of the Book of Romans. The very *survival* of the Jewish people would seem to suggest that. Against all odds—against *great* opposition—the nation of Israel was established in the land of Israel after World War II. It seems, when you think about it, the most unlikely of events given the opposition of the *entire* Arab world (actually, more than the Arab world—the entire *Islamic* world).

You know, if you've never seen the movie *Exodus*, you owe it to yourself. It's easy for someone of my generation to forget the fact that many young people have come along and probably never seen it, may never have *heard* of it before. It's a relatively painless way to experience what those days were like. Better yet, read the novel by Leon Uris on which the movie *Exodus* was based. But whatever you do, familiarize yourself with that moment in time, because it has *profound* implications for what is going on in the Middle East right now. You can't understand what's happening by going back five years, or ten years, or even 30 years. You've got to go back to 1948—the establishment of the State of Israel from a United Nations mandate, and to the events that followed on the heels of that. The movie and the book are very accurate representations of what happened, and what's going on right now in the war between Israel and the Arab peoples around her is simply a carrying-on of the war of 1948 and the profound resentment of the Arab world to the establishment of an Israelite state. Cardinal Dulles also said this:

Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, teaches that he has come not to abolish the Law and the prophets but to fulfill them, even though he is here embarking on a series of antitheses, in which he both supplements and corrects certain provisions in the law of Moses.

Avery Cardinal Dulles - The Covenant with Israel

Now, I have to stop here and make one point. It's worth commenting that the Cardinal's statement is true *only* if one is looking at this from the Jewish view—that the Law of Moses includes the Oral Law and the traditions of the elders. I think a lot of Christian people, when they hear the “Law of Moses” or “Torah”, think that this is talking about the first five books of the Old Testament—the Written Law of God, the Ten Commandments, the statutes, the judgments, and so forth. Well, that isn't true of Judaism in general. For Judaism in general, the Law of Moses includes the Oral Law, all the works of the sages; it includes the Mishnah; it includes the Talmud. The “Law of Moses” is the whole package. And so consequently, when he Jesus set out to rectify, or to correct, certain aspects of the Law of Moses, he was not correcting aspects of the *Written Law*. He's correcting aspects of the *Oral Law*. Jesus was *explicit* that he wasn't destroying the Written Law; it was the Oral Law that he corrected.

Continuing to examine Cardinal Dulles' article, now—it's an interesting article about Israel and the Covenant:

Such is the Church's respect for Holy Scripture that Catholic interpreters are not free to reject any of these New Testament passages as if one contradicted another. Systematic theology has to seek a way of reconciling and synthesizing them. The task, I believe, is feasible if we make certain necessary distinctions.

Avery Cardinal Dulles - The Covenant with Israel

Now, this is an interesting approach that he's taking here. He's basically saying we cannot lay aside *any* New Testament scripture. What we *can* do is try to create a consensus—a synthesis—of what these things are trying to say.

The task, I believe, is feasible if we make certain necessary distinctions. Thomas Aquinas, gathering up a host of patristic and medieval authorities, distinguished the moral, ceremonial, and judicial precepts of the Old Law. Inspired in part by his reflections, I find it useful to distinguish three aspects of the Old Covenant: as law, as promise, and as interpersonal relation with God. The law, in turn, may be subdivided into the moral and the ceremonial.

Avery Cardinal Dulles - The Covenant with Israel

Actually Aquinas, I think, may have been closer to the truth, but attempting to subdivide the Law (with a view to abolishing part of it) *founders* on Jesus' plain statement. Here's what he said; it's in Matthew 5, verse 17:

Matthew 5

NIV '84

¹⁷ Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.

¹⁸ I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear [*You might want to check out the window to see if they're still there.*], not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.

So in the Written Law, not one stroke of the pen, not one letter has been abolished. Now, I have to tell you, I am fully aware of the problems that creates. They are *enormous*. But the problems are there to be solved, not just dismissed or tossed aside. Keeping this in mind, Jesus *does* suggest a distinction between Written Law and tradition. And from that one distinction, much can be understood. There is a distinction

between the basic Law (sometimes called the “Moral Law”) as it applied to an individual. This is one aspect. On the other hand, there is the administrative Law, applied to the community.

