

*“Irresistible”
Reclaiming the New that Jesus Unleashed for the
World”*

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While many of us have been working hard to make church more interesting, it turns out that fewer people are actually interested. And while most people outside the church continue to have a favorable view of Jesus, they don't necessarily have a favorable view of his body, the church. Modern, mainstream Christianity is fatally flawed.

I've yet to hear a story from anyone who abandoned Christianity based on anything directly related to Christianity—at least the original version, anyway. People leave the faith because they had a bad church experience. The way forward is not complicated, though some will find it controversial. There was something about the faith of these first- and second-century believers that made it attractive, compelling, and seemingly irresistible. Jesus stepped into history to introduce something new. He didn't come to Jerusalem offering a new version of an old thing or an update to an existing thing. But it wasn't just his new message that made Jesus irresistible. It was Jesus himself. People who were nothing like him liked him. And Jesus liked people who were nothing like him.

Jesus was arrested and crucified because he was too popular. People who were nothing like him liked him. New brands rarely sit well with those whose fortunes are tied to the old ones. Those who profit most from the status quo are least inclined to let it go.

The Jesus movement was an all-skate. It was for all nations. Jesus claimed to be the fulfillment of Judaism and a replacement for paganism. Jesus was new wine. Judaism and paganism were old wineskins. The new Jesus introduced stood in stark, blatant, and unambiguous contrast to the values and assumptions of both empire and temple. The apostle Paul leveled his harshest criticisms at those who attempted to integrate empire and temple thinking into the new Jesus introduced. Reformers would dedicate, and on occasion forfeit, their lives to free the church of the values, culture, and tone of empire and temple. The temptation to pour the new wine Jesus offers into the old wineskins of temple and empire is with us today.

I'm convinced it's the mixing, blending, and integration of the old with the new that makes the modern church so resistible. Jesus warned us two thousand years ago against pouring new wine into old wineskins. In the end, both the wine and the wineskins are ruined. The result is a mess.

His message to Pharaoh was unequivocal: You've got something that belongs to me and I'm not leaving here without it! The events at Mount Sinai signaled the inauguration of a covenant relationship between God and the nation of Israel. Then we will be like all the other nations, with a king to lead us and to go out before us and fight our battles. The problem, of course, was God did not intend for Israel to be like all the other nations. God intended for Israel to stand out from all the other nations.

God was fine living in a tent. He seemed to prefer it. Besides, he wasn't home most of the time anyway. And according to plan, when Solomon took the throne, the grand construction project began. Twenty years later it was completed. Israel's God was not a regional god with a regional scope. Israel's God was the living God whose power and presence was not limited to a particular piece of real estate. Temple leaders did not view Jesus as Judaism 2.0. They rightly understood Jesus to be a threat to everything they valued. Jesus claimed to be greater than the temple. That was a problem. Everything on that list had a shelf life. As long as we cling to the old Jesus came to replace, we will never fully appreciate, experience, or even recognize the new he came to put in place.

Jesus said, “On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” That is my favorite Bible prophecy. Jesus predicted us. More to the point, Jesus predicted something new. He spoke in the future tense. “I will build . . .” As in, it hasn’t happened yet. Something new is on the horizon. What was this new nobody knew was coming? His “church.” The Greek term *ekklesia*, translated church over one hundred times in your English New Testament, *ekklesia* is translated assembly in the passage above. Why? That’s what the term means. *Ekklesia* was not, is not, a religious term. It does not mean church or house of the Lord. It certainly shouldn’t be associated with a temple. The term was used widely to describe a gathering or assembly, civic gatherings, or an assembly of soldiers.

An *ekklesia* was a gathering of people for a specific purpose. Any specific purpose. Standing in that scorching Galilean sun, Jesus did not predict a place. He predicted a people, a new assembly signaling a new movement; a name that spoke of direction, intention, and passion. In the beginning, the Jesus movement was called The Way. Jesus’ followers viewed themselves as stewards of the way forward for all humankind.

