

NEW-COVENANT ARTICLES
VOLUME TWELVE

Books by David H.J.Gay referred to in this volume:

'A Gospel Church': A Warning.

Amyraut & Owen Tested: And Found Wanting.

Attracting Unbelievers to Church: Points to Ponder.

Baptist Sacramentalism: A Warning to Baptists.

Battle for the Church: 1517-1644 (second edition).

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Christ Is All: No Sanctification by the Law.

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The Seeking Sinner: Fact or Figment?

Three Verses Misunderstood: Galatians 3:23-25 Expounded.

To Confront or Not to Confront?: Addresses to Unbelievers.

New-Covenant Articles

Volume Twelve

The covenant of which [Jesus] is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises... By calling this covenant 'new', he has made the first one obsolete

Hebrews 8:6,13

David H.J.Gay

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davidhjay@googlemail.com

Scripture quotations come from a variety of versions

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can be found at davidhjay.com

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Note to the Reader

This is the twelfth volume in my collected articles on the new covenant. Although such pieces will continue to be posted on davidhjay.com, once again I not only want to set my work in a more permanent form for those who have already discovered it, but in the hope of reaching a new audience. The fact is, there is a growing body of believers who, having had more than enough of the bondage and fear produced by the law teachers and their clever tricks with Scripture, are displaying a voracious appetite for the liberating gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. I am thinking of them. If they find any value in these articles, they might like to explore my full-length books, the links to which are on davidhjay.com

I express my continued gratitude to Ace and Peggy Staggs for all the internet work they do behind the scenes. I also record my debt to those believers who support me in prayer. Mere words inadequately express what I feel about my brothers and sisters who encourage me in all these ways and more. God will remember them and their labour (Heb. 6:10).

New-Covenant Theology: A Summary

This summary represents my understanding of new-covenant theology. Scriptural justification for these statements may be found throughout my works.

New-covenant theology takes full account of the progressive nature of revelation, and thus it sees the new covenant as the goal and climax of the previous biblical covenants. The Bible is not flat but is progressive in revelation; ‘but now’ is a critical scriptural phrase marking the disjoint between the old and new covenants. The Old Testament (old covenant) must be interpreted in light of the New (new), not the other way about.

God has one eternal plan centred in Jesus Christ.

The law of Moses was one. It cannot, must not, be divided into three bits. God gave Israel the old covenant as a temporary measure, as a shadow of the person and work of Christ who fulfilled it and rendered it obsolete.

Believers are not under the law of Moses, but under the law of Christ. Having died to the Mosaic law, they are not under that condemning letter, but, by the Spirit, they are in union with Christ, married to him, and thus are enabled, empowered and motivated to live to his glory in obedience to Scripture.

Christ is all. He is his law. He is the covenant.

Believers use the law of Moses as a paradigm (pattern or typical example),¹ as part of ‘all Scripture’, but not as a list of detailed rules.

Sinners do not have to be prepared for Christ by first being taken to the law.

¹ See, for instance, 1 Cor. 5:6-13; 9:8-14; 10:1-11,18; 14:21; 2 Cor. 6:14 – 7:1; 8:15; 13:1.

New-Covenant Theology: A Summary

There is one body of the redeemed, the eschatological Israel, ‘the Israel of God’ (Gal. 6:16), comprising the redeemed from the time of Adam to Pentecost, and redeemed Jews and Gentiles from that time until the end of the age.

The word ‘active’ plays a major role in new-covenant theology, and in two respects. *First*, while the redemption of the elect is accomplished through the passive obedience of Christ – that is, through his death on the cross – it is Christ’s active obedience – that is, his life-long obedience to his Father in fulfilling the Mosaic law – which is imputed as righteousness to the believer.² The believer’s justification – that is, his righteousness in Christ by faith alone – is this fulfilment of the law, and not merely pardon from sin. *Secondly*, the believer is enabled by the Spirit to be active – and not passive – in his progressive sanctification; that is, in his obedience by faith to the law of Christ, and proceeding from his faith in Christ.

² Although I have serious reservations about the words ‘active’ and ‘passive’ in this regard, I let the common usage stand.

Applications Invited

Imagine this advertisement:

This church invites applications from suitable candidates for the post of pastor. Only those who are prepared to commit fully to John Owen's rubric need apply.

John Owen:

On this office [of pastor], and the discharge of it, [Christ] has laid the whole weight of the order, rule and edification of his church, in his name and by virtue of his authority.¹

Would you apply? Is any mere mortal up to the job? Above all, is Owen's rubric scriptural? Do the proof texts he cited substantiate his claim?

If you want my view, please see my *Pastor*.

¹ Owen cited Acts 20:28; Col. 4:17; 1 Tim. 3:15; 1 Pet. 5:1-4; Rev. 2:1-5, *etc.*, as proof texts. Taken from John Owen: *The True Nature of a Gospel Church*.

Addressing Unbelievers: Compliment or Confront?

Learning from Paul's Address at the Areopagus

Introduction

In fulfilling Christ's command to take the gospel into all the world to see sinners converted, it is but stating the obvious when I say that we can only do this by making real contact with unbelievers.¹ Having made this contact, of course, we have to go further, finding ways of reaching them with the gospel, actually communicating with them. To help us (as they see it) in this, a number of writers are encouraging us to adopt a style which pagans will find acceptable, non-threatening. Confrontation is taboo; conciliation, softly, softly is in. In reaching modern man, new methods, modern methods, are required. So we are being told.

I disagree. I fully accept, of course, that we wear different clothes to the apostles, we have different modes of transport, and all the rest, but I assert without reservation that we today are dealing with the same sort of men and women as the apostles did, and that their methods must be ours.

The audience

Yes, modern man is 'modern'. But he is, beneath his skin, the same as every man (apart from Christ) has been since Adam's fall. Nothing changes here! Man is still as dead in sin as ever he was, as much under the wrath of God as before; he continues to hate God, dismissing the things of God as foolishness. The scriptural assessment of the natural man stands unaltered:

¹ In this article, I have lightly edited a mss. of an Appendix to a book I am writing in order to deal more largely with the issue in hand.

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Those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God (Rom. 8:5-8).

The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned (1 Cor. 2:14).

You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience – among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the flesh and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind (Eph. 2:1-3).

And the sinner's present and, unless he is converted, eternal condemnation could not be more plainly laid out:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil... Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him (John 3:16-19,36).

No wonder then, as Christ stated:

Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God... Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you: 'You must be born again' (John 3:3-7).

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And so on. None of this must be glossed over. None of it must be missed. This is what the apostles faced. And so do we. Yet they reached sinners with the gospel and saw them converted, both Jews and Greeks. How did they do it? What did they say? What did they avoid saying? Their methods must be ours. That is my thesis.

In this article, I want to explore this a little by looking at Acts 17:16-34, the record of Paul dealing with pagans – religious pagans – in the Areopagus at Athens. Nothing could be more relevant.

I say ‘religious pagans’, but this, of course, is a tautology; all pagans, all men, are ‘religious’. Oh yes they are – however stoutly they deny it. There are no atheists. Every man has, believes in, and yields devotion to some sort of a god – self, the rational mind, a philosophy, evolution, sex, power, food, money, reputation, self-gratification, or whatever. The list is endless. As Martin Luther said, the great pope is Pope Self. Yes, all men are religious. Those who deny it, deny it religiously!

And so to Acts 17:16-34.

The importance of Acts 17:16-34

I am not alone in asserting the importance and relevance of Acts 17:16-34 in the present context. Take Georges Housney:

Paul’s speech to the Greek philosophers in Athens takes up a space of just eleven verses, yet it has occupied theologians and those interested in evangelism² for decades. There is hardly a book on missions that does not use this story to support a variety of views on evangelistic³ theory and practice.⁴

And Robert L. Deffinbaugh:

The longer I look at the Athenian philosophers, these ancient heathen, the more they look like Americans [the West in general – DG] of today. These Gentile heathen of centuries ago

² For those ‘interested in evangelism’ Housney had ‘missiologists’.

³ Housney had ‘missiological’.

⁴ Georges Housney: ‘Analysis of Paul’s Acts 17’.

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enjoyed the blessings of political freedom in what was one of the earliest democracies. They were cultured, highly intelligent, and educated, and very religious, but they had rejected God and exchanged the worship of the one true God for ‘gods’ of their own. How much like them our non-Christian culture is like. We have more confidence in human reasoning and our search for truth than we do in the one who is the truth, the Lord Jesus Christ. We, as a culture, are always in pursuit of something new and novel.⁵

No wonder then, that, according to F.F.Bruce:

...probably no eleven⁶ verses in Acts have formed the text for such an abundance of commentary as has gathered around Paul’s Areopagus’ speech.⁷

Again:

The bibliography on this discourse is immense.⁸

Ben Witherington III:

This passage is in many regards one of the most important in all of Acts, as is shown by the enormous attention scholars have given it. In fact it has attracted more scholarly attention than any other passage in Acts.⁹

In this article, then, I want to face the question: What does Acts 17:16-34 say about our approach to pagans today? Indeed, I

⁵ Bob (Robert L.) Deffinbaugh: ‘The Athenian Encounter and Contemporary Christianity’ in ‘The Apostle in Athens, Preaching to Philosophers (Acts 17:15-34)’.

⁶ Bruce had ‘ten’.

⁷ F.F.Bruce: *The Book of the Acts (Revised Edition)*, William B.Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 1988, p333.

⁸ F.F.Bruce: *The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary (Third Revised and Enlarged Edition)*, William B.Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, (Apollon, Leicester), 1990, p379.

⁹ Ben Witherington III: *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary*, William B.Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, The Paternoster Press, Carlisle, 1998, p511.

want to polarise it: Should our approach be by way of compliment or confrontation?¹⁰

Paul at the Areopagus

Paul, moved – ‘greatly distressed’ (Acts 17:6), ‘vexed’, ‘grieved’, ‘burning’, even to ‘paroxysm’ – by the idolatry at Athens, took the gospel to the Jews (and proselytes) by reasoning with them in the synagogue (or its equivalent), as was his custom (Acts 9:20; 13:5,14; 14:1; 16:13; 17:1-2,10; 18:4,19; 19:8). Not only in the synagogue, but also in the marketplace, he attempted to engage with as many as showed interest, whether Jews or pagans:

While Paul was waiting for [Silas and Timothy] at Athens, his spirit was provoked within him as he saw that the city was full of idols. So he reasoned in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there (Acts 17:16-17).

Some philosophers who were prepared to engage in conversation with Paul, did so to sneer at him:

Some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers also conversed with him. And some said: ‘What does this babblers wish to say?’ Others said: ‘He seems to be a preacher of foreign divinities’ – because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection (Acts 17:18).

By calling Paul a ‘babblers’, they were using a highly-derogatory term – ‘seed-gatherer’, ‘one who lounges in the marketplace, making a living by picking up anything that falls off a cart’, ‘beggarly, abject, a parasite’; above all, ‘an empty talker’.¹¹

However, for their own reasons – maybe for sport in satisfying their predilection for the hearing of any new teaching, indulging their hobby – the philosophers took Paul to the

¹⁰ I am not appealing for discourtesy, and love must govern all we do, but even so the question is valid. It is the question I want my readers to face.

¹¹ See Joseph Henry Thayer: *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, ninth printing 1991.

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Areopagus to hear more about his ‘new ideas’. They liked his talk – not his doctrine, but his talk. They wanted to hear more. A pleasant diversion for the afternoon or whatever? A kind of the jack-in-the box that would jump about for their intellectual amusement? Oh? Luke recorded the scene:

And they took [Paul] and brought him to the Areopagus, saying: ‘May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? For you bring some strange things to our ears. We wish to know therefore what these things mean’. Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new (Acts 17:19-21).

Paul’s address

Expectant silence, I should imagine, fell, as Paul stood up (Acts 17:22),¹² and opened his discourse – and on a pejorative note, at that:

Men of Athens, I perceive that in every way you are very religious (Acts 17:22).

Now this can be misread. It must not. I called this opening ‘pejorative’. Let me explain. Paul was not congratulating his hearers, flattering them by praising their spirituality. Not at all! As the AV (KJV) puts it:

Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things [you] are too superstitious.¹³

The Greek word translated ‘superstitious’ can refer to the fear of gods; a good thing, as some would see it, men showing a reverence for the gods, having a sense of piety and religion. Or the word can speak of rank, unadulterated superstition. Joseph Henry Thayer opted for what he called Paul’s use of ‘kindly

¹² Probably motioning with his hand, this seeming to be the usual way of addressing a crowd (Acts 12:17; 13:16; 19:33; 21:40; 26:1).

¹³ The ‘too’ is odd. How much superstition is acceptable? ‘Very’ would be better than ‘too’.

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ambiguity'. Which is it? Was Paul being complimentary? Or, as I have asserted, confrontational?¹⁴

Clifford C.Pond:

When Paul calls them religious (AV [KJV] 'superstitious'), he is not commending their religion... Paul is disgusted!... The altars and shrines of the pagans were... places of gross immorality in the name of religion.¹⁵

Bruce came down – only just, and very gently at that – on the confrontational side:

This characterisation of the Athenians by Paul was not necessarily meant to be complimentary... The expression Paul used could also mean 'rather superstitious'... What was piety to Greeks was superstition to Jews.¹⁶

Again:

[The] KJV [AV] [rendering] 'too superstitious' is not entirely wrong;¹⁷ to Paul, the Athenian religion was mostly superstitious... Too much stress should not be laid on the likelihood of Paul's commencing his address with a compliment... On the other hand, Paul would not commence his discourse with an insult.¹⁸

Of course! I am not for a moment suggesting we insult unbelievers. But flattering them is not the alternative.

I think it is true to say that a majority of commentators come down on the gracious, complimentary side of the meaning of the word which Paul used. Indeed, it may be right (with Thayer) to say that Paul intended a 'kindly ambiguity'. Nevertheless, my own view ('it would be'; I can hear the retort) is that Paul was upfront right from the start. I am asserting that, even with his

¹⁴ For more, see my 'Confronting The Cultures'; 'No Mixture! Separation!'; 'Need Not Want: A Warning', and so on.

¹⁵ Clifford C.Pond: *Paul... at Athens*, Strict Baptist Mission, Abingdon, p9.

¹⁶ Bruce p335.

¹⁷ But, as I have noted, it is very odd! How much superstition is acceptable? 'Very' would be better than 'too'.

¹⁸ Bruce (Greek) p380.

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opening salvo, the apostle confronted his hearers. Let me offer some justification for what I allege.

For a start, Paul could never have praised anybody for showing reverence for gods. He could never have congratulated anybody for their devotion to idols. Never! So, if he was using the word in a complimentary sense, he could only have been flattering his hearers. Flattery? Buttering up his hearers? The man of the apostle's stamp – the man who wrote the following words – would never, in this context, have fallen back on flattery:

We are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. Who is sufficient for these things? For we are not, like so many, peddlers of God's word, but as men of sincerity, as commissioned by God, in the sight of God we speak in Christ (2 Cor. 2:15-17).

We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways. We refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to everyone's conscience in the sight of God. And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God (2 Cor. 4:2-4).

You know, brothers, that our visit to you was not a failure. We had previously suffered and been insulted in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in spite of strong opposition. For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you. On the contrary, we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts. You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed – God is our witness. We were not looking for praise from men, not from you or anyone else (1 Thess. 2:1-6).

In any case, whether or not Paul spoke in terms of 'superstition' or 'religion', he was being confrontational. He was grieved, angry that his hearers should be deluded; he was distressed.

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While Karl Marx could talk in terms of ‘religion being the opium of the people’, he did not go far enough. Religion is not only a drug, a soporific; it is fatal. Satan likes and uses the institutions of religion (2 Thess. 2:4; Rev. 2:9; 3:9).¹⁹ Paul would never preach religion. He would never encourage religion. He had had more than enough of that in his early days as a Jew:

My manner of life from my youth, spent from the beginning among my own nation and in Jerusalem, is known by all the Jews. They have known for a long time, if they are willing to testify, that according to the strictest party of our religion I have lived as a Pharisee (Acts 26:4-5).

You have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers (Gal. 1:13-14).

In both passages, the apostle goes on to declare the glorious change he experienced in his conversion to Christ – not to ‘the Christian religion’. He certainly made this clear when he wrote to the Philippians:

Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh – though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law,

¹⁹ This is not confined to Jews and synagogues. Take ‘temple’ (2 Thess. 2:4): see 1 Cor. 3:16-17; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:20-22, and so on).

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but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith – that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead (Phil. 3:2-11).

In the following, when Paul spoke of ‘worship’, he used the word that is translated ‘religious’ in the above, even ‘ritual’, and did so in a critical way:

Let no one disqualify you, insisting on asceticism and worship [the word in question] of angels, going on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason by his sensuous mind (Col. 2:18).

On the other hand, we do have:

If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person’s religion is worthless. Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world (Jas. 1:26-27).

Here, ‘religion’ carries positive overtones. Even so, it is best understood in terms, not of religion, but spirituality, practical godliness: ‘Spirituality that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is...’. What we must not do is read back into the Bible 1800 years of Christendom, and then read it back out again.

So, apart from James 1:27, and this qualified as in the preceding paragraph, ‘religion’ and ‘religious’ carry negative overtones in the days of the new covenant. Paul, the man who declared the following, would never countenance ‘religion’ as understood by pagan Greeks:

I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2).

Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! (1 Cor. 9:16).

What we proclaim is... Jesus Christ as Lord (2 Cor. 4:5).

If I may accommodate that last verse, in the present context I think it is fair to say that Paul would declare:

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What we proclaim is not religion, but Jesus Christ as Lord.

Consequently, I am of the opinion that Paul opened his address at the Areopagus on a confrontational note. He was not being diplomatic, ingratiating himself, congratulating his hearers, winning their confidence, assuring them that all they needed was a bit of tweaking of their 'religion'. I am sure that both the tone of his voice and his body language would have put this beyond doubt.

Whatever view may be taken of that, it cannot be denied that, as he went on – even immediately – the apostle made his position clear. As always, Paul went for the jugular, doing so without a whiff of ambiguity. For at once he moved to exposing his hearers' ignorance, their stupidity – their crassness being blazoned abroad for all to see, with their veneration of 'an altar with this inscription: 'To the unknown god' (Acts 17:23)! What ignorance! Moreover, how imprudent of these wiseacres to broadcast it to the world!

Talk about fingers crossed – this is a case of belt, braces and string! Superstition in the raw! Many gods – with one for luck! And Paul exposed it.

As Pond put it:

[Paul] did not begin with a story to make people listen, nor with a humorous allusion to put them in the right mood. He did not even begin with a parable. He began with a concrete example from their life that exposed their folly, and led him immediately to their relationship with God.²⁰

As the apostle made clear when writing to the Corinthians:

The word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart'. Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save

²⁰ Pond p10.

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those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men...

And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God. Yet among the mature we do impart wisdom, although it is not a wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to pass away. But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory...

Let no one deceive himself. If anyone among you thinks that he is wise in this age, let him become a fool that he may become wise. For the wisdom of this world is folly with God. For it is written: 'He catches the wise in their craftiness'; and again: 'The Lord knows the thoughts of the wise, that they are futile'. So let no one boast in men (1 Cor. 1:18-25; 2:1-8; 3:18-21).

Paul proceeded to proclaim the one and only God, the true God, to them, rebuking his hearers' ignorance, declaring how God continually works to the end that men might come to him. Quoting back at them – *at them*, I stress – their own poets, the apostle showed, yet again, how witless his hearers were – even their own poets rebuking their madness:

'In him we live and move and have our being'; as even some of your own poets have said: 'For we are indeed his offspring' (Acts 17:28).

The point must not be missed. Paul was not quoting the pagan poets on a par with Scripture. Nor was he ingratiating himself with his audience, by quoting their bards with approval. Not at all! Rather, he was highlighting his hearers' inconsistency. He was citing their poets to challenge their thinking! How dim-

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witted they were, ‘being’, as they claimed, ‘God’s offspring’, ‘to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man’ (Acts 17:29)! Fancy! Sophisticated men, men who prided themselves on their rationality, such ‘enlightened’ men with their vaunted worldly-wisdom, actually making and worshipping an idol crafted out of stone or wood or precious metal and gems! And this, even as they were cherishing the thought that they were, as their own admired-poets declared, this god’s offspring! How daft can men get! The cleverest of men are spiritually ignorant (1 Cor. 1:18 – 2:16; 3:18-23), and in saying this, Paul, like Nathan addressing David (2 Sam. 12:7), was pointing straight at his hearers.

Pond again:

Paul’s application begins with an unflattering summing up of the condition of his audience. ‘Such ignorance’ was a brave comment on the intellectual pride of the Stoics and Epicureans of Athens (1 Cor. 1:20-21).²¹

Paul had yet more to say:

The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead (Acts 17:30-31).

The material point is that Paul got this far in his first meeting with the pagan philosophers! This was his opening (and, as it turned out, his closing) discourse. Having been given the opportunity, he grasped it with both hands. Paul had no thought of process; no softly, softly, here. Rather, he opened with all guns blazing. A better illustration might be to speak of him, right from the start, drawing his rapier and, deftly wielding it, driving to the very heart of the issue. Obviously, he was not looking for common ground with the world. Not at all! Rather he exposed his hearers’ folly. In God’s name, he warned them of the coming judgment. He told them of the one who would judge them, the Lord Jesus Christ. He commanded them, in God’s

²¹ Pond p19.

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name, to admit their error, repent, confess their blindness, and turn. He unequivocally laid out the evidence of Christ's resurrection. In all this he was flying directly in the face of his hearers' so-called wisdom, confronting both them and their 'wisdom' with the truth, confounding both them and their arguments.

Conclusion

In my view, Acts 17:16-34 shows us that we are to approach sinners by confronting them with the gospel, confronting them with Christ. The man of Acts 17 who addressed the Athenian philosophers in the Areopagus is the very same man who did not hold back when issuing the following statements. Do not miss where and how Paul *started* when setting out the gospel:

The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonouring of their bodies among themselves, because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed forever! Amen.

For this reason God gave them up to dishonourable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done.

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They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips, slanderers, haters of God, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, disobedient to parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Though they know God's righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them (Rom. 1:18-31).

Our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come (1 Thess. 1:5-10).

Paul always sang from the same song sheet.

What have others thought about Paul at the Areopagus?

Comments from others

Kenneth F.W.Prior:

Although Paul's example [in Acts 17] encourages us to adapt our style to those whom we are out to reach, at the same time we must be quite clear and uncompromising in the truth we proclaim. This... is clear from Paul's labours in Athens. Yet it is always tempting, out of a genuine desire to commend our message to unbelieving minds, to make it palatable by sacrificing or playing down any aspect of the truth that is likely to be unpopular. The New Testament churches were not lacking in those who had succumbed to this temptation. In Galatia, there were the Judaisers who wanted to modify the basic and vital doctrine of justification by faith to accommodate the prejudices of those with a Jewish

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background.²² At Colossae, there were others who thought the doctrine of Christ's person could be adapted to suit the presuppositions of Greek philosophy. Paul himself had every opportunity to feel the same pressures, as he found that both the preaching of the cross and the resurrection were the objects of ridicule to sophisticated Greeks. But Paul persisted with both truths. The cross was to him the power of God (1 Cor. 1:18), while if he dropped the resurrection, what he was left with was futile (1 Cor. 15:17). The pages of church history are full of examples of Christians trying to bridge the gulf between biblical truth and secular thought, and in the process sacrificing vital points of doctrine.²³

Cornelius Van Til:

So then we conclude that even at Athens Paul did virtually the same thing that he had done in Lystra; he challenged the wisdom of the world. He did what later he did in his letter to the Corinthians when he said: 'Where is the wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the disputer of this world? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For after that [, in the wisdom of God,] the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God through the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe' (1 Cor. 1:20-21).²⁴

Witherington:

[Acts 17:23] strikes a balance notable throughout this speech between making contact with the audience and condemning their idolatry... This way of putting it is not much different from what we find in Romans 1:20-23... Romans 1:22 says

²² The thrust of Galatians is not that there is no justification by the law, but that there is no justification or sanctification by the law. See my *Christ Is All; Sanctification in Galatians*.

²³ Kenneth F.W.Prior: *The Gospel in a Pagan Society: The relevance for today of Paul's ministry in Athens*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1975, p115. As I indicated in the first note in this article, I am working on a mss. dealing with this subject at large. In that book, I will show that Prior's reference to 'the pages of church history are full of examples of Christians trying to bridge the gulf between biblical truth and secular thought, and in the process sacrificing vital points of doctrine' could not be more up to date.

²⁴ Cornelius Van Til: *Paul at Athens*.

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their thinking was futile because they rejected what they could know of the true God from creation and so their minds were darkened... This comports with what is said in Acts 17:27 about pagans groping around in the dark for the true God... The call for repentance at the end shows where the argument has been going all along – it is not an exercise in diplomacy or compromise, but ultimately a call for conversion, after a demonstration of what the Athenians obviously do not truly know about God. Familiar ideas are used to make contact with the audience, but they are used for evangelistic purposes to bolster arguments that are essentially Jewish and Christian in character.²⁵

Houssney:

Paul did not approve of Greek philosophy. He did not encourage the Stoics and Epicureans to read their literature in order to find Jesus or to discover redemptive analogies in their literature.

Taken in its entirety, Paul's speech was not irenic. On the contrary, though compassionate throughout, it was confrontational and polemic. He was correctional from beginning to end. He confronted their belief system on several fronts.

Houssney's conclusion could not be more pertinent:

The speech Paul gave at the Areopagus has been used to justify some evangelistic²⁶ practices that are clearly not biblical. Paul has been made to say just the opposite of what he actually said in his speech.

D.A. Carson issued some salutary warnings:

What is striking is that Paul does not flinch from affirming the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. And that is what causes so much offence that Paul is cut off, and the Areopagus address comes to an end...

Paul does not trim the gospel to make it acceptable to the worldview of his listeners. For Paul, then, there is some irreducible and non-negotiable content to the gospel, content that must not be abandoned, no matter how unacceptable it is to

²⁵ Witherington pp523-524.

²⁶ Houssney had 'missiological'.

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some other worldview. It follows that especially when we are trying hard to connect wisely with some worldview other than our own, we must give no less careful attention to the non-negotiables of the gospel, lest in our efforts to communicate wisely and with relevance, we unwittingly sacrifice what we mean to communicate.²⁷

Deffinbaugh:

It would seem to me that much of that which characterises our heathen culture characterises the Christian and our Christian culture [that is, Christendom – DG]... Many of the methods, skills and techniques which are taught Christians are really the products of human minds and human inquiry, and not of biblical revelation.²⁸ They are not simple, gospel answers to life's problems, but complex and drawn out processes. They do not have the stamp, 'made in heaven', but 'made by man'. Let us ever be alert to those subtle human elements which creep into our theology and practice, in the name of religion [that is, in essence, Christendom – DG], but not in accordance with the gospel. How much of our religion and of our worship is but our own adaptation of God's revelation, or our own re-shaping of God, to make him more to our liking? How much of our worship is God-centered, rather than man-centered, and which focuses on pleasing and serving God, rather than on getting God to serve us, to meet our needs? And how much of our proclamation of the gospel is consistent with Paul's preaching, the proclamation of a simple, straightforward message of man's sin and of coming judgment, of Christ's sacrifice and of salvation for all who would repent and believe? May the gospel shape our worship and our every action, as it did Paul.

