

NEW-COVENANT ARTICLES  
VOLUME THREE

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

*Baptist Sacramentalism: A Warning to Baptists.*

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

*Christ is All: No Sanctification by the Law.*

*Eternal Justification: Gospel Preaching to Sinners Marred by Hyper-Calvinism.*

*Infant Baptism Tested.*

*New-Covenant Articles: Volume One.*

*No Sacerdotalism: A critique of the laying on of hands.*

*Particular Redemption and the Free Offer* (second edition).

*Psalm 119 and The New Covenant.*

*Romans 11: A Suggested Exegesis*

*Sabbath Questions: An open letter to Iain Murray.*

*The Gospel Offer is Free.*

*The Hinge in Romans 1 – 8: A critique of N.T.Wright's view of Baptism and Conversion.*

*The Pastor: Does He Exist?*

*The Priesthood of All Believers: Slogan or Substance?*

*Voyage to Freedom.*

# **New-Covenant Articles**

## *Volume Three*

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**

**BRACHUS**

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Scripture quotations come from a variety of versions

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## *Note to the Reader*

This is the third volume in my collected articles on the new covenant. Although such pieces will continue to be posted under the eDocs link on David H J Gay Ministry ([sermonaudio.com](http://sermonaudio.com)), and on [christmycovenant.com](http://christmycovenant.com), once again I not only want to set my work in a more permanent form for those who have already discovered it, but I hope to reach 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, which are available on Amazon and Kindle. I have also opened a You Tube site with the same heading as the one on [sermonaudio](http://sermonaudio.com).

I express my continued gratitude to Ace and Peggy Staggs for all the internet work they do behind the scenes, and to Moe Bergeron for the way he presents my material on [christmycovenant.com](http://christmycovenant.com). My thanks also to John Dunn for his glowing Foreword. 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).





## *Foreword*

Dear reader, it is with profound joy that I write this brief introduction to the third in the series of David Gay's excellent article publications, written from a vibrant new-covenant perspective!

Herein, you will find the product of a sharp and prodigious mind that has embraced the noble Berean spirit of the first-century *ecclesia* community. The strength of David's theological writing lies in the fact that his insightful thoughts are unfettered by the many competing theological systems and presuppositions of our day. These articles are the result of a truly robust and inquiring interaction with the scriptural witness, alone, and the illumination of the blessed Spirit of God. Gay's agenda is not beholden to maintaining traditional theological bastions, confessional formulations, or the entrenched systematics of any particular denomination or academy. His articles are written without pretence, without presumption, without desire to blindly maintain the unquestioned status quo, and with a refreshing and sincere willingness to rediscover the first-century context of the apostolic new-covenant Scriptures.

These articles will both engage and challenge serious believers of all denominational backgrounds who wish to study the Scriptures with open minds and hearts. They will bring greater light the singular glories of Jesus Christ, the particular uniqueness of the new-covenant administration, and the unique identity and role of all believers under the new ministry of Christ's poured out Holy Spirit. This series will help the reader to see that the essence of understanding the Scriptures goes far beyond the worn-out debate of one-for-one continuity vs. discontinuity.

Rather, David convincingly shows that the New Testament is properly understood from the perspective that the old covenantal paradigms of the flesh have given way to the glorious new eschatological and spiritual realities, centrally located in crucified, risen, and exalted Lamb! Jesus is the singular

## *Foreword*

interpretative lens that guides the new-covenant perspective which David so adeptly champions.

In this volume, Gay shares with us the broad scope of his life-long Christian learning and wisdom. He treats masterfully with the subjects of Christ's atoning priesthood, the Christian priesthood, the biblical covenants, the law, justification, sanctification, and church history. And throughout the development of his ideas, he interacts authoritatively with other theological positions, demonstrating his seasoned understanding of the issues that derive from traditional lines of thought. All the while, David closely maintains the pre-eminence Christ's own new-covenantal perspective in delivering the final verdict.

Dear reader, I commend this new publication to you with the hope that, by it, the grace and peace and blessing of Jesus Christ will abound to you more and more in your walk of faith. Be blessed. Be encouraged. Be ravished with Jesus!

John Dunn  
Fenwick, Ontario  
Canada  
7th January 2015

## *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, 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.

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.



# *Priesthood: Our Need, God's Provision*

## ***Our need***

‘Priesthood’ is a concept written large in Scripture, in both the Old Testament and the New.<sup>1</sup> In truth, it is not too much to say that unless we come to terms with what God says in his word about ‘priesthood’, we will never grasp how we, as sinners, may approach him, and be saved from our sins. This is not to say that we are saved because we understand all the ins-and-outs of ‘priesthood’. No! *But unless we are resting in what God has accomplished through ‘priesthood’, we are still in our sins.* And, for those of us who have been saved from our sins, the more we comprehend the biblical meaning of ‘priesthood’, the better will we appreciate what God has done for us in and through Christ. In light of these facts, it is clearly impossible to overstate the importance of ‘priesthood’.

For ‘priesthood’ lies at the heart of the biblical answer to that ancient, all-important question, that question which all of us should ask: ‘How then can a man be righteous before God?’ (Job 25:4, NIV). How indeed! And the question should be made personal: How can *I* be righteous before God? It should be made even more direct: Reader, how can *you* be right with God?

And you need to be made right with God. Make no mistake about it. ‘Who can say: “I have made my heart clean; I am pure from my sin?”’ (Prov. 20:9). Note the ‘then’ in Bildad’s question. ‘How *then* can a man be righteous before God?’ Note also the ‘before God’. We are not talking about our standing and reputation before men – but God! The context brings out what Bildad had in mind – the sovereign holiness of God, his infinite power, and the smallness and sinfulness of man. Oh yes, it was because Bildad recognised that all men are sinners and, unless they are made right with God, that all will die and perish as

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<sup>1</sup> For this article, I have lightly edited my *The Priesthood* pp9-46, adding a little from my *Christ*.

sinners, that he asked his question: 'How then can a man be righteous before God?'

Reader, on the authority of God's word, the Bible, I tell you as plainly and as lovingly as I can, you are a sinner – as we all are. And your sin makes you 'unright' with God. It must be dealt with. I tell you the truth. I cannot leave you in the dark. I cannot pull the wool over your eyes. I dare not. As I have to answer before God for what I say, unless *you* are made right with God, *you* will perish. You will perish because you are a sinner who has not been made right with God.

Sin. What are we talking about? The word, as you will have noticed, has come up several times already. As it will, again and again. It's bound to. It's the origin of the catastrophic state man finds himself in, and the cause of all the misery in the world. And there's more than enough of that to go round! Would anybody disagree? I think not. Well then, let me say it again. Sin is the cause of all this wretchedness.

Yes, sin is the problem. *But man simply will not face up to it.* He'll do anything but call it by its name. Euphemism is the order of the day! It is has been so since Adam fell. Mankind has not been slow at finding comfortable ways of describing the horrible thing, and so avoiding the cutting word. Sin? Never! Not me! My behaviour is, perhaps, at times, 'inappropriate'. I 'make mistakes'. I have 'failings', 'shortcomings'. My actions are 'unfortunate' or 'improper'. I 'blunder'. I 'stumble'. I 'sometimes get it wrong'. And so on. No! Away with such evasion! Let's call it by its proper name – by its one-syllable, three-letter name. Sin it is, and sin is what we are talking about.

Sin! What is sin? What is a sinner? The Bible tells us. Sin, at root, is defiance of God. Let me explain.

God has made himself known to us in his works in nature; that is, in creation. 'The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands' (Ps. 19:1, NIV). 'What may be known of God is manifest in [all men], for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world his invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead' (Rom. 1:19-20). God has not left himself without witness, in that he does good to all,

giving us rain from heaven and consequent harvests, and so on (Acts 14:17). In all this, and more, God has made himself known to us.

But what does man do with this knowledge? He stifles it. Yes, it is true. He stifles it. 'Men... suppress the truth in unrighteousness' (Rom. 1:18). And when we stifle the knowledge of God, all sorts of appalling consequences follow:

Men... suppress the truth in unrighteousness... Although they knew God, they did not glorify him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man – and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things... [They] exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen (Rom. 1:18-25).

Never! You can't mean it! Making images and worshipping idols? Well, that can't be true, can it? 21st-century man in the west is far more civilised than that! We have out-grown the primitive, and the use of such foolish things as idols!

Oh? Really? Don't be so sure. The invented gods of the cultured mind are as heinous in God's sight as any totem pole. And modern man has devised countless gods of that 'sophisticated' sort – sex, entertainment, power, reputation, money, sport, greed, gluttony, lawlessness, violence, perversion, for a start. The list is endless. And, don't forget, God's complaint is that sinners 'worship and serve the creature rather than the Creator'. Ah, creature worship! *That's* common enough. And there's one creature in particular who always gets our first and best attention. Self. That's him! Self. At bottom, the great god for sinful man is, as it has always been, SELF! As Martin Luther said: 'I have within me the great pope, Self'.<sup>2</sup> Self – not God. And self-worship is the root and height of sin.

But if man suppresses God's revelation of himself in nature, how much more does he suppress God's revelation of himself in Scripture! Above all, how much more does sinful man suppress

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<sup>2</sup> [famousquotesandauthors.com/authors/martin\\_luther\\_quotes.html](http://famousquotesandauthors.com/authors/martin_luther_quotes.html)

the gospel of Christ, defying God in Christ as he offers salvation to all, and commands and invites all to repent and trust his Son!

God has spoken to us through Christ. 'God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by his Son' (Heb. 1:1-2). And what sort of things has he said by his Son to us sinners? How about this for a start:

Come to me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest (Matt. 11:28).

Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in me has everlasting life... If anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink... He who believes in me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in me, shall never die (John 6:47; 7:37; 11:25-26).

What is the sinner's response to such free, generous invitations, to such plain commands and such gracious offers? Staggeringly, amazingly, he turns his back on them, or brushes them aside, and snubs Christ. By nature, sinners refuse God's offers of mercy, refuse his invitations to come to him through Christ and so be saved, and refuse his commands to repent and believe, even though they are unmistakably warned of the consequences of refusal (Prov. 1:20-32). And they *are* warned:

He who believes in [Christ] is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God. And this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil... He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him (John 3:18-19,36).

In light of such invitations and such warnings, sinners say: 'No' to God in Christ? Sinners refuse his offers and overtures of mercy? Sinners ignore his commands? Sinners dismiss his warnings? Can it be possible? It is altogether too possible, I am afraid. Left to ourselves, it is the universal response of sinners to God in his gospel. And in our refusal of God's offers of mercy, our defiance of God has reached its zenith. We, as sinners, are in rebellion against his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. The Jews of Christ's day were guilty: 'He came to his own, and his own did



not receive him' (John 1:11). 'We will not have this man to reign over us' (Luke 19:14). Christ had to tell them: 'You refuse to come to me to have life' (John 5:40, NIV), complaining that, though he would often have gathered them to himself, they were not willing (Matt. 23:37; Luke 13:34).

Nothing has changed. It is still the same today, and the same for us all. As unregenerate sinners, we are determined to go our own way. We will not submit to God in Christ. God is not in all our thoughts. We do not reverence him as we ought (Rom. 3:10-18). 'The carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be' (Rom. 8:7). To 'the natural man', spiritual things – 'the things of the Spirit of God' – are 'foolishness'. As Paul said, 'the natural man does not receive', welcome or accept, them (1 Cor. 2:14). When I was a boy, and I did something wrong, my mother would tell me I was 'ardened'. I didn't know what she was talking about, except that it was bad. I only later came to realise what she meant. I was, of course, 'hardened'.

This, in essence, is what sin is. It is saying 'No' to God as he has revealed himself in his works of creation, in Scripture and, above all, in Christ in the gospel. We are all sinners. We all, by nature, set ourselves against God. We are hardened, defiant. Sin, rebellion against God, is ingrained in us.

### ***What does God do about it?***

We are sinners. We are in rebellion against God. Now what does God do about it? Well, he certainly does not stand by, helplessly wringing his hands. Oh no! Men rage against God, defy him – defy him and his Christ; they would, if they could, abolish both him and his law (Ps. 2:1-3). But 'he who sits in the heavens shall laugh. The LORD shall hold them in derision. Then he shall speak to them in his wrath, and distress them in his deep displeasure' (Ps. 2:4-5; see also 37:9-15). And how does *that* show itself? Let me return to the earlier extract from Paul's letter to the Romans, and include a bit more, and take it a bit further:

Men... suppress the truth in unrighteousness... Although they knew God, they did not glorify him as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened.

Professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man – and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things. *Therefore God also gave them up...* [They] exchanged the truth of God for the lie, and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen. *For this reason God gave them up... And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over...* (Rom. 1:18-28).

Man defies God. Therefore God gives man up. ‘Therefore God also gave them up... For this reason God gave them up... And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over’. This is not the only place in Scripture where we learn of it. When Moses was on Sinai receiving the law, the Israelites under Aaron sinned by making and worshipping an idol. ‘Then God turned and gave them up to worship the host of heaven’ (Acts 7:41-42). God gives sinners over.

How does this ‘giving up’ of sinners by God show itself? Paul spelled it out. God gives sinners over so that men receive ‘in themselves the penalty of their error which was due’. God gives men up ‘to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts, to dishonour their bodies among themselves... to vile passions... a debased mind’. And it shows itself in sins. The list reads like tomorrow’s headlines! Perversion of every kind, all manner of wickedness, cruelty, malice, hatred, envy, murder, strife, deceit, hatred of God, violence, pride, bragging, untrustworthiness, grudge-bearing... (Rom. 1:18-32; see also Gal. 5:19-21; Eph. 2:1-3; 4:17-19,22,25,28-29,31; 5:3-8,11-12,18; Col. 3:5-9; 1 Tim. 1:9-10; 2 Tim. 3:2-5; Tit. 3:3; 1 Pet. 2:1; 4:3-4; 2 Pet. 2:10-22).

The catalogue seems remorseless and endless. It is. It never stops. Listen to tomorrow’s news. Of course, I am no prophet. Nevertheless, I guarantee it will include a record of sins and evils – some of which we admit to be massive, some of which we consider trivial. But there is nothing trivial about this business. Nothing! Sin leads to sins. All the sins listed by the apostle in Romans 1 are the consequence of the fundamental original sin of defiance against God. We are all sinners. And we daily live to prove it. And for this we are all under the wrath of God. The apostle opened this section in his letter to the Romans in this way. He certainly did not mince his words: ‘The wrath of God is

revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness...' (Rom. 1:18). In saying this, he was simply following his Master, Christ. The sinner who has not had his sin forgiven and dealt with, says Christ, 'is condemned already' (John 3:18). 'The wrath of God abides on him' (John 3:36). So that we – all of us – must justly say of ourselves: 'We... [are] by nature children of wrath' (Eph. 2:3). There is nothing – nothing – trivial about *that*!

We are *all* sinners, I say again. *Our* sin – *our* heart, mind and will bent on defiance of God, and God's consequent giving of *us* up to *our* sin – shows itself in *our* sins; that is, in *our* sinful thoughts, words and actions. Christ told us so: 'Those things which proceed out of the mouth come from the heart, and they defile a man. For out of the heart proceed evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications [sexual immorality], thefts, false witness, blasphemies' (Matt. 15:18-19).

I go further. Deep down, we all *know* we are sinners. How? Because God has written the knowledge of it within us. And he has used indelible ink. Indelible ink, I say. Much as we try – and we certainly do try – we cannot expunge what God has written in our conscience, nor can we stifle God's persistent voice. Pilate said it: 'What I have written, I have written' (John 19:22). How much more with God! Quiet it may be, but God's voice is insistent. It *will* keep rising to the surface of our mind. It troubles us, disturbs us. It torments our conscience. It makes us feel embarrassed, not to say ashamed. It makes us blush – even in secret. I know it does. Right from Adam and Eve's first sin, mankind has known fear, tried to cover up and hide from God (Gen. 3:7-10). And I know it not only by experience – though that certainly verifies it – but by Scripture. God has told us so.

Reader, you know you are a sinner. Your conscience bears witness to you, and your thoughts continually accuse or else excuse you. The Bible says so. Speaking of sinners in general, Paul declares in terms that 'their conscience also bears witness, and between themselves their thoughts accuse or else excuse them' (Rom. 2:15). That's putting it in the third person. Coming closer to home, we have to say: '*Our* conscience also bears witness, and *our* thoughts accuse or else excuse *us*'. Speaking for

myself, I have to admit: ‘*My* conscience also bears witness, and *my* thoughts accuse or else excuse *me*’. And, of course, I say to you: ‘*Your* conscience also bears witness, and *your* thoughts accuse or else excuse *you*’. And we all accuse or else excuse one another. Deep down, we know that we are not right with God. I know it. You know it. We all know it.

***And that's not the end of it***

And another thing. There is ***another*** aspect of this wretched business that we – all of us – know by nature; all cultures and societies instinctively share the knowledge of what I am talking about. They certainly show it. What is that? Just this: We know we *need* to come to God. We all know we *must* come to him. *All* peoples have this sense of the need – the duty, the obligation – to worship God. Of course they do. God has placed this sense of need, duty, obligation in us all. Note the ‘so that’ in the following:

God, who made the world and everything in it... has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their pre-appointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings, *so that* they should seek the Lord, in the hope that they might grope for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us; for in him we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:24-28).

It is highly significant, is it not – and could not be more relevant in dealing with modern man – to note that Paul raised this point with the Athenians, and raised it because he had seen the utter stupidity – and worse – of their use of idols. The Athenians! Of all people! The Athenians, renowned for their love of debate and meticulous investigation, their insatiable curiosity for ideas, actually showed their true colours – their ‘ignorance’, their superstition – by the inane way in which they tried to satisfy their inbuilt sense of the need to worship God. They were a ‘very religious’ people, with many ‘objects of... worship’, including ‘an altar... to the unknown god’, by which they foolishly thought they might be able to worship the true God, whom they did not know (Acts 17:21-30)! Nevertheless, there it is. A people, renowned for

their free-thinking and their sophisticated love of enquiry, actually exposing their crass ignorance, and making fools of themselves! But – and this is the point I wish to make here – it showed that, with all their sophisticated intellectualism, with all their boasted love of reason and the modern, they still could not disguise the fact that they had an innate sense of the need to worship God, and that they had to satisfy its insistent demand. It was instinctive.

Paul had met a similar thing at Lystra when the people stupidly thought ‘the gods have come down to us in the likeness of men’, and ‘the priest of Zeus... brought oxen and garlands... intending to sacrifice with the multitudes’ because of the miracle wrought through Paul. Barnabas and Paul had their work cut out in trying to stop the nonsense. So much so, ‘they could scarcely restrain the multitudes from sacrificing to them’. Nevertheless, the pagans’ opinion soon swung violently; having been incited by Jews from Antioch and Iconium, ‘they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead’ (Acts 14:8-20). Excessive praise soon led to blind rage; worship to hatred. Natural man is nothing if not fickle! He is as unstable and unreliable as an over-free weather vane swinging in the slightest breeze.<sup>3</sup>

In these episodes, we meet the exposure and explosion of one of the greatest myths Satan ever perpetrated on the human race. Fallen man, deceived by our arch-enemy, prides himself on his rational, calm ability to weigh the evidence, sift the various theories, and come to a sane and stable conclusion about God, his own soul and eternity, does he not? He can stand back and, with level-headed detachment, can work it all out.

The truth is, nothing could be further from the truth. It certainly didn’t happen at Athens or Lystra, 2000 years ago, not by a long chalk. Nor is it happening anywhere today.

The madness shown in the ancient world has been repeated again and again down the centuries. And it is still the same for us

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<sup>3</sup> Acts 14:19 could mean that the Jews persuaded the pagans, and turned them against Paul and his teaching. So much so, the pagans stood back while the Jews stoned the apostle and dragged him out of the city. If so, it does not alter that fact that pagan opinion very quickly swung 180°.

moderns. Man is ever the same, everywhere and at all times. Even today. Even modern man. Even us! So much has changed in the world, so much 'progress' – and with what speed! *But not this*. We know we need to come to God, but we continue to display our utter foolishness in the way we try to do it.

### ***What we all know about it***

In addition to knowing that we must come to God, we seem to know by nature that we cannot come empty-handed. We must bring a sacrifice, an offering. Right from the fall of man, God showed Adam that he needed to be covered with the skin of a victim – whose blood, obviously, had been shed (Gen. 3:21). Adam's sons, Cain and Abel, knew they must bring an offering to God (Gen. 4:3-4). As did Job (Job 1:5). Bearing in mind that the book of Job is one of the earliest books in the biblical canon, if not the earliest, this reference carries more than usual significance. Right from the entrance of sin into the world, men felt their guilt, and knew they could not come to God empty-handed. And that knowledge has never been erased from the human psyche. It is ingrained in us all. It is there, deep in the conscience. The attempt to atone for sin, and to erase a sense of guilt, has never ceased. All cultures – pagan, idolatrous, whatever – are basically religious, sacramental. See my *Baptist Sacramentalism: A Warning to Baptists* pp300-301, where I show that even Hitler's Germany and the Soviet bloc felt compelled to satisfy the fundamental human need for sacral rites. The notion that the gods must be propitiated by some offering – human, animal or some other – is (as far as I can tell) universal. All men everywhere, all societies, in all generations, seem to display the conviction. All societies. Even ours!

'Wait a minute! That's an overstatement if ever there was. You can't tell me a 21st-century man sitting on the Clapham omnibus<sup>4</sup> is thinking about sacrificing animals in order to appease God! Come off it!'

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<sup>4</sup> The ordinary, average, reasonable man in the street, Joe Bloggs, John Doe.

Quite right! I'm pretty sure that particular gentleman doesn't spend his time thinking about appeasing God by the sacrifice of a bull or a goat. Mind you, I wouldn't rule it out altogether. Oh no! Animal sacrifice in the UK in the early 21st century is not as rare as some might like to think! But I'll concede the point. Nevertheless, *this* I do assert. The man on the Clapham bus *instinctively feels and knows that he has to do something to be right with God*. Oh, yes he does. I'll prove it. Ask him whether he thinks all will be well with him in the end, and how. It won't be long before he's telling you he's sure of it, adding: 'I do my best', or some such. That's it. 'I do'. Sinners are always harping on about it. 'I do... I do...'. A young man asked Christ: 'What good thing shall I *do* that I may have eternal life?' (Matt. 19:16). The Jews asked Christ: 'What shall we *do*, that we may work the works of God?' (John 6:28). The jailer asked Paul and Silas: 'What must I *do* to be saved?' (Acts 16:30). Do, do, do. Sinners know they cannot come empty-handed to God. They have to do something. They have to bring what they've done. They have to bring something – a sacrifice. They *want* to bring something. The hardest thing to get a sinner to do is to come to God empty-handed. '*Something* in my hand I bring', unbelievers really mean, even though, from time-to-time, they might sing the exact opposite.

Do, do, do. Bring, bring, bring. In one way or another, God must be appeased. So men know. So men try. In some societies it might be a sheep, a goat, a chicken or... a child! In the 'cultured' west, it might be... decency, keeping the rules, playing the game, being baptised – or, more likely, sprinkling my baby – saying my prayers, chanting the rosary, going to church or chapel, keeping the festivals, Christmas, Easter, going to Mass... It might be anything and everything. The list is endless. But whatever it is, it is natural man's attempt to satisfy the urge to make himself right with God. And it all boils down to *doing* something. And that's what the sinner brings to God, that's what he offers him.

That's why I stick by my assertion. We all know we need to appease God. We have to bring something. Call it an offering or a sacrifice. Call it what you will. But we have to do it. We have to bring it. We know we can't come empty-handed. We *want* to

bring something to God. And the more mystifying and complicated it is... the better we are pleased. Remember Naaman? How he raged because he despised Elisha's non-appearance and his simple, humiliating counsel! He wanted action! He wanted Elisha to come out and do something spectacular. And the more spectacular the better (2 Kings 5:10-12)!

### ***We all know we need a priest***

We all know we need to come to God, and we all feel we need to bring or do something. Furthermore, we seem to know by nature that we cannot come directly to God with our worship and sacrifice, but that we need an intermediary, a priest to present our sacrifice for us. We seem to know instinctively that we dare not approach God directly. Hence the widespread practice of priestcraft.<sup>5</sup>

‘Just a minute! There you go again. You aren’t telling me the man on the Clapham bus has a priest, are you?’

Well... let me assure you that even if *he* doesn’t, not a few of the many people who get on that bus *will* have a priest, and will regularly be turning to him, for his services and his ministrations. It might be mumbo-jumbo, it probably is mumbo-jumbo – that’s what many think – but, even so, they are determined to use the priest and his ‘magical’ potions; they need him and his professional competence. But as for the gentleman we are talking about, sitting quietly on the bus, perhaps he doesn’t have a priest at the moment. Even so, just wait! Wait until a death occurs in his family, especially if it’s a particularly close member. Nine times out of ten, and more, he will be only too relieved that some priest – he might be called a minister, pastor, elder or whatever – some ‘reverend’, ‘ordained’ official will, for a fee, ‘do the necessary’ at the funeral or cremation, won’t he? What’s that if it isn’t priestcraft? If it is objected that evangelicals and the Reformed have ‘a minister’ to conduct their funerals, and this has no ‘priestcraft’ overtone, that may well be so. I was referring to *unbelievers* calling in a professional ‘to do the job’. What ‘job’?

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<sup>5</sup> Let me explain my terms. By ‘priesthood’, I mean the system God has set up in his word. By ‘priestcraft’, I mean the system(s) set up by men.



## *Priesthood: Our Need, God's Provision*

And may I remind evangelicals and Reformed not to forget the ever-present danger of 'priestcraft' on such occasions?

And that's only one example of what I'm talking about. Time and again, such priests are called in 'to do the job'. Individually, and nationally, whenever disaster or trouble occurs, the majority of men wheel out the priest to perform his religious ministrations. And he, of course, is perfectly willing to fit the bill. Priestcraft is rampant.

Why, I knew of an undertaker who, if he had not called upon a certain minister or priest for a while, got a phone call: 'You haven't asked me to conduct a funeral for some time. Why not?' Why, I wonder, did the undertaker get that phone call? I can hear fingers twitching for some pocket money! As I will show, they are only aping the priests in Malachi's day.

C.H.Spurgeon, in his usual pithy way, got to the root of it:

All the world desires a way to God. Hence men set up priests and anoint them with oil, and smear them with I know not what, only that they may be mediators between them and God. They must have something to come between their guilt and God's glorious holiness.<sup>6</sup>

In short, it seems to be an almost, if not entirely, universal phenomenon: men seem to know they need – or, at least, they seem to want – a priest with an ability to offer sacrifice to appease the 'gods', or 'God', or whoever... or whatever... somehow or another... to 'make things right'. I cannot account in any other way for the priestcraft which seems to be the feature of almost all, if not all, societies. Priests, popes, witch doctors, medicine men, tribal holy men, gurus and all the rest – how can we account for them? The love of altars, ritual, robes, vestments, the fetish, smells and bells, teachers that can tell us what's what, and all the rest of it – where does it come from? Where? How is it that so many societies have sacral rites with their attendant priests? How is it that *all* of them do?<sup>7</sup>

The answer is plain. It does not arise as a matter of mere imitation. It's more than copy-cat. Priestcraft is endemic. And it

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<sup>6</sup> [spurgeon.org/sermons/3442.htm](http://spurgeon.org/sermons/3442.htm)

<sup>7</sup> See my *Baptist* pp301-303 and my *Infant (passim)* for more on this, and the link with sacramentalism.

is endemic because men have an innate sense of the need to approach God, and yet, I say, they instinctively realise that this can only be done by means of a specially 'ordained' man using his unique power of sacrifice and ritual. In this way, and only in this way, can they make effective contact with the Almighty.

Although this is to anticipate slightly, do not forget Israel's tendency, to put it no higher, to copy pagan gods, altars, sacrifices and priestcraft, directly in contravention of God's explicit command. My point is, where did all the paraphernalia come from? It was there for Israel to copy. There was certainly no shortage of it. See, for example, Deuteronomy 12:2-4,29-31; 13:1-18; 16:21 – 17:7; 20:17-18; 28:36,64; 29:17-18,25-26; 30:17; 31:16-18,20,29; 32:12,15-18,21,37-38; Ezekiel 20:32. And, as a classic case, take Judges 17 and 18. Where did it come from? The fact is, the need for a priest is not just a *common* experience. It is a *fundamental* of the human race.

### ***God has ordained it so***

The need for a priest is more than 'natural'. We really do need a priest who will offer a sacrifice to make us right with God. How do I know that? How can I be so dogmatic? Because we have been left in no doubt about it. We really do need the services of an intermediary who will offer a sacrifice to make us right with God. God himself decreed that it should be so. Not only that, he has told us so, declaring it to us in Scripture. God has told us that we sinners can only be right with him by the agency of a priest and his sacrifice. That's the truth of it! We *can* only come to God through a priest. He will not deal with us sinners except through a sacrificing priest, and on the basis of his sacrificial work. God could not have made it more patent. He has categorically stated it in Scripture.

And not only in Scripture. God, in history, has taken steps to make the principle plain. At Sinai, through Moses, God established a covenant with Israel, based upon the principle of 'priesthood': 'Under it [that is, the levitical priesthood] the people received the law' (Heb. 7:11). However that verse is interpreted, we can say that the 'priesthood' was absolutely fundamental to the Mosaic covenant. No 'priesthood', no communion with God.

It was only through 'priesthood', only on the basis of 'priesthood', that God would deal with Israel. Priests, whom he appointed, offering the sacrifices which he ordained, and offering them precisely when and how he specified, formed the core, the basis of the covenantal system under which God would deal with his people. In no other way, and on no other basis, on no other ground, would he deal with the Hebrew people.

In fact, returning to a point I made a few moments ago, long before Israel – let alone the levitical priesthood – existed, God had, right from the fall of Adam, established the principle that sacrificial blood must be shed to atone for sin (Gen. 3:21; 4:4), reinforcing it in such episodes as Abraham's sacrifice of a ram in the place of his son (Gen. 22:8,13). Observe how often – and, please note, how often *before* the giving of the law – we are told that so-and-so 'built an altar' upon which to offer sacrifice to God. Noah did it (Gen. 8:20); so did Abraham (Gen. 12:7-8; 13:4,18; 22:9), Isaac (Gen. 26:25), Jacob (Gen. 31:54; 33:20; 35:1,3,7,14; 46:1), Moses (Ex. 17:15) and Jethro (Ex. 18:12) – frequently at God's express command, but sometimes not. And all this *before* the establishment of the levitical priesthood for Israel at Sinai. (For this, and other religious practices, see also Gen. 14:18; 47:22,26; Ex. 19:22,24; 20:2-26; Job 12:19, NKJV footnote; Job 21:14-15; 22:17,27; 36:14, NKJV footnote; Job 42:8; Heb. 7:1-6,13-14).

Man is nothing if not religious.

Above all, in the period before his revelation of the levitical system at Sinai, God had made the sacrificial principle clear in the Passover, by his promise as he was bringing Israel out of Egypt: 'When I see the blood, I will pass over you' (Ex. 12:13).<sup>8</sup> The sacrificial lamb had to be killed, the blood had to be shed, and that blood had to be applied to the door-post and lintel. And God, as always, kept his promise! The angel of death, seeing the blood, 'passed over' those sheltering beneath it. Those trusting in

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<sup>8</sup> And not only in the Passover. In the plagues leading up to the final, crowning plague – the slaughter of the firstborn – the point constantly at issue with Pharaoh was liberty for Israel to worship God in sacrifice (Ex. 3:18; 5:1,3; 7:16; 8:1,20,25-27; 9:1,13; 10:3,7-9,11,24-26; 12:31-32,38).

the shed blood of the sacrificial lamb were delivered. Those not under the blood perished.

And all this was leading up to the momentous event which took place within a few weeks of the exodus, following hard upon the Passover. God, at Sinai, in a majestic revelation of glorious and solemn ritual, finally established the Hebrew people as a nation under the levitical system, declaring to Israel: 'You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation' (Ex. 19:6).

There was no mistaking what this meant. At the confirming of the covenant, Moses set up an altar at the foot of Sinai, and made sure that young bulls were sacrificed upon it. With half the blood, he sprinkled the altar, and with the other half he sprinkled the people – having read the book of the covenant to them (Ex. 24:1-8). Sacrificial blood confirmed the covenant, and consecrated both the altar and the people. 'You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation' (Ex. 19:6), the LORD declared. They were consecrated to this by sacrificial blood. 'Not even the first covenant was dedicated without blood' (Heb. 9:18).

The nation, yes, was to be a 'kingdom of priests', but as he made clear, God restricted the priesthood itself – the actual priesthood – to Aaron and his descendants (Ex. 28:1; 29:9; Num. 3:3-10; 16:1 – 18:7; 25:10-13). In establishing this priestly system, God could not have spelled it out more precisely, even down to the oil and incense:

And you shall anoint Aaron and his sons, and consecrate them, that they may minister to me as priests. And you shall speak to the children of Israel, saying: 'This shall be a holy anointing oil to me throughout your generations. It shall not be poured on man's flesh; nor shall you make any other like it, according to its composition. It is holy, and it shall be holy to you. Whoever compounds any like it, or whoever puts any of it on any outsider, shall be cut off from his people'. And the LORD said to Moses: 'Take sweet spices, stacte and onycha and galbanum, and pure frankincense with these sweet spices; there shall be equal amounts of each. You shall make of these an incense, a compound according to the art of the perfumer, salted, pure and holy. And you shall beat some of it very fine, and put some of it before the Testimony in the tabernacle of meeting where I will meet with you. It shall be most holy to you. But as for the incense which you shall make, you shall not make any for yourselves, according to its composition. It shall be to you holy for the LORD.

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Whoever makes any like it, to smell it, he shall be cut off from his people' (Ex. 30:30-38; see also Ex. 25:6; 30:1,7-9,27; 31:11; 35:8,28; 37:25-29; 40:5,26-27; Lev. 16:12-13; Num. 4:16; 1 Chron. 28:18; 2 Chron. 13:11).

What is more:

You shall put the holy garments on Aaron, and anoint him and consecrate him, that he may minister to me as priest. And you shall bring his sons and clothe them with tunics. You shall anoint them, as you anointed their father, that they may minister to me as priests; for their anointing shall surely be an everlasting priesthood throughout their generations (Ex. 40:13-15).

And it was not only the priests' garments that had to be holy. The priests, themselves, had to be particularly holy, and in precise detail<sup>9</sup> which God spelled out:

And the LORD said to Moses: 'Speak to the priests, the sons of Aaron, and say to them: "None shall defile himself... he shall not defile himself, being a chief man among his people, to profane himself... They shall be holy to their God and not profane the name of their God..."'... Speak to Aaron and his sons, that they separate themselves from the holy things of the children of Israel, and that they do not profane my holy name by what they dedicate to me... "While he has uncleanness upon him, that person shall be cut off from my presence... I the LORD sanctify them... I the LORD sanctify them"' (Lev. 21:1 – 22:16).

As the priests were ordained to their task, a bull and two rams had to be sacrificed, after Aaron and his sons had laid their hands upon the creature-victims. The shed blood was then used symbolically to sanctify the whole process, to sanctify the entire apparatus of sacrifice and worship, and to make atonement for sin. The procedure was repeated for seven days. In this way, the tabernacle (the tent where God met with his people) and the priests were consecrated to God by the blood of sacrifice – right from the very start (Ex. 29:10-28,35-46).

What is more, as biblical passage after passage makes clear, the priests, in their regular ministry, had to offer sacrificial blood to God, and do it as he had appointed. No other course was open.

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<sup>9</sup> Please read the passage in its entirety.

In this way, and this way only, could Israel approach God Almighty, God the all-holy.

Of course, sacrifice was not the priests' sole duty. Guidance for Israel (Num. 27:21), judicial settlements and pronouncements for the people (Ex. 28:30; Lev. 13:9-23; Num. 5:11-31; Deut. 17:8-13; Mal. 2:7; and so on), and intercession with God for the children of Israel (Ex. 28:29-30), were also part of their responsibilities. Apart from the unique initiatory Moses-Joshua period, and before the institution of the monarchy (when Israel hankered after the way of the pagans, and got what they wanted), the priests were the peak of the hierarchy in Israel (Num. 18:20-32; 35:25,28,32; *etc.*).

Nevertheless, the priest's primary task was to offer sacrifices to God on behalf of the people he represented. God was thus showing that he will deal with sinners only through an intermediary; that is, by a priest offering the right sacrifice to him, the Almighty, in the appointed way, and offering that sacrifice for sinners, and on their behalf. Thus God finally established the principle of 'priesthood' once and for all. It is hard, if not impossible, to imagine how God could have made the concept of 'priesthood' more impressive or more definite.

To illustrate its importance, let me cite two striking historical episodes in which God showed that he would only accept a man who offered the right sacrifice to him, but he would accept such a man if he did offer the right sacrifice. The first predates Sinai; the second speaks of a time after the giving of the law to Israel.

*First*, consider the events immediately following the flood and Noah's leaving the ark, long before Sinai. What was the first thing that Noah did when setting foot on dry land after the deluge? How did he mark God's deliverance of him and his family? How did he mark this new beginning for the human race? The Bible tells us:

Then Noah built an altar to the LORD, and took of every clean animal and every clean bird, and offered burnt offerings on the altar. And the LORD smelled a soothing aroma. Then the LORD said in his heart: 'I will never again curse the ground for man's sake, although the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; nor will I again destroy every living thing as I have done. While the earth

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remains, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, winter and summer, and day and night shall not cease' (Gen. 8:20-22).

And, realise it or not, appreciate or not, every human being – indeed, every aspect of the entire natural world – *has* reaped (both literally and figuratively) the benefit – and *is* reaping the benefit, day in and day out, night in and night out, year in and year out – of that promise of God to Noah, which promise arose directly through Noah acting as a priest, and offering acceptable sacrifices to God. The principle of 'priesthood', the priority of 'priesthood', could hardly have been made more explicit – in the first place to Noah, and, if we will heed it, to us all.

*Secondly*, consider the events immediately following the return of the Jews from captivity in Babylon (Ezra 1:1-6), long after Sinai. By Ezra's time, the priesthood had been allowed to degenerate into an appalling state of decrepitude. Sorting out the priesthood was the first thing the Jews did upon their return to their land. The *first* thing, please note. There was need, as I say. The priesthood had fallen into decay and disuse. And it was a calamity. Sorting it out was the highest priority for the Jews. And in sorting out the priesthood, they allowed no compromise. Those who could not establish their genealogical credentials 'were excluded from the priesthood as defiled' (Ezra 2:62; Neh. 7:63-65). What is more, it is expressly recorded that the Jews, having completed their reformation, even though there was no temple, and even though they were afraid of their enemies all around them – it is expressly recorded, I say, that despite their fear, nevertheless 'they set the altar on its bases; and they offered burnt offerings on it to the LORD, both the morning and evening burnt offerings'. They also kept the feasts and daily burnt offerings as God had ordained. 'From the first day of the seventh month they began to offer burnt offerings to the LORD, although the foundation of the temple of the LORD had not been laid' (Ezra 3:3-6).