By the time William Tyndale came along, church officials had abandoned Jesus’ new model of leadership. They had replaced it with the top-down, imperial model. The gospel was unchained from the pulpit and made accessible beyond mass to the masses. From the first century through the twenty-first century, there has always been a remnant, a group who has refused to define church in terms of location or hierarchy. There have always been, and will always be, men and women who view the church as a movement with a divinely inspired mission and mandate. From a first-century religious point of view, Jesus was not a status quo kind of guy. But the common folk? They loved him.

Right up to the end, they were convinced Jesus had come to extend something old rather than introduce something new. Jesus used his final Passover meal to announce the end of Passover as they knew it. First-century Jews were not the only ones who had a difficult time recognizing the temporary nature of that divinely instituted arrangement between God and ancient Israel. The church has an uncomfortable history and habit of selectively rebranding aspects of God’s covenant with Israel and smuggling them into the *ekklesia* of Jesus. To all this the reformers responded with, “Sola Gratia! Sola Fide! Solus Christus! Soli Deo Gloria!” Salvation comes by way of faith alone, through grace alone in Christ alone, to the glory of God alone! It’s a mistake to assume our brand of Christianity is free of all old covenant leftovers.

The modern church suffers from its own version of mix-and-match theology and orthopraxy. Why do pastors leverage phrases like, “The Bible says . . .” and “The Bible teaches inadvertently giving equal authority to everything in the Bible? Why do we take marriage and dating advice from a pagan king with seven hundred wives? Why would I blow up my career by writing this book? But if you . . . if I . . . if we . . . desire to participate in the *ekklesia* of Jesus, there is no room for rebranded, repurposed, and retrofitted old. I’m convinced our current versions of the Christian faith need to be stripped of a variety of old covenant leftovers. Decades of mixing and matching have resulted in a version of faith filled with leftovers from the covenant Jesus fulfilled and replaced.

The prosperity gospel is rooted in God’s covenant with Israel rather than the teaching of Jesus. The justifications Christians have used since the fourth century to mistreat people find their roots in old covenant practices and values. Careless mixing and matching of old and new covenant values and imperatives make the current version of our faith unnecessarily resistible.

While Jesus was foreshadowed in the old covenant, he did not come to extend it. He came to fulfill it, put a bow on it, and establish something new. The covenant God made with the nation of Israel at Mount Sinai was between God and the nation, not God and individuals in the nation. The way we present the Bible to children and the way we talk about the Bible in church leaves the impression that it’s an all-skate. It’s all God’s Word for all God’s people for all God’s time.

Much confusion, not to mention bad theology, stems from our proclivity to cherry-pick, edit, and apply portions of God's covenant with Israel (or texts referencing God's covenant with Israel). To apply these verses to, or claim this promise for, any other group is dishonest and dangerous.

To put it in broad terms, under the old covenant when you obeyed, you were blessed. When you disobeyed, you were punished. Under the new covenant, when you obey, you may suffer. If you disobey, the world may applaud you and you may even prosper. The fact that someone chose to publish the old covenant with the new covenant in a genuine leather binding doesn't mean we should treat them or apply them the same way. The Bible is all God's Word . . . to somebody. But it's not all God's word to everybody. The covenant Jesus inaugurated was more akin to the covenant God established with Abraham when he promised to bless the world through him. This was God's way of saying, "Abraham, this is on me! I take full responsibility for fulfilling my promises to you." Unilateral. Unconditional.

The author of Hebrews says it best. Jesus was the "guarantor of a better covenant." Later he writes, "The new covenant is established on better promises." Besides, you weren't included in the old covenant to begin with! The covenant between God and Israel is obsolete. God's covenant with Israel is not as important for followers of Jesus as his new covenant with the church.