Pond:

There must be a place in our approach to modern pagans, whether in personal witness, tracts, addresses, or on radio or television, for finding points of contact. [But] we will avoid every temptation to be popular.²⁹

²⁷ D.A.Carson: 'Worldview Evangelism – Athens Revisited'.

²⁸ Sadly, how true! This is precisely the point I address in the aforementioned book I am preparing.

²⁹ Pond p17.

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I have made my position clear. So, I ask again, reader: Does Acts 17:16-34 justify approaching unbelievers with the gospel by way compliment or confrontation? What is your view? What is your practice?

The Verse on Emberton Clock Tower

The following verse is inscribed on the clock tower in the village of Emberton, which is just south of Olney in Buckinghamshire, England. It bears repeating, and merits the widest possible distribution. Above all, it demands a response from us all – now!

*Time's on the wing, how swift he speeds his way,
Hastening to sink in one continuous day,
Pause passing traveller. 'What thy destiny?'
When death unveils a vast eternity
Live then to Christ, in Christ eternal gain
No Christ, No Hope, but everlasting pain.*

Reader, what is your response?

Surely there can be only one sensible answer! Come to Christ at once, trusting his blood and righteousness to prepare you to enter that 'vast eternity' at peace with God.

Why Attempt the Futile?

Many well-intentioned believers, in their desire to evangelise, try, by using rational argument, to convince unbelievers of the existence of God, and that he created the universe.

I say that this is unnecessary. What is more, the effort is misguided; at the very least, it is without scriptural warrant. Hence the ‘futile’ in my chosen title.

The Bible never attempts to prove the existence of God, or that he created the universe. Never! Rather, it categorically asserts both. And it does so right from the word ‘go’:

In the beginning, God...

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

That’s how the Bible opens (Gen. 1:1). And it never looks back!

God is adamant: he has given all men without exception clear, sufficient and undeniable evidence of his existence and his creating power:

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they reveal knowledge. They have no speech, they use no words; no sound is heard from them. Yet their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world. In the heavens God has pitched a tent for the sun. It is like a bridegroom coming out of his chamber, like a champion rejoicing to run his course. It rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other; nothing is deprived of its warmth (Ps. 19:1-6).

Working on that premise, axiom, assertion, revelation – that God exists, and that he created the universe – the Bible goes on to insist that men must accept it, and act upon it. If not, says God, they are fools:

The fool says in his heart: ‘There is no God’ (Ps. 53:1).

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And God pulls no punches about the dire consequences which stem directly from that foolish denial:

The fool says in his heart: 'There is no God'. They are corrupt, doing abominable iniquity; there is none who does good. God looks down from heaven on the children of man to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all fallen away; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one (Ps. 53:1-3).

God could not be more blunt in his repetition of the stark fact which had been set out earlier in the Psalms:

The wicked boasts of the desires of his soul, and the one greedy for gain curses and renounces the Lord. In the pride of his face the wicked does not seek him; all his thoughts are: 'There is no God' (Ps. 10:3-4).

The fool says in his heart: 'There is no God'. They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds; there is none who does good. The Lord looks down from heaven on the children of man, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one (Ps. 14:1-3).

Indeed, as Paul declares, the natural man is guilty before God and under his wrath because, being fallen in Adam, although he knows full-well that God exists and that he created the universe, he deliberately stifles that knowledge, refuses to act upon it, deliberately and arrogantly substituting a god of his own making to replace the one true and living God:

The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honour him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the

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glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things (Rom. 1:18-22).

So let's not beat about the bush! Although, like the Bible, I talk about believers and unbelievers – meaning those who trust in Christ, and those who do not – in reality, all men and women really are believers. Some believe God exists and that he created the universe; some do not. But we all believe: we either believe that God exists, or we believe that he does not. The question of proof does not arise! It is all a matter of faith.

So don't let the so-called atheists kid themselves. We are all believers! They are! Those who reject the God of Scripture, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and prefer to talk about luck, chance or fate, bowing down to any other god whatsoever, or claiming there is no god at all, are still believers. The truth is, they have more faith than those of us who submit to the living God who created the universe, and, above all, who trust his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, for our salvation. They need it! It demands far more faith to rely upon blind chance than to trust in the Redeemer, the incarnate Son of the everlasting God!

Consequently, what we believers should be concerned about is not trying, by rational argument,¹ to convince men that God exists, and that he created the universe: in their heart of hearts, all men know that already! No! Like Paul, we should be challenging their denial of God, challenging their suppression of the knowledge of God. Furthermore, we should resolutely assert God's rights and claims over created men, we should preach his gospel, offer sinners salvation through trust in Christ, demanding their repentance towards God over their rebellion

¹ Logical arguments are like sharp knives: there is a risk that they will cut the user. Remember the Socratic Club meeting in Oxford in 1948 where C.S.Lewis' logic was routed by Elizabeth Anscombe! Take one example. The system we see in creation demands a designer. Very well. But who designed the designer? In short, the argument has not advanced the case at all; it has merely shifted it. As I have said, the existence of God is not a question of proof; from first to last it is a matter of faith.

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against him, their stifling of their knowledge of him, and their consequent sins. After all, this is precisely what Christ insisted on:

Repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his [that is, Christ's] name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem (Luke 24:47).

And which Paul certainly did:

I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus (Acts 20:21; see also Acts 2:38; 26:18-20).

So let's not waste our time attempting the futile – trying to prove God's existence. Let us get on asserting him and demanding obedience to him. That is what the Bible does; it demands submission to the evidence, the evidence which in their hearts all men know to be true, but deliberately suppress:

Without faith it is impossible to please [God], for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him (Heb. 11:6).

What is more – and finally – one day everyone will have to acknowledge what they know in their hearts:

God highly exalted [the Lord Jesus Christ], and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:9-11).

I close with this personal address to all who read these words: self-styled atheist, agnostic, or whatever you like to call yourself, that which I have just quoted from Scripture is what you will do, and do one day soon. You will have to openly acknowledge what you have always known to be true, but what you are determined to suppress: that God exists and that he created you; that consequently you owe him your worship and obedience; and that you are accountable to him. All that, in the final day, you will acknowledge. But it will not be saving. I urge

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you, therefore, to bow the knee to God *now*, submitting yourself to him. I plead with you to repent and trust Christ, and do it without delay.

‘A Gospel Church’: A Warning

Introduction

Isn't it odd how somebody coins a phrase, and that phrase catches on and becomes common currency among believers – even to the extent that many regard it as a scriptural expression?¹ But there can be a catch, a very serious catch: what if that phrase has come from a theology that is unscriptural? If so, then it follows that many believers, through their repeated use of the phrase in question, are being unconsciously influenced by the theology behind it. It is very much like the singing of hymns: for many – without them being aware of it – hymn-book phrases carry more weight than Scripture; hymn-book phrases become ‘received wisdom’.

The phrase I have in mind is one which appears in countless articles, blogs, books and commentaries: ‘a gospel church’ – or its stable companion, ‘a Christian church’. This phrase – ‘a gospel church’ – I fully acknowledge is almost invariably used in a casual way by many who never give a second thought as to its origin and substance. Again, I am sure that many use it to speak of a church which practices and preaches the gospel, to distinguish it from churches that do not. The intention is good, but ‘a gospel church’ is a most unfortunate choice; it compounds the problem I am talking about.

The theology behind it

Although ‘a gospel church’ may seem to be an innocuous phrase, it is, in fact, loaded, and heavily loaded at that. It carries large overtones. Let me explain.

¹ To produce this article, I have lightly edited the Introduction to my forthcoming booklet with the same title. In that booklet I go on to set out the details of the two consequences which I speak of at the conclusion of this article.

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The phrase comes from (or, at least, is much popularised by) a theology – covenant theology, to be precise – which, this past 450 years or more, has detrimentally coloured the way many believers read and understand Scripture.

While covenant theologians talk – as Scripture does – about the old and new covenants, alas, they mean something quite different to the Bible: they have invented a system which postulates a covenant which they call ‘the covenant of grace’, a phrase unknown in Scripture. And since the Bible has a great deal to say about covenants,² this invention grievously imposes a man-made construct on a vital scriptural principle, and thus clouds it dreadfully.

Covenant theologians allege that their invented over-arching covenant, ‘the covenant of grace’, has been revealed in two different administrations: the old covenant in the Old Testament and the new covenant in the New Testament. In essence, covenant theologians allege, these two covenants are the same, just different administrations of their one covenant of grace.³

Furthermore, those covenant theologians who hold to infant baptism (and that is the majority)⁴ try to use their system to support their practice by contending that the church is the same in both Testaments. From this assertion, they argue that what circumcision was in the Old Testament, baptism is in the New. Baptism, they say, has replaced circumcision. That being so, they go on to argue that since infants were circumcised in, as they put it, the Old Testament church (that is the Jewish church), infants ought to be baptised (sprinkled is what they really mean) in the New Testament church (that is, the gospel church). Hence the phrase I am objecting to – ‘a gospel church’ – is one which

² See my *Redemption*.

³ This is simplistic. There is a spectrum of views covered by the umbrella of ‘covenant theology’. I will not stop to show the wrongness of this theological system, having done so, in detail, in various works; principally, *Christ Is All*.

⁴ Those covenant theologians who hold to believer’s baptism have an uphill struggle to handle the implications of covenant theology.

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is based on a faulty theology, and, consequently, one which carries massive overtones, unscriptural overtones; not least, infant baptism. We are not talking about a phrase which is innocent, harmless. Far from it!⁵

Let me show that covenant theologians do indeed talk in terms of 'the Jewish church' (meaning Israel) and 'a gospel church' (meaning believers in the days of the new covenant).⁶ We could, perhaps, start with John Owen and his *The True Nature of a Gospel Church*.⁷ In addition to 'a gospel church', the following extract is full of other covenant-theology speak.⁸ This is what Owen stated right at the start of his book:

⁵ See, for instance. my *Battle; Clarity; Conversion; Infant*.

⁶ This, of course, runs in tandem with 'the Jewish sabbath' and 'the Christian sabbath'. In this case, 'Jewish' is a tautology – the sabbath has only ever been 'Jewish'. And, speaking of a day, the sabbath has never been 'Christian'. We may extend this. A fully-consistent covenant theologian would be happy to talk about the old covenant in terms of the members of the *Jewish* church keeping the *Jewish* sabbath, their *Jewish* priests offering *Jewish* sacrifices on *Jewish* altars in a *Jewish* temple – with its counterpart in the new covenant being the members of the *Christian* church keeping the *Christian* sabbath, their *Christian* priests offering *Christian* sacrifices on *Christian* altars in a *Christian* temple. Of course, no covenant theologian is fully consistent – they all pick and mix, selecting items according to taste. Although not holding to covenant theology, Rome gets closest to being consistent in this matter. The scriptural position is that the new covenant uses all the old-covenant shadows, but only in a spiritual sense, Christ having fulfilled the shadows: believers are the temple of the Spirit and spiritual priests within that temple; Christ himself is their sabbath; they, trusting his one finished sacrifice, offer spiritual sacrifices to God; and so on. The Fathers started the ball rolling for this adulteration of Scripture when they imposed the old covenant on the *ekklesia*, with disastrous results. For my arguments on all this see my *Sabbath Questions; Sabbath Notes; Essential; Horne; Pastor; The Priesthood of all Believers; Christ Is All*.

⁷ John Owen: *The True Nature of a Gospel Church, The Works of John Owen*, Vol.16, The Banner of Truth Trust, London, 1968.

⁸ As I have noted, there is a spectrum of views under the umbrella 'covenant theology'. Owen was idiosyncratic in his covenant theology, but he was a covenant theologian.

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There is no other sort of visible church⁹ of Christ organised... but a particular church or congregation (either in the Old or New Testament), where all the members thereof do ordinarily meet together in one place to hold communion one with another in some one or more great ordinances of Christ.

I break in: how, when and where did Israel 'meet together in one place to hold communion one with another in some one or more great ordinances of Christ'? Would some covenant theologian give me a scriptural reference for it?

Considering the descendants of Abraham who would eventually become the nation of Israel, Owen, without batting an eyelid, declared:

After the descent of a numerous progeny from Abraham's loins, God takes them to himself in one visible body, a national but congregational church, into which he forms them four hundred and thirty years after the promise, in the wilderness [that is, at Sinai with God's giving of the law and the establishment of the old covenant for Israel by the hand of Moses]; and although all Abraham's natural posterity, according to the external part of the promise made to him, were taken into visible church fellowship, so that it became a national church, yet it was such a national church always, in the wilderness and in the promised land...¹⁰ They were always bound to assemble at the tabernacle or temple thrice at least every year; hence the tabernacle was still called 'the tabernacle of the congregation'...

With the coming of the Messiah, his finished work, ascension and outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the old covenant was fulfilled and rendered obsolete, and the new covenant was brought in. This is what Scripture teaches.¹¹ Owen, however, expressed this in terms of his covenant theology:

When Christ had divorced this people [that is, Israel the *Jewish church*], abolished their mosaical constitution... he erects *his gospel church*, calls in disciples by his ministry, forms them

⁹ 'Visible church' is another example of covenant-theology speak. For more, see below.

¹⁰ Owen had 'Holy Land'.

¹¹ See my aforesaid works for the full justification of my claim.

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into a body, furnishes them with officers and ordinances, and after he had suffered, rose again, and continued here forty days...

And so Owen went on. When referring to the ministry of Haggai to the Jews after the return of Judah from Babylonian captivity, and during their rebuilding of the temple, Owen confused confusion even more when he spoke of:

...the great discouragements laid before [the Jews] by the adversaries of Judah, when they find the children of the spiritual captivity are about to build *a gospel church* unto the Lord.

Staggering! While there is no question but that Owen was a great theologian, these extracts clearly illustrate the cost of letting a theology trump Scripture: Owen ended up in nonsense-land on this issue.

Let me turn to another writer who said the same sort of thing as Owen, but did so in a far more accessible manner – Matthew Henry. Although he used ‘a Christian church’, Henry, was, of course, speaking of ‘a gospel church’. Like Owen, grievously confusing the establishment of the nation of Israel with the foundation of the church, Henry claimed that the Jewish church began at Mount Sinai. Commenting on Acts 2, he spoke of:

...the giving of the law upon Mount Sinai, whence the incorporating of *the Jewish church* was to be dated.

Commenting on Acts 7, he declared:

They [that is the Jews] are ready to look upon him [that is, Stephen] as an apostate from *the Jewish church*, and an enemy to them... But let us see what this is to Stephen’s case. They had charged him as a blasphemer of God, and an apostate from *the [Jewish] church*; therefore he shows that he is a son of Abraham, and values himself upon his being able to say: ‘Our father Abraham’, and that he is a faithful worshipper of the God of Abraham, whom therefore he here calls the God of glory. He also shows that he owns divine revelation, and that particularly by which *the Jewish church* was founded and incorporated... but also that they [that is, the Jews he was addressing] might consider that what they were now doing

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against *the Christian church* in its infancy was as impious and unjust, and would be in the issue as fruitless and ineffectual, as that was which the Egyptians did against *the Jewish church* in its infancy.¹²

And commenting on Acts 15:

Many of the Jews who embraced the faith of Christ, yet continued very zealous for the law... They knew [the law] was from God and its authority was sacred, valued it for its antiquity, had been bred up in the observance of it, and it is probable had been often devoutly affected in their attendance on these observances; they therefore kept them up after they were by baptism admitted into *the Christian church*... In a few years the mistake would be effectually rectified by the destruction of the temple and the total dissolution of *the Jewish church*, by which the observance of the Mosaic ritual would become utterly impracticable.¹³

In this way, covenant theologians, on the basis of their philosophical covenant-system, fly in the face of the fact that Israel was a nation, not the church. What is more, they disregard the fact that the overwhelming majority of the people of Israel were unregenerate; if not, they use that fact to bolster their view which inevitably follows in the wake of infant baptism, and talk of churches comprising the regenerate and unregenerate. Whichever it is, they end in an unscriptural cul-de-sac. The scriptural position could not be more explicit: only the regenerate can be part of the *ekklēsia*;¹⁴ regeneration is the absolute minimum qualification for membership.¹⁵ As for Israel, while there was a spiritual remnant in the nation (see, for

¹² Henry was referring to Israel in Egypt.

¹³ What Henry could not see – or what his system would not let him see – was that it did not take the Romans in AD70 to render the old covenant and its law obsolete. Christ did that! And Romans, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Hebrews, and so on, declared it – long before AD70! See my *Christ Is All*.

¹⁴ The *ekklēsia* – ‘the called-out ones’.

¹⁵ It also requires a credible testimony and baptism (dipping) as a believer.

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example, Romans 9 – 11),¹⁶ in no sense was every Israelite regenerate. In any case, no nation has even been a church. Israel in the old covenant was not. The church was not founded until Christ brought in the new covenant.

But there is it. Covenant theologians speak of Israel as a church: 'the Jewish church'. And this, as I have said, carries a huge price tag, infant baptism being not the least of it: infant baptism has brought immense – not to say, eternal – damage to many. And infant baptism is a direct consequence of covenant theology with its view that Israel and believers form one continuous body, being merely two manifestations of one 'church' belonging to different administrations.¹⁷

I leave the question there, but, in my booklet with the same title as this article, I take all this a little further in two respects. *First*, I show how the concept of 'a gospel church' plays into infant baptism. Having done that, *secondly* I say a little more about the question of mixed churches, churches made up of the regenerate and unregenerate.

¹⁶ See my *Romans 11*.

¹⁷ All this is somewhat simplistic. John Calvin, for instance, though he pre-dated the invention of covenant theology, held to the continuity of the church, infant baptism and mixed (regenerate and unregenerate) churches. Infant baptism, of course, started with the Fathers, Augustine being the main culprit for establishing its cataract of disastrous consequences.

Hair-Splitting Justified Over Justification

Hair-splitting has a bad name.¹ And, in most cases, rightly so. Nit-picking, gnat-straining, quibbling over tiny details, is a wretched business, one which should almost always be left to the small-minded. There are, however, occasions when hair-splitting is commendable; indeed, when it is essential; there are topics about which we cannot give too much attention to detail. In this article, I am concerned with one such: justification.

When thinking about the doctrine of justification, hair-splitting is not only justified; it is an absolute necessity. Unless we are prepared to split hairs in the matter of justification, we shall ruin the gospel – or allow it to be ruined under our very noses. And the consequences of that will be horrendous beyond contemplation.

What, precisely, do I have in mind? Since I have, in several works, set out the doctrine of justification,² in this present article I am concerned solely with the necessary precision we need to exercise in our definition of justification. I want to focus on where we should be fastidious when we are talking about ‘justification by faith’.

Let me state it this way:

¹ ‘Puritan’ was a pejorative nickname their opponents gave to those within the pre-1660 Church of England who wanted scriptural reform while retaining the Church’s uniformity as the State Church. Moreover, the Puritan emphasis upon precise obedience to Scripture, coupled with discipline in the church, earned them other nicknames, such as ‘Disciplinarians’ or ‘Precisians’. When one Puritan was told that he was too precise, he retorted: ‘Sir, I serve a precise God’. See my *Battle*.

² See, for instance, *Justification; Christ’s Obedience Imputed; Four ‘Antinomians’*; ‘What is Justifying Faith?’; ‘Justification: Fact or Feeling?’.

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Justification is on the basis of God's grace alone, and received by the sinner through faith alone.

The two nice points I have in mind are these:

1. The *basis* of justification is grace; faith is its *means*. It is vital to distinguish between the two. Making faith the basis of justification, allowing faith to become the basis of justification, is fatal.

2. Having cleared that hurdle, it is essential to hold on to the word 'alone', doing so with tenacity. The basis of justification is grace – and grace *alone*; the means of justification is faith – and faith *alone*.

Now both these essential principles are under threat today. Sometimes the danger arises inadvertently; more often it is comes by reason of heavy attack.³ Whatever the cause, the result, alas, is the same. Unless we believers are wide awake, we run the very serious risk of allowing the biblical doctrine of justification by faith to be ruined.

Alarmist? I think not.

Now this is nothing new, of course. Satan has always attacked justification by faith, the very citadel of the gospel. But I want to draw the attention of believers to issues we face today. And stand and face them we must. Otherwise, as I have said, the consequences will be horrendous beyond contemplation.

Let me tackle the first point I raised:

1. The *basis* of justification is grace; faith is its *means*. It is vital to distinguish between the two. Making faith the basis of justification, allowing faith to become the basis of justification, is fatal.

³ As for the latter, see, for instance, my *Conversion; Hinge*.

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Take Romans 4:16. Some Bible versions, alas, use words like ‘depends on’; principally,⁴ the English Standard Version:

That is why it [that is, the promise, justification itself] *depends on* faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace.

Now herein lies the danger. The words ‘depends on’ need thought; very, very careful thought indeed. Of course, faith is essential. I have said so. Without faith no sinner will be justified. Faith is an absolute necessity; without it, we cannot come to God at all (Heb. 11:6). In that sense, justification ‘depends on’ faith, yes. No saving faith, no saving trust in Christ, no justification.

But... and there is a serious ‘but’.

The Greek word in question is *dia*. Now I recognise that this very small word carries a huge range of meanings. It is often the way. The smaller the word, the greater, it seems, its breadth of meaning, the greater its weight and importance. So here. Hence the need for this hair-splitting. The question is: How can we – amidst this plethora of meanings – decide the proper translation of *dia*? The rule is as it always is: the context must decide.

But before we get to that, let me make my point as clearly as I can. Here are some of the other major contemporary versions of Romans 4:16:

Therefore, the promise comes *by* faith, so that it may be by grace (NIV).

Notice, however, how the NIV weakens the first ‘by’ by the second ‘by’; this should be ‘according to’. The same applies to this:

Therefore it is *of* faith, that it might be by grace (AV or KJV).

Better by far are these versions:

⁴ I say ‘principally’, but this needs qualification. The ESV was derived from the RSV. It is no surprise then to find that ‘depends on’, or something very like it, is used in the RSV, NEB, Jerusalem Bible, and the like.

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For this cause it is *of* faith, that it may be according to grace (ASV).

This is why the promise is by faith, so that it may be according to grace (HCSB).

For this reason it is *by* faith, in order that it may be in accordance with grace (NASB).

Now all these versions have ‘of’ or ‘by’ faith: justification is by faith. They rightly steer well clear of any thought of justification being ‘because of’ faith, justification being ‘on the basis of’ faith. The ESV, however, with its use of ‘depends on’ gets uncomfortably close to it. It is playing with fire. It can lead to the notion of a sinner’s justification being *grounded on* his faith, the sinner being justified *because of* his faith, his justification being *on account of* his faith, *on the basis of* his faith. I accept that ‘depends on’ can be perfectly acceptable if the fine nuance is preserved. My fear is that this fine tuning will not always be understood or held on to. And herein lies the danger.

What, precisely, is this danger? If we ever get to think that faith is the *cause* of our justification, if we come to think that we are justified *because* we believe, we have, at the very least, turned faith into a work. Now we know that the desire to work for justification is inherent, deep-seated, in the natural man. As sinners, we are convinced that we can do it. We always want to do something. Rome and the cults tap into this ingrained desire. Again, how many times do we hear an unbeliever, when challenged about being right with God, bold as brass tell us: ‘I always *do* my best’?

The jailer asked Paul and Silas: ‘What must I *do* to be saved?’ (Acts 16:30). True, Paul told him to ‘believe’ (Acts 16:31), to trust Christ. But when setting out the doctrine of justification by faith – see below – Paul took the greatest pains to leave no room for the notion of justification by works.

What about the encounter between Christ and the Jews? The Jews asked Christ what they had to *do* to please God. No doubt, they were asking how could they earn their way into God’s good

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books, what would satisfy him: ‘What must we *do*, to be *doing* the works of God?’ (John 6:28).⁵ Naturally, the Jews thought in this way. After all, they were children of the old covenant. And the old covenant was a covenant of works. Perfect obedience to the law of God through Moses to Israel would bring salvation. The Jews knew this full-well. As God had told them:

You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the LORD (Lev. 18:5).

When, on their return from captivity, the children of Israel confessed their nation’s sin to God, in their confession they repeated the principle in question:

You [that is the LORD] warned them [that is, Israel] in order to turn them back to your law. Yet they acted presumptuously and did not obey your commandments, but sinned against your rules, which if a person does them, he shall live by them, and they turned a stubborn shoulder and stiffened their neck and would not obey (Neh. 9:29).

God could justly complain:

I gave them my statutes and made known to them my rules, by which, if a person does them, he shall live... But the house of Israel rebelled against me in the wilderness. They did not walk in my statutes but rejected my rules, by which, if a person does them, he shall live (Ezek. 20:11,13).

And Paul could not have been more explicit:

Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them (Rom. 10:5).

Oh yes, the Jews knew that under the old covenant, justification came by perfect obedience to the law. And this is why, as I have explained elsewhere,⁶ Christ came into the world under the law, with the intention of fulfilling the law completely. Which he did. Thus the sinner, upon his trusting Christ, is fully justified in

⁵ I am not saying they were sincere.

⁶ See my *Christ’s Obedience Imputed*.

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and by Christ's fulfilment of the law, and is declared righteous before God in the Redeemer on the basis of his finished work.

This is why Jesus, in his reply to the Jews, took up their word, and used it for his own purpose:

This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent (John 6:29).

This word play must not be read as though Christ was saying that faith is a work. Rather, he was calling for faith, saying that trust in him (Christ) was what God required.⁷ This is the doctrine of the new covenant. This is how justification is received – by faith.

Right from the start, however, the doctrine of justification by faith met with heavy attack in the early church. And that explains why Paul could not have taken more steps than he did to destroy this dreadful, mistaken notion of attempted justification by our own works.

Let me spell out his extended argument.

For a start, there is no justification by the law:

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it – the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness... at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law (Rom. 3:21-28).

Justification is by faith! Not by law! Not by works!

The apostle, without a break, presses home the point:

⁷ See my *Offer*.

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What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness'. Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness, just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works (Rom. 4:1-6).

On the basis of grace, justification is received by faith, not on the basis or by our works.

Paul still has not finished. As he goes on to declare, justification is not by circumcision:

Is this blessing then only for the circumcised, or also for the uncircumcised? For we say that faith was counted to Abraham as righteousness. How then was it counted to him? Was it before or after he had been circumcised? It was not after, but before he was circumcised. He received the sign of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised. The purpose was to make him the father of all who believe without being circumcised, so that righteousness would be counted to them as well, and to make him the father of the circumcised who are not merely circumcised but who also walk in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised (Rom. 4:9-12).

Justification is on the basis of grace, it is received through faith, not by any rite, ceremony or ordinance.