And when the temple foundation had been laid? What was their next concern? Just this:

When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the LORD, the priests stood in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the LORD, according to the

ordinance of David king of Israel. And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the LORD: 'For he is good, for his mercy endures for ever towards Israel'. Then all the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised the LORD, because the foundation of the house of the LORD was laid (Ezra 3:10-11).<sup>10</sup>

And when it was completed? We are told expressly:

The temple was finished... Then the children of Israel, the priests and the Levites and the rest of the descendants of the captivity, celebrated the dedication of this house of God with joy. And they offered sacrifices at the dedication of this house of God, one hundred bulls, two hundred rams, four hundred lambs, and as a sin-offering for all Israel twelve male goats, according to the number of the tribes of Israel. They assigned the priests to their divisions, and the Levites to their divisions, over the service of God in Jerusalem, as it is written in the book of Moses (Ezra 6:15-18).

And when Ezra the priest (Neh. 8:2,9) came from Babylon, and had meticulously handed over to the temple authorities all the valuable material he and his entourage had brought with them to Jerusalem, what was the first thing he and his fellow-returns did? Just this:

The children of those who had been carried away captive, who had come from the captivity, offered burnt offerings to the God of Israel: twelve bulls for all Israel, ninety-six rams, seventy-seven lambs, and twelve male goats as a sin offering. All this was a burnt offering to the LORD (Ezra 8:35).

And, at the dedication of the city wall, after it was rebuilt:

The priests and Levites purified themselves, and purified the people, the gates, and the wall... Also that day they offered great sacrifices, and rejoiced, for God had made them rejoice with great joy; the women and the children also rejoiced, so that the joy of Jerusalem was heard afar off. And at the same time... [those appointed gathered] the portions specified by the law for the priests and Levites; for Judah rejoiced over the priests and Levites who ministered. Both the singers and the gatekeepers kept the charge of their God and the charge of the purification, according to the command of David and Solomon his son (Neh. 12:30,43-45).

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<sup>10</sup> It is interesting to note that the priests joined in the physical work, but at least some nobles did not (Neh. 3:1,5,22,28).



It could not be made more emphatic. 'Priesthood' and sacrifice was at the very heart of Israel's worship and service of God. And all was to be carried out as God had prescribed in Scripture. I do not see how God could attach any greater importance to 'priesthood' than he did in the old-covenant history of Israel.

Take the book of Leviticus. The first nine chapters are taken up with the subject. Chapter 10 deals with false priestly-worship; that is, unauthorised or profane worship. Chapters 11 to 17 deal with various laws administered by the priests. Chapters 21 and 22 deal specifically with regulations for the priests. And the other chapters are part of the overall purpose of God for Israel: 'These are the commandments which the LORD commanded Moses for the children of Israel on Mount Sinai' (Lev. 27:34). And throughout the book, 'priesthood' is an ever-present and recurring phenomenon. Indeed, as it is throughout the rest of the Old Testament. In short: 'Under it [that is, the levitical priesthood] the people received the law' (Heb. 7:11). And, to anticipate, nothing has changed in this regard as we come into the New Testament era. The principle of 'priesthood' is absolutely fundamental to all our dealings with God. It has been so from the fall of man, and it will remain so for ever. 'Priesthood' permeated the old covenant; it permeates the new.

Take Israel's crossing of the Jordan and entry into Canaan. In setting out from their camp, crossing the river, and the victory at Jericho, God could not have made the priests any more important or necessary to Israel's well-being than he did. Before they could take a step, the Israelites had to wait until the priests themselves moved. When *they* moved, the people could move, but not before. And when the people did follow the priests, they had to keep close to them – but not too close. Without the priests, nothing was accomplished (Deut. 20:2-4; Josh. 3:2-4,6-17; 4:10-11,15-18; 6:1-27). See Numbers 35:25 for the key role played by the high priest in the law of the cities of refuge. And see 1 Chronicles 6:48-49; 15:1-29 for the priests' pivotal role in the temple, and bearing the ark. And so on, and on...

Thus God showed Israel how important 'priesthood' was – to him and, if they would only realise it, to them. And Israel, in their better moments, got the point; they saw what 'priesthood' was

about, they put it into practice, they delighted in it, and reaped its benefits. (See, for example, 2 Chron. 22:10 – 24:16; 29:1 – 31:21; 35:1-19). But, alas, Israel was not always in one of its 'better moments'! I have already drawn attention to the way Israel frequently aped the world's idolatrous worship. And that leads us to the next point.

Before I get to that, however, let us remind ourselves that some of the Old Testament saints drew even greater benefit from 'priesthood', blood sacrifice, and other old-covenant principles and practices. In such things, they 'saw' (but only dimly, it is true) the coming of the new covenant and the day of Christ, and they delighted in it, and looked forward to it. Though he predated the old covenant, Abraham undoubtedly did (Gen. 22:7-8,13-14 with John 8:56). He was not unique (Matt. 13:17; Heb. 11:13; 1 Pet. 1:10-12).

Sadly, it was only a remnant which had 'eyes' to 'see' such things. Why, as I have just said, Israel often failed to appreciate what we might call the 'every-day' benefits of priesthood, allowing it to fall into disrepute. And what a harvest they reaped!

### ***The damage caused by a corrupt priesthood***

Just as the sacrifices were a blessing to Israel, what a curse it was to be without them (Joel 1:9,13; 2:14-17)! Again, it was a mark of judgment when, for instance, Azariah the prophet had to confront King Asa to tell him: 'For a long time, Israel has been without the true God, without a teaching priest, and without law' (2 Chron. 15:3). As it was when Ezekiel warned: 'They will seek a vision from a prophet; but the law will perish from the priest, and counsel from the elders' (Ezek. 7:26). The reason for the warning is clear. Right from the start, God had ordained that the priests should 'teach the children of Israel all the statutes which the LORD has spoken to them by the hand of Moses' (Lev. 10:11). The instruments of guidance, the Thummim and Urim, were with Levi (Deut. 33:8). And even before the establishment of the levitical priesthood, God gave Aaron to Moses as a mouthpiece for him: 'You shall speak to him and put the words in his mouth. And I will be with your mouth and with his mouth, and I will teach you what you shall do. So shall he be your spokesman to

the people. And he himself shall be as a mouth for you, and you shall be to him as God' (Ex. 4:15-16).

No wonder, therefore, that when Asa's son, Jehoshaphat, came to the throne, as part of his work of national reformation, he reinstated this ordinance – this ordinance which had fallen into disuse. He sent leaders, Levites and priests out to the people. To do what? 'They taught in Judah, and had the book of the law of the LORD with them; they went throughout all the cities of Judah and taught the people' (2 Chron. 17:1-9). What a blessing – to have God teaching the people through his priests. What a curse to be without it!

Even worse, perhaps – whenever the priests kept up the form of their ministry, but corrupted it, the consequences were serious in the extreme, both for them and the nation. Worse? I think so. When there were no priests, at least the people knew it. *False* priests, however, might easily have pulled the wool over their eyes. Might? They did! Not that the people always minded, let me hasten to add. Oh no! It was not unknown for the people to realise that they were being misled, and yet to like it that way, and to draw encouragement from the false, corrupt ministry to enable them to press on in their disobedient ways (Jer. 5:29-31). An absent ministry would have been the lesser of the two evils!<sup>11</sup>

A corrupt priesthood was worse than no priesthood. It was bound to be so. Since God's commands were clear, and since the declared benefits of obedience were so great, the Israelites could not fail to know that the consequences of disobedience were commensurately dire. Whenever the 'priesthood' was corrupted, reformation was the foremost priority. Until the 'priesthood' was put right, nothing would be right, nothing could be right. The Bible records not a few occasions of it. We have just noted the reformation carried out in Ezra's time.

But it was not the first time that reformation was needed, not by a long shot. As I have already remarked, Israel's first sin after Sinai was the making of the golden calf and their sacrifices to it

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<sup>11</sup> The same goes for the churches today. I myself would prefer a silent pulpit to a pulpit occupied by a false teacher, a teacher who corrupts the gospel, and thus ruins many.

(Ex. 32:1-6). *After* Sinai? The debacle was going on even as Moses was on the mountain receiving the law at God's hand!

It was, for instance, a great pity that reformation did not take place when Eli was priest. In those days, his sons, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests, but they 'were corrupt; they did not know the LORD... The sin of the young men was very great before the LORD'. And this had very serious consequences. So grievous was their sin, they cut themselves off from God without an intercessor, with no atoning sacrifice. Eli, for his part, had failed to rebuke them, and his house would pay the price. God made it clear to him, that he (the LORD) would visit him and his house in judgment. And so he did. And not only Eli and his house. Through their sinful ways, his sons had taught Israel to despise 'the offering of the LORD', and to trespass against God. Because of this, God judged the entire nation (1 Sam. 2:12-17,22-25,27-36; 3:11-14; 4:1-22), not just the priests. A corrupt priesthood cast a long and fearful shadow.

Again, after Israel had split itself into two kingdoms, Jeroboam, who ruled the northern kingdom, not only set up idols at Bethel and Dan, but 'he made shrines on the high places, and made priests from every class of people, who were not of the sons of Levi', installing them to serve his idol at Bethel (1 Kings 12:26-33). Even so, God did not leave him without witness: 'A man of God went from Judah to Bethel by the word of the LORD' and cried out against the abomination (1 Kings 13:1-3). Not only so, when Abijah came to the throne in Judah, the southern portion, and war threatened between the two kingdoms, he rightly – though hypocritically, for he himself rebelled against God (1 Kings 15:1-3) – challenged the people of Israel, the northern kingdom, over their deliberate rebellion against God's order:

Hear me, Jeroboam and all Israel... With you are the gold calves which Jeroboam made for you as gods. Have you not cast out the priests of the LORD, the sons of Aaron, and the Levites, and made for yourselves priests, like the peoples of other lands, so that whoever comes to consecrate himself with a young bull and seven rams may be a priest of things that are not gods? But as for us, the LORD is our God, and we have not forsaken him; and the priests who minister to the LORD are the sons of Aaron, and the Levites

### *Priesthood: Our Need, God's Provision*

attend to their duties. And they burn to the LORD every morning and every evening burnt sacrifices and sweet incense; they also set the showbread... the lamp stand... for we keep the command of the LORD our God, but you have forsaken him. Now look, God himself is with us as our head, and his priests with sounding trumpets to sound the alarm against you. O children of Israel, do not fight against the LORD God of your fathers, for you shall not prosper! (2 Chron. 13:4-12).

How regularly the chorus, or similar, is repeated: 'Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who made Israel to sin' (1 Kings 16:26,31; 22:52; 2 Kings 3:3; 10:29; 13:2,11; 14:24; 15:9,18,24,28; see also 1 Kings 16:3; 21:22; 2 Kings 9:9).

God, through Zephaniah, had to complain of Jerusalem:

Woe to the city of oppressors, rebellious and defiled! She obeys no one, she accepts no correction. She does not trust in the LORD, she does not draw near to her God. Her officials are roaring lions, her rulers are evening wolves, who leave nothing for the morning. Her prophets are arrogant; they are treacherous men. Her priests profane the sanctuary and do violence to the law (Zeph. 3:1-4, NIV).

The link between the effect – Jerusalem's rebellion, defilement, disobedience, lawlessness, arrogance, lack of trust in God and ignoring of him – and the cause – in part at least, the priests who displayed irreverent contempt for the temple, and drove a coach and horses through the law – is plain for all to see.

Again, in the days of Malachi, the priests brought God's judgment upon themselves, and the nation, through their sinful ways. As God told the priests:

'The lips of a priest should keep knowledge, and people should seek the law from his mouth; for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts. But you have departed from the way; you have caused many to stumble at the law. You have corrupted the covenant of Levi', says the LORD of hosts. 'Therefore I also have made you contemptible and base before all the people, because you have not kept my ways, but have shown partiality in the law' (Mal. 2:7-9).

And God spelled out their sin. Had they not offered the blind and the blemished to him in sacrifice? Had they not performed their service for a fee? Had they not sneered at their work, calling it

wearisome? For these, and other sins of a like nature, God said he would curse them. See the entire book of Malachi.

By these examples – and there is no shortage of them – we see what God thought of the priesthood he established for Israel. It was a principle and practice of the utmost importance to him, precious to him – so important, so precious, that he would not let those who brought dishonour upon it go unpunished. It was an insult to God himself. He must visit his people in judgment for their sin. So great was the dignity God placed upon ‘priesthood’, so strong his condemnation of the priests who defiled it, and the nation which allowed it to be defiled, and often liked it that way, that he exclaimed:

‘Shall I not punish them for these things?’ says the LORD. ‘Shall I not avenge myself on such a nation as this?’ An astonishing and horrible thing has been committed in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule by their own power; and my people love to have it so. But what will you do in the end? (Jer. 5:29-31).

Jeremiah grieved for Zion’s degradation, and he knew where to lay the blame. It was ‘because of the sins of her prophets and the iniquities of her priests’ (Lam. 4:13). See 2 Chronicles 36:14.

In light of all this, no words of mine can express the dignity, the value, the importance we should place upon ‘priesthood’. God could not regard it any more highly than he does. As a consequence, if we fail to get to grips with ‘priesthood’, if we fail to value it as we should, we do so at our eternal peril.

### ***Priesthood in the new covenant***

Centuries later than Jeremiah, after the coming of Christ, the writer of the letter to the Hebrews set out the principles of ‘priesthood’ in detail. But before we look at these principles, a question naturally arises: Why did God, in the letter to the Hebrews, so thoroughly explain, *and explain to New Testament believers*, the details of ‘priesthood’ – especially concentrating on the levitical priesthood he gave to Israel? Surely, with Christ’s triumph on the cross, the old covenant and its priesthood were abolished? So they were. The writer to the Hebrews said so in unmistakable terms (Heb. 7:18; 8:13). So why would he spend so

long writing about a priesthood which had been abolished, and going into so much detail about it? Although I will not stop to answer that fascinating question now, I will return to it shortly. It goes without saying that God had a good reason to make sure his servant went into such detail. A very important principle must be involved.

There certainly is! Nevertheless, as I say, leaving that to one side just for the moment, let us first look at the principles of 'priesthood' as set out by the writer to the Hebrews:

Every high priest taken from among men is appointed for men in things pertaining to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins. He can have compassion on those who are ignorant and going astray, since he himself is also subject to weakness. Because of this, he is required, as for the people, so also for himself, to offer sacrifices for sins. And no man takes this honour to himself, but he who is called by God, just as Aaron was... Every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices... When Moses had spoken every precept to all the people according to the law, he took the blood of calves and goats, with water, scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, saying: 'This is the blood of the covenant which God has commanded you'. Then likewise he sprinkled with blood both the tabernacle and all the vessels of the ministry. And according to the law almost all things are purified with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no remission (Heb. 5:1-4; 8:3; 9:19-22).

But – and what a 'but' – the Sinaitic covenant with Israel was only a shadow, an earthly picture, not the heavenly reality itself. It was ineffective. It had inbuilt weakness. For a start, as the writer to the Hebrews pointed out, the priest himself was 'subject to weakness'. The truth is, of course, the priest was a sinner himself. So much so, he had to sacrifice for himself as well as the people. Actually, he had to sacrifice for himself *first* – before sacrificing for the people! This point had been driven home, as we have seen, by the way God demanded sacrifice even at the ordination of Aaron and his sons. And this fact alone, therefore, immediately exposed the fundamental flaw in the old covenant. How could a priest, who was himself a sinner, offer an effective sacrifice for another sinner? He couldn't!

This is the ultimate futility of all priestly systems (apart from one! – see below). Why? Because of the circular argument involved. This fundamental flaw is unavoidable. Let me expose it by setting out the Roman Catholic priestly system. At the bottom of the pile, an insignificant member of ‘the faithful’ goes to his priest to confess his sins and receive absolution. Very well. Where, in his turn, does the priest himself go? Perhaps to the senior priest in his area. Where does that senior priest go? To his bishop? Where does he go? To the cardinal? Where does he go? To the Pope? Where does he go? To his private priest. Where does he go? To his senior priest? And so on and on. Round and round for ever and a day. A circular argument *par excellence*. But it’s no joke! Millions of sinners are living, and dying, and entering eternity, based on such a misguided, ineffective system. Catastrophic! I am not making this up. Every Pope has his own personal and private confessor.<sup>12</sup>

What is more, by God’s ordination, the levitical system itself demanded repeated sacrifices, and this, yet again, served to highlight its inherent inadequacy, its intrinsic weakness. Their very repetition proved the ineffectiveness of those sacrifices. An effective sacrifice, once offered, would have put an end to all other sacrifices. But the old covenant had no effective sacrifice. So the sacrifices had to be repeated again and again and again...

This, of course, is one of the stupidities of, say, the Roman Catholic Mass. According to their dogma, they offer Christ repeatedly in the Mass. Not only is this blasphemous, it is self-evidently ineffective. If such a sacrifice, offered by a Roman priest, *was* effective, that would be the end of it. The fact that the next Mass is already arranged – before this one has finished – trumpets the uselessness of the system so loudly that only the

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<sup>12</sup> In answer to the question: ‘Does the Pope go to Confession’, Msgr Vincent Tran Ngoc Thu, who served Pope John Paul II as a secretary for 8 years, replied: ‘Yes, the Pope confesses every week. The Pope’s confessor is an elderly Polish monsignor who comes on Saturdays, or if the Pope is abroad, the following Friday’ ([zeitun-eg.org/JPII.htm](http://zeitun-eg.org/JPII.htm)). An email to me from the Catholic Enquiry Office (15th Aug. 2011): ‘Dear David, Thank you for your email. Yes the Pope does have a confessor. With best wishes, Jo’.



deliberately deaf can fail to hear it. The number of bequests for repeated Masses to be said in order to release the one who has died from purgatory is testimony to the grip this nonsense has on the minds of the duped. If a million Masses haven't done the job, a million and one certainly won't. Can't they see it? Won't they see it?

This is the point about even the law of God itself. Because of the frailty of the flesh, it was, therefore, weak – in fact, it was powerless and useless – in regard to the removal of sin (Rom. 8:3; Heb. 7:18, both NIV). Its priests, and their repeated sacrifices, could never take away sin, could never make sinners perfect. The truth is, God had decreed it to be so. His wrath, he made clear, could not be propitiated, nor his justice satisfied, by the priests and their sacrifices which he had ordained under the first covenant, the law:

For the law, having a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with these same sacrifices, which they offer continually year by year, make those who approach perfect. For then would they not have ceased to be offered?... For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins... Every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins (Heb. 10:1-11).

So why did God give the law? Why did he set up this ineffective, repetitive priestly-system?

For two reasons. God gave it to Israel to foreshadow the coming reality in the new covenant. In addition, he was using the old-covenant system as a temporary guide, teacher to instruct the Jews until the establishment of that new covenant. Speaking scripturally, God gave Israel the law as a pedagogue. 'The law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor' (Gal. 3:24,25).

Let me explain. Consider the word 'tutor', Greek *paidagōgos*, 'tutor' (NKJV), 'schoolmaster' (AV), 'in charge' (NIV), 'tutor', literally 'child-conductor' (NASB), 'guardian' (ESV). Sadly, some of these translations (especially, 'schoolmaster' and 'tutor'), even the transliteration 'pedagogue', give the misleading impression that the law was an 'educator', much like *didaskalos*

(Rom. 2:20; Heb. 5:2, for example). *This* is not the meaning of *paidagōgos*. The word is a combination of *pais* (child) and *agōgos* (leader), derived from *agō*, 'to drive, to lead by laying hold of, to conduct' with the idea of discipline. As Thayer explained: 'The name was applied to trustworthy slaves who were charged with the duty of supervising the life and morals of boys... The boys were not allowed so much as to step out of the house without them, before reaching the age of manhood... The name carries with it an idea of severity (as of a stern censor and enforcer of morals)'. And, linking this with the previous point, the child-custodian's job was not to *bring* the immature boy anywhere; rather, he had to discipline and protect the boy *until* he reached maturity. During that time, the Jews were 'kept under the law, shut up' (Gal. 3:23, AV), 'were held prisoners by the law, locked up' by the law (NIV), 'held captive under the law, imprisoned' (ESV), 'kept under guard by the law' (NKJV), confined by the law.<sup>13</sup>

As Paul went on to explain:

Now I say that the heir, as long as he is a child, does not differ at all from a slave, though he is master of all, but is under guardians and stewards until the time appointed by the father. Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world. But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons (Gal. 4:1-5).<sup>14</sup>

By the levitical priesthood, therefore, God was instructing – by stern discipline – Israel concerning the coming of Christ and the gospel. That is why this old Jewish economy lasted until the coming of Christ, the Seed according to the promise given to Abraham (Gal. 3:16-25). But with the coming of the Seed – that is, with the coming of Christ (Gal. 3:16) – more particularly, with his triumph on the cross, and the rending of the temple veil (Matt. 27:50-51; Luke 23:45; Heb. 10:19-21) – the old covenant was

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<sup>13</sup> I have drawn this paragraph from my *Christ* p128.

<sup>14</sup> I was a modern pedagogue – a Mathematics teacher – for years, but if I had acted the part of a real pedagogue, the State would have locked me up for abuse of young people!

abolished, and the new established. And all was entirely as God had planned from eternity past. All had been leading up to the new covenant. 'The law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ' (John 1:17).

### ***The new covenant***

The new covenant! The effective covenant! In this covenant, by his grace, in the fullness of time (Gal. 4:4), 'what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin' (Rom. 8:3). That is, as he had always decreed, at the right time, God established a new covenant, an effective covenant, thereby abolishing the old covenant, having made it obsolete (Heb. 7:18-19,22; 8:6-13; 9:23-28; 10:1-18). The old and the new covenants are not different administrations of one covenant. Not at all! The old and the new are very different covenants – chalk and cheese. If you have any doubts, reader, please read Romans, Galatians and Hebrews. In fact, it is the new covenant – or the heavenly covenant – which is the original covenant (Heb. 9:23). In particular, the Mosaic covenant copied the heavenly covenant in the matter of priesthood. The new-covenant priesthood is the true priesthood; the old was the shadow. Hence John 1:17. And this principle applies right across the board. The old covenant was the shadow of the new.

Indeed, the old covenant had to be fulfilled and abolished before the new covenant could be established. 'The Holy Spirit indicating this, that the way into the holiest of all was not yet made manifest while the first tabernacle was still standing' (Heb. 9:8). Christ 'takes away the first that he may establish the second' (Heb. 10:9).

But, in abolishing the old covenant, and setting up the new, God did not abolish the principle of 'priesthood'. Oh no! Far from it! Abolish it? He confirmed it and made it glorious! At long last, but at the appointed time (Gal. 4:4), 'priesthood' had come into its own. In the new covenant, God in Christ established the *effective* priesthood, *the* one and only effective priesthood. The new covenant has this effective priesthood at its very heart. The covenants certainly changed, but the principle of 'priesthood' did

not. Different covenants, different priests, but 'priesthood' constant. As I have already observed, just as 'under it [that is, the levitical priesthood] the people received the law' (Heb. 7:11), under the priesthood of Christ, we receive the gospel.

And this is the answer to the intriguing question I raised a moment or two ago: Even though the old-covenant priesthood was ineffective, and was abolished by Christ along with the old covenant, why did God, in the letter to the Hebrews, so thoroughly explain, *and explain to New Testament believers*, the details of 'priesthood', especially concentrating on the levitical priesthood he gave to Israel, and yet was now abolished? Why?

The answer is that God always had in mind, even from eternity, the real 'priesthood', the only 'priesthood', the priesthood of Christ in the new covenant. And in setting out, for believers, this new-covenant priesthood of Christ, God made full use of the principles of 'priesthood' he had established and revealed to Israel in the levitical system. Moreover, God warned Moses expressly to make sure that everything in the old covenant was securely based on the true heavenly covenant (Ex. 25:40; Heb. 8:5; 9:23; 10:1; see also Col. 2:17). So, when he brought in the new covenant, God went back to the old to teach his people the spiritual and heavenly realities of the new covenant in Christ. This was one of the major purposes of God giving Israel the old covenant. But all along, his intention had been the coming of Christ and the new covenant. The new-covenant priesthood of Christ has been, and still is, the real and only priesthood.

Let me spell out this new-covenant priesthood. Long before he instituted the levitical priesthood at Sinai, God had given Abram a remarkable revelation of what he would one day establish through Christ his Son. 'Melchizedek, king of Salem... the priest of God Most High' met and 'blessed' the patriarch after Abram's victory over the kings. And Abram gave Melchizedek 'a tithe of all' (Gen. 14:18-20). In this way, this mysterious figure suddenly appeared in Scripture and, almost at once, disappeared.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Who was (is) he? Up till writing my *The Priesthood of All Believers*, I had held that Melchizedek was none other than Christ himself, making a pre-incarnate appearance, but, having been challenged about this, I was not so sure. Turning to some familiar weighty commentators, I found my

What did this strange, brief encounter signify? What was God showing to Abram? Nothing less than Christ as the great high priest of the new covenant. And Christ's priesthood stemmed not from Levi (who had not yet been thought of, let alone born) but from Melchizedek.

And here we come across one of the glories of the new covenant. While the 'priesthoods' in the two covenants (old and new) have many principles in common, there is one way in which the new-covenant 'priesthood' differs from that of the old. Under the old covenant, it was impossible for a king to be a priest. King Uzziah tried it – to his cost:

[King Uzziah's] heart was lifted up, to his destruction, for he transgressed against the LORD his God by entering the temple of the LORD to burn incense on the altar of incense. So Azariah the priest went in after him, and with him eighty priests of the LORD — valiant men. And they withstood King Uzziah, and said to him: 'It is not for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the LORD, but for the priests, the sons of Aaron, who are consecrated to burn incense. Get out of the sanctuary, for you have trespassed! You shall have no honour from the LORD God'. Then Uzziah became furious; and he had a censer in his hand to burn incense. And while he was angry with the priests, leprosy broke out on his forehead, before the priests in the house of the LORD, beside the incense altar... The LORD had struck him. King Uzziah was a leper until the day of his death (2 Chron. 26:16-21).

Yet, in the new covenant, the concept of the kingly priest is at its heart. Zechariah prophesied of it. 'An elaborate crown' was 'set...

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thinking further exposed to question. John Brown: 'Some... have strangely held that he [Melchizedek] was the Son of God' (*An Exposition of Hebrews*, The Banner of Truth Trust, London, 1961, p261). John Owen was a little kinder to me: 'That he was the Son of God himself... some learned men have conjectured and contended. Howbeit, this... is directly contrary to the text, wherein he is said to be "made like unto the Son of God"' (*An Exposition of Hebrews*, 7 Volumes in 4, Sovereign Grace Publishers, Evansville, Indiana, 1960, Vol.3 Part 2 p297). With Brown, all I can now definitely say is that Melchizedek was the 'king of Salem... the priest of God Most High' (Gen. 14:18).

on the head of Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest'. This, of course, was prophetic – prophetic of Christ:

Make an elaborate crown, and set it on the head of Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Then speak to him, saying: 'Thus says the LORD of hosts, saying: "Behold, the Man whose name is the BRANCH! From his place he shall branch out, and he shall build the temple of the LORD. Yes, he shall build the temple of the LORD. He shall bear the glory, and shall sit and rule on his throne; so he shall be a priest on his throne, and the counsel of peace shall be between them both"' (Zech. 6:9-15).<sup>16</sup>

This should not surprise us. Melchizedek, the great original of the new-covenant priesthood, was both king and priest. He was 'king of Salem' and 'priest of God Most High' (Gen. 14:18; Ps. 110:1,4). As Melchizedek, so Christ. Christ is king and priest.

So what does this priesthood of Christ involve? The writer to the Hebrews explained. God the Father, from eternity, had appointed his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, as priest of this new covenant, this great, final covenant – and under this covenant, he, this glorious, sinless high priest, came into the world to offer one effectual sacrifice for all time for all his people. And that sacrifice he *did* offer. In exultation, on the cross, he cried out in glorious triumph: 'It is finished!' (John 19:30); 'it is accomplished!' (see John 19:28). By his one offering – of himself, of his own blood – he perfected for ever all the sinners on behalf of whom he died:

Christ did not glorify himself to become high priest, but it was he [God the Father] who said to him: 'You are my Son, today I have begotten you'. As he also says in another place: 'You are a priest for ever according to the order of Melchizedek.'... Though he was a Son, yet he learned obedience by the things which he suffered. And having been perfected, he became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey him, called by God as high priest 'according to the order of Melchizedek'... If perfection were through the levitical priesthood... what further need was there that another priest should rise according to the order of Melchizedek, and not be called according to the order of Aaron?... Jesus has become a surety of a

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<sup>16</sup> Surely Isa. 22:20-25 speaks of the same thing. For 'branch', see Isa. 11:1; Jer. 23:5; 33:15; Zech. 3:8; 6:12. For 'root', see Isa. 11:10; Rom. 15:12; Rev. 5:5; 22:16. See also Ps. 85:10-13; 110:1-7.

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better covenant... Because he continues for ever, [he] has an unchangeable priesthood. Therefore he is also able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them. For such a high priest was fitting for us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and has become higher than the heavens; who does not need daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for his own sins and then for the people's, for this he did once for all [time] when he offered up himself. For the law appoints as high priests men who have weakness, but the word of the oath, which came after the law, appoints the Son who has been perfected for ever (Heb. 5:5-10; 7:1-28).

The writer to the Hebrews went on:

Christ came as high priest of the good things to come, with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands; that is, not of this creation. Not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood he entered the Most Holy Place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. For if the blood of bulls and goats, and the ashes of an heifer, sprinkling the unclean, sanctifies for the purifying of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? And for this reason, he is the mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance (Heb. 9:11-15).

In short:

This is the main point of the things we are saying: We have such a high priest, who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens... If he were on earth, he would not be a priest, since there are priests who offer the gifts according to the law; and who serve the copy and shadow of the heavenly things... But now he has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as he is also mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises... This man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down at the right hand of God, from that time waiting till his enemies are made his footstool. For by one offering he has perfected for ever those who are being sanctified (Heb. 8:1-6; 10:12-14).

‘This man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down...’. Sat down? What a small thing to pick on! Seemingly small, it is, in fact, something which carries far-reaching consequences. The aaronic priests were always active, walking here, there and everywhere, constantly doing one thing after the other, lifting this and pouring that, moving from one piece of apparatus to another. Busy, busy! Always on the go! What a contrast with Christ. ‘It is finished’, he cried, and, entering heaven, he ‘sat down’. The writer to the Hebrews makes much of the fact (Heb. 1:3; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2).

And what does that tell us? It shouts it from the roof-tops. The priesthood and their sacrifices under the old covenant never saved a sinner. That is why the old-covenant priests never sat down, but were always active, never finishing their work. The levitical priests’ work was never done. They were always sacrificing. Christ, in glorious contrast, by his one sacrifice, has perfected for ever those who are being sanctified. He offers no more sacrifice. And that is why he sat down.

In the above-extracts from the letter to the Hebrews, we have the doctrine of ‘priesthood’ which, I say again, underlies all biblical teaching on the answer to the question with which I opened my book. How can sinners be made right with God? Here is the answer. By ‘priesthood’, and only by ‘priesthood’. No priest – no redemption! No sacrifice – no salvation! But, and what a ‘but’, it must be the right priest, the only priest – Christ. And it must be the right sacrifice, the only sacrifice – Christ’s precious blood. No other priest, no other sacrifice will do.

It cannot be the levitical priesthood, offering the old-covenant sacrifices. That will not do! The law was weak, powerless, ineffective (Rom. 8:3; Heb. 7:18). Perfection could not be obtained by the levitical order (Heb. 7:11). No! A different priesthood was called for. And one was ready! God had, from eternity, purposed it and prepared it (Heb. 10:1-10). And that priesthood had to be of the order of Melchizedek. And so it is. The old covenant will not do; it has to be the new covenant.

And if *that* is so – and it certainly is – if the old-covenant priesthood and sacrificial system which had been set up by God himself, as a temporary instructor for the Jews, was ineffective –



as it was – and has long since been fulfilled and abolished – as it has – how much more is it true for priestcraft. That is, any and every priestly system devised by men must be ineffective.

I say again, for a sinner to be able to come to God, he must have the right priest and the right sacrifice. No other priest, no other sacrifice will do. And Christ is the one effectual priest – Christ, priest in the order of Melchizedek. Not only that, Christ himself is that one effective sacrifice. Christ is both priest and sacrifice. Christ and his shed blood, which he as priest offered in sacrifice to God, does save from sin all those who trust him. Save? Yes, indeed. By offering his sacrificial blood to his Father, Christ redeems, sanctifies, justifies, delivers and washes the sinner from the guilt, the condemnation, the pollution, the power and – one day – the presence of sin. Christ takes all who trust him and his sacrifice, and presents them faultless to his Father. Having completed his work on the cross, having accomplished the redemption of his people in his sacrificial death (Matt. 1:21; John 19:28,30; 1 Tim. 1:15), he was buried, rose from the dead and ascended into glory, back to his Father. And there he sits, his believing people can say, ‘even at the right hand of God’, where he ‘also makes intercession for us’ (Rom. 8:34), making ‘intercession for the saints according to the will of God’ (Rom. 8:27). As we are told, ‘he always lives to make intercession for them’ (Heb. 7:25). To overhear the sort of things he prays, may I suggest you read through John 17?

Earlier I quoted Spurgeon. Let me take the extract further:

All the world desires a way to God. Hence men set up priests and anoint them with oil, and smear them with I know not what, only that they may be mediators between them and God. They must have something to come between their guilt and God's glorious holiness. Oh! if they knew it, what they need is Christ. You need no priest, but the great ‘apostle and high priest of our profession’. You need no mediator with God, but the one mediator, the man Christ Jesus, who is also equal with God. Oh! world, why will you gad about to seek

this priest and that other deceiver, when he whom you need is appointed by the Most High?<sup>17</sup>

Reader, if you are trusting in the merits and sacrifice of that great high priest, the Lord Jesus Christ, to save you from your sin, then you have inherited all the eternal benefits of the work of your glorious Redeemer. He is yours, and you are his, for ever. He has taken all your sins, and you have received all his righteousness. 'God... made [Christ] who knew no sin to be sin [or a sin offering] for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in him' (2 Cor. 5:20-21). In other words, God has justified you. By Christ's death, by Christ's righteousness, you are accounted righteous in God's sight (Rom. 5:18-19). Moreover, with all the saints you can say: 'Having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ' (Rom. 5:1). You are free of condemnation, now (Rom. 8:1,33-34). Christ has sanctified you, perfectly separated you unto God (John 17:19; 1 Cor. 1:2,30; 6:11; Eph. 5:25-27; Heb. 2:11; 10:10,14) by his Spirit (2 Thess. 2:13-14; 1 Pet. 1:1-2). Not only that. Christ, having accomplished your salvation on the cross, and, having been raised from the dead, entered heaven, where he ever lives to plead the merits of his person and his finished work on your behalf.

In company, therefore, with all who trust the Lord Jesus Christ as both Lord and Saviour, you may rejoice. You may delight in God, and with a deeply-felt sense of peace, rest in the glorious assurance that you are at all times – and for ever – welcome in his presence. From your heart, not merely with your voice, you can sing of your great high priest who represents you in the courts of heaven, and always speaks for you. You can delight in his priesthood, you can sing of it. It is no fantasy! The Lord Jesus, your Redeemer, lives, prays and reigns in heaven for *you*. Perhaps the following words, by Charitie L.Bancroft, will enable you to express in song what you now know to be the truth, and what you have come to feel in your heart:

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<sup>17</sup> In the extract (downloaded from [spurgeon.org/sermons/3442.htm](http://spurgeon.org/sermons/3442.htm)), I have changed Spurgeon's four uses of 'want' to 'need' – which is, of course, precisely what he meant.

*Priesthood: Our Need, God's Provision*

*Before the throne of God above  
I have a strong, a perfect plea,  
A great High Priest, whose name is love,  
Who ever lives and pleads for me.*

*My name is graven on his hands,  
My name is written on his heart.  
I know that while in heaven he stands<sup>18</sup>  
No tongue can bid me thence depart.*

*When Satan tempts me to despair,  
And tells me of the guilt within,  
Upward I look and see him there  
Who made an end of all my sin.*

*Because the sinless Saviour died,  
My sinful soul is counted free.  
For God the just is satisfied  
To look on him and pardon me.*

*Behold him there! the risen Lamb!  
My perfect, spotless righteousness,  
The great unchangeable I AM,  
The King of glory and of grace.*

*One with himself I cannot die.  
My soul is purchased by his blood,  
My life is hid with Christ on high,  
With Christ my Saviour and my God.*

And that's not the end of it. One day, this glorious high priest, the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory (1 Cor. 2:8; Jas. 2:1), will come and take you to himself into eternal glory (Heb. 9:28), making you completely like himself (John 17:24; Rom. 8:29-30; 1 John 3:1-2). You will then be utterly, completely and eternally saved from your sin. And your joys will never end.

One final note. Not only does Christ, as priest and sacrifice, save his people from their sin, he unites them to himself here and now. The fact is, this is how he saves them from their sin. This is how he justifies them. All that he is, all that he has accomplished,

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<sup>18</sup> Would the hymn writer have preferred 'appears', but poetic licence, and all that? The truth is, as I have just explained, Christ now sits. But, let us not forget, Christ stood to receive Stephen (Acts 7:55-56).

*Priesthood: Our Need, God's Provision*

belongs to each and every one of his people. He and his people are one.

And a corollary or effect of that union with Christ – a very important corollary, too – is that all believers are themselves priests of God. Yes, it is true. Staggering as it may seem, nevertheless it is a fact. By reason of their union with Christ, as a consequence of their union with Christ, believers themselves are made royal priests of the Lord God himself (1 Pet. 2:4-10; Rev. 1:6; 5:10; 20:6).

Why leave it in the third person? Believer, all this is *yours*. In and through Christ, *you* are a priest. As such, *you* are a member of that select band, ‘the priesthood of all believers’. And exploring that priesthood is what my book, *The Priesthood of All Believers*, is all about. I invite you to read it.

## *The Rise of the Anabaptists*

Many of the saints I shut up in prison... and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. And I punished them often... and compelled them to blaspheme; and being exceedingly enraged against them, I persecuted them even to foreign cities

Acts 26:10-11

It is night in Zurich on the 21st of January, 1525, and the snow lies thick upon the ground.<sup>1</sup> A lone man, wrapped against the bitter wind and keeping to the shadows, trudges along the street known as Neustadt close by the Grossmunster. He stops, glances furtively about him, then knocks gently upon a door, his breath coming hoary in the frosty air. He rubs his numbed hands together and stamps his feet in the snow. The door is opened a mere crack. For a brief moment the shadowy snow is dimly yellowed by the flickering light from within. The man kicks the snow from his boots and steps quickly across the threshold. The door is closed, the bolt shot home. The street falls dark and silent once more – apart from the mournful moan of the freezing wind.

