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One Liguori Drive
Liguori, MO 63057-9999
www.liguori.org

Distinct Testaments and Visions

Fr. Thomas M. Santa, CSSR

The other day I overheard a theological discussion between two people. One person presented a vision of Jesus as peacemaker—a man of patience, love, and forgiveness. The other presented an entirely different vision of God that is also found in the Bible: the Yahweh God of the Old Testament.

I've heard this discussion many times. One moment someone is talking about the vision of the New Testament—the vision of the kingdom of God—and the next moment that same person is talking about “eye for eye, tooth for tooth” (Exodus 19:21) or the need to “pursue your enemies, and harry them in the rear” (Joshua 10:19).

Perhaps these people think everyone is familiar with the teaching of the testaments. Perhaps their focus changes because one vision of reality seems more comfortable at the moment. Or perhaps something else is at work.

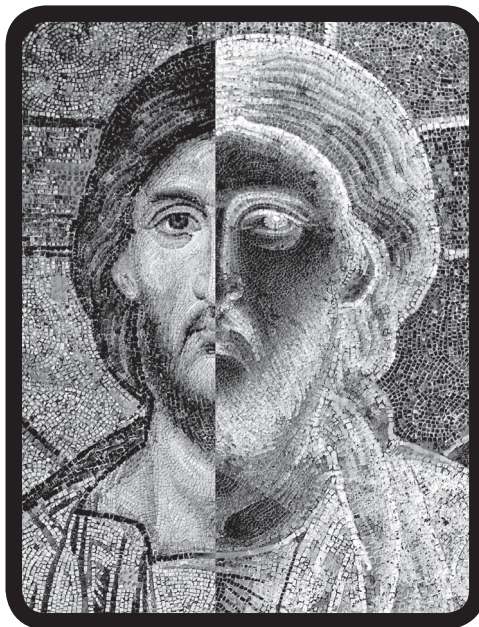
Jesus once said, “not the smallest letter or the smallest part of a letter will pass from the law, until all things have taken place.” He also said, “You have heard,...but I say to you” (Matthew 5:18–23). This seems to be a contradiction. On one hand, Jesus assures his listeners that nothing will be changed; on the other hand, he hints at a new direction for those willing to receive it.

If everyone interested in this subject wants

guidance from the Word of God, it might be helpful to clarify what seems to be a contradiction. It isn't possible to have it both ways, and the vision of the Old Testament is often in direct conflict with that of the New Testament.

Clarifying the vision

Clarification can be discovered if we answer a simple question: Do you believe Jesus proclaimed a new vision, a new understanding of the relationship between God and his people?



If you discern the answer to be yes then, in the words of Jesus, you have to try to resist pouring “old wine into new wineskins” (Mark 2:22). In other, perhaps a little crasser words, the New Testament vision trumps the Old Testament vision every time. You cannot have it both ways.

But if you answered no, you can then pick and choose—at least that seems to be the reality of what is happening.

The Church has always been at least a little reluctant to completely embrace the idea that Jesus proposed a new vision, a new way of seeing. There has been enthusiasm for the idea of a new vision of Church as opposed to the old idea of temple and synagogue. There has been enthusiasm for the idea of new people in charge—the apostles and the presbyters rather than the scribes and the Pharisees.

There has been enthusiasm for the idea of a new vision of the kingdom of God as something that might come as we all enjoy the hope of everlasting life, as opposed to the notion that this moment is all we have. And there has been enthusiasm for other ideas that seem old and out of place.

However, throughout the centuries there has also been a stubborn resistance to basic, fundamental and—because of the simplicity of what has been proposed—radical change in personal thoughts and behaviors. People seem willing to go only so far and to resist ideas that make them uncomfortable or that invite them to stretch their minds or change their way of seeing.

Context is key

It’s easy to fall into the comfort zone and choose to stay firmly rooted there. It’s perfectly understandable. It takes a huge amount of energy to embrace a vision, to try to see in a new way, to make the choices and decisions that might impact each person’s unique perception of life. It’s understandable that a person might choose to effortlessly go with the flow.

At the same time, however, it’s difficult to

spend time with the vision of God presented in the New Testament and not be at least a little challenged and at least a little uncomfortable.

For people with a tendency toward scrupulosity, clarification gives an important perspective. The ability to clearly understand a point, a perspective, or a particular teaching of Scripture within context is of great importance. Understanding that Jesus’ words are often informed

by the experience of the Old Testament is an important lesson. Understanding that the experience of the Old Testament is clarified on more than one occasion by the experience and teaching of the New Testament is also very important.

I missed the beginning of the conversation I overheard, so perhaps I misunderstood the seemingly effortless switch in focus from one point of view to another. On the other hand, perhaps I did stumble on a lesson that continues to be important and challenging: Words matter. Testaments matter. Context matters. The energy a person devotes to the study and understanding of the text is always worth the effort and the time.

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The Human and the Divine

The following is adapted from *With Hearts Full of Joy: Following Christ the Redeemer* by Mathew J. Kessler, CSSR, and José Antonio Medina, STD (Liguori Publications, © 2010).

We are loved for who we are, created in his image and likeness. Whatever boundary (sin) existed between the divine and the human was overcome in Jesus' birth. Like revelation, the Incarnation is God's movement toward us in love.

Parents show their love by providing an environment where their children know absolute love. This bond is what we mean to God. It's impossible not to be an object of God's attention and affection because we reflect a part of God's nature. If every man, woman, and child could feel this unconditional love from both heaven and Earth, all would be nice. Unfortunately this doesn't always happen.

Psychologists tell us the human need for acceptance is essential, but distorted

self-perception can diminish how we feel around others. It's not uncommon for shame (embarrassment for who we are) and guilt (embarrassment for what we've done) to distort a healthy self-perception to the point of withdrawal. We think, incorrectly, that God can't love us because of something we've done or said, so we isolate ourselves, shutting ourselves off from the love and support of God and others.

The fact of the Incarnation says we are each loved by God under *all* circumstances and that his presence compels us to see him at work in ourselves and in those around us. Instead of being isolated, we're united by a strong bond that brings into community the human and the divine.



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Q *When does lust become a serious sin? I'm regularly distracted by members of the opposite sex. I wish this temptation would just go away.*

A Go away? What do you mean when you say you want the temptation to go away? Be thankful you're alive! Noticing another human being and acknowledging your attraction isn't a sin of lust. It's a normal human reaction.

If you want to know what a lustful response to beauty might be, read the story about King David and Bathsheba in the Old Testament (2 Samuel 11).

The world has more than enough sin and temptation. We needn't look for it where it doesn't exist.

Q *Why do you caution us to note publication dates of books on scrupulosity? Good advice is good advice whether current or long-established. Please rethink your objections.*

A Next time you want to fix your car, why not use the owner's manual for a Model T Ford? After all, a car is a car, and good advice is good advice. But don't be surprised if it doesn't help you with your onboard computer system or tell you why your fix-engine light is on.

In the last 50 years, our understanding of human psychological and behavioral challenges has increased significantly. The people who advised us 50 years ago did the best they could, but they didn't know what we know today.

It's worth your while to pay attention to up-to-date information, because it's often more helpful than that of the past.



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