Again:

For the promise to Abraham and his offspring that he would be heir of the world did not come through the law but through the righteousness of faith. For if it is the adherents of the law who are to be the heirs, faith is null and the promise is void (Rom. 4:13-14).

Justification is on the basis of grace, it is received by faith, not by our works.

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The consequence:

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God (Rom. 5:1-2).

Paul never tired of the theme. Take just one example: the letter he wrote to the churches of Galatia.⁸ He could not have been more explicit: no justification by the law. As he declared:

We know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified... If righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose (Gal. 2:16,21).

It gets worse. Not only is there no justification by the law, but all who attempt it inevitably bring upon themselves the condemnation of God and the curse of the law:

All who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written: 'Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, and do them'. Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for 'The righteous shall live by faith'. But the law is not of faith, rather 'The one who does them shall live by them'. Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us – for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree' – so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith (Gal. 3:10-14).

Moreover, there is no justification by circumcision:

I, Paul, say to you that if you accept circumcision, Christ will be of no advantage to you. I testify again to every man who accepts circumcision that he is obligated to keep the whole law. You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by

⁸ Contrary to the common view, Galatians is not about justification. It is about justification by faith leading to progressive sanctification, and neither are brought about by the law. See my *Christ Is All; Sanctification in Galatians*.

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the law; you have fallen away from grace. For through the Spirit, by faith, we ourselves eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness (Gal. 5:2-5).

And so on.

All this can be – must be – generalised. It must not be restricted to the law of Moses and the rite of circumcision. The fact is, no works of ours – under any law whatsoever – no observance of any rite or ceremony, not even any God-given ordinance – contributes to our justification. Justification is on the basis of God's grace, and is received by faith. The basis is grace, not any work that we might do – not past, present or future.

As Horatius Bonar put it:

*Not what my hands have done
Can save my guilty soul;
Not what my toiling flesh has borne
Can make my spirit whole.*

*Not what I feel or do
Can give me peace with God;
Not all my prayers, and sighs and tears
Can bear my awful load.*

*Thy work alone, O Christ,
Can ease this weight of sin;
Thy blood alone, O Lamb of God,
Can give me peace within.*

*Thy love to me O God,
Not mine, O Lord, to thee,
Can rid me of this dark unrest,
And set my spirit free!*

*Thy grace alone, O God,
To me can pardon speak;
Thy power alone, O Son of God,
Can this sore bondage break!*

*No other work, save thine,
No meaner blood will do,
No strength save that which is divine,
Can bear me safely through.*

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In short, justification, though received by faith, is on the basis of grace. These two – faith and grace, the means of justification and the basis of justification – must never be confused.

So much for my first concern. Now for the second.

2. Having cleared that hurdle, it is essential to hold on to the word ‘alone’, doing so with tenacity. The basis of justification is grace – and grace *alone*; the means of justification is faith – and faith *alone*.

I can say that justification is by faith. Excellent! So it is. But any Church Father, any Papist, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Federal Vision man, New Perspective advocate, Baptist Sacramentalist... could say ‘Amen’ to it.⁹ What I have left out is key. What have I omitted to say? Justification is by faith *alone*. Luther felt the point so keenly, he actually distorted his translation of Romans 3:28 into German to include the ‘alone’, though it is not in Greek. He had no need to do this since the apostle goes on to make the case very clearly, ruling out any contribution from circumcision or law.¹⁰ Even so, Luther was right to say:

⁹ See my *Infant; Conversion; Hinge; Luther; Baptist*.

¹⁰ As Luther himself saw. Commenting on his use of ‘alone’, and the criticism he met for it, he said: ‘The text itself, and... Paul’s meaning, urgently require and demand it. For in that passage he is dealing with the main point of Christian doctrine; namely, that we are justified by faith in Christ without any works of the law. Paul excludes all works so completely as to say that the works of the law, though it is God’s law and word, do not aid us in justification. Using Abraham as an example, he argues that Abraham was so justified without works that even the highest work, which had been commanded by God, over and above all others, namely circumcision, did not aid him in justification. Rather, Abraham was justified without circumcision and without any works, but by faith, as he says in chapter 4: “If Abraham were justified by works, he may boast, but not before God”. So, when all works are so completely rejected – which must mean faith alone justifies – whoever would speak plainly and clearly about this rejection of works will have to say: “Faith alone justifies and not works”. The matter itself and the nature of language requires it’. In his ‘Open Letter on Translating’, Luther stated: ‘Furthermore, I am not the only one, nor the first, to say that faith alone makes one righteous. There was Ambrose, Augustine

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Whoever would speak plainly and clearly about this rejection of works will have to say: 'Faith alone justifies and not works'.

Silence when men are thinking salvation is by faith and... is guilty silence. Plain speaking, leaving no room for doubt, is essential under such conditions. In other words, hair-splitting is essential.

Paul, of course, had set the pattern, long before Luther. He had recognised the problem I am talking about. Writing to the Ephesian believers, he told them:

By grace you have been saved through faith (Eph. 2:8).

Enough said? No! He did not leave it there:

By grace you have been saved through faith... not a result of works, so that no one may boast (Eph. 2:8-9).

Why did the apostle not stop at 'faith'? Why the negative? Why did he state the case from the opposite point of view? Why did he add 'through faith... not a result of works'? Is it not obvious that Paul spotted the danger that some might think that their works – even thinking of their faith as a work – might contribute to their salvation? I am convinced of it. Plenty of people do think in terms of 'faith and...' – and that, despite the apostle's demolition of the claim! Consequently, he took the necessary steps to close the loophole. He was thinking of his readers, was he not? He did not want them to run away with a wrong impression. So he did all he could to make sure they couldn't.

And he did not leave it even there! For he went on immediately to add:

For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Eph. 2:10).

Paul, having stopped one danger, knew he had, at once, to correct yet another! Having removed the notion that a sinner's

and many others who said it before me'. For my contribution to this issue, see my 'The "But" of John 1:17: Absent but Vital'.

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work could contribute to his salvation, having stressed the sovereign and free grace of God in salvation without the sinner's works, the apostle saw the risk that his readers might run away with the idea that works don't count at all! 'Out of frying pan into the fire'! So he stopped it before it could start. Hair-splitting, you see.

Let me set out the apostolic teaching on this.

A sinner cannot work for his salvation, but once he is saved he is duty-bound, under apostolic command, to work out the salvation that God has already worked in:

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure (Phil. 2:12-13).

James put it as clear as noonday. A sinner is justified on the basis of grace alone and is received by faith alone, but the faith which justifies never comes alone:

Faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say: 'You have faith and I have works'. Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe – and shudder! Do you want to be shown, you foolish person, that faith apart from works is useless? Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says: 'Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness' – and he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone. And in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way? For as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so also faith apart from works is dead (Jas. 2:17-26).

And this is why Paul hammered home all these points to the Ephesians, making sure he established salvation by faith alone,

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without works, but also making it clear that once a sinner is saved he will inevitably go on to produce good works, that it is his duty¹¹ so to do:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Eph. 2:8-10).

The fact is, if Paul had not painted the full picture, he would have failed, and worse; if he had not been willing to split hairs, he would have been cavalier, acting irresponsibly. But he, having a true pastoral heart, was not confining his thinking to the theoretical; he had his readers and their eternal welfare in mind, and so he took steps to make sure they got the right message, the complete message, and thus prevented any possible misunderstanding.

I am convinced that Paul was a hair-splitter when it came to justification in all its aspects. I am further persuaded that we must be the same. Justification is on the basis of God's free grace alone and is received by faith, and by faith alone. It leads to good works, certainly, but justification is by faith alone because of God's grace alone. We must never yield an inch on this principle. We must proclaim this gospel doctrine with all the vigour and passion we can muster. In short, we must be hair-splitters when it comes to justification by faith alone on the basis of grace alone.

¹¹ Do not miss the 'should'.

Hatpegs or Driving Seat?

Or

How to Read the Bible

My friend, Rick Peterson, came across something he had written in an old Bible some years ago. He sent it to me. Being struck by the quote, I posted it on my Face Book page. It brought an encouraging response. Rick was pleased because, as he said, it showed that others have the same conviction. Here is the extract:

There is a huge difference between me having something to say and using the Bible to say it, and the Bible having something to say, and using me to say it.

About 25 years ago, I heard a man start his sermon in the usual way by announcing his text. But he immediately told us – he *warned* us, would more apt – that he was not going to preach those words, but use them as a peg upon which to hang some thoughts; in other words, he was using Scripture as a hatpeg for his ideas.

Hence my title: ‘Hatpegs or Driving Seat?’ or ‘How to Read the Bible’.

What I mean is, how do we read or preach the Scriptures? Do we treat the Scriptures as a collection of texts, as hatpegs upon which to hang our – or other men’s – thoughts, ideas or systems? Or do we treat the Scriptures as the authoritative word of God which it is our duty and privilege to understand, expound, apply and submit to?

As Peterson said:

There is a huge difference between me having something to say and using the Bible to say it, and the Bible having something to say, and using me to say it.

C.H.Spurgeon captured the point in his usual pithy way:

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There is an essential difference between man's word and God's word, and it is fatal to mistake the one for the other.¹

Of course, I readily admit that we all come to Scripture with our pre-suppositions. I do. You do. When I open my Bible, I know that I instinctively reach for my glasses; that is, I adopt my pre-suppositions. But one pre-supposition is essential for us all: I must take what I am reading to be the word of God, not just ordinary words in an ordinary book, a collection of the ideas of men. I am reading God's word. I cannot prove my supposition, but it is fundamental to my reading and preaching of Scripture. I believe – note the word – I believe I am reading and preaching the word of God. What I am trying to do is receive, obey, present, proclaim and declare the word of God. I am not making Scripture fit my system, nor am I setting out my ideas, having hung them on convenient proof texts. In other words, when I come to Scripture, Scripture is in the driving seat – not my ideas, not the systems of men. I am not rejecting the idea of a theological system, but I am saying that Scripture – not theology – must rule the roost.

I do not always succeed in this, I confess. But I really do try.

Alas, it seems to me, when faced with something that contradicts their favoured theology, many preachers, writers and Bible readers do not even try. Let me give but one example of what I am talking about.

Some years ago, in my efforts to preach consecutively through books of the Bible, I found my Reformed theology on the law was seriously challenged by Hebrews, and then demolished by Galatians.² I have not kept this experience to myself. I am known as a new-covenant theologian. Many believers do not like this at all. And they say so. And they write against me and my doctrine.

¹ C.H.Spurgeon sermon 1979.

² See 'My Testimony'.

Hatpegs or Driving Seat?

I make no complaint about this. Indeed, I welcome constructive dialogue. ‘As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another’ (Prov. 27:17).

But, sad to say, what I usually find is that those who engage with me on the law do not do so by starting with Scripture and arguing it out. Oh no! They begin, continue and end with their theology – usually the system devised by Thomas Aquinas, tweaked by John Calvin, and set in confessional concrete by the Westminster Puritans in the 1640s. Oh, my opponents quote plenty of Scripture, yes, but they do so very much in the spirit of the Westminster Confession; namely, make a claim, and then produce a sheaf of proof texts.

This is highly questionable, highly dangerous. What we must do is start with Scripture – not theology. We must start with Scripture – its passages, its paragraphs, its context. We must not hang everything on isolated verses. By such a method, you can ‘prove’ almost anything!

Moreover, if you study the Westminster Confession, you will soon discover that very often the last thing provided by the chosen proof texts is proof! Indeed, on not a few occasions the proof texts are actually irrelevant to the point being made.

But the main fault with this approach is that such readers, preachers and writers are treating the Bible as a collection of hatpegs and not, as it is, the mandatory, authoritative word of God. Throughout the entire journey, Scripture – not theology – must be in the driving seat. Scripture must call the shots – not any man-made system, however old and hallowed by tradition and highly-respected theologians!

Brendan Hoban's Warning

An item on the BBC News website this morning (23rd August 2018),¹ caught my eye. Calling it up, I found it contained a quote from Brendan Hoban. The more I thought about what Hoban said, the more I came to see that his words raised a whole bundle of issues, all of them important, issues about which I feel very strongly. Hence this little article.

Brendan Hoban is an Irish Catholic priest in the Killala diocese, a columnist and an author of a number of books. I will not give him the title he likes to use – ‘Father’ – since Christ directly forbids all such:

You are not to be called ‘Rabbi’, for you have only one Master and you are all brothers. And do not call anyone on earth ‘father’, for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. Nor are you to be called ‘teacher’, for you have one Teacher, the Christ. The greatest among you will be your servant. For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted (Matt. 23:8-12).

I confess that I do not see how Christ could have expressed himself more clearly. No titles in the church of God. Full stop! No titles here, then.

Brendan Hoban, deploring the decline in the number of Roman Catholic priests in Ireland, has, in his terms, issued a stern, if not sad, warning to all Catholics: ‘If you have no priest, then you have no Mass, and if you have no Mass, then you have no Church’. He was speaking, of course, of having no Romanist-ordained cleric. He was telling Catholics: ‘If you have no cleric, no priest, you have no man qualified to offer Christ in the sacrifice of the Mass. As a consequence, you have no Church’; no Roman Catholic Church is what he meant, it goes without saying. And outside the Roman Catholic Church – so Hoban

¹ ‘Ireland between Popes’.

must believe, as Rome teaches – there is no salvation. In short, no consecrated Roman priest, no Church, no salvation.

The Catholic Catechism, following the Fathers with their oft-repeated mantra ‘Outside the Church there is no salvation’, certainly reinforces this claim:

Basing itself on Scripture and Tradition,² the Council teaches that the [Roman] Church... is necessary for salvation.

Of course, as with so many Confessions and Catechisms (not only Roman),³ there are inbuilt contradictions supported by the double-speak of theologians. As the Roman Catechism goes on:

Hence they could not be saved who, knowing that the Catholic Church was founded as necessary by God through Christ, would refuse either to enter it or to remain in it... Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience – those too may achieve eternal salvation.

Not only does this involve double-speak, but it compounds the problem because it teaches salvation by works. And this is expressly denied in Scripture:

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it – the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation [the one who would appease the wrath of God] by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus. Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded. By what kind of law? By a law of works? No, but by the law of faith. For we hold

² Note the capital.

³ As for the Reformed, see, for instance, my *Infant*.

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that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law (Rom. 3:21-28).

And, of course, this rules out any attempt at salvation by our own works. Paul, writing to the believers at Ephesus was categorical:

By grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast (Eph. 2:8-9).

Getting back to the Catholic Catechism, let us never forget, it's what people think, or like to think – not the hair-splitting metaphysics and wire-drawn nuances of the theologians – that they take to heart; more disastrous still, it is what they cling to as they plunge into eternity. Now from a Roman Catholic point of view, Hoban is right. In the Roman Catholic Church, the priest is the kingpin. No priest, no Mass. No Mass, no Church. No Church, no salvation. This is what Catholics believe.

And they are wrong. Badly so.

First, all man-made priests are, not to put too fine a word on it, a blasphemous nonsense. All men must have a priest, I know, for the Bible shows that it is so, but no man-made priest will do the job. The only effective priest for sinners is the Lord Jesus Christ. I will not set out my arguments in full here, having done so in detail in my *Priesthood: Our Need, God's Provision*, but if, reader, you are in any doubt, I urge you to weigh what I have said in that volume.

Let me hasten to add that what I am dismissing spreads far wider than Catholics. The cults, of course, each of them in particular, have their 'man of God'. Moreover, many evangelicals and Reformed get uncomfortably close to it with their love of the sacerdotal minister.⁴ Not only that, they show the same trait with their adulation – I use the word advisedly –

⁴ See my *Pastor* See also 'Appendix 4: J.C.Ryle on "Prove All Things"' in my *Sowed*.

of making a shibboleth⁵ of a virtually-infallible Confession (or system of theology) drawn up for a specific purpose by long-since dead men – good men, in their day, no doubt, but men just the same.⁶ As J.C.Ryle observed:

Human nature would always rather lean on a visible minister, than an invisible Christ.⁷

All man-made priests (whatever name they travel under) are a cheat, a scam. There is no sacrifice offered by any man that God will accept. Indeed, there is no further sacrifice to be offered since Christ completed the work the Father gave him to do (John 19:30) – culminating in his perfect sacrifice of himself at Calvary.⁸ His one offering has put an end to all sacrifice for sin, for by that one offering he has perfected for ever all those who trust him as their Saviour and Lord:

It was indeed fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. He has no need, like those high priests [of the old covenant], to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all [time] when he offered up himself (Heb. 7:26-27).

When Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and more perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation) he entered once for all into the holy place, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. For if the blood of goats and bulls, and the sprinkling of defiled persons with the ashes of a heifer, sanctify for the purification of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God. Therefore he is the mediator of a

⁵ That is, a cultural marker. I use the word with the added sense of a cultural marker which is beyond challenge.

⁶ See my 'A Thanksgiving Day Thought'; "'No Confession? Nothing to Debate!'"

⁷ J.C.Ryle: *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels (Matthew)*, James Clarke & Co. Ltd., London, 1954, pp299-300.

⁸ Hear my sermon 'Tetelestai'.

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new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions committed under the first covenant (Heb. 9:11-15).

Christ has entered... into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf... [not] to offer himself repeatedly... But... he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him (Heb. 9:24-28).

Every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God... For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified (Heb. 10:11-14).

Has the penny dropped? Notice how, in this vital matter of salvation, Scripture speaks not of the Church but Christ. Hoban fears the lack of his Church. What he should dread is the lack of Christ – the scriptural Christ, that is. He should dread dying without trusting Christ, and trusting Christ alone.

So, while Hoban grieves over the decline of Papist priests and what that will mean for Catholics in their erroneous view of salvation, he – and his readers – should come to their senses at once. They should jettison their blasphemous delusion, and start thinking scripturally.

What all Catholics, including Hoban, and everybody else, too, should know is that without the Lord Jesus Christ men and women have nothing, and have nothing to look forward to but eternal damnation. So... for their salvation, they should call upon Christ, trusting him and his finished work, trusting him alone, and do it now.

Out of love for your soul, reader, let me bring this home as close as I can. Without the Lord Jesus Christ you have nothing, and have nothing to look forward to but eternal damnation. So... for

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your salvation, call upon Christ, trusting him and his finished work, trusting him alone, and do it now.

Is it Me?
Or
The Cat Let Out of the Bag

With such a main title, I am, of course, leaving myself wide open to the obvious answer: ‘Yes’.

Let’s see. Let’s see what you think.

Here are two paragraphs written about Princeton Theological Seminary, which was founded in 1812.

Here is the first:

The name of the seminary is known in all the world. Its chief distinction is its biblical teaching. The ground of its faith is the Bible. Its only question is: ‘What has God said?’ Its only proof is God’s word. Its professors have never reached the point of thinking that they knew more than the Bible. This seminary has always taught that there are but two questions to be considered: (1) Is this the word of God? And (2) What does it mean? This ascertained, there is nothing left but to believe and adore.

Here is the second, setting out the first of ‘three significant elements in the [seminary’s] tradition’:

It was a confessional tradition. They were committed to the classic Confessions of the Reformed Churches, particularly the Westminster standards. They were doctrinal maximalists [that is, they allowed no compromise in their views]. To say the tradition was confessional is to say that it was theological, involving a view of life founded on the decree of God, and the covenant purpose of God to justify, sanctify and glorify sinners by Jesus Christ. As A.A.Hodge put it, the characteristic of Princeton theology was ‘close and persistent adherence to the type of Calvinism taught in the Westminster standards as these are interpreted in the light of the classical literature of the Swiss, Dutch and English Puritan theologians, who wrote after the date of the Synod of Dort, especially Francis Turretin of Geneva and John Owen of England’. [John Gresham] Machen, at a later date, wrote of the fact that though he had given his

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life to the study of the New Testament he regarded this as ancillary [that is, additional, subsidiary, secondary, supplementary] to systematic theology. Princeton scholars were not just able technicians; they served, in their work, the knowledge of God.

So I ask again: Is it me? The first paragraph tells me that the basis, the only basis, for the seminary was Scripture. *That*, for the seminary, was ‘the only question’. The second paragraph tells me that theology, Calvinistic theology, Westminster Assembly theology was primary. One of its leading professors actually stated that for him the study of Scripture (and that, only the New Testament) came second to systematic theology.

So which is it? How can both be true? They can’t. Consequently how can the current (July 2018, pp16-22) *Banner of Truth* contain the 1971 article ‘The Princeton Men’ by Paul Helm, which opens with the first paragraph above, and which has the second paragraph as the first main paragraph after the introduction? How is this possible?

I am well aware of the usual escape clauses which will be trotted out. But it will not wash. Indeed, as my title goes on to say, the cat really is let out of the bag.

The point is, when it comes to addressing vital contemporary questions like the new covenant, the believer and the law, the way to bring sinners to Christ, assurance, and so on, too many fall back on a Confession, and let the theological system contained in that Confession trump all. If only – if only – the Reformed would not only repeat, but act in accordance with, the first paragraph of that article! Let Scripture speak! Let Scripture speak unfettered by man-made Confessions! Let us take seriously such passages as Deuteronomy 4:2; 12:32; Joshua 1:7; Proverbs 30:6; Isaiah 8:20; Acts 17:11; 2 Timothy 3:15-16; Revelation 22:18-19. And act upon them.

Atheists & Evangelicals Awake! Nietzsche Being Dead Still Speaks

Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), the atheistical philosopher who has had a huge influence down to the present day, claimed that God was dead, killed by 19th-century man with his Higher Criticism, Darwinism, *etc.* But this brought him an overwhelming sense of grief: Who or What would replace this God? And he needed replacing for, as Nietzsche clearly saw, ‘no God’ means ‘no authority, no rule, no solution, no purpose’. ‘No God’ means that man is condemned – but condemned to what? By getting rid of God, man thinks he has gained freedom, but it is a freedom to bondage; man is left in a vacuum of meaninglessness.

It is no use trying to hold on to Christ’s ethic while rejecting Christ himself. To give him his due, Nietzsche saw the futility of those who thought they could keep the Christian ethic without keeping the Christ. He rejected both Christ and his ethic.

Darwin’s theory of evolution, he argued, was good, but not good enough. It is not enough to strive merely for the survival of the fittest. Mankind must strive for greatness. In effect, he must become his own god.

So, if, as Nietzsche taught, Christ is the curse of mankind, what or who is it’s saviour?

In his quest for an answer, having turned his back on Christ, Nietzsche returned to the gods of Rome and Greece. One god above all others – Dionysius, the god of the grape-harvest, winemaking and wine, of fertility, ritual madness, religious ecstasy, and unrestrained consumption – was Nietzsche’s chosen god. Devotion to Dionysius, bowing down at his shrine, living in self-indulgence for today, would bring some sort of meaning for mankind. So thought Nietzsche.

But he found that the void would not go away. Once more he tried to fill it, but yet again failed. Nietzsche wanted to find a philosophy that would do the job, cover all the nasty outcomes of the murder of God, and stop-up all loopholes. Nevertheless, even though he made notes for his proposed ‘Will to Power’, he was forced to face the inevitable conclusion: he was engaged in a futile task; no philosophy could do the job. So he gave up the doomed project, using the notebooks in which he was recording his thoughts as mere scrap paper for shopping lists.

Thus he was left – and, so Nietzsche taught, all mankind with him – with a chaos of cultural choice and emptiness. Indeed, Nietzsche foresaw that ‘the last men’ would be banal, pursuers of the trivial, lovers of self, mediocre, devotees of a ‘religion of comfortableness’ and self-delusion. He had no answers to the questions: ‘How should we live? Why? To what purpose or end?’ All he was left with, following the rejection of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, was to accept the consequences of this rejection, adopt the Dionysian prescription, and replace God with an orgy of self-satisfaction and indulgence, with no rule, no point to it all – except to live for the here-and-now, trying to make the most of it, aiming for individual greatness, striving to become ‘supermen’. Such was the conclusion of Nietzsche, the arch-atheist philosopher.

But in all this, Nietzsche – for all his intellectual prowess – was simply displaying his ignorance, and so he became a testimony to the truth of God’s assessment of the natural man. If only Nietzsche had read his Bible at this point, he would have seen that Paul had summed him up 1900 years before: professing to be wise, Nietzsche had become a fool (see Romans 1:22). Indeed, Paul had detailed Nietzsche’s folly:

The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written: ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise; the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate’. Where is the wise person? Where is the teacher of the law? Where is the philosopher of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world

through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe. Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength.

Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God – that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: ‘Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord’.

And so it was with me, brothers and sisters. When I came to you, I did not come with eloquence or human wisdom as I proclaimed to you the testimony about God. For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling. My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom, but on God’s power.

We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. No, we declare God’s wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. However, as it is written: ‘What no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what no human mind has conceived’ – the things God has prepared for those who love him – these are the things God has revealed to us by his Spirit. The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who knows a person’s thoughts except their own spirit within them? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we

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may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, explaining spiritual realities with Spirit-taught words. The person without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God but considers them foolishness, and cannot understand them because they are discerned only through the Spirit. (1 Cor. 1:18 – 2:14).

Nietzsche did not seem to realise that Paul had seen that men in his day were adopting Nietzsche's philosophy, and that he had predicted that men would go on throughout the age adopting that philosophy:

There will be terrible times in the last days [that is, the gospel age]. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God (2 Tim. 3:1-4).

As is plain for all to see, 1900 years before Nietzsche, Paul had precisely spelled out Nietzsche's position – what he ended up with and saw – with dread – as the 'future' of mankind – and all because of man's rejection of the living God!

In an extended passage to the Romans, Paul had argued that when men get rid of God they have to replace him with a god of their own. This need not be an idol of wood and stone, of course; the gods of sex, power, greatness, intellectualism, entertainment, pleasure – the list is endless – will be used to fill the void. But the effort to replace God simply shows the madness and guilt of men. Paul set it all out, delineating the eternal consequences men bring upon themselves in the forlorn quest:

The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being

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understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse.

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like a mortal human being and birds and animals and reptiles.

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator – who is forever praised. Amen.

Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for unnatural ones. In the same way the men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed shameful acts with other men, and received in themselves the due penalty for their error.

Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done. They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they have no understanding, no fidelity, no love, no mercy. Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them (Rom. 1:18-30).

Nietzsche might be modern, but he was only repeating that which had been tried before. Indeed he was a living exemplar of the futility set out in the book of Ecclesiastes, proving that:

...there is nothing new under the sun (Eccles. 1:9).

For Jeremiah had summed up Judah's sin thus:

They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water (Jer. 2:13)...

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...going on to draw the inevitable conclusion:

...LORD, you are the hope of Israel; all who forsake you will be put to shame. Those who turn away from you will be written in the dust because they have forsaken the LORD, the spring of living water (Jer. 17:13).

Despite the scriptural warning, however, men are still playing the same game. As Isaiah declared:

The LORD, the LORD Almighty, called you on that day to weep and to wail, to tear out your hair and put on sackcloth. But see, there is joy and revelry, slaughtering of cattle and killing of sheep, eating of meat and drinking of wine!...