A second man comes into the street, clinging to the shadows. He also steps inside the house. He is followed by two others; then another... Within a few minutes, twelve or so men are packed into the room of the house which belongs to Felix Manz. Their breath hangs misty, their faces reddened with cold. They blow upon their numb fingers, rub their arms and nervously shuffle their feet. But their spirits are even colder than their bodies. Disappointment, sadness, grief is scored upon their features, especially about their eyes. Their hearts are heavy with anxious care – too full for words. ‘Are we all here? Good! Well, let’s pray then’.

They fall upon their knees. Words come now.

O Lord God Most High in heaven, hear us. You are the God who teaches and guides all hearts, grant us your direction, guide us, show

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<sup>1</sup> I have taken this material from my *Battle* pp42-60. You may also listen to me reading it on a free download of my audio book (David H J Gay Ministry sermonaudio.com).

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us your mercy. Help us, O Lord, for our flesh is weak. Help us, O Lord, for without your help we shall not be able to withstand the persecution and the suffering which will surely come upon us...

Their prayers come to an end. Slowly they rise to their feet. One, George Blaurock, speaks, his eyes meeting those of one of the others:

Conrad Grebel, I ask you... for God's sake, baptise me... baptise me with the true baptism, with Christian baptism. I acknowledge my faith in Christ. Baptise me, I ask you.

Conrad Grebel obeys the request of his friend and baptises him, following which Blaurock baptises all the others. Each man professes himself to be a true believer in Christ. Each promises to follow Christ as a true disciple should. Each pledges to live his life separated from the world. And they promise to teach the gospel and maintain the faith together.

In this way, on the 21st of January, 1525, in Zurich, Anabaptism was born. That wintry night, the first church of the Anabaptists came into existence. A little more than seven brief years had passed since Martin Luther nailed his theses to the door at Wittenberg when this church was formed. Its members were those, and only those, who had been baptised upon profession of their faith in Christ.

This was a step of the utmost significance. It was nothing short of a revolution. By this act, a mighty blow was struck in the struggle for the church, since this was the greatest, the most complete break with Rome which could have taken place. It is not too much to say that more than a thousand years of the Church system which had been imposed by Rome on millions of men and women, and the slavery which she had enforced by a reign of terror throughout Europe, were broken that night in the house of Felix Manz by this tiny handful of brothers. It is a gross understatement to say that Rome would fight back, but the zenith of her power had passed. These dozen or so men had possessed the audacity to wrench their shackles off! And thousands of enslaved believers would follow them. Thousands upon thousands! Nevertheless, the first Anabaptists could not have realised just how immense a step they had taken. These Swiss

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Christians had simply obeyed their understanding of God's word, dared to follow the teaching of Scripture on the doctrine of the church, and in this way a church had been formed on the only basis known in the New Testament. The consequences would be felt throughout Europe; what is more, throughout the world. They will be felt as long as time shall be.

These Swiss believers were not the first to reject infant baptism and the theories of Constantine. Oh no! During the Dark Ages there had been those who denounced the Papacy, and – among other things – baptised only believers. Some formed churches of such. Interestingly, among the scores of abusive labels which had been given to them by the Papists down the centuries, one was Anabaptist! Unfortunately, many of the details of their heroic struggles have been lost as a consequence of the tremendous war Rome unleashed upon them. But men such as Peter of Bruys, who laboured in the south of France, and was burned at the stake in 1124, and Henry of Lausanne, who was condemned at the Council of Rheims in 1148, and languished in solitary confinement and starvation until he died, are all known to God. Also some of the Waldenses and Albigenses were forerunners of the Anabaptists of Zurich. As only to be expected, we mainly – or only – know about these and similar believers through the censures of the Papists. Nevertheless, the scant details we have tell us that Rome did not have it all her own way, not even at the height of her power. God did not leave himself without witness (Acts 14:17). No, not even in the Dark Ages.

But why were the Swiss believers so sad in 1525? And why so furtive?

They were sad because, by their obedience to Christ, they had been forced to forsake their friend Ulrich Zwingli. In the same year that Luther made his protest against Rome, Ulrich Zwingli, a priest in the Roman Church, was reading the recently published Greek New Testament. He was struggling with the things he discovered there, for God was speaking to him about his sin and about the only Saviour of sinners, the Lord Jesus Christ. By 1519, Zwingli was converted. An outbreak of the plague had concentrated his mind on eternal things, and he found help by the

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study of the teachings of Luther. Above all, he was led to faith in Christ by his reading of the New Testament.

By 1522, Zwingli was in Zurich in charge of the reformation taking place there. Around him were several young men who had been converted through his ministry. These young men, endowed with outstanding ability, were vigorous in faith and all were eager to learn as they studied the Greek New Testament under Zwingli's instruction. The group included Conrad Grebel and Felix Manz, among others. All of them were committed to the furtherance of the gospel; all of them were zealous for Christ; and all of them were more than willing to play their part in the battle which was raging for the recovery of the church. Indeed, they were eager for it.

Sadly, by the end of 1523, sharp differences arose between Zwingli and several of the young men over the correct way to proceed and bring about the full reformation of the church. Zwingli at first agreed with the others that the Scriptures, and only the Scriptures, should determine what was to be done in the church. But he drew back from that position. For example, although he knew the Mass was an abomination according to the teaching of the Bible, he was unwilling to abolish it until the town council gave him the authority. All the same, at one stage he did make up his mind to end the observance of the Mass, and he actually went as far as to set a date for the momentous step – Christmas Day, 1523. However, a short while before the day arrived, he abandoned his plans. The young men felt betrayed by their erstwhile friend and teacher.

The question of baptism was also raised among them – even before the ending of the Mass. Zwingli went so far as to assert that infant baptism was not valid, since it was not warranted by Scripture, and he even preached against it. But in this matter, as in the question of the Mass, he compromised and drew back from his stated position.

All this was a great source of sadness to the young men, and could so easily have shaken their resolve and dampened their ardour. Nonetheless, they knew they must continue to follow Scripture and obey Christ. If this meant they had to sever the precious bonds of friendship with their former teacher, then so be



it. They owed much to Zwingli, but they owed everything to Christ.

Yet why were they so secretive about it? What was there to be afraid of? The answer is, a great deal! Their fears were fully justified and arose directly out of the dominance of Constantine ideas in the Church and State. I referred to this in the previous chapter. We shall look into the matter a little more fully at this point.

### ***Church and State after Constantine***

The step the Anabaptists took that night in the house of Felix Manz amounted to a rejection of the Church system which had dominated Europe since the days of the Roman Emperor Constantine early in the 4th century. As previously explained, Constantine had taken steps which led to the joining together of the State and the Church, fusing it into one body – something completely foreign to the New Testament – thereby forcing Christianity upon men by the power of civil law. Although all the changes did not come in overnight, from that time on, to belong to the State (that is, to be a citizen of a country) would come to mean the same thing as being a member of the Church. In this way, the nonsensical notion of a ‘Christian country’ was born. Although the story is complicated, and there were many twists and turns, it was not long before the pope ousted the Emperor as head of Church and State – there can be only one head! – and from that time the Papacy locked Europe in its iron grip. Shrewdly taking over the apparatus of government – both spiritual and temporal – the Roman hierarchy enforced its will on all the people by what amounted to a virtual police-state throughout the Continent.

Entrance to this Universal Church was brought about by infant baptism at the hand of a priest. Every infant in the State was baptised; every baptised infant was said to be regenerate; every baptised infant was a member of the Church. If any man dared to leave the Church, even if such a thing were possible, he became virtually Stateless. Excommunication by the Church authorities meant the removal of the apostate from the Church, but it also signalled his or her expulsion from the State. That is a pleasant

way of putting it. It meant exile or execution, of course. The cost in human suffering was colossal. Thousands were slaughtered. Thus the huge numbers of men and women who were burned at the stake or strangled or drowned in the name of religion during the Dark Ages, were executed as a direct consequence of the edicts of Constantine. Indeed, the same kind of reasoning has been responsible for the martyrdom of countless men and women in the name of religion – grievously, not excepting ‘Christ’ – ever since. We shall meet the dire practice repeatedly in these pages. It is one of the major threads which binds this history together.

Relations between the Church and the State became very complicated after the Emperor Constantine’s so-called conversion. Until that time the New Testament position largely prevailed; that is, Christians believed that the church and the State were both instituted by God, that they had distinct and separate powers, and it was wrong for either body to trespass on the realm of the other. In other words, the church did not try to organise the State; nor did the church allow itself to be organised by the State. The two kingdoms were separate. However, the State would not long tolerate this independent spiritual body which thrived among its citizens, so it soon began to persecute the church, and many saints were put to death by the civil authorities. This brutality commenced even in New Testament times, as is clear from the many references to it. (See, for example, Matt. 10:17-18,23; Acts 4:1-30; 5:17-18,27-28,40-41; 8:1; 9:1; 12:1-4; 18:12; Heb. 10:32-34; Rev. 2:10,13; see also, perhaps, Acts 21:33; 22:24). Nevertheless, the church continued to prosper spiritually despite – or because of – the persecution, and it generally managed to keep itself free of State influence. But in the early years of the 4th century, Constantine brought the persecution to an end by virtually welding the Church and State into one body, thus forming the monolithic State-Church. Once established, this then became the norm for over a thousand years. It was a tragedy of mammoth dimensions.

From the time of Constantine, either the Church or the State could be master of this man-made monster, the State-Church. But only one of the partners could be master, not both. When it was offered the chance, the Papacy made sure the Church was

dominant over the State. On occasions the roles were reversed, and the State ruled the Church – a condition known as Erastianism, so named after one Thomas Erastus, who was born in Switzerland in 1524. Erastianism, however, existed long before Erastus. For example, it was a feature of the Council of Clarendon in 1164 which proposed that the excommunication of a nobleman should only be allowed with the king's consent. By this dogma, the Church became a mere department of State. The Church of England, for one, adopted Erastian principles.

Between the two extremes – domination of the Church by the State and *vice-versa* – a third expedient was adopted by the Reformers, following Luther's break with Rome. They approved of Constantine's fusion of the Church and State, and they said that both constituents are of equal status, equal partners in the State-Church union. That was the teaching of Luther, Zwingli and, later, John Calvin, along with the rest of the Reformers, as I will show. At least, it was so in theory. I will develop this enigmatic point as the story unfolds. It was the position the Presbyterians would eventually adopt in due course. But the claim of equality for the two partners of the State-Church coalition proved a severely unstable position. So much so, either the one or the other inevitably came to dominate the partnership. The truth is, the measures the Reformers put in place led to a virtual Erastianism in the Reformed Churches; that is, the domination of the Church by the State. But in 1525 all that lay in the future.

As I said, Constantine complicated matters. He did worse than that. Far worse. He started the wholesale corruption of the scriptural relationship between the State and the church, with consequences so vile they are hard to overstate. Spurgeon had something to say about the way many regarded the Emperor through rose-coloured spectacles and even saw him as the glorious fulfilment of the prophecy of the man-child in Revelation 12.

C.H.Spurgeon commented:

If you refer to the expositors you will find that they discover in this passage the dragon-ensign of pagan Rome, and its removal from its position by Constantine, who set up the cross in its stead. I do not

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believe the Lord took any more interest in Constantine than in any other sinner, and it seems to me little short of blasphemous to say that he was the man-child who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron, and was caught up to God and to his throne.

Spurgeon went on to say – and his words ought to be weighed very carefully – Constantine’s ‘adoption of Christianity as the State religion was not a thing for glorified spirits to rejoice in, but a dreadful calamity, fitted only to make sport for Pandemonium. No one ever did the church a worse turn than he who first joined her to the State. The act was a piece of State policy and kingcraft and no more, a business utterly unworthy of record by an inspired pen’.

That is the truth of the matter. Yet the Papists and the Reformers thought Constantine was a triumph! In shining contrast, the Anabaptists regarded him – and rightly so – as an unmitigated disaster. They challenged the Constantine doctrine and all that followed from it by their action in Zurich in 1525. What they did was to go back to the New Testament position regarding the relations between the church and the State, and they overthrew the twelve hundred years of almost unbroken wrong-headed practice. Naturally the defenders of Constantine immediately latched on to the most visible aspect of the Anabaptist’s rebellion against the *status quo* – the question of baptism. Infant baptism was central to the entire culture of the Constantine State-Church. It was absolutely basic to it. The Papists and the Reformers put their finger on this vital point when they nicknamed the Swiss brothers ‘Anabaptists’, from the Greek word for ‘again’, because it was said that they baptised again. They ‘re-baptised’. The Anabaptists themselves denied this, and denied it emphatically. They declared that their infant baptism had not been valid; it was no baptism at all. Their baptism as believers was their one and only baptism since the baptism of infants was alien to the New Testament. This stance provoked a severe reaction against them, to put it mildly. It is this response we now look at.

***Reaction to the Anabaptists by the Papists and the Reformers***

Naturally, the Papists hated the Anabaptists and all their works and doctrines. No wonder! The ‘heretics’ had struck a blow at the very foundation of the papal system, and shaken it mightily. They had attacked the Romish method of entrance to the Church; in fact, they had attacked the very notion and basis of the Roman Church altogether. It would not be tolerated! It could not be allowed to go unpunished if the Papacy was to survive. Rome looked to her vested interests, and moved decisively to protect them. There was nothing for it. The Anabaptists must be exterminated. For this reason, Rome poured a torrent of fire upon them.

But sadder still, the Reformers also hated the Anabaptists. Luther, Zwingli, and Calvin in his turn, along with many others, were scathing of them. Far worse, the Reformers attacked and abused them with vigour. I emphasise the point I have just made – the Reformers and the Papists held similar views on the union of the Church and State, both asserting that Constantine was a triumph in the history of the church. The ‘heretics’, to the contrary, retorted that both he and his doctrine were utter disasters. The gulf could not have been wider.

The Reformers and the Papists both believed it was the magistrate’s task to enforce discipline in the church, whereas the ‘heretics’ said the magistrate had no power in Christ’s kingdom. This was to prove a battle-ground which would be fought over many times in the next one hundred and fifty years. Alas, the Reformers and the Papists proved unlikely companions in arms against the Anabaptists in the struggle for the recovery of the New Testament church. It was another instance of former enemies made allies against a common foe; almost as bad as Pilate and Herod who, sinking their differences for a while and treating Christ with contempt and mockery, ‘became friends with each other, for before that they had been at enmity with each other’ (Luke 23:11-12). What is more, between them the Papists and the Reformers had a firm grip on the levers of State, and possessed the sword which enabled them to enforce their will upon the masses. Nor did they hesitate to exercise their grisly

power – they wielded it with vigour in one form or another. The truth, however, resided with the despised ‘heretics’.

### ***The views of Zwingli and Luther – Luther especially***

Zwingli and his followers were very severe towards the Anabaptists, and persecuted them with savage intensity. He believed firmly in the power of the magistrate to carry out Church discipline. In this he was a virtual Erastian. But what was Luther’s attitude towards the Anabaptists? First of all, it is necessary to discover what Luther believed in principle, and then to see how far he worked his understanding out in practice. What did Luther think about relations between the State and the Church? What did he think about uniformity or divergency in religion? Should men be forced to practice a common religion, or could they do as they believed according to their conscience enlightened by Scripture, free of punishment? Unfortunately, there is great difficulty in defining Luther’s views on these questions, and the same goes for Calvin. The fact is, Luther’s views were complicated and confused, even ambiguous and contradictory.

Now what did Luther think of the Church and State? He simply could not make up his mind. Sometimes he viewed the church in the old Constantine manner, as a mixture of believers and unbelievers lumped together by their infant baptism – wheat and tares; that is, he, like all the Reformers, misapplied the parable of the tares. I will examine this misinterpretation of Scripture in a later chapter. By his mistaken understanding of the parable, Luther could say that ‘the temporal authorities are baptised with the same baptism as we’. By this, he meant that the Church and the State were one and the same, they constituted one body. This unity came about through the sacramental rite of infant baptism which made all citizens into Church members.

That is one aspect of his views. Yet at other times Luther regarded the church in the same way as the Anabaptists did. In other words, he thought of the church as the New Testament speaks of it – a company of the regenerate, separate from the State; that is, Luther held similar views to the Anabaptists, who taught that regeneration, followed by faith, followed by baptism,

led to New Testament church membership. The State and the church are separate. From time to time, Luther said things along those lines. So much so, it could be said of Luther that ‘the true church for him was always the church of the redeemed known only to God, manifest here and there on earth, small, persecuted and often hidden, at any rate scattered and united only in the bond of the Spirit’.

Reader, you can see how ambiguous Luther was on the make-up of the church. He simply could not decide.

Luther, in common with the Papists, also thought ‘the magistrate should be the nursing father of the Church’. But the consequence of this meant that the Church was somewhat dependent on – even beholden to – the State. Indeed, Luther went further when he made pronouncements and took steps which actually put the Church under the power of the State. For example, Luther – in desperation at the poor spiritual condition of the Church – was prepared to call upon the German nobility to reform it. In this way, he produced a Church which depended on the State to put it right, instead of it being a persecuted remnant within a pagan society, which is the biblical, and Anabaptist, concept of the church. Luther just could not see how a church could reform itself. It needed the outside power of the State to do the necessary work, he thought. Therefore, he looked to the nobility to put the reform of the Church in hand. But by this grossly mistaken view and misguided step, Luther ensured that the Church and the State became more closely linked. And worse, the Church was made subservient to the civil authority. In this appeal to the nobles, Luther actually hoped for the formation of a Christian State, though he did not believe that society could be Christianised! It was a grievous mistake on the part of Luther, born out of fear that the Reformation might collapse unless the political authorities rescued it. He hoped that recourse to the princes might be only temporary. Some hope! The reality is that ‘this timidity, which has been called prudence, did immense injury to the Reformation’, wrote J.H. Merle d’Aubigne. As a result of Luther’s mistaken action, from that time on the Reformed Church would be infiltrated by political agents, dominated by secular forces and thereby manipulated to serve the

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political ends of the State. If only Luther had followed the Anabaptists back to the New Testament! But he did not, and the Reformed Church became an arm or department of the State. The true church, the scattered remnant, would be persecuted by the secret police which would be formed, inevitably, by the Reformed State-Church.

Luther's conflicting opinions made him into an enigma. D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones rightly said:

Luther's relationship to the Anabaptists is a most fascinating one; it is a kind of ambivalent relationship. He reacted against them, and yet in a sense he admired them and was a little bit jealous of the wonderful discipline that they were able to exercise in their own churches. He had to admit that there was a quality of life in their churches which was absent in the churches to which he belonged.

We shall see the horrendous consequences of Luther's tragic mistakes – mistakes repeated by many others – as we trace the unfolding of the battle for the church during the following hundred years or so. We shall see how this attempt to use the secular arm to establish the church was tried time and time again. And with appalling consequences in blood. Sadly, the desire on the part of some Christians to use political means to gain spiritual ground is not yet dead. With the best of motives, I freely admit – but mistakenly, all the same – believers are still laying their hands on the weapons forged by Constantine. As we go on, I will enlarge upon this.

This brings us to the next point. What about the issue of uniformity in religion and its enforcement by the State? Luther was muddled over it. On the one hand he could rightly say that 'heresy is a spiritual matter and cannot be prevented by constraint... Better to let men err than to drive them to lie'. But, as we shall discover, he was prepared to adopt measures which flatly contradicted this.

The upshot of all this is, Luther's views on these matters were never clear – neither to him nor others. He never resolved his position. He contradicted himself. As d'Aubigne said:

Never perhaps was there so immense a space between the premises laid down by any man and the conduct he adopted... There was some



inconsistency in Luther: he often expressed himself in a contradictory manner on what princes ought and ought not to do in the Church. This is a point upon which the Reformer and his age had no very settled opinions.

The last few words just quoted are false. While Luther had no very settled views on these matters, it is not true to say that all the men of his age were as undecided as he. The Anabaptists had very clear convictions on the questions. And they were basically right in their views; that is, they were scriptural. The consequence of Luther's indecision and mistaken opinions was dreadful.

And he was not alone in that.

### ***The practical effect of Luther's views***

It is time to trace out the practical effects of Luther's views. At first, he tried to form churches according to the New Testament pattern – 'to gather together such ardent souls as could be assembled in a particular locality'. But he failed. His system could not bring about the scriptural pattern. So he fell back to a second and inferior idea. Realising that the Reformed Church was in a desperate condition, he felt he had to form a 'church within the Church', drawing upon an ancient ploy of the Manichaean heretics. This misguided notion had long been taken over by the Constantine State-Church, but Luther resurrected it, spruced it up, and tried to give it a new lease of life. Nevertheless, despite his best endeavours, it failed miserably, as always. But, even so, it was not the last time this expedient would be used. Luther attempted to set up a spiritual nucleus within the carnal churches. In particular, in 1522 Luther drew up arrangements for the observance of the Lord's supper. He said that not all Church members could take the supper – only those who were truly Christian. What a dreadful mess this Constantine and Reformed view of the church leads to! Non-Christian church members? Should non-Christians be members of the church? It is not a case of non-Christians taking the supper – they ought not be in the church in the first place.

Anyway, Luther tried to restrict the Lord's supper to Christians, barring non-Christian Church members. But he failed.

Why? Because things were so bad he just could not tell who the Christians were! A contemporary, Franz Lambert, bluntly called the vast majority of them nothing but heathen! They were Church members, but they needed to be saved. We shall come back to this theme, since it was a vital issue in the battle to recover New Testament church life and order. Luther persisted in his attempt to find the spiritual nucleus of the Reformed Church – ‘he still desired to gather true believers into an inner fellowship’. But he found the procedure difficult, if not beyond him. In any case, it was contradicted by his other views and practices. Hence he drew back, and ‘by 1526 he declared his dream to be impossible’. But it was at this very point that the Anabaptists proved him wrong. What is more, though he thought the Anabaptists were so greatly mistaken, they actually fascinated him, for they demonstrated that the New Testament pattern is not to be fobbed-off as an idealistic dream; it is workable. As I noted above, Luther envied the Anabaptists and their churches in spite of himself. He really wanted their spirituality.

Luther now found himself caught in a dilemma, and he never got out of it. He never could decide whether the church is a voluntary body, made up of the regenerate – that is, the New Testament position – or if it is a territorial body, made up of every citizen baptised in infancy – the Constantine position. The Anabaptists plumped for the New Testament order. Luther wanted it, but said it could not be had.

By 1527, Luther was convinced that uniformity was essential. He was appalled at the confusion and chaos throughout Saxony with the multiplicity of separate churches which were springing up, in addition to this lack of spiritual life within the Reformed Church. There was only one solution as far as he could see. And this became ‘the big thing’ to Luther, his great idea. The Diet of Speyer in 1526 had given political power to the Electors – the heads of the German States. Luther grasped the main chance as he saw it. In every locality, there must be a single religion. There was nothing for it. A uniform religion had to be established. And the political powers would bring it about for him. They would do what he could not. Thus Germany would have one uniform religion. That would put an end to all the nonsense of various

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churches and carnality within the Reformed Church. But would it? Some hope!

And what about those who disagreed with the one enforced religion? What would Luther do with them? What is more, who would say what this uniform religion ought to be? And who, exactly, would put it into effect and enforce it? Finally, how would it be done? Luther, at first, allowed that those who disagreed with the form of this uniform Church could migrate to lands where they might find a more favourable environment. Further, he turned to the Elector to set up a board of 'Visitors' under the authority of the politicians, to bring in this one religion. Thus he put the Church into a position where it was under the thumb of the State.

The Anabaptists would have none of it. Not at any price! They were not going to be cowed into submission, nor would they just go away. Therefore just what could Luther do with them? In the beginning, he showed himself unwilling to butcher them, as the Zwinglians were doing. In 1527, he said, in reference to the Anabaptists:

It is not right, and I am deeply troubled that the poor people are so pitifully put to death, burned and cruelly slain. Let everyone believe what he likes. If he is wrong, he will have punishment enough in hell fire. Unless there is sedition, one should oppose them with Scripture... With fire you won't get anywhere.

At this stage, Luther was thinking in terms of the death penalty – in this regard of enforcing religious uniformity – only for the crime of sedition. The Anabaptists were free to believe and practice as they wished, as long as they were not seditious. If they were not rebellious, or did not incite disobedience to the State, they would be allowed liberty. But, of course, since the State and the Reformed Church were fast becoming virtually one and the same body, disagreement with the tenets of the Lutheran Church, and rebellion against the State, became very difficult to distinguish. However, even as late as June, 1528, Luther still thought banishment was sufficient punishment for the Anabaptists. He said: 'I cannot admit that false teachers are to be put to death. It is enough to banish'. But, by 1529, at the Second Diet of Speyer, things had moved, and moved with a vengeance.

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The death sentence was passed upon Anabaptists, and John, Elector of Saxony, began to execute them.

Luther was caught. He was trapped, enmeshed in the iron cogs of the State-Church machine which he had built, or which he had allowed to be built. By his foolish, misguided words and actions, he had fashioned a monster. He had made, he had forged, the State and the Reformed Church into one body. The engines of persecution, torture and death now began to grind the poor heretics to powder, to ashes. Luther fudged and squirmed. But he could not get free. In 1530, he went further in his opposition to the Anabaptists, perhaps driven on in spite of himself. He pronounced the death penalty upon them for blasphemy as well as sedition, defining both offences very narrowly. Then, in 1531, Philipp Melanchthon, Luther's fellow-German Reformer, produced a notorious *Memorandum* which Luther duly signed. This defined blasphemy even more tightly. For example, any criticism of the ministerial office – as defined by the enforcing power, that is – was called an 'insufferable blasphemy'. Another infamous *Memorandum* followed in 1536, again from Melanchthon, and again signed by Luther. Now *all* Anabaptists were to be put to death, not merely the political fanatics among them.

An indication of Luther's attitude during this diabolical confusion in which he was entangled by his own mistakes, is to be seen in the case of the thirty Anabaptists held by Philip of Hesse. Philip consulted various bodies – cities and universities – to determine what he should do with his prisoners. He had tried banishment, but they had not yielded. What could he do next? He was unwilling to execute them. Hence he consulted for advice. The sternest replies came from the Lutherans. Melanchthon argued that even passive resistance by the heretics must be met with death, and Luther actually signed the dreadful document. From now on, if anybody protested that it was wrong to punish those who dissented from the one State religion, that in itself was accounted blasphemy and merited death! The Anabaptists, with their practice of believer's baptism and separated churches, were an offence against God. They were an offence against the State-Church. They must die!

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Luther tried to salve his conscience by adding postscripts to Melanchthon's *Memoranda*. He wrote: 'I assent. Although it seems cruel to punish them with the sword, it is crueller that they condemn the ministry of the Word and have no well-grounded doctrine and suppress the true, and in this way seek to subvert the civil order'. Contradicting himself, he added an appeal for mercy. But it was no use. It was too late. Things had gone too far, and the State machine was beyond his control. It had a life of its own. It cannot be denied – Luther himself grew hardened as the slaughter went on.

But despite its severity, all the persecution was utterly useless. Take Fritz Erbe as just a single example. Even though Erbe died in the Wartburg after sixteen years imprisonment, it was said that his continued 'steadfastness... had converted... half of the populace of Eisenach to Anabaptism'. Anabaptist growth was phenomenal.

I have said that Luther acted against his own principles. It hardly seems credible that the man who persecuted the Anabaptists with such savagery, could condemn himself so clearly in his own writings. For example, on the church and the State, he said: 'One must carefully distinguish between these two governments... one to produce righteousness, the other to bring about external peace and prevent evil deeds'. Again, with homely illustration in order that everybody could understand, he said:

Constantly I must pound in and squeeze in and drive and wedge in this difference between the two kingdoms, even though it is written and said so often that it becomes tedious. The devil never stops cooking and brewing these two kingdoms into each other. In the devil's name the secular leaders always want to be Christ's masters and teach him how he should run his church and spiritual government... May God hinder him [that is, the devil], amen.

Again he wrote:

The temporal government has laws which extend no further than to life and property and external affairs on earth, for God cannot and will not permit anyone but himself to rule over the soul. Therefore, when the temporal authority presumes to prescribe laws for the soul, it encroaches upon God's government and only misleads souls and destroys them. We want to make this so clear that everyone will

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grasp it, and that our fine gentlemen, the princes and bishops, will see what fools they are when they seek to coerce the people with their laws and commandments into believing this or that... I think it is clear enough here that the soul is taken out of all human hands and is placed under the authority of God alone.

Luther's frustration over men who continued to confuse the church and the State came to the surface in the open letter which he penned in 1525. He declared: 'There are two kingdoms, one the kingdom of God, the other the kingdom of the world. I have written this so often that I am surprised that there is anyone who does not know or remember it... Now he who would confuse these two kingdoms... is the same as putting the devil in heaven and God in hell'.

It certainly seems that Luther had grounds for his frustration. The vast majority did confuse the two kingdoms. But there was one distinguished man above all others who did 'not know or remember' what Luther wrote. There was one man in particular who confused the two kingdoms. Unfortunately, that man was Martin Luther himself.

What is more, it would not have been so bad if he and his friends could have kept their bitterness to words, words which were as harsh as they could think of. Luther vented his spleen when he called the Anabaptists 'sneaks, corner preachers, fanatical enthusiasts, re-baptisers'. That last attack was the nub of it, of course. Another Lutheran gave voice to a blanket criticism; the Anabaptists were attempting 'to pervert everything in this human life', he said. They were the worst heretics of all time, apparently. Bad enough, in all conscience! If only the onslaught could have stayed at that level. Sadly, the Lutherans matched their actions with their words.

The Anabaptists were not perfect, needless to say. They made their mistakes; and some of their mistakes were grievous, and cost them dear. However, it must be borne in mind that there was no organised body that can rightly be called 'The Anabaptists', though, like so many authors, I am forced to write as though there were. Rather, there were thousands of individuals, several factions, and hundreds of separated churches all called Anabaptists, even though no coordinated, homogeneous body

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ever existed. What is more, their diversity was highly complex. Nor was it possible that these various churches and loose groupings could profess a universal, uniform faith. Also it has to be admitted, to put it bluntly, some adopted heretical views, especially on the person of Christ, and whether salvation depends on the grace of God or the so-called free will of man. Some Anabaptists were themselves intolerant of any dissent. Some spoke of the Reformers in a wild, harsh way, ignoring the vast amount of good which God accomplished through them.

Reader, I hope I have said enough to show you that I do not regard the Anabaptists as perfect. My opinion must be obvious. If I felt that the Anabaptists represented churches closest to the New Testament during the one hundred and twenty years I write of, my book would stop now! What is more, if we all became Anabaptists similar to the way they developed in the 16th century, Utopia would not be ushered in.

Having said that much, it is right to speak of the way the Anabaptists and the Reformers clashed over the connection between the State and the church, and to come to a judgment on it. On that issue, and other connected matters, I have no hesitation in asserting that the Anabaptists were largely in the right, and the Reformers were largely in the wrong. I realise that this is a gross over-simplification of the subject, but a thorough examination of the point would demand another book!

To return to the kaleidoscope presented by the Anabaptists. Some of the fringe element were extremists and they brought much trouble upon the mainstream Anabaptists by their sinful and foolish antics. For example, in 1534 some of them took over the town of Münster, announced the end time had come, and committed horrible sins in the name of Christ. This was an appalling disaster for the Anabaptists as a whole, doing their cause – indeed the cause of God – much harm for many years. But Münster was not their only catastrophe in the 16th century. A later development led some of them to hold and teach defective views on the person of Christ. This again brought much abuse upon them, and many paid for their errors at the stake. All the same, it was wrong to blame all of them for the sins and excesses

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of a minority like the men of Münster, for instance. And, in any case, what a dreadful act, to burn men for erroneous beliefs! As the Anabaptists aptly remarked, this is no way to convert people! Even so, the Reformers found it very convenient to blacken the character of all the Anabaptists with the sins of a minority, or even with the excesses of the lunatic fringe, and it was a tactic often used throughout the time this book deals with. The unjust smear has been repeated very frequently ever since. All the Anabaptists were branded with the outrages of Münster, even though the evils were committed by only a few of them. And the cheap vilification was a great wrong! Sad to record, some critics to this day want to tar all Anabaptists with the brush of Münster.<sup>2</sup>

\* \* \*

However all that is to anticipate. We have got ahead of ourselves, somewhat. To go back to 1525...

Zwingli and the Zurich council were especially bitter against the Anabaptists. Such was the ferocity of the persecution which the authorities meted out, the 'heretics' had to flee. But there was precious little respite for them even in that. Wherever they went, the Reformers and the Papists were vehement in their persecution so that the 'heretics' were scattered again and again, driven homeless throughout Europe, being forced to seek temporary refuge wherever they could find it.

Nevertheless, yet again God was working out his purposes for his church. Because of the persecution they had to endure, the doctrine of the Anabaptists was heard throughout the entire Continent; Germany, Poland, Moravia, the Low Countries, Norway, Italy and England, all were drawn into the battle for the church. All these nations heard again the New Testament teaching on church life. It was similar to the experience of the early church, but instead of Saul, now it was Rome and the Reformers who were guilty:

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<sup>2</sup> I am delighted to be able to record that there are signs of improvement in recent years. See my *Infant* and my *Baptist*.



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At that time a great persecution arose against the church... and they were all scattered... Saul... made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison. Therefore those who were scattered went everywhere preaching the word (Acts 8:1-4).

By this 16th-century scattering, thousands were forced to witness the savage persecution meted out to the Anabaptists, in addition to listening to their preaching, and watch their daily lives – thousands who might never have heard of them otherwise. Thus many flocked to join them, swelling their ranks massively as a direct result. Once again, by the will of God, those who opposed the New Testament teaching on the church actually contributed to their own downfall and to the advance of the church of Christ. The more the Anabaptists were ‘mown down’, the more they grew.

But, to put it mildly, the persecution was dreadful in the extreme. Men, women and *children* suffered agonies and torments beyond the power of words to describe. It is a wonder that flesh and blood could bear it. The Anabaptists were exiled, clapped in irons, kept barely alive on bread and water; they were tied together in chains, the first pushed into the river to drown, each pulling the next in to drown as he died. Many were burned at the stake; some were beheaded; others were branded; others had fingers torn off; some had their tongue pierced through with a stick, or cut out altogether; others had pieces of flesh ripped off with red hot pincers. Some were locked in their meeting houses and burned alive. And all because they would obey Christ as he has revealed his mind in Scripture. They would not baptise their infants, and they would form churches only out of regenerate men and women.

Reader, what do you say to this? What do you say of yourself in the light of such things? Are you obedient to Christ? Do you try to do all that he teaches you in his word? Or are you making excuses for disobedience? These Anabaptists put Christ before everything and everyone; they reckoned that obedience to their Saviour was their one chief concern in life. Although former friends turned against them, hated them and persecuted them, it did not hinder them in their obedience. To speak plainly – what

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tawdry excuses are often made for rank disobedience to Christ these days. Too often it is a case of anything for a quiet life. Christ comes way down the list of priorities for a great many. Reader, what about you?

Listen to these words of Christ. You know them well enough I am sure, but let me remind you of them:

Therefore whoever confesses me before men, him will I confess before my Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies me before men, him I will also deny before my Father who is in heaven. Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a man's foes will be those of his own household. He who loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me. And he who loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. And he who does not take up his cross and follow after me is not worthy of me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it (Matt. 10:32-39).

These words apply to all things in the Christian faith. And this includes church life – your church life. What is your response to Christ, now?

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The first to be executed as an Anabaptist was Felix Manz. He died at the hands of the Zurich authorities under Zwingli. Manz was born the illegitimate son of a papist priest. He was well educated, a thorough Hebrew scholar, and versed in both Latin and Greek. Not only so, he was an eloquent preacher. In the early days at Zurich he was a firm friend of Zwingli and supported him in the reforms. In 1522, he began to question the notion of a State Church and the validity of infant baptism. Manz tried to help Zwingli see the teaching of the New Testament, but Zwingli broke with him. As explained above, it was at the house of Felix Manz that the first Anabaptist church was formed in January, 1525.

After that auspicious day, Manz engaged in preaching the gospel in the fields and in his mother's house. He was arrested and expelled from the town, but he was eventually brought back

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to be imprisoned at Zurich. He escaped with twenty others, and not long after he was reported to be baptising. The Reformed pastors tried to silence him, but he was resolute. He was arrested again, and accused that he had declared that 'he would seek out those who wished to accept Christ and follow his word, and he would unite with them by baptism'. For this, the death sentence was pronounced upon him:

Manz shall be delivered to the executioner, who shall tie his hands, put him into a boat, take him to the lower hut, there strap his bound hands down over his knees, place a stick between his knees and arms, and thus push him into the water and let him perish in the water... his property shall also be confiscated...

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It is a cold, winter's afternoon about three o'clock, the 5th of January, 1527, and there is a keen, biting edge to the wind. The gate of the Wellenberg prison is thrown open, and Felix Manz is led on his last journey, past the fish market down to a waiting boat. He raises his voice and calls out to the crowds, preaching as he goes, praising God that, even though he is a sinner, he is privileged to die for the truth. His powerful voice declares, among other things, that believer's baptism is the only true baptism.

At last, Felix Manz reaches the river Limmat which flows swiftly and dark in the last light of the wintry afternoon as dusk closes in. The thronging crowds fall silent and still. They catch and hold their breath. A voice rings out across the water; a woman's voice. It is his mother who calls to him:

Remain true to Christ, my son... remain true to Christ. Do not yield to the temptation... do not yield...

The river bank falls silent once more as the echo of her words dies away. The sentence of death is read. Manz is put into the boat. His hands are tied over his knees. The block is thrust between his arms and legs. One last word! Manz cries out in Latin: 'Into thy hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit'. He is tied to a hurdle and thrown into the river. The dark, cold waters quickly surge over his head. Down, down he slides. Instinctively,

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he gasps for air. The struggle proves too much. The river flows gurgling on. Felix Manz is dead. He has proved that his words to the town council were no idle boast:

I hereby resolve that I will remain faithful to Christ, and put my trust in him who knows my every distress, and is mighty to deliver. Amen.

Felix Manz was only twenty-six years old when he gave his life in the conflict for the recovery of the New Testament church. I have no doubt that in his death he experienced the truth of his own words in a richer and fuller sense than ever before:

*With gladness will I sing now;  
My heart delights in God,  
Who showed me such forbearance,  
That I from death was saved  
Which never hath an end.  
I praise thee, Christ in heaven,  
Who all my sorrow changed.*

## ‘A Threefold Cord’

‘What shall we do with these men?... But so that it spreads no further among the people, let us severely threaten them, that from now on they speak to no man in this name’. And they called them and commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered and said to them: ‘Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you more than to God, you judge. For we cannot but speak the things which we have seen and heard’... ‘Now, Lord, look on their threats, and grant to your servants that with all boldness they may speak your word’

Acts 4:16-20,29

In the early 1580s, after twenty-five years on the throne, Elizabeth still dominated the Church of England.<sup>1</sup> She was not its Supreme Governor in name only! Insisting on uniformity at every turn, she detested the Puritans, while hating the Anabaptists along with the new-fangled Separatists who were now beginning to form churches. The authorities had clamped down upon the Puritans, largely beating them into a grudging and sullen submission by this time, although the measures against them remained in force. Archbishop Whitgift compelled every minister of the State Church to subscribe to the Royal Supremacy in all matters, to pledge unqualified assent to the Thirty-Nine Articles, and to use only the *Book of Common Prayer* in worship. In 1584, a list of twenty-four questions on disputed points was presented to every Church of England minister, to be answered on oath. In addition, to put a stop to all opposition, printing was forbidden unless licensed by the Star Chamber. But, although the Puritans were emasculated, the Separatists proved more difficult to browbeat. The fact is, though worship outside the State system was entirely illegal, an increasing number were daring to do it.

