

NEW-COVENANT ARTICLES
VOLUME EIGHT

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

Amyraut & Owen Tested and Found Wanting.

Assurance in the New Covenant.

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

Believers Under the Law of Christ.

Christ is All: No Sanctification by the Law.

Fivefold Sanctification.

Four 'Antinomians' Tried and Vindicated: Tobias Crisp, William Dell, John Eaton and John Saltmarsh.

Infant Baptism Tested.

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The Priesthood of All Believers: Slogan or Substance?

New-Covenant Articles

Volume Eight

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

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Scripture quotations come from a variety of versions

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Note to the Reader

This is the eighth 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), 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. I also record my debt to those believers who support me in prayer. Mere words inadequately express what I feel about my brothers and sisters who encourage me in all these ways and more. God will remember them and their labour (Heb. 6:10).

New-Covenant Theology: A Summary

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

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

God has one eternal plan centred in Jesus Christ.

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

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

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

Believers use the law of Moses as a paradigm, 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.

Antinomianism

Reformed and Mystical

Yes, I know the title is bizarre, but all will, I hope, become clear.

Reformed antinomianism

A Reformed antinomian? As odd an oxymoron as you can get, you might think. But no! The Reformed are deeply concerned about antinomianism within their ranks.

In the second decade of the 21st century, antinomianism is one of the buzz words in evangelical circles. The Reformed are up in arms about it – at least, up in arms about what they see as antinomianism among the advocates of new-covenant theology. But, truth to tell, they are also wrestling with it much closer to home. They have a home-grown antinomianism, an antinomianism flourishing in their own backyard. Naturally, they do not like it, not one little bit!

Mark Jones, a Reformed writer, has gone into print about it, and the title of his book says it all: *Reformed Theology's Unwelcome Guest*.¹ He states:

As someone with some scholarly acquaintance with post-Reformation Reformed theology, particularly in the area of Puritanism, I have been dismayed at some of the theology that passes as Reformed, when in fact it has corollaries to [has counterparts in?] seventeenth-century antinomianism.²

David B. Garner sets out what he sees as the Reformed-antinomian mantra:

Don't you know? You are free. The gospel is free. Do you feel obligated, responsible, duty-bound? That's not grace. Don't you know any sense of obligation, desire for reward, or fear of

¹ Mark Jones: *Reformed Theology's Unwelcome Guest*, P&R Publishing, Phillipsburg, 2013.

² Jones xvi.

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disappointing God is evidence that legalism still holds you captive? Let go and let God. Celebrate your justification and reject the compulsion!³

So, how do the Reformed propose to deal with this home-grown antinomianism? Judging by Jones' book, and the range of endorsements it has received from Reformed scholars,⁴ their perceived antidote is a repeat prescription of what was tried before; namely, to fall back to the 'cure' attempted in the 1640s in England. And what was that? The Westminster Assembly, called in order to sort out the rampant antinomianism of the time, turned to John Calvin's threefold use of the law of Moses, and, more particularly, to its refinement and extension at the hands of covenant theologians.⁵ Mainstream Reformed teachers today are convinced that the Puritan preventative of antinomianism (and, they hope, its cure) remains the best on offer. They would say it is scriptural. And Jones' book is his attempt to spell it out by making extensive use of Reformed writers and the Westminster standards. As he himself said:

I make no apologies for depending on Reformed authors. We will see how various Reformed luminaries... have addressed such topics as the law [of Moses], the gospel and good works... My commitment to the Westminster standards is resolute, and so this work unashamedly fits in the Westminster (Puritan) tradition.⁶

It is not, of course, my place to offer advice to the Reformed, but even so I will. Before you try to fend off what you perceive as antinomianism, make sure you really understand what it is! That's the first thing. Much of what you dismiss as

³ David B.Garner: 'You Just Might Be An Antinomian', a favourable review of Jones' book. Garner is being ironic.

⁴ At the opening of Jones' book there are endorsements by Gert van den Brink, Michael A.G.Haykin, Steven J.Lawson, Derek Thomas, Carl R.Trueman, Cornelis P.Venema and Guy Prentiss Waters. J.I.Packer wrote the Foreword.

⁵ See my 'The Law and the Confessions', 'Preparationism in New England', 'John Eaton: Antinomian?'.
⁶ Jones xvi.

antinomianism is, in fact, apostolic teaching. Instead of falling back on the Westminster standards (and the host of writers who have gone into print on the basis of those standards), why not put those standards to one side for once, and actually read Scripture unfiltered? Specifically, I suggest you weigh Romans 6 – 8, 2 Corinthians (especially chapter 3), Galatians, Ephesians 2, Philippians 3 and Hebrews – and that’s just for starters. Once you come to terms with the un-glossed teaching in these passages, then you will be in a position to recognise real antinomianism and deal with it. After all, a man is not an antinomian simply because he disagrees with Calvin, or because he is not a covenant theologian (which Calvin himself was not) or a ‘Westminster man’! Acts 17:11, *sola Scriptura*, in your terms, still rules the roost, I hope. It is worse than useless trying to fight a disease that you have misunderstood in a patient you have misdiagnosed, and then giving him the wrong medicine.

I have a vested interest in making this plea. For I am what is known as a new-covenant theologian, and I have set out my views, and the arguments behind them, in scores of books, articles, videos and discourses. And, for my pains, I have been charged with antinomianism. But just because a man emphasises the believer’s liberty in Christ, and does so based on the exegesis of the passages cited in the previous paragraph, it does not make him an antinomian. If it does, then it puts Paul and the writer of the letter to the Hebrews in the dock!

Having said that, I readily admit that there is such a thing as real antinomianism, and that some contemporary teachers are getting pretty close to it. And it needs stopping! I am not for a minute defending real antinomianism – if I need to say such a thing. After all, I have written and spoke often enough against the accursed error. Even so, I state it categorically once again.

However, as I have said, it is not really my place to offer advice to the Reformed on how to deal with their own problems, and that’s not my reason for writing this article. My real purpose in raising this internecine fight in the Reformed camp is somewhat different. The truth is, I was struck by some comments by J.I.Packer in his Foreword to Jones’ book, and I thought them worth pursuing a little further.

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Packer pinpoints the problem. The issue is progressive sanctification.⁷ Quite right! And, having nailed the issue, Packer goes back to history to trace the source of the trouble:

With regard to [progressive] sanctification, there have been mystical antinomians who have affirmed that the indwelling Christ is the personal subject who obeys the law in our identity once we invoke his help in obedience situations, and there have been pneumatic antinomians who have affirmed that the Holy Spirit within us directly prompts us to discern and do the will of God, without our needing to look to the law to either prescribe or monitor our performance. The common ground is that those who live in Christ are wholly separated from every aspect of the pedagogy of the law.

I pause. As you can see, Packer rightly divides antinomians into two – mystical and spiritual (or pneumatological). The mystical antinomians say it is Christ, himself, who actually lives the holy life in, through and for the believer. The pneumatological antinomians attribute this godliness of life to the Spirit using the law written on the believer’s heart. The link between the two, the common bond between them, is that the believer is not accountable under an external law, and that he is passive in his progressive sanctification. So far so good with Packer.

But when he speaks of ‘the law’, because of his Reformed position, Packer is, of course, referring to the law of Moses. And in the case of Reformed antinomians (whether mystical or spiritual), he is right to do so. The Reformed are convinced that the law the believer has to deal with is the law of Moses. Since Reformed antinomians teach that the believer is not under the law

⁷ The sinner, on coming to faith, is united to Christ and is justified and positionally sanctified. Thus, in God’s sight, in Christ he is accounted or made righteous, free of sin and condemnation, and perfectly separated unto God. See, for instance, 1 Cor. 1:2,30; 6:11; Eph. 5:25-27; Heb. 10:10-18; 13:12. In his Christian life, he has to work out his perfection in Christ, and he will be moved to do so by the Spirit under the direction of Scripture; this is his progressive sanctification or holiness of life. But this, alas, is imperfect. The believer will only be absolutely sanctified in the eternal state. I will set out my arguments on all this in my forthcoming *Fivefold Sanctification*.

of Moses, Packer's concerns apply strictly only to them. For the Reformed, following Calvin, the Mosaic law (or rather, as they define it, 'the moral law', or the ten commandments) is the believer's perfect rule and the whip to drive the believer to attain to it in his progressive sanctification. Packer deplores that some Reformed teachers are leading their followers away from submission to the law of Moses.