Now, this is not too hard to understand. There were laws that applied to you (if you lived back in the ancient times) as an individual, and then there were a set of laws that the community had to administer in order to function together as a community. I think that’s what Thomas Aquinas is talking about when he called it “judicial”. Other people call it “civic”. I call it “administrative”. You can actually discern, in Moses’ Law in a way, the patterns of law that have continued down through time, and they’ve found expression in our Constitution in the three branches of our government. They are: legislative, administrative, judicial. And so we had that same pattern in Moses. There had to be a judiciary to judge difficult matters of the Law. There had to be an executive to carry out those matters, as well. And so consequently, the Mosaic Covenant included all of that. And to Jews today, it includes what the sages have said all the way down from time immemorial to today about what that Law meant. Now, it’s also important to note that the Mosaic administration was *still* in effect when Jesus came on the scene. You might call that (some would) the “Old Covenant”. I’d like to clarify that by saying it is the *administration* of Moses that is still in effect. In Matthew 23, Jesus spoke to the multitude and to his disciples. He said this:

Matthew 23

AKJV

² [...] The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat:

³ All therefore whatever they bid you observe, that observe and do; but do not you after their works: for they say, and do not.

⁴ For they bind heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and lay them on men’s shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with one of their fingers.

Now, understand this. What he’s talking about is the scribes and the Pharisees sitting in Moses’ seat as *administrators* of the Law, or as judges. They’re not legislators. God did not intend for them to have that role. They were to be judges and administrators, and so they were carrying on with that. But you didn’t dare follow their example, because they were not doing what they decided other people had to do. He goes on to say:

Matthew 23

AKJV

⁵ But all their works they do for to be seen of men: they make broad their phylacteries, and enlarge the borders of their garments,

⁶ And love the uppermost rooms at feasts, and the chief seats in the synagogues,

⁷ And greetings in the markets, and to be called of men, Rabbi, Rabbi.

⁸ But be not you called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ; and all you are brothers.

⁹ And call no man your father on the earth: for one is your Father, which is in heaven.

¹⁰ Neither be you called masters: for one is your Master, even Christ.

¹¹ But he that is greatest among you shall be your servant.

¹² And whoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted.

Now, *that* is an interesting statement. How are we supposed to take this—when Jesus says don’t call any man on earth your father—when all of us have daddies out there whom we consider our father?

Hardly anyone objects to a Christian calling his dad “father”, nor do we mind very much referring to our 10th grade Algebra teacher as “teacher”. In fact, I myself have been called by students, “Hey, Teach.” And this leaves me wondering what Christ was talking about here. Now, if we take it in the culture of the

time (which I think is a legitimate way to look at some of these things) the sages (known in the scriptures as the Scribes, the Rabbis, the Masters) had taken upon themselves the mantle of Moses the Lawgiver. Mind you, not just Moses the Judge—Moses *the Lawgiver*. Their decisions, in their view, were on a par with the Written Law, with Moses, and in some ways even considered *above* the Written Law, in that they had to use these to interpret the Written Law. *They* got to decide what the Written Law actually meant. And so, over time, they had built up a set of ideas, of traditions, that they treated like divine Law. Consequently, these titles implied *far more authority* than God had ever given to any man. And so Jesus told his disciples, “Don’t take these titles, these authorities, these responsibilities upon yourselves. And don’t let anybody act like you have them, *because you don’t*.” Cardinal Dulles went on:

The moral law of the Old Testament is in its essentials permanent. The Decalogue, given on Sinai, is at its core a republication of the law of nature, written on all human hearts even prior to any positive divine legislation. [*And, you know, he basically is right about that.*] The commandments reflecting the natural law, reaffirmed in the New Testament, are binding on Christians. But, as St. Thomas explains in the *Summa* (I–II.98.5), the Mosaic Law contains additions in view of the special vocation and situation of the Jewish people. The Decalogue itself, as given in Exodus and Deuteronomy, contains some ceremonial prescriptions together with the moral.