I'm not suggesting the two testaments are not equally inspired. My point is they aren't equally applicable. No one has spotted Jesus of Nazareth in the Old Testament until they were first introduced to him by way of the New Testament. 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. Jesus did not come to abolish—as in destroy—the validity of, or undermine the credibility of, the law. Jesus came to bring it to a designated end.

Once they could no longer defend the historicity or inerrancy of the entire Bible, they found their entire faith to be indefensible as well. That's tragic. The Jewish Christians traveling with Peter were "astonished" God would do for Gentiles what he'd done for believing Jews. In spite of everything Jesus taught, his followers were still clinging to old covenant thinking. The first and only item on the agenda was whether or not Gentiles who embraced Jesus should be required to embrace the Law of Moses as well.

It took about twenty years, but Peter had finally come to terms with the uncomfortable but undeniable reality that the ekklesia of Jesus was not the continuation of or version 2.0 of Judaism. It was stand-alone new. It is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.

Perhaps James' statement should be the benchmark by which all decisions are made in the local church. Paul did not consider the Law of Moses the go-to source for Christian behavior. This is why the instructions in the letter weren't anchored to anything other than the authority of the Council. The law of Moses was no longer the point of reference for how Gentile believers were to conduct their lives.

For Paul, the Law of Moses was a directional sign, not a final destination. According to Paul, Jesus followers are dead to the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments have no authority over you. None.

Under the new covenant, we don't visit the temple; we are the temple. The mobile God had moved yet again—from tabernacle to temple to the hearts of those embracing God's final sacrifice for sin. The Greek term translated "old" actually means obsolete or outdated. This explains why the Jerusalem Council did not instruct Gentiles living in Antioch to obey the Jewish law. It was obsolete. They instructed the Antiochian Gentiles to be sensitive to believing Jews who were still in transition. The Obsolete Testament and the New Testament. It's not pithy, but it's accurate. Our most embarrassing, indefensible moments resulted from Christians leveraging the old covenant concepts. It only takes a small dose of the wrong thing to corrupt the whole thing. Paul never, as in never ever, questioned the divine origin of the Jewish Scriptures. He never felt compelled to sanitize them either. Apparently there was something wrong with the old covenant. If he's correct, the Bible says there's something wrong with part of the Bible.

He just called three or more of the Old Testament books of your English Bible obsolete and outdated. We call the Bible the Word of God and ignore the inconvenient, offensive portions of the old covenant while freely resurrecting the portions that suit us in the moment.

To be clear, obsolete doesn't mean bad. Obsolete means something new and better has come along. God's covenant with Israel served as the moral, ethical, cultural, spiritual, and civic road map for an ancient civilization that knew nothing but slavery. Now that he's here, we should put our cassette tapes away. We can appreciate them without playing them. Consequently, much of what was sanctioned in the Old Testament would eventually be sanctioned by the church. And that's unfortunate. Preachers and teachers have been mixing, matching, allegorizing, and ignoring original context ever since.

So while Gentile believers were enamored with the Jewish Scriptures, they were not all that enamored with the Jewish religion. Little did the brave church fathers know that by lifting the Jewish Scriptures out of their Jewish context and retrofitting them as Christian Scriptures, they were laying the foundation for the reintroduction of old covenant style violence and bloodshed.

It wouldn't be long before the violent God of the Old Testament became the violence-affirming God of the church. Combining the covenants paved the way for church support of slavery, anti-Semitism, inquisitions, forced conversions, and a host of other un-Jesus-like enterprises. If only the early church had heeded Jesus' and Paul's instructions. If only they had heeded the decision of the Jerusalem Council. Instead, they re-hitched ancient Judaism to the new covenant, thereby granting the old covenant equal authority with the new. This has haunted the church ever since.

While modern Christians may struggle to reconcile the behavior of God in the two testaments, at least we've stopped using the Old Testament as an excuse to wage war on one another. When it comes to what's in the Bible, the Old Testament is one of the primary stumbling blocks for non- and post-Christians. The Old Testament is used far more than the New Testament to create doubt in the minds of undergrad and graduate students. The church has communicated for centuries that our faith rises and falls on the defensibility of a collection of documents that include the Hebrew Scriptures. For the record, it doesn't.