But this is not the real issue. Christ has fulfilled the law of Moses, and thus rendered it obsolete (Matt. 5:17-20; Rom. 8:1-4; 10:4; Heb. 7:11-19; 8:6-13). What is more, the believer has died to the law of Moses in order to be married to Christ. Above all, it is only because he has died to the law of Moses and is united to Christ that there is any possibility of him living a sanctified life, bearing fruit to God (Rom. 6:14; 7:4-6).⁸ And this means that the Reformed antinomianism Packer deplores simply reflects his failure to grasp apostolic teaching.

Nevertheless – nevertheless – Packer does make a valid point. Indeed, he makes a *vital* point. Although the believer is free from the law of Moses (Gal. 5:1), this does not mean that he is free from all law. Antinomianism (of whatever variety) rears its head when believers think themselves free of all law all together, when their mis-exegesis of Scripture leads them to maintain this so-called freedom. Mis-exegesis? Yes. Take, for example, Paul's words to the Romans: 'Sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace' (Rom. 6:14). If men grab this verse out of context – as some do – they can so easily run away with the idea that believers are free of all law altogether.⁹ But this is utterly wrong. The context makes it clear. The believer no longer lives in the old age, the age of the old covenant. He is free from the law of Moses since it has been fulfilled by Christ and rendered obsolete. Yes, it still acts as a paradigm for the believer, but, even so, he has died to that law. And that is why sin will no longer rule over him. But the apostle is not for a moment

⁸ For my arguments behind all this, see my works, especially my *Christ*.

⁹ The 'consistent' Reformed get round this by glossing the text to read 'the curse or condemnation of the law', or by calling on one of the other various 'escape routes' they are so fond of. See my *Christ* pp99-110,392-408. Do not skip the extracts!

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suggesting that the believer is free of law altogether! The context, as I say, puts it beyond doubt. For Paul immediately goes on (Rom. 6:15 – 7:6) to teach that the believer is under law to Christ. Although the apostle does not use the phrase in the context, nevertheless by his two illustrations he makes this very point: the believer is under the rule, the governance, the law of Christ. Christ is both his slave master and his husband. He is under the law of Christ. As the apostle declares:

Though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings (1 Cor. 9:19-23).¹⁰

Paul is clear: he is not under the law of Moses, but he is under the law of Christ; the law of Christ is the law of God for him. Packer's words, therefore, need correcting here. Although he talks of the law of Moses, the real law is the law of Christ. Steven J. Lawson (in his endorsement of Jones' book) supplied the necessary adjustment to Packer:

Sad to say, portions of the Reformed community have given shelter to this new antinomianism, claiming that personal obedience to the law of Christ is merely optional.

So, properly nuancing Packer's words, antinomianism does arise when men say that believers are free from the law of Christ. This is doctrinal antinomianism. And we must not be surprised if the very suggestion today that believers are not under the binding law of Christ leads to practical antinomianism tomorrow.

With that vital adjustment to his words, let Packer go on with his description of the antinomianism he wants to correct. This is how antinomians (as he defines them) talk:

¹⁰ See my 'Believers Under the Law of Christ'.

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The freedom with which Christ has set us free, and the entire source of our ongoing peace and assurance, are based upon our knowledge that what Christ, as we say, enables us to do he actually does in us for himself. So now we live, not by being forgiven our constant shortcomings, but by being out of the law's bailiwick altogether; not by imitating Christ, the archetypal practitioner of holy obedience to God's law, but by burrowing ever deeper into the joy of our free justification, and of our knowledge that Christ himself actually does in us all that his and our Father wants us to do. Thus the correlating of conscience with the Father's coded commands and Christ's own casuistry of compassion need not and indeed should not enter into the living of the Christian life, as antinomians understand it.

Let me unpack this. It is a proper mixed bag, I'm afraid. Packer wants believers under the law of Moses, whereas the New Testament teaches that believers have died to the law of Moses, and are under the law of Christ. So in reading the above from Packer, 'law' has to be understood in two ways: the law of Moses and the law of Christ. As I have explained, for the Reformed, antinomianism, as they see it, arises when believers do not submit themselves to Calvin's view of the law of Moses as their perfect rule and whip to produce progressive sanctification. For new-covenant theologians, however, antinomianism arises when believers do not submit to the law of Christ. That's the first correction which must be made to Packer's words.

Secondly, within Packer's garbled account, we come across some biblical gems, which, alas, he dismisses. Contrary to Puritan teaching, the believer's assurance does not come from the evidence of his progressive sanctification, but from the inner witness of the Spirit taking him to Christ, and to his sinless standing before God in Christ.¹¹ And, contrary to Packer's dismissal of it, the believer *is* moved to progressive sanctification by setting his mind and heart on Christ (Col. 3:1-17, for instance), not by concentrating on rules and regulations. On the other hand, Packer is right to stress the authority of the Scriptures in the believer's life. But, there again, it is not the Scriptures alone. It is both the Scriptures and the inward work of the Spirit. But the

¹¹ See my *Assurance*.

point that Packer wants to make – and I agree with him in this – is that antinomianism looms when men weaken the role of Scripture in the law of Christ.

To put it another way, we are talking about the objective and subjective. The Reformed are heavy on the objective – the Scriptures, the word (actually, they mostly talk of the ten commandments in this connection). Antinomians are heavy on the subjective – the inward Christ, the inward Spirit, the inward law on the believer's heart. But the scriptural position is that it is both, with the objective Scriptures instructing, monitoring and calibrating the subjective.

Packer comes to his conclusion thus:

The bottom line of all this? The conclusion of the matter? Here, as elsewhere, the reaction of man does not lead to the righteousness of God, but rather obstructs holiness. In God's family, as in human families, an antinomian attitude to parental law makes for pride and immaturity, misbehaviour and folly. Our true model of wise godliness, as well as our true mediator of God's grace, is Jesus Christ, our law-keeping Lord. Mark Jones's monograph is the work of a Puritan-minded scholar and theologian who understands these things well, has researched historic antinomianism with thoroughness, and has many illuminating things to say about it. His book is a pioneering overview that I commend most warmly, particularly to pastors. Why to them? Start reading it, and you will soon see.¹²

Certain things stand out in all this. 'Mystical antinomians... and... pneumatic antinomians... have affirmed that the Holy Spirit within us directly prompts us to discern and do the will of God, without our needing to look to the law [nuanced, as I have explained] to either prescribe or monitor our performance'. 'The Father's coded commands... need not and indeed should not enter into the living of the Christian life, as antinomians understand it'. And then we have Garner's: 'Don't you know any sense of obligation, desire for reward, or fear of disappointing God is evidence that legalism still holds you captive? Let go and let God. Celebrate your justification and reject the compulsion!'

¹² J.I.Packer's Foreword to Jones x-xi.

These antinomian mantras are serious errors. So, while Packer is confused and confusing, he does put his finger on some vital points. What is the role of the Scriptures in the law of Christ? Are believers under that law? Are believers passive in their progressive sanctification? Or are they decidedly active? Is it all a question of love? Or is there a measurable, verifiable standard of obedience?