Avery Cardinal Dulles - The Covenant with Israel

Now, it has been said that the devil is in the details. That’s certainly true of this statement. He said, “The commandments reflecting the natural law, reaffirmed in the New Testament, are binding on Christians.” We are left to ponder what constitutes “natural law” and which commandments contain “some ceremonial prescriptions”. Now, we need to understand, first of all, that something cannot be deemed as abolished *merely* because it is ceremonial. Because then we have to decide, “Well, what do you mean ‘ceremonial’?” You have to have some sort of definition of whatever it is. But this thing we call Holy Communion, or the Lord’s Supper, or the Christian Passover—the bread, the wine—we do understand, don’t we, that that is *totally ceremonial*? And Christians *everywhere* do some version of this ceremony. Well, the Cardinal goes on to explain what he means. He says:

Injunctions that were over and above the natural law could be modified.

Avery Cardinal Dulles - The Covenant with Israel

The devil is in the details, because what do we define as “the natural law”? Well, of course, the Catholic Church believes they have the authority to make that call. He goes on to say:

The Church, adapting the law to a new stage in salvation history, was able to transfer the Sabbath observance from the last day of the week to the first and to cancel the Mosaic prohibition against images.

Avery Cardinal Dulles - The Covenant with Israel

You have to ask yourself, “Why on earth?”, but I won’t ask that here. He continues:

The New Law, in its moral prescriptions, is much more than a republication of the Old. The law is broadened insofar as it is extended to all peoples and all ages, inviting them to enter into a covenant relationship with God. It is deepened insofar as Christ interiorizes and radicalizes it, enjoining attitudes and intentions that were not previously matters of legislation.

Avery Cardinal Dulles - The Covenant with Israel

What do you mean by that? Well, Jesus said:

Matthew 5

AKJV

²⁷ You have heard that it was said by them of old time, You shall not commit adultery:

²⁸ But I say to you, That whoever looks on a woman to lust after her has committed adultery with her already in his heart.

He internalized it (“interiorized” was, I think, the Cardinal’s word) and he radicalizes it, making the *attitude itself* a matter of legislation. Now, on this particular point, the Cardinal and I disagree. Why is it necessary for the New Testament to *reaffirm* any commandments or any law? Even a *cursory* reading of the New Testament should make it clear that it is *built on* and *assumes* the authority of the Old Testament. There’s no place in the New Testament like you have in the Old Testament, where there is a set of laws delivered to the church to keep. There is nowhere to be found, anywhere in the New Testament, listings of laws and commandments and so forth that we are expected to obey. Oh, there are four items mentioned in Acts 15, but is there anyone out there who believes those four items are absolutely the only laws in any way binding upon Christians? It would be a very unserious way of considering this thing.

Everyone should understand that the New Testament is built on and *assumes* the authority of the Old. That said, there are two ways of reaffirming something. One is by *stating* the reaffirmation, the other is by *living* it. Jesus supplied the statement reaffirming it as clearly as anyone could. We’ve already read it; I’ll read it again.

Matthew 5

NIV ’84

¹⁷ Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.

¹⁸ I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.

What more do you need for a reaffirmation, or any idea of what is reaffirmed, than that statement? Then there is this simple, demonstrative fact: Throughout the *entire period* when the New Testament was being written (from AD mid-50s until maybe the late 70s) the *entire Christian church*—worldwide, in every nation, in every place—continued to observe the Sabbath on the last day of the week, not the first. And they all continued in the observance of the Passover, the Days of Unleavened Bread, Pentecost, the Feast of Tabernacles, and even the Day of Atonement. All this is easily demonstrated if one just remembers, when reading the New Testament, that you are reading someone else’s mail. These things were written in a time, in a place, to a people, who *understood* what they were being told. And we have to somehow try to place ourselves in that situation so we can understand it, as well. All this, by the way, is laid out in the book, *The Thread: God’s Appointments with History*, which we mentioned earlier in the program.

But Cardinal Dulles’ article is about the covenant God made with Israel. He said this:

The Pontifical Biblical Commission draws the correct conclusion: “The early Christians were conscious of being in profound continuity with the covenant plan manifested and realized by the God of Israel in the Old Testament.”