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<sup>1</sup> I have taken this material from my *Battle* pp192-202. You may also listen to me reading it on a free download of my audio book (David H J Gay Ministry sermonaudio.com). Strictly speaking, this article does not address issues involved in new-covenant theology. Nevertheless, men such as my three subjects were striving towards *ekklēsia* life as they saw it, and this is intimately connected with new-covenant theology.

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Responsibility for this could not be laid at Whitgift's door, for he was certainly zealous in the prosecution of his vigorous campaign, and the prisons rapidly filled with victims of all sorts. Some paid with their lives. Nevertheless, the rebels remained defiant. In such a time, the world came to hear of Henry Barrowe, John Greenwood and John Penry.

Barrowe, a Norfolk man who was well-connected by birth, graduated at Cambridge about the year 1570 to become a lawyer. At that time, he was a drunken, debauched young man, a rank unbeliever. One day, however, when passing a London church, he caught sound of the preacher very loud in his discourse. His companion showed no interest in going in to 'hear a man talk', as he put it, but Barrowe did, and was converted. By 1586, he belonged to a secret Separatist group in London, about a hundred strong, which was meeting in various places like houses along the river, Deptford Woods or the Gravel Pits at Islington. It is probable that the group had developed out of the secret church of 1567-70 where Richard Fitz was pastor, although this company did not actually become a church until 1592. One John Greenwood was another member.

Greenwood graduated at Cambridge about the year 1580, and was much influenced by the radical Puritan teaching there, the memory of Thomas Cartwright and Robert Browne remaining very much alive. He became an Anglican minister, then a zealous Puritan chaplain in Essex, but remained deeply affected by the teaching of Browne. Moving to London, he associated with the Separatists, where he fell in with Barrowe.

The secret company of Separatists used to gather all day each Lord's day for prayer and exposition of Scripture, starting at five in the morning. Any brother was at liberty to preach or pray since the group rejected all Anglican notions of worship. There was a precious sense of charity among the members, especially when relieving the needs of any who were arrested and sent to prison. When in prison himself and looking back in fond remembrance of those times, Barrowe said:

So sweet is the harmony of God's graces unto me in the congregation and the conversation of the saints at all times, as I think myself a sparrow on the house-top when I am exiled from them.

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Whitgift's spies were everywhere. Greenwood was seized reading the Scriptures in a house on the 7th of October, 1586, and thrown into the Clink. On hearing the grievous news, Barrowe did not try to run away and hide. Quite the opposite – he actually rode to the Clink to visit his friend, but on the way he happened to discuss the New Testament teaching about the office of a bishop with a fellow-traveller, who then betrayed him to the authorities. When Barrowe arrived at the prison, they were waiting for him. He was allowed in, but not allowed out! After his arrest, the officials quickly sought the warrants necessary to legalise their unlawful actions.

In his several trials, Barrowe did not always conduct his defence wisely, using somewhat rough language on occasion. But, it must be remembered, the times were brutal. He may have used stern words; his enemies took sterner measures. Generally, in their trials, the Separatists defined their position with clarity and simplicity, conducting themselves with humility against the jeers of the tyrannical Star Chamber. But Barrowe was blunt – in the extreme, some would say – but who can cast the first stone? Addressing Whitgift face to face, he dared to call him a 'beast' and a 'monster'. It was true enough, but he probably paid for his penetrating words – with his life. The truth is he was not out to save his skin. It was the thought of the terrible sufferings that men and women were enduring – just because they wanted to worship God according to the New Testament – which always stirred him to the depths. Rightly, he would not stand on genteel ceremony with men who were responsible for the crushing of his brothers and sisters. He could write, in a moving appeal born of 'tortured helplessness' as he put it, that 'these enemies of God detain in their hands within the prisons about London, about three score and twelve persons, men, women, young and old, lying in cold, in hunger, in dungeons and in irons'. He had no time or wish to bandy fine words with the 'enemies of God'. If seventy-two Separatist prisoners were locked away in London, it can only be wondered how many of them languished in gaols in the rest of the country.

The main accusations against Barrowe were that he had dared to say that the parish system of the Church of England, in which

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no distinction is made between believers and unbelievers, means that such assemblies are not true churches; that no prince can make laws for the church other than Christ allows in his word; that the worship of the Church of England is idolatrous; that its ministry is antichristian; that the Church must reform immediately, without waiting for the prince; and that any transgressor is to be excommunicated, including the queen herself if necessary – there must be no respect of persons. Greenwood, in his trial, declared that Christ is the only head of his church and his laws cannot be altered by any man. Statements like these put both men on a direct road to the gallows.

Barrowe and Greenwood maintained that the only right and proper course for those who believe that the State Church is unscriptural is to separate from it. It is wrong of men, and dishonourable of them, to continue in a system which they do not believe in, and to accept payment from that system and to teach its doctrines and practices. These statements, of course, made uncomfortable reading for a great many, especially the Puritans who were guilty of the very things Barrowe and Greenwood denounced. The Puritans did continue in the State Church and were paid for it, even though they knew the Church was corrupt.

These were serious assertions. They are relevant today. It is always wrong and dishonourable for men to be part of a corrupt church system which they do not believe in, and to be maintained by that system for teaching and upholding practices and doctrines they know to be questionable or even false. But it is done! And not only in the State Church. Whenever men stifle conscience and act against it in order to keep their position, *and for whatever reason*, it is wrong. Doing a little evil to accomplish much good is not a Christian principle (Rom. 3:8).

The laws which had been framed against the Papists were now invoked with vigour against the Separatists. Because Barrowe and Greenwood refused to conform to the Church of England and attend 'some Church, Chapel, or usual place of Common Prayer', they were confined in the Fleet, the torture chambers of which were the most terrible in London. From their dungeon, they sent the queen a 'lamentable petition' on the 13th of March, 1588, on behalf of the miserable prisoners. Some were in cold and foul



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cells, others bound hand and foot 'with bolts and fetters of iron', they said. One man had died of gaol fever in prison, aged sixty-six. Another had been dragged from his wife and eight children, and subsequently died in prison. Two aged widows died of gaol disease. The offence common to all? They had listened to Greenwood preaching.

Reader, would you be prepared to suffer in order that you could worship in a church where you did not have to use set prayers? What price would you pay so that you could be in a church which was composed only of the regenerate? Are you willing to put yourself out in order to meet with a church to hear scriptural preaching from powerful ministers? Do you value these things – enough to pay a high price for them?

Barrowe and Greenwood did not give way under their torments. What an understatement! Nor did they gripe. Taking the fight for the recovery of the New Testament church to their enemies, during their time in prison they published a massive amount of literature. How they did it is almost too much to grasp. Think of their courage. A sentence of death hung over those engaged in this kind of work, by reason of the Star Chamber Decree. Furthermore, how could they see to write in the pitch-black darkness? And where did they get writing materials? There was no peace and quiet in the crowded, foul dungeons, no books to consult. How did they smuggle their works out of prison? But write they did. And how!

Some of the titles and subjects of their books make interesting reading in themselves: *A Brief Summary of the Causes of our Separation*; *A True Description of the Visible Congregation of the Saints* (the Separatists mistakenly continued to use the idea of 'visible' churches – see my *Infant Baptism Tested*); a treatise against read prayers; a treatise against the criticism which linked the Separatists to the Donatists, members of a protest movement in the 4th-century churches of North Africa; *A Summary of Certain Conferences in the Fleet*; a volume calling upon the queen to root out apostate ministers; *A Brief Discovery of the False Church*. This last-mentioned volume was not as brief as all that, since it was nearly four hundred pages long. And three

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thousand copies were printed! This list on its own shows that Barrowe and Greenwood were men of the highest calibre.

During 1589-90, forty-two Anglican ministers were appointed to confer with the Separatist prisoners. The preachers chosen by the authorities for this task were mainly Episcopalian Puritans. In truth, the conferences were a sham, since their real purpose was to discover the whereabouts of the secret meetings. But the underhand scheme failed utterly!

Barrowe did not buckle in the face of stern opposition, but continued his resolute fight to get the church back to the New Testament. He alleged that it is the immediate duty of the godly to separate from a corrupt church – in this case the Church of England; that parishes are no true church; that without proper spiritual discipline there can be no church, no ministry and no Lord's supper; that the Scriptures are the sole and complete guide and rule in the church; that no man can alter the least part of the Bible; that a particular church is a company of faithful and holy people gathered in the name of Christ, governed by his laws and officers. He had a high – a biblical – view of the church. He roundly declared:

Most joyful, excellent, and glorious things are everywhere in the Scriptures spoken of this church. It is called the city, house, temple, and mountain of the eternal God, the chosen generation, the holy nation, the peculiar people, the vineyard, the garden enclosed... the heritage, the kingdom of Christ, yea... his love, his spouse, his queen, and his body, the joy of the whole earth. To this society is the covenant and all the promises made of peace, of love, and of salvation, and the presence of God, of his graces, of his power and of his protection.

Barrowe opposed Presbyterianism, holding to the same church officers as Browne had done a few years before him. Nevertheless, he was somewhat confused as to the actual exercise of power in a local church. Sometimes it seems he felt the officers were the practical authority; at other times he seemed to come to a Congregational view, where the members ruled the church through the church meeting. This question of the rule of a church would prove a thorny issue among the Separatists within a few years. Barrowe believed that only the pastor could administer

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the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's supper, consequently if the pastor was in prison the church would have to go for months without the supper. The pastor must be supported financially, he claimed, but only by the monetary gifts of the believers. While it is not certain, it is possible that he was beginning to question the practice of the baptism of infants. Should it be for believers only? There is some evidence that he was thinking along these lines.

Barrowe was allowed to rot in the Fleet until 1593, 'kept by the prelates in most miserable and strict imprisonment'. He pitifully pleaded for the release of 'our poor worn bodies out of this miserable gaol', but it brought little response. The less fiery Greenwood was released for a little while in 1592. Yet, despite all the hostility they met with, the members of the London group even now did not 'play safe'. They formed themselves into a church in 1592, at the very height of their troubles, with one Francis Johnson as pastor. It became known as the Ancient church.

Barrowe and Greenwood were finally charged and sentenced to death under one of Elizabeth's statutes against the publishing of unauthorised books. On several occasions they were about to be executed but were reprieved at the last minute, once with the ropes actually tied around their necks. What harrowing experiences! But eventually, on the 6th of April, 1593, the abominable sentence was carried out, and the two Separatists were hanged at Tyburn. It is reported that just after their death the queen asked a learned adviser what he thought of the two men. 'If they had lived, they would have been two as worthy instruments for the church of God as have been raised up in this age', he replied. She asked another what end they made. 'A very godly end, and prayed for your Majesty and the State', she was told.

Meanwhile what of the third element of the threefold-cord, John Penry? He too was executed, hanged on the 29th of May, 1593.

Penry was born in 1559 in the mountains of Wales. He went to Cambridge and thence to Oxford, where Puritan influence was instrumental in converting him from his zealous Romanism. At one time, he was so eager a Papist he would break out of his rooms to go to midnight Mass. After his conversion, greatly

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sensing the joy of his salvation, Penry grieved over the state of the thousands of his fellow-Welshmen who never heard of Christ, but were given up to idolatry, swearing, adultery, theft and superstition. He was appalled that the Anglican priests were ignorant, drunken and debauched. He knew that the people of Wales were practically destitute of preaching, the bishops being too much taken up with the suppression of Puritans and Separatists in England to bother about the spiritual welfare of the Principality.

Penry did what he could to take the gospel to his home-land, single-handed. He travelled widely throughout Wales, preaching in the open air, without official position or recognition. It was reported of him that he was 'an edifying preacher and a good man... esteemed by many... with more than ordinary learning in him'. He was known as a most gifted minister, godly, full of love and compassion for souls, learned and sympathetic, devoted to the service of the gospel. He was a very effective preacher. Sinners were converted and saints were edified under his ministry, not only in Wales but in England and Scotland, too.

Naturally, this sort of preaching aroused a decadent, drunken and negligent clergy, who fought back in anger. Their jealousy expressed itself in a bitter hatred of him, whereupon he appealed to the queen and Parliament in a treatise he published in 1587. This in itself was illegal, and made him a marked man. In his book, he pleaded that preaching might be set up in Wales, 'that some ordering might be taken for the preaching of the gospel among the people'. At this stage, he was a loyal Episcopalian and submissive to the queen, clearly holding to the concept of a State Church, to be ruled and funded by Parliament. He was no Separatist, but a decided and faithful son of the established Church. He even dedicated the work to 'my fathers and brethren of the Church of England'. All he asked was that Welsh preachers should be sent to preach Christ to the Welsh in their own language. Non-resident ministers and those who merely read the Homilies should be got rid of. The crying, desperate need was for living preachers! Living in more senses than one! As for money to support them, he declared that:

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They whose hearts the Lord has touched would thresh to get their living rather than the people should want preaching. Our gentlemen and people, if they knew the good that ensues from preaching, would be soon brought to contribute.

But this kind of publication was against the law. It was a violation of the Star Chamber Decree. For this offence, Penry was roughly handled, thrown into prison for a month and then tried. The charge brought against him was that he said that ministers who never preach are no true ministers. He did not draw back. 'I thank God that I ever knew such a heresy, as I will, by the grace of God, sooner leave my life than leave it [that is, the heresy]', he declared. Whitgift retorted that he would make him recant. 'Never, God willing, so long as I live', came the staunch reply. He would prove the worth of his words.

Yet, amazingly, he was released, but continued to face persecution. Even now, he would not take the easy way out, but showed immense courage and devotion to Christ. He wrote that he could not, he would not, give up the fight. Rather, he said:

If I perish, I perish. If I might live upon this earth the days of Methuselah twice told, and that in no less comfort than Peter, James and John were in the Mount; and after this life might be sure of the kingdom of heaven; yet to gain all this, I dare not go from the former testimony to the truth of Jesus Christ. If my blood were an ocean sea, and every drop thereof were a life to me, I would give them all by the help of the Lord for the maintenance of the same my confession.

He went to Scotland where he was well-received on account of his Puritan principles and he was allowed to preach freely. In September, 1592, Penry's thoughts once again turned home-wards to Wales, and he returned to London in order to petition the queen that he might be allowed to preach in his own land. This was a highly dangerous move. Whitgift had a warrant out for his arrest, and Elizabeth had written personally to James of Scotland to have Penry apprehended. To add to the risk, Penry now showed that his continued study of the New Testament had brought him to the Separatist position. He had joined the newly-formed London church, the Ancient church, where he fell in with Barrowe and Greenwood, men whom he called 'my dear brethren'. This was a step fraught with danger. Nevertheless, he

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did not flinch. He was appointed to preach in the church, but was recognised by the vicar of Stepney, betrayed to the authorities and imprisoned.

During his trial, he heard that his friends, Barrowe and Greenwood, had been hanged and he knew that he now had no hope of escape. He made one final pathetic appeal in which he stated: 'I am a poor young man, born and bred in the mountains of Wales. I am the first, since the last springing up of the gospel in this latter age, that laboured to have the blessed seed thereof sown in these barren mountains... If my death can procure any quietness unto the church of God, and unto the State of my Prince, and his kingdom wherein I was born, glad I am that I had a life to bestow in this service'.

On the day his friends were executed, Penry wrote to his wife, whom he had married less than five years before. When we recall that it was an age when there was nothing like Social Security, Widow's or Child Benefit to fall back on, and she had four little girls to bring up on her own, his words are most moving. He faced death squarely. He addressed his letter:

To my beloved wife, Hellenor Penry, partaker with me in this life of the sufferings of the gospel of the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, and resting with me in undoubted hope of that glory which shall be revealed... So dear a sister and so loving a wife in the Lord... I know, my good Helen, that the burden which I lay upon thee of four infants, whereof the eldest is not yet four years old, will not seem in any way burdensome unto thee. Yea, thou shall find that our God will be a father to the fatherless, and a stay unto the widow... I am ready, pray for me. The Lord comfort thee, good Helen, and strengthen thee. My God will provide. My love be with thee now and ever in Jesus Christ... In great haste, with many tears, and yet in great spiritual comfort of my soul, your husband for a season, and your brother for evermore.

Four days later, he wrote to his four 'dear and tenderly beloved daughters, to be read when they come to years of discretion and understanding... I have left you four Bibles', he said, 'being the sole and only patrimony and dowry that I have for you'. Since he had commenced the letter wishing them 'deliverance, comfort, safety and sure hope', and we know that the eldest was called Deliverance, perhaps we are here given all four names.

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Last of all he wrote to the church, 'the distressed and faithful congregation of Christ in London'. 'Seeing banishment, with loss of goods, is likely to betide you all, prepare yourselves for this hard entreaty', he told them. He advised them to leave England, and in so doing remember to cleave together. 'Be all of you assured that he, who is your God in England, will be your God in any other land under the whole heaven; for the earth and the fullness thereof are his, and blessed are they that for his cause are bereaved of any part of the same'. He pleaded with the church to take into exile his 'poor and desolate widow' along with his 'fatherless and friendless orphans'. 'The Lord, my brethren and sisters, hath not forgotten to be gracious unto Zion. You shall yet find days of peace and rest if you continue faithful'.

As John Penry sat at his mid-day meal on the 29th of May, 1593, he was informed that he had but four hours to live. That same afternoon, forbidden to utter any last words, he was hanged in secret at St Thomas-a-Watering, Southwark, on the baseless charge of treason. He was little more than thirty years old.

Reader, any words of mine must be superfluous, an insult to the memory of such godly men as these three. I leave you to ponder their testimony. Who can be unmoved?

It is appropriate to quote the words of Paul, commenting on his own sufferings for Christ. 'But I want you to know, brethren, that the things which happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel, so that it has become evident to the whole palace guard, and to all the rest, that my chains are in Christ; and most of the brethren in the Lord, having become confident by my chains, are much more bold to speak the word without fear... I am appointed for the defence of the gospel. What then... Christ is preached; and in this I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice' (Phil. 1:12-18).

May the re-telling of the sufferings of Barrowe, Greenwood and Penry produce a similar furtherance of the gospel in our day.

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In 1593, Elizabeth and her bishops seemed all-conquering. They had defeated the Puritans in general, and the Presbyterians in particular, cowing them into an unwilling submission. With the execution of Barrowe, Greenwood and Penry, the Separatists, too, were at a very low ebb. It is true that Sir Walter Raleigh reported that there were nearly thirty thousand of them at the time, but this was a wild exaggeration. Probably there were no more than five or six hundred. The stark fact is, their leaders had been hanged or had died in dungeons, their surviving pastors, teachers and most able members were in prison. As one bitter critic of the Separatists put it, it appeared that 'they were at the most, a very small number of very silly and base people, here and there in corners dispersed, now, thanks be to God, by the good remedies that have been used, suppressed and worn out; so as there is scarce any news of them'.

Separatism was about to die, even in its infancy. Or was it?



## *A Thanksgiving Day Thought*

Well, actually, it's a thought for every day!

On Friday, the 21st of July, 1620, the members of the church which had left Scrooby some twelve or so years before, met for their last day together upon earth.<sup>1</sup> They were about to set sail from Holland, *via* England to New England. The preacher was John Robinson. Robinson lifted up his voice and preached to the whole church for the last time. As he drew to a close, he said:

We are now ere long to part asunder, and the Lord knows whether ever we shall live to see one another's faces. But whether the Lord has appointed it or not, I charge you before God and his blessed angels, follow me no further than I follow Christ; and if God shall reveal anything to you by any other instrument of his, be as ready to receive it as ever you were to receive any truth by my ministry. For I am confident the Lord has more truth and light yet to break forth out of his holy word. I bewail the state and condition of the Reformed churches, who have come to a full-stop in religion, and will go no further than the instruments of their reformation. The Lutherans cannot be drawn beyond what Luther saw; the Calvinists, they stick where Calvin left them. This is a misery much to be lamented; for though they were shining lights in their times, yet God did not reveal his whole will unto them, and if they were alive today they would be as ready to and willing to embrace further light, as that they had received. Keep in mind our church covenant, our promise and covenant with God and one another, to receive whatsoever light or truth shall be made known to us from his written word. But take heed what you receive for truth – examine it well and compare it and weigh it with other scriptures of truth before you receive it. It is not possible that the Christian world should come so lately out of such thick anti-Christian darkness, and that perfection of knowledge should break forth at once.

This farewell sermon of John Robinson has resonated down the centuries. Its stirring appeal has affected many for good. He called upon the people to search the Scriptures, to follow all the light which God grants in his word, and not to follow men, even

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<sup>1</sup> I have drawn this from my *Battle*. See also my *Voyage*.

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great men, even men which have been much used of God. It is most remarkable that Robinson emphasised this particular point in his final sermon to the departing saints.

How is it that many who think highly of the 1620 settlers pay so little attention to Robinson's excellent point? For instance, why do they give the impression (to put it no stronger) that they cannot accept that Calvin, great man though he was, did not see all the truth? Why do they so often try to make out that he was entirely consistent with himself at all times? Let me extend the point. Why do so many think that the men of Westminster, in the 1640s, with their Confession and other documents, set out the final word for all believers until the end of the age? Why is it that not a few of those who take such a view actually preach the Confession and not Scripture (2 Tim. 4:2)? And when confronted with new-covenant teaching on, say, the law or the discontinuity of the covenants, why are they singularly unwilling to face Scripture, and read it shorn of their confessional-spectacles? I do not say that they should throw the spectacles away, but I am asserting that they should read, interpret and apply their Confession by Scripture, and not the other way round. The same goes for all who treat the Heidelberg Confession, the Savoy Declaration, the 1689 Particular Baptist Confession, the writings of J.C.Philpot or John Nelson Darby... in like manner.

And it's not only John Robinson who laid down this vital marker, is it? We have the inspired record, a record that was surely given to set an example for us:

These Jews [of Berea] were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so (Acts 17:11).

Clearly, the Spirit demands that believers in all ages – not least, that we today – search the Scriptures, and be ready and willing to submit our minds, hearts and lives to what God has revealed in his word. Christ rebuked the Jews, not for searching the Scriptures, but for not applying them: 'You search the Scriptures... yet...' (John 5:39-40), he complained. As he prayed for his people: '[Father] sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth' (John 17:17). And, as the prophet thundered: 'Should not a

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people seek their God?... To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them' (Isa. 8:19-20; see also Luke 16:29; 2 Tim. 3:14-17). What Scripture does *not* say is: 'To the Reformers, to the Puritans! Never move beyond them and their great Confessions!'



## *Fourfold Justification*

Justification by faith alone is the citadel of the gospel. It is at the heart of the new covenant. No wonder, then, that down the years it has been under constant attack. Satan knows that if he can ruin this doctrine, millions of souls will be deceived, with eternal consequences. He has, therefore, tried one ploy after another to subvert justification by faith alone.

Justification by faith alone was the leading issue at the Reformation. God broke Rome's grip – which she had maintained for centuries – and once again the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ was freely proclaimed to sinners. But right from the start, Satan renewed his attack on this major doctrine. He has never stopped trying to subvert the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

Never more so than today. A growing number among the Reformed are molesting the doctrine, the Progressives and the advocates of the Federal Vision, among them. The so-called New Perspective shows no signs of withering. Deification and Orthodoxy are making themselves felt. Among the Baptists, sacramentalism has reared its ugly head. And Rome, whatever tinkering it has allowed, has never repudiated the Council of Trent with its anathemas for all who hold to the doctrine of justification by faith alone. And so on.

I wrote my *Eternal Justification* to try to deal with another of these attacks upon the New Testament doctrine of justification by faith alone; namely, the hyper-Calvinistic doctrine of eternal justification. This relatively unknown warping of the biblical doctrine of justification is, in fact, an ever-present danger for those who hold the doctrines of grace. The Puritans met the error, but it probably had its hey-day – *until now, that is* – in the 1870s in England among the Gospel Standard Strict Baptists. With the coming of the internet, however, eternal justification has now begun to reach a much wider audience. And if it takes hold and grows, the effect on the preaching of the gospel will be unspeakably bad.

## *Fourfold Justification*

One of the fundamental facts about justification is that there are four scriptural aspects to it. And that is what I want to set out in the article.<sup>1</sup>

In the New Testament, we find statements about justification which, at first glance, may appear difficult to reconcile.

For instance: ‘Having been justified by faith, we have peace with God’ (Rom. 5:1). Justification by faith. And yet, a few verses later the apostle declares: ‘Having now been justified by [Christ’s] blood’ (Rom. 5:9). Justification by the blood of Christ. Yet again, in the closing verse of the previous chapter, the apostle states that Christ ‘was raised for our justification’ (Rom. 4:25). Justification in the resurrection of Christ. And, going back to Romans 5:9, what Paul goes on to say is: ‘Much more then, having now been justified by [Christ’s] blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him’ (Rom. 5:9). Believers are ‘eagerly waiting for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will also confirm [them] to the end, that [they] may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ’ (1 Cor. 1:7-8); that is, justification at the final judgment. And, of course, at the root of it all, we have God’s eternal decree to justify his elect through Christ:

Whom [God] foreknew, he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover, whom he predestined, these he also called; whom he called, these he also justified; and whom he justified, these he also glorified (Rom. 8:29-30).

Now, how can a sinner be justified in eternity past, justified in the death and resurrection of Christ, justified by faith, and yet be justified in eternity to come? We must not dismiss this question as trying to be clever with words. Whenever we come across a difficulty in Scripture, there is always a gem underneath. In this case, the stronger our grip on this fourfold view of justification, the greater will be our appreciation of its richness. Moreover, a biblical stance on the four aspects of justification will keep us from the error of ‘eternal justification’. No mean benefits!

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<sup>1</sup> For this article, I have lightly edited my *Eternal* pp31-38; see also pp175-176.

Before I develop the point, let me digress for a moment or two to say a few words on this ‘seeming contradiction’.

***The seeming contradiction***

I include the definite article because, here, once again, we meet our old friend ‘the seeming contradiction’, ‘the paradox’, ‘the antinomy’ of the gospel. That venerable gentleman keeps turning up, does he not? Of course he does! Like the poor, he is ever with us. As long as we are in this fallen world, we shall never be able fully to understand all God’s revelation, let alone explain it all and in all its ramifications. Yes, it is our duty and privilege to try to grasp as much of God’s truth as we can, and to explore it with all the zeal, care and grace God gives us, to ‘enquire and search carefully’ (see 1 Pet. 1:10), but we shall always end up where we cannot fully comprehend, cannot answer every question, cannot take it any further; that is, we shall meet with one ‘seeming contradiction’ after another. It is inevitable.

Well, how should we greet our old friend? I have fully gone into this matter elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> so I will not repeat myself here, except to say that the right way to treat any biblical paradox – formed by two seemingly contradictory statements drawn from Scripture – is to hold both in tension. Just like railway lines,<sup>3</sup> we must let them stay parallel. We must not, whatever we do, try by human ingenuity to fuse them into one. Above all, we must not get round the seeming contradiction by getting rid of one aspect of the paradox to leave the other to stand alone in all its pristine glory. Continuing with the railway illustration – we would be mad to get rid of one of the rails! Such a railway might be remarkably logical, but it would be singularly fatal to travel on. Yet, scoring a blue pencil through one aspect of the paradox is the very thing many do in order to preserve their all-encompassing demand for logical consistency.

Such well-intentioned people are misguided. Logic is not the idol to which every argument must bow the knee and conform. God does not demand it of us. I am not aware of any command:

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<sup>2</sup> See my *Offer* pp75-152; *Particular* pp9-12,58-60,64,71-72,96-97,125-126,155-176,202.

<sup>3</sup> I am talking of traditional railways, of course.

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‘Above all things, never be illogical’! We are not to try to be wiser than God. Whatever God has revealed in his word, we must maintain – even at the cost of human logic. We must not devise schemes which warp God’s revelation in order to preserve our logical purity, or to fend off accusations of Arminianism or antinomianism or whatever. The fact is, if we do leave ourselves open to the sort of abuse the apostle faced (Rom. 3:4-8; 6:1-2), it is an indication that we are maintaining Scripture in its proper balance! The right course in all these things is to declare what Scripture says, and leave God to look after his truth. Just as God did not need Uzza’s hand to steady the ark (1 Chron. 13:9-10), neither does he need us to protect his gospel from the accusation of logical inconsistency. Peter’s dogmatic endorsement of Paul, and his categorical dismissal of those who, in his day, tried their ‘adjustments’ on his fellow-apostle’s writings, bears repeating. At this juncture, it is most apposite: ‘Our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given to him, has written to you, as also in all his letters... in which are some things hard to understand, which untaught and unstable people twist to their own destruction, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures’ (2 Pet. 3:15-16). We must not do it!

One final illustration from the railway: On a long straight stretch of track, the rails do meet – in the infinite distance. All seeming contradictions will be resolved in eternity!

There it is. Getting back to the main theme, however: the New Testament speaks of justification in four aspects.<sup>4</sup> God, because of his grace, on the basis of his grace, justifies, declares righteous, all those sinners who trust the merits, the person and the work of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Such sinners are one with Christ. He bore all their sin. They bear all his righteousness. God in Christ decreed it all in eternity, accomplished it on the cross and in the resurrection, and by his Spirit applies it to the elect sinner at the point of faith. And, finally, it can be properly said that all the elect will be ultimately justified when Christ

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<sup>4</sup> References, other than the ones I have given, could include Rom. 3:21-31; 4:1-25; 8:18; 1 Cor. 1:18; Eph. 2:5,8; 1 Thess. 1:10; 2 Thess. 1:7-10; 2 Tim. 1:9; Tit. 2:11-14; 3:5; Heb. 10:39; 1 Pet. 1:5,9; 2:24; 4:13; 5:1.



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returns. No passage, perhaps, captures all this better than the first chapter of Ephesians:

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will... In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us with all wisdom and understanding. And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ, to be put into effect when the times will have reached their fulfilment – to bring all things in heaven and on earth together under one head, even Christ. In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory. And you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession – to the praise of his glory (Eph. 1:3-14, NIV).

All of it was purposed in eternity past. All of it was accomplished by Christ. All of it is experienced in time, here and now. But all of it will come to final and complete fulfilment – 'be put into effect' – in eternity to come. All four statements are true and consistent with each other. In terms of human logic, they may seem inconsistent. Yet, in terms of biblical revelation, it all makes perfect sense – as long as we allow each statement to bear the weight God has given it in Scripture, and do not warp any aspect of any statement to make it all fit together with our pre-conceived ideas of logical consistency, in order to preserve our theological system.

Gathering this together, we may say that justification is to be considered in four respects. Although we have to be careful when introducing adjectives, let me set it out as simply as I can. First, we have *decreed* or *determined* justification. Secondly, we have *accomplished* justification. Thirdly, we have *applied* or *actual*

### *Fourfold Justification*

justification. And fourthly, we have *absolute* or *final* justification. Let me explain.

By *decreed* or *determined* justification, I mean that God the Father, in eternity past, decreed or determined to justify his elect through union with his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, in his death and resurrection.

By *accomplished* justification, I mean that Christ, when he died and rose again, accomplished the justification of all for whom he died, all the elect in him.

By *applied* or *actual* justification, I mean that when the elect are brought to faith by the effectual working of the Holy Spirit, they come into the actual experience and benefit of their justification by the imputed righteousness of Christ.

By *absolute* or *final* justification, I mean that, at the last judgment, God will totally vindicate his elect, and they will for, all eternity, be entirely free from sin in all its aspects.<sup>5</sup>

All this is glorious new-covenant doctrine. Do not miss its trinitarian nature. Do not miss that it is all ‘in Christ’. God justifies sinners by virtue of the union between Christ and his elect. The elect are justified in eternity past – decreed justification. They are justified at the cross and in Christ’s resurrection – accomplished justification. And they are justified in their experience – applied, actual or experimental justification at regeneration and faith; that is, conversion. And they will be finally and absolutely justified in eternity to come. And all is ‘in Christ’.

In particular, the sinner is *actually* justified as the Holy Spirit regenerates him, convicts him, and brings him to faith and repentance and so joins him to Christ, unites him to Christ (Gal.

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<sup>5</sup> One of my mss. readers told me a story by way of illustration. A man was asked: ‘Are you saved?’ ‘Do you mean’, said he, ‘have I been saved, am I being saved, or shall I be saved?’ He could have opened with: ‘Was I saved in God’s decree?’

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3:26-27; Eph. 1:13).<sup>6</sup> For it is as he believes, and only as he believes, that the sinner is actually ‘in Christ’, and Christ is in the sinner. And it is then that he is actually justified.

*And here we have reached the precise heart of the matter. **This** is what we are talking about.*

Justification. Justification by faith. *Actual* justification by faith. God, because of his grace, on the basis of his grace, justifies, declares righteous, all those sinners who trust the merits, the person and the work of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Such sinners are one with Christ. He bore all their sin. They bear all his righteousness. God the Father decreed it all in eternity; in Christ, he accomplished it on the cross and in the resurrection; in eternity to come, God will vindicate his elect as justified. But – and this is the essence of the quarrel with ‘eternal justification’, and my reason for writing this book – God only actually justifies his elect when by his Spirit he applies the work of Christ to them at the point of faith. Leaving aside the final justification – over which I can see no quarrel – we may say that while the elect sinner is eternally justified in God’s decree, and justified by union with Christ in his death and resurrection, *he is not **actually** justified until he comes to saving faith in Christ.*

As the Westminster documents put it:

God did, from all eternity, decree to justify all the elect, and Christ did, in the fullness of time, die for their sins, and rise again for their justification; nevertheless, they are not justified, until the Holy Spirit does, in due time, actually apply Christ unto them.<sup>7</sup>

This is worth repeating: The elect ‘are not justified, until the Holy Spirit does... actually apply Christ unto them’; that is, until they exercise saving faith. This is what the Scriptures clearly assert: ‘Having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand’ (Rom. 5:1-2). Until the

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<sup>6</sup> Gal. 3:26-27 does *not* refer to water baptism, but regeneration – which leads to faith.

<sup>7</sup> *Westminster Confession* 11.4.

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elect are regenerated and come to faith, they are not actually justified, they are not at peace with God.

I must stress this yet again. An undoubted truth it is, that before they come to faith – indeed, before they are even born into this world – the elect *are* justified in God’s decree in eternity. Yes. Furthermore, before they come to faith – indeed, before they are even born into this world – the elect *were* (are) representatively justified in union with Christ in his death and resurrection. Yes. *But before they come to faith, the elect **are not actually** justified. They are only actually justified as and when they believe.*<sup>8</sup>

Now this is precisely where the hyper-Calvinists go astray. How? They place the word ‘actual’ not where it belongs biblically, at the point of faith, but in eternity with the decree of God; hence ‘eternal justification’. In short, they argue that the elect are actually justified in eternity.

At first glance, I admit, this may seem a spat about words, but it certainly is far more than that! The consequences of the word-order here are massive, as I will make clear. But the issue at this stage in the debate is this: instead of doing what Scripture does, and placing the word ‘actual’ at the point of faith, hyper-Calvinists place it at the point of God’s decree in eternity.

Why do they do it? Why do they shift the word ‘actual’? Fundamentally, they do it because of the priority (to them) of their theological system, and their consequent obsession with fitting every passage of Scripture into that system, leaving no loose ends, no unresolved paradoxes. More immediately, they do it because, in justification, they want to protect God’s sovereignty, the freeness of his grace to the exclusion of the sinner’s works, and the certainty of accomplishment of Christ’s redemptive work. They further wish to give assurance to those who doubt their justification. These ‘more immediate’ motives are excellent, motives for which I have nothing but praise, but... whatever the motive, however good the motive, it is always –

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<sup>8</sup> The elect who lived before Christ were justified by anticipatory faith in him.

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always – wrong to tinker with Scripture. In this case: motive, excellent; method, bad.

Besides, they have no need to worry. God can protect his doctrine without our interference. Moreover, such interference always leads to error. It does here. The upshot is that hyper-Calvinists end up *opposing* the biblical doctrine of ‘justification by faith’.<sup>9</sup> This is how serious it is.

So much so, we need to look closely into the way hyper-Calvinists warp the biblical doctrine of justification by faith, and move actual justification from its biblical location – at the point of faith – to fix it back in eternity. And this examination I undertook in the rest of my *Eternal Justification*.

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<sup>9</sup> I am not being pejorative. I am well aware that hyper-Calvinists use the phrase – except, significantly, in the Gospel Standard Articles – but I will give my reasons for asserting that what they understand by ‘justification by faith’ is very different to the biblical meaning. Moreover, as I will show, this leads directly to my subtitle: ‘Gospel Preaching to Sinners Marred by Hyper-Calvinism’.



# *Liberty or Bondage: Sarah or Hagar?*

## ***Introduction***

We are talking about Galatians 4:21-31, the passage where Paul sets out the allegory<sup>1</sup> of Sarah and Hagar.<sup>2</sup> As the apostle makes clear, the law, given to Israel through Moses on Mount Sinai, was a covenant of bondage, a covenant that was in stark contrast to another covenant (Gal. 4:21,24-27). The two women, Sarah and Hagar, represent these two covenants. Which covenant did Sarah represent? The answer is patent: the Abrahamic covenant fulfilled in the new covenant. How do we know this? Well, how would the Galatians have understood Paul's allusion? Not having the benefit of 2 Corinthians 3 or Hebrews 8, and limited to what they knew from the apostle's letter they were now reading (or having read to them), nevertheless their minds would have leapt to the covenant with Abraham, and for two reasons.

*First*, Paul had already stressed the Abrahamic covenant of promise (Gal. 3:6-9,14-19,29). Let me remind you of the case the apostle had made in his letter to the Galatians:

Abraham 'believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness'. Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying: 'In you all the nations shall be blessed'. So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham... that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we [believers] might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. Brethren, I speak in the manner of men: Though it is only a man's covenant, yet if it is confirmed, no one annuls or adds to it. Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say: 'And to seeds', as of many, but as of one: 'And to your Seed', who is Christ. And this I say, that the law, which was four hundred

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<sup>1</sup> For this article, I have lightly edited my *Christ* pp87-89,141-146; see also pp380-385,430-432.

<sup>2</sup> 'Allegory' (AV), 'allegorically speaking' (NASB), 'are symbolic' (NKJV), 'taken figuratively' (NIV). From *allēgoreō*, 'to speak allegorically or in a figure' (Thayer).