Mystical antinomianism

Unfortunately, with few exceptions, Jones deliberately did not name those he had in mind,¹³ so I have drawn examples of mystical antinomianism from the writings of John Crowder¹⁴ and Steve McVey.¹⁵ Not all the following is bad, let me say at once, but there are clear indications of which way the wind is blowing. And as always, don't forget it is what people think they read, what they take away, that is all important. And on that score, I am categorical. If these principles gain ground, antinomianism will run rampant.

In what follows from Crowder, note his emphasis against the believer's personal effort and obedience to Scripture, his teaching that the believer is assimilated into Christ, and that progressive sanctification is not to be thought of in terms of the believer's obedience to Scripture by the Spirit, but by his subjective thinking of Christ.¹⁶

¹³ Jones xvi.

¹⁴ In what follows from Crowder, unless otherwise stated, I have quoted from his *Mystical Union: Stuff they never told you about the finished work of the cross*, Sons of Thunder Ministries & Publications, Kindle Version, 2010.

¹⁵ Steve McVey: *52 Lies Heard in Church Every Sunday: and why the truth is so much better*, Harvest House, 2011.

¹⁶ The new-covenant motive and standard for the believer's obedience is, of course, Christ (Rom. 12:1-2; 2 Cor. 6:14 – 7:1; Eph. 4:32 – 5:2; Col. 3:1-2; Tit. 2:11-15; 3:3-8, and so on), but all this is to be calibrated by Scripture, and is brought about by the believer's personal obedience to Scripture, in the power of the Spirit.

Mystical antinomianism – a working description

Crowder:

There is a growing interest in authentic, mystical Christianity: a mysticism rooted in a person (him knowing us and us knowing him), not in human attempt at spiritual disciplines or mental ascent... As a new creation, you have been liberated from the struggle of self-improvement. Absolutely flawless, our old, fearful, sinful, blemished, selves have been eradicated once and for all. Perfected once and for all by [Christ's] sacrifice, we can drink daily from the fountain of our union with him, no longer expecting defeat. As our mind changes regarding the truth of our identity, our outward lives bear corresponding fruit. No longer believing the false humility... that we are 'still sinners'... We are sons and daughters – our true identity shines from the inside out chock-full of inheritance. Right here. Right now.

So many see Jesus as the one we must 'imitate'... rather than the our substitute who accomplished all things pertaining to salvation on our behalf.

Mystical union... we are talking about our union with Christ. We are in him, and he is in us. Mysticism is the experience of this union with God.

The Reformers did not go far enough... They missed it on the topic of indwelling sin in the believer. This is where the Puritan derailed and took the ship into a downward spiral... The Reformers were not reformed enough... The cross united us to Christ, not just positionally, but effectively. It doesn't just cover our sins, but eradicates sinfulness itself from us.

Passive progressive sanctification

Crowder again:

The centrality of the new birth and new creation is found in the saving act of Christ – not in our feeble attempts at mustering faith. Our faith-response to that saving act – however important – relies for its validity of the act itself. Our response is merely a recognition and experience of facts.

The church is obsessed with her own transformation, evidenced by a mountain of self-help books. The contemplative journey is not a path of becoming. It is a path of realising what we've already become in him. We are awaking to a transformation that

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has already taken place. Our journey is a discovery of the true self. And this is but the by-product of something much greater – the discovery of Christ in us... Beyond simple – the gospel is an absolutely effortless unveiling of the truth of the Godhead in you. We are not arriving into him, but realising he arrived into us.

It's high time the church gets delivered from God pleasing... Does happy, effortless Christianity sound scandalous to you? Does a daily walk of joyful, sinless existence seem like an impossibility? If the answer is 'yes' then allow me to introduce you to the gospel. At least, the gospel as you may have never heard it before. The original version is so easy and pleasurable that it's offensive... It is a gloriously happy message of effortless union with God.

This is a book [Crowder's] designed to challenge the believer... You will be challenged to stop striving to get closer to God.

God didn't save you so you could do good. He saved you so you could be dead and he could work through you. He doesn't want you trying to please him. He is only pleased with Christ... God doesn't help you. God does things for you.¹⁷

Scripture

Crowder again:

The Bible is not the word of God. Yes, the Bible is fully inspired and it's the means by which we see Jesus. But Jesus Christ – not the Bible itself – is the word... Christ is the ultimate text... In the Scriptures, I can no longer see regulations and legalisms that seem to come 'in addition' to him... Grace must be the lens through which I see all else. I begin to see him – the fulfilment of the law – jumping off every page.

Summing it up

Crowder confused positional and progressive sanctification:

Sanctification is not a process. It is a *Person*. The Bible tells me so! *And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and*

¹⁷ Crowder: *Mystical* pp54,88, quoted by Kelly M.Kapic (editor): *Sanctification: Explorations in Theology and Practice*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, 2014, p245.

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redemption (1 Cor. 1:30, ESV). *He is your sanctification*. Any system that tries to draw your attention away from the person of Christ and onto your own efforts is antichrist in nature. Your union with God is not an incomplete relationship that comes progressively. Time is not the magic formula that makes you holy. Jesus' sacrifice made you holy. Christ's work was enough to purify you, spirit, soul and body... Christ has replaced you!¹⁸

And, finally, Steve McVey. I allow that his statements are provocatively simplistic – and, no doubt, deliberately so – but, once again, I repeat my warning: it is not only what we say or write, but what people think we say or write, that counts – and the latter more than the former in many respects. What will men gather when they are told that the following are lies?

When we do wrong we are out of fellowship with God
You should live by the teachings of the Bible
God only speaks today through the Bible
Your sins can disqualify you from being used by God
We need to seek spiritual power
We should live by Christian morals
You grow in holiness
You should pray to love Christ more
We are positionally righteous
Christ empowers us to keep God's law
If you don't forgive others, God won't forgive you
It's better to burn out for Christ than to rust out
The truth will set you free

Conclusion

The antinomians I write against teach in a way that may be summarised thus: The Holy Spirit, Christ formed in the believer, releases the believer from all law. The believer has no duty to obey the law of Christ. The way to be holy is to do nothing, but rest in God's action. To demand obedience to Scripture in order to produce a life of holiness is to fall back into legalism. We should stop talking about 'law', 'command', 'rule' and 'duty';

¹⁸ John Crowder: 'Sanctification is Not a Process', being an article drawn from his *Mystical*. See my *Fivefold*.

rather, we should stress the inner Christ, the inward work of the Spirit, and the law written on the heart.

Although there are elements of truth in some of this, the overall effect is disastrous, and represents a tragic misunderstanding of the new covenant. The scriptural position is that the believer is free from the law of Moses (Gal. 4:21 – 5:1), but by walking in the Spirit (Gal. 5:25) – that is, living by the power of the Spirit in obedience to Christ as revealed both within him and in the external Scriptures – he fulfils the law of Christ (Gal. 6:2).

Listen to the apostle (and this is only one of scores of such passages) as he calls believers to holiness of life:

Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, to make you obey its passions. Do not present your members to sin as instruments for unrighteousness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and your members to God as instruments for righteousness. For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law [that is, the law of Moses] but under grace. What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? But thanks be to God, that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification. For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord... My brothers, you... have died to the law [of Moses] through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the

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dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God. For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law [of Moses], were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. But now we are released from the law [of Moses], having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code (Rom. 6:14 – 7:6).¹⁹

¹⁹ The ‘written code’ (literally, ‘the letter’), of course, refers to the Mosaic law, not to the external Scriptures.

Believers Under the Law of Christ

Synopsis

Some new-covenant theologians, dissenting from mainstream new-covenant theology, teach that believers are not under the law of Christ. In tandem with this, they also say that the Scriptures are not an integral part of Christ's law. These two points are inextricably linked. In this article, I seek to prove that these men are wrong, that their case depends on faulty exegesis of certain key texts of Scripture. Indeed, on some of these texts, they adopt, or at least favour, a translation not found in any modern major version of the Bible. Finally, I argue that the consequences of this faulty exegesis are severe.