...the prophet immediately adding the atheist's mantra – which Paul quoted (see 1 Corinthians 15:32):

...'Let us eat and drink', you say, 'for tomorrow we die!' (Isa. 22:12-13).

Nietzsche was blind to the eternal; he lived and died only for the material. But, as Paul explained, the visible world, the present age, the tangible, the here-and-now – this is not ultimate reality. As the apostle told the Corinthians:

We [that is believers] fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal (2 Cor. 4:18)

Isaac Watts:

*This life's a dream, an empty show;
But the bright world to which I go
Has joys substantial and sincere...*

Who is the Saviour of men? Who gives purpose and meaning? Christ! Not Dionysius! Christ and Christ alone! As Peter declared:

Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God (John 6:68-69).

And Christ avowed:

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I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me (John 14:6).

And Peter preached:

Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12).

Nietzsche had forsaken Scripture, forsaken the God of Scripture, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and turned his back on Christ, the only Redeemer of sinners. Consequently, he lived and died proving the truth of Scripture – the Scripture in which God has laid out the consequences of atheism. Atheists be warned! (We should speak of so-called atheists – ‘so-called’, for as Nietzsche discovered, all men have a god, all men know they need a god, all men invent a god if they reject the one true God). They should learn from, take warning from, Nietzsche. By getting rid of God, he descended from futility into actual madness. It is the same for men today; if not literally, then spiritually, mankind is descending into madness. As the Greeks observed: ‘Whom the gods intend to destroy, they first drive mad’. And, as Nietzsche further discovered, so-called atheists are nothing but fools:

The fool says in his heart: ‘There is no God’ (Ps. 14:1; 53:1).

Evangelicals, too, should listen to Nietzsche. He predicted current Western culture – how ‘the last men’ would invent for themselves a ‘religion of comfortableness’ – the adulation of pleasure, immediate gratification. Alas, a growing number of evangelicals are turning their churches into centres which are tainted with this philosophy.¹ They are going to the world, adopting its principles, and doing so in order to attract the unchurched into their churches, where they entertain them with their programmes, in hope of... what? Are they teaching them that they can have ‘life’ now – self-esteem, indulgence – and heaven after all? Fools they must be if they are.

¹ See my *Relationship; Gadfly; Confront; Attracting*.

Beware of Parrots!

There is a very real place for rote learning. It is essential that children should be taught by rote to learn the multiplication tables (number bonds); they need to know, for instance, that $5 \times 9 = 45$, and know it without conscious thought. Likewise, they must learn the alphabet, and be able to recall it on auto-pilot.

Similarly, when we come to spiritual matters, rote learning of the order of the books of the Bible, for instance, is an invaluable asset. Knowing the basic facts of Scripture, dates in church history, and such like, is an excellent thing.

But in the spiritual realm, catechising – though it has undoubted advantages – has an inbuilt risk. I know we are told: ‘Train up a child in the way he should go’, and promised that ‘even when he is old he will not depart from it’ (Prov. 22:6).¹ I also accept that this training includes rote learning. And I acknowledge that catechising has a long and illustrious history. But in spiritual matters, the risk remains.

And when I speak of catechising, I am thinking of adults as well as children.

What risk am I talking about?

In spiritual matters, the risk is that rote learning, catechising or coaching can produce nothing but parrots; that is, children or adults who can repeat facts. Having learned facts, they can regurgitate them. There is nothing wrong with this, of course, except if and when such an ability is taken as a sign of regeneration; that is, when proficient parrots are regarded as true believers.

The fact is, truth in the mind, stored in the memory, and repeated in the mouth, while good, is not good enough. A parrot

¹ Although this, quite properly, is taken in the positive sense, the same goes for the negative.

Beware of Parrots!

can be taught to repeat facts of Scripture, and repeat them flawlessly. But the most word-perfect parrot will never be regenerated. Hence my chosen title: ‘Beware of Parrots!’; beware of thinking that those who know the facts are regenerate; they may be nothing more than proficient at remembering and repeating facts. They may have learned the language, and that is all.²

We must never forget that regeneration is the one great essential.³ Christ could not have been more explicit:

No one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again... No one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying: ‘You must be born again’. The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit (John 3:3-8).

Scripture puts the matter beyond a shadow of a doubt. While the regenerate do know facts, that is far from all that marks them as regenerate. The regenerate have been given a new heart by the Spirit of God, and this leads to far, far more than the knowledge of facts. Ezekiel prophesied of it:

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws (Ezek. 36:25-27).

As did Jeremiah, quoting God directly:

I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will they teach their neighbour, or say to one another: ‘Know the LORD’, because they will all know me, from the least of them

² See my ‘Preparationism in New England’.

³ George Whitefield, when asked why he preached so often on ‘You must be born again’, replied: ‘Because you must be born again!’

Beware of Parrots!

to the greatest... For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more (Jer. 31:33-34).

And this is quoted in Hebrews (Heb. 8:7-13; 10:1-18).

Thus it is clear. The mind learns and knows the facts, those facts are stored in the memory, but in the regenerate they also penetrate the heart leading them to love and obey, from the heart, the truth that has been learnt. As Paul told the Romans:

Thanks be to God that, though you used to be slaves to sin, you have come to obey from your heart the pattern of teaching that has now claimed your allegiance (Rom. 6:17).

Truth has to enter the mind, be stored in the memory, but until it reaches the heart, it has not done its saving work. Mental assent must lead to heart commitment: ‘God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed *from the heart* that form of doctrine to which you were delivered’ (Rom. 6:17); that is, said Paul, God be thanked, the truth entered your mind, penetrated your heart and so produced heartfelt obedience. In saving faith, mind, heart and will are involved.⁴

Yes, the sinner has to believe the facts – the record – of the death and resurrection of Christ, but he also has to believe this in his heart; he has to trust Christ. As Paul told the Romans:

If you declare with your mouth: ‘Jesus is Lord’, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you profess your faith and are saved (Rom. 10:9-10).

Am I knocking the parental use of a catechism? No! Nevertheless, I think it right to issue this warning.

But, as I have hinted, I have a far larger pool to fish in at this time. A growing number of churches are setting up courses to attract and instruct unbelievers – whom they increasingly call ‘the unchurched’ – courses to teach them the elements of Christianity. Sometimes they have Bible studies specifically for

⁴ For far more on all this, see my *Secret*.

Beware of Parrots!

unbelievers ('the unchurched'), or so-called 'seekers'.⁵ And this, coupled with other innovations in evangelistic efforts,⁶ is fraught with danger. In short, I am thinking of the way unbelievers are coached, trained, instructed in the gospel. Many contemporary preachers seem content to inform the mind; that seems to be their aim (if they go so far as to have an aim) – to present facts. This clearly carries the risk of producing parrots. As does the use of training courses for unbelievers, helping them to 'explore' the rudiments of Christianity. Coupled with sociological influences, cultural pressures, and the like, coaching methods carry this risk in large measure.

A particularly able parrot might be taught to repeat the Westminster Confession, say, but only a regenerate person knows the power of the gospel in a saving way. An unbeliever can complete an exploration course in the elements of Christianity, gain 100% in the final examination, and yet be unregenerate.

So: 'Beware of Parrots!'

Let us beware for ourselves. Head knowledge is one thing – it is essential – but regeneration is the *great* essential: As Joseph Hart put it:

*Let us ask th'important question,
(Brethren, be not too secure),
What it is to be a Christian?
How we may our hearts assure!
Vain is all our best devotion,
If on false foundations built:
True religion's⁷ more than notion;
Something must be known and felt.*

Just so! Something must be *known and felt*. Better, *someone* – Christ – must be known, and our relationship to him must be felt!

⁵ See my *Seeking*.

⁶ See, for instance, my *Relationship; Attracting; Gadfly*.

⁷ For the sake of scanning, I let the objectionable word stand. I would prefer 'True spirituality's'.

Beware of Parrots!

Let us beware for others – those who sit under our preaching, and, if we use them, those who attend our Bible studies or exploration courses for unbelievers.

I say again: ‘Beware of Parrots!’

PC Preaching?

Do We Need More – or Less – of It?

PC? Politically correct; that is, designed not to offend, intended to meet local taboos, calculated not to upset anyone.

Do we need preaching that is PC in this sense? Do we need *more* of it? that is, do we need more preaching that is Nice, Genteel, Sedate, Accurate but Non-Offensive, Pleasant, Non-Threatening?

I say we do not! I say we don't need any of it!

Let me start again.

PC preaching; that is, Powerful, Penetrating, Pointed, Personal, Confronting, Challenging, Convincing, Conscience-Pricking, Convicting, Converting preaching. Do we need such preaching?

I say we do!

Consider some biblical preachers.

Take the prophets.

Take the account of Nathan addressing David over his sin with Bathsheba; he was PC, in this right sense (2 Sam. 12:7-10).

Take Isaiah. Look how he opened his ministry:

Hear me, you heavens! Listen, earth! For the LORD has spoken: 'I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me. The ox knows its master, the donkey its owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand'. Woe to the sinful nation, a people whose guilt is great, a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption! They have forsaken the LORD; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on him (Isa. 1:2-4).

Having started in this way, Isaiah carried on in the same vein

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And Isaiah is typical of all the prophets – all of them, up to and including Malachi.

John the Baptist was no exception. Hear how he addressed Israel:

Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near... You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not think you can say to yourselves: 'We have Abraham as our father'. I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. I baptise you with water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire (Matt. 3:2,7-12).

Now consider the apostles.

Take Peter:

Fellow Israelites, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's deliberate plan and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross (Acts 2:22-23).

When challenged about the healing of the man at the gate of the temple, Peter's answer was, in the right sense, PC:

Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a man who was lame and are being asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed... Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved (Acts 4:8-10,12).

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And when Peter and John were told not to speak of Christ again, they did not mince their words:

Which is right in God’s eyes: to listen to you, or to him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard (Acts 4:19-20).

The apostles preaching was obviously PC in the right sense since the high priest complained: ‘We gave you strict orders not to teach in this name... Yet you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and are determined to make us guilty of this man’s blood’ (Acts 5:28). By way of response, the apostles could not have more PC in the right sense:

We must obey God rather than human beings! The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead – whom you killed by hanging him on a cross. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Saviour that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins. We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him (Acts 5:29-32).

Take Paul addressing the religious intellectuals at Athens:

People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious [that is, very superstitious].¹ For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship – and this is what I am going to proclaim to you... God... now... commands all people everywhere to repent. For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead (Acts 17:22-23,30-31).

And listen to the apostle’s closing words to the Jews in Rome:

The Holy Spirit spoke the truth to your ancestors when he said through Isaiah the prophet: ‘Go to this people and say: “You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have

¹ See my *Confront*.

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closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them”?. Therefore I want you to know that God’s salvation has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will listen! (Acts 28:25-28).

This is PC preaching in the right sense!

Let me take it a little further. PC preaching like this – is this not preaching *at* people? So it is! So it ought to be! It goes without saying that treating the pulpit as a coward’s castle, settling old scores, dealing with issues that should be dealt with personally, 6 feet above and 50 feet beyond criticism, is reprehensible. Nevertheless, our preaching must be personal, pointed, convicting; in other words, PC in the right sense. All the above were examples of it.

And what about the greatest example – the most PC, in the right sense, of them all – the Lord Jesus Christ? Where shall I start? Where shall I end? Consider this:

Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But I tell you, it will be more bearable for Tyre and Sidon on the day of judgment than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted to the heavens? No, you will go down to Hades. For if the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Sodom, it would have remained to this day. But I tell you that it will be more bearable for Sodom on the day of judgment than for you (Matt. 11:21-24).

And this:

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people’s faces. You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You travel over land and sea to win a single convert, and when you have succeeded, you make them twice as much a child of hell as you are.

Woe to you, blind guides! You say: ‘If anyone swears by the temple, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gold

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of the temple is bound by that oath'. You blind fools! Which is greater: the gold, or the temple that makes the gold sacred? You also say: 'If anyone swears by the altar, it means nothing; but anyone who swears by the gift on the altar is bound by that oath'. You blind men! Which is greater: the gift, or the altar that makes the gift sacred?...

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices – mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law – justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside they are full of greed and self-indulgence. Blind Pharisee! First clean the inside of the cup and dish, and then the outside also will be clean.

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness.

Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You build tombs for the prophets and decorate the graves of the righteous. And you say: 'If we had lived in the days of our ancestors, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets'. So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets. Go ahead, then, and complete what your ancestors started!

Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing. Look, your house is left to you desolate. For I tell you, you will not see me again until you say: 'Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord' (Matt. 23:13-39).

Of course, many do not like this sort of preaching. It is not PC; that is, politically correct. It is nothing new. In the nineteenth-century, Lord Melbourne put it in his dry way: 'Things are coming to a pretty pass when religion is allowed to invade

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private life'. In other words, spiritual life, especially preaching (or, as he put it, 'religion') must remain detached, impersonal, decorous, polite; it must be PC (in the wrong sense) – certainly *not* PC (in the right sense).

If he had lived a little longer, Melbourne would not have thought much of C.H.Spurgeon, would he? Oh no! Spurgeon was clear on the issue:

And now, says one: 'Sir, are there any here that you have been preaching *at*?' Yes, I like to preach *at* people. I do not believe it is of any avail to preach *to* people; preach right *into* them and right *at* them.²

PC preaching in the right sense!

Again, as he concluded a very pointed sermon on August 9th, 1857, Spurgeon mused aloud: 'Now, I do not know whether I have been personal to anybody this morning'. Was he apologising for it? Certainly not! 'I sincerely hope I have', he declared. He went on:

I meant to be. I know there are a great many characters in the world that must have a cap made exactly to fit them, or else they will never wear it, and I have tried as near as I could to do it. If you will not say: 'How well that applied to my neighbour', but just for once say: 'How well it applied to me', I shall hope that there will be some good follow from this exhortation; and though the antinomian may turn away, and say: 'Ah! it was only a legal sermon', my love to that precious antinomian. I do not care about his opinion. My Saviour preached like that, and I shall do the same. I believe it is right that Christians should be told what they should do.³

PC preaching in the right sense!

A few weeks later, he took the same line:

Now... by God's help, I shall labour to be personal... I ask... every... person that he will please understand that I am preaching *to him*, and *at him*; and if there be anything that is

² C.H.Spurgeon sermon 128.

³ Spurgeon sermon 145.

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personal and pertinent to his own case, I beseech him, as for life and death, to let it have its full weight with him, and not begin to think of his neighbour, to whom, perhaps, it may be even more pertinent, but whose business certainly does not concern him.⁴

PC preaching in the right sense!

J.A.James contrasted what he called ‘the blameless commonplace and accurate insipidity of many modern [that is, mid-19th century] discourses’ – that is, PC in the wrong sense – to the addresses of preachers in the past:

For pregnancy of thought, for knowledge of the word of God, for raciness of style, for evangelical warmth, for [knowledge of the] anatomy of the human heart, for closeness of application, and especially for intensity of feeling, where shall we find their equals? They preached *to* their congregations, and not merely *before* them;⁵ they felt that the objects of their addresses were immortal souls in danger of being lost, and [they] knew their business in the pulpit was to save these souls from perdition. They preached as if they expected there and then to achieve the great work of conversion;⁶ and felt as if the eternal destinies of their hearers were suspended on the name in which they discharged their duties, and as if they were to ascend the next moment after they had finished their sermons to give an

⁴ Spurgeon sermon 165, emphasis his. See also his ‘One More Cast of the Net’ (Spurgeon sermon 1931).

⁵ What an important point! *To* not *before*. I would broaden this to include *to not for*. How often a preacher is regarded as ‘one who will preach *for* us today’. That tells us a great deal. I have been prepared to reply to an invitation to preach *for* a people to say that while I do not preach *for* men, I am willing to preach *to* them. But, in my experience, too often men would prefer a preacher who preaches *before* or *for* them not *to* them. As for preaching *at* them, words fail!

⁶ A man complained that he saw no conversions. Spurgeon retorted: ‘You don’t expect conversions every time you preach, do you?’ ‘No! Of course not’, came the reply. ‘There’s your trouble’, said Spurgeon (or words to that effect). See Lewis A.Drummond: *Spurgeon: Prince of Preachers...*, Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids, 1992, pp411-412, for this, and for the occasion when Spurgeon had the point turned back upon himself.

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account of them at the bar of God... The power [their sermons] exhibit, their heart-searching appeals in which they abound, are the very things now wanting. There may be, and should be, more... logical arrangement... precision... vigorous clear argument, but still, combined with this, there should also be the pointed interrogation,⁷ the pungent appeal, the bold apostrophe [that is, direct address], the gush of feeling, the forcible expostulation [that is, earnest remonstrance, protest], and the tender invitation... Especially should there be the direct personal address... Our hearers must be made to feel that they are not merely listening to the discussion of a subject, but to an appeal to themselves. Their attention must be kept up, and a close connection between them and the preacher maintained by the frequent introduction of the pronoun 'you',⁸ so that each may realise the thought that the discourse is actually addressed to him. Many preachers do not come near enough to their congregation.⁹

And, of course, there is one topic which is the most PC, in the right sense, of the lot! rather, it is a person. It is not considered at all PC (politically correct) today to insist on the uniqueness of Christ, and to insist that it is essential to know him as Saviour and Lord if one is to be saved. Yet Scripture could not be more explicit. When Christ challenged his disciples as to whether or not they would leave him, Peter replied for them all:

Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God (John 6:68-69).

Christ later advanced on that confession, making his exclusive and essential role even more explicit:

I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me (John 14:6).

⁷ The use of questions is vital. See my *Preaching*.

⁸ Note the emphasis on 'you' – vital, PC in the right sense but certainly not politically correct. Note also James' 'pointed interrogation'.

⁹ John Angell James: *An Earnest Ministry the Want of the Times*, Hamilton, Adams & Co., London, 1848, pp126-128.

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The disciples did not fail to get the point. As Peter unequivocally declared to the Jewish bigwigs:

Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved (Acts 4:12).

To proclaim this today will become increasingly non-PC (non politically-correct), but it is definitely PC (in the right sense) to preach Christ in this way; that is, to preach him pointedly, probingly, personally and with conviction, confronting sinners with the gospel – confronting them with Christ the only Redeemer – that they might be convicted and converted.

More PC preaching? In the biblical sense, we can't get enough of it!

Turn or Turn Up?

I could have used other titles: ‘Trust or Attend?’, ‘Crisis or Process?’, ‘Convert or Conform?’, ‘Crunch or Course?’, ‘Believe or Mingle?’, and so on.

What am I talking about?

Have you not noticed the sea change which has taken place in recent years in the evangelical world? Have you not seen how evangelical terminology is being altered, even diluted? Instead of referring to ‘sinners’, ‘unbelievers’, ‘the ungodly’, ‘pagans’, ‘the lost’, and the like – all scriptural terms – a growing number of evangelicals now talk about ‘the-not-yet-Christians’, ‘the unchurched’, and the like. The key word – ‘conversion’ – is quietly being dropped in many quarters. Indeed, what ‘conversion’ stands for is suffering from neglect – if not meeting serious attack, both insidious and open. It is not just a question of words; a vital principle, a vital practice and experience is at stake. I am speaking of regeneration, a new heart – the work of the sovereign Spirit – leading to conviction of sin, heart-repentance and heart-trust in Christ, inevitably followed by obedience to Christ in his law (progressive sanctification). This, the great essential (see, for instance, Ezekiel 11:19-20; 18:31-32; 36:26-27; John 3:3-8; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Hebrews 12:14), is being seriously undermined, not least among – of all people – evangelicals!

Although I have written extensively on all this,¹ the issue is so big and so far-reaching, I really must try again.

Today, the advice (note the word; I use it deliberately) an increasing number of evangelicals proffer to ‘the unchurched’, ‘the not-yet-Christians’, is often along these lines (though the full details are never spelled out):

¹ See my *Relationship; Attracting; Confront; Gadfly; Infant; Conversion; Hinge; Deceit*; and so on.

Turn or Turn Up?

- Come to our church, join in the activities we have specially designed just for you, get to feel at home among us, and stick at it until something ‘clicks’.
- Attend one of our courses, and be ‘coached’ or ‘indoctrinated’ in the system.
- Having learned the system we will present to you, tick the boxes.

Of course, I am being deliberately provocative: I want to draw attention to what is going on just beneath the surface. No evangelical church uses such explicit language,² but this is what more and more evangelistic efforts boil down to.

There are four big errors here.

First, ‘the community’ – not God – is made the centre; the church focuses on ‘the community’ and not God – how to devise schemes to help ‘the community’, to fix ‘the community’s’ problems, ameliorate its hang-ups, rather than see sinners converted to the glory of God.

Secondly, in furtherance of the first end, the church no longer confronts sinners; rather it seeks to be ‘helpful’ to ‘the unchurched’. ‘Awkward’ words, off-putting words – above all, the scriptural content of such words – are dropped; in addition to ‘conversion’, in saying this I include words such as ‘sin’, ‘transgression’, ‘iniquity’, ‘guilt’, ‘condemnation’, ‘wrath’, ‘damnation’, and the like.

Thirdly, in furtherance of the first two aims, the two regimes which should be kept separate – the church and the world – are being deliberately mingled. I say ‘church’, but the error I am referring to is starkly brought to light if we give ‘the church’ its proper, scriptural, name – the *ekklēsia*, the called-out ones, those

² Having said that, I am working on a booklet in which I quote various sources which get close to it. Take this from the website of the Kempston Community Church: ‘Our meetings are designed for absolutely anyone’; that is, of course, designed for ‘you’ – the members of ‘the community’.

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who have been called out of the world and are separate from it. Today, however, increasingly the church and the world are being formed into one homogenous, happy body.³

Fourthly, conversion (as much as its biblical content is left) is turned into a managed process.

In short, today, instead of condemned and ruined sinners being called immediately to Christ for salvation, ‘the unchurched’ are being invited to come to ‘church’, to make themselves at home there, and thus ‘explore Christianity’.

I know of no scripture that gives the slightest warrant to any of this. In Scripture, no unbeliever is ever invited to attend church, join a course, learn the ropes, and so on. Rather, the call is always to repentance and saving trust in Christ – and trust in him at once, now.

Let me prove it. Listen to some biblical preachers going about their work.

Take Joshua:

Choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord (Josh. 24:15).

Isaiah:

Look to me [that is, the LORD] and be saved, all the ends of the earth! (Isa. 45:22).

This does not mean: ‘Attend church, go on a course’. It means what it says: ‘Look to me [that is the LORD], turn to me, do it now, and be saved’. This is God’s call to sinners. And the response required is immediate, without the slightest suggestion of a process:

³ I am not saying it is just a modern phenomenon. C.H.Spurgeon spoke about it often enough even in his day. In addition to the extracts in my *Attracting*, see the extract from Spurgeon at the end of this article.

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Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the LORD, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon (Isa. 55:6-7).

This does not mean attend church, keep seeking, keep hoping the penny might drop. It means what it says: ‘Call upon the Lord Jesus to save you, and do it NOW!’

As Christ demanded:

Repent and believe [put your trust] in the gospel (Mark 1:15).

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light (Matt. 11:28-30).

‘Come to me’, says Christ, not: ‘Come to church, join a course, participate in our activities...’.

And we know what Paul said to unbelievers:

Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved (Acts 16:31).

God... now... commands all people everywhere to repent (Acts 16:30).

Moreover, the gospel offers sinners the glorious assurance of what will always follow saving repentance and trust in the Lord Jesus Christ:

Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved (Rom. 10:13).

In short, believers should recognise their duty and privilege under God, and stick to it, not adjusting Christ’s manifesto to make it appeal to pagans – their likes, their culture. And that manifesto is what? This:

Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation. Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned (Mark 16:15-16).

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We are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God... Behold, now is the favourable time; behold, now is the day of salvation (2 Cor. 5:19 – 6:2).

God condemns sinners, not for neglecting to attend church, not for failing to go on a course and complete it, but for not obeying the gospel, for not trusting Christ:

As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life. For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil... Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him (John 3:14-19,36).

[The Spirit] will convict the world concerning sin... because they do not believe in me (John 16:8-9).

They have not all obeyed the gospel... All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people (Rom. 16:16,21).

I will not labour the point. Nevertheless, the issue is critical, the situation desperate. Eternal consequences hang upon getting it right. Reformation in this area is urgently needed – before it is too late! Let us hear no more of the bleating: ‘Will you come to church?’ Rather, let us make every effort to urge and persuade sinners to obey the clarion command, invitation and exhortation of the gospel: ‘Go to Christ!’ ‘Flee to Christ, now!’

Extract from C.H.Spurgeon on the need for the church to keep itself separate from the world

A garden is a plot of ground separated from the common waste for a special purpose: such is the church. The church is a separate and distinct thing from the world. I suppose there is such a thing as ‘the Christian world’; but I do not know what it is, or where it can be found. It must be an exceptional mixture. I know what is meant by a worldly Christian; and I suppose the Christian world must be an aggregate of worldly Christians. But the church of Christ is not of the world. ‘You are not of the world’, says Christ, ‘even as I am not of the world’. Great attempts have been made recently to make the church receive the world, and wherever it has succeeded it has come to this result, the world has swallowed up the church. It must be so. The greater is sure to swamp the less. They say: ‘Do not let us draw any hard-and-fast lines. A great many good people attend our services who may not be quite decided, but still their opinion should be consulted, and their vote should be taken upon the choice of a minister, and there should be entertainments and amusements, in which they can assist’. The theory seems to be, that it is good to have a broad gangway from the church to the world: if this is carried out, the result will be that the nominal church will use that gangway to go over to the world, but it will not be used in the other direction.⁴ It is thought by some that it would perhaps be better to have no distinct church at all. If the world will not come up to the church, let the church go down to the world; that seems to be the theory. Let the Israelites live with the Canaanites, and become one happy family. Such a blending does not appear to have been anticipated by our Lord in the chapter which was read just now [that is, John 15]: ‘If the world hates you, you know that it hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love his own: but because you are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hates you’ (John 15:18-19). Did he ever say: ‘Try to make an alliance with the world, and in all things be conformed to its ways?’ Nothing could have been further from our Lord’s mind. Oh, that we could see more of holy separation; more

⁴ Today, many believers are erecting a gangway from the world into the church – and a broad gangway, at that. This is what this article is about. See also my *Relationship; Attracting*.

Turn or Turn Up?

dissent from ungodliness, more nonconformity to the world! This is 'the dissidence of Dissent' that I care for...

I long to see Christian people become more distinct from the world than ever, because I am persuaded that, until they are so, the church will never become such a power for blessing men as her Lord intended her to be. It is for the world's good that there should be no alliance between the church and the world by way of compromise, even to a shade. See what came to pass when spiritual men⁵ and the world became one in Noah's day: when 'the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair', and were joined with them.⁶ Then came the deluge. Another deluge, more desolating even than the former, will come, if the church ever forgets her high calling, and enters into confederacy with the world.⁷

The conclusion? I can do no better than quote the word of God to Judah through Jeremiah. Please do not misread the word 'old' or 'ancient' in what follows; the need is not to return to the 'traditional', but to the 'scriptural':

This is what the LORD says: 'Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls' (Jer. 6:16).