Jesus treated the Hebrew Scriptures as authoritative. Paul insisted they were God-breathed. Peter believed Jewish writers were carried along by the Holy Spirit. But they never claimed their faith was based on the integrity of the documents themselves. Jesus, the apostle Paul, the author of Hebrews, and the Jerusalem Council have given us permission to unhitch our faith from God's covenant with Israel.

Pretty much everything that makes us resistible is tethered to some version of blended-model theology. How should we navigate, teach, and apply the narratives describing God's activity among a people bound to a covenant that is no longer in effect? If we aren't supposed to apply it, blend it, mix it, or edit it, what do we do with it? Just accept the fact that everything in Exodus through Malachi, while fascinating, is not binding. It's not your covenant.

The authors of the New Testament considered the old covenant Scripture, but they didn't consider it binding. As inspired as the old covenant may be, it has no, nada, none authority over us, and any effort on our part to wiggle back up underneath its authority is tantamount to declaring the new covenant insufficient. The reason Psalms, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes were copied and cared for was due to authorship, not content. Resist the temptation to resolve theological, ideological, or ethical conflicts between the Old Testament and the teaching of Jesus and the apostles.

We do others and ourselves a great disservice when we retrofit the values, behaviors, and narratives of the Old Testament to make them compatible with the new. The promises found in most of the Old Testament are not your promises. Yours are better. They may not be as promising, but they are better promises. Everything promised between Exodus and Malachi is promised within the context of a bilateral suzerainty treaty between God and a nation.

So don't go snooping around for promises in the old covenant. You may live long and prosper, but in the end, Sheol. Every promise you need today is found within the context of Jesus' new covenant. It's a better covenant. If you can't find it there, don't go looking elsewhere. God's promises to Israel are not his promises to you. Again, yours are better. On the other hand, there are principles, both stated and illustrated, throughout the Old Testament.

Lots of sowing and reaping. Proverbs is full of common sense cause-and-effect relationships. Solomon's financial suggestions alone are worth the price of a genuine leather-bound study Bible. But for the record, don't do anything because Simon and Solomon say. They are not the bosses of you. The Old Testament is great for inspiration, but not application. Don't do anything the Old Testament tells you to do because someone in the Old Testament tells you to do it or because they did it themselves.

Paul never sets his application ball on an old covenant tee. When it came to how believers are to live, he was quick to point to Jesus as the standard. When Paul described the believer's relationship with God, he always spoke in new covenant terms. We should always affirm the goodness and divine origin of the old covenant. And as I'll explain in more detail later, the holier I got, the more intolerant and judgmental I became. We're reminded again of the cause-and-effect nature of God's relationship with Israel.

The second commandment was not second in importance. It was second in sequence. Love for God was best demonstrated and authenticated by loving one's neighbor. Vertical love for God was to be manifested through one's horizontal love for their neighbors. Jesus issued his new commandment as a replacement for everything in the existing list. Including the Big Ten. Participants in the new covenant are not required to obey most of the commandments found in the first half of their Bibles. His primary concern was not that they believe something. He insisted they do something. Jesus followers weren't expected to look up. They authenticated their devotion by looking around. Jesus did not leverage his holiness, his personal righteousness, or even his divinely granted moral authority. On a personal note: Jesus' love for you, not his authority over you, is what he leverages to inspire you as well.

Again, Jesus never played the God card. After all, few of Paul's specific applications are found in the teaching of Jesus. If you read Paul's epistles carefully you'll discover that while he considered the old covenant Scripture, he didn't consider it binding; just the opposite. For Paul, the Old Testament narratives provide new covenant folks with encouragement, context, and hope—but not applications to live by.