Introduction

Todd Braye, for instance, has published two papers: 'Law of Christ' (2nd June 2015) and 'Five Reasons Why I Object to Classic NCT's Definition of the Law of Christ' (6th March 2012), in which he is explicit: believers are not under the law of Christ; the Scriptures are not part of the law of Christ; the law of Christ is entirely inward and spiritual.¹ Braye states:

We all understand that, as Christians, 'we are not under law' (Rom. 6:14). Christ died to set us free from the law in its totality (Gal. 5:1). I take Paul to mean exactly that. We are not under law, any covenantal law.

Responding to my enquiry, Braye confirmed this:

I do not think we are under the law of Christ. I do not think we are under law! I think the obedient Christian is ruled by the promised Spirit, not law. I think the Christian is a '*doulos Christou*' and obeys his word. But that is not the same as being under a new external law, however spun.

¹ Braye, of course, is not alone in this. Several members of the Facebook group, New Covenant Grace, are very much in sympathy with him on this issue.

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Even so, in his articles he affirms:

We all understand and embrace the necessity of obedience to Christ. This is an inside-out obedience which is actual and verifiable. I do not advocate libertinism or moral licence. ALL Scripture is profitable for... correction, reproof, and 'training in righteousness'. Discipleship is nothing more or less than baptising believers, and teaching them to obey everything Christ commanded. I repeat: obedience to Christ is necessary. And that means, *ipso facto*, obeying the law of Christ.

But what is the role of the Scriptures?

What then of commands written in ink on a page? I am truly happy to have them. They are gifts to us. What are [*sic*] their role? The apostle tells us that all Scripture is profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness. Could we not leave it at that?... New-covenant imperatives and commands are not the law of Christ, but simply express what is in accordance with that law, *i.e.* the indwelling Christ in/by [*sic*] his Spirit.

In expressing such views, as Braye himself admits, he is rowing against the 'established' tide of new-covenant theology. As he puts it, he disagrees with:

Classic new-covenant theology [which] defines the law of Christ in terms of the commandments of Christ and his apostles found in the New Testament, written on the pages of Scripture, written in ink. It's defined, therefore, as something external, outside the believer.

So, his own conclusion is:

Where is the law of Christ?... I say: 'The law is written on my heart. [Christ] is engraved there, because "God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts" (Gal. 4:6), and Christ "lives in me" (Gal. 2:20). As Ezekiel of old wrote: "...I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes..." (Ezek. 36:27)'.

The law of Christ is the indwelling Christ, written upon the hearts of believers in [*sic*] his Spirit. It is not external, but internal, not in the form of code, but a person. New-covenant members are conformed to a person, not to an external code, or list of imperatives.

While there is much that I agree with in both Braye's papers, much that is heart-warmingly scriptural – the emphasis on the inward work of the Spirit, the believer's liberty in Christ, the believer's conformity to Christ, and so on – nevertheless, on these vital points – whether or not the believer is under the law of Christ as a law, and whether or not the Scriptures are an integral part of the law of Christ – I strongly disagree with him. I am convinced that his exegesis is wrong. I go further. Braye's faulty exegesis must not gain ground. If it does, the consequences will be very severe indeed. We are talking about something that is crucial, at the very heart of the new covenant, something I know that Braye is also convinced of.

The evidence is strong that those who disagree with me on this point will insist that I, and others like me, are in some way playing down the work of the Spirit in the heart of the believer in this day of the new covenant, that we are returning to something very much like the age of Moses, and that we are trying to live the spiritual life in a legal way, urging fleshly obedience to a list of rules. I must, therefore, try to make my position as plain as I can.² Although I have said such things repeatedly throughout my works, I say it again here:

The law of Christ is radically different to the law of Moses in its nature. It is not merely outward. One of the great provisions of the new covenant is that Christ writes his law, by his Spirit, in the heart of every believer. Every believer is taught by the Spirit. Christ is formed in the heart of every believer. The law of Christ is not merely a list of commands; it certainly is not an external code like the Mosaic law. The Spirit motivates and empowers the child of God to willing, not slavish, obedience to Christ, obedience to Christ out of love for him, and not from tormenting fear of punishment.

² In fact, the criticism can get even more bizarre. Take one of the aforementioned Braye's supporters, who, when talking of the work of the Spirit and the commands of Christ, challenged those of us who take the stance I do here: 'Why will [you] persist in "tearing apart what the Lord has joined together"?' I replied: 'This is precisely what some of us see you and others doing. Admit that the Spirit and the Scriptures are in harness at the heart of the law of Christ, and this debate is over. It is you and others who "tear them apart".'

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All that, and more like it, is taken for granted in this article. Taken for granted? I *glory* in it! So when I contend for the centrality of the Scriptures within the law of Christ, I do so with the absolute understanding that this is completely and utterly in harness with the Spirit in the believer's heart.

Now to go on.

I draw attention to some warning flags concerning his exegesis, flags raised by Braye himself. As he so clearly states, he disagrees with 'classic new-covenant theology', taking a view in contrast to that expressed by several named writers of weight.³ This does not necessarily mean that he is wrong, but it ought to give his readers serious pause for thought. What is more, on certain key texts (Galatians 6:2 and 1 Corinthians 9:19-21) he favours a translation which is found in none of the major Bible versions.⁴ While Braye's suggested changes to the usual translation in these key texts do not automatically rule out his conclusion, they give further ground for serious pause for thought. What is more, I fail to see how he can assert that believers have to 'obey everything Christ commanded. I repeat: obedience to Christ is necessary. And that means, *ipso facto*, obeying the law of Christ', and yet, at the same time, say that believers are not under Christ's law, and that the Scriptures are not part of that law. Braye, it seems to me, is self-contradicting at this point.

³ I exclude myself from this encomium, though he does name me, for which I sincerely thank him.

⁴ This reminds me of Jonathan F. Bayes' defence of the citadel of his own work, *The Weakness of the Law: God's Law and the Christian in New Testament Perspective*, Paternoster Press, Cumbria, 2000, in which he propounded the covenant-theology view of the law. I refer to the way Bayes dealt with Rom. 8:1-4. He could only do this by proposing a series of changes to the text. I concluded what I said in response to Bayes on this point: 'In this sophisticated way, the plain teaching of the apostle is turned on its head. I, for my part, will stick with the almost-universally held text. Besides, both the immediate context of Rom. 5 – 8, and the analogy of faith, support the usual translation against that proposed by Bayes. And the context is always king!'

This is how I propose to go about making good my claim that Braye's exegesis is faulty, and that this inevitably leads to a wrong conclusion. I will look at the vital texts; namely, Romans 6:14, 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, Galatians 5:1 and 6:2, and, finally, 1 John 3:4.⁵ From these passages, I hope to show that it is perfectly right and proper to speak of the believer being under the law of Christ. This, it seems to me, is my great task in this article. For if it can be established that the believer is, indeed, under the law of Christ, then the question naturally arises: Where shall we find that law? It has to be objective. Where is it? There can only be one answer. In Scripture! Thus it is imperative for me to try to storm the citadel, as it were, and prove, from Scripture, that the believer *is* under the law of Christ. As I have said, the citadel having been gained – namely, that the believer is under the law of Christ – then the fact that the commands of Christ and the apostles⁶ are an integral part of the law of Christ, must, as a matter of course, follow. Braye's assertion that believers have to obey Scripture, it seems to me, concedes the point. Scripture is the arbiter. In other words, Scripture is the believer's rule; Scripture is the believer's law.