Avery Cardinal Dulles - The Covenant with Israel

And he is absolutely correct on that. The fact is, they did not think they had a new religion. They did not change their God. It was in continuity with everything that had come before. He continues:

“Israel continues to be in a covenant relationship with God, because the covenant-promise is definitive and cannot be abolished. But the early Christians were also conscious of living in a new phase of that plan, announced by the prophets and inaugurated by the blood of Jesus, ‘blood of the covenant,’ because it was shed out of love.”

Avery Cardinal Dulles - The Covenant with Israel

Now, Cardinal Dulles is working his way around to the conclusion that all the Jews are *still* in a covenant relationship with God, and I can see his point. Because, as I said, they shouldn’t even *exist* as a people, with all the determination and hatred to destroy them, if there were not some divine protection. And I think the author of Hebrews probably would agree with that. In Hebrews 8, here is the statement made about the covenant that is to come. He said:

Hebrews 8

NKJV

¹⁰ For this *is* the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.

Now, this isn’t a doing away with a commandment. It’s not a question of whether, or which; it’s a question of *where* the commandments are. They’re not *merely* in tables of stone—they are written in the hearts and minds of a people. He goes on to say:

Hebrews 8

NKJV

¹¹ None of them shall teach his neighbor, and none his brother, saying, “Know the Lord,” for all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them.

¹² For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more.

¹³ In that He says, “A new covenant,” He has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.

You know, there’s rather a large gap between “vanishing” and being “ready to vanish”. But, there’s something of considerable importance here that is often overlooked. This is not the covenant Jesus made with his disciples at the Last Supper. That covenant was new, but it was not *this* covenant spoken of in Hebrews 8. This one is made, not with everyone—it’s made with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, which is an interesting question all in itself. Somehow, out in the future, a house of Israel and a house of Judah will be reconciled, and a new covenant with God made with them.

This underlines something very important about what we call the Old Covenant. It was a *collective* covenant made with a *people*, not merely with a person. Abraham's covenant was personal. God made this covenant with *one man*, and it had to do with his descendants and with his family. The Israelite covenant, which we call the Old Covenant, was made with and for a *people* who would be living in the land of Israel and conducting their affairs as a community. And once you live together in a community, all sorts of questions of administrative law, judicial law, tort law...all these things begin to come into play. And that is what the Israelite covenant—the Old Covenant—was about.

The apostle Paul wrestled with this question in the letter to the Romans, most notably in chapters 9 through 11, and Cardinal Dulles addresses those particular scriptures. He says:

Without any pretense of giving a final solution I shall try to indicate some elements of a tenable Catholic position. Paul in this passage clearly teaches that God has not rejected His People, for His gifts and call are irrevocable. As regards election, they are unceasingly beloved for the sake of their forefathers. "If they do not persist in their unbelief," he says, the children of Israel "will be grafted in" to the olive tree from which they have been cut off. He predicts that in the end "all Israel will be saved" and that their reconciliation and full inclusion will mean life from the dead. God's continuing love and fidelity to his promises indicate that the Old Covenant is still in force in one of its most important aspects—God's gracious predilection for His Chosen People.

Avery Cardinal Dulles - The Covenant with Israel

He notes, as I have, that the persistence of the Jews as a people, in spite of all attempts to destroy them, stands as a witness that God has not finally washed his hands of them. The incredible hatred of the Jews by forces of evil in this world is also a witness.

I'm not a Catholic, but I was fascinated by what Cardinal Dulles had to say and also by something that Pope Benedict said. He said this:

As Christians, he says, we are convinced that the Old Testament is directed toward Christ, and that Christianity, instead of being a new religion, is simply the Old Testament read anew in Christ.

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) - God and the World [paraphrased by Dulles]

I don't think anyone could say that better. He said:

We can be certain that Israel has a special place in God's plans and a special mission to accomplish today. The Jews "still stand within the faithful covenant of God," and, we believe, "they will in the end be together with us in Christ."

Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) - God and the World [paraphrased by Dulles]

You know, the statement that Christianity, instead of being a new religion, is simply the Old Testament read anew in Christ is *truly* profound. It's exactly what Jesus was saying in the Sermon on the Mount.

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