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and thirty years later, cannot annul the covenant that was confirmed before by God in Christ, that it should make the promise of no effect. For if the inheritance is of the law, it is no longer of promise; but God gave it to Abraham by promise. What purpose then does the law serve? It was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made; and it was appointed through angels by the hand of a mediator... If you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise (Gal. 3:6-9,14-19,29).

The Galatians would not have forgotten such glorious statements. They would have made the inevitable connection. They would have got the apostle's point. He was talking about the new covenant – indeed, he was *stressing* the new covenant – the covenant of which every believer is a member. Gentile believers can say: 'We, though we are Gentiles, we are – by reason of being in Christ – we are the true, spiritual children of Abraham. We are the heirs of the promise. This is our right and privilege in the new covenant'.<sup>3</sup> Sarah represents this covenant. She speaks to us of what we, as believers, are, and what we have, in Christ.

*Secondly*, the allegory itself contains the explicit reference to Abraham, Hagar and Isaac, and the implied reference to Sarah (Gal. 4:21-31). Paul, in referring to Sarah, was speaking of the Abrahamic covenant fulfilled in the new. *That* is how the Galatians would have read the apostle. That is how we must read him. As a consequence, the covenant represented by Hagar is the law, the Mosaic covenant.

Paul was writing to the Galatians because they were being taught by law mongers, and – worse – because they were listening to their insistence that they, as believers, had to go under the law. Worst of all, the Galatians wanted to go along with what they were being taught, and desired 'to be under the law'. To put an end to the Judaisers' teaching, and call a halt to the Galatians' hankering after the law, the apostle used the history of the two women to warn his readers of what they were letting themselves in for if they went back to the old covenant. He bluntly told them

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<sup>3</sup> Jewish believers can say the same of course, but the startling fact is that Gentiles are, in the new covenant, now being grafted into Christ (Rom. 11:11-36). See my *Romans 11*.



not to go down the law-route into bondage. The allegory, he explained, speaks of ‘two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar – for this Hagar is [represents] Mount Sinai... and corresponds to... bondage’ (Gal. 4:21-25). And this covenant the apostle expressly called a covenant of bondage. In other words, the old covenant, the law, was a works covenant which no sinner could keep, but was a covenant that enslaved those under it. Note further, *contrast* was Paul’s theme; he drew a graphic contrast between law, bondage and flesh in the one covenant – and promise, freedom and the Spirit in the other.

Though he was addressing the Galatians, Paul, in fact, was answering the Judaisers who wanted believers to go under the Mosaic covenant. They were arguing this on the mistaken basis that the Abrahamic and the Mosaic covenants were really one and the same.<sup>4</sup> Not for a moment would the apostle countenance the

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<sup>4</sup> The law mongers were similarly attacking most, if not all, of the churches of the time, opening their campaign at Antioch (Acts 15:1-2; see also Acts 15:4-29; 2 Cor. 3:1 – 4:6; 10:1 – 13:6; Gal. 2:4-5; 5:7-12; Phil. 3:2-11; Hebrews *passim*; Jude 4, for instance). Let me quote what I said near the start of my *Christ* (p18): ‘The Judaisers had a theology behind them. First, they knew that God had revealed himself to Abraham and to Moses, and that the Abrahamic covenant was a covenant of promise, and the Mosaic covenant was a covenant of law. Their theology was this: these two covenants are one and the same. That is what they claimed. They argued for the oneness of these two covenants. How do we know this? Although the apostle does not quote them, and therefore we do not have their actual words, we can argue back from the way Paul dealt with the Judaisers. The evidence is plain to see. Paul would not have spent the time he did refuting the notion of the oneness of the covenants if the Judaisers were not advocating it. And, make no mistake, that is precisely what the apostle did; he devoted considerable time and energy in taking the idea of the oneness of the two covenants, and showing how wrong it was. See, for instance, the last four chapters of Galatians... [See] how vigorously Paul argued for the distinction in the two covenants; more... see how cogently, how invincibly, he set out the contrast between the two covenants; further... see how he made it as plain as noonday that believers, whether Jew or Gentile, are members of the new covenant – that is, they are the spiritual children of Abraham – and that without the law. And not only in Galatians. The same can be

thought. The old and new covenants one and the same? Nonsense! The Mosaic covenant was a covenant of bondage, external, of the flesh, condemning and killing – a covenant utterly in contrast with the new covenant, a covenant of life and Spirit (John 1:17; Rom. 7:4-11; 2 Cor. 3:6-11; Gal. 3:17,19,23-25; 4:1-7,21-31; Heb. 7:18-22; 8:6-13; 12:18-24).

Incidentally, this puts covenant theologians firmly on the side of the Judaisers, and, therefore, decidedly against Paul. Let me prove it. Many Reformed writers will not have the apostle's teaching here at any price. In one respect, they have the same faulty theology as the Judaisers. Flying in the face of Scripture, they say there are not two covenants here in Galatians 4, but one; the two women do not represent two covenants, but two *aspects* of one covenant; the slavery of the Mosaic covenant was not really a part of that covenant at all – it was all a misunderstanding, a Jewish misinterpretation of the covenant. So it is claimed. But Paul said no such thing. He said it was the covenant itself which enslaved. It was no misunderstanding! The Mosaic covenant was based on a slavish principle, 'do and live' – with its corollary, 'fail and die'. Those under it, the Jews, 'were held prisoners by the law, locked up' by it (Gal. 3:23, NIV).

The law could bring life (Lev. 18:5; Ezek. 18:19; 20:11-25; Matt. 19:17; Luke 10:28; 18:18-20; Rom. 7:10; 10:5), yes, but the obedience had to be perfect (Gal. 3:10; Jas. 2:10). Now, since all men (apart from Christ) are sinners (Rom. 3:23; 1 John 1:8; 3:4-5), no man can be saved by law (Acts 13:39; Gal. 2:16; 3:11). If he could, 'if righteousness comes through the law' – that is, through a sinner keeping the law – 'then Christ died in vain' (Gal. 2:21). But no sinner can be saved by law. The fault, however, is not with the law, for the law is 'perfect' (Ps. 19:7), 'good' (1 Tim. 1:8), 'holy and just and good' (Rom. 7:12). The fault is with man (Rom. 7:14; 8:3; Heb. 8:7-8). 'If there had been a law given

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found in Romans, 2 Corinthians, Philippians, and so on. In short, in dealing with the Judaisers, Paul knew he had to take their faulty theology of the oneness of the covenants, and prove it false. And that is what he did. No! Well... he did – but that's not all he did. Let me spell it out: he took a firm grip of their theology of the covenants, and *demolished* it!

which could have given life, truly righteousness would have been by the law [of God]' (Gal. 3:21). But since it was not possible for any sinner to fulfil the law, inevitably the Mosaic covenant spelled slavery.

The law *itself* was a works covenant. It was not a case of the Jews turning a grace covenant into a works covenant. Even so, many Reformed teachers continue to insist the law *was* a covenant of grace; indeed, in their determination to uphold their covenant theology, they speak of '*the* covenant of grace'. Furthermore, according to Reformed teachers, to confuse the Mosaic covenant with the covenant of works – to deny it is the covenant of grace – is the most common error in interpreting the allegory. The 'first covenant' and 'old covenant', they claim, refer, not to the Mosaic covenant, but to the whole age between Adam's fall and Christ's [first] coming; the Mosaic covenant and Abrahamic covenant being one and the same.

This is quite wrong. In Galatians 4:21-25, Paul was speaking of two covenants – the old and the new (within the Abrahamic covenant). Those under the law are slaves, those under grace are saints. The two covenants, and those under them, are on different spiritual planets. These two covenants cannot be the same covenant. 2 Corinthians 3:6-17, Galatians 3:10-29, and many other places, utterly refute it.

In fact, Reformed theologians themselves deep down – despite their seemingly confident assertions – have a real problem, a massive problem, an intractable problem, with the Mosaic covenant, and are guilty of double-speak. Some admit the Mosaic covenant certainly looks as though it is the covenant of works, but even so, they claim, it is, after all, the covenant of grace. But the law did not merely look like the law – it was the law; the word of God says so! Other Reformed teachers say the law was the covenant of grace 'more legally defined' at Sinai. But how can *grace* be 'legally defined', let alone '*more* legally defined'? Another Reformed writer wants it both ways. The law was the covenant of works – a 'modified' version of the Abrahamic covenant – but also a 'renewal' of the single covenant of grace spanning all time from Adam to the eternal state to come. Grace, law, gospel and curse all jumbled together, it seems. Some grace!

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Some muddle! There have been many versions of the theme. Some argue the point from the two givings of the law. The first, so they say, was a works covenant, whereas the second was as a rule to those who are in Christ. Elsewhere I have demonstrated the schizophrenic nonsense this is.<sup>5</sup>

Let us look more closely into this allegory.

### ***The allegory***

Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not hear the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons: the one by a bondwoman, the other by a freewoman. But he who was of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and he of the freewoman through promise, which things are symbolic. For these are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar – for this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children – but the Jerusalem above is free, which is the mother of us all. For it is written: ‘Rejoice, O barren, you who do not bear! Break forth and shout, you who are not in labour! For the desolate has many more children than she who has a husband’. Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise. But, as he who was born according to the flesh then persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, even so it is now. Nevertheless what does the Scripture say? ‘Cast out the bondwoman and her son, for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the freewoman’. So then, brethren, we are not children of the bondwoman but of the free (Gal. 4:21 – 5:1).

We are not dealing here with some minor matter. Rather, the apostle is talking about the two covenants which tower over the entire range of Scripture; namely, the Abrahamic covenant and the Mosaic covenant. The Abrahamic covenant comprised two parts or strands.<sup>6</sup> The one that concerns us here – as it did Paul in Galatians (Gal. 3:6-29) – is that part of the Abrahamic covenant which came over into the new covenant.

Now for the apostle’s teaching. And his teaching is crystal clear in light of the Judaisers’ insistence that the two covenants

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<sup>5</sup> See my *Christ* pp69-74,360-368.

<sup>6</sup> See my *Infant* pp78-113.

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are one. No, retorted the apostle. These two great covenants, the Mosaic (Hagar) and the new in the Abrahamic (Sarah), are chalk and cheese. Not only that. Believers are in the new covenant, and they must not allow themselves to be taken under the old covenant, the Mosaic covenant, the law. Why not? Paul immediately explained, thundering out these words:

For freedom Christ has made us free; stand fast therefore, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage (Gal. 5:1, footnote). It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery (NASB).

The opening note of Galatians 5 is vital. If grasped, the debate about the believer and the law is over. Freedom! Liberty! LIBERTY! Freedom, that glorious note of the gospel, the sinner's freedom as the result of justification, is Paul's triumphant cry, setting the tone for what follows. Note his abrupt, dogmatic statement: 'For freedom Christ has made us free'. Note the striking way Paul puts it, the emphatic order of his words: 'For freedom Christ has made us free'. Note the seeming tautology, 'for freedom... free', which so powerfully stresses the 'for freedom'. Modern editors, no doubt, would get Paul to tidy up his manuscript. But not the Holy Spirit! Oh, no! Why, it was the Spirit who chose such a terse way of speaking. The form of Paul's Greek, the very sound of his words, and their repetitive nature, reverberates, thumping home his point. By giving his readers (and hearers) a linguistic jolt as they move from Galatians 4:31 to 5:1 – with no chapter or verse divisions, of course – the apostle compels them to pause, draw breath, and ask what is going on. His words would have electrified the Galatian congregation as his letter was read aloud, the listeners sensing that something out of the ordinary – something of high significance – was being put before them. Paul astutely employs this 'outburst' to draw his readers' (and hearers') attention to the climax of his letter. He is forcing the Galatians to sit up, pin their ears back, take notice and think clearly about what they have in Christ, and what, therefore, is being fatally threatened by their desire to submit to the Judaisers' call for obedience to the law. Which is? Freedom! It is freedom which is paramount, and it is freedom which Paul stresses in this punchy, arresting way.

What is this freedom? Freedom from sin, death and the law; in particular, here, the law. The law, I stress. It is not freedom from the ceremonial law, or freedom from the curse of the law; it is freedom from the law.<sup>7</sup> What is more, it is not merely freedom from the law for justification that the apostle speaks of. Certainly not! In Galatians 5 and 6, Paul is clearly speaking of the justification of the sinner, *and his consequent sanctification*.<sup>8</sup> He

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<sup>7</sup> For my exposure of the these and other escape routes or glosses adopted by the Reformed, see my *Christ* pp99-110; see also, *and especially*, pp392-408; ‘The Law: Reformed Escape Routes’ (eDocs link on David H J Gay sermonaudio.com).

<sup>8</sup> In ‘An Important Clarification’, I drew attention to the distinction between what might be called ‘positional sanctification’ and ‘progressive sanctification’: ‘The elect, immediately they are brought into Christ by faith, are fully, absolutely, perfectly, utterly, completely, irreversibly and permanently sanctified... by the application of Christ’s work to them by the Holy Spirit (see, for instance, 1 Cor. 1:2,30; 6:11; 2 Thess. 2:13; Heb. 2:11; 10:10,14,29; 13:12; 1 Pet. 1:2; Jude 1)... Scripture [also] teaches that believers are new creatures in Christ, and that this new life will show itself – must show itself – by their growth in grace and in the knowledge of their Lord and Saviour, Christ Jesus. Indeed, this new life, and its development, is the cardinal evidence of their saved condition; without it, their profession is false (see, for instance, 2 Cor. 5:17; 7:1; Phil. 3:12-16; Col. 3:10; 1 Thess. 4:3; 2 Pet. 1:5-11). In other words, believers must be sanctified!... When Scripture speaks of “holiness, without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14), it is not referring to that absolute sanctification which the elect have upon believing, but to “progressive sanctification”, to personal godliness; the context of Heb. 12:14 is invincible proof that it is so... Scripture calls upon the saved sinner to work out his salvation by God’s grace in the power of the Holy Spirit (Phil. 2:12-13). Furthermore, while it is the believer’s duty and privilege to obey God in this command – he is responsible for the “perfecting [of his] holiness in the fear of God” (2 Cor. 7:1) – he has the assurance that, under the terms of the new covenant, the Spirit will inevitably move him to it, and enable him to do it, so that he can join the apostle in declaring: “By the grace of God I am what I am”. Again, whatever good is accomplished by, through, and in the believer, he with Paul can only say it was “yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me” that did it (1 Cor. 15:10). Finally, with the writer to the Hebrews, all believers must pray: “Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great shepherd

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is addressing *brethren*, not unbelievers, calling them to ‘walk’ worthy of God, and his main concern is to tell them that if they try to use the law as the way of sanctification it will inevitably lead to enslavement, bondage to rules, and will never produce the godliness desired. *This* is the theme of the entire letter; and Galatians 5:13-18 is surely its high-water mark. Yes, Paul deals with the danger of going to the law for justification (Gal. 5:2-12), but it is a grievous mistake to *limit* the believer’s liberty, and the threat to it, to justification. Such a restriction indefensibly diminishes the letter to the Galatians. In any case, justification always leads to sanctification and is intimately bound up with it. No! Sanctification is the issue.

Let us remind ourselves of the apostle’s rhetorical questions which came earlier in the letter: ‘This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?... He who supplies the Spirit to you... does he do it by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith?’ (Gal. 3:2-5). When the apostle asks: ‘Are you now being made perfect?’, what is he talking about? Justification? There is no ‘being made’ about justification! It is instantaneous. No! A man must be deliberately blind if he cannot see that Paul is addressing progressive sanctification here. Moreover, what he is asking is this: ‘Are you being sanctified by the law?’ That, too, stands out as plain as noonday. Above all, his question is rhetorical, remember. He is not asking out of doubt, seeking instruction. Not at all! He is demanding a response. And the response he demands and expects is... what? Fill in the answer for yourself, reader. Are *you* being sanctified by the law? Are you *seeking* to be sanctified by the law? Do you think it is *possible* to be sanctified by the law? If the answer is: ‘Yes’, then remember what is at stake – your liberty in Christ. No, I didn’t say it. Well, I did – but it was Paul the apostle who told you so, just he told the Galatians.

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of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make [us] complete in every good work to do his will, working in [us] what is well pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen” (Heb.13:20-21)’ (my *Christ* p11).

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Having grasped his readers' attention (Gal. 5:1), Paul issues two sharp commands, two commands which follow as a direct consequence of his teaching. The *first*, positive: 'Therefore stand', or 'keep standing firm', virtually a military command putting backbone into unnerved soldiers. The *second*, negative: 'And do not be entangled again', or 'do not be subject again to a yoke of bondage' or 'slavery'. This dramatic verse therefore opens with freedom or liberty, and closes with the risk of the loss of that liberty; namely, slavery or bondage. Liberty, freedom *is* the idea, the crux. Without a doubt, liberty as opposed to bondage is a major leitmotiv throughout the letter (Gal. 2:3-5,11-14; 3:1-18,22-29; 4:1-9,21-31; 5:1,13). This is what the apostle is fighting for. This is why he is sparing no effort in his defence of the Galatians against the Judaizers. It is no academic nicety which concerns the apostle. Paul is wrestling for liberty as opposed to slavery – and that, not in the abstract. Paul is wrestling for the Galatians' liberty. He is wrestling for every believer's liberty; for my liberty and, Christian reader, for *your* liberty. Please keep this personal note in mind.

Liberty! Christ did not accomplish merely the *forgiveness* of sins for his people; his intention was to *liberate* his people, to *free* them from their sins that they might have *freedom*: 'If the Son makes you free, you shall be free indeed' (John 8:36). Freedom! Liberty! No more slavery! The end of bondage! Christ died to *redeem* his people. To redeem is to purchase, to buy back in order to deliver; especially, to pay a ransom for a slave to set him free from his captivity (Lev. 25:25-26; 27:20; Deut. 7:8; 9:26; and many other verses). Christ shed his blood to redeem his people (Acts 20:28; 1 Cor. 6:20; Gal. 3:13; 4:5; 1 Pet. 1:18-19; Rev. 5:9), to redeem them from the law (Rom. 6:14; 7:4,6; 8:2-4; 10:4; Gal. 3:13,24-25; 5:1,13-18), to redeem them from the enslaving fear of death (Heb. 2:14-15), to redeem them from sin (Tit. 2:14), from its condemnation (Rom. 8:1,33), dominion (Rom. 6:14) and, in eternity, its presence (Rom. 8:23; Heb. 9:12,15). It is a real redemption which Christ wrought. Christ really has freed his people (1 Pet. 2:16) from sin, death and hell. Here, freedom from the law. Believers are free (1 Cor. 7:22; 9:1; 10:29; 2 Cor. 3:17). Truly free! Actually free! Now!



## *Liberty or Bondage: Sarah or Hagar?*

Paul's emphasis on liberty in Galatians 5, as I have pointed out, comes hard on the heels of his allegory or metaphor of Hagar and Sarah (Gal. 4:21-31).<sup>9</sup> Hagar, the slave woman, corresponds to the law given on 'Sinai which gives birth to bondage' (Gal. 4:24). Here we have the sinner's problem – bondage! Problem, did I call it? Ask any slave if he has a 'problem'! Sarah, however, corresponds to the other 'covenant' (Gal. 4:22-24,26), the covenant of freedom, the new covenant. Here we have God's glorious answer for the sinner – freedom! Hagar speaks of the enslaved; Sarah speaks of the free. Do the two make one covenant? Can they be combined? 'What does the Scripture say?' 'Cast out the bondwoman'. And what is Paul's conclusion, his application? Believers 'are not children of the bondwoman but of the free'. Believers are not slaves – they are free. Sinai – the law – spelled bondage; Christ brought freedom. Believers are not children of law, but children of grace. They must not go back to the law. They dare not go back to bondage. They are in the covenant of the Spirit, not the flesh. Let them live like it! Paul paints the contrast in stark tones. In light of the Judaisers' calling them to go under the law, he presents the Galatians with an ultimatum. It is freedom or slavery.

William Gadsby cast his thoughts on Galatians 4:21 – 5:1 into a hymn:

*What! must the Christian draw  
His comforts from the law,  
That can do nothing but condemn?  
If this be Zion's rule,  
Then unto Hagar's school,  
Must Sarah send her free-born son.*

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<sup>9</sup> Paul uses the slavery metaphor in Rom. 6, in Gal. 3 (with the pedagogue), in addition to Gal. 4 (with Hagar). Law and slavery are Siamese twins. It is important to note that the slavery of the old covenant, the law, is very different to the slavery of righteousness in the new covenant, which we meet in Rom. 6. The difference is paralleled by the difference between the 'law' in the law of Moses and the law of Christ. I explore this on p214 of my *Christ*. See also my *Psalms* 119.

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*But the bond-woman's son  
With such shall not be one;  
Isaac alone is lawful heir;  
So Abra'm must obey,  
And Ishmael send away,  
Nor Hagar must continue there.*<sup>10</sup>

And Paul uses the allegory to tell the Galatians (and hence all believers) what they must do. Just as Sarah would not allow Hagar and her son to remain in the company of Isaac, so the believer must have no truck with the old covenant: 'Cast out the bondwoman and her son'. He leaves them with no alternative. Paul is not telling them merely not to submit to the law, please note. Rather, they must get rid of every suggestion that they should submit to it. They must not listen to the Judaisers. On no account give them house room! As John, when he faced another set of false teachers, put it to his readers: 'Watch out that you do not lose what you have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully. Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God... If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work' (2 John 8-11, NIV). The Galatians must get their brain in gear, start thinking properly, thinking as new-covenant people, and give up this incredible 'desire to be under the law' (Gal. 4:21). Paul snaps out: 'Do you not hear the law?' Driving home his point, the apostle goes on to tell them some basic truths about the law – after all, the majority of the Galatians were almost certainly Gentiles, and, therefore, largely ignorant of its daily realities. And one thing we can be sure of! The Judaisers certainly wouldn't have told them! See 2 Corinthians 11:12-15. Indeed, the agitators would have acted much as the false teachers Peter wrote against – promising others liberty while they themselves were slaves (2 Pet. 2:19). Speaking of the Judaisers, Paul was adamant: 'For not even those who are circumcised keep the law, but they desire to have you circumcised that they may boast in your flesh' (Gal. 6:13).

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<sup>10</sup> Gadsby: *Hymns* number 522.

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So, as I say, Paul lets the Galatians have some home truths to think about, and he pulls no punches. In particular, he stresses that the law enslaves all who are under it, while Christ, at such tremendous cost, has bought freedom for his people – not least, freedom from the law! ‘Liberty! Do you really want to put that in jeopardy? Circumcision is only the first step. Oh, I know that’s all the Judaisers are calling for at the moment, but if you take that step, let me tell you where you will end up’:

It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law (Gal. 5:1-3, NIV).

*And that means slavery!*<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, the apostle presses home the point by referring to the Galatians’ own experience. ‘Because you are the sons of God, you are free. Don’t lose this’, he passionately urges them, ‘don’t be enslaved all over again by going back under the law. You are not slaves. Give up this madness!’ This is why he writes to them. This is why he utters his cry, his great cry: ‘For freedom Christ has made us free’, from which follows his directive: ‘Stand fast therefore, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage [slavery, NIV, NASB]’ (Gal. 5:1). Bondage is the very antithesis of the Christian’s experience; do not go back to it! Would Christ have set his people free from the prison house and pedagogy of the law (Gal. 3:22-25; 4:1-7) to take them straight back into it? Christ’s purpose in coming into the world and going to the cross was to set his people free (Isa. 42:7; 49:9; 61:1-2; Luke 1:74; 4:18).<sup>12</sup> How wrong, then, to fix the manacles of the law onto the saints – as is done when the law is made the rule of sanctification. Believers are free, free from the yoke of bondage – whether

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<sup>11</sup> From close observation, I can testify that once a person takes the bait, and gets hooked on the law, there is no limit to it.

<sup>12</sup> Charles Wesley: ‘Come, thou long expected Jesus,/ Born to set thy people free;/ From our fears and sins release us,/ Let us find our rest in thee’. We could well add: ‘From the law you have redeemed us’.

God's law, pagan principles or man-made regulations. And this includes what the Reformed call 'the moral law', the ten commandments.<sup>13</sup> None of this will sanctify! And progressive sanctification, do not forget, *is* Paul's concern. Keep in mind the rhetorical questions he posed in Galatians 3:2-5. Is sanctification by the law? Of course not!

The truth is, freedom from the bondage of the law is the very freedom for which Christ made us free. Liberty from the law! Freedom from *the law*, full stop! And this freedom is the release from subservience to the law (Gal. 3:13,22-25; 4:1-9,21-31). Christ has accomplished this through his death and by his resurrection, and by the work of his Spirit (Gal. 2:19-20; 3:2; 4:5-6; Rom. 7:4). Consequently, any dropping back into bondage is utterly out of the question. Or ought to be.

Reader, I hope I am getting through to you. I want you to feel the passion in Paul's words. I want you to get some sense of the depth of his emotion. Desperately anxious lest he should fail, tormented by the thought that the Galatians might be gullible enough to yield to the Judaisers and go under the law, the apostle beseeches them not to do it. 'Don't do it!' He pleads with every fibre of his being. As an advocate in court who, in his closing speech, takes his last chance to appeal for his client's life, his cry is vehement, earnest and intense. If the Galatians allow themselves to be enslaved all over again, all will be lost. This is Paul's last throw. It is all or nothing!<sup>14</sup>

Come to think of it, my illustration of the advocate fails miserably. The advocate is, quite rightly, a professional, disinterested. Not the apostle! He is 'in the pains of childbirth' (Gal. 4:19, NIV). In my mind's-eye, I can see him, tears coursing

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<sup>13</sup> As before, see my *Christ* pp99-110; see also, *and especially*, pp392-408; 'The Law: Reformed Escape Routes' (eDocs link on David H J Gay sermonaudio.com).

<sup>14</sup> See similar cases in Rom. 9:1-3; 10:1; 2 Cor. 11:1 – 12:11; Gal. 1:6-9; Phil. 3:2. Paul gave the Romans the same 'ultimatum' – live for God, in the Spirit, not in bondage to flesh, sin and law (Rom. 6:11-23; 7:4-6; 8:12-14). If you do the latter, 'you will die' (Rom. 8:6,13). Reaping follows sowing (Gal. 6:8). As Christ said: 'You will know them by their fruits' (Matt. 7:16).

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down his cheeks, his arms outstretched, his fervent words flowing apace.<sup>15</sup> This is how serious it is. The debate between those who advocate the new covenant and those who advocate covenant theology is, in effect, a debate about liberty and slavery. Is there a debate about that? Who wants to be a slave to law, sin and death? Give me slavery to Christ every time. Reader, what do you say? Are you with Sarah or Hagar?

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<sup>15</sup> This is not at all fanciful. See him with the Ephesians (Acts 20:31); before Agrippa (Acts 26:1,29); at Philippi (Phil. 3:18). In this, he was following his God and Saviour (Matt. 23:37; Luke 19:41; Rom. 10:21).



## *What Does It Mean to Be a Priest?*

The Bible must be its own interpreter. Its pages speak of several kinds of priest. Melchizedek was a priest; there were the levitical priests of the order of Aaron; there were the high priests; and there is the priesthood of our Lord Jesus Christ. How does the priesthood of believers fit into all that?<sup>1</sup>

The great original priesthood in human history is that of Melchizedek. Christ was a priest in his order. In the age which came between Melchizedek and Christ, the old covenant, the priesthood of the house of Aaron, served as an earthly copy of the true heavenly priesthood of the Redeemer, a picture, an indistinct silhouette of Christ and the work he would accomplish. The levitical priests were appointed to ‘serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven’ (Heb. 8:5, NIV). A copy and shadow, please note, a copy of what was already established, at least in the mind and decree of God, in heaven. All the regulations of worship and sacrifice of the earthly sanctuary were but material copies of the work of the true – the spiritual, the heavenly – sanctuary (Heb. 9:1-28). In fact, the new covenant – or the heavenly covenant – is the original covenant (Heb. 9:23). It was planned by the triune God in eternity, accomplished through the mediator in his incarnation, life, death and resurrection, is experienced in time when the elect are called, and will be finally and completely fulfilled in eternity. ‘He is the mediator of the new covenant, by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant, that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance’ (Heb. 9:15; see also 9:26).

So why did God set up on earth, for the Jews, this shadowy picture of Christ’s heavenly priesthood? The reason is plain. The idea of a ‘copy’ or ‘picture’ tells all. God was instructing Israel concerning Christ, the true priest, and his one effective offering for sin. Blurred and shadowy as a copy though the old covenant was, nevertheless it demonstrated to the Jews what Christ would

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<sup>1</sup> For this article, I have lightly edited my *The Priesthood* pp89-94.

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accomplish when the appointed time had arrived, and God would send his Son into the world to save sinners (Gal. 4:4; 1 Tim. 1:15). It would also foreshadow what Christ would be permanently engaged in doing in heaven (Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:24-25). But with this difference; on earth, Christ would accomplish and offer his sacrifice to his Father, once; in heaven, he would continually plead the merits of that sacrifice.

In other words, the levitical system had a demonstrating or instructing role for the Jews.<sup>2</sup> Day after day it cried out to them: ‘God demands sacrifice as an atonement for sin’. And it kept on telling them that God would accept only a blood-sacrifice of atonement and propitiation, a blood sacrifice as appointed by him. But it spoke such things not only for them. The old priesthood performs a similar task for us, even now, even though it was abolished and fulfilled along with the old covenant, 2000 years since, when Christ brought in the new. We, today, in the age of the new covenant, still gain valuable instruction from the old covenant. By meditating on the ministry of those earthly priests, we learn much about the priesthood of our Saviour. By examining the old priesthood, we also come to discover more about what is meant by saying that all believers are priests. So let

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<sup>2</sup> I am not saying that this was its only role. ‘What purpose then does the law serve? It was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made... Before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed. Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ’ (Gal. 3:19-24). This ‘tutor’ speaks of the law, not so much as an instructor, but rather as a stern child-custodian set over the Jews until the coming of Christ. This is *the* characteristic element of the law’s rule over Israel in the old covenant: ‘Now I say that the heir, as long as he is a child, does not differ at all from a slave, though he is master of all, but is under guardians and stewards until the time appointed by the father. Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world. But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying out: “Abba, Father!” Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ’ (Gal. 4:1-7). See my *Christ* pp128.



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us remind ourselves of the qualifications and duties of priests, especially the high priest, by turning once again to Hebrews 5:1-4:

Every high priest is selected from among men and is appointed to represent them in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness. This is why he has to offer sacrifices for his own sins, as well as for the sins of the people. No one takes this honour upon himself; he must be called by God, just as Aaron was (Heb. 5:1-4, NIV).

Under the old covenant, a priest had to be a man, not an angel, so that he could represent other men before God; he had to have compassion upon those with whom he dealt and for whom he made representation before God; he had to be called of God for the work; he had to be separated from the world unto God; he needed sacrifices to offer; he was to speak *to* God *for* the people, and speak *for* God *to* the people.

The old-covenant priests, therefore, knew they were an elect company, chosen by God to minister in his presence on behalf of others. They were to offer sacrifices. They were a special people to God. He stipulated that they had to come before him clothed in holy garments. He went further. Israel as a whole, the priests in particular, could declare: 'He has clothed me with garments of salvation and arrayed me in a robe of righteousness' (Isa. 61:10, NIV). Symbolic, of course, in the old covenant.

Again, God looked upon the priests as his ministers, his servants whom he would use to instruct the people in the knowledge of himself. He ordained that the priests should 'teach the children of Israel all the statutes which the LORD has spoken to them by the hand of Moses' (Lev. 10:11; see also Deut. 17:8-13). 'The lips of a priest should keep knowledge, and people should seek the law from his mouth; for he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts' (Mal. 2:7). This instruction was carried out both privately (Hag. 2:11-13; Zech. 7:1-7, say) and publicly – the latter, perhaps, along the lines of Nehemiah 8:

All the people assembled as one man in the square... They told Ezra the scribe to bring out the book of the law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel. So... Ezra the priest brought the

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law before the assembly which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. He read it aloud from daybreak till noon... in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. All the people listened attentively to the book of the law. Ezra the scribe stood on a high wooden platform built for the occasion... Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded: 'Amen! Amen!' Then they bowed down and worshipped the LORD with their faces to the ground. The Levites... instructed the people in the law while the people were standing there. They read from the book of the law of God, making it clear [or translating it], and giving the meaning so that the people could understand what was being read. Then Nehemiah... Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who were instructing the people, said to them all: 'This day is sacred to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep'. For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the law... Then all the people went away to... celebrate with great joy, because they now understood the words that had been made known to them (Neh. 8:1-12, NIV).

Why did God want his people taught his law? Besides the obvious answer – that God would never have given it to Israel unless he wanted the people to hear and understand it – the Lord intended that the ministry of the priests, under the law, should turn many from the paths of sin into the way of righteousness. It would, perhaps, be better stated the other way round: the Lord intended that, under the ministry of the levitical priests, the law should turn many from the paths of sin into the way of righteousness. (See Lev. 18:5; Neh. 9:29; Ezek. 20:11,13,21; Rom. 7:10; 10:5). In ideal circumstances, it would have done so, but the law was weak through the inability of sinful man to keep it, and therefore the levitical ministry failed in this regard (Acts 13:39; Rom. 3:20; 7:7 – 8:4; Gal. 2:16; 3:21; Heb. 7:11,18-19; 9:9; 10:1). Christ, of course, was born a man, born a Jew under the law, and, as a Jew, kept the law, but was cursed under it, and by offering up his obedient life in sacrifice (Rom. 5:19; Phil. 2:8), earned salvation for his people (Gal. 4:4-5; see also Matt. 1:1-

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16:21; Luke 2:21-27; John 1:14; Rom. 1:3; 8:3; 9:5; Gal. 3:13; Phil. 2:7-8; 1 Tim. 1:15).<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, the priests and Levites were responsible for the care of the place and apparatus of worship. Again, God allowed only the priests to come near to him. Above all, the high priest alone could come into the Most Holy Place, and that but once a year (Lev. 16:2; Num. 3:5-10,25,31-32; 16:5; Deut. 21:5; Heb. 9:7-8). Such were the duties and qualifications of the priests of God under the old covenant.

In a spiritual sense, within the limits as defined by the New Testament, such are the fundamental elements of the qualifications and duties of believers as priests of God under the new covenant. These elements are of such importance, let me list them. Under the old covenant:

1. A priest had to be a man, not an angel.
2. A priest was a member of an elect company, one who offered sacrifices to God.
3. A priest was a teaching minister. He not only taught the people the law of God, but he also administered justice.
4. The aim of his teaching the law was to turn the people to God. (This ministry failed, however, because of the ‘weakness’, the sinfulness of the people).
5. The priests had the responsibility of the care of the place and apparatus of worship. They alone could approach God.

As I say, within the limits as defined by the New Testament – that is, in a spiritual sense – such are the fundamental elements of the qualifications and duties of believers as priests of God under the new covenant.

It is plainly self-evident that there are real differences between the covenants, and corresponding differences between the priesthoods, differences which carry enormous consequences, now that Christ has fulfilled and abolished the old covenant and set up the new. Nevertheless, just as the old-covenant priesthood

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<sup>3</sup> See my *Christ* pp93-98.

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teaches us a great deal about Christ and his priesthood, so it teaches believers about their privileges and responsibilities as priests in the new covenant.

To begin with, all the children of God are the elect of God, born again of the Spirit of God, and so become spiritual men and women, made into kingly priests. ‘You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood’. All believers are called of God and separated from the world, sanctified and washed in the blood of Christ.

Furthermore, all believers, as priests of the Lord, have sacrifices to offer to him, and they are consecrated to this service, having been made clean through the blood of the Redeemer, anointed with the Holy Spirit and clothed with Christ. It is because of this that they, and they alone, can come near to God.

Again, as ministers, all believers have the responsibility and privilege of preaching the gospel – in the full breadth of what the New Testament means both by ‘minister’ and ‘preach’. I acknowledge that this must sound incomprehensible to many believers, even ridiculous, if not frightening. Me? Preach? Yes, but notice the qualification, ‘the full breadth of what the New Testament means by “preach”’. Although I have already hinted at this, and I will not stop to explain further now, the point I am making is of such importance, I will come back to it.

Moreover, as priests, believers are required to keep God’s temple holy – a priestly duty. These references to the temple can be both individual and corporate. Both as individuals, and together as a body, they have to be holy. Godliness in the individual *and* in the assembly (Matt. 5:8; Rom. 6:15 – 7:6; 1 Cor. 5; 2 Cor. 6:14 – 7:1; Eph. 5:3-11; 2 Thess. 3:6-15; Heb. 12:14) is essential.

Finally, as holy, anointed priests, believers come right into God’s presence, right into the holiest of all; and they come with confidence into the Most Holy Place, not just once a year, but at all times and in every place (John 1:12-13; Rom. 8:28-30; 9:22-24; 11:5; 12:1; 1 Cor. 2:6-16; 3:16-17; 6:19-20; 2 Cor. 1:21; 5:21; 6:17; Eph. 1:3-14; 2:13,18-22; Phil. 3:9; Col. 3:3; 2 Tim. 1:9; Heb. 4:16; 9:14; 10:19-22; 12:18-24; 13:15-16; 1 Pet. 1:2; 2:9; 1 John 2:20,27; Rev. 1:5-6).

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All believers, therefore, really are the priests of God. They all have all the necessary qualifications. They are, amazingly, the spiritual royal-priests of the Lord and, as such, truly are priests. In fact, it could be said that they are more ‘priestly’ than any old-covenant priest ever could be.



## *New-Covenant Priests: Who Are They?*

Even as he was pronouncing judgment on man for Adam's fall, God promised to send a Redeemer who would bring deliverance by his sufferings and death (Gen. 3:15). Centuries later, addressing Abraham, God enlarged upon this promise:

Get out of your country, from your family and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed (Gen. 12:1-3; see also 12:4-7; 15:1-21; 17:1-27).

And after he had set up the old covenant with Israel through Moses at Sinai, God, throughout the age of the old-covenant prophets, continued to issue a stream of prophecies to his people, in order to confirm, to explain and to enlarge upon his promise to Abraham. These prophecies, these truly staggering promises, were issued, naturally enough, in old-covenant language. In particular, God promised a world-wide expansion and future glory for Israel and its priesthood:

Your children shall be taught by the Lord, and great shall be the peace of your children. In righteousness you shall be established (Isa. 54:13-14).

The sons of the foreigner who join themselves to the Lord, to serve him, and to love the name of the Lord, to be his servants – everyone who keeps from defiling the sabbath, and holds fast my covenant – even them I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer. Their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations (Isa. 56:6-7).

You shall be named the priests of the LORD; they shall call you the servants of our God (Isa. 61:6).

I will also take some of them for priests and Levites (Isa. 66:21).

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Then will I purify the lips of the peoples, that all of them may call on the name of the LORD and serve him shoulder to shoulder. From beyond the rivers of Cush my worshippers, my scattered people, will bring me offerings (Zeph. 3:9-10, NIV).