Before getting into the detail of individual texts, however, we should look at the big picture. That is to say, before we get involved in the minutiae of specific verses and passages,⁷ let us remember that the overwhelming majority of the first readers of those passages were not readers at all. Could they all read? In any case, none of them possessed a copy of the apostolic letters in question. They were hearers, listening, almost certainly, to one man reading the one copy of an individual letter. How did they *hear* the words? What impression did they take away with them? They did not have the opportunity that we have – to take out our

⁵ I choose the latter partly because it is a crucial text in this debate, and partly because at least one of the advocates of Braye's view takes a view of the verse which is supported by none of the major modern versions, and, as a consequence, comes to a wrong view of the passage.

⁶ Who, of course, include the old covenant as a paradigm. See my 'The Law the Believer's Rule?'

⁷ As will be obvious, I am not dismissing detailed examination of specific texts.

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personal copy, pore over every nuance at our leisure, consult parallel places, and so on. What I am saying is that we must not miss the wood for the trees. What is the general impression, the overall picture, that we discover in the post-Pentecost Scriptures? Clearly, it is one of believers being called to obedience, in the power of the Spirit of God, to apostolic commands, the apostles addressing believers as responsible and accountable men and women obliged to obey the instructions they are being given in Scripture, all to the glory of God in Christ by the Spirit. In short, speaking for myself, the New Testament gives me the impression – to put it no stronger – that the believer is under Christ’s law, rule, reign, headship, lordship and governance, administered through the apostles by the Spirit in the Scriptures, the believer having had that law written in his heart by the Spirit. And this law is more penetrating than Moses’ law. Yes, it is so!⁸

Of course, I admit at once that the phrase ‘under the law of Christ’ does not appear in Scripture, but this is the merest quibble; the same could be said of not a few words and phrases which are common currency among us. And rightly so.⁹ The question is, is the principle, the concept, scriptural? I hope to prove that the passages I have mentioned, in their context, establish beyond all doubt that the believer *is* under the law of Christ.

Christ is King (Ps. 2:6; 45:6; Matt. 28:18-20; John 12:15; 18:37; Acts 2:30-31; Heb. 1:8). A king does not reign unless he issues his rule. The glory of the new covenant is that King Jesus reigns and rules his people by his word, having, by his Spirit, written his law in their heart, and moving them and enabling them to submit willingly to his ‘gentle’ (Matt. 11:28-30) reign. That great messianic psalm (it is quoted more than any psalm in the New Testament) could not be plainer; Christ rules a willing people:

⁸ See my ‘The Penetrating Law of Christ’. I will return to this.

⁹ ‘New covenant’ appears only three times, ‘justification by faith alone’ never, ‘the law of Christ’ once, ‘the Lord’s supper’ once, ‘the ten commandments’ twice, ‘the righteousness of Christ’ never, and so on.

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The LORD says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool’. The Lord sends forth from Zion your mighty sceptre. Rule in the midst of your enemies! Your people will offer themselves freely on the day of your power (Ps. 110:1-3).

And, I assert, Christ rules them, not only inwardly by his Spirit in their heart, but by his Spirit in his written word. That is to say, although I agree with Braye that the Scriptures are useful (profitable) (2 Tim. 3:16-17), nevertheless this is not the last word on the subject. For a start, the Scriptures are useful for *instruction*, and, moreover, instruction in, and including, *paideia*, ‘the whole training and education of children, employing commands and admonitions, reproof and punishment, correcting mistakes, curbing passions, including chastisement and chastening for their amendment’.¹⁰ The law of Christ does not stop at the inward work of the Spirit, leaving the Scriptures as something useful, something alongside and supportive of, but not absolutely essential to, the inward work of the Spirit. Far from it! Yet, according to Braye, the commands and imperatives of the new covenant are not part and parcel of the law of Christ. I assert the opposite: the law of Christ comprises the presence of the inward Spirit *and* the external Scriptures, the Spirit *and* the word, in harness, right at its very heart. They cannot be divorced. They must not, in any way, be divorced. Indeed, we must never teach in such a way that anybody could think there is the slightest gap between the inward and outward work of the Spirit – in the heart and in the written word. All this I see as the overall big picture of the New Testament.

And this leads me to the conclusion that it is right and proper for believers to talk of ‘law’ and ‘commands’ and ‘rule’ in the new covenant. Moreover, I will argue that it is essential for believers to think, speak and act in this way. Not to do it will, as I have said, lead to dire consequences.

¹⁰ See Thayer.

One final point. Since I want to keep this article in bounds, I will confine my remarks to the essentials.¹¹ For my full argument, the reader should consult my *Christ Is All: No Sanctification by the Law*, including the relevant extracts.¹²

Romans 6:14

Sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace (Rom. 6:14).

At first glance, these words seem to teach, as Braye asserts, that the believer is delivered from law, all covenantal law; indeed, from all law altogether. But ‘first glance’ is not the way to discover the meaning of Scripture. The context is king. And that context flatly refutes the notion that the believer is not under any covenantal law. Throughout Romans 5:12 – 7:6, the apostle is clearly speaking of the law of Moses. I submit that the context further shows that while the believer is most definitely delivered from the law of Moses, he, equally definitely, is now under Christ’s law. I summarise the leading points:

The lack of the article – ‘law’ and not ‘the law’ – makes no difference. It probably strengthens the point.¹³

Paul has already established that all men are under one law or another (Rom. 2:12-15).¹⁴

Throughout the passage, Paul is speaking of the Mosaic law.

Having spoken of justification in the earlier part of Romans, in Romans 6 the apostle has now moved on to speak of progressive sanctification.

Do not miss the eschatological ‘but now’ (or, in the context, ‘now’) which comes in this context, as it does again and again in

¹¹ Even so, on re-reading this prior to publication, I find that my remarks have been extended to an inordinate length. I apologise. It is only the seriousness of the matter that has driven me to such a length.

¹² Especially, but not exclusively, pp211-278,481-527.

¹³ See my ‘What Is the Law?’

¹⁴ See my ‘All Men Under Law’.

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Romans – indeed, throughout the New Testament (Rom. 3:21; 5:9,11; 6:22; 7:6; 8:1; 11:30; 11:31 (second ‘now’ in NIV, NASB); 16:26; see also John 15:22,24; Acts 17:30; 1 Cor. 15:20; Gal. 4:9; Eph. 2:12-13; 5:8; Col. 1:26; Heb. 8:6; 9:26; 12:26; 1 Pet. 2:10). It is the *eschatological* ‘but now’ which is at the root of the apostle’s argument from Romans 5:12 and on. We have moved out of the old age, the age of the old covenant, into the new age, the age of the new covenant. This is the basis of the apostle’s argument here.

Coming to the individual experience, having spoken of the believer’s union by faith to Christ at conversion (Rom. 6:1-13), and having made his statement – ‘Sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace’ (Rom. 6:14) – the apostle immediately moves into two illustrations; slavery and marriage. The believer has a new slave master. He is no longer a slave to sin; he is now Christ’s slave (Rom. 6:15-23). The believer is no longer married to the law, the law of Moses; he is married to Jesus Christ, he belongs to him (Rom. 7:1-6). Both illustrations, in the context, speak of rule, reign, headship, lordship and governance; in short ‘law’.¹⁵ While the phrase ‘the law of Christ’ is not used in the context of Romans 6:14, whatever else is the apostle speaking about? He is speaking of Christ as the believer’s ruler, master, head, lord, governor, husband – one who exercises his rule by his law. The slavery illustration surely speaks for itself; for the husband illustration, see Ephesians 5:22-24; Colossians 3:18; Titus 2:5; 1 Peter 3:1. Nothing could be clearer: the believer is no longer under the rule, the reign, the headship, the lordship, the governance of Moses

¹⁵ And we know that marriage is a covenant (Mal. 2:14; see also Prov. 2:17). The wife is under the covenantal law of marriage to her husband. Anticipating what is to come, let me have a word about an objection I have seen raised; namely, that slaves do not have written contracts, do not consult a book of rules. With respect, this is a quibble, pushing the illustration too far. Something similar could be done with the marriage illustration – the wrong person has died! As always with illustrations we must get the main point. And the main point here is that the believer is *under* the rule of Christ. In any case, slavery-law, written slavery-law, was enshrined in the old covenant, as well as other cultures in antiquity.