Alas, the people's response was grievous:

But you said: 'We will not walk in it' (Jer. 1:16).

May we show a better spirit, a wiser spirit, than that.

⁵ Spurgeon had 'the church'. We should reserve the use of 'church' for the days of the new covenant. See my '*A Gospel Church*': *A Warning*, and the shorter article with the same title.

⁶ Hear my 'Sons Of God & Daughters Of Men'.

⁷ C.H.Spurgeon sermon 1957.

This Place Needs a Church Plant!

I happened to overhear a public conversation in which the point at issue was this: a certain housing development needed ‘a church plant’. All those taking part in the conversation were fully persuaded of it. One man said that, after all, this is what they did in the New Testament.

This set me thinking.

They were talking about ‘a church plant’. What did they mean by it? Were they talking about a building, a church building, in which to carry out church activities? If so, why does this housing development need such a building?

Or were they talking about setting up a church, a body of believers? If so, why does this housing development need a church?

And is it true that the New Testament shows us that the early believers did this sort of thing? Did the early believers decide to plant churches in unevangelised cities, on housing estates, and the like?

As far as I can see, the New Testament warrants none of this.¹ I know of no such ‘church plant’ in Scripture. And if the people in the conversation had a building in mind, if they were thinking that a church building of some sort was essential, how is it that the early church was not in the least bothered about erecting any building?²

¹ Of course, if the Spirit moves believers into a housing development, and if they are able to form themselves into an *ekklēsia*.... A couple of big ‘if’s there! I, for one, do not know of anything like it. In any case, in this article I am not concerned with that, but with outsiders setting up a church as part of an evangelistic scheme to reach the people living on that housing estate.

² Apart from the very first days in Jerusalem, the early believers met in a believer’s home (Acts 4:23-31; 12:5,12; Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15; Philem. 2). The earliest church building dates from about the

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Of course, it goes deeper than this; far deeper. The real issue is the reasoning behind it all. By talking of ‘a church plant’, what these people wanted was a group of believers to set up an organisation on the housing estate to set up programmes to attract unbelievers to attend that church in order to evangelise them.

Probing deeper still, the core issue is what this ‘evangelism’ is supposed to lead to. And what is that – precisely? Conversions? The fundamental question for those who want this ‘church plant’ with its ministry of attracting unbelievers to church attendance is this: What do they understand by ‘conversion’? Since I have written at large on this and associated issues,³ in this article I will concentrate on the talk of ‘a church plant’.

In saying what I have thus far, I readily admit that I have already put myself out of court with the vast majority of today’s believers, most of whom understand what a ‘church plant’ is, and, I suspect, strongly echo the call for it, taking it for granted, no less. I myself used to. But no longer. Saying this does not turn me into a hyper-Calvinist, however, nor indicate that I have no interest in the conversion of sinners.⁴

As I read the New Testament, believers took the gospel to unbelievers, preached the gospel to them – I use the word ‘preach’ in its widest new-covenant sense – saw sinners converted – that is, convicted of sin, brought to repentance and saving trust in Christ – whereupon they baptised them upon their profession of faith – that is, they dipped, immersed them in water – and then continued to teach them the law of Christ. This, after all, is precisely the mandate issued by Christ:

middle of the third century. This practice, once started, grew rapidly, and the buildings soon became more and more elaborate, especially under Constantine.

³ See my *Attracting; Gadfly; Confront; Infant; Conversion; Hinge; Secret; Seeking; Saving*. Above all, see my *Relationship*.

⁴ My works belie the accusation. See, for instance, my *Offer; Eternal; Septimus; No Safety*; ‘Gospel Snippets’.

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All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age (Matt. 28:18-20).

And how were churches formed? On the day of Pentecost, Peter preached, and sinners were convicted and converted. Then, we are expressly told:

So those who received [Peter's] word were baptised, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and... prayers... And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved (Acts 2:41-47).

In other words, gospel preaching led to conversion, including baptism, which led to the formation of a church – the exact opposite of what is being proposed by 'a church plant'. In the New Testament, there is not the slightest hint of forming a church to attract unbelievers into long-term attendance in order to evangelise them. Rather, churches were raised as a result of conversions. A church plant, however, is an activity designed to attract unbelievers to attend church that they might be evangelised.

I agree that the two passages I have quoted refer to what happened at the beginning of the gospel age, on the day of Pentecost and just after. But as far as I can tell, the basic pattern never varied. Take Acts 16, for instance. Think about Philippi. Nobody planted a church in Philippi. But an *ekklēsia* was formed there. How?

Under the sovereign direction of the Holy Spirit, Paul and Silas went to Philippi, a city made up of Greeks, Romans, Jews and pagans – but no believers. These two believers did not set up a church – they did not plant a church – to attract unbelievers so that they might evangelise them. Not at all! Rather, under the Spirit's impulse, using their commonsense, they sought and took every opportunity of meeting unbelievers in order to directly

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and pointedly preach the gospel to them. By God's grace, they saw sinners converted, whereupon they baptised them. These new converts, having come together through their conversion and baptism, were formed into a church – an *ekklēsia* – a church without any premises. The church was not planted from outside, but was raised up by the Spirit through conversions under the preaching of the gospel. This *ekklēsia* met in a home of one of the members in order to carry out their mutual responsibilities and enjoy the privileges granted them by Christ in the new covenant. All, from first to last, was by the Holy Spirit's sovereign power and direction. All church activities were entirely internal, consisting of the believers' mutual edification, and the glorification of God among themselves.

These are serious issues. In the New Testament, there is no thought of 'planting a church' with the design of attracting unbelievers so that they might be evangelised. At the very least, such an idea puts the cart before the horse. According to the New Testament pattern, a church can only be planted – actually, it would be better described as 'raised up' – through conversions by the Spirit. Not only does 'church planting' invert this order, it is based on an idea utterly at variance with the New Testament. The church has no business attracting unbelievers to itself – churchifying unbelievers – in order to evangelise them.

I say again, these are very serious issues. For when I speak of the New Testament, I am not talking merely in a historical sense. I really mean the new covenant. And what happened at Philippi (and elsewhere in Acts) is the pattern for the entire age in which we are living; as Christ said, it is 'to the end of the age' (Matt. 28:20). Talk of church planting maybe commonplace today, but it is unknown in the New Testament.

I know this sounds a jarring note. But before you dismiss my claims, I ask you to be a Berean (Acts 17:11), and search the Scriptures to see if what I have said is right.

The ‘O’ Word!

Have you noticed the frequency with which a certain ‘O’ word is being used by many believers? It is a word that has immense power in their eyes, a word that trumps almost everything else, a word that is used to justify the insertion of almost any non-scriptural practice into the life of the *ekklēsia*.

The ‘O’ word I have in mind is OPPORTUNITY. For many believers, OPPORTUNITY justifies almost anything and everything. If any activity they propose is questioned, the answer comes back: ‘But think of the OPPORTUNITY’!

Take the way the *ekklēsia* has become a forum where believers and unbelievers mix in one happy family, where unbelievers are absorbed into the activities and programmes of the church: believers and unbelievers are given the same welcome; they sing the same hymns in which they make the same professions, and avow the same convictions; they are all encompassed in the one public prayer; they are equally included in the reading of Scripture – passages which are nearly always addressed to believers; and both believers and unbelievers sit under the same lectures in which, for at least 95% of the time, all in the congregation are treated as believers.

And, in saying this, I am thinking of the best of such churches. I will not stop to deal with so-called churches which are little better than fast-food outlets, coffee shops and doughnut stalls – and worse!

When anybody challenges any of this, the answer comes back: ‘But think of the OPPORTUNITY’!

Christmas and funeral services for unbelievers (with full ‘Christian rites’ implied, if not stated, often tinged with a

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mumbled get-out clause, in the effort to salve any tender conscience) are typical of what I am talking about.¹

There is not an atom of scriptural warrant for this; often, little or no biblical justification is attempted. No! All must bow to the god of the hour: OPPORTUNITY. OPPORTUNITY trumps all!

Just as an aside – but a very weighty aside – do the advocates of OPPORTUNITY ever think of the other side of the coin? They talk of OPPORTUNITY. But what of the unbelievers who spend decades in such an atmosphere, their sense of well-being regularly confirmed by attendance at funeral services for unbelievers, from which they can gladly – but mistakenly – draw the conclusion that all be well in the end? What of the day of judgment, when the advocates of OPPORTUNITY have to meet the deluded unbelievers who will be at the receiving end of Christ's inevitable pronouncement of their everlasting doom?

I want to place on record my conviction that there is another 'O' word, a word which should replace OPPORTUNITY in this context. I am thinking of the word OBEDIENCE.

While we have no scriptural warrant for justifying almost any and every abuse of the *ekklesiā* in the name of OPPORTUNITY, there is overwhelming warrant for insisting on the believer's OBEDIENCE to the law of Christ. Christ himself could not have been more explicit:

You call me teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am... I... your Lord and teacher... have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you... If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them (John 13:13-17). A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another (John 13:34). Believe... in me... believe me (John 14:1,11). If you love me, keep my commandments (John 14:15). He who has my commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves me (John 14:21). He who does not love me does not keep my words; and the word which you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent

¹ For funeral services, see my *Deceit*. For the general point, see my *Relationship; Attracting*.

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me (John 14:24). Abide in me (John 15:4). This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you (John 15:12). You are my friends if you do whatever I command you (John 15:14). These things I command you, that you love one another (John 15:17).

The apostolic position is clarity itself:

It is required that those who have been given a trust [that is, stewards] must prove faithful (1 Cor. 4:2).

Faithful to Scripture, of course.

Not:

It is required in stewards that a man be found clever at justifying will-worship with the mantra of OPPORTUNITY.

Christ's accolade to the OBEDIENT in the final day will be:

Well done, good and faithful servant! (Matt. 25:21,23).

Faithful to Scripture, of course.

I know of no warrant for saying that it will be:

Well done clever servant who used invented systems of his own so that he might take every OPPORTUNITY.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with the word OPPORTUNITY itself. Nor is there anything wrong with addressing a mixed congregation with the gospel. Indeed, there is everything to be said in its favour. The error I am driving at is the mixing of believers and unbelievers in the spiritual activities of the *ekklēsia*, and treating both parties as one and the same, or virtually so.² And all in the name of OPPORTUNITY.

Two Objections

Objection 1: But, contrary to what you say, we do use Scripture to justify our practice.

² See my *Gadfly*.

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Answer: I agree. You do *use* Scripture to try to justify your practice. But this is precisely the point I am making. You start with your practice and *use* – note the word – you *use* Scripture to justify it. This is utterly wrong! Scripture must come first, and practice must follow. You have reversed the order. And this is fatal.³

What is more, as I have argued elsewhere, teachers who advocate your practice do not even use Scripture; they abuse or prostitute it.⁴

Objection 2: We are obeying Christ. He commanded us to go out into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature (Mark 16:15), and this is what we are doing.

Answer: No! In saying this, you could not have more clearly demonstrated the rightness of my response to the previous objection. By your practice, you are *not* going out into the world; rather, you are attracting the world into the *ekklēsia*. You are committing the same error as John Calvin in his attempted justification of mixed – regenerate and unregenerate – churches: he warped the parable of the wheat and tares (Matt. 13:24-30), saying that wheat and tares co-exist in the church throughout this age. Not at all. Christ taught that the field is the world, not the church!⁵ Similarly, Christ commands believers to go into the world to preach the gospel, not to attract unbelievers into the *ekklēsia* to try to evangelise them.

Three final thrusts

1. In all this, you are going directly against the plain command of Scripture that believers must keep themselves separate from the world (2 Cor. 6:14 – 7:1, for instance). It is one thing for believers to go out into the world on the gospel-rescue mission; it is quite another for them in that attempt to mix the church and the world, mix believers and unbelievers in the *ekklēsia*.

³ See my 'Hatpegs or Driving Seat?'

⁴ See my *Relationship*.

⁵ See my *Infant*.

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2. By your practice of encouraging unbelievers to mix freely with believers in the *ekklēsia* – often over extended periods, reinforced by the precious truth of the gospel being promiscuously applied to both believers and unbelievers – you are the very least in danger of falling foul of Christ's command: 'Do not give dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls to pigs' (Matt. 7:6).

3. In all this, and above everything else, remember that we are talking about Christ's *ekklēsia* (Matt. 16:18). What right have we – what right have you – to tinker with the format, the ambience and the manifesto for his *ekklēsia* which Christ set out in his word?

Trollope on Preaching: A Spectator Seeing More of the Game

Unlike those of us who try to write polemically or dialectically, the novelist can be blunt (though hiding behind fictional characters), and tell it as it is. And get away with it. And, perhaps, gain more ground.

In 1992, two UK politicians had a meal together. During their conversation, Jim Callaghan told Roy Hattersley that he ‘must write a big political novel’.¹ Hattersley was not impressed: ‘It’s just not what I want to do’, he replied. ‘I [it?] wouldn’t be any good’. Callaghan came back. As Hattersley noted: ‘Jim’s reply could not have been more frank’:

I never thought of it being any good. But it would be accurate. You know what goes on – times, places, that sort of thing. In a hundred years’ time people would say: ‘It’s not much of a novel, but you learn a lot about twentieth-century politics’. That’s what I meant.²

In 1857, Anthony Trollope (1815-1882) published his *Barchester Towers*. The following extract³ from that novel concerns preaching. Alas, but only as to be expected, it is full of Christendom-speak and religion.⁴ For my purposes, however, I hope we can see beyond that:

There is, perhaps, no greater hardship at present inflicted on mankind in civilised and free countries than the necessity of listening to sermons. No one but a preaching clergyman has, in

¹ Both men were Labour politicians, Callaghan having been Prime Minister, Hattersley later to become Deputy Leader of the Labour party.

² Roy Hattersley: *Who Goes Home? Scenes from a Political Life*, Little, Brown and Company, London, 1995, pp312-313.

³ Which I have slightly edited, but not always noting small changes.

⁴ Words, phrases or concepts such as ‘clergyman’, ‘public worship’, ‘church attendance’, ‘house of God’.

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these realms, the power of compelling audiences to sit silent, and be tormented. No one but a preaching clergyman can revel in platitudes, truisms and un-truisms, and yet receive, as his undisputed privilege, the same respectful demeanour as though words of impassioned eloquence, or persuasive logic, fell from his lips. Let a professor of law or medicine⁵ find his place in a lecture room, and there pour forth simplistic⁶ words and useless empty phrases, and he will pour them forth to empty benches. Let a barrister attempt to talk without talking well, and he will talk but seldom. A judge's charge has to be listened to by none but⁷ the jury, prisoner and gaoler. A member of parliament can be coughed down or counted out. Town councillors can be tabooed. But no one can rid himself of the preaching clergyman. He is the bore of the age, the old man whom we Sinbads cannot shake off,⁸ the nightmare that disturbs our Sunday's rest, which⁹ overloads our religion and makes God's service distasteful.

Trollope raised the obvious objection: 'We are not forced into church!'. He had his Christendom-answer ready:

No: but we desire more than that. We desire not to be forced to stay away. We desire, indeed, we are resolute, to enjoy the comfort of public worship; but we desire also that we may do so without an amount of tedium which ordinary human nature cannot endure with patience;¹⁰ that we may be able to leave the house of God without that anxious longing for escape, which is the common consequence of common sermons.¹¹

⁵ Trollope had 'physic'.

⁶ Trollope had 'jejune'.

⁷ Trollope had 'A judge's charge need be listened to *perforce* by none but...'.
⁸ The reference is to Sinbad the sailor, who never gave up. Trollope evidently wishes he could get free of the kind of preaching he is criticising, but he knows he never will.

⁹ Trollope had 'the incubus that'.
¹⁰ As Winston Churchill said: 'The head cannot take in more than the seat can endure'.

¹¹ Trollope allowed an exception to the charge of boredom – the notorious sermon of the odious Mr Slope who abused the pulpit to launch an attack upon his 'enemies': 'There was, at any rate, no tedium felt in listening to Mr Slope on the occasion in question. His subject came... home [too smartingly] to his audience to be dull, and, to tell the

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All good knockabout stuff, no doubt. Nothing to do with us, of course. It allows us a good laugh at the expense of nineteenth-century Anglicanism – if that is really what we want to do. But, as I say, it has nothing to do with us.

Oh? So I have been wasting my time – and yours – on such a trivial purpose? Far from it! I have a very serious matter in hand.

Is there a whiff of truth in what Trollope said – concerning us, I mean? Indeed, would a modern Trollope even think it worth his while to waste ink on preaching? Who, among his readers, today, would be interested?¹² I go further. Unless our preaching improves, why should people be interested? Pagans, in particular – does our preaching command their attention? Does it merit it? Indeed, most Christians – for all their elevated protestations of its worth – seem to get a pitiful amount from it.

Let me be specific. And blunt. Are our sermons – more often read (or virtually read) lectures, if that – are our sermons not infrequently boring? Are a growing number of preachers mastering the art of spicing them up (I could use stronger terms!) with PowerPoint and distributed-notes laid out with clever alliterations, but, in truth, the sermons accomplish little?

My answer must be obvious.

truth, Mr Slope had the gift of using words forcibly. He was heard through his thirty minutes of eloquence with mute attention and open ears, but with angry eyes, which glared round from one enraged parson [person?] to another, with wide-spread nostrils from which already burst forth fumes of indignation, and with many shufflings of the feet and uneasy motions of the body, which betokened minds disturbed, and hearts not at peace with all the world’.

¹² In the 1982 BBC production (but not, as far as I can see, in the book), the nearest I can find is the jokey way Dr Vesey Stanhope referred to the threat held over him if he did not quit Lake Como and come back to Barchester forthwith: he would be condemned to an eternity of listening to his own preaching!

Trollope on Preaching: A Spectator Seeing More of the Game

I am not alone in my low opinion of current preaching. Edward Donnelly, himself quoting Trollope, could not have been more explicit:

Such was Trollope's assessment of preachers in 1857, and if they [that is, preachers] are not resented as much today, it is only because they have been marginalised in society. Instead of being irritating, they are now pathetic.¹³

I go further than Donnelly. I think he was using 'pathetic' to describe the world's view of preachers and their preaching. I am sure he was right. But, I am afraid, the word really does apply to much of today's preaching, full stop! It is not just the world's assessment; it is mine. I know I live in this particular glasshouse, and I know I must take my own medicine. But if we wait for a perfect man to speak out, we shall have a long wait. Speak out, therefore, I must.

So strongly do I feel this, I say that we want a good dose of the spirit of Amos, Malachi or Ezekiel in our pulpit labours. Or John the Baptist. We, as preachers, need to be injected with what fired them. And what about Christ? 'Gentle Jesus, meek and mild'? Really? Take a look at Luke 10 and 11 and see! Ask the early first-century Pharisees, and inhabitants of Bethsaida and Korazin, what they thought of Christ and his preaching. What would Trollope have made of *that*? More important: What would Christ and his preaching have made of *Trollope*?

My point is that Trollope's sentiments cut close to the bone for us today.

I talked of 'want'. 'Need' is more like it! We *need* – we must have – a return to the type of preaching we find in the Bible: Spirit-filled preaching, prophetic preaching, confronting preaching, persuasive preaching, preaching with power. We need preachers of that stamp. Now! The words 'want' and 'need' may be short. How about a four-syllable adjective to

¹³ Edward Donnelly in Philip H.Eveson (ed.): *The Gospel Ministry Today...*, Evangelical Press, Darlington, 2005, p66.

Trollope on Preaching: A Spectator Seeing More of the Game

keep them company? *Desperately* need! We desperately need biblical preachers.

I have not published this because Anthony Trollope was an expert on preaching. Quite the opposite! As far as I can judge, he was not even converted. He certainly passed through, or, at least, brushed against, various phases of Churchmanship – High Church, Evangelicalism, the Oxford Movement – but *Essays & Reviews*¹⁴ and John William Colenso¹⁵ turned him into a liberal, moderate Anglican of the Broad Church school. I know of no evidence that he ever came to trust Christ for salvation. No, I don't publish this because Trollope was an expert on gospel preaching, well-fitted to give us positive advice. Not at all! Nevertheless, he was a perceptive observer, a candid observer, one who was prepared to commit his observations to print. He was, as my subtitle has it, a spectator who saw more of the game than many of the players,¹⁶ one who saw something which many believers of his day either failed to see, or did not want to see.

And that is my purpose in publishing this now. As I have made clear in other works,¹⁷ and as I am reiterating here, I am convinced that we have reached a low-point in preaching today, and I am determined to do anything I can to raise awareness of our sad condition, and thus encourage a change, even if it means quoting Trollope. I do so, working on the principle of using 'all means' (1 Cor. 9:22) in the spirit of the sacred preacher's injunction:

In the morning sow your seed, and at evening withhold not your hand, for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good (Eccles. 11:6).

¹⁴ Published in 1860, it advanced higher criticism.

¹⁵ The Bishop of Natal who wrote against biblical infallibility.

¹⁶ Charles Haddon Spurgeon was the most notable exception.

¹⁷ See in particular my *Preaching; Sowed*.

Christendom in the Ukraine, January 2019: A Wake-Up Call

As I write, January 2019, the BBC reports that the Orthodox Church of the Ukraine has separated from the Russian Orthodox Church. In its commentary – vividly illustrated with enlightening photographs and videos – the BBC raises the political and military consequences of the move, not only for the two nations involved – Russia and the Ukraine – but for the Balkans in general.

I want to comment very briefly.

In this article, I am not interested in the political or the military. I am concerned with the spiritual. But even here, I am not going to write about the plethora of priestly gold, gems, vestments and such like on display, nor the brazen idolatry evident in the garish, iconic apparatus of sacramental sacerdotalism. No! What strikes me – and what I want to draw attention to – is the way this event sheds light yet again on what happens when men follow the Fathers, Constantine and Theodosius, and not Scripture – even when they don't have a clue about the history!

Let me explain.

In the 4th century, these two Roman Emperors – Constantine and Theodosius – in league with the bishops of the Catholic Church, invented Christendom. The seeds of this cockatrice had been sown by the Fathers in the previous centuries with their many departures from the new covenant, and their increasing return to the old covenant.¹ These two Emperors simply nationalised – indeed, they ‘empire-ised’ – the monstrosity, and gave it legal and political status. Once established, however, Christendom proved to have a powerful life of its own, and it wasn't long before its tentacles were spreading far, wide and deep, grasping to itself more and more of Western culture.

¹ See my *Pastor*.

Contrary to what a great many people think, contrary to what a *growing* number of people think,² the time of the Fathers (men who lived, mainly, in the 2nd – 5th centuries, AD), by and large proved to be a time of disaster for the church³ of Jesus Christ. While not all that they did was bad, nevertheless the Fathers took a series of steps which inflicted massive and lasting damage on the church. But this innovation – Christendom – stands head and shoulders above all the rest in terms of the devastating effect it has had on the gospel and the church of Jesus Christ, to say nothing of the eternal consequences for the millions reared in it. Another way of looking at this is to think of Christendom as an envelope holding all the other innovations. So serious was this invention of Christendom, some discerning believers down the centuries have given it a name: ‘The Fall of the Church’.

I fix no precise date to the invention of Christendom. This is not possible. It didn’t happen overnight. It was a process. But in broad outline, within a few years of the so-called conversion of the Roman Emperor, Constantine, he and the Fathers had put in place (or did a great deal towards putting in place) the monstrosity.⁴

² Witness the number of publications, articles and glowing reviews promoting the Fathers which are issued by Reformed and evangelical (some, to my amazement, baptistic) publishing houses and magazines.

³ The word ‘church’ is fraught with difficulty. The New Testament word is *ekklesia*, assembly; literally, ‘called-out ones’. Christendom has ruined this concept. To cope with Christendom’s ruination of *ekklesia*, many talk of the ‘visible church’. This phrase is unbiblical and serves only to further confuse the issue. See my *Infant* pp118-119,237-263,297. Similarly, in my works I have had trouble with ‘church’ and ‘Church’. I admit a measure of inconsistency in all this.

⁴ Constantine’s Edict of Milan (AD313) officially ended the Roman Empire’s persecution of believers, and Christianity, receiving State recognition and acceptance, became its official religion in AD380 under Theodosius I. The union of Church and State, coupled with infant baptism, produced Christendom, which, in turn, produced – and continues to produce – hordes of nominal but unregenerate ‘Christians’; that is, to coin a phrase, ‘Christendom Christians’. This is ‘the Fall’ in question. See my *Battle*.

What is Christendom? It is that grotesque, Satanic system – that conglomeration of Church and State, in which citizenship and Church membership are one and the same – in which millions of unregenerate babies are ‘made’ ‘Christians’ by ‘priests’ or ‘ministers’ who exercise sacramental powers through baby-sprinkling, these babies then being called ‘Christians’ and Church members, and treated as such at birth, throughout life, and at death.⁵

Christendom has proved Satan’s master-stroke. By it, the arch-enemy of souls has deluded millions of men and women for 1800 years, even to their eternal ruin. He is making use of it to this very hour.

Contemporary evangelicals have (to a certain extent) dispensed with one of the curses of Christendom⁶ – national Church/State corruption, enforced by the magistrate (that is, government edict, the law, enforced by the police) – only to replace it with another. Many of them have devised or adopted a replacement; namely, a Church/Community system – Church/Social instead of Church/State. They have done this in order to attract pagans into church attendance in order to evangelise them. And so we now find ourselves being advised – urged – to adopt this latest development of Christendom thinking. Consequently, we find ourselves at the opening of a new chapter in the dismal history of Christendom, with men like Bill Hybels, Rick Warren, Timothy Keller⁷ and Ray Evans (*et al*) in the van of this latest extension of Constantinian practice.⁸

⁵ As for that last, see my *Deceit*.

⁶ Let me list some of the consequences of Christendom: veneration for buildings, priestcraft, pastorcraft, the clergy and laity split, sacerdotalism, sacramentalism, vestments, ordination, apostolic succession, the mixture of the regenerate and unregenerate in so-called visible churches, the idea of ‘attending church’, ‘public worship’; in short, Churchianity, institutionalised religion in the name of Christ. While none of it is far beneath the surface, it goes without saying that not all Christendom devotees adopt all its corruptions.

⁷ The first reference in Evans’ book is to one of Keller’s books: ‘A brilliant insight into the issues shaping church life and growth. It is a

But accommodation of the church to and with the world – and, at bottom, this is what it is – always leads to the world’s assimilation of the church. Let me repeat that by re-stating it. The church might like to think it can cherry-pick from the world, but the world is all the while swallowing the church.

Well, recent happenings in the Ukraine – the grotesque scenes of politicians and priests, particularly the Heads of State and the Orthodox Church, hand in hand – have exhibited, for all who have eyes to see, one of the appalling consequences of Christendom. It has put it on the giant screen in the public square, splashing it across the world’s media. And the sight of the Head of the Ukrainian State and the Head of the Orthodox Church living in each other’s pocket is sickening; sickening, that is, to anyone who longs for the scriptural simplicity of the *ekklēsia*.

