

John Calvin for Everyone
The Institutes of the Christian Religion
Book 2 – Chapter 11
THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE TWO TESTAMENTS

In the previous chapter Calvin discussed the ways in which the Old and New Testaments were alike and in this chapter he summarizes five ways in which they are different.

Summary: The first way in which they are different is that the Old Testament, and especially the promise given to Abraham, is focused on earthly and not heavenly rewards, which for Calvin, is the focus of the New Testament. Calvin goes so far as to say that the promise of the Holy Land is *“solely a symbol of ...a heavenly inheritance”* (pg. 451) meaning that eternal occupation of the Holy Land by Israel was never God’s end game.

The second difference between the two Testaments is that the Old Testament let people only see *“a shadow”* rather than *the “substance”* of all that God had planned for the world (pg. 453). Calvin uses the covenant given to Abraham as an example. Though the people of Israel knew what was in the covenant, it was only with the coming of Christ in the New Testament that the covenant was fulfilled; so the people of Israel only saw a shadow of the reality of God’s promised fulfillment.

The third difference is that, according to Calvin, the Old Testament was *“carved on tablets of stone”* which *“preached death”* while the New Testament is *“written upon men’s hearts”* and *“preaches life”* (pg. 456). The Old Testament then offers humans no more than a list of laws which they can never fully follow, while the New Testament is *“an instrument of life, for it frees men...and restores them to God’s favor”* (pg. 457).

The fourth difference is one, which Calvin admits, flows out of the third. The Old Testament is *“...one of “bondage” because it produces fear in men’s minds; but the New Testament, one of “freedom” because it lifts them to trust and assurance”* (pg. 458). Calvin uses the example of Hagar and Sarah. Hagar, who was a slave, gave birth to Ismael, who even though he was Abraham’s son would never receive the inheritance of the covenant promise. Sarah, on the other hand, who was free, gave birth to Isaac, who would be the inheritor of the covenant. Thus the New Testament is like Sarah and the Old like Hagar.

The fifth difference is that the Old Testament concerns God’s setting apart one people, Israel, to carry the covenant of grace. The New Testament tells the story of Jesus coming into the world in order that the covenant of grace be released to all of humanity. *“The calling of the Gentiles, therefore is a notable mark of the excellence of the New Testament over the Old”* (pg. 461).

At the end of this chapter Calvin acknowledges that it appears that the God of the Old Testament is different from the God of the New Testament. Calvin’s explanation for this is that God *“accommodates himself to men’s capacity, which is varied and changeable”* meaning that at one time in history, the Law (Old Testament) was necessary and only later would humanity be ready for Jesus (pg. 463).

Reflection: The gift Calvin offers us here is that even though he sees the New Testament as being different from the Old Testament, he sees them both as part of a single, seamless story. The Old points to (foreshadows) Christ, while the New shows us the complete story.

Questions:

1. What do you think of Calvin’s five differences? Do you like/dislike some more than others?
2. Calvin argues that the Holy Spirit was not present in the giving of the Law of God. Do you believe that this is true? Why or why not?
3. How would you explain to someone that the God of the Old Testament is indeed the same God in the New Testament?