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and his law, but he is under the rule, the reign, the headship, the lordship, the governance of Christ; in short, he is under the law of Christ.

To be under the law, whether the Mosaic or pagan, is to be under the dominion of sin. To be under grace is to be liberated from the rule of the law, whether the Mosaic or pagan, released from the dominion of sin (Rom. 6:14; 7:6).

None of this rules out the fact that the believer is under the law of Christ. Rule it out! It establishes it! The law that Paul speaks of in Romans 6 and 7, the law that the believer is free of, is the law of Moses, the law of sin and death (Rom. 8:2), and the law that has set him free from that law is ‘the law of the Spirit of life... in Christ Jesus’ (Rom. 8:2). Clearly the believer is under that law! When Paul says: ‘Now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code’ (Rom. 7:6), he is telling believers that they are no longer in the old age but in the new. In the old age, men served under an external code in the ‘old way’. In the new age, believers serve – yes they do ‘serve’ – in the new way, in the power, energy and life of the Spirit, under the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus; in short, under the law of Christ. They ‘serve’, said Paul, using *douleuō*, ‘to obey commands, to render service due, to be a slave’.¹⁶

I do not see how the apostle could have been more explicit:

Thanks be to God that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. I am speaking in human terms, because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification (Rom. 6:17-19).

‘Obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed’. Where are believers supposed to find that ‘standard of teaching’? Do they know it by the Spirit writing it in

¹⁶ See Thayer.

their heart? Do they know it by the external word? Or is it a happy combination of both? I say it is that happy combination. But I also assert that Paul was here stressing the written word, the Scriptures, especially the apostolic instruction in and through those Scriptures, even as he was contributing to them. And this, I am convinced, is all part and parcel of the law of Christ which the believer is under.

The apostle enforces all this by the what he goes on to say in Romans 8:

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. 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 set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God's law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God (Rom. 8:1-8).

Let me pause. The man in the flesh cannot please God; he cannot submit to his law, he will not submit to it, because he hates both the lawgiver and his law. The things of God are not only foolishness to him (1 Cor. 2:14); they are hateful to him. But when that man is transformed from being a man 'in the flesh' into a man 'in the Spirit' – that is, when God delivers him from the realm of darkness, and transfers him into kingdom of Christ (Col. 1:13), clearly, as a man who is now in the Spirit, under Christ's reign, he can please God, he will please God. How? When he was a man in the flesh he showed his hostility to God by refusing to submit to his law. Now, as a man in the Spirit, he shows his love for God by submission to it; that is, he delights in God's law, he obeys God's law. Does he do it in his own power? Not at all! The context is clear. It is the indwelling Spirit who turns this man from rebellion to submission, enabling him to 'walk... according

to the Spirit'. When he was in the flesh, the man hated God's law; now that he is in the Spirit, he echoes David's words: he loves God's law (Ps. 119:97).¹⁷

The underlying argument here, of course, is eschatological, not merely personal or individual. It is true in the personal sense, it goes without saying, gloriously true, but the basic fact remains that whereas, as a man in the flesh, he belonged to the age of the old covenant,¹⁸ now, as a man in the Spirit, he belongs to the age of the new covenant. And the effect of this transfer is shown, as Paul states here, either by rebellion or submission to God's law. As the apostle goes on to declare: 'You... are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if [since] in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him' (Rom. 8:9). But the believer, since he is a new man in the Spirit, does belong to Christ, he is married to Christ (Rom. 7:4).¹⁹ Thus the believer will submit to Christ under his law, submit as a willing slave of Christ, and joyfully submit to him as a wife to her husband (Eph. 5:22-24; Col. 3:18; Tit. 2:5; 1 Pet. 3:1).

The great question is: What is the law of God in these two ages? The law in the first age was the law of Moses. But what law does the believer, the man in the Spirit, submit to? The answer is obvious: the law of Christ. The law of God in the old covenant was the law of Moses; the law of God in the new covenant is the law of Christ.²⁰ In the context starting at Romans 5:12, the law for the believer must be, can only be, the law of Christ. The man, having died to the law of Moses, is now under Christ as his slave and his husband-head, with the result that he is under Christ's law. Paul takes this absolutely for granted here in order to lay stress on the believer's obedience to Christ's law. This is the apostle's purpose – not merely to inform the believer that he is under the law of Christ. That can be taken as given.

¹⁷ See my *Psalms 119*.

¹⁸ In eschatological terms, the unconverted still do.

¹⁹ Note how 'belong' is used in Rom. 7:4 (ESV, NIV) and Rom. 8:9 (ESV, NIV, NASB) even though translating two different Greek words. Why? Because this conveys the proper sense.

²⁰ I make this point repeatedly throughout my *Christ*. See especially pp214-219,483-487.

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What the apostle is looking for is the believer's obedience to that law. Obedience is his point.

And all this, of course, explains the seeming contradiction between Romans 6:15-23 (believers are slaves) and Romans 8:15 (believers do not serve as slaves). Believers are free of the law of Moses, they do not serve Christ in the flesh under the old law, under 'the written code' (Rom. 7:6), but they are slaves of Christ, under his law, and serve him by the Spirit. And this is perfect freedom.

In short, Braye's categorical deduction that the believer is not under any covenantal law – specifically, the law of Christ – is wrong. Romans 6:14, in its context, proves that the opposite is the case. The believer, united to Christ, being a slave to Christ, and married to Christ, is under Christ's rule, reign, headship, lordship and governance; in short the believer is under the law of Christ. I know the phrase 'the law of Christ' is not used in the context, but, I ask again, what else is the apostle talking about? What else can he be talking about?

In appending some extracts from others, I do not use their words to *prove* what I say; the context does that. I start with Thomas R.Schreiner:

The phrase 'under law' (*hupo nomon*) occurs eleven times in Paul (Rom. 6:14-15; 1 Cor. 9:20 [4 times]; Gal. 3:23; 4:4-5,21; 5:18). It is immediately evident that the phrase is particularly important in Galatians since Paul uses it there most often... The phrase should be interpreted in terms of redemptive history. The old era of redemptive history refers to the time period when the Mosaic covenant was operative... To be under the law refers to the old era of salvation history, to the time period of the [Mosaic] law... Jesus Christ is the exception that proves the rule, for he was the only one who lived under the law and kept the law (Gal. 4:4-5). Consequently, through his atoning death, he was able to liberate those under the law from the power of sin. The fullness of time – the fulfilment of God's redemptive purposes in Christ – spells the end of the [Mosaic] law's reign. Indeed, Paul turned the tables on his Jewish opponents. He promised in Romans 6:14 that 'sin will have no dominion over you'. And why is it the case that sin will not rule over believers? Paul's answer on first glance is rather surprising 'since you are

not under law but under grace'. However, if the line of thought I have traced in the answer to this question has been followed, the Pauline response is actually perfectly sensible. Sin exercises control over those who live under the law [any law other than the law of Christ], and this truth is confirmed by Israel's history under the Mosaic covenant and the [Mosaic] law. Therefore, the power of sin is broken for those who are no longer under the old era of salvation history – for those who live in the new era inaugurated by Christ. It is those who are under the dominion of the [Mosaic] law who are enslaved to sin, not those who enjoy the grace of Jesus Christ. Romans 6:14-15 promises liberation from the tyranny and mastery of sin for those who live in the new era of redemptive history... [Hence] Paul's use of the phrase 'under law' should be understood in redemptive-historical terms. Those who are under the law are also under the dominion and authority of sin. The history of Israel under the Mosaic covenant confirms the truth that those who lived under the [Mosaic] law were subject to sin's mastery. Paul proclaims that believers are no longer under the [Mosaic] law. A new era of salvation history has been inaugurated... The [Mosaic] law has been abolished now that Christ has come. Believers are no longer under the [Mosaic] law.²¹

And now for Douglas J.Moo²² on Romans 6:14:

These words are to be understood of a promise that is valid for every believer at the present time: 'Sin shall certainly not be your lord – now or ever!'