Not that they will pay any attention to me, of course, but let me advise both men (and their successors): history shows us that there cannot be two top dogs. As I say, this monstrosity – Christendom – has been ruling the roost for millions for the best part of 1800 years, and history has a habit of repeating itself. These two ‘friends’ will soon fall out – if they haven’t begun to do so already, behind the scenes. They will struggle for dominance. Historically, the State has sometimes ruled the Church; at other times, the Church has ruled the State. It will happen again.

must-read’. That was not the last of it by a long chalk: see Ray Evans: *Ready, Steady, Grow: Equipping Today’s Gospel Churches*, InterVarsity Press, Nottingham, 2014, pp9,220-235.

⁸ The subtitle of Evans’ book is *Equipping Today’s Gospel Churches*. Allowing the use of the adjective ‘gospel’ in this connection – but I strongly object to it since it is a hangover of Reformed covenant-theology, and ‘gospel church’ should not figure in a believer’s phrase-book (see my *Infant* and my *Christ Is All; ‘A Gospel Church’; ‘A Gospel Church’: A Warning*) – Evans’ book would be more accurately described as *Equipping Today’s Christendom Churches*; that is, equipping them to adopt and exploit the culture of the age. For my response, see my *Relationship*.

So what has all this to do with us?

In my title, I spoke of ‘A Wake-Up Call’: a wake-up call for whom? For all evangelical believers! The fact is, all these Ukrainian shenanigans are much closer to home, and are far more serious and pertinent, than a mere historical quirk taking place in a faraway country of which (to accommodate Neville Chamberlain’s infamous words in the late 1930s) most of us (in the UK in his day, he meant) ‘know nothing’.⁹ State Churches, National Churches, denominations, associations, and all such federations, are inventions of men, and have been foisted upon Scripture. Every sight of the church turning to the world and fawning upon it is appalling. Christendom is Satan’s tool. Away with the abomination! Back to Scripture! Back to the new covenant! We shouldn’t touch the beast with a barge pole. This should be the response of evangelicals.

Alas, it is not! At least, not for a growing number.

In particular, I deplore the present fraternisation between many evangelical churches and the world. I deplore the way many believers look to the State to pass laws to bolster a decaying Christendom. I abominate the way evangelicals are seeking the world’s advice, and adopting the world’s methods, in order to try to reach sinners. All such goings-on are playing with fire, and he who plays with fire is liable to get his fingers – and more – burnt! And it won’t be the world that has to be taken to the casualty ward!

⁹ In 1938, Chamberlain spoke of Czechoslovakia (under threat from Hitler) as ‘a far away country of which we know nothing’. By this, he hoped to keep Britain out of the looming war – a typical head-in-the-sand approach. If not that, he was naïve in the extreme. This warning applies to the matter in hand.

The Marshmallow Gospel

I have just moved home, and last Lord's day I attended the morning service at the (fairly) local evangelical church. Alas, the service fully lived-down to my expectations. I say 'lived-down' and 'expectations', because I am convinced that the evangelical world is in a spiral (and spiritual) decline, and I have written and spoken about it.¹ Sad to record, I met it again last Lord's day!

So strongly do I feel about my (to put it mildly) disquieting experience, I want to set out – very briefly – my impression of what I heard. I do so in hope of raising some sort of protest against what is going on. I know my experience is not unique, but I cannot let it go unchallenged. Furthermore, when this article and its audio are live, I will forward the links to the man who conducted the service, and offer to meet him to discuss it. While it is grievous that I have to make this critical review, and contemplate this confrontation, nevertheless I have a responsibility to discharge; I cannot bury my head in the sand. I know we need to speak the truth in love (Eph. 4:15), and I know I need the weeping attitude of Jeremiah and Paul (Jer. 23:9; Acts 20:31; Phil. 3:18), and, above all, God in Christ (Matt. 23:37; Rom. 10:21), but the truth must be spoken.

While I do not want to fault a man for a word, and I acknowledge that not every discourse can contain the entire gospel, there must be an irreducible minimum. And it is not only the negative – the omissions – that I complain of; several of the man's positive assertions were seriously wrong.

For a start, he treated everyone of us – me, in particular, even though I was a perfect stranger to him – as a believer. He did not deem it necessary to offer even a hint of the unbeliever's need to

¹ See, for instance, my *Relationship; Attracting; Deceit*; 'Why Are You Following Christ?'; 'A Vital Lesson For Today'; 'Turn or Turn Up?'; 'The "O" Word'.

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be saved, he gave no warning to the ungodly, nor any indication of how a sinner can be saved. Indeed, I cannot recall that words such as ‘sinner’, ‘unconverted’ or ‘judgment’ were used.

I was told repeatedly that I was Jesus to this generation.

I was told that in the parable of the good Samaritan and ‘love your neighbour’ (Gal. 5:14) we have the gospel in a nutshell, the gospel’s essence; ‘loving my neighbour’ is the gospel.

I was given the decided impression that the provision of food for the hungry, accommodation for the homeless in the community, the running of coffee mornings – that this is the work of the gospel.

I was assured that there is no anger in God; I need have no fear of it.

‘Love... love... love...’ is the key, was the repeated theme.

The man constantly talked of ‘Jesus... Jesus... Jesus’. Never once, that I recall, did he speak of the Lord Jesus Christ.

He made no mention of the spiritual deadness of the sinner, the wrath of God upon the unbeliever, the necessity of regeneration, the conviction of sin, conversion, the redeeming work of Christ – his blood and righteousness – the need for repentance and saving faith, and such like. We were not given a hint of a whisper of a suggestion that the Bible speaks in the stark terms of, for instance, Romans 1:18 – 3:20, Ephesians 2:1-3 and Hebrews 9:27. Indeed, we were presented with a God more akin to Father Christmas.

The real Christ – the scriptural Christ – the Christ of Matthew 3:11-12; 11:20-24; 23:1-39 – as the merest selection from the Gospels – was not mentioned. Judging by this man’s discourse, such a Christ does not exist. Anyone reading the Gospels for the first time, after hearing the discourse in question, would surely find just as William Griffin said of C.S.Lewis’ experience on reading the Gospels:

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Lewis had been led to expect a lovable figure in the person of Jesus; instead, he met a stern and unbending one.²

I can hear the objection: ‘Isn’t God a God of love? What of John 3:16-17?’ Of course. As Christ told us:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him (John 3:16-17).

But look how Christ went on:

Whoever believes in [Christ] is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s only begotten Son... Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him (John 3:18,36).

Indeed, John 3:16-17 plainly teaches that unbelievers will perish. There was no mention of any suggestion of it, however, in the discourse last Lord’s day.

I was repeatedly told that God’s love is unconditional. Really? Has the man never read the verses just quoted? Don’t they contain a condition? And what about:

No one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again... No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying: ‘You must be born again’ (John 3:3,5-7).

Unless you are converted and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 18:3).

Unless you repent, you too will all perish... Unless you repent, you too will all perish (Luke 13:3,5).

Aren’t they conditions?

² William Griffin: *C.S.Lewis: The Authentic Voice*, Lion, Tring, 1988, p172.

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The man's text for his discourse was Psalm 145, which he read, giving running thoughts on the verses. However, he gave us no sense of the context; he made no attempt to argue the text; he simply delivered a series of sentimental thoughts on the psalm. And even then, he suddenly stopped at verse 18, left the passage, saying nothing at all about – not even reading – the closing verses, especially:

The LORD watches over all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy (Ps.145:20).

Why? Why did the man not deal with this solemn statement?

Such a cavalier attitude displays a gross abuse of Scripture, a prostitution of the text, and it carries a heavy price tag.³

Although I am not a prophet, my spirit is moved to repeat God's words to Judah through Jeremiah:

'I have heard what the prophets say who prophesy lies in my name. They say: "I had a dream! I had a dream!" How long will this continue in the hearts of these lying prophets, who prophesy the delusions of their own minds? They think the dreams they tell one another will make my people forget my name, just as their ancestors forgot my name through Baal worship. Let the prophet who has a dream recount the dream, but let the one who has my word speak it faithfully. For what has straw to do with grain?' declares the LORD. 'Is not my word like fire', declares the LORD, 'and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?' (Jer. 23:25-29).

Last Lord's day, I did not receive grain, I did not sit under a ministry of fire and hammer. Rather, I was served a sickly dish of froth, syrup and candy floss. It was social work smothered with the sauce 'Jesus... Jesus... Jesus'.

As I say, I am not a prophet; nor am I an apostle. I do not have an apostle's authority. But my spirit within me cries out, echoing Paul's words to the Galatians:

³ See my 'Hatpegs or Driving Seat?'

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I am astonished that you are so quickly [remember, Galatians is the first letter written – DG] deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be under God’s curse! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be under God’s curse! (Gal. 1:6-9).

Here in the UK, I am bound to add, I am astonished to see how widely evangelicals are deserting the scriptural gospel for that which is no gospel at all, and doing so despite our glorious spiritual heritage.

As the psalmist prayed:

May God arise, may his enemies be scattered; may his foes flee before him. May you blow them away like smoke – as wax melts before the fire, may the wicked perish before God. But may the righteous be glad and rejoice before God; may they be happy and joyful (Ps. 68:1-3).

Today, I am afraid, we need to pray that we might be delivered from our friends!

What would Paul have thought of such a performance? We know his settled determination:

I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2).

The so-called gospel with no sense of sin, no recognition of the wrath of God, no placarding (Gal. 3:1) of the finished work of Christ, no mention of – let alone emphasis on – the necessity of regeneration, conviction and conversion, no attempt to persuade sinners to repent and trust Christ at once, is, at best, a marshmallow gospel. It is, in fact, no gospel at all!

I cannot close without repeating God’s warning to us all:

It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment (Heb. 9:27).

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Then we have God's promise of salvation to all:

Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved (Rom. 10:13).

So, as Isaiah declares:

Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the unrighteous man his thoughts. Let him turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon (Isa. 55:6-7).

Finally, let me address the preacher I heard last Lord's day – and with him, all who stand to preach the gospel (not excluding myself):

You know that we who teach will be judged more strictly (Jas. 3:1).

We know that Israel and Judah were plagued with false prophets. But we also know that the churches will have to face false teachers (2 Pet. 3:1). Consequently, God's word to Ezekiel in this context is surely relevant to us, and we would do well to heed it. Listen to one of the marks of the false prophet or teacher:

They lead my people astray, saying: 'Peace', when there is no peace, and because, when a flimsy wall is built, they cover it with whitewash...

What did Ezekiel (and we, therefore), have to do about it:

Therefore tell those who cover it with whitewash that it is going to fall. Rain will come in torrents, and I will send hailstones hurtling down, and violent winds will burst forth. When the wall collapses, will people not ask you: 'Where is the whitewash you covered it with?'

Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: 'In my wrath I will unleash a violent wind, and in my anger hailstones and torrents of rain will fall with destructive fury. I will tear down the wall you have covered with whitewash and will level it to the ground so that its foundation will be laid bare. When it falls, you will be destroyed in it; and you will know that I am the LORD. So I will pour out my wrath against the wall and

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against those who covered it with whitewash. I will say to you: 'The wall is gone and so are those who whitewashed it, those prophets of Israel who prophesied to Jerusalem and saw visions of peace for her when there was no peace, declares the Sovereign LORD' (Ezek. 13:10-16; see the entire chapter).

To close, a word to all of us who speak for Christ: We need constantly to bear in mind the solemn warning God issued to Ezekiel:

Son of man, speak to your people and say to them: 'When I bring the sword against a land, and the people of the land choose one of their men and make him their watchman, and he sees the sword coming against the land and blows the trumpet to warn the people, then if anyone hears the trumpet but does not heed the warning and the sword comes and takes his life, his blood will be on his own head. Since he heard the sound of the trumpet but did not heed the warning, his blood will be on his own head. If he had heeded the warning, he would have saved himself. But if the watchman sees the sword coming and does not blow the trumpet to warn the people and the sword comes and takes someone's life, that person's life will be taken because of his sin, but I will hold the watchman accountable for his blood'.

Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the people of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. When I say to the wicked: 'You wicked person, you will surely die', and you do not speak out to dissuade him from his ways, that wicked person will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. But if you do warn the wicked person to turn from his way and he does not do so, he will die for his sin, though you yourself will be saved' (Ezek. 33:1-9; see Ezek. 33:1-20).

Yes, the sinner is accountable for his sin. But my point in this article is to underline yet again the heavy responsibility borne by every believer who speaks for Christ. I leave the man I heard last Lord's day to face this. I have to. We all do. There is no escaping it.

Cleansing the Temple Today

I refer, of course, to the two occasions – the first at the start of his ministry, the second as it drew to its close – upon which Christ, stirred – righteously angered, incensed – by what he saw, entered the temple and cleansed it. Christ’s cleansing of the temple is recorded in all four Gospels: John 2:13-16 (at the start of Christ’s ministry) and Matthew 21:12-13, Mark 11:15-16 and Luke 19: 45-46 (at the end of his ministry). Alas, ‘cleansed’ is too bland, too sanitised (no pun intended). Let me quote the relevant passages. They speak for themselves:

When it was almost time for the Jewish Passover, Jesus went up to Jerusalem. In the temple courts he found people selling cattle, sheep and doves, and others sitting at tables exchanging money. So he made a whip out of cords, and drove all from the temple courts, both sheep and cattle; he scattered the coins of the money changers and overturned their tables. To those who sold doves he said: ‘Get these out of here! Stop turning my Father’s house into a market!’ His disciples remembered that it is written [in Ps. 69:9]: ‘Zeal for your house will consume me’ (John 2:13-17).

Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. ‘It is written’, he said to them, ‘My house will be called a house of prayer’, but you are making it “a den of robbers” (Matt. 21:12-13, quoting Isa. 56:7; Jer. 7:11).

Historically, various kings of Judah – Asa, Joash, Hezekiah and Josiah – had attempted a necessary cleansing of the temple in their day, some to a lesser extent, some to a greater.¹

My question is this: Do we need a cleansing of the temple today?

Well, of course not! The temple has long since ceased to exist, its role having been fulfilled in and by Christ.²

¹ See my series ‘Thoughts on the Kings of Judah’.

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But... in a spiritual sense, do the churches need cleansing today?

I say they do. In many cases, in a growing number of cases, I say they do.

Let me give an example of what I am talking about, another example, I mean. I say ‘another’ because I have written and spoken about this matter on several occasions.³

All I quote here is in the public domain.⁴ The church in question is not ashamed to publish the material which now follows. Quite the opposite; it glories in it.

On its website, under the heading ‘About’, the church in question declares:

Church Planting had been on the heart of Bromham Baptist Church (BBC) for a number of years and in early 2005 it came to the forefront as part of the then-minister’s vision. From that time on, we sought God for the way forward, both in terms of location and leadership. After much prayer, and many pictures and words [*sic*], we felt led to Marston Moretaine, a village with a population of approx[imately] 4000, 8 miles south of Bromham and four miles east of Junction 13 of the M1.

Our vision was to establish an emerging expression of church, aimed at unbelievers and the ‘de-churched’, which would develop into a full expression of Christian community for those who don’t connect with ‘traditional’ styles of church. We also felt that as well as focusing on mission locally, we should have an international focus, which led us early on to be an official link with the Williamson family in Cusco, Peru who have been on a similar journey to ourselves. A Special Church-Member’s Meeting in January 2008 confirmed the call to plant a church in Marston Moretaine, to be led by BBC’s Staff Elder, Steve Gaunt, and his wife Jo-Ann. Although two couples lived in the village, nobody else had heard of us, and so we spent 12 months building relationships, and becoming known in the

² See my ‘The Place of “Place” in the New Covenant’.

³ See my *Relationship; Attracting*; ‘Why Are You Following Christ?’; ‘A Vital Lesson For Today’; ‘Turn or Turn Up?’; ‘The “O” Word’; ‘The Marshmallow Gospel’.

⁴ I have very lightly edited the grammar *etc.*

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community. We helped out at the village Youth Club; took over the running of two Mum & Baby groups; helped restart a Mum's & Toddler's group; started hearing children read at the local lower school; started two 'Chatterbox' cafés in local lower schools for mums, dads and carers to have refreshments and chat after dropping their children off in the morning; and ran a 'Holiday Club' during the first week of August.

The relationships and trust we built up led us to establish 'Sunday Brunch' in October 2008 in the local school hall. 'Sunday Brunch' is a café open from 10.30am to 12 noon on the 1st and 3rd Sundays of the month. Its aim is to provide opportunities for people to make new friends and explore the Christian faith in a relaxed and friendly setting. It's about food – fun – friends – family – faith. We serve a brunch, have a theme for the day which includes a quiz and a ten minute 'food4thought'. Newspapers are available, and there is a crèche area and children's work.

'Sunday Supplement' was launched in September 2009 following a positive response to a feedback survey of those attending 'Sunday Brunch' – part of which asked if people would be interested in coming along on a Sunday morning once a month to a time of modern worship, prayer, a short talk, and the sharing of people's stories with tea, coffee, doughnuts and children's work. 'Sunday Supplement' met on the 4th Sunday of each month from 10.30am to 12 noon.

'**Sunday Extra**' was introduced at the beginning of 2011 at [the] request of those attending our 'Sunday Supplement' who wanted to meet on the second Sunday of each month as well. However, there was a desire for a slightly different format from that of our 'Sunday Supplement'. People wanted to share communion together, have time for reflection, and receive longer teaching on topics relevant to their daily lives.

We have continued to see growth with anywhere between 50-70 people coming along to our 'Sunday Brunch' and 60-80 at our 'Sunday Extra' services. We have also seen, through the five Alpha courses we have run, 17 people coming to faith, 15 of whom we have had the privilege of baptising.

In July of 2012, we became a fully constituted church with 40 members, and called Steve Gaunt as our Minister and his wife Jo-Ann as our Associate Minister. In 2013 we became members of the Central Baptist Association and the Baptist Union of Great Britain.

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We have taken the name ‘Vale Community Church’ to reflect our desire to see God’s Spirit flow through the whole of the Vale of Marston, and to be at the centre of the community where people can come together to discover God’s love for them.

We challenge ourselves not to settle, and believe God has called us to keep pioneering. It has been exciting to see how God has gone ahead of us and opened door after door! And as they say: ‘The rest is history!’

On the page: ‘I’m New’:

For some people going anywhere for the first time can be a bit of a nerve-racking experience. To help avoid any worries, here’s a quick summary of what you can expect on a Sunday morning at Vale Community Church.

Sunday Brunch (1st Sunday)

First of all how many churches do you know that serve breakfast and where the children can play table tennis and table football, and parents can relax and chat to each other, or just read the Sunday newspapers[?]

We meet in the hall at Church End [*sic*] Lower School (Forest End site), and start at 10.30am when bacon baps, sausage sandwiches, croissant, pastries, toast, fruit, fruit juices and tea or coffee [are] available. On the tables you will find a quiz based on our theme for the day. There are various activities to try out each time, rounded off by a short thought for the day. Sunday papers are also available, which people are free to take home with them at the end of the morning. ‘KidsZone’, our children’s activities, runs for part of the morning, and there is also an area set aside for pre-school children with all sorts of toys. We finish at 12.00 noon.

Sunday Gathering (2nd, 3rd & 4th Sundays)

We start at 10.30am with light refreshments usually consisting of cakes, fruit juice, tea or coffee, all shared around small tables. At 10.45am we sing some worship songs – both well-known hymns and more-modern songs, to which you can sit or stand; it doesn’t matter. We then have a mixture of prayers, drama, sharing our stories, a short talk on subjects relevant to our daily lives and communion (2nd & 4th Sundays). ‘KidsZone’ our children’s activities run from 11.10am, and the children come back and join us at 11.50am to share what they have been doing, until we close at 12.00 noon.

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Family Service (5th Sundays and all throughout August)

10:30 – 12:00, starting with tea, coffee and cakes. [This is] a time when everyone in the church family comes together, from the youngest to the oldest to celebrate a part of the church's life in all sorts of different ways.

We aren't super-spiritual beings, we are just normal people and you will find we are a friendly bunch, and if you don't understand something please simply ask! Our aim is to provide opportunities for you to make new friends and explore the Christian faith in a relaxed and friendly setting. It's about: 'Food – Fun – Friends – Family – Faith'.

When to arrive and what to wear

If it's your first visit then it's probably best to turn up around 10.30am. You'll be greeted on the door by our welcoming team who will show you to a table and explain about breakfast. A little later in the morning our host for the day will explain what is going to happen for the rest of the morning...

What to wear? This is easy. Wear whatever you feel comfortable in. We are an informal gathering and accept people as they are. Whether you come as a suited businessman or a freaked-out punk – that is fine with us.

Is it just Sundays?

Absolutely not! God is with us all week long, and we aim to lead lives pleasing to him. We're not perfect, and we do make mistakes, but we desire to make a positive difference in everything we do.

To further encourage us we have midweek groups ('Life Groups') which help us to be a strong, vibrant and growing community of God's people, and to fulfil His⁵ purposes in our generation. If you are just looking into Christianity, you are welcome to come along to a small group to ask all those questions about God and Christianity that you've always wanted to ask, but never had the opportunity.

We are involved in serving the community in various ways and we run various children's events throughout the year. For more details see our 'What We Do Locally' page.

⁵ Upper case original.

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Facilities

We aim to be an all-inclusive church. The school premises in which we meet are easily accessible for those with physical disabilities, with a ramp to the entrance, and a wheelchair-accessible toilet.

Please contact us or speak to a member of the welcome team if you have any specific needs, or any suggestions for further improvement.

The website's 'Sundays' page has further explanation of the terms:

'Sunday Brunch' is a café that provides opportunities to make new friends and explore the Christian faith in a relaxed and friendly setting. We have bacon baps, sausage sandwiches, croissant, pastries, toast, fruit, fruit juices and tea or coffee available. On your table you will find a quiz based on our theme for the day. There are various activities to try out each time, rounded off by a short thought for the day. Sunday papers are also available.

'Sunday Gathering' provides an opportunity for those wanting to gather together as family to: worship; pray; receive teaching relevant to their daily lives; and share people's stories. This all takes place around tables and simple refreshments in a friendly and relaxed atmosphere. We share bread and wine (communion) on the second and fourth Sundays of the month.

'Family Service' is a time when everyone in the church family comes together, from the youngest to the oldest to celebrate a part of the church's life in all sorts of different ways.

My Comments

Mere words fail to do justice to the website in question. The graphics and the photographs make things very clear indeed.

The material point is that we are supposed to be talking about a church – to give it its proper, scriptural name, an *ekklēsia*; this is what we are supposed to be talking about. All the above, however, is more akin to an advert for Starbucks or McDonalds, and has only the remotest connection with what Scripture teaches about the *ekklēsia*. That being so, we are faced with

something exceedingly serious. To depart from the scriptural pattern, to impose worldly ideas and practices upon anything belonging to the new covenant, must carry a heavy penalty from the hand of Christ. As for the church, Christ loved and died for the elect, and he set up the *ekklēsia*. It is his church (Matt. 16:18); he is the king of the church; he is the only king of his church; only Christ – through his Spirit in his word – has the right to stipulate its terms. Christ purchased the church of God by his blood (Acts 20:28). The church must, therefore, be exceedingly precious to the Lord Christ. Men tamper with the church at their peril!

Yet, in the shenanigans taking place at the Vale Community Church, this is precisely what is going on!

How?

The idea that the church exists to attract unbelievers, the ‘de-churched’, or the ‘unchurched’, to its assemblies in order to evangelise them is utterly foreign to Scripture. It is pure Christendom-speak. The very word chosen by God to describe the saints and their gatherings – the *ekklēsia*, ‘the called-out ones’ – precludes any such thought. The first saints no more thought of attracting unbelievers – the ‘de-churched’ or ‘unchurched’ – to their assemblies than flying to the moon! ‘Who or What are these “de-churched” or “unchurched”?’ they would have asked, scratching their heads, looking at each other lost in bewilderment. ‘Attract unbelievers to our assemblies?’, they would have gasped: ‘Impossible!’ ‘Make *ekklēsia* life and the gospel attractive to the unregenerate?’ ‘Unthinkable!’ ‘Form lasting relationships with unbelievers through the provision of bacon baps and coffee in the *ekklēsia*, with a free Sunday newspaper thrown in, so as to prepare the way for those unbelievers to come to church to listen to our message?’ ‘Perish the thought!’ ‘Make the *ekklēsia* appealing to the children of darkness?’ ‘Has not Christ told us in the bluntest of terms that just as the world hated him and his words, they will hate us and

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our words (John 15:18-27; 16:2-4,33; 17:14-18)?⁶ How can we even think of attracting them? What would be the point? If we are acting scripturally, in the ways appointed by the apostles, unbelievers wouldn't want to come, in any case. The atmosphere would be utterly alien to them. They would be like fish out of water'.

It comes as no surprise, therefore, to discover that there is no evidence in Scripture of any protracted 'church attendance' by unbelievers. Moreover, it is clear that believers would never have encouraged such a practice. There is not the slightest suggestion that the early churches actively sought or encouraged it. The notion that the early believers set up fast-food outlets to attract unbelievers to 'attend church' is ludicrous. The truth is, 'church attendance' is a Christendom concept from start to finish. It was unknown in the first days of the gospel. These are simple but stubborn and unmistakable facts. The church was for believers. The church and the world were separated communities (2 Cor. 6:14 – 7:2). The church was what its name implies: the *ekklēsia*, the called-out ones.

As I say, those early believers knew that the world had hated the prophets for centuries past, and killed them (Matt. 23:31,34,37; Luke 11:47; 13:54; Rom. 11:3; 1 Thess. 2:15). They did not forget that the world (to put it mildly) had not welcomed Christ (John 1:11), but had hated him and wanted to kill him, even from birth (Matt. 2:1-20; Rev. 12:1-6), let alone when he began his ministry (Luke 4:28-29; John 5:18; 7:1,19; 8:37,40; 11:47-53,57); eventually they got their way. And now it would hate them. They expected it. Christ could not have made the position clearer:

Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and

⁶ I do not see why the world would hate and want to persecute believers who, while avoiding the confrontational aspect of the gospel, are offering them so many carnal goodies free of charge.

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kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles... Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, and you will be hated by all for my name's sake (Matt. 10:16-22).

They will deliver you up to tribulation and put you to death, and you will be hated by all nations for my name's sake (Matt. 24:9).

If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master'. If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours (John 15:18-20).

As Christ prayed:

I have given them your word and the world has hated them, for they are not of the world any more than I am of the world. My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but that you protect them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it. Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world (John 17:14-18).