We don't love because the Bible tells us to love. We love because God the Father through Christ the Son has loved us. How much value does the old covenant have? Not any. How much value does the old covenant have now that the new one is here? None. Paul dismisses the primary relevance of the Scriptures he grew up with. Paul never leverages the old covenant as the basis for Christian behavior.

The term submit doesn't play well in our culture; understandably so. In a Christian marriage, husbands lay down their lives for their wives. Not because of what the Bible says. Because of what Jesus did. Imagine a world where people were skeptical of what we believed but envious of how well we treated one another. Everybody wants to be one-anothered.

Everybody wants to feel included in a community characterized by one-another love. After all, Paul said, "The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love." When someone predicts his own death and resurrection and pulls it off, you roll with pretty much whatever he says. According to John, God's love requires a response; but not a vertical response. Those days had come and gone. We know that we have come to know him if we keep his commands. Whose commands? God's commands? Nope. Dear friends, I am not writing you a new command but an old one, which you have had since the beginning. John's reference to "the beginning" is not a reference to Genesis but the beginning of the Jesus movement. This is remarkable. According to John, who got it straight from Jesus, if we love well, all is well. Period. That's it. Or to quote Paul, "The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love." Believers maintain fellowship with God by loving those God loves.

Under the new covenant, we do not love God and love our neighbors. Under the new covenant, we love God by loving our neighbors. New covenant people don't begin or end with the question: What does the Bible say about . . .? That's so old covenant. New Testament imperatives are not there for your benefit, though you may benefit by complying. New Testament imperatives aren't there for God's benefit. As I've said, he's fine. New Testament imperatives are there for the benefit of the one-anothers around us.

Under the old covenant, why was answered with an eye to the sky. They obeyed to be blessed.

Honoring Mom and Dad under the old arrangement wasn't really for the benefit of Mom and Dad. It was about the security and prosperity of the kids. This is the nature, force, and tone of the old covenant. New covenant obedience is always connected to a who. Often, the who beside you. The old covenant why centered on doing right by God. The new covenant why centers on doing right by your neighbor. The Ten Commandments are part of God's covenant with Israel. Why would anyone put their own family in jeopardy on behalf of an abandoned child? Christian Scripture didn't require it.

Long before there were chapters and verses, there existed an expression of sacrificial love that would eventually capture the attention of the empire. The reason Christians should tell the truth is inexorably linked to the gospel, not a verse in the Bible. Anything that makes us liars for life is a sin because lying dishonors the people to whom we lied. The behavioral standard for new covenanters is straightforward: If it's not good for them, it's sin. We don't need chapter and verse. We have something better. My behavior at home is a far better indicator of my devotion to God than my public speaking.

This is why I bristle when Christians refer to their pastor as anointed based on their oratory skills. Paul would respond with, Show me the love. Love trumps insight, knowledge, giftedness, education, and IQ in God's economy. Christian leaders who elevate the gifts of the Spirit over the fruit of the Spirit don't understand the Spirit. It's perhaps Paul's clearest statement regarding the shift from vertical to horizontal morality. What does love require of me?

While folks outside our faith community may be critical of what we believe, they would be envious of how well we treat one another and stunned by how well we treat them. But to love the way Jesus called us to love requires a complete break with the inspired but retired, beautiful but obsolete, old covenant. Under the new covenant, the holiest people often have the dirtiest hands.

The "you" next to you is more sacred than the temple mount, Golgotha, and the garden tomb combined. The value of a container is determined by what it contains. With the arrival of the Holy Spirit, your value skyrocketed. For more years than I would like to admit, I thought God was most glorified through my high ethical standards and wait-until-marriage morality. While those are important things, they are not the entire thing. If sin makes you mad but doesn't break your heart . . . you guessed it . . . you have work to do.