The promise is confirmed by the assurance that 'you are not under law but under grace' [Rom. 6:14 linked to Rom. 3:19-21,27-28; 4:13-15; 5:13-14,20 and, especially Rom. 5:20 and 7:1-6].

As in all these references, *nomos* here must be the Mosaic law, the *torah*.

²¹ Thomas R.Schreiner: *40 Questions About Christians and Biblical Law*, Kregel, 2010, pp73-75.

²² I am glad to quote Moo since he is a thoroughly competent witness, an acclaimed witness, one who is highly respected. But at certain key points he is too cautious, even weak, as I will indicate. The truth is, his very reticence in those areas gives added weight to my use of him.

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Paul [makes] release from the law [of Moses] a reason for the Christian's freedom from the power of sin: as he has repeatedly stated, the Mosaic law has had a definite sin-producing and sin-intensifying function; it brought 'knowledge of sin' (Rom. 3:20), 'wrath' (Rom. 4:15), 'transgression' (Rom. 5:13-14), and an increase in the severity of sin (Rom. 5:20). The law, as Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians 15:56, is 'the power of sin'. This means, however, that there can be no final liberation from the power of sin without a corresponding liberation from the power and lordship of the law [of Moses]. To be 'under law' is to be subject to the constraining and sin-strengthening regime of the old age; to be 'under grace' is to be subject to the new age in which freedom from the power of sin is available.

[Of course:] We cannot conclude from this verse that the believer has no obligation to any of the individual commandments... Still less... that Christians are no longer subject to 'law' or 'commandments' at all – for *nomos* here means *Mosaic law*, not 'law' as such.²³

Moo on Romans 6:17-19:

Paul wants to make [it] clear that becoming a Christian means being placed under the authority of Christian 'teaching', that expression of God's will for New Testament believers... Paul would then imply that Christians, while no longer 'under the Mosaic law', are nevertheless bound by an authoritative code of teaching.²⁴

Moo's use of 'imply' is too weak. Paul's statement is categorical. As I said before, I do not see how the apostle could have been more explicit:

Thanks be to God that you who were once slaves of sin have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed, and, having been set free from sin,

²³ Douglas J. Moo: *The Epistle to the Romans*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 1996, pp387-390; 'The Law of Moses or the Law of Christ', *Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspectives on the Relationship between the Old and New Testaments*, John S. Feinberg (editor), Crossway Books, Westchester, 1988, pp210-211, emphasis his.

²⁴ Moo: *Romans* pp401-402.

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have become slaves of righteousness... so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification (Rom. 6:17-19).

Moo on Romans 7:

The main topic... is the Mosaic law. [Rom. 7:1-6] contains the main point that Paul wants to make in this chapter... It is almost certain... that Paul here refers to the Mosaic law.

Paul argues that a person's bondage to the law [of Moses] *must* be severed in order that he or she may be put into a new relationship with Christ... Death severs relationship to the law... But... not only... does Paul... illustrate the general principle that 'a death frees one from the law'... he also sets up the theological application... in which severance from the law [here, of Moses] enables one to enter a new relationship.²⁵

Moo, commenting on Romans 7:4, spoke of the apostle's preceding argument which, Moo (too weakly) said, suggests:

...that, as in Romans 6:14, Paul in Romans 7:4 is viewing the law as a 'power' of the 'old age' to which the person apart from Christ is bound. The underlying conception is again salvation-historical, as is suggested by the 'letter'/'Spirit' contrast in Rom. 7:6. Just as, then, the believer 'dies to sin' in order to 'live for God' (Rom. 6), so he or she is 'put to death to the law' in order to be joined to Christ. Both images depict the transfer of the believer from the old realm to the new. As long as sin 'reigns', God and righteousness cannot; and neither, as long as law 'reigns', can Christ and the Spirit.²⁶

Moo, writing later in Romans:

Against those who might object that the abandonment of the law [of Moses] as a code of conduct (Rom. 6:14; 7:1-6) leads to licence, Paul argues that the gospel itself provides sufficient ethical guidance for Christians. Through the renewal of the mind that the gospel makes possible, Christians can know and do the will of God (Rom. 12:2), and by following the dictates of love,

²⁵ Moo: *Romans* pp409-414.

²⁶ Moo: *Romans* pp414-416. See my 'The Law Written'; 'The Law on the Believer's Heart'.

they can accomplish all that the law [of Moses] itself demands of them (Rom. 13:8-10).²⁷

Yes, but yet again, Moo is weak. The Spirit *accomplishes* all this; he does more than make it ‘possible’. This is one of the great glories of the new covenant; the Spirit really does motivate and enable the believer to be obedient. Further, we need to be clear: the gospel does provide guidance for the believer, yes. But how can we know what this gospel is? Directly by the Spirit or by the Spirit interpreting and applying Scripture? The very fact that the apostle is teaching this, and teaching it through writing, would seem to suggest, to put it no stronger, that it must be the latter; it can only be the latter. And, finally, this instruction is not merely ‘guidance’, ‘advice’, ‘suggestion’, only ‘good’ or ‘valuable’. It is Christ’s *law*, and the believer must obey it.

In short, on Romans 6:14, I submit, Braye is wrong. The believer *is* under the law of Christ.

1 Corinthians 9:19-23

For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all [men], that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings (1 Cor. 9:19-23, ESV).

Let me quote the pertinent words in other versions:

I am not free from God’s law but am under Christ’s law (NIV).
Not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ (NASB).
Under the law to Christ (AV).

²⁷ Moo: *Romans* p746. Note his reference to James D.G.Dunn’s ‘the kind of life expected’ of believers.

I have quoted the entire paragraph because it is essential to get the context. The real issue of the passage is evangelism. The passage is not primarily a discourse on law, but on how to reach sinners with the gospel. So whatever we deduce from the passage, we need to bear in mind that Paul was not setting out to make a definitive statement on ‘law’. That being said, clearly ‘law’ plays a vital part in this paragraph. But why did Paul raise – not merely mention – ‘law’, when he was really talking about his approach to sinners? Why raise such an abstruse topic at this point?

Because he knows that all men are under law,²⁸ in one form or another, as he so clearly stated in Romans 2:12-15; that is, because he knows that all men are slaves to one master or another, subject to their master’s law. Slavery is the fundamental issue here. All men, I say again, are slaves. In Christ, that slavery is perfect freedom (Rom. 8:21; 2 Cor. 3:17; Gal. 5:1,13); outside of Christ that slavery is utter bondage (2 Pet. 2:19), and condemnation (2 Cor. 3:6-11). And the preaching of the gospel, the preaching of Christ (1 Cor. 2:2; 9:16; 2 Cor. 4:5), leading to conversion, is designed by God to deliver sinners from all forms of bondage, and bring them into glorious freedom in Christ (Luke 4:18; John 8:31-36). So that is why Paul raised the question of ‘law’ here. ‘Law’ leading to slavery is at the root of the problem.²⁹

‘Am I not free?’ thundered the apostle, right at the start of the chapter. Of course he is! But... he is willing to become a slave in order to³⁰ reach men with the gospel: ‘Though I am free from all,

²⁸ God always deals with men under law. All men are under law. God has ensured it thus by creation (Rom. 2), then with the Jews at Sinai, then with believers in Christ. As before, see my ‘All Men Under Law’.