‘Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight. Behold, he is coming’, says the Lord of hosts. ‘But who can endure the day of his coming? And who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like launderer’s soap. He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver; he will purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer to the Lord an offering in righteousness’ (Mal. 3:1-3).

These prophecies – and they were repeated time and again throughout the age of the old covenant – culminated in these towering statements:

‘Behold, the days are coming’, says the Lord, ‘when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah – not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them’, says the Lord. ‘But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days’, says the Lord: ‘I will put my law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No more shall every man teach his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying: “Know the Lord”, for they all shall know me, from the least of them to the greatest of them’, says the Lord. ‘For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more’ (Jer. 31:31-34).

‘For on my holy mountain, on the mountain height of Israel’, says the Lord GOD, ‘there all the house of Israel, all of them in the land, shall serve me; there I will accept them, and there I will require your offerings and the first-fruits of your sacrifices, together with all your holy things. I will accept you as a sweet aroma when I bring you out from the peoples and gather you out of the countries where you have been scattered; and I will be hallowed in you before the Gentiles’ (Ezek. 20:40-41; see also chapters 40-48).

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean. I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the



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heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my Spirit within you... I will put my Spirit in you, and you shall live... David my servant shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd... I will make a covenant of peace with them, and it shall be an everlasting covenant with them... I will be their God, and they shall be my people... (Ezek. 36:25-27; 37:14,24-28).

How should we – living in the time of the new covenant – interpret such prophecies? Are we to expect a world-wide expansion of Israel and the priesthood – the erection of the temple, the reinstatement and enlargement of the levitical priesthood, the sacrifices of sheep, bull and goats in profusion? In short, are we to look for a glorified old-covenant? Is that how we, in the days of the new covenant, should read these prophecies? Is that what God intended?

We have no need to guess. We are told what to make of all this. We know what God intended, by his Spirit, to convey through his prophets:

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the pilgrims of the dispersion... elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace be multiplied. Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to his abundant mercy has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time... Jesus Christ, whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith – the salvation of your souls. Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully, who prophesied of the grace that would come to you, searching what, or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ who was in them was indicating when he testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. To them it was revealed that, not to themselves, but to us they were ministering the things which now have been reported to you through those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven – things which angels desire to look into (1 Pet. 1:1-12).

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Clearly, therefore, we are meant to read those old-covenant prophecies as prophecies of the new covenant, prophecies of Christ and of believers within that covenant. Although the prophets used old-covenant language, they were, in fact, speaking of the glories of the new covenant. And these glories are spiritual, not fleshly; internal, not external; effective, not shadows. We know that the prophets – all of them – spoke in this way (Matt. 1:22-23; 5:17; 13:17; 26:56; Mark 1:2-3; Luke 1:70; 10:24; 18:31; 24:25,27,44; John 1:45; 6:45; Acts 3:18-25; 10:43; 13:40; 24:14; 26:22; 28:23; Rom. 1:2; 3:21; 16:26; 2 Pet. 3:2). This is how we are to understand these old-covenant prophecies.

In particular, we have these clinching statements in the letter to the Hebrews:

Now [at this time] [Christ] has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as he is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second. Because finding fault with them, he says: ‘Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah – not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they did not continue in my covenant, and I disregarded them’, says the Lord. ‘For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. None of them shall teach his neighbour, and none his brother, saying: “Know the Lord”, for all shall know me, from the least of them to the greatest of them. For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more’. In that he says: ‘A new covenant’, he has made the first obsolete. Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away (Heb. 8:6-13).

We have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. And every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God, from that time waiting till his enemies are made his footstool. For by one offering he has perfected forever those who are being sanctified. But the Holy Spirit also witnesses to us; for after he had said before: ‘This is the covenant

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that I will make with them after those days', says the Lord: 'I will put my laws into their hearts, and in their minds I will write them', then he adds: 'Their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more' (Heb. 10:10-17).

I make no apology for such extensive scriptural extracts, for in this way I have deliberately allowed Scripture to speak for itself, and speak with a voice that cannot be mistaken – at least, mistaken with impunity. The prophets were speaking of what Christ would do for his people, in his people, and through his people in the new covenant. Indeed, as we read the prophets, we not only see what Christ has accomplished for the elect, but we discover what Christ himself is in the new covenant. For *Christ himself is the new covenant*. The Father, addressing his Son in and through the prophet Isaiah, declared:

I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness, and will hold your hand; I will keep you and give you as a covenant to the people, as a light to the Gentiles, to open blind eyes, to bring out prisoners from the prison, those who sit in darkness from the prison house (Isa. 42:6).

It is too small a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob, and to restore the preserved ones of Israel; I will also give you as a light to the Gentiles, that you should be my salvation to the ends of the earth... I will... give you as a covenant to the people, to restore the earth, to cause them to inherit the desolate heritages; that you may say to the prisoners: 'Go forth' (Isa. 49:6-9).

As the prophets predicted, all this is fulfilled in the new covenant. It is all here, now. It has been in place ever since Christ came and established it. Mary, on learning that she was to bear the Messiah as her son, declared:

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Saviour. For he has regarded the lowly state of his maidservant; for behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed. For he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. He has helped his

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servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his seed forever (Luke 1:46-55).

Zacharias, in addressing his infant son, John, speaking of Christ, asserted:

Blessed is the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people, and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets, who have been since the world began, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us, to perform the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath which he swore to our father Abraham: to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all the days of our life. And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Highest; for you will go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the remission of their sins, through the tender mercy of our God, with which the dayspring from on high has visited us; to give light to those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace (Luke 1:68-79).

Thus the original promise which had been issued at the fall, had been given to Abraham, and had been enlarged upon time and again by the prophets, was now about to be fulfilled by Christ. And it was! As Jesus announced at his final supper, just before his death:

This is my blood of the new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins (Matt. 26:28).

This cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is shed for you (Luke 22:20).<sup>1</sup>

And in his triumphant cry on the cross: 'It is accomplished' (John 19:30), we hear the inauguration of that new covenant.

Christ told his disciples that the Spirit would glorify him – Christ – by leading them into all truth:

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<sup>1</sup> Do not miss the link, the comparison and contrast with Moses and the old covenant (Ex. 24:8). 'The law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ' (John 1:17).

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I will pray the Father, and he will give you another helper, that he may abide with you forever – the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him; but you know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you... The helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you... When the helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, he will testify of me... When he, the Spirit of truth, has come, he will guide you into all truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak; and he will tell you things to come. He will glorify me, for He will take of what is mine and declare it to you. All things that the Father has are mine. Therefore I said that he will take of mine and declare it to you (John 14:16-17,26; 15:26; 16:13-15).

Thus, we are given, in the apostolic writings, the authoritative explanation of all these things:

Know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying: ‘In you all the nations shall be blessed’. So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham... Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He does not say: ‘And to seeds’, as of many, but as of one, ‘And to your seed’, who is Christ. And this I say, that the law, which was four hundred and thirty years later, cannot annul the covenant that was confirmed before by God in Christ, that it should make the promise of no effect. For if the inheritance is of the law, it is no longer of promise; but God gave it to Abraham by promise. What purpose then does the law serve? It was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made; and it was appointed through angels by the hand of a mediator. Now a mediator does not mediate for one only, but God is one. Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not! For if there had been a law given which could have given life, truly righteousness would have been by the law. But the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed. Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ,<sup>2</sup> that

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<sup>2</sup> This speaks of the law, not so much as an instructor, but rather as a stern child-custodian set over the Jews until the coming of Christ. This is

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we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor. For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptised into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise (Gal. 3:7-9, 16-29; see also Rom. 4:1-25).

The upshot? As believers, we may say:

Such confidence... is ours through Christ before God... Our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant... of the Spirit... As God has said: 'I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people... I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters', says the Lord Almighty (2 Cor. 3:4-6; 6:16-18, both NIV; see also Lev. 26:11-12; Jer. 32:38-40; Ezek. 37:24-28).

All this is true of every believer. Every believer, each believer, is a full beneficiary of, and a full partaker in, all the glories of the new covenant in Christ.

In the rest of this short article I concentrate on just one aspect of what the believer is in the new covenant; namely, that he is, in Christ, a priest, a spiritual priest of God.

We are talking about the priesthood of all believers. The priesthood of *all* believers? Yes. And this vital point must not be forgotten. *All* believers. That's what the Bible speaks of. The

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*the* characteristic element of the law's rule over Israel in the old covenant: 'Now I say that the heir, as long as he is a child, does not differ at all from a slave, though he is master of all, but is under guardians and stewards until the time appointed by the father. Even so we, when we were children, were in bondage under the elements of the world. But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of his Son into your hearts, crying out: "Abba, Father!" Therefore you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ' (Gal. 4:1-7).

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priesthood of *all* believers. We are *not* dealing with the priesthood of a special class of believers – the clergy. Oh no!

Let me prove it. Peter, when he wrote his first letter, told his readers:

You also... are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ... You are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood (1 Pet. 2:4-10).

To whom was the apostle writing? Believers. But he was not only addressing believers of his own day. He was speaking to all believers then – and ever since. That is, he was addressing all who are members of the new covenant. *All* of them, I stress. No special class. Certainly not ministers or preachers or pastors (in the commonly-received way of using the words today). Just believers. Nevertheless, *all* believers. Not *some* believers, super-saints. *All* believers. According to Peter, all believers, the moment they are converted, become priests of the Lord in the new covenant. And every believer is as much a priest as any other. And each and every believer has all the qualifications and responsibilities of every aspect of the priesthood of all believers.

How do we know that? Well, to whom, precisely, does Peter address his letter? He tells us. I am writing, he says, to God's elect, those sanctified by the Spirit, those who are obedient to Christ and sprinkled by his blood; the regenerate; those who have tasted God's grace, who love Christ, who believe in him, and are saved, and find him precious; the called; the redeemed by Christ's blood; those who rejoice in Christ and have spiritual hope; those who have obeyed the truth; those who have a heavenly inheritance, who are being kept by God's power through faith for everlasting salvation; those who are the children of God (1 Pet. 1:1-25; 2:1-8).

Now *all* this is true of *all* believers, *all* the children of God. And it is as true today, as it was the day Peter wrote his letter. There is no exception; not one believer is left out. These are the people to whom Peter writes – the true children of God. And Peter tells all of them that *they* are the priests of God. So then, all the children of God, all believers – all of them – are 'a chosen generation, a royal priesthood'. In short, all who have been freed from their sins by the blood of Christ are made into 'a kingdom

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and priests to serve his God and Father' (Rev. 1:6; see also 5:10; 20:6, all NIV).

So, reader, if you are a believer in the sense I have set out, you are one in whom all those glorious old-covenant prophecies are fulfilled – fulfilled by Christ. 'Once at the end of the ages, [Christ] has appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself' (Heb. 9:26), and so establish the new covenant, rendering the old outdated, defunct: 'In that he says: "A new covenant", he has made the first obsolete' (Heb. 8:13). And you have a vital part in all this. You are a new-covenant priest of God. You are one of whom it can be said: 'Our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ... gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for himself his own special people, zealous for good works' (Tit. 2:13-14). And one way of describing this 'special-ness', this 'zealousness for good works', is to say that believers are the Lord's priests. *You* are a priest!

'I believe in the priesthood of all believers'. Good! Christians should. It is a biblical doctrine. All Christians are these priests. But what of the practical outworking of it? Has 'the priesthood of all believers' made any real difference to your understanding of the Christian life and its daily experience? How has it affected you? If you are a believer, you are a priest of God – as much as any believer ever has been, is or ever will be. Can you point to anything in your life as a consequence of it? Do you know what it means to be a priest? What does it mean to *you*?

If you wish to see more on what I say on this vital matter, please read my *The Priesthood of All Believers: Slogan or Substance?*



## *The Abrahamic Covenant*

Infant baptisers support their practice of infant baptism by arguments based on the Old Testament Abrahamic covenant, those promises which God made to Abraham concerning his physical seed.<sup>1</sup> They apply these promises to the church,<sup>2</sup> by which they mistakenly – incredibly – mean believers and their children. In this way, the circumcision of Israelite boys comes to be replaced by the baptism of infants who are born in families where the father or the mother, or both, are Christians (or nominally so). The promises of the Abrahamic covenant are applied to such children.

This is totally unwarranted. Unwarranted, it may be – it is! – even so, it does not lack, what seems to many, an impressive theology to buttress it. But... let us see how well this ‘impressive’ theology stands up.

Its fullest formulation may be found in covenant theology, that logical system invented by the Reformers, which is built upon the mistaken premise that the old and new covenants are continuous, being one and the same covenant, being merely different administrations of what they call ‘the covenant of grace’.<sup>3</sup> All this directly leads to the disastrous application, to the church, of old-covenant principles which concerned Israel.

### ***Covenant theology***

Let me say a few words about the history of this covenant theology and its consequences, the bondage it has brought to so

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<sup>1</sup> I have prepared this article by lightly editing my *Infant* pp78-113.

<sup>2</sup> I would like to drop ‘church’ and use *ekklēsia*, but I feel I ought to continue to use the language familiar to the overwhelming majority. I say this because ‘church’, today, is largely part and parcel of institutional Christianity – Christendom. And Christendom has done much harm, over many centuries, to the cause of Christ in general, and to the individual believer in particular – to say nothing of the appalling affect it has had on unbelievers.

<sup>3</sup> A non-biblical term which was warped by covenant theologians and woven into their scholastic scheme.

many believers. Yes, it was the Reformers who introduced it – a system The Reformers but not Martin Luther or, it may surprise some of his followers to learn, not John Calvin! Although Johann Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575) was probably the first to publish a work containing the concept of federal salvation, Kaspar Olevianus (1536-1587) ‘was the real founder of a well-developed federal theology’.<sup>4</sup> This took place in Germany when Olevianus and Zacharias Ursinus (1534-1583) drafted the final version of the Heidelberg Catechism (1562). William Ames (1576-1633) was the leading British exponent of covenant theology, which dominated the Westminster Confession of the Presbyterians (1643-1646) and the Savoy Declaration of the Independents (1661).<sup>5</sup>

Although covenant theology plays an important part in infant baptism today, the Fathers, when they drifted towards infant baptism, did not argue for it on the basis of the Abrahamic covenant; indeed, by them, ‘the Abrahamic covenant is hardly ever mentioned’. True, the 4th century laid the foundations for it,<sup>6</sup> but it was the Reformers who systematised covenant theology, and the Puritans who took it to its pinnacle. Its introduction, however, did not go uncontested. These facts need wider recognition.<sup>7</sup>

So why did the Reformers invent covenant theology? David Wright:

The 16th century Reformers... were confronted with the urgency of justifying [infant baptism] in the face of Anabaptist protests which took *sola Scriptura* more strictly than did the likes of Luther, Calvin and company. [Supposed] covenantal parallelism [between the covenant with Abraham and the new covenant] proved the most

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<sup>4</sup> Louis Berkhof: *Systematic Theology*, The Banner of Truth Trust, London, 1959, pp211-212.

<sup>5</sup> See J.D.Douglas (gen. ed.): *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, The Paternoster Press, Exeter, 1974, pp36,165,267,729,1005; R.T.Kendall: *Calvin and English Calvinism to 1649*, Paternoster Press, Carlisle, 1997, pp38-39.

<sup>6</sup> H.F.Stander, and J.P.Louw: *Baptism in the Early Church*, Carey Publications, Leeds, 2004, pp37,69,80,185.

<sup>7</sup> See Horton Davies: *Worship and Theology in England...*, Book 1, William B.Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1996, Vol.2 pp311-313.

sophisticated and durable of their [attempted] defences, which in turn made the assumption of universal infant baptism (made legally binding in some Reformation strongholds, such as Geneva) a factor in the rise of covenantal theology to prominence in the later 16th and the 17th centuries.<sup>8</sup>

Wright quoted John W. Riggs:

From a historical perspective, the Reformed use of covenant to interpret Christian baptism first arose, almost always, when arguing for infant baptism. In other words, its origin was not in theological or exegetical reflection on baptism as such, but as a specific response to the [Anabaptist] challenge to a long-held practice of infant baptism.<sup>9</sup>

In other words, the Reformers began with the practice they had inherited from Rome, and went looking for a theology to support it. But if they had taken Scripture as seriously as did the Anabaptists, they would have started with Scripture, tested their practice against it, and come to the right way to baptise.

As John Howard Yoder said: ‘For the Reformers, the total Bible was to be taken as one flat book, with every text having the same kind of authority, regardless of its place in the Bible, when it served their purposes’ – when it served their purposes! So, for instance:

The religious government of the Old Testament [the old covenant] could be an example for the State Church in the 16th century without reference to what happened to that government under divine providence in the Old Testament or what Jesus did about being a king... The Anabaptists were the only mission group of the Reformation to make clear the fundamental distinction between the Old Testament and the New... Over against the ‘mainstream magisterial’ Reformation for which in all history there has been but one age since the covenant with Abraham... the Anabaptists spoke... of the old covenant and the new... The significance of the

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<sup>8</sup> David Wright: ‘Christian baptism: where do we go from here?’, in *Evangelical Quarterly*..., April 2006, p28.

<sup>9</sup> John W. Riggs: *Baptism in the Reformed Tradition: A Historical and Practical Theology*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville and London, 2002, p122.

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relationship between [the] Testaments [more particularly, the covenants] is enormous in practical consequences.<sup>10</sup>

Let me say a little more about this question of continuity and discontinuity:

The two Testaments are strictly continuous (apart from the 400 year gap), but the two covenants are radically different, and have to be contrasted by us because they are contrasted in Scripture. The one, the Mosaic covenant, the old covenant, was the covenant of the flesh, outward, a shadow, ineffective, condemning, killing, a covenant of death, a temporary covenant which was fulfilled by Christ and abolished because it was weak and useless. The other covenant, the new covenant, is superior in that it is spiritual, of the Spirit, inward, the reality, effective, saving and permanent. While the Reformed want to talk in terms of the continuity of the two Testaments, this, in fact, is virtually irrelevant. What really matters is the fundamental disjoint of the two covenants. See John 1:17; Romans 8:3; 10:4; 2 Corinthians 3:6-11; Galatians 3:19; Hebrews 7:12,18,22,28; 8:7-13. This is precisely what the Reformed will not face up to.<sup>11</sup>

Leonard Verduin:

It would seem that the Reformers, in their haste to find the [Anabaptists] guilty of heresy at this point, were themselves led into error, the error of not appropriating the teaching, found so unmistakably present in the letter to the Hebrews for example [as well as Romans and Galatians], that the Old Testament [old covenant] is superseded by the New. One can go very far indeed in saying that there is a discontinuity between the Old Testament [more particularly, the old covenant] and the New before one lands in error as great as that of the man who refuses to accept the discontinuity that the New Testament plainly teaches.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> John Howard Yoder: 'The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision', in *Radical Reformation Reader: Concern No.18*, Scottdale, 1971, pp19-20.

<sup>11</sup> This represents a highly significant improvement on, refinement of, the equivalent passage in my *Christ*. I am grateful to some North American new-covenant friends for pointing me in the right direction to help me reach this important clarification.

<sup>12</sup> Leonard Verduin: *The Reformers and Their Stepchildren*, The Paternoster Press, Exeter, 1964; reprinted, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1980, pp210-211.

Given Verduin's Reformed background, these comments cannot be ignored – at least, ignored with impunity.

Ronald E. Diprose noted how the Presbyterians at the Westminster Assembly argued for their view of the church by what they called 'Jewish subordinations' which, they alleged, 'do, in the moral equity of them, concern us as well as them... We may... urge an argument', they claimed, 'from subordinations in the Jewish Church to prove a subordination still... There should be subordinations now in the Christian Church,<sup>13</sup> that was then in the Jewish'. 'In other words', Diprose observed, 'Israel's Levitical order is seen [by such men] to constitute a model for the church'.<sup>14</sup>

In addition to the ridiculous notion of a *Jewish* as opposed to a *Christian* church, among the many dreadful consequences which have come from over-emphasising the continuity between the Testaments, Cyprian used it to establish the priesthood, which, linked with sacramentalism, rapidly led to priestcraft and

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<sup>13</sup> This love of adjectives to qualify biblical principles is another grievous outcome of the imposition of the old covenant on believers and the church, which started with the Fathers, and has been compounded by the invention of covenant theology. Covenant theologians simply cannot stop using them; they have a predilection for adjectives to qualify biblical words and so bolster their inventions. For example, *visible/invisible* church, *Jewish/gospel* church, *infant* baptism. And when they talk about the law, the words *moral*, *ceremonial*, *judicial*, *social* and *civil*, are commonplace in their works, even though they are utterly unknown in the Bible. And its not only the lack of words! The concepts are not there either! See my *Christ; Pastor*.

<sup>14</sup> Ronald E. Diprose: *Israel in the Development of Christian Thought*, Instituto Biblico Evangelico Italiano, Rome, 2000, pp137-138. See Benjamin Wills Newton: *The Doctrine of Scripture Respecting Baptism Briefly Considered*, Lucas Collins, London, 1907, pp43,48-49,51-52; Stuart Murray: *Biblical Interpretation in the Anabaptist Tradition*, Pandora Press, Kitchener, 2000, pp97-124; Rich Lusk: 'Paedobaptism and Baptismal Efficacy: Historic Trends and Current Controversies', in Steve Wilkins and Duane Garner (eds.): *The Federal Vision*, Athanasius Press, Monroe, 2004, pp106-107; Stephen J. Wellum: 'Baptism and the Relationship between the Covenants', in Thomas R. Schreiner & Shawn D. Wright (eds.): *Believer's Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ*, B&H Academic, Nashville, 2006; Wright: 'Christian' p168.

sacerdotalism; the slaughter of heretics has been justified on its basis; and, principally for my purposes, infant baptism has been built on circumcision. I have gone into this in more detail elsewhere.<sup>15</sup>

As B.B. Warfield put it, infant baptisers believe that the church ‘carried over into itself all that was essentially Israelitish’.<sup>16</sup> But this is utterly wrong; it flies in the face of the New Testament itself.

It is not only wrong, it is complicated. To try to unravel the arguments infant baptisers use, I will look at them under four headings. *First*, I will examine their claims based on the Abrahamic covenant. *Secondly*, I will consider the double aspect of that covenant from Romans 9. *Thirdly*, I will look at the way infant baptisers confuse the Abrahamic covenant with the Mosaic and new covenants. *Finally*, I will consider the new covenant itself.

## ***1. The Abrahamic covenant***

The terms of the Abrahamic covenant are found in Genesis 17:7-8:

And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you. Also I give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are a stranger, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.

Before we examine these promises in more detail, some preliminary and obvious remarks are called for. The promises God gave to Abraham applied to the man himself *and to his*

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<sup>15</sup> See my *Christ; The Priesthood; Pastor*. I accept Wright’s assertion that there are ‘sharp questions’ about the covenant, which those who, like me, baptise believers, need to face (Wright ‘Christian’ p168). And I do face them (see, for instance, my *Infant*). But Reformed infant-baptisers, in their turn, cannot duck some ‘sharp questions’ about the logical system they have foisted upon Scripture.

<sup>16</sup> Benjamin B. Warfield: *Studies in Theology*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1988, p404.

*descendants*. As Warfield's words make clear, infant baptisers take this principle – this Abrahamic, Israelitish principle of physical descent – into the New Testament, into the new covenant, into the church. But this is utterly out of order; it is completely misguided; it runs counter to Scripture. We have no need to guess or speculate as to what the New Testament understands by 'the seed of Abraham'; it tells us – and plainly: The children or seed of Abraham in New Testament terms *are believers, all believers, only believers and nothing other than believers*. Most definitely *they are not the children of believers*.<sup>17</sup> The covenant does not apply to the children of Christians on the basis that they are the physical descendants of believers. In the New Testament, in the new covenant, it is not a matter of physical descent; it is entirely a question of faith. The issue is not: 'Is my father a believer?' But: 'Am I a believer?' The New Testament is clear. Abraham is:

The father of all those who believe... who also walk in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham had... Abraham... is the father of us [believers] all... Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham... So then those who are of faith are blessed with believing Abraham... For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus... And if you are Christ's, then are you Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise... Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise (Rom. 4:11-12,16; Gal. 3:7,9,26-29; 4:28).

These verses clearly teach that it is believers – and only believers – who are the seed of Abraham in the language of the New Testament; *not the children of believers*. It is only 'those who are of faith' who are the 'sons of Abraham'. Only believers are in the covenant in the gospel age, in the new covenant; not believers and their children. Thus, when infant baptisers contend for infant

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<sup>17</sup> I am not saying, of course, that the children of believers cannot themselves be the spiritual children of Abraham. Rather, that in the New Testament, the *definition* of the seed of Abraham does not include the children of believers. Those who do include such children in the definition of Abraham's seed, fly in the face of Scripture, and confuse the physical and the spiritual. Nowhere is it ever stated that Abraham is the father of believers *and their children*.

baptism on the basis of the promises of God to Abraham concerning his physical seed, their argument is utterly false; utterly false, I repeat. But this is just what infant baptisers do. They wrongly apply the terms of the Abrahamic covenant to Christians *and their children*. Where, in the New Testament, are the children of believers told they are the seed of Abraham? and told it simply because they are the children of believers?<sup>18</sup>

What is more, when they apply the promises of the covenant which God made with Abraham and his physical seed, to Christians and their children, infant baptisers are not only wrong; they prove too much. Let us look at Genesis 17:7-8. By God's promise, since all the descendants of Abraham were in the covenant, then it followed that they all inherited all the promises of the covenant. Once a boy born to an Israelite was circumcised, he himself was an Israelite, one who inherited all the rights and privileges of an Israelite. God established his covenant with that circumcised boy and his descendants for ever through Abraham. That is what God promised in the Abrahamic covenant. He said as much in Genesis 17. The point is, infant baptisers wrongly apply this covenant principle to Christian parents. This must mean – it can only mean – that they think a Christian's children are in the covenant in the same way as – or, at least, parallel to – the terms of Genesis 17. A Hebrew's children were Hebrews; a Christian's children must be Christians! If this passage could be applied to Christians as infant baptisers do apply it – a big 'if' – it would mean that all the children of all believers are included in the covenant; and in it for ever. What is more, they all inherit all the promises of the covenant.

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<sup>18</sup> I invite anybody who suggests Acts 2:39 to read it again. There is no mention of any covenant. If the claim is still maintained, then it follows that not only are the children of believers in the covenant, but everybody is – 'all who are afar off'. If it is then said that the qualifying clause – 'as many as the Lord our God will call' – governs all, I agree entirely. The promise here is to everybody without exception. All who repent (and believe) and are baptised will be saved. If the verse is still applied to the Abrahamic covenant, however, then indiscriminate baptism must be the result.



## *The Abrahamic Covenant*

Calvin, replying to the Anabaptists, certainly raised the stakes, declaring that they were criticising God, not the Reformers, when they argued against infant baptism:

The Lord did not anciently bestow circumcision upon [the Israelites] without making them partakers of all the things signified by circumcision... The covenant... is no less applicable to the children of Christians in the present day... If ['since' Calvin meant] [the children] are partakers of the thing signified, how can they be denied the sign? If they obtain the reality, how can they be refused the figure?... Let God, then, be demanded why he ordered circumcision to be performed on the bodies of infants. For baptism and circumcision being here in the same case [Oh? What a begging-of-the-question!], [the Anabaptists] cannot give anything to the latter without conceding it to the former.

Calvin's argument was both dangerous and puerile. God 'ordered circumcision to be performed' on baby boys under the Abrahamic covenant, yes; he guaranteed – guaranteed – all the promised inheritance to those boys, yes; they were Israelites, with all the benefits attached to being an Israelite. But where did God order believers to baptise their babies, and guarantee them all the inheritance of true believers? Calvin's premise was wrong; 'baptism and circumcision' are not 'in the same case'; in covenant theology, they may be, but not in Scripture. Do the babies of believers 'partake of the thing signified' in baptism? Do they have 'the reality' of the figure? According to Calvin, apparently so:

The divine symbol communicated to the child, as with the impress of a seal, confirms the promise given to the godly parent, and declares that the Lord will be a God not to him only, but to his seed; not merely visiting him with his grace and goodness, but his posterity also to the thousandth generation.

If [since] the children of believers, without the help of understanding, are partakers of the covenant, there is no reason why they should be denied the sign, [just] because they are unable to swear to its stipulations.

[Such] children, deriving their origin from Christians, as [since] they are immediately on their birth received by God as heirs of the covenant, are also to be admitted to baptism... Baptism... is a kind of

entrance, and as it were initiation into the church, by which we are ranked among the people of God, a sign of our spiritual regeneration, by which we are again born to be children of God... Wherefore, if we would not maliciously obscure the kindness of God, let us present to him our infants, to whom he has assigned a place among his friends and family; that is, the members of the church.<sup>19</sup>

Phew! If Calvin was only half right, why would Paul have said that Christ had not sent him to baptise, and speak in the way he did about the ordinance (1 Cor. 1:17)?<sup>20</sup> Indeed, why didn't he advocate – and practice – promiscuous baptism? It brings to mind the claims of faith-healers. Why don't they visit the hospitals and empty the wards? Likewise, if baptism carries such benefits, why preach? Have as many children as you can, and baptise them all! And why stop at baptism – why not the Lord's supper?

Does anybody know why Calvin baptised infants? Indeed, I ask all covenant theologians: Are these particular infants in the covenant by birth, or does baptism bring them into it? A personal note: I was standing with fellow-speakers at a Reformed conference for a group photograph. The birth of my grandson had been announced at 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'? Is the infant 'baptised because he is in the covenant, or to get him covenanted? Putting it another way, do infant baptisers 'baptise' infants because they are regenerate, or to regenerate them. This is no idle question.<sup>21</sup> William Cunningham gave an honest reply to the question: 'There is a difficulty felt – a difficulty which Scripture does not afford us materials for altogether removing – in laying down any very

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<sup>19</sup> John Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, James Clarke and Co., Limited, London, 1957, Vol.2 pp531-532,534,542,546,549,554.

<sup>20</sup> See my *Baptist* pp245-260.

<sup>21</sup> Some of them talk about something they call 'presumptive regeneration'. Do not miss yet another example of their need to use adjectives to qualify perfectly good biblical words in order to bolster their system or try to ward off its disastrous consequences.

distinct and definite doctrine as to the precise bearing and efficacy of baptism in the case of infants'. As I say, this is honest, but that is all that can be said for it! It is a frank admission that the whole system is a muddled charade. As he put it: 'There are undoubtedly some difficulties in the way of applying fully to the baptism of infants the definition usually given of a sacrament'.<sup>22</sup>

Nevertheless, infant baptisers plough on. But do they really believe that all the children of Christians are Christians? Do they believe that all the baptised children of believers inherit all the covenant promises? Well, do they? Surely it does not need to be pointed out, but the sad fact is, unfortunately, not all the children of believers will be converted, whether or not they are baptised as infants. On the infant baptiser's logic, why is this? They claim that they and their children are in the covenant of Genesis 17. Well then, since God was the covenant God of the seed (or children) of Abraham (Gen. 17:7), is he the God, the covenant God, of the seed (or children) of believers or not? Do infant baptisers really believe that their children are in covenant with God for ever? Furthermore, are the children of *their* children in an everlasting covenant with God likewise? Abraham's descendants were. All of them were. If infant baptisers are right, then a Christian's baptised children are in the covenant, his grandchildren are in the covenant, his great-grandchildren are in the covenant, *ad infinitum*. Really? Infant baptisers claim that the Abrahamic covenant applies to believers and their children. If they are right then all their seed are in the covenant for ever. They are all – all of them – regenerate.

But this is ridiculous. The mistake, of course, is to leap from the physical covenant made with Abraham – and it was physical, 'in your flesh' (Gen. 17:13) – to the spiritual life of the church. This is totally unwarranted, and, as a result, highly dangerous. The truth is, the physical covenant blessings promised to the seed of Abraham have no connection with the church at all. None whatsoever. Physical covenant blessings certainly came through physical descent in the Old Testament, in the old covenant, but does grace come through physical descent? It most decidedly

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<sup>22</sup> William Cunningham: *Historical Theology*, The Banner of Truth Trust, London, 1960, pp126,145. See my *Infant* pp192-199.

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does not. It never did. And in New Testament (new covenant) terms it is expressly ruled out. It is not a question of physical descent. This vital point has been made already. Regeneration has nothing to do with human birth ties. Nothing whatever. Let me quote John 1:11-13:

He came to his own, and his own did not receive him. But as many as received him, to them he gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in his name: who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

Is it not perfectly clear? Grace does not run in the line of physical descent in the New Testament. As we shall see, it never did, not even in the Old Testament. The same goes for the old and new covenants. There never was a time when it did; there never will be a time. Infant baptisers are going further than the Abrahamic covenant itself.

Another of the promises in Genesis 17 concerned the land (Gen. 17:8). Infant baptisers say that to this day the physical seed of believers are included in the covenant. Well then, is the physical land also included? Will the baptised children of believers inherit the promised land? Of course not! What a silly suggestion! But what *will* they inherit? Since the children of Abraham did inherit the land, on the infant baptiser's argument the children of believers must inherit something. They must inherit the promise of God. What promise? What, if not the land? Is it 1 Peter 1:4? Do the children of Christians come into 'an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven'? All believers have this covenant inheritance. God has promised it to them. Do the children of believers come into this, on the basis that their parents are Christians, and consequently they themselves are in the covenant and were baptised? Believers possess an incorruptible inheritance – do their baptised children possess it, too? If not, why not? On the arguments of infant baptisers, children must inherit something from the covenant by virtue of their physical descent from Christians. What, exactly, do the children of believers inherit through the covenant?

Further, must it be an eight-day baptism (Gen. 17:12)? If not, why not? And what about servants in a home where the husband

or wife or both are Christians or nominally so? Are they included in the covenant? What about the children of these servants? Are they included in the covenant, likewise? They were in the Abrahamic covenant, with no suggestion that they had adopted Israelite convictions (Gen. 17:12-13). So, to come to a practical case, if a Christian has adult servants, must they be baptised? What if they are not converted, or do not even make a profession, must they be baptised even so? Are they in the covenant? Are they Christians? These are no idle questions. Meredith Kline tried to face up to them, but the consequences proved too much:

Perhaps the complications that can easily be foreseen developing in this area are in themselves sufficient to turn us from further consideration of this approach as a proper interpretation of New Testament directives.<sup>23</sup>

Is this the best that can be said for the practical consequences of the attempt to apply the covenant in the way infant baptisers do? It is more than ‘sufficient to turn us from further consideration of this approach’. It is an utter farce. It is nothing less than a frank admission of the failure of their case based upon a most improper interpretation of Scripture. Infant baptism, on the basis of this kind of partial, pick-and-choose application of the Abrahamic covenant, ought to be stopped now!

Again, if an Israelite parent did not circumcise his infant, that boy was to be ‘cut off from his people’; he had broken God’s covenant (Gen. 17:14). How does this apply to infant baptism? What will infant baptisers do to those persons whose parents were Christians but who did not baptise them as infants? What will they do to the unbaptised infant? How will the child be ‘cut off from his people’? What will it mean? My wife and I were such parents; we were believers but we did not baptise our infants. Thus the question is of personal interest to me and millions like me. What happens to those whose parents did not baptise them as infants? Will infant baptisers cut them off from Christ and salvation? What will this mean in down-to-earth terms? Would some infant baptiser spell it out for us?

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<sup>23</sup> David Kingdon: *Children of Abraham*, Henry E. Walter Ltd., Worthing, 1973, pp48-49.

Let me explain. My parents were not believers when I was born. I was not baptised as an infant. In my teens, I was converted and baptised. My parents later professed faith, and were baptised. In time, I married a believer who had been baptised upon profession of faith – her believing parents had not baptised her as an infant. When our children were born, we did not baptise them as infants. On credible profession of faith, in their teens, at their request and after due examination, they were baptised. When, in their turn, in their marriages to believers, they had children, they did not baptise them as babies. But these children are now coming to profess Christ, and those who have so professed him have been baptised. As I say, would some infant baptiser please write to me, and set this in the context of Genesis 17? Who should be ‘cut off’? And what will that mean?

Ishmael was circumcised but he was expressly excluded from the covenant (Gen. 17:15-27; Rom. 9:7-8; Gal. 4:22-31). What, exactly, is the spiritual equivalent of this in the baptism of the New Testament? Who are the Christian Ishmaelites?

What is more, why do Reformed infant-baptisers not baptise *all* children? Since the covenant applies for a thousand generations (Deut. 7:9; 1 Chron. 16:15-17; Ps. 105:5-10), once a man is in the covenant, all his descendants are in the covenant, even to a thousand generations. On the principles of infant baptism, once any man is in the covenant, all his descendants must be baptised, even to a thousand generations. Let us pause for a moment and consider this. It is bound to mean virtual indiscriminate baptism in the end.

The arithmetic is unassailable. In round figures, 2000 years have passed since the New Testament; 70 generations, say. Allowing, for the moment, 2 offspring *per* generation, and no intermarriage, a believer of the New Testament age would now have  $2^{70}$  descendants, approximately  $10^{22}$ , alive today. So the 120 believers at Pentecost would have approximately  $10^{24}$  descendants alive today; a million, million, million, million. Obviously, this figure will be drastically reduced by intermarriage and all the rest, (but it will be increased if more than two offspring are produced and have children in each generation). The point I am making is that when the arithmetic is

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applied to all the generations since Pentecost, leaving aside isolated tribes, the likelihood of anybody alive today not having at least one believer in his ancestry, is so remote as to be unthinkable. (As I write, the world population is just under a ‘mere’ 7000 million!) In other words, everybody alive today must be in the covenant. Furthermore, why begin at Pentecost? What about Abraham? He lived 42 generations before the birth of Christ (Matt. 1:17). So we are talking about 110 generations! All this makes the possibility – of anybody alive today *not* being in the covenant – even more remote. Nor must it be forgotten, Psalm 105 speaks of 1000 generations – which Calvin applied to the babies of believers. In short, everybody alive today almost certainly has at least one ancestor who was in the covenant. And this has large consequences for infant baptisers and covenant theologians.

Let John Cotton spell it out:

If you can say, you have known some of your ancestors in this covenant, and you have not refused it, but laid claim to it, when you understand it yourselves, it is certain this covenant reaches to you.<sup>24</sup>

Cotton was stricter than the Bible. A man is in the covenant if but *one* of his ancestors was. And he is in it, whether or not he knows his ancestor was. And where does this idea of ‘refusing the covenant’ come from? Can a man, in the covenant by God’s decree through birth, refuse it?

By the way, how does Exodus 20:5 effect the infant-baptiser’s argument based on the generations in the covenant? ‘I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generations of those who hate me’. Suppose a man is a believer, but his son, though in the covenant and baptised as an infant, turns out to be a hater of God. Are *his* children in the covenant, or does God visit the iniquity of their father upon them? And so on.