New covenant folks don't get angry at lost things. They go looking for 'em. Moral and ethical purity was still important, but I discovered there was more to faithfulness than fidelity. Every generation of believers must be prepared to explain their decision to follow Jesus in their generation to their generation out of concern for their generation. We're to live in such a way that our behavior underscores rather than undermines our message. They walked away from a version of Christianity anchored to and supported by the old covenant. Appealing to post-Christian people on the basis of the authority of Scripture has essentially the same effect as a Muslim imam appealing to you on the basis of the authority of the Quran. You may or may not already know what the Quran says. But it doesn't matter. You don't view it as authoritative.

Unchurched people may not be interested in church, but they certainly want to be one-anothered. I've never heard a de-conversion story involving disbelief in something essential to following Jesus. What new de-converts find impossible to continue believing eventually intersects with something in the Bible or something about the Bible. And when it's something in the Bible, the Old Testament is usually the culprit.

The Christian faith doesn't need to be propped up by the Jewish Scriptures. In a post-Christian context, our faith actually does better without old covenant support. They typically did not leverage the Jewish Scriptures to make their case to the Gentile world. Many, perhaps most, post-Christians and non-Christians tend to have a favorable view of Jesus.

While modern folks may be hesitant to recognize Jesus as divine, they're not in the least bit hesitant to laud him as someone whose life is worth imitating. So what should we new covenant folks do with our old friend, the Old Testament? The two most accurate and least offensive options are the Jewish Scriptures or the Hebrew Bible. "old" assumes something newer or better has taken its place.

What if, instead of Old and New Testaments, our texts were labeled the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Bible. Why not be consistent and make it a book divided into two parts, the Hebrew books and the Christian books. So, if you really want to follow Jesus' example, drop the Old Testament and start referring to the first half of your Bible as the Law and the Prophets. If that seems a bit over the top, just go with the Hebrew Bible. Christianity begins with Jesus, not Genesis. Our faith doesn't teeter on the brink of extinction based on the archaeology or the history or the Old Testament. The faith of Jesus' earliest followers did not rest on a historically, archaeologically, scientifically accurate book.

Our faith does not teeter on the brink of collapse based on the historicity, credibility, or even the believability of the Old Testament. When skeptics point out the violence, the misogyny, the scientific and historically unverifiable claims of the Hebrew Bible, instead of trying to defend those things, we can shrug, give 'em our best confused look, and say, "I'm not sure why you're bringing this up. My Christian faith isn't based on any of that."

JESUS FIRST, BIBLE SECOND

The resurrection serves as our apologetic or argument for the reliability of Christian Scripture. Your unbelieving friends and family members don't have to accept the Old Testament as reliable or the New Testament as inspired as a precursor to embracing Jesus as Savior. Athanasius of Alexandria, who was first to compile the list of documents that would eventually be recognized and sanctioned by the church as the official New Testament.⁵ The list first appears in a letter dated . . . don't rush by the date . . . AD 336.

As it turns out, there is, in fact, evidence to support the flood narrative, Israel's exodus from Egypt, and the Hebrew Bible's account of what happened at Jericho. But even if there wasn't, that would in no way undermine the reliability of the accounts of Jesus' life found in the documents that comprise the New Testament. The way most of us talk about the Bible leaves folks with the impression that if it's not all verifiably true, then none of it can or should be trusted. The credibility of our faith is not contingent upon our text being infallible or inerrant. It rests securely on an event.

The world would be a less confusing place if thoughtful Christians would refrain from quoting the Bible and would reference instead the extraordinary people God chose as his spokes folks. Anyone who lost faith in Jesus because they lost faith in the Bible lost faith unnecessarily. The approach to preaching, teaching, writing, and evangelism most of us saw modeled and, consequently, unwittingly inherited, is perfectly designed for a culture that no longer exists.

They put all their eggs in one basket. The Easter basket. As part of my shift, I stopped leveraging the authority of Scripture and began leveraging the authority and stories of the people behind the Scripture. The foundation of our faith is not an inspired book but the events that inspired the book.