Oh yes, the early believers knew that what they were as believers, what they did as believers, what they stood for as believers, what they wanted by their preaching, and how they preached, was going to be anathema to the world. And they knew it was inevitable. They had no illusions about it. They knew that the world's hatred was an integral part of their stance for Christ; it 'went with the territory'. This hatred was not 'a difficulty' which took them by surprise; they had been forewarned and, as expected, they experienced it. They did not go out of the way to court or provoke it, but they knew it was the way God was going to advance the cause of Christ as they took the gospel to sinners. 'All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted' (2 Tim. 3:12). The suggestion that they would establish schemes to get round this is a

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downright insult to the memory of the early believers, and what they had learned from Christ through his apostles.

It is only as sinners are regenerated, converted, given a new heart by the Spirit in the new covenant, and so given a spiritual appetite and love for Christ and his truth, that they will become interested in, let alone want, 'church'. The early believers took this as self-evident, a given.

Consequently, as the apostle asked – rhetorically :

What partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said: 'I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty' (2 Cor. 6:14-18).

Is the Vale Community Church in any danger of falling foul of encouraging the practice so roundly condemned by Christ when he confronted the crowds who were flocking to him? What am I talking about? Listen to his words:

Very truly I tell you, you are looking for me, not because you saw the signs I performed but because you ate the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. For on him God the Father has placed his seal of approval (John 6:26-27).

I repeat my question: Is the Vale Community Church in any danger of falling foul of this? I say it is! I go further. It is not merely in danger of falling foul of Christ's accusation. It is actually doing so! Blatantly so!

After his condemning accusation in John 6:26-27, Christ immediately preached his most divisive and confrontational sermon – and did so deliberately – with the designed effect of

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causing the overwhelming majority to melt away like snow in summer. The approach of the Vale Community Church runs directly contrary to Christ's stated principles! And it is not alone!

Let us never forget the clear statements of Christ:

My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me... Whoever serves me must follow me... You must follow me (John 10:27; 12:26; 21:22).

Paul was adamant that believers should follow him as he followed Christ (1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1; Phil. 3:17; 1 Thess. 1:6; 2 Thess. 3:7,9, for instance), that we should be followers of God (Eph. 5:1).

In light of John 6, how can the goings-on at Vale Community Church, and similar places, be said to fit comfortably with following Christ? They can't!

Consequently, we today need such a prophetic and confrontational ministry as Christ's in John 6. The present declension – the rapid and widespread declension – among evangelicals makes the need for such a ministry imperative.

Where is the wrath of God, the condemned status and standing of the unconverted (Rom. 1:18 – 3:20; Eph. 2:1-3) in all this fast-food carnality? When will it be raised? Where will it be raised? How will it be raised? With a doughnut in one hand, and a Sunday newspaper in the other?

How will the offence of Christ, his gospel, and especially the cross (Rom. 9:33; 1 Cor. 1:23; Gal. 5:11; 1 Pet. 2:8), be brought into this 'fun and food' palaver?

Will it be: 'When you have finished your sausage roll, replenished your mug of coffee, and had a good laugh at the cartoons in the free Sunday newspaper, I want to preach to you about your sin and your consequent state of condemnation under the wrath of God. I want, by the Holy Spirit's power, to probe you, to convict you of your sin, to urge you to repent and savingly trust Christ, and to persuade you to rely entirely and

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only upon the Redeemer's blood and righteousness for your everlasting salvation, and do so now'? Can you imagine it? After all that food and fun, with all that razzmatazz going on, how is it possible to preach in order to arouse the sinner's sense of sin, to let him know and feel that he is under the wrath of God, to preach the blood of Christ, the need to repent and trust Christ, and all the rest?

What of Paul's determination:

I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2)?

Can you picture him saying this – and carrying it out – while making sure everybody had a bacon bap, and encouraging all and sundry 'to have fun'?

Is it just me, or does anybody else see a parallel between this 21st-century evangelical religion and 1st-century Jewish temple-abuse? If so, you must see the tie up between the spiritual today and the physical then. In the days of the old covenant, the temple played a vital – though symbolic – part; in the days of the new covenant, Christ, having fulfilled the shadow, has brought in the spiritual equivalent. Christ is the temple. His saints are the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 3:16-17; 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16; Eph. 2:21, for instance). The *ekklēsia* is the local expression of Christ meeting with his saints. Accordingly, I see a direct parallel between 1st-century Jewish temple-abuse (speaking physically) and 21st-century evangelical religion (speaking both spiritually and physically). The *ekklēsia* has been turned into a Starbucks or McDonald's fast-food outlet, varnished with a layer of sentimental 'Christianity'.

Of course, in today's cleansing, our weapons are not material – whips and so on. We do not literally throw out the fast-food ovens, and burn the newspapers. No! But we must confront those who dream of turning the *ekklēsia* into a kitchen *cum* funfair, confront those who organise the kitchens, plan the menus, man the serving hatches, deliver the goodies to the customers (non-paying, I know, but they are customers all the same). Indeed, the entire paraphernalia and the principles behind

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it must be abolished in a spiritual way. And that is my purpose in publishing this article. We have the mandate:

The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ (2 Cor. 10:4-5).

Yes, our weapons are spiritual, but Christ has given us those weapons, and he did not give them to us for ornamental purposes! Our mandate is clear: we must do all we can in a spiritual way to bring everything and everyone to submit to Christ. We must not forget our mandate; we must not change our mandate; we must carry out our mandate; and we must use our weapons to keep purifying the *ekklēsia*. The temple must be cleansed. And without delay!

A Glance into the Abyss: Modern Evangelicals Warned

For some time, in various works,¹ I have been grappling with the way in which evangelical church life is changing; rather, the way evangelicalism is being radically altered as an increasing number of churches adopt the principles and practices set out by teachers who are re-engineering *ekklēsia* life.²

Let me say a word or two on what I mean by this ‘re-engineering’ of the ‘church’. I start by giving the church its proper, scriptural name, an *ekklēsia*; this is what we are supposed to be talking about. Modern evangelicals are radically – root and branch – altering the church, turning it into the forum *par excellence* to attract unbelievers – the ‘de-churched’, or the ‘unchurched’, as they like to call them, seemingly reluctant to describe them as they should as ‘unbelievers’ or ‘unconverted’ or ‘pagans’ – to attract unbelievers into long-term attendance at, and participation in, its assemblies, and all in order to evangelise them.

This is utterly foreign to Scripture. It is pure Christendom-speak. The very word chosen by God to describe the saints and their gatherings – the *ekklēsia*, ‘the called-out ones’ – precludes any such thought. There is no evidence in Scripture of any protracted ‘church attendance’ by unbelievers. Moreover, it is clear that the first believers would never have encouraged such a practice. There is not the slightest suggestion that the early churches actively sought or encouraged it.

¹ See my *Relationship; Attracting*; ‘Why Are You Following Christ?’, ‘A Vital Lesson For Today’, ‘Turn or Turn Up?’, ‘The “O” Word’, ‘The Marshmallow Gospel’, ‘Cleansing the Temple Today’. These works should be consulted for the justification of what I say in this article.

² Incidentally, as I pointed out in *Relationship* – in which I engage with Ray Evans, a leading exponent (in the UK) of this trend – ‘re-engineering’ is one of his favourite words.

A Glance into the Abyss: Modern Evangelicals Warned

Moreover, since Scripture knows nothing whatsoever of this modern process, in order to attract pagans, the ‘re-engineers’ have to go to the world – to pagans – to learn from them, to ape them, devising extensive programmes to attract and hold pagans while they are being evangelised. Hence their emphasis on the carnal – food, entertainment, accountancy techniques, business methods, dumbing down the gospel, and all the rest. Naturally – I use the word advisedly – all this pagan razzmatazz is necessary if the church is to appeal to pagans.

There is much more that needs to be said about this – and in my aforesaid works I have to try to say some of it. As I have already noted, if you are not up to speed with what I am talking about, before you go on with this article, please consult those works.

In one of those aforesaid works – ‘The Marshmallow Gospel’ – I quoted Jeremiah 23:25-29, the LORD speaking to Jeremiah:

‘I have heard what the prophets say who prophesy lies in my name. They say: “I had a dream! I had a dream!” How long will this continue in the hearts of these lying prophets, who prophesy the delusions of their own minds? They think the dreams they tell one another will make my people forget my name, just as their ancestors forgot my name through Baal worship. Let the prophet who has a dream recount the dream, but let the one who has my word speak it faithfully. For what has straw to do with grain?’ declares the LORD. ‘Is not my word like fire’, declares the LORD, ‘and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?’ (Jer. 23:25-29).

As I was writing that piece and doing the audio, one clause stood out. Indeed, I wondered if I was going too far by quoting it in reference to contemporary evangelicalism. So much so, it crossed my mind that perhaps I should skip the words with an ellipsis. But I did not. And I am glad I did not. Because I have now come to see the thrust of God’s words to the prophet, and through him to Judah. And that thrust is devastating.

Before I go on to explain, let me digress for a moment.

When talking with believers about this re-engineering of *ekklēsia* life, in trying to stress its seriousness, I have found

myself saying: ‘Where will it end up? If this goes on, think! What it will be like 50 years from now?’³ But I have been reminded in reply that it won’t take that long – that the consequences are evident already. And, of course, I know this to be true.

Moreover, as I say, I have come to see that God through Jeremiah had already – 2700 years ago! – put his finger on the ultimate consequence of every move away from the scriptural position; specifically, the long-term consequences of the novelties now being introduced and becoming increasingly common in the evangelical scene. Here is the passage I have in mind:

They [that is, the false prophets] think the dreams they tell one another will make my people forget my name (Jer. 23:26-27).

By ‘the name of God’, we are to understand the character of God, his person. False teaching always leads God’s people away from the true God. This is what God told Jeremiah and Judah. The false prophets were doing this deliberately, intending to draw Judah away from God, make them forget him, replacing him with a god of their own.

While I do not say that the modern evangelicals I have in my sights are deliberately doing this – I think they are mistaken teachers rather than false teachers – the end result of their teaching will be the same; in time, God’s people will forget the true God, and they will therefore inevitably end up with a different god and a different gospel. It is not that they will end up merely (I say ‘merely’, but there is nothing ‘merely’ in the new covenant) with a different kind of church – this is happening as I write; in time, they will have a different god and a different gospel. Hence my use of the word ‘Abyss’ in the title.

This, I acknowledge, is a very serious assertion. But if I am right, it is very serious state of affairs.

³ Indeed, that was one of the points I made when tackling infant baptism (see my *Infant* pp284-285).

A Glance into the Abyss: Modern Evangelicals Warned

Forgetfulness is endemic in us all. Believers are no exception; we are all prone to forget, all of us. Put ‘remember’ or similar in a Bible-concordance search-engine, and see how many references there are. No wonder Robert Robinson included the self-condemning thought in one of his hymns – a hymn which is sung so very often:

*Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it;
Prone to leave the God I love.*

In light of this, you can see the reasoning behind Christ’s gift of the Spirit to his first disciples. As he himself explained:

The Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you (John 14:26).

Christ did not give his Spirit aimlessly. Evidently, the apostles needed reminders. So do we.

And Peter certainly did his bit in this regard:

I will always remind you of these things, even though you know them and are firmly established in the truth you now have. I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in the tent of this body (2 Pet. 1:1-13).

Forgetfulness is nothing new. Israel was always prone to forget God (Judg. 3:7; 8:33-34), and that as a result of listening to false teaching (Jer. 9:14) – even though God had warned them against it (Deut. 4:9). And that takes us back to Jeremiah 23:26-27: ‘They [that is, the false prophets] think the dreams they tell one another will make my people forget my name’. Whatever the motive, bad teaching always leads to bad practice; specifically, it leaves men with a wrong view of God.

Charles Ellicott on 1 Corinthians 15:33:

Words that seem harmless, because they float lightly like thistledown, may bear in them a seed of evil which may take root and bring forth evil fruit.

Yes, and one of those ‘evil fruits’ is the forgetting of God, replacing him with a god of our own. Likewise with the gospel.

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Albert Barnes on the same verse:

The sentiment of the passage is that the contact of evil-minded men, or that the close friendship and conversation of those who hold erroneous opinions... tends to corrupt the morals, the heart, the sentiments of others. The particular thing to which Paul here applies it is the subject of the resurrection. Such contact would tend to corrupt the simplicity of their faith, and pervert their views of the truth of the gospel, and thus corrupt their lives. It is always true that such contact has a pernicious effect on the mind and the heart.

Yes, and one of those ‘pernicious effects’ is the setting up of a god and a gospel of our own.

‘Scaremongering!’ I hear the retort of the modern evangelical. ‘We will never forsake God, never invent our own gospel!’ Oh? Such people should bear in mind what Paul said to the Corinthians. Having set out some dire examples from Israel’s history – examples of their apostasy – he went on:

These things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall (1 Cor. 10:11-12).

Oh no! The danger is very real, make no mistake about it.

Furthermore, we should never forget how quickly the Galatians (and Paul’s letter to them was the first to be written, please remember) departed from God and the gospel in this respect:

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you to live in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel – which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be under God’s curse! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be under God’s curse! (Gal. 1:6-9).

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In our day, as an inevitable result of this re-engineering of the *ekklēsia*, the scriptural distinctives are being whittled away. With the passing of time, those distinctives will become more and more vague, and increasingly become a distant – and fading – memory in the minds of believers. We shall, in time, lose them. A generation will grow up who never knew them. The real, true, scriptural God, Christ and gospel, will be lost in the mists of antiquity.

‘But since so many evangelicals are adopting these new methods which are being taught by eminent teachers, it must be OK! In any case, look how it works! Look at the number of people attending such churches!’

How wrong can one be? Numbers are of no importance here. If history teaches us anything, it certainly teaches us that the majority is not always right. The reverse is often the case! We know that false prophets had numbers (prophets and devotees) on their side; for instance, there were 850 versus Elijah (1 Kings 18:19), and about 400 against Micaiah (1 Kings 22:6).

Believers must always get back to Scripture; that is the scriptural method, that is the scriptural protection. God surely designed preaching and the ordinances (baptism and the supper) with this in mind – God constantly taking us back to Scripture, back to the God of Scripture, back to the Christ of Scripture, back to the gospel of Scripture. Take the supper. Christ could not have been more explicit: ‘Do this in remembrance of me’ (Luke 22:19). Yes, we must never move away from the God of Scripture and his gospel.

Satan knows this. No wonder, then, that this principle is always under attack. Paul warned Timothy of it, telling him what he should do about it:

I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears

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tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires; and will turn away their ears from the truth, and will turn aside to myths (2 Tim. 4:1-4; see also Tit. 1:13-14).

Today, it is not ‘myths’ that I see warping the *ekklēsia*; at least, that is not my chief concern here. Rather, evangelical re-engineers are looking to pagans – McDonalds, Starbucks, football managers, and the like – for their principles and practices, and these re-engineers by their teaching – conferences, discourses and books – are having huge success. And when I say ‘they’, I mean both the teachers and the taught. But it will not be only pagan principles and practices they have to buy into: they will end up with their gods and their gospel.

The fact is, it is already happening!

The modern emphasis is not on God – his sovereign intervention – but on our activity, what we do, what we devise, what our management schemes can produce.

My point is simple and stark. I say that many evangelicals are seriously altering *ekklēsia* life, doing so by tampering with its biblical character, mandate and practice. This will have a devastating long-term effect. The ultimate result will be that believers end up with a different god and a different gospel.

We know our responsibility. We have to stick with the old paths and the old gospel – as God commanded Judah through Jeremiah:

Stand by the ways and see and ask for the ancient paths, where the good way is, and walk in it; and you shall find rest for your souls.

Alas, we know Judah’s response. As Jeremiah records: ‘But they said: “We will not walk in it”’ (Jer. 6:16).

What will be our response? What will be yours?

We have a clear-cut choice. We either keep faith with God – the God of Scripture, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ – and exalt him – by word and practice – or we invent a new god,

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or allow one to be invented for us. Do we want the real, scriptural, Lord Jesus Christ, or the new, sentimental Jesus? Is God a God of judgment as well as mercy, or a kindly, ineffective old gentleman who smiles benignly upon all? And that is only two of a host of questions that need to be asked – and answered!

To bring this article to a close: I say that if things go on as they are, we shall end up with not only a different *ekklēsia*, but a different god and a different gospel. It is happening already. And it is devastating. It is worse. It is damning and damnable: ‘damning’ because anything less than the gospel has no saving power, and ‘damnable’ because every teacher is responsible and accountable to God for what he teaches – and what he fails to teach (Ezek. 33:1-20; Jas. 3:1).

Letting William Dell Speak Today

Introduction

When re-recording my audiobook *Four ‘Antinomians’ Tried and Vindicated: Tobias Crisp, William Dell, John Eaton and John Saltmarsh*, I came to the closing section of the chapter dealing with William Dell. Being struck with the force of what I was reading, impressed with its relevance to the evangelical scene today, I felt I should publish a small article, hoping to reach as many people as possible with the vital material. In the six years since I published my *Four ‘Antinomians’*, I have become increasingly grieved over the lack of real gospel preaching. It goes without saying that lip service is paid to the necessity of gospel preaching, book after book is written on the subject, conferences, articles and blogs call attention to it, but in my experience, we continue to be subjected to a diet of dry, boring lectures instead of preaching; we get virtual magazine articles, not infrequently read word for word to us from the pulpit, often repeated by a PowerPoint presentation, followed by duplicated notes; we are treated to legal or recipe disquisitions instead of gospel preaching; and the churches are being increasingly managed as corporate businesses with carnal programmes designed to appeal to and attract pagans into church attendance; in addition, Sandemanianism still stalks the land. A toxic mixture indeed! All this I have written on in the years following the publication of my *Four ‘Antinomians’*.¹

As I say, on re-reading the closing section of the chapter in my *Four ‘Antinomians’* dealing with William Dell, I saw its relevance to the above. So much so, I felt I should publish it

¹ See my *Relationship; Attracting*; ‘Why Are You Following Christ?’; ‘A Vital Lesson For Today’; ‘Turn or Turn Up?’; ‘The “O” Word’; ‘The Marshmallow Gospel’; ‘Cleansing the Temple Today’; *Preaching; Secret; Seeking; Saving*.

separately in order to drive home truth which is so desperately needed today.

Briefly – for further background, see my *Four ‘Antinomians’ – William Dell (c.1607–1669)*, Master of Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge from 1649 to 1660, was a leading radical Parliamentarian. He became a chaplain in the New Model Army, was a powerful preacher with the reputation of being a so-called antinomian. In 1652, he published his *The Crucified and Quickened Christian*, being a ‘discourse on Galatians 2:19-20’. Dell divided his sermon into two. *First*, he dealt with the crucified Christian. *Second*, he moved on to the quickened Christian.

The relevant closing section from the chapter on Dell

Having dealt fully with his text, Dell, in his parting shot, gathering all together, went for the jugular:

By all which we may perceive, that true faith is a greater matter than the most are aware of. For men usually think, that when they hear the gospel in the outward ministry, and assent to it that it is true, that this is faith, and that then they do believe; but the true faith of God’s elect is a greater matter than this; for through that we are truly made one with the Son of the living God, and do abide and live in him for ever. And so this right faith is a most high and precious grace, and is the first manifestation of the Father’s eternal love to the soul, and the first grace whereby we have entrance into the kingdom of God. It is the sabbath of sabbaths.² It is the greatest and highest worship of God. It is infinite and everlasting righteousness. It is the mortification of the flesh, the quickening of the Spirit, our mighty victory over the law, sin, death, hell, the world and the devil. It is the first and last, and all in all, in the kingdom of the Son. And he that believes, as the Scriptures have said, is already truly passed from sin to righteousness, from death to life, and from Satan to God.

² I take this to indicate that Dell rightly understood that the new-covenant fulfilment of the sabbath is the believer’s rest and delight in Christ.

In short:

So that right faith is a most precious grace, and is found in very few of the common professors of the worldly church; so that Christ himself makes this question: ‘The Son of man, when he comes, shall he find faith upon earth?’ [Luke 18:8]. And therefore it concerns all to inquire and try: Whether we partake of this faith or not? And whether the life we live in the flesh, be in the faith of the Son of God? Otherwise we must know, that as he that believes shall be saved, so he that believes not shall be damned [Mark 16:16].³

Reader, if this is antinomianism, then, speaking for myself, I wish to be an antinomian – in my preaching, in my writing, and, above all, in my living, day-by-day experience. May God grant that we may soon have many such ‘antinomians’ in the pulpits of our land. How acute is our need of them! And may all who read these words be such ‘antinomians’. Let the Reformed hack and hew as they will. Dell has got to the core of the new covenant. Due allowance must be made, of course, for his 17th-century style, but Dell has surely got to the heart of the gospel here. Oh for preachers of like stamp! I know I’ve said it before, but I’ve had more than my fill of hearing boring lectures, when I was supposed to be under the preaching of the gospel. Oh, for men like Dell to preach Christ to us, to preach us into Christ, and to preach Christ into us! Oh for the New Testament emphasis on the exuberant joy that is the lot of all believers through their liberty from the law through the redeeming work of Christ! May we know, may we love, may we feel, what it is to be united to Christ! Above all, may we live in the good of it.

I have no doubt but that this sort of preaching will prove saving for sinners and sanctifying for saints. It is the sovereign elixir for both the unconverted and the converted, God’s appointed way of dealing with both. Consequently, and above all, it will glorify God – for purposing so great a salvation for us ruined, helpless and polluted sinners, for accomplishing it through the work of such a glorious Saviour, and for applying it

³ Dell pp47-48.

Letting William Dell Speak Today

to us so freely and graciously by the power of the sovereign Holy Spirit.

Sowing a Small Seed

Paul, writing to the Galatians, gave them his testimony:

For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone; nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus (Gal. 1:11-17).

As Saul of Tarsus, the apostle had been born and lived in Judaism. The more he heard of Christ, the more he hated him, and the more vehemently he persecuted him by laying cruel hands on his church (Acts 8:3; 9:4-5; 22:4-5,7-8; 26:9-11,14-15; 1 Cor. 15:9; Gal. 1:23; Phil. 3:6). But Christ had stopped him in his tracks, confronting him outside Damascus. Saul had been converted:

You have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. But when... [God] was pleased to...

Saul had been a dyed-in-the-wool Jew, his life had been in Judaism, he had been advancing in Judaism – indeed, he had been an exemplary Jew according to the righteousness of the law (Phil. 3:6,9), when God called him by his grace and converted him to Christ. In short, the Lord brought him out of

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Judaism and openly placed him into ‘the church of God’.¹ Before his conversion, he had persecuted the church of God; after his conversion, he was a member of the church of God, one who spent his life preaching the gospel to advance the glory of God in the church (Eph. 3:20-21).

So what? We all know this like the back of our hand! Why make such a song and dance about it? Why write an article on it? Paul was a converted Jew; he no longer persecuted the church of God – he was a member of it! So what? Very good, no doubt, but hardly worth an article is it?

Wait a minute!

Here we meet one of those little scriptural asides which seem so trivial in themselves, yet – when seen in their proper light – punch far above their weight. Little sins cast long and deep shadows, and little asides can convey massive truth.

What am I talking about?

Covenant theologians – especially infant baptisers – like to claim that the two covenants – the old and the new, the Mosaic covenant and the new covenant – are really one and the same covenant, being, in fact, virtually one with the Abrahamic covenant. Indeed, they like to argue that all these covenants (and the Davidic) are really nothing more than different administrations of the one covenant of grace.² Consequently, they say, Israel was the church in the old covenant. As a further consequence, they go on to claim that infant baptism replaces circumcision. These wrong-headed claims have caused – and still do cause – immense spiritual damage to millions, damage which can be eternal.

¹ As one of the elect, as are all the elect, from eternity he had been in the church in God’s decree. The elect are actually in the church only as they trust Christ. See my *Eternal*.

² It is, of course, far more complicated than this. For one thing, covenant theologians are not agreed among themselves about the Mosaic covenant. See my *Christ Is All*; ‘Covenant Theology Tested’.

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Since I have written at large in these issues,³ all I want to do at this time is to sow a tiny seed, hoping that it might germinate, grow and burst its way through the confessional concrete which keeps so many from coming to a scriptural understanding on these vital matters.

Let us get down to brass tacks.

Paul was born a Jew and was advancing in Judaism. According to covenant theologians, therefore, he was born a member of the church of God, sealed in it by his eighth-day circumcision (Phil. 3:5). Indeed, he must have been an exemplary member of the church. Yet he tells us that while he was a Jew, while he was advancing in Judaism, he persecuted the church of God.

So was he persecuting his own people, the Jews?

Of course not! As a Jew, he was persecuting believers.

You see the point?

Paul only entered the church of God by conversion. Israel never was the church of God. The church did not come into existence until Christ established the new covenant. Birth does not qualify for membership of the church of God (John 1:11-13). These are obvious – but vital – scriptural facts.

Covenant theologians, alas, fly in the face of these biblical facts.

Take Louis Berkhof. Writing on the Sinaitic covenant, Berkhof was categorical: ‘In a large measure Church and State became one. To be in the Church was to be in the nation, and *vice-versa*, and to leave the Church was to leave the nation’.⁴ What a manifestly false assertion! The nation of Israel the church? Matthew Henry, commenting on Mark 2:23 where it is recorded that the disciples ate the corn on the sabbath, said: ‘What a poor breakfast Christ’s disciples had on a sabbath day morning, when

³ See, for instance, my *Infant*; *A Gospel Church*; *Clarity*; “‘A Gospel Church’: A Warning”.

⁴ Louis Berkhof: *Systematic Theology*, The Banner of Truth Trust, London, 1959, p298.

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they were going to church’! Going to church? They must have had a remarkably long journey that sabbath. The church was not even founded at the time. And what a mongrel mix up – the sabbath and the church! Nevertheless, there is the claim – the church is the same in both Testaments, in both covenants, infant baptisers say. John Calvin frequently talked in such terms.⁵ As did Dick Lucas when preaching on the Old Testament. Sadly, some Baptists agree with them; Erroll Hulse, for instance, who said: ‘The gospel Church is not a different Church from that which existed in the Old Testament period’!⁶

Nonsense; loose, dangerous nonsense!

Paul’s testimony proves it to be nonsense. As a circumcised Jew before his conversion, he was a fully-paid up member of Israel! Israel was not the church!

Consider the other disciples of Christ. According to infant baptisers, Christ’s disciples were members of the church before they met Christ. After all, they were in the covenant, they were circumcised, they belonged to the nation of Israel; hence they were members of the church, according to infant baptisers. Presumably, on regeneration leading to faith they became members again. But the point is this: if they were members of

⁵ Take, for instance, this: ‘When the army of the Assyrians laid siege to the holy city Jerusalem, who was it that made such havoc among them as compelled them to raise the siege, but the angel who was appointed at that time for the defence of the Church?... [God] rejected the tribe of Ephraim; not that he cast them off for ever, or completely severed them from the rest of the body of the Church, but he would not have the ark of his covenant to reside any longer within the boundaries of that tribe... We know that when the anger of God is extended over the whole body of the Church, as the good and the bad are mingled together in her, the former are punished in common with the latter, even as Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Daniel, and others, were carried into captivity... Without a signal and extraordinary interposition on his part, no hope could be entertained of the restoration of the Church’ (John Calvin commenting on Ps. 78:44,67; 79:10-11).