The point is, what happens if an infant’s father is a rank infidel, but his grandfather is a true believer? Since the grandfather is in the covenant, his son, though an unbeliever, is

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<sup>24</sup> Perry Miller: *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1961, p92.

also in the covenant! But even if he is not, the promise still descends to the infant through his grandfather. Are infants to be baptised because the father is in the covenant, or because the grandfather is, or because the great-grandfather is? Louis Berkhof said that some infant baptisers actually do reason on this basis to the end that ‘children whose parents have left the church have not thereby forfeited their privileges as children of the covenant’. In other words, some infant baptisers do argue for the virtual indiscriminate baptism of infants, irrespective of the standing of the parents. ‘Covenant theology’ has come to a sorry state when this happens.

Calvin to John Knox:

God’s promise comprehends not only the offspring of every believer in the first line of descent, but extends to thousands [*sic*] of generations. Whence it has happened that the interruption of piety which has prevailed in Popery has not taken away from baptism its force and efficacy... To us then it is by no means doubtful [a *litotes*; that is, it is certain] that offspring descended from holy and pious ancestors, belong to the body of the church, though their fathers and grandfathers may have been apostates... [Let me suppose a case:] It is unjust, when God, three hundred years ago or more [say], has thought them worthy of adoption [that is, one of their ancestors at that time was a believer], that the subsequent impiety of some of their progenitors should interrupt the course of heavenly grace. In short, as each person is not admitted to baptism from respect or regard to one of his parents alone, but on account of the perpetual covenant of God, so in like manner, no just reason suffers children to be debarred from their initiation into the church in consequence of the bad conduct of only one parent.<sup>25</sup>

On the basis of Genesis 17:12, why do infant baptisers not adopt infants, and baptise them? This is no trivial question. Berkhof said it is the principle and practice of some infant baptisers where ‘the parents were unfit or unwilling to vouch for the Christian

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<sup>25</sup> John Calvin: *Letters of John Calvin...*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1980, pp215-216. See below for note on Calvin: *Institutes* Vol.2 p521. So much for the children of apostates, according to covenant theology. But a question suggests itself: Were those apostates, themselves, in the covenant or not? After all, they had an ancestor who was.



education of their children'. As he put it: 'Others could step in to guarantee this'.<sup>26</sup>

What is more, if a foreigner became an Israelite, his children and slaves had to become – and did become – Israelites, too, by circumcision (Exod. 12:48). Charles Hodge, at least with the merit of consistency, said that the equivalent applies to Christians! Really? He was actually prepared to maintain that 'if the father becomes a citizen of a country he makes his children citizens. In like manner, when a man becomes a Christian, his children are to be regarded as doing the same thing'.<sup>27</sup> This is staggering. It is unbelievable. I agree that if a man takes on English or American nationality, say, his dependent children do,<sup>28</sup> but do infant baptisers really believe that if a man is converted, his children are to be regarded as converted? Apparently they do. Warfield, for instance, said that the parent acts as a representative of his child, and 'that the status of the parent determines the status of the child'. And to remove all misunderstanding, he explained that he meant 'in the church of God... as well as... in the State'.<sup>29</sup> What an incredible claim!

John Murray said that 'baptised infants are to be received as the children of God and treated accordingly'.<sup>30</sup> Surely this must be a gross mistake. But A.A.Hodge was even more frank than Murray. He said that the baptised infant should be 'taught from the first to recognise himself as a child of God, with all its privileges and duties; trained to think, feel, and act as a child of God'.<sup>31</sup> What an amazing statement! How terribly misguided.

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<sup>26</sup> Berkhof p642. What is this talk of 'Christian education'? I am not, of course, implying that parents should not train up their children in the ways of God (Prov. 22:6), but, according to covenant theology, the infant is in the covenant, full stop, by virtue of the faith of its parent, grand-parent or whoever – whether or not the parent gives it a 'Christian education'.

<sup>27</sup> Kingdon p47.

<sup>28</sup> As Paul said: 'I was born a [Roman] citizen' (Acts 22:28). Where in the Bible is anyone said to be 'born a Christian'?

<sup>29</sup> Warfield p403.

<sup>30</sup> Kingdon p47.

<sup>31</sup> A.A.Hodge: *Evangelical Theology*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1976, p337.

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What untold damage this must have done to unregenerate children who have been trained, constantly brought up, to look upon themselves as children of God. It is horrific.

I ask again: Since all the children of the Israelites were Israelites by the covenant, are infant baptisers really prepared to say that all the children of Christians are themselves Christians? In their discussion of infant baptism, it is obvious that they get very close to saying it, if not actually committing themselves to the position. And it is totally wrong and a diabolical suggestion. Reader, I can do no better than to refer you to John 1:11-13 once more. In New Testament (new covenant) terms, birth has nothing to do with spiritual life. That there are advantages in being born to Christian parents, no one denies. But this is not the issue.

In the Presbyterian *Directory for the Public Worship of God*, the section on the *Administration of the Sacraments* gives this counsel to a minister when he baptises a child. He is to say:

The promise is made to believers and their seed; and that the seed and posterity of the faithful, born within the church, have, by their birth, interest in the covenant, and right to the seal of it, and to the outward privileges of the church, under the gospel, no less than the children of Abraham in the time of the Old Testament... that children by baptism, are solemnly received into the bosom of the visible church, distinguished from the world, and them that are without, and united with believers... That they are Christians, and federally holy before baptism, and therefore are they baptised.<sup>32</sup>

This is a shocking statement to be found in a Reformed document. Elsewhere,<sup>33</sup> I have said more about the use of the words ‘sacrament’ and ‘visible church’, but for now I call your attention to what is said about children who ‘have by their birth’ come into all these benefits, including ‘that they are Christians’. Christians by their birth? Does the principle of John 1:11-13 not run totally contrary to the *Directory*? How can any non-Papist speak as the *Directory* advises? A child of a Christian is a

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<sup>32</sup> *The Confession of Faith* and other documents of the Westminster Assembly, The Publication Committee of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, 1967, pp382-383.

<sup>33</sup> See my *Infant; Baptist; Pastor; Hinge; No Sacerdotalism*.

Christian by means of his birth? Is this what infant baptism comes to?

The arguments for infant baptism based upon the Abrahamic covenant are mistaken, and worse. Far worse! And the consequences are alarming, even diabolical. But certain questions remain. What of the Abrahamic covenant and the Christian? Is there no connection whatsoever between the two? And where does the new covenant (Heb. 8:13) fit into this discussion? We now look into these matters.

## ***2. The double aspect of the Abrahamic covenant***

Romans 9:6-8 must be considered at this point. It reads:

But it is not as though the word of God has taken no effect. For they are not all Israel who are of Israel, nor are they all children because they are the seed of Abraham; but: 'In Isaac your seed shall be called'. That is, those who are the children of the flesh, these are not the children of God; but the children of the promise are counted as the seed.

Infant baptisers fail to act on the practical implications of this passage. It's worse; they act *against* them. The passage teaches that there was a two-fold aspect to the covenant which God made with Abraham; there was a two-fold line of descent. One, physical; the other, spiritual. Abraham's physical descendants were physical Israelites. Isaac was, Esau was, Jacob was, and so on. But within and among the physical descendants there was another line of descent – those who were Abraham's spiritual children. Abraham's physical descendants, or 'the children of the flesh' (Rom. 9:8), were physical Israelites; Abraham's spiritual descendants, or 'the children of the promise' (Rom. 9:8), were spiritual Israelites. All Abraham's descendants were the seed of Abraham, but not all of them were his children, in the terms of the spiritual covenant (Rom. 9:7). Jacob was. Esau was not (Rom. 9:10-13).

This is the very point Paul develops in Romans 9:6-8. God declared his mind to Abraham. He gave him his word, he instituted his covenant with him. When Paul wrote to the Romans, this covenant, this word from God, had not failed or

collapsed (Rom. 9:6), though it might appear that it had, since not every Israelite was saved. The truth is, God's covenant had not failed, and for this reason – Abraham's descendants were of two sorts, physical and spiritual. 'For they are not all Israel who are of Israel' (Rom. 9:6); that is, just because they were physically descended from Abraham, it did not mean that they were so spiritually. God's word had not failed. All the spiritual Israelites had received the fulfilment of the spiritual promise of the covenant. That is what Paul taught in Romans 9:6. The principle applies today. In particular, all believers – Jew and Gentile – are the spiritual Israelites, and all of them inherit the spiritual promise to Abraham. In addition, the spiritual descendants of Abraham are not only the children of Abraham, they are much more; they are even 'the children of God' (Rom. 9:8). In other words, the spiritual descendants of Abraham are, in New Testament terms, believers. See Galatians 3:7,9,26-29. The physical descendants of Abraham are most decidedly not the children of God simply because they are the physical descendants of Abraham (Rom. 9:8). This double aspect to the Abrahamic covenant is brought out very clearly in various other passages – Luke 3:8; John 1:47; 8:30-32,37-39; Romans 2:28-29; Galatians 4:22-29; 6:16, for instance. If only infant baptisers would act upon this double aspect of the Abrahamic covenant, the discussion would be at an end.

What is more, it is the new covenant which is in force in now (Heb. 8:13), and it is precisely this covenant which is the continuation of the spiritual aspect of the covenant with Abraham. Moreover, it is through the new covenant that believers during the gospel age are linked to Abraham and all the Old Testament saints in the line of faith and grace. Reformed infant-baptisers go badly astray at this point. They link believers to the physical aspects of the covenant with Abraham. This is a mistake of immense proportions. For one thing, they do not give sufficient weight to the *newness* of the new covenant. They conflate and confuse the physical and spiritual. And this is a gross violation of the clear New Testament teaching on flesh and spirit, letter and Spirit. Three passages must suffice:

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My brethren, you also have become dead to the law through the body of Christ, that you may be married to another – to him who was raised from the dead, that we should bear fruit to God. For when we were in the flesh, the sinful passions which were aroused by the law were at work in our members to bear fruit to death. But now we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter... There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: he condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God. But you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Now if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not his. And if Christ is in you, the body is dead because of sin, but the Spirit is life because of righteousness. But if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you. Therefore, brethren, we are debtors – not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh. For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption by whom we cry out: ‘Abba, Father’. The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs – heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with him, that we may also be glorified together (Rom. 7:4-6; 8:1-17).

God... who also made us sufficient as ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life (2 Cor. 3:5-6).

## *The Abrahamic Covenant*

Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another, so that you do not do the things that you wish. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. Now the works of the flesh are evident, which are: adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lewdness, idolatry, sorcery, hatred, contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, dissensions, heresies, envy, murders, drunkenness, revelries, and the like; of which I tell you beforehand, just as I also told you in time past, that those who practice such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law. And those who are Christ's have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live in the Spirit, let us also walk in the Spirit (Gal. 5:16-25).<sup>34</sup>

The Reformed, I say again, conflate and confuse these two disparate entities, these two contrasting entities, flesh and spirit, letter and Spirit. The contrast between the two aspects of the Abrahamic covenant is highlighted by the following: How does a man become a physical Israelite? By being born into an Israelite family and then being circumcised. How does a man become a spiritual Israelite? Certainly not in that way. 'For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is that circumcision which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly, and circumcision is that of the heart, in the spirit, and not in the letter' (Rom. 2:28-29). In other words, a man becomes a true spiritual Jew (that is, a believer) by being spiritually circumcised; that is by being regenerated. Regeneration is the way a man becomes a spiritual Israelite (that is, a child of the promise), a child of God and a child of Abraham. This regeneration shows itself in faith (and repentance), so that Abraham is 'the father of all those who believe, though they are uncircumcised... who also walk in the steps of the faith which our father Abraham had while still uncircumcised' (Rom. 4:11-12). This regeneration, which leads to faith, itself comes about as God works out his purpose and promise according to his electing grace.

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<sup>34</sup> For more, see my 'Flesh and Spirit' (Edocs link on David H J Gay Ministry sermonaudio.com).

Paul developed this argument more fully in the verses which follow on from Romans 9:6-8. He spoke of ‘the word of promise... the purpose of God according to election’ (Rom. 9:9-11), and he continued in the same vein to the end of chapter 11, saying: ‘Israel has not obtained what it seeks; but the elect have obtained it, and the rest were hardened. Just as it is written’ (Rom. 11:7-8). Simply because a man is a physical Israelite – that is, because he is in the Abrahamic covenant in its physical aspect – it does not mean he is elect and hence will be regenerated and come to faith. By no means. True spiritual Israelites are those who are believers, and only they; they are believers through their regeneration; and they are regenerated because of the election of God.

Timothy’s mother is a classic case – she was a ‘Jewish woman who believed’ (Acts 16:1). She was a daughter of Abraham in a physical sense by her natural birth; she was his spiritual daughter by election and regeneration.<sup>35</sup> The same goes for all the elect, Jew or Gentile. God has determined to save them, he has decreed it, he has promised it, and they all come to faith. Thus it is that his word has not failed (Rom. 9:6). Certainly not! For all the elect (whether Jew or Gentile) will be regenerated, they will all come to faith. The covenant of God stands firm.<sup>36</sup> ‘Therefore it is of faith that it might be according to grace, so that the promise might be sure to all the seed, not only to those who are of the law, but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all’ (Rom. 4:16); that is, the father of us – the believing elect – all – whether Jew or Gentile. Abraham was ‘fully convinced that what [God] had promised he was also able to perform’ (Rom. 4:21). God’s predestination is so powerful, he can even raise up his elect from stones (Luke 3:8).

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<sup>35</sup> Note the distinction between a Jew and a disciple in the words of Christ: ‘As I said to the Jews... so now I say to you’ (John 13:33).

<sup>36</sup> ‘All Israel will be saved... for the gifts and calling of God are irrevocable’ (Rom. 11:25-29). Whether ‘all Israel’ means ‘all elect Jews’ or ‘all the elect, the new Israel’, does not affect the point. All the elect will be saved; God’s covenant is absolute. For this section, see my *Romans 11*.

## *The Abrahamic Covenant*

To summarise all this. There is a descent from Abraham according to the flesh, and there is a descent according to the Spirit. The children of the flesh are the natural children of Abraham, whereas the children of the promise are the spiritual children – they are the children of God, and they only. The physical promises of the covenant applied to the physical children,<sup>37</sup> but the spiritual promises apply only to the spiritual children.

Reader, you might well ask: What bearing does all this have on the question of infant baptism? As I said earlier, infant baptisers do not act according to the principles of Romans 9:6-8. They take the *physical* promises (or some of them – they are selective!) which were made to Abraham in Genesis 17, and apply them to *spiritual* men – to believers. They confuse the two strands in the line of descent. This is just downright foolishness, and worse. The physical promises and conditions of the covenant (circumcision, the promised land, and so on) applied to the physical descendants of Abraham, and only to them. On the other hand, the spiritual promises apply only to the spiritual children of Abraham, to the elect who prove their election by their saving faith. These two strands must not be mixed up; they must not, under any circumstances, be confused. But this is exactly what infant baptisers do. They try to apply the physical covenant to believers. In particular, they take the terms, conditions and promises involved in physical circumcision, and then apply them to the physical children of believers in baptism. It is an appalling mistake, and one with dire consequences.

But it is not only infant baptisers who mix up the two strands in the Abrahamic covenant. Far from it. In fact they repeat the error of many Jews themselves; as for example the Jews in Luke 3:8. The Jews in question, who had been circumcised, but were not spiritually minded, made exactly the same mistake as can be made by infant baptisers today. Those physical Israelites forgot – or did not understand, or chose to neglect – the distinction

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<sup>37</sup> I will not plunge into an examination of prophecy to look at the future (if any) of physical Israel and the land *etc.* It is not relevant to the work in hand.



between the physical and the spiritual descendants of Abraham. They confused the double aspect of the Abrahamic covenant. And it had disastrous results. They thought that just because they were the children of Abraham they must be the children of God. ‘We have Abraham as our father’, they protested, they bragged. ‘We are Abraham’s descendants... Abraham is our father... We have one Father – God... Our father [is] Abraham’ (John 8:33,39,41,53). John the Baptist disabused them of this mistaken notion in no uncertain terms (Luke 3:8); as did Christ (John 8:37-47,53-55). They were most definitely not the children of God, even though they were Abraham’s physical children. Yes, they had descended from Abraham and had been circumcised, but that did not make them the true sons of Abraham, the children of God.

William Hendriksen justly commented on Luke 3:8:

The reason why these people were headed for damnation was that for their eternal security they were relying on their descent from Abraham... John the Baptist was fully aware of the fact that physical descent from Abraham did not guarantee being a true son of Abraham.<sup>38</sup>

The application of this to the present discussion of infant baptism lies in this: Those who have been brought up under the infant baptism system stand exposed to precisely the same dangerous assumption as the Jews of Luke 3:8, and over exactly the same issue. What about those who were baptised as infants, but are never regenerated? If they have been baptised as infants on the basis of the covenant, but they are not regenerate, they can plead – falsely like the Jews – that since their father is in the covenant, and they were dealt with as infants in accordance with the covenant, then it follows they are in the covenant themselves. I do not say that all who were baptised as infants, but who are never regenerated, do argue this way. I say it is a possibility. And a completely understandable possibility from their point of view. It is possible that they might claim that they are in the covenant, when they are not. They might claim they are Christians, when they are nothing of the sort – just like the physical Jews tried to

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<sup>38</sup> William Hendriksen: *The Gospel of Luke*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1979, p205.

claim they were spiritual Jews, when they were not. To use Hendriksen's words – they can make the mistake of 'relying on their descent' from a man who is in the covenant. If so, they are 'headed for damnation'.

I go further. I say that if those who were baptised as infants actually believe what they have been told times without number by their teachers, it is likely they will argue this way, even if they are not regenerated. Why? Those who have been baptised as infants can very easily make the mistaken claim that they are Christians, when they are not, because – after all – from their earliest days they have been assured by the teaching of many – if not all – of their elders, their catechisms and the Confessions under which they have been reared, that they are Christians. Since they have been treated and regarded as Christians from childhood, it cannot be wondered at if they actually do believe their teachers and parents, and think they are saved! They have been 'received as children of God', they have been told that they are 'in some sense the children of God, accounted members of Christ from the womb, ingrafted into the church, and have put on Christ'. They have been 'taught from the first to recognise themselves as children of God'. They have been told they are in the covenant.

What if they actually do believe such horrific and erroneous statements? It would not be at all surprising if they did. What if they act upon them?<sup>39</sup> What if they die relying upon them? What will the minister who baptised an infant – an infant who never was regenerated – say to the unregenerate but professing Christian on the day of judgment? What will the minister say to him just before he is cast into hell? It will not do, it will be no

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<sup>39</sup> 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?'

comfort on that awful day – it will be no excuse – to try to explain at that frightful moment that the Confession said that not ‘all who are baptised are undoubtedly regenerated’. It will be cold comfort to say that the unregenerate professor ought to have listened more carefully to the qualifying statements of the theologians who warned him that not all baptised children would definitely become believers. An apt reply suggests itself – which end of the dog was I supposed to believe – his wagging tail or his slavering jaws? You told me I was a Christian! I believed it. I was mistaken. You were mistaken. Now what...?

***Reformed double-speak***

Let me say a little more on this Reformed double-speak. Rather, let Wright say a little more: ‘Just as these qualifications are commonplace among the Reformers, so also the generality of their baptismal theology conveys a decisively realist message: baptism is God’s normal channel for imparting his gifts... to his children’.<sup>40</sup> This comment, from an infant baptiser of repute, need to be weighed, and weighed seriously by all infant baptisers or would-be infant baptisers. According to Wright, despite all the qualifiers, the overall effect of Reformed comments is to give, at the very least, the impression of absolute assurance that grace is conveyed by water; in short, baptismal regeneration. It is all very well trying to row back by qualifiers but, as Wright so perceptively noted, such qualifiers do not let the Reformed escape the hook. Baptismal regeneration is the upshot. Indeed, in many cases, Reformed infant-baptisers don’t want to avoid the notion of baptismal regeneration.<sup>41</sup>

As for double-speak, take Calvin. Here is the *carte-blanche*: ‘Christ by baptism has made us partakers of his death, ingrafting us into it’. Now for the get-out: ‘Those who receive baptism with true faith, truly feel the efficacy of Christ’s death... and the efficacy of his resurrection in the quickening of the Spirit’. Again, the categorical: ‘We are to receive [baptism] as from the

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<sup>40</sup> David F.Wright: *What has Infant Baptism done to Baptism? An enquiry at the end of Christendom*, Paternoster Press, Milton Keynes, 2005, p99.

<sup>41</sup> See my *Infant (passim)*, especially pp8-9,37-65,215-218; *Hinge*.

hand of its author, being firmly persuaded that it is [Christ] himself who speaks to us by means of the sign; that it is himself who washes and purifies us, and effaces the remembrance of our faults; that it is himself who makes us partakers of his death, destroys the kingdom of Satan, subdues the power of unlawful desire; indeed, makes us one with himself, that being clothed with him we may be accounted the children of God. These things, I say, we ought to feel as truly and certainly in our mind as we see our body washed, immersed and surrounded with water'. Then the qualifier: 'Not that such graces are included and bound in the sacrament, so as to be conferred by its efficacy'. On the other hand, the assurance: 'Nor does he merely feed our eyes with bare show; he leads us to the actual object, and effectually performs what he figures'. Even so, the escape: 'But from this sacrament... we gain nothing, unless in so far as we receive [it] in faith' .<sup>42</sup>

Reader, leaving the question of how a baby can receive all this since it cannot believe, I just cannot keep up with all this double-speak. Can you? Water baptism does not accomplish any of it, of course, but do those who think Calvin is right always keep his caveats in mind? My question is: The large promise or the small print – which predominates? I suspect most infant baptisers, parents – and then the children as they grow up – prefer to believe the 'good' news, whatever theological cautions come their way. And who can blame them?

And the double-speak occurs not only in Calvin. Take Richard L.Pratt, who spoke of 'the Reformed assertion that there are both connections and separations between baptism and divine grace'. This, of course, enables the Reformed to play fast and loose with the subject and make large promises at the same time as withdrawing them. He went on: 'The New Testament never... speaks of baptism as mere [*sic*] symbol. The language of "sacrament" was sustained by Reformed churches precisely because the New Testament ties baptism so closely to the bestowal of divine grace'. I pause. 'Closely'? Nothing of the sort! If Scripture ties baptism to the bestowal of grace, it does so infallibly and invariably. No nonsense about 'closely' – it does or

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<sup>42</sup> Calvin: *Institutes* Vol.2 pp515,520-521.

it does not. ‘There is also an antitype which now saves us – baptism’ (1 Pet. 3:21). Take: ‘This is my body’ (Matt. 26:26). Is it – in the sacramentalist’s terms? If it is, it is – not closely but absolutely.

To let Pratt continue. Having made such claims as: ‘Spiritual realities occur in conjunction with baptism’ (but see the entire passage), he concluded: ‘To sum up: Reformed theology holds that baptism is a sacrament and not a mere [*sic*] symbol. At the same time, it distinguishes itself from traditions that too closely associate the rite and divine grace’. Oh?

As Thomas J. Nettles pointed out:

From [Pratt’s] discussion [which, as I say, see] we are led to believe that we really do not know what the sacraments mean, what they convey, when they might transport sacramental grace and when they might not. This appears to communicate [give] a nominalistic [that is, in name only, a question of words, the opposite of ‘realistic’] view of divine freedom, so that God might sovereignly decide not to keep any promises ‘intimately associated’ with this sacrament. This is tantamount to an admission that nothing truly congruent with the divine character and reconciliation of sinners to God, nothing necessary to that transaction, is present in the sacraments. Why, then, does Pratt want to reserve an aura of gracious power for what is purely a positive [posited? that is, assumed that it will prove true – see *Concise*] institution and may not operate in accordance with its supposed biblical purpose? The indecision and lack of resolution is powerfully demonstrated in his contentions that ‘baptism and “grace and salvation” are not utterly inseparable’, that ‘it is possible for a person to be regenerated or saved without baptism’, and that ‘not everyone who is baptised is certainly regenerated’. We are forced to ask: ‘Is there any other aspect of ostensibly saving grace that operates in such an inconsistent manner or that cannot be relied on to accomplish its stated purpose?’<sup>43</sup>

In other words, Nettles here exposes the double-speak of the Reformed which leads them, even though they think that God might, or might not, convey grace in baptism, to be prepared to state dogmatically that he does – and then add the qualifiers to let

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<sup>43</sup> John H. Armstrong (ed.): *Understanding Four Views On Baptism*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2007, pp60-64,74-75.

them off the hook. See earlier for the same in Calvin's comments on Ephesians 5:26-27.

I repeat the point I made in passing. Why is it that so many sacramentalists cannot seem to stand by their convictions? I refer to talk of a 'close tie' between baptism and the bestowal of grace. This kind of language is very frequent but it is quite wrong. Either baptism and the bestowal of saving grace are linked *absolutely*, or they are not linked at all.

Reader, please do not run away with the idea that I pretend that all those baptised as believers are truly regenerate. In the day of judgment, we shall have many surprises – and some shocks – no doubt. And all those responsible for baptising believers will have to answer for what they have done. If they have been lax or corrupt, the burden of their responsibility will be great. But if they have sincerely and honourably applied the tests of Scripture to those they baptised, and if they have been honest in saying that they have no right or power to guarantee that the candidate is truly believing – not being able to read men's hearts – no more can be asked of them.

My point about infant baptisers is that the infant was told two directly contradictory things. Which was he supposed to believe? True, he was warned that not all baptised infants are regenerated. But nevertheless he was also treated and addressed as a Christian. Above all, he was *assured* that he is regenerate, when he was not. For my own part, if I may be forgiven for the introduction of another personal note, I never assure anyone whom I baptise that he is a believer. I say that I baptise on the best evidence I have before me, and on the basis of the most searching tests I can apply. But only God knows the truth. I sincerely aim to act now so that no one on the day of judgment will be able to say that I told him he was a Christian.

D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones posed a man of straw:

There are people who seem to think that they can solve this problem very simply. They say infant baptism must be wrong because baptism is the seal and sign of regeneration, and we do not as yet know whether a child will be regenerate or not. But that is a very dangerous argument, surely, because are you certain that the adult is regenerate? Someone may certainly say that he believes in the Lord Jesus Christ, but does that prove that he is regenerate? If you say that

you are sure he is, because he has said that he believes, then what do you say later on when he denies the faith entirely, as many have done? No, we cannot be certain that anybody is regenerate. It is not for us to decide who is born again and who is not... Similarly, people often say something like this: 'Look at the thousands of children who were baptised when they were infants. They were accepted into the Christian Church but subsequently they lapsed, proving that they were never really Christians at all'. The answer again, of course, is exactly the same.<sup>44</sup>

With respect, no, it is not! There are several mistakes here. Baptism is not a seal of anything; it is a sign.<sup>45</sup> As to the practice of baptising believers, I apologise once again for the personal note, but since I do not know what everyone else does, I can only speak for myself. As I have just stated, I do not baptise anybody assuring him he is definitely regenerate. If he later proves apostate, I admit, as it turns out, I had made a mistake – even though I did my best at the time to find out if he was truly converted – but he can never say I deceived him by giving him a false assurance. Above all, there is a vast difference between baptising an adult who voluntarily confesses Christ – and I look for more than a mere verbal testimony – and taking a baby and telling everybody that it is being baptised because it is regenerate, or because we presume it is regenerate, or will be regenerate, and that it is in the covenant, that it is holy, and so on. If tragic disappointment comes after baptism – and, sadly, it is not unknown – someone is responsible. In the case of believer's baptism, if the baptiser has dealt faithfully with the person being baptised, the responsibility falls squarely on the professing believer. Who carries the can for the baby who is baptised but proves to be finally unregenerate? The baby, the parent, the minister, the theologian, or...?

This is the point I have tried to raise here. I say, with respect and a sense of horror and sadness, that some – if not many – infant baptisers will have to face those whom they assured that they were regenerate, when they were not.

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<sup>44</sup> D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones: *The Church and the Last Things*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1998, pp42-43.

<sup>45</sup> See my *Infant* pp137-154, but also *passim*.

No wonder the term ‘lapsed Christians’ has to be invented to cope with this body of so-called ‘unregenerate Christians’. What is an unregenerate Christian? Lapsed? They never were Christians in the first place! But they have been repeatedly assured throughout their childhood that they are. They have been received and regarded as such. And all the time they were anything but. This dreadful – literally, full of dread – possibility is reason enough to abandon the practice of infant baptism. To build its practice on the covenant is fallacious. It arises out of a confusion of the two strands of the Abrahamic covenant.

### ***3. Confusion of the Abrahamic, Mosaic and new covenants***

Some infant baptisers muddle the various covenants in Scripture, virtually boiling them down into one.<sup>46</sup> For instance, they believe that the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants are ‘essentially the same’, to use Berkhof’s words. Then they say that these two covenants are the same as the new covenant. Berkhof stated that the covenant ‘is essentially the same in all dispensations’. In particular, he alleged that ‘the covenant of Sinai was *essentially* the same as that established with Abraham... Little need be said respecting the New Testament dispensation of the covenant’, he went on. ‘The covenant of grace, as it is revealed in the New Testament, is essentially the same as that which governed the relation of Old Testament believers to God’, he maintained.<sup>47</sup>

This last statement of Berkhof’s is perfectly correct as it stands – the Old Testament saints, along with the New Testament saints, are in the new covenant, which is the spiritual aspect of the Abrahamic covenant. However, that is not all that Berkhof meant, as can be readily seen. He said that the Abrahamic covenant, the Mosaic covenant and the new covenant are all essentially the same covenant.

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<sup>46</sup> See my *Christ*; ‘Covenant Theology Tested’ (Edocs link on David H J Gay Ministry sermonaudio.com; *New-Covenant Articles: Volume One*) for more on this.

<sup>47</sup> Berkhof pp279,297,299.



Yet this is manifestly not true, and his statement confuses the issue terribly. Berkhof failed to distinguish the twofold aspect of the Abrahamic covenant at this point. If only infant baptisers would agree that the essential unity and continuance of the covenant between the two Testaments consists of that oneness between the new covenant and the spiritual aspect of the Abrahamic covenant, the debate would be over. Berkhof certainly kept to his assertion that he thought little need be said about the new covenant, since his subsequent explanation of the glorious changes under that covenant was woefully inadequate. What a mistake, seeing that these glorious changes found in the new covenant lie at the very heart of the gospel! In fact, let me call it by his name: to belittle the new covenant in this way is nothing less than appalling. If ever a system was self-condemning, here it is!

It is clear that other infant baptisers – besides Berkhof – also fail to distinguish between the covenants when they claim that the Abrahamic covenant, the Mosaic covenant and the new covenant are virtually one and the same. David J.Engelsma, for instance, wrote of *the* covenant. He referred to Genesis 17:7, Jeremiah 31:31-34, Ezekiel 16:20-21 and Exodus 4:22 applying all the references to *the* covenant, as he called it.<sup>48</sup> Reader, this is clearly wrong. How can references to the Abrahamic covenant, the Mosaic covenant and the new covenant all apply to *the* covenant? After all, the Jeremiah passage could not be plainer. The new covenant is the *new* covenant, and it is expressly said to be ‘not according to’ the Mosaic covenant. It must be different. It cannot be the same covenant, can it?

Nevertheless, Calvin certainly thought the various covenants were one covenant. He went even further when he attacked ‘some madmen of the sect of the Anabaptists’, as he called them, for daring to express their views on the differences between the old and new covenants. He declared that ‘the covenant made with all the fathers in so far from differing from ours in reality and

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<sup>48</sup> David J.Engelsma: *The Covenant of God and the Children of Believers*, Protestant Reformed Church, South Holland, Illinois, third printing, 1993, pp4-5.

## *The Abrahamic Covenant*

substance, that it is altogether one and the same'. To say anything to the contrary was, according to Calvin, a 'pestilential error'.<sup>49</sup>

But risking Calvin's strictures, are we not told very plainly and bluntly that the old covenant has been abolished and the new has come? (See Rom. 6:14-15; 7:1-6; 8:2-11; 2 Cor. 3:7-11; Heb. 7:11-19; 8:6-13; 9:15; 10:16-20). We know that the Mosaic covenant has been abolished (2 Cor. 3:7-11).<sup>50</sup> What is more, as the old covenant was abolished and the new covenant came in, a comparison, even a stark contrast, was drawn between the two. Far from being 'altogether one and the same' covenant, as Calvin put it, they are very, very different. How different can be easily seen in Paul's words. He said:

God... made us... ministers of the new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. But if the ministry of death, written and engraved on stones, was glorious... which glory was passing away, how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious? For if the ministry of condemnation had glory, the ministry of righteousness exceeds much more in glory. For even what was made glorious had no glory in this respect, because of the glory that excels. For if what is passing away was glorious, what remains is much more glorious (2 Cor. 3:5-11).

This is a vital point. The Bible contrasts the two covenants, the old and the new, and contrasts them very sharply indeed. In the following quotations, please observe the use of the words *but*, *yet* and *on the other hand*. They are words of contrast. Two covenants are clearly contrasted in the following passages:

For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (John 1:17).

You are not under law but under grace (Rom. 6:14).

For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. For Moses writes about the righteousness which is of the law, 'The man who does those things shall live by them'. But the

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<sup>49</sup> Calvin: *Institutes* Vol.1 pp369-370. Calvin, as I have explained, allowed his judgment to be badly warped by his inordinate zeal against the Anabaptists. We will meet this again.

<sup>50</sup> I link the physical aspect of the Abrahamic covenant with the Mosaic covenant, and take the two to be the old covenant. See John 7:22.

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righteousness of faith speaks in this way... if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you will be saved (Rom. 10:4-9).

For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them'. But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for 'The just shall live by faith'. Yet the law is not of faith, but 'The man who does them shall live by them'. Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law, having become a curse for us... that the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith (Gal. 3:10-14).

For these are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai which gives birth to bondage, which is Hagar – for this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia, and corresponds to Jerusalem which now is, and is in bondage with her children – but the Jerusalem above is free (Gal. 4:24-26).

For on the one hand there is an annulling of the former commandment because of its weakness and unprofitableness, for the law made nothing perfect; on the other hand, there is a bringing in of a better hope, through which we draw near to God (Heb. 7:18-19).

But now he has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as he is also the mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises. For if the first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second (Heb. 8:6-7).

Are these quotations not sufficient to prove that the old and new covenants are very different? Do they not show that the new is far superior to the old? How can anyone maintain that they are 'essentially the same', or 'altogether the same', as infant baptisers do? Rather, we must stand with Paul in Romans 8:2-3: 'For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh...'. There it is – two laws, two systems, two economies, two covenants. The old, the law of sin and death; the new, the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus. The contrast, I say again, could not be greater. The old covenant was an external covenant, a covenant of the flesh; the new covenant is a spiritual covenant, of the Spirit, of the spirit. The old was a

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covenant of death; the new is a covenant of life. There is no greater contrast than between death and life! No wonder Hebrews 8:13 declares: 'In that he says: "A new covenant", he has made the first obsolete'. Christ has taken 'away the first that he may establish the second' (Heb. 10:9).

Think of the highly significant words of Christ in Mark 2:18-22. Infant baptisers like John Calvin, Matthew Henry and William Hendriksen prove woefully inadequate in their comments on the passage, a passage in which Christ draws a very clear contrast between the old and the new covenants. He illustrates this in two ways: It is futile both to sew a piece of new cloth onto an old garment, and to put new wine in old wineskins. The lesson? The two covenants are very different; they cannot be cobbled together.

The same point is made in Hebrews 2:1-4, which reads:

Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away. For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard him...?

The contrast is drawn, as before, between two covenants, and once again the contrast is stark. One covenant is 'the word spoken through angels', which is the law (Acts 7:53; Gal. 3:19); the other covenant is 'the things which we have heard... so great a salvation', which is the gospel. In other words, a clear contrast is marked out between the law and the gospel, between the old and the new covenants. The old covenant was concerned with 'transgression and disobedience', in that every sin 'received a just reward', retribution or penalty; the new covenant is also concerned with sin, but instead of bringing punishment it brings salvation. As before, the contrast could not be more sharply made. The new covenant, of course, is far superior to the old, and that is why 'we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard'. These things are so much better than what was heard under the Mosaic covenant.

John Brown commented on the passage, justly saying that 'there is a beautiful contrast between the... "letter that kills", the

ministration of condemnation and death – and the salvation, the revelation of mercy, the ministration of justification and life’. Yes, it is ‘a beautiful contrast’.<sup>51</sup> As William Plumer declared: ‘It is right in us to follow the Scriptures and distinguish between the Mosaic and the Christian dispensations. Many and great errors proceed from a neglect to do this’.<sup>52</sup> They certainly do. Infant baptism is one. That is why I have written my *Infant Baptist Tested*, my *Christ is All*, and so on!

The same contrast is underlined in Hebrews 9. The old covenant was done away with at ‘the time of reformation’ (Heb. 9:10); that is, by the work of Christ. As far as benefits go, the new covenant is on a totally different plane to the old. The first covenant was all outward, it accomplished no salvation and it was done away with. But when we come to the new... What a difference! What a change! The old, ‘the blood of bulls and goats’, is sharply contrasted with the new, ‘the blood of Christ’. What conclusion ought the inspired penman be expected to draw after such a contrast as that? ‘How much more shall the blood of Christ... purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? And for this reason he is the mediator of the new covenant’. As he said, it was necessary that Christ should redeem from ‘the transgressions under the first covenant’ because the first covenant was useless to save. And that is the very thing which Christ did (Heb. 9:11-15)! How is it possible for infant baptisers to say these covenants are one and the same?

Hebrews 10:1 keeps up the argument. Omitting the ‘and’, which is not in the original, the verse reads: ‘For the law, having a shadow of the good things to come, not the very image of the things, can never...’. Once again, we have a contrast. Indeed, as Plumer observed: ‘In this verse shadow and image are directly opposed to each other’.<sup>53</sup> Colossians 2:17 supports this claim.

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<sup>51</sup> John Brown: *An Exposition of Hebrews*, The Banner of Truth Trust, London, 1961, p75.

<sup>52</sup> William S. Plumer: *Commentary on... Hebrews*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1980, p85.

<sup>53</sup> Plumer p386. The concept of ‘shadow’ is very important; see my *Christ* and my *Sabbath Questions* as just two of my works. Infant baptisers cling too much to the shadow; the reality has come! See, also,

And the contrast, the opposition, is between the law and the gospel as most commentators agree. John Owen put it this way: ‘There is a great difference between the shadow of good things to come, and the good things themselves actually exhibited and granted unto the church. This is the fundamental difference between the two Testaments [covenants], the law and the gospel, from whence all others do arise, and into which they are resolved’.<sup>54</sup>

The rest of Hebrews 10 goes on to draw the same contrast between the two covenants, and comes to the same conclusion as earlier passages, but from the opposite point of view; namely, from the point of view of punishment, not mercy. The two covenants both carried punishments, but since the new covenant is so superior to the old, it is only to be expected that the punishments under the new covenant are far more serious than those under the old. And they certainly are. ‘Anyone who has rejected Moses’ law dies without mercy... Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace?’ (Heb. 10:28-29). Note the ‘of how much worse punishment’ under the new covenant. How can the covenants be the same? Their punishments are as different as their benefits.