⁶ Erroll Hulse: *The Restoration of Israel*, Henry E. Walter, Ltd., Worthing, 1968, p26.

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the church before they met Christ, why did Christ say that he had chosen them ‘out of the world’ (John 15:19)? According to infant baptisers he had chosen them out of the church!

Take the thousands of Jews who were converted, as recorded in Acts. If those Jews had been properly admitted to the church (Israel) by birth and circumcision – or as proselytes by choice and circumcision – why did they have to be openly admitted to the church all over again by baptism following their profession of faith in Christ? Why were Jewish converts – who had been circumcised – baptised? Indeed, why, if circumcised, are they today?

Foolishly, we may permit ourselves a little smile as we think of the way covenant theologians – infant baptisers, in particular – struggle to maintain their position. But a moment’s reflection will wipe the smile away. Think of the way covenant theologians warp Scripture to justify their claims! Think of the delusion and its cost for millions! Think of how many are pinning their eternal hopes on their infant baptism. They are repeatedly taught – and so they come to think – that they are somehow or another right with God because they were sprinkled as a baby, or because their father or mother was ‘in the covenant’, and they were baby-sprinkled with that in mind!⁷ And the entire fandango is based on their gross misunderstanding of the covenants!

Such men and women talk about being ‘in the covenant’; or ‘under the covenant’.⁸ I hope this tiny seed I have sown will

⁷ I have not moved much in infant-baptist circles, but when preaching in one of their strongholds, I had a new experience. I met an unbeliever (aged about 60) who thus far had been impervious to the gospel, precisely on this basis: ‘My father was in the covenant!’ was his reply to all offers of mercy and the direst of warnings. Indeed, so I was told, he liked nothing better than a strong sermon on judgment! His believing son, rightly, was seriously concerned about it. This experience, as I say, was new to me. I ask those who do move among infant-baptisers: ‘Is it an isolated case?’

⁸ I was standing with fellow-speakers at a Reformed conference for a group photograph. The birth of my grandson had been announced at

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make them think again. I hope it will provoke them to start questioning the theology which prevents them from reading Scripture unfiltered by their Confession. More, I hope they will stop talking about being ‘in the covenant’ by reason of birth and baby sprinkling, and start talking about – and experiencing – being ‘in Christ’ by faith. Let’s have no more talk about being ‘under the covenant’; rather, we all must start to think in terms of being ‘under the blood and righteousness of Christ’ by faith.

the meeting that morning. I felt a nudge in my side. A Reformed minister hissed in my ear: ‘Get him under the covenant, brother; get him under the covenant’. As I recall it now, I wish I had asked: ‘On your principles, isn’t he already under the covenant?’ Or is there a difference between being ‘*in* the covenant’ and *under* it?

A Breath of Fresh Air Wanted

A Brief Review of McGrane on NCT

Let me explain my title.

Kevin McGrane wrote a series of articles which were published in *The Gospel Magazine*, which he then expanded to produce a book that was published by The Gospel Magazine Trust in 2018, entitled *New Covenant Theology Weighed and Found Wanting*.

Kevin Bidwell (minister of Sheffield Presbyterian Church) opened his highly-approving review of McGrane's book in the *Evangelical Times* (April 2019) by saying: 'To read this book was like a breath of fresh air'.

Really?

As I will argue, whatever else may be said about McGrane's book, 'fresh air' it is not. By briefly challenging the thesis behind McGrane's book, I will explain.

Let me say straight away that I have a personal interest. Not only am I an advocate of New-Covenant Theology, but McGrane has done me the signal honour of including my name in a list of those he considers the principal exponents of New-Covenant Theology. Indeed, he has flattered me even more by treating me as its leading UK exponent. Leaving that to one side, I pay tribute to the compliment he has paid me with his thorough and extensive reading of my works. He has certainly done his homework, and I commend him for it.

Moreover, I am grateful to him in another way. In my experience, when I engage with others about their work, even sending them my manuscripts, they make no response – not even an acknowledgement. The fact is, booting my work into the long grass is probably the best way of closing down the argument. But McGrane has, off his own bat, read my material and offered a detailed response. And I sincerely thank him for it.

Of course, in so doing, he has taken a risk. So pernicious does he consider my works, and so plainly does he make his feelings about them known, it might well be that unbiased readers of his book will have their curiosity sufficiently aroused by his denouncements to encourage them to read my works in context and in full for themselves, not simply taking McGrane's digest or opinion as the last word. I certainly hope so.

Now to get down to brass tacks.

What was McGrane trying to prove? His chosen title should tell us, shouldn't it? I remind you of that title: *New Covenant Theology Weighed and Found Wanting*. New-Covenant Theology weighed. Yes, but what scale or measure was McGrane using to weigh New-Covenant Theology? What did he weigh it against? New-Covenant Theology found wanting – by what standard?

Take the front cover of McGrane's book. It has a diagram of a balance scale with two pans – one down, the other up. While strangely – incongruously – both pans are empty, the implication is clear: New-Covenant Theology is light; it cannot match the weight in the other pan. But the question is: What is in the heavy pan? What has McGrane weighed New-Covenant Theology against? We are not told on the front cover. I guess most people would assume it to be Scripture, but if they do, they are making a very serious mistake. McGrane has weighed New-Covenant Theology, not against Scripture, but against logic; to be precise, against the logic of the theology undergirding the documents produced by the Westminster Assembly in the 1640s. Unfortunately, McGrane failed to make this clear in his front-cover title and diagram.

But not to worry. As soon as we get into the book itself, all becomes clear. As he says on the first page:

This work does not purport to be an exhaustive analysis of New Covenant Theology; neither is it primarily a defence of Reformed theology. An enterprise to do justice to either of those aims would result in a work longer and more systematic than the present. What the Reformed faith teaches is clearly set

out in its confessions of faith and catechisms, as well as in works of systematic theology. In the Reformed church generally, office bearers are required to subscribe [to] a confession of faith, and there is therefore a presumption that a Reformed presbyter will be teaching a body of divinity that is publicly known and stated. His doctrine may be considered Reformed only insofar as it accords with Reformed standards, and not otherwise. The situation is entirely different with New Covenant Theology: there are no widely accepted confessions or catechisms of this movement, nor are there works anything like approaching a systematic theology, nor are there any common subscriptions; indeed, there is significant resistance to all of these.¹

A little later, he explains:

We have focused on the unreasonableness of NCT and the fallacious nature of its attacks on Reformed theology: if the doctrines of NCT are unreasonable and illogical then there are no satisfactory grounds to believe they are true; and if NCT's attacks upon Reformed theology are misinformed or fallacious then there are no grounds to believe they have any substance or weight.²

Thus it is clear: the logic and reasonableness of the theology of the Westminster documents is the standard.

But just pause for a moment. Think about this making of human logic – and human logic, man's system, man's theology, is what we are talking about – the shibboleth; just think about what McGrane said:

If the doctrines of NCT are unreasonable and illogical then there are no satisfactory grounds to believe they are true.

Really? Any teaching that does not conform to the logical system set out in the Westminster documents is false. That is what McGrane is saying. But surely Scripture must be the ground on which all doctrine must be judged! Isn't this an absolute given? Is logic, human logic, to be the test? Does

¹ McGrane p1.

² McGrane p4.

McGrane insist on human logic when dealing with the seeming paradox between God's sovereignty and human responsibility? Does he demand human logic when trying to reconcile the free offer of the gospel to sinners as sinners, duty faith and particular redemption? All these doctrines are thoroughly scriptural, yet they are incapable of being reconciled by human logic – unless one or other are pared down.³

Logic cannot be the ultimate test.

But there it is. For McGrane, the logic of the theology of Westminster is the acid test.

McGrane certainly sticks to his last. I counted twenty-five references to 'Reformed' in his book's Introduction alone. As for the Index, there are six references to the Westminster Shorter Catechism, eight to Puritans and thirty to Westminster. And so it goes on – see the number of references to 'covenant of works', 'covenant of grace' and 'moral law' – all non-biblical phrases, philosophical inventions beloved of Reformed writers and teachers as essential elements of their system. McGrane builds his case on them. For instance, I counted over seventy-five references to 'moral law' in the Index.

Yes, there can be no question but that McGrane keeps to his self-appointed thesis. Even so, I think that he should have been explicit in his title.

But now we know. McGrane starts with the principle that the Reformed faith is defined by the logic of the theology set out in the Westminster documents (and, I suppose, those that are derived from them); in particular, those documents give us the definitive and final word on the law, right down to the end of the age. If any writer or teacher, therefore, has the temerity to say he does not agree with the Westminster men on the law, test his works against the Westminster documents, show that he does not agree with the Westminster men on the law, and hence

³ See, for instance, my *Offer; Amyraut*; 'The Law: Reformed Escape Routes'.

prove that such a man is in error because he does not agree with Westminster on the law.

There are several things wrong with this.

I can, of course, only speak for myself, but I think that the other men marked out by McGrane would agree with me. McGrane's effort is an entire waste of time as far as it concerns me. After all, I say quite openly and repeatedly that I disagree with John Calvin, the Puritans and the Westminster documents on the law. And I openly and repeatedly say why. And the reason? Because of Scripture, and because of the Reformed glosses that have to be wheeled out time and time again to circumvent the plain teaching of Scripture, in order to maintain their covenant theology.⁴

The point is, it does not take a book to prove that a cat has four legs. I am convinced that John Calvin and the Westminster documents are wrong on the law, that they are unbiblical in this regard, and I have said so repeatedly. So what? McGrane has proved the obvious: I don't agree with Westminster on the law.

So while I thank McGrane for reading my works and publicising the fact that I (among others) disagree with the Reformed faith on the law, it seems a bit OTT to write a book to do it!

Then again, not only has McGrane done something which – in my case – is totally unnecessary, but he has used a circular argument. He knows that I disagree with the Reformed on the law. He proceeds with the principle that the Reformed view of the law – as set out by the men of Westminster – is definitive; he then shows the obvious – that I disagree with Westminster on the law; and hence – QED – he 'proves' that I disagree with Westminster. Which takes us back to where we came in.

More important, according to McGrane, all this proves that I must be unscriptural on the law. But is disagreeing with the

⁴ See my *Christ Is All*.

Westminster documents the unforgivable sin?⁵ Does disagreeing with the Reformed faith mean that my teaching must, therefore, of necessity, be unscriptural?

And this is getting us close to the nub of the question.

The fact is, McGrane is just the latest in a very long line of Reformed writers⁶ who seem utterly incapable of setting out their views on the law without beginning with, depending on, and concluding with the Westminster documents. Oh yes, they all parrot the mantra that their confessions and catechisms are subordinate standards of faith, they all chant *sola scriptura* (the Scriptures alone for faith and practice), but time and time again their works belie them.

As an example, take this which was written about Princeton Theological Seminary, which was founded in 1812:

The name of the seminary is known in all the world. Its chief distinction is its biblical teaching. The ground of its faith is the Bible. Its only question is: 'What has God said?' Its only proof is God's word. Its professors have never reached the point of thinking that they knew more than the Bible. This seminary has always taught that there are but two questions to be considered: (1) Is this the word of God? And (2) What does it mean? This ascertained, there is nothing left but to believe and adore.

Excellent!

But in my article 'Is it Me? Or The Cat Let Out of the Bag', I show how the Seminary signally failed to live up to this claim.

And so it goes on. The Reformed claim to make Scripture the touchstone, but they all fall back on their confessions, catechisms and theology. McGrane does.

⁵ Does McGrane tick every Westminster box? For instance, does he think the magistrate should enforce the Christian religion (presumably, for McGrane, Presbyterianism) on us all, including pagans?

⁶ See, for instance, my 'Is it Me? Or: The Cat Let Out of the Bag'; 'A Must-Listen Podcast'; 'A Must-See Debate'; 'No Confession? Nothing to Debate!'.

And this takes us to a very serious point.

The inescapable truth is that this Reformed blind spot is an inevitable result of the priority they afford their catechisms and confessions. One of the curses of all catechisms and confessions drilled into infants is that such documents naturally – inevitably – assume a superior position to Scripture. Scripture is reduced to providing proof texts⁷ to bolster the theology the Reformed want to inculcate.⁸

And that's not all. Proof-texting is virtually a continuation of the approach to Scripture adopted by the medieval scholastics which so appalled William Tyndale when he was a student at Oxford; namely, forcing Scripture into a system of wiredrawn logic, all the while missing the big picture. As Jonathan Kleis put it:

An expectation of 'logic' and 'rationality' is deeply indebted not to Scripture (which... contains many elements which seem to stand in tension or in paradox with each other) so much as to [Christendom's] scholastic heritage. (As an aside, I find it ironic that Calvinists who demand such logical coherency are themselves at odds with Calvin himself, for, as many scholars have noted, a number of tensions exist in Calvin's own writings that he apparently did not think it necessary to resolve...)....⁹ The kind of airtight logical coherency demanded by proponents of classic Calvinist soteriology [that is, way of salvation] when evaluating alternative views is artificial rather than biblical, likely owing more to scholastic history than to inspired Scripture.¹⁰

And all this, as I say, means that the Reformed, by their dependence on proof texts, miss the big picture on the law.

⁷ Proof texts, incidentally, which, in the Westminster documents, not infrequently are irrelevant to the claim being made.

⁸ This is such a common error, reaching much further than the Reformed and the matter of the law. See, for instance, the chapters 'The Fundamental Flaw' and 'What of Scripture' in my *Relationship*.

⁹ In fact, Calvin was self-contradictory – see, for instance, my *Infant, Christ Is All*.

¹⁰ Jonathan Kleis: 'How to Avoid Reading the Bible Like a Scholastic'.

When I say ‘big picture’, I am referring to the reading of such passages – passages, not mere individual verses – as Romans 6:1 – 8:4; 2 Corinthians 3:6 – 4:6; Galatians; Ephesians 2:1-22; Philippians 3:2-16; Colossians 2:9-23, Hebrews, reading them aloud, and reading them in more than one version, weighing them carefully, and doing so without filtering them by any confession.

And this is the crux.

I appeal to all my readers: Let us not pay lip service to taking the Bible as our authority. Let us mean when we say it. Let us be Bereans – in deed as well as in mantra. We know the Bereans:

...received the word [the preaching of Paul and Silas] with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so (Acts 17:11).

We need to make sure the same – exactly the same – can be said of us. Alas, when it comes to addressing vital contemporary questions like the new covenant, the believer and the law, the Reformed fall back on a confession, and let the theological system contained in that confession trump all. Of them it might well be said that they:

...receive teaching, examining the Westminster documents daily to see if these things are so.

If only – if only – the Reformed would not only repeat, but act in accordance with, their confession:

The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.¹¹

Let Scripture speak! Let Scripture speak unfettered by man-made confessions!

¹¹ Westminster Confession 1.10.

Indeed, wasn't this one of the fundamental principles and drivers of the Reformation? Didn't Tyndale give his life blood so that Englishmen could read Scripture for themselves, unfiltered by the priests? Isn't it ironic that Reformed men today so readily fall back to the papist principle which the original Reformers so greatly detested! Substitute 'Council of Trent' for 'Westminster documents' and the principle is the same.¹²

Of far greater importance, God has made his mind – and our duty – as plain as a pikestaff in Scripture.

Take the old covenant:

You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God that I command you (Deut. 4:2).

Everything that I command you, you shall be careful to do. You shall not add to it or take from it (Deut. 12:32).

Be... careful to do according to all the law that Moses my servant commanded you. Do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left (Josh. 1:7)

Every word of God proves true... Do not add to his words, lest he rebuke you and you be found a liar (Prov. 30:5-6).

To the teaching [that is, the law, Scripture] and to the testimony! If they will not speak according to this word, it is because they have no light (Isa. 8:20).

And, taking Christ's words in the period of transition between the covenants as a command, we must 'search the Scriptures' (John 5:39).

Things are no different in the new covenant:

[The Bereans] received the word [the preaching of Paul and Silas] with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so (Acts 17:11).

¹² Similarly, if Rome would go back to Scripture and not stop with the Fathers, their priestcraft would collapse. Substitute 'Reformed' for 'Rome', 'Westminster' for 'Fathers', and 'the law' for 'priestcraft', and the picture will be in focus.

The sacred writings... are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work (2 Tim. 3:15-17).

I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book (Rev. 22:18-19).

I appeal to Reformed teachers: Don't nod your head solemnly at such extracts. Get on and do it! Do it over the question of the law. Reading Scripture through the Westminster documents, using Scripture to proof-text the Westminster documents, falls foul of the above principles. The Reformed need to heed Paul's charge to Timothy:

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word (2 Tim. 4:1-2).

How solemn a charge is that! How weighty is its introduction! And how poignant when you recall that this is almost certainly Paul's final charge, as recorded in Scripture, before his death (2 Tim. 4:6)!

Yes, indeed, preach the word – not the confession or catechism, nor the theology behind the confession. This is not an empty comparison. I recall John de Witt at a Banner of Truth Minister's Conference bemoaning that the following Sunday he had to preach on the trinity – the next topic in the confession. I say to such men: 'Preach the word', not men's ideas imposed on the word, not systematic theology encapsulated in a confession.

To be specific: What McGrane now needs to do is what I attempted in my *Christ Is All* – take every New Testament passage on law and expound it in its context. As for myself, I might have been wrong on every single passage – I admit it. But at least that is what I did; I tried to expound Scripture in its

context. Of course, if being Reformed, if conforming to the Westminster documents, is what counts...

McGrane and I have been facing each other on paper; alas, we have been at cross purposes. We have been talking, but not in the same conversation. We are agreed that the Westminster documents are adamant that the law (at least the ten commandments) are absolutely binding on all men today, and is the believer's perfect rule for progressive sanctification. OK. Fine. McGrane is *pro* Westminster on the law; I am not. OK. Fine. We could go on and include the Reformed insistence of preaching the law to prepare sinners for Christ. OK.

But now let us have the real conversation. What does Scripture say on these matters? Scripture – not a Puritan confession. I have set out my position in a number of books. Will McGrane now do the same? If McGrane really does believe the Westminster documents are subsidiary to Scripture, if he really does believe in *sola scriptura*, let him prove it by giving us a detailed exposition of the law in Scripture in context without any mention of 'Reformed', 'Westminster', 'confession', 'Puritan', 'covenant of works', 'covenant of grace', 'covenant of redemption' or 'moral law'. After all, none of those words or phrases appear in Scripture, so the apostles and their readers must have understood about the law without using such terms. We must be able do the same. Will McGrane do it?

If so, that will be worth waiting for! When may we expect it?

The fact is, whatever McGrane's book is, it can hardly be called (as Bidwell) 'fresh air'. On my reckoning, it is at least 370 years old; and going back to Calvin, we need to add another 100 years; and going back to Aquinas... How about going back 2000 years to Scripture, and sticking with Scripture unfiltered? Will McGrane do that?

Now... wouldn't that be a breath of fresh air!

On the Basis of the Priesthood

Consider these intriguing words: ‘Under [the levitical priesthood] the people received the law’ (Heb. 7:11). At the very least, we may speak of a link between the levitical priesthood, the people and the law. In fact, it is much stronger than this. It was *under* the levitical priesthood that the people of Israel received the law. The NIV and the NASB use the word *basis*; the people received the law *on the basis* of the levitical priesthood. The writer does not say that on the basis of the law the people received the priesthood, but that on the basis of the priesthood the people received the law. I say again, what an intriguing statement!

For a start, as the writer to the Hebrews makes clear, only the Jews could have received the law, since no people could have the law without the levitical priesthood. Now who were under the levitical priesthood? The Jews. Only the Jews. No Gentiles had the levitical priesthood, nor any of the other old-covenant shadows – the sabbath, the sacrifices, the ark, the temple, the feasts, observance of the new moon, and so on. Gentiles were not under that covenant; it was not given to them; indeed, they were excluded from it unless they converted to Judaism (Ex. 12:48-49; Lev. 24:22; Num. 9:14; 15:15-16,29).

The same goes for the law. The Jews were the only people to have it (Deut. 4:1-2,5-8,12-14; 33:4; Ps. 147:19-20; Rom. 2:14; 3:1-2; 9:4; 1 Cor. 9:20-21). Under the levitical priesthood, on the basis of the levitical priesthood, the people of Israel – and they alone – received the law.

Now what ‘law’ is the writer thinking of? Without question, this can only be the law of Moses, the entire law of Moses. ‘Law’ cannot be confined to the so-called ceremonial law or ‘the law of priesthood’. The writer to the Hebrews knew nothing of this way of subdividing the law by any such construct. After all, the so-called tripartite division of the law was only invented centuries after the time of the apostles. Once it had been

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invented, of course, it became a handy template for those who wanted to get round awkward passages of Scripture – awkward because they do not fit into their system of logic and theology, but, rather, destroy it. The same may be said today.

But the writer to the Hebrews knew nothing of this philosophical, non-scriptural invention. So when he talks about ‘the law’, ‘the law’ is what he means. Take just two examples. When he tells us that Moses declared ‘every commandment of the law... to all the people’ (Heb. 9:19), obviously he means every commandment of the entire law. And when he reminds his readers that ‘anyone who has set aside the law of Moses dies without mercy on the evidence of two or three witnesses’ (Heb. 10:28), he does not mean there are certain aspects of the law that are outside this solemn declaration.

Indeed, using glosses to circumvent Scripture amounts to the traducing of it. It smacks of the Pharisees who were so sternly rebuked by Christ for doing this very thing:

You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! For Moses said: ‘Honour your father and your mother’; and: ‘Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die’. But you say: ‘If a man tells his father or his mother: “Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban”’ (that is, given to God) – then you no longer permit him to do [or let him escape from doing] anything for his father or mother, thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do (Mark 7:9-13).

The same here.

The fact is, the entire law of Moses was given to the people of Israel, and they were given it on the basis of the levitical priesthood. This is what the writer to the Hebrews asserts.

John Calvin commented:

The law was annexed to the priesthood.

Excellent! The priesthood was not annexed to the law. No! The law was given to Israel on the basis of the priesthood.

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John Owen, in his commentary on Hebrews, declared:

The levitical priesthood... was appointed by God, or confirmed by law, yet it was a far greater advancement that therewith the whole law was given, and thereon did depend, as [the writer] declares in the next verses... The whole law is intended... That whole law was given by the voice of God out of the tabernacle whereof Aaron was the minister... So that the people in the largest sense may be said to receive the law under that priesthood.¹

Just so!

Very well. Israel was given the law of Moses on the basis of the levitical priesthood.

Clearly, the two – priesthood and law – were inextricably linked (Heb. 7:11-12,14,18-19,22,28). The two stood or fell together, and all depended on the priesthood. If the priesthood was changed then – there was no choice about it – the law had to change too: ‘The priesthood being changed, of necessity there is also a change of the law’ (Heb. 7:12). If the priesthood was temporary, so was the law of Moses. If the first fell, the second fell with it. If one was fulfilled, the other was fulfilled in and with it. If one was superseded, so was the other.

Now we know that Christ came and fulfilled the old priesthood, rendering it obsolete (Heb. 4:14 – 10:18). The same, therefore, goes for the Mosaic covenant and its entire law (Heb. 8:13).²

Calvin could hardly have been stronger when he said that Christ, by establishing his priesthood, abrogated, annulled or abolished the law:

Now, as some might doubt whether the abolition of the law followed the abolition of the priesthood, [the writer to the Hebrews] says that the law was not only brought in under it, but that it was also by it established.

¹ Alas, Owen then introduced Reformed glosses, and showing that he failed to grasp the full meaning of the text.

² See my *Christ Is All; Redemption; Three*. See also my *Priesthood: Our Need, God’s Provision, Believers*.

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The point is, the levitical priesthood – and, therefore, the Mosaic covenant and its law with it – was changed. More than that, Christ fulfilled the old covenant (with its law), rendering it obsolete, establishing his covenant – the new covenant – with his own law, all on the basis of his everlasting and effective priesthood.

Calvin again:

As the authority of the law and the priesthood is the same, Christ became not only a priest, but also a lawgiver; so that the right of Aaron, as well as of Moses, was transferred to him. The sum of the whole is that the ministry of Moses was no less temporary than that of Aaron; and hence both were annulled by the coming of Christ, for the one could not stand without the other... That law, as it was [that is, because it was] subordinate to the ancient priesthood, was abolished when [that] priesthood was abolished. And Christ, being made a priest, was invested also with the authority of a legislator, that he might be the teacher and interpreter of the new covenant.³

In short, Christ is his people's lawgiver in the new covenant, and he rules them by his own law, the law of Christ, on the basis of his priesthood.

Hence any talk of believers being under the law of Moses is totally unscriptural. It is as wide of the mark as saying believers are under the levitical priesthood, have to keep the sabbath, attend the temple, offer the sacrifices, and partake in the feasts. Hebrews 7:11-12 proves it:

Under [the levitical priesthood] the people received the law...
The priesthood being changed, of necessity there is also a change of the law.

Indeed, to read the entire letter to the Hebrews puts the issue beyond doubt.

Let me quote some of the more pertinent passages. Having made his statement in Hebrews 7:11-12, the writer then moves on to

³ Alas, Calvin then introduced Reformed glosses, showing that he failed to grasp the full meaning of the text.

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argue that Christ is a priest in the order of Melchizedek, not Aaron (Heb. 7:13-17). And this carries huge consequences:

On the one hand, a former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness (for the law made nothing perfect); but on the other hand, a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God (Heb. 7:18-19).

That is not all. Unlike Aaron, Christ was consecrated to his priesthood by God's oath (Heb. 7:20-21). And the consequence of that? Just this: 'This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant' (Heb. 7:22).

The writer then draws a stark contrast between Christ's priesthood and the levitical priesthood (Heb. 7:23-28), concluding with this:

The law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever (Heb. 7:28).

The writer goes straight on – there should be no chapter division:

Now the point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, a minister in the holy places, in the true tabernacle that the Lord set up, not man (Heb. 8:1-2).

This really is the point! It is the point of the argument in Hebrews. It is the point of my article.

What is more, as the writer to the Hebrews argues, all this shows that:

...Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second.

For he finds fault with them when he says: 'Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of

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Egypt. For they did not continue in my covenant, and so I showed no concern for them, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall not teach, each one his neighbour and each one his brother, saying: 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more'.

In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away... Therefore [Christ] is the mediator of a new covenant... The law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities (Heb. 8:6-13; 9:15; 10:1).

The writer comes to his concluding exhortation:

Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire (Heb. 12:28-29).

To sum up and apply all this: God gave Israel the Mosaic covenant and its law at Sinai, based upon the levitical priesthood. Christ came into the world under the Mosaic covenant and its law (Gal. 4:4), and fulfilled it (Matt. 5:17),⁴ thus establishing the new covenant under his everlasting and effective priesthood, removing all the shadows of the old covenant by bringing in their reality (Col. 2:17) – he being that reality. Thus Christ has become his people's lawgiver in the new covenant, ruling them by his own law, the law of Christ.

This is what I understand to be the theology of the new covenant.

⁴ See my *Believers*.