Hebrews 12:18-29 stresses exactly the same distinction between the covenants. The old covenant was physical; the new is spiritual. The old was full of burning and blackness, darkness and tempest; the new is full of joy and happiness. The old said: ‘Stay away, keep off’. The new cries: ‘Come and welcome’. The old brought terror, fear and trembling – even for Moses! The new brought peace and salvation. It is impossible that these covenants should be the same covenant. How can anyone say that they are? I prefer the verdict of Isaac Watts:

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my *Infant* pp122-136 for the part played by circumcision in the infant baptiser’s argument.

<sup>54</sup> John Owen: *An Exposition of Hebrews*, 7 Volumes in 4, Sovereign Grace Publishers, Evansville 13, Indiana, 1960, Vol.3 Part 1 p429.

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*Curs'd be the man, for ever curs'd,  
That does one wilful sin commit;  
Death and damnation for the first,  
Without relief, and infinite.*

*Thus Sinai roars, and round the earth  
Thunder, and fire, and vengeance flings;  
But Jesus, thy dear gasping breath  
And Calvary, say gentler things:*

*'Pardon and grace, and boundless love,  
Streaming along a Saviour's blood;  
And life, and joy, and crowns above,  
Obtained by a dear bleeding God'.*

*Hark! How he prays (the charming sound  
Dwells on his dying lips), 'Forgive!'  
And every groan and gaping wound  
Cries, 'Father, let the rebels live!'*

*Go, ye that rest upon the law,  
And toil and seek salvation there,  
Look to the flame that Moses saw,  
And shrink, and tremble, and despair.*

*But I'll retire beneath the cross;  
Saviour, at thy dear feet I'll lie!  
And the keen sword that justice draws,  
Flaming and red, shall pass me by.<sup>55</sup>*

I have spent some time in showing the contrast between the law and the gospel, between the old covenant and the new, because some infant baptisers are very definite in their view that all the covenants – the Abrahamic, the Mosaic and the new – are one and the same. This is manifestly not true.

Unfortunately, as Plumer said, 'many and great errors' come from the misunderstanding – principally as far as the present purpose is concerned, the error of infant baptism. I am well aware of the ways in which infant baptisers explain (or, rather, explain away) the Hebrew passages, for instance. But the contrast is not drawn in Scripture between *certain aspects* of the old covenant

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<sup>55</sup> *Gospel Hymns*, compiled by The Strict and Particular Baptist Society, London, 1915. Third Edition 1935, number 394.

and the new. The contrast is *root and branch*. The two covenants themselves are contrasted, the two covenants in their entirety, not only some aspects of the covenants.<sup>56</sup>

What is more, a very serious pastoral question arises at this juncture. What if those who are taught that the two covenants are essentially the same, actually believe it? Does it matter? It certainly does. There is a very real danger that those who think the two covenants are the same might try to find salvation by the old covenant. If so, it would be disastrous. Watts had it right. The gospel is at stake in all this. Personal eternal issues are at stake.

The New Testament is clear. The two covenants are not the same. The Mosaic covenant is abolished in Christ, but the spiritual aspect of the Abrahamic covenant lives on, and lives on with vigour – it is the new covenant.

To that covenant, we must now turn.

#### **4. The new covenant**

The terms and promises of the new covenant are to be read in Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 8:8-12; 10:16-17. They are:

Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah – not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was a husband to them, says the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No more shall every man teach his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying: ‘Know the LORD’, for they all shall know me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more (Jer. 31:31-34).

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<sup>56</sup> The Mosaic covenant was a (I did not say ‘the’) covenant of works. Christ was born under it, and earned the salvation of his people by keeping its commands and suffering its curse (Gal. 4:4-5). Do covenant theologians who think the covenants are all one and the same, think Christ was born, lived, was cursed and died under what they call the covenant of grace?



Let me say a little more on Reformed misunderstandings of the new covenant. The promises of the new covenant are not men's promises to the 'visible church'; they are God's promises given by God to all the elect. Furthermore, these promises do not apply only at the end of the age; they are true of all the elect *now* – contrary to Pratt who thought:

The new-covenant community will consist exclusively of truly regenerate people only when Christ returns... The covenant community [in this present age] in reality consists of two communities... baptised believers and baptised unbelievers... In Romans 2:28-29... Paul distinguished between the visible and invisible people of God in the Old Testament... The distinction between the visible and invisible church expresses the belief that the visible covenant community of the New Testament remains a mixture of regenerate and unregenerate people who are baptised... When Christ returns in glory, the visible church will be one and the same with the invisible church.<sup>57</sup>

This is incredible. And that puts it mildly! Take the question of the time. Are we really to understand that when Jeremiah spoke of, and the writer to the Hebrews quoted, 'the days are coming' (Heb. 8:8), that both men were talking about the *second* coming of Christ? that they were not referring to the *first* coming of Christ, his death and resurrection, and Pentecost? The answer is self-evident. The writer to the Hebrews said these things are true 'now': 'But now', he said, 'but now [Christ] has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as he is also mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises' (Heb. 8:6). Now! Not at the end of this age. 'But now' (not forgetting its equivalents) is one of the most important phrases in the New Testament (see Rom. 3:21; 6:22; 7:6, for instance). Owen: "Now" is a note of time, of the present time... now the gospel is preached... The accomplishment of these things was in "the fullness of times" (Eph. 1:10)... This time is here intended... the ministry of John the Baptist... the coming in the flesh and personal ministry of our Lord Jesus Christ himself... his death... the resurrection... Pentecost... [and] the apostles, under the

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<sup>57</sup> Armstrong pp46,68-69.

infallible conduct of the Holy Ghost'.<sup>58</sup> Paul explained what he understood by 'the fullness of the time'; it is the *first* coming of Christ (Gal. 4:4). Lloyd-Jones: 'The whole span of time has been divided by the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ into this world. That is the division [of time] which is emphasised in the New Testament. The times in which we live are called "the last times", "the last days"... and they all refer to the time that follows the [first] coming of the Lord Jesus Christ into this world... [1 Cor. 10:11; Heb. 1:1-2]... The climax of the ages happened at the incarnation. Time has been divided once and for ever by that event'.<sup>59</sup> William Gouge: "'Now"... sets out the time present; namely, the time of our pilgrimage, while... we live on earth... By "these days" he means the time of the gospel, from the time that Christ was exhibited in the flesh to his glorious coming to judgment. They are called "the last days"'.<sup>60</sup> So much for the 'time'.

Furthermore, there is not the slightest hint of a suggestion in Hebrews 8:6-13 that the new covenant is made up of two communities – believers and unbelievers, elect and non-elect, all of whom are baptised. The suggestion is incredible. It is true, of course, that the Hebrew people comprised two communities – the physical, the non-elect, the unbelieving in the old covenant; and, as I have explained, the spiritual, the elect, the believing in both the old and new covenants. Both communities were in the old covenant, both carried its responsibilities, and both partook of all its benefits. The elect and believing were also in the new covenant, and they partook of all the benefits of both the old covenant *and* the new. And the benefits of the latter are infinitely better than those of the former. We are expressly told that the new covenant is better than the old (Heb. 7:22; 8:6; 12:24). Now, coming to our day, on the Reformed argument we have to believe that while all in the old covenant received all its benefits, some in

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<sup>58</sup> Owen Vol.3 Part 3 pp50,110,141-143.

<sup>59</sup> D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones: *An Exposition of Ephesians 1:1-23. God's Ultimate Purpose*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1978, pp199-200.

<sup>60</sup> William Gouge: *Commentary on Hebrews*, Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids, 1980, pp126,552,559.

the new covenant do not receive its benefits. This is ridiculous. It would mean that the new covenant is *worse* – not *better* – than the old! *All* in the old covenant received its benefits; *all* in the new receive its benefits. The New Testament emphasis *is* upon two communities, yes – I agree with Pratt on this – but the two communities in question are the world and the church (John 17:9-11,13-16; Gal. 1:4; Col. 1:13; 1 John 4:5-6; 5:19), not two communities within the new covenant. The New Testament never speaks – as Pratt would like – of *three* communities – two in the new covenant (all baptised; some regenerate, some unregenerate) and one outside.

Getting back to Jeremiah and Hebrews, Owen: ‘In the promise itself, we may consider... whom it is made unto... The new covenant is made with them alone who effectually and eventually are made partakers of the grace of it... Those with whom the old covenant was made were all of them actual partakers of the benefits of it; and if they are not so with whom the new covenant is made, it comes short of the old in efficacy... The excellency of this [new] covenant... is here declared, that it does effectually communicate all the grace and mercy contained in it unto all and everyone with whom it is made; [to] whomsoever it is made withal, his sins are pardoned’.<sup>61</sup> And, don’t forget, Owen had already explained at large that he understood these things to be in place ‘now’ – not at the end of the age.

True, the writer to the Hebrews issued many warnings to his readers (Heb. 2:2-3; 3:7-19; 4:1-16; 6:4-8; 10:26-31,35-38; 12:25). Pratt claimed that this means ‘even members of the new covenant are now threatened with eternal judgment’.<sup>62</sup> But, of course, by this, Pratt meant the unregenerate members of the new covenant, adults who had been baptised as infants but failed to show marks of grace, that *they* are the ones threatened with eternal punishment. This will not stand up. In saying this, Pratt effectively destroyed the warnings. But the warnings are real. And they are not issued to the sort of people Pratt claimed. (In fact, such people did not exist in the New Testament – there is no mention of them whatsoever there – which in itself stands in

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<sup>61</sup> Owen Vol.4 Part 1 pp169-170.

<sup>62</sup> Armstrong pp68-69.

glaring contrast to infant-baptiser literature. Nor do they exist nowadays). If the warnings were issued to those members of the covenant who, baptised as infants, were unbelieving, I find it passing strange that the writer did not, at least, drop a hint he was referring to such, making full use of the Reformed qualifiers. But if it is still thought that he was addressing such, would Pratt apply Hebrews 6:9; 10:39 to *them*? The warnings are, of course, given to all *professing* believers – which is not the same as saying they are actual members of the new covenant. This is no splitting of hairs. ‘Examine yourselves as to whether you are in the faith’ (2 Cor. 13:5) does not mean: ‘All you who are in the new covenant, baptised as infants but showing no signs of grace, examine yourselves’. It is something *all professing believers* must do. The insertion of baptised infants into this discussion is precisely that – an insertion, a novelty, a notion foisted on the text – which would only be thought of by those who have a special interest in trying at all costs to discover the idea of the visible church in Scripture, and so try to justify infant baptism. What is more, such an insertion allows – encourages – those to whom the warnings *are* addressed – professing believers – to avoid self-examination, and to do so on the basis of an unscriptural notion.

As we have seen, the covenant has changed dramatically from the old to the new. The Mosaic covenant has been abolished, but the spiritual aspect of the Abrahamic covenant lives on in the new. But, reader, I must remind you once more, Reformed infant-baptisers staunchly disagree. They think the covenants are ‘essentially the same’. And consequently they ignore or play down the dramatic changes which have come with the changes in the covenant. But these changes are vital, and cannot be stressed too much. They must not be suppressed or passed over or swamped in a deluge of metaphysics. What are the changes? What do these verses from Jeremiah and Hebrews teach?

In the new covenant, God makes promises to his people. Note, to his people. But, unlike the old, not to his people *and their children*. There is no reference whatsoever to children. The silence about children in the new covenant is deafening, when compared to the old covenant, the physical aspect of the Abrahamic, and the Mosaic. Again, the new covenant is internal;

not external, as was the old. In the new covenant, the work is done in the mind and heart; in the old, it was written on tablets of stone, and was in the flesh. Further, in the new covenant, all who are in the covenant receive all its benefits; God says that they all shall know him, from the least to the greatest, and all the sins of all of them shall be forgiven. Not one of them is left out, they all obtain the full benefits of the covenant. There is no exception. But, as has already been shown, in the old covenant many received only the physical benefits, they never did receive the spiritual promises. While they were all of Israel, they were not all true Israelites (Rom. 9:6-8). Jacob was, Esau was not (Rom. 9:10-13). But in the new covenant, all who are in the covenant receive all the benefits of it. This is another staggering contrast to the old.

Lest my argument should be dismissed as antinomianism, let me hasten to say that under the new covenant, the terms are more strict, more searching, far more penetrating than under the old. 'For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace. What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not! Do you not know...?... Having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness' (Rom. 6:14-18). (See the entire passage, Romans 5:20 – 8:17). Believers have to 'give the more earnest heed' to the new covenant (Heb. 2:1-4), when compared to the old. The law of God is now written, not on tablets of stone but on the minds and hearts of believers (2 Cor. 3:3; Heb. 8:10). They delight in the law of God, they love it (Ps. 119:77,97) because God has given them a new mind, a new heart, a new will, putting his Spirit within them (Ezek. 36:25-27; 2 Cor. 3:3; 5:17). Thus the believer will keep the law of God – God's Spirit will cause him to do so. 'I will put my Spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes, and you will keep my judgments and do them' (Ezek. 36:27). Only the regenerate can keep the commandments of God,<sup>63</sup> but they all will keep them. If men do

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<sup>63</sup> The law of God in the old covenant was the law of Moses; in the new covenant, it is the law of Christ. See my 'The Law on the Believer's Heart' (Edocs link on David H J Gay Ministry [sermonaudio.com](http://sermonaudio.com); *New-Covenant Articles: Volume One*).

not, however much they profess they know God, they are liars (1 John 2:3-5).

The difference between the old and the new covenant is not only in the fact that the law is now written on the heart, and not on tablets of stone. A (the?) principal part of the difference in the two covenants lies in this: That law which is written on the heart in the new covenant is not the law of Moses, but the law of Christ (1 Cor. 9:21; Gal. 6:2; see John 13 – 16). And this makes the conditions and terms of obedience far more incisive under the new covenant than under the old.<sup>64</sup> Jesus declared that he had not come to destroy the law; indeed he affirmed that not ‘one jot or one tittle’ would pass from it. Furthermore, he said that whoever breaks ‘one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven’ (Matt. 5:17-19). That is not all. ‘Unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven’ (Matt. 5:20). Christ took several of the ten commandments, and on each occasion he tightened the screw, saying: ‘You have heard that it was said... but I say to you’ (Matt. 5:21-22,27-28,31-32,33-34,38-39,43-44). Under the new covenant the laws are far more strict than the old; they deal with the heart, the mind and the motive for obedience, not only a mere outward conformity to a written code. Christ concluded his discourse by stating bluntly: ‘Not everyone who says to me, “Lord, Lord,” shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father in heaven’ (Matt. 7:21). Holiness is essential (Heb. 12:14). See also 1 John 3:7,10,22,24; 5:2-3; 2 John 6.

## ***Conclusion***

Let me sum up this look at the way the practice of infant baptism is based upon the Abrahamic covenant: I have examined this under four headings, and I have tried to show that the physical aspects of the covenant with Abraham do not apply to believers. It is the new covenant – the spiritual aspect of the Abrahamic covenant – which applies to them. Therefore it follows that the

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<sup>64</sup> See my *Christ* pp232-238,252-253,493-498,508-509,535-540.

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children of believers are not included with their parents in the covenant on the grounds that their parents are believers and are in the covenant. The children can only be said to be in the covenant after they have come to faith – not because they are the children of believers. Hence there is no justification for the baptism of infants on the basis that their parents are believers. Until the children demonstrate that they themselves have been brought to saving faith, it is impossible to say that they are in the covenant. It is wrong to baptise them on the assumption that they are – or will be.





## *What Price Antinomianism?*

If I were a serious advocate of covenant theology, determined to put a stop to new-covenant theology,<sup>1</sup> I would set up an ‘automatic correct’ on my computer, one which would enable me, by means of a single keystroke, to enter the word ‘antinomianism’ in any manuscript on which I might be working. I am sure I would find myself using the word so often when writing against new-covenant theology, that I would wonder however I got by without the ‘automatic correct’! I say this because, it seems, whenever a covenant theologian tackles any new-covenant work, as long as he can slap the sticker ‘antinomianism’ on it, and dismiss the writer as an ‘antinomian’, he successfully hits the ball into the long grass. Out of sight, out of mind! Very nice, too! No need for further thought, no more consideration, no serious weighing of Scripture: new-covenant teaching is ‘antinomianism’, and that’s bad! End of story!

Now there are many things seriously wrong with this kind of reaction; not least, it runs diametrically counter to Acts 17:11. What is more, hardly any two covenant theologians agree as to what ‘antinomianism’ is; except that it’s bad, of course! So much so, the list of things that have been called – and then dismissed – as ‘antinomianism’ grows longer by the day, it seems.

In this short article, I not only want to draw attention to this unbiblical way of going on, but, above all, I want to highlight, yet again, one of the glories of the new covenant. And this is how I propose to go about it. Reader, I am going to set you a little test. I am going to introduce you to a certain Mr X and a certain Mr Y, both believers. I am going to quote some things that were said about these two gentlemen. Then I am going to ask you to tell me which of the two, if either, or neither, were ‘antinomians’, guilty of teaching ‘antinomianism’. Notice the past tense. Both Mr X

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<sup>1</sup> The two theologies, though they sound similar, are very different entities; very different indeed. See my ‘Covenant Theology Tested’ in my *New-Covenant Articles: Volume One*; the eDocs link on David H J Gay [sermonaudio.com](http://sermonaudio.com); and under David Gay on [christmycovenant.com](http://christmycovenant.com)

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and Mr Y are long since dead. But the words I quote about them were actually put into print and published, and are extant. So I am not making it up. Was Mr X an antinomian? Was Mr Y?

#### **First, Mr X.**

Of Mr X, it was said that he thinks about himself in this way:

The good man feels that when he is presenting to God his prayer and his praises and other holy things, that many vain and foolish thoughts often come unbidden, as the unclean fowls came down upon the sacrifice which Abraham had laid in order to be offered to God (Gen. 15:11); and he feels that his sacrifice is sadly spoiled; and he asks: 'Can the pure God accept such impure sacrifices as I now bring and lay on his altar?' There is so much of self and sin in our holiest things that our very tears need washing, and our very repentance towards God needs to be repented of. In each of our hearts there is a fountain of black, filthy waters; and when we think we are about to present a gift pure and clean to God, the stream bursts forth, and the gifts we thought would be so clean and pure are besmeared with vile effusions of our own corrupt heart. And we often think that Satan empties much of the horrible filth of hell into our hearts, making each of them into a sewer for the foul waters of the abyss of despair to run through.

On the strength of what you have just read, would you say that Mr X was an antinomian?

Although I have not finished with Mr X, now for Mr Y.

#### **Second, Mr Y.**

Of Mr Y, it was said that he (and his like) thinks about himself (themselves) in this way:

He who is our great high priest before God is pure without a stain. God sees him as such, and he stands for us who are his people, and we are accepted in him. His holiness is ours by imputation. Standing in him we are in the sight of God, holy as Christ is holy, and pure as Christ is pure. God looks at our representative, and he sees us in him. We are complete in him who is our spotless and glorious head.

Would you say that Mr Y was an antinomian?

## *What Price Antinomianism?*

Before I tell you what I think, let me give you a fuller picture. These two statements, the first about Mr X, and the second about Mr Y, were issued by a writer who belonged to the early Plymouth Brethren; a man, therefore, who was writing somewhere in the mid 19th century. Unfortunately, we do not have his name. Misguidedly, but, no doubt, with the excellent motive of humility, such men published anonymously. This was a mistake. But there it is. This writer, whoever he was, was writing about a Mr X, someone he called ‘the good man’; in other words, a fine believer. Likewise for Mr Y.

Now Mr X and Mr Y were, in fact, one and the same man. In other words, said the Brethren writer, ‘the good man’, the believer, on the one hand, looks upon himself as nothing but a vile and polluted sinner, one of whom not a good word can be said, while, on the other hand, and at the same time, he looks upon himself as utterly perfect in Christ.

Reader, now that I have given you this information, does it affect your answer to the question: Were Mr X and Mr Y antinomians?

And one final piece to complete the picture. The writer was referring to himself. He, himself, was both Mr X and Mr Y. How does *that* affect your view? Was the man an antinomian?

We know that a certain W.Mcdonald read these two statements. We know further that, to put it mildly, Mcdonald did not like what he read, and quoted the statements when he himself penned an ‘Introduction’ to a book written by Daniel Smart, published in 1899.<sup>2</sup> I give its full title:

W.Mcdonald’s ‘Introduction’ to Daniel Steele’s *A Substitute for Holiness or Antinomianism Revived: the theology of the so-called Plymouth Brethren examined and refuted*.<sup>3</sup>

I now quote Mcdonald in his own words:

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<sup>2</sup> I gladly own my debt to John Jack Jeffery for this reference. He used it in his 2010 paper on antinomianism ([ncbf.us/2010-think-tank-bliss-camp-n-y](http://ncbf.us/2010-think-tank-bliss-camp-n-y)).

<sup>3</sup> [gospeltruth.net/Antinomianism/antinom-intro](http://gospeltruth.net/Antinomianism/antinom-intro)

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One of their [early Brethren] writers gives the following description of a good man: 'The good man feels that when he is presenting to God his prayer and his praises and other holy things, that many vain and foolish thoughts often come unbidden, as the unclean fowls came down upon the sacrifice which Abraham had laid in order to be offered to God (Gen. 15:11); and he feels that his sacrifice is sadly spoiled; and he asks: 'Can the pure God accept such impure sacrifices as I now bring and lay on his altar?' There is so much of self and sin in our holiest things that our very tears need washing, and our very repentance towards God needs to be repented of. In each of our hearts there is a fountain of black, filthy waters; and when we think we are about to present a gift pure and clean to God, the stream bursts forth, and the gifts we thought would be so clean and pure are besmeared with vile effusions of our own corrupt heart. And we often think that Satan empties much of the horrible filth of hell into our hearts, making each of them into a sewer for the foul waters of the abyss of despair to run through'.

McDonald gave his assessment of this statement:

Can anything worse than this be said of the most wicked man living? Satan can do no worse than to empty the 'horrible filth of hell into his heart', and make him a 'sewer for the foul waters of the abyss of despair to run through'. This is the best thing the gospel of the Plymouth Brethren can do for poor, fallen, human nature.

McDonald went on:

And yet, strange to say, this same man, who is filled with the 'horrible filth of hell', and is a 'sewer for the foul waters of the abyss of despair to run through', is, at the same time, pure as Christ is pure. Here are his words: 'He who is our great high priest before God is pure without a stain. God sees him as such, and he stands for us who are his people, and we are accepted in him. His holiness is ours by imputation. Standing in him we are in the sight of God, holy as Christ is holy, and pure as Christ is pure. God looks at our representative, and he sees us in him. We are complete in him who is our spotless and glorious head'.

And then came McDonald's punch line: 'Here is full-fledged antinomianism'.

Reader: What do you say? What is your view? Was McDonald right? Or what?

## *What Price Antinomianism?*

As for what I think, the best I can say for McDonald is that he did not understand the gospel. He displayed a woeful ignorance of what Scripture tells us about what Christ has accomplished for the elect, and by his Spirit has applied to the believer. Before I offer biblical support for my assertion, let me comment on the original Brethren writer's statements.

As for his first view of himself, Mr X, although I understand what he was saying, and why he was saying it, in my view he was mistaken. My guess is that he would have called upon Romans 7:14-24 in defence of his view himself, along with, say, 1 Corinthians 15:9 and 1 Timothy 1:15, the Romans passage being his main support. But the interpretation of that passage has proved highly contentious. Moreover, it is unique. This should give pause for thought. My own view of the passage is that the man of Romans 7:14-24 does not exist. Rather, Paul is proving that the law can neither justify or sanctify. I have given my full argument elsewhere.<sup>4</sup>

Getting back to the Brethren man's first statement, Mr X, I agree of course that we, as believers, are still sinful. That is true. But this Brethren man, in overstating this, has used expressions that took him far beyond the way Scripture talks about the believer. No believer, in Scripture, is ever addressed as a sinner. No passage, leaving aside Romans 7:14-24, speaks like he did of any believer. As I say, the good man spoke of himself, Mr X, in a way that lacks scriptural support.

Even so, it is utterly wrong to call the man an antinomian for such a statement. In fact, it is quite the opposite! Clearly, the man deplored his wretched spiritual condition, as he saw it; he certainly did not glory in it, excuse it or justify it. This is not antinomianism. Misguided and over-zealous as the man was, he certainly was not an antinomian. McDonald was very wide of the mark. And if Mr X *was* an antinomian, and if Romans 7:14-24 *is* called upon to justify his statement, then McDonald was castigating Paul for the same error. Paul was an antinomian! Hmm!

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<sup>4</sup> See my *Psalm 119* pp57-61.

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As for the Brethren man's second statement, Mr Y, all I can say is that he hit the nail right on the head. He was stating nothing more, and nothing less, than the scriptural position of the new-covenant man. In this second statement, Mr Y set out the biblical truth about every believer. This is *not* antinomianism. It is the gospel. In short, if what Mr Y said is antinomianism, then, speaking for myself, I am delighted to own the label. Call me such an antinomian any day and every day! I will glory in it. Why? Because Scripture teaches it; that's why!

Let me quote some scriptures to prove it, and so endorse what Mr Y set out. I ask you, reader, to judge whether or not he caught the spirit and essence of what follows. Let me summarise the teaching of what we find here. By the work of Christ, by the Holy Spirit's application of that work of Christ, the sinner, at the point of conversion, is justified and sanctified.

Pause for a moment. I have just stated something that is absolutely stupendous. At the point of conversion, on coming to faith in Christ, the sinner is justified and sanctified.

*Justification.* The concept of justification is drawn from the law courts: the believer is totally acquitted of all guilt and accounted fully righteous in God's sight, as righteous as Christ is righteous. The believer has the righteousness of Christ imputed to him.<sup>5</sup>

*Sanctification.* The concept of sanctification is drawn from the experience of Israel. God sanctified Israel. The root meaning of 'sanctification' is 'separation'. God delivered Israel from Egypt, separating Israel from Egypt. He further separated Israel from all nations altogether by giving them his law, particularly the sabbath as the special marker to distinguish them as his people. And, as always, Scripture takes this shadowy old-covenant principle,

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<sup>5</sup> See my *Eternal*.

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takes it and uses it as a paradigm,<sup>6</sup> in order to illustrate the reality of the believer's experience in the new covenant.<sup>7</sup>

In what follows, I will show that Scripture plainly teaches that the sinner, at the point of believing, is justified and sanctified in Christ, justified and sanctified by virtue of his union with Christ. Thus he has been translated out of Adam into Christ, he is made utterly righteous in God's sight, and he is totally separated from sin, darkness and paganism. All this is irreversible. God decreed it in eternity; Christ accomplished it in his death and resurrection; the Spirit applies it to the sinner in bringing him to Christ; and God will make it absolute at the return of Christ. In this way, God regards the believer as perfect, as perfect as Christ is perfect, as sinless as Christ is sinless, as righteous as Christ is righteous, totally free of condemnation, utterly free of all accusation.

One further point. And a very important point, at that. Do not limit what follows to the eternal state. These passages speak of the believer's *present* position, his standing before God, *here and now*, an immediate and inevitable concomitant of his conversion. Of course, as I have just said, absolute sanctification must await the return of Christ – when believers shall see Christ as he is, and be like him (1 John 3:2). Even so, the following passages set out the believer's present standing before God, and the believer should think and talk and sing of himself and his fellow-believers as such, and use such terms without the slightest hesitation. Hesitation? He should glory in them! Mr Y was right. McDonald was wrong.

Listen to what Scripture says of every believer, and let these glorious statements sink in:

Now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it – the

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<sup>6</sup> See my 'The Law the Believer's Rule?' in my *New-Covenant Articles: Volume One*; the eDocs link on David H J Gay sermonaudio.com; under David Gay on christmycovenant.com

<sup>7</sup> I will set out my arguments on all this in my forthcoming book on the subject. For now, I ask you to weigh Ex. 4:22-23; 19:3-6,10,14,22-23; 31:13-17; Deut. 4:1 – 6:25; 7:6-11; 10:15; 26:16-19; Ps. 135:4; 147:19-20; Isa. 45:4; Ezek. 20:9-12,20; Rom. 3:1-2; 9:4-5; Eph. 2:14-18.

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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, 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...

That is why [Abraham's] faith was 'counted to him as righteousness'. But the words 'it was counted to him' were not written for his sake alone, but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification...

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... While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation...

For as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous. Now the law came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more, so that, as sin reigned in death, grace also might reign through righteousness leading to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord...

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit...<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The Brethren man's first statement, Mr X, must not be taken to read as though he was 'walking according to flesh'. To be 'walking according to the flesh' is to be unregenerate. Clearly, the man was not that! No



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Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died – more than that, who was raised – who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us (Rom. 3:21-26; 4:22-25; 5:1-2,8-11,19-21; 8:1-4,33-34).

To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints... You are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption ... You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God (1 Cor. 1:2,30; 6:11).<sup>9</sup>

God... for our sake... made [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:20-21).

Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish (Eph. 5:25-27).

The Father... has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins (Col. 1:12-14).

We have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. And 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, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified [that is, being made holy in life, progressively sanctified]. And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying: 'This is

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unregenerate man knows, confesses and deplors his sin, and wishes he could perfectly worship God!

<sup>9</sup> Paul's opening to the Corinthians is unique, and not the least aspect of its significance lies in the fact that the Corinthian *ekklēsia* was probably the most disorderly in all the New Testament. Even so, in Christ, by his Spirit, the Corinthians *were* sanctified, *were* separated to God, *were* perfect in his sight.

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the covenant that I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds', then he adds: 'I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more'. Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin... Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood (Heb. 10:10-18; 13:12).

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who are elect... according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit... You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy... Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God (1 Pet. 1:1-2; 2:9-10; 3:18).

Any comment of mine would be superfluous.

As I say, the believer can and should sing about his standing before God. Let me quote two hymns which show the way.

First, a hymn by Johann A. Rothe:

*Now I have found the ground wherein  
My anchor, hope, shall firm remain,  
The wounds of Jesus, for my sin  
Before the world's foundation slain;  
Whose mercy shall unshaken stay,  
When heaven and earth are fled away.*

*Father, thine everlasting grace  
Our scanty thought surpasses far;  
Thy heart still melts with tenderness,  
Thy arms of love still open are,  
Returning sinners to receive,  
That mercy they may taste and live.*

*O love, thou bottomless abyss,  
My sins are swallowed up in thee!  
Covered is my unrighteousness,  
Nor spot of guilt remains on me,  
While Jesus' blood, through earth and skies,  
Mercy, free, boundless mercy, cries.*

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*Jesus, I know, has died for me;  
Here is my hope, my joy, my rest;  
Hither, when hell assails, I flee,  
I look into my Saviour's breast;  
Away, sad doubt, and anxious fear!  
Mercy and love is written there.*

*Though waves and storms go o'er my head,  
Though strength, and health, and friends be gone,  
Though joys be withered all and dead,  
Though every comfort be withdrawn,  
Steadfast on this my soul relies,  
Redeeming mercy never dies.*

*Fixed on this ground will I remain,  
Though my heart fail, and flesh decay;  
This anchor shall my soul sustain,  
When earth's foundations melt away;  
Mercy's full power I then shall prove,  
Loved with an everlasting love.*

And now a hymn by Don Fortner:

*Sing all saints, beloved and chosen,  
You for whom the Saviour died,  
Plead<sup>10</sup> your gifts and praise the giver:  
'You are washed and sanctified'.  
Sanctified by God your Father,  
And by Jesus Christ his Son,  
And by God, the Holy Spirit,  
By the holy, Three-in-One!*

*One with Christ, beloved, accepted,  
Righteous made by God's decree,  
Sanctified when God accepted  
Us in Christ our Surety!  
Sanctified when we with Jesus  
Lived, and died, and rose again!  
Sanctified by God the Spirit  
When by grace we're born again!*

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<sup>10</sup> Fortner had 'claim'.

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*Holiness is ours in Jesus,  
Not by works that we have done,  
But by God's free love and mercy –  
Yes, by sov'reign grace alone!  
By his word, and truth, and promise,  
By his righteousness and blood,  
Holiness in Christ our Saviour  
Makes us fit to see our God!*

*He will sanctify us wholly  
In the resurrection day.  
Blameless at our Saviour's coming,  
Body, spirit, soul shall be!  
He perfected once forever,  
By his blood, the sanctified!  
Spotless, blameless, guiltless, perfect,  
Is the Saviour's ransomed bride!*

I return to my original question and leave it with you: What price antinomianism?

## Reviews



## *Christ is All: No Sanctification by the Law*

Dr John S. Waldrip

\*\*\*\*\***Life changing!** July 20, 2013

David H.J. Gay writes in a way most can easily follow to show that an error concerning the Mosaic Law has found its way through Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin into mainstream Protestant thought. Gay shows the error of this and points the reader ever and always to the Lord Jesus Christ as the Object the divine Means by which the believer's sanctification is accomplished. I would give this book six stars if the author had left out the final chapter of the book.

Terence Clarke

\*\*\*\*\***Deals thoroughly with Christian sanctification in Christ rather than Moses (Law)** 16 August 2013

David Gay thoroughly deals with the biblical concept and application of sanctification (imparted righteousness) which he reveals is in Christ alone. He demolishes the teaching of the reformers and those that follow on this issue that sanctification is by the 10 Commandments. He shows that just as in justification Christ is all and as far as the sanctification of believers is concerned 'Christ is in all'. This is anything but an antinomian approach but emphasises the power of Christ in the Christian's life. David's style is unusual in that it displays a preacher's approach to delivery but is fresh and direct. He does repeat his arguments throughout the book so that the reader should be in no doubt of them or misunderstand them. He introduces briefly his amillennialist view on Israel which, I find, is not argued with the same biblical thoroughness as the main subject. Recommended for all those who have a true interest in biblical sanctification and the whole work of Christ.

Moe Bergeron

\*\*\*\*\***At last a view of 'New Covenant' Sanctification** August 30, 2013

'Antinomian!' is a hideous charge that is levelled at those who do not believe in any use of Sinai's Law for the saint's sanctification. The fact of the matter is that anyone who subscribes to such a use, including a third use, of Sinai's Law denies the clear biblical teaching of Romans 7:6 and 2 Corinthians 3. The written code and the way of the Spirit are opposed to one another. In the apostle Peter's 2nd letter and in the 1st chapter he explains New Covenant sanctification. Learn of Christ! David Gay's work is a must read for all who understand that the Lutheran/Reformed debate is not Law vs. Gospel. It truly is Letter vs. Spirit.

Mr Rod Angus

\*\*\*\*\***Insightful, courageous and clear** 27 August 2013

The Reformed teaching that the OT law, especially the 10 Commandments, is the Christian's standard and perfect rule for obedience, when not overtly taught, is nevertheless the incipient ingredient lurking in the minds of many believers. The belief that the Law is an aid to sanctification is a lie. The law dis-empowers and condemns, but never sanctifies. David Gay has written a unique book exposing this Reformed spell that has been cast over the Church. As he writes 'The same grace that saves... also sanctifies'. Grace wins the love of the heart in a way that the law never could. 'The Law of Christ' is 'a real law. Love is its goal, love is its motive'. My only real problem with David's wonderful book is his continued allegiance to the Augustine-Calvin Christologically deficient teaching on election. I have already contacted him over this, to which he graciously replied. I hope he sniffs this one out in the same way as he has exposed the lie concerning the believer and the law. Nevertheless, this is an outstanding piece of writing. Thank you David.

Amazon customer

\*\*\*\*\***Demolishes Reformed view of sanctification by law**

November 12, 2013

Best and most thorough book on New Covenant Theology I have ever seen. Completely demolishes the erroneous Reformed doctrine of sanctification by law.

Tom Knotts

\*\*\*\*\***The best book I have ever read next to Bible on the law and grace** April 30, 2014

This book was recommended to me by my former pastor and I have to say it is the best book I have read on the law and grace. Gay takes the time to break each and every passage down dealing with the subject but the beauty is that he goes beyond that and ties in things I had never considered. A great book.

James M.Kray 'Lewis Fan' reviewed *Christ is All: No Sanctification by the Law*

\*\*\*\*\***So good, I read it 2 times in a row** June 27, 2014

A real challenge to the typical 'use the Law for your sanctification' view held in most Reformed circles. Very readable style too. I wonder how many are trapped in their doctrinal statements and/or confessions. Have you ever noticed that Paul never says 'Walk in the Law'? and this by an ex-Pharisee! I bought the Kindle AND the paperback.



James M.Kray 'Lewis Fan'

\*\*\*\*\***A Very Good Presentation on Law/Gospel** August 13, 2014

This book will get you thinking hard about the Law/Gospel relationship. If you are Reformed or think that the Law of Moses can be broken down into civil, ceremonial and moral, think again. Even non-Reformed have adopted this 3 way division. So good, I had to read it two times in a row.

Audio book (may be downloaded from [sermonaudio.com](http://sermonaudio.com))

JamesC. (Fallbrook, CA)

**Great Audio Book!** August 29, 2014

Thank you for providing this free audio book. I am benefiting greatly from the material in it. It is eye-opening – as radical as the biblical doctrine of election. I am seeing things that I once glossed over. Coming out of Way of the Master evangelism and Reformed thinking, the information in this book is causing a welcomed paradigm shift for me.

J. Duncan

\*\*\*\*\***Great!** October 7, 2014

I am becoming very impressed with Gay's writing. He uses and quotes a wide array of sources (demonstrating he is well versed with differing viewpoints), and most importantly, allows the Bible to guide his thinking. This book is largely a refutation of Covenant Theology, though Gay is not a dispensationalist (see last chapter). He mentions that, while he doesn't prefer to be labelled, many have said he would fit under 'New-Covenant Theology' in his biblical theology. I would agree. I was especially impressed by his demonstration of the new covenant along with its 'law' being the 'Law of Christ.' Many strong points are made demonstrating this is not simply the 'moral law' such as many covenant theologians (including 1689 Baptist federalists) hold. However, the bulk of the book was geared towards proving the subtitle of the book, that sanctification does not come through the law, as taught by Calvin and many of the reformers. But, in case that last sentence was misleading, Gay believes (though I can't remember if it was explicitly stated) in the doctrines of grace (5 points of 'Calvinism'), although this doesn't have a major purpose in the book. A tremendous read for just \$1. I am looking forward to checking out more of his books, as most centre around this topic.

James

\*\*\*\*\***Paradigm-Shifting book!** October 14, 2014

I listened to the audio book on sermonaudio. This book really threw me for a loop since I was heavy into the Way of the Master 'Have you kept the 10 commandments?' Evangelism. It was so revolutionary to my thinking that I was left questioning what I really believed. The information helped tear my focus from the Law onto where it should be – Christ. The author does an excellent job of backing up his claims from Scripture. Through the author, the Spirit revealed to me things that were plain as day. I highly recommend this book.