²⁹ There is a close parallel in Rom. 7:1-6. See my ‘Who’s Your Husband?’ Similarly, see Heb. 12:18-24. In opening a sermon on this passage, I asked the question: ‘Which mountain are you living on?’ This was especially apposite since I was preaching in a relatively flat area of the UK. I was, of course, speaking spiritually. Here the question is: ‘What law are you under? Who’s your bond-master?’ See my ‘Three Questions in One’.

³⁰ Do not miss the repeated *hina*, ‘in order that’, seven times in verses 19-23, taking the form (though not the content) of a chiasm, a writing style that uses a repetitive pattern for clarification and/or emphasis.

I have made myself a servant to all [men]'. Actually, it is stronger than this: Paul was willing to become a slave, *edoulōsa*, to enter into slavery, bondage (see NIV, NASB), in order to reach men with the gospel.

The apostle was defending his ministry, especially the seeming inconsistency of his behaviour, in face of the abuse he received for it (1 Cor. 9:3). As he explained, he was willing to do all he could to reach all men with the gospel, even to the extent of putting himself into slavery, although this made him appear inconsistent to others. Men are divided into two: Jews and Gentiles. The Jews have the law of Moses; they are under the law of Moses. The Gentiles do not have the law of Moses; they are not under the law of Moses, but they are under their own law. Very well. As the apostle explained, in order to reach the Jews, 'those under the law [of Moses], I became as one under the law [of Moses]', even though he himself was not under the law of Moses. To reach the Gentiles, 'those outside the law [of Moses], I became as one outside the law [of Moses]', even though he himself was *not* outside the law of God. In all this, contrary to appearances, Paul was acting consistently.

Do not miss the word play.³¹ When he was trying to reach Gentiles, Paul was willing to become *anomos*. But this did not make him *anomos*! What? No, indeed! The apostle was willing to become *anomos* (literally, here, act as one not under law; that is, not under Jewish law, the law of Moses), but this did not make him *anomos* (literally here, either lawless or law-less; that is, he was still under law, still obliged to keep the law that he was under).³² Throughout the passage he was talking about legal obligation, slavery. Even though he was acting as if he were free of law, treating law with cavalier abandon, playing fast and loose with law, he was, in truth, under law all the time. So much so, he

³¹ Scripture is full of word play (see Mic. 1:8-16; Matt. 16:18; Rom. 3:27; 8:2-4; 9:6; 1 Cor. 9:19-23; 11:3-16; Gal. 3:24 with 5:18; Gal. 6:2,16; Phil. 3:3; 2 Thess. 3:11 (NIV); Philem. 10-11, and so on).

³² See below on 1 John 3:4, where *anomos* will play a vital part yet again.

immediately went on to explain what law it was that he was under throughout.³³

Though I have kept to the past tense – as did the apostle – the fact is we must read it in the present tense.³⁴ This is the apostle’s settled position in the new covenant. That is what he is saying. And, clearly, in the new covenant, the apostle is not under the law of Moses, but, even so, he is still in a law relationship with God. Indeed he is under law to God. As all the major versions express it, he is under the law of Christ. The law of God in the new covenant is the law of Christ.³⁵ And Paul is under it. And all this applies to every believer today.

Now, although all the major versions use ‘under the law of Christ’ or its equivalent, Paul did not actually use *hupo nomon*, ‘under law’, but *ennomos*, ‘in law’. So why do all the major translations, without exception, use ‘under law’? Because that is precisely what Paul is saying! I have already touched on the apostle’s love of word play. Is it possible that Paul is engaging in more of it here – between *ennomos*, ‘in law’ and ‘in Christ’? I think it very likely. In fact, I am sure of it. And to be ‘in Christ’, as I explained from Romans 6, is to be united to Christ. And part of this union with Christ is to be united to him as slave-master and husband, to be under Christ’s rule, reign, headship, lordship and governance; in short, to be under the law of Christ. Therefore it is perfectly correct – indeed, necessary – to speak of the believer being ‘under the law of Christ’ in 1 Corinthians 9. The major versions all agree. This is precisely what Paul is saying in the context.

Paul had already told the Corinthians that believers are slaves of Christ: ‘For he who was called in the Lord as a bondservant is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is

³³ Incidentally, given the lawless behaviour of the believers at Corinth, it is not difficult to see why Paul is stressing this point so vehemently here.

³⁴ Actually, ‘made myself a slave’ (verse 19) and ‘became’ (verse 20) are in the aorist –one act with lasting result. See Gordon D.Fee: *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, William B.Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, reprinted 1991, pp427-428.

³⁵ See my *Psalms 119*. “‘The Law’ in “‘the Law of Christ’”.

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a bondservant of Christ' (1 Cor. 7:22). The apostle used *doulos*, the very word he used in Romans 6. The Corinthians would have got the point, even as they listened to the apostle's words (1 Cor. 9:19-23) being read to them. Slavery is the underlying theme of the paragraph in question. Believers are slaves of Christ. This can only mean that they are under his rule, governance and law.

C.K.Barrett translated 1 Corinthians 9:21 thus:

I became as if I were outside the law (though I am not free of legal obligation to God but under legal obligation to Christ)...

He commented:

This is one of the most difficult sentences in the [letter], and also one of the most important, for in it Paul shows how the new relation to God which he has in Christ expresses his debt of obedience to God... He is not free of legal obligation to God (*anomos theou*) but under legal obligation to Christ (*ennomos Christou*).

Barrett then spoke of 'the difficulty in which Paul found himself':

He must direct the Corinthians' obedience in the way of Christ, but he must do this without permitting Christianity to become a new law... He does not say that he is 'under the law of the Messiah' (*hupo ton nomon tou Christou*). Yet he is not 'God's lawless one' (*anomos theou*)... He is 'Christ's law-abiding one' (*ennomos Christou*)... He is not related to God by legal observance, but by grace and faith, and in Christ, only; but precisely in this non-legal relationship he is Christ's slave, who owes absolute obedience not to a code (though on occasion [too weak, DG], and with due caution, he can give precepts to his followers), but to Christ as a person, and to the absolute principle of universal love, which Christ both taught and exemplified.³⁶

I have just hinted at the Corinthians having to hear these words. For that is the fact of the matter. We should bear in mind that the Corinthians would have heard these words read aloud to them in

³⁶ C.K.Barrett: *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (second edition), A&C Black, London, 1971, pp212-214. The law of Christ is not a list of rules but, as Barrett agrees (but too weakly, alas), the believer is under Christ's commands by the apostles through the Spirit in Scripture.

the first instance. What would they have taken away from that hearing? We don't have to guess! Read the passage aloud and see. Men are under law, both Jew and Gentile. All men are. The issue is, what is the law in question? The believer is not under the old law, the law of Moses. But neither is he outside or removed from law, free from all law. He is not law-less. The question is, what law is the believer under? That is the question. He is under law, but what law? The law of Christ. The believer's law is the law of Christ. As Femi Adeyemi put it:

Christou is [a] genitive of source, which indicates that this law comes from Christ. In verses 20-21 Paul drew a clear distinction between the Mosaic law and what he called 'the law from Christ'.³⁷

In looking first at the big picture, I am not suggesting we should ignore the minutiae of the words. Far from it. Indeed, I am now about to look at the exact words of the apostle.

It might be that *ennomos* has a nuance very slightly different to *hupo nomon*, but it is only a shade of a difference. In any case, the concept of being subject to law, keeping within the law, closely related to the Lord by law, is strengthened by the nuance. It is a far more intimate relationship than merely being 'under' the law of Christ. As Gordon D.Fee translated it, it speaks of being 'subject to law'.³⁸ I see the nuance reflecting the marriage aspect of the believer's union with Christ, rather than its slavery aspect. Believers are not only under Christ's law; they are in-lawed to Christ. Let me explain.

According to Joseph Henry Thayer, *ennomos* means 'bound to the law, bound by the law', while *en*, in this context, speaks 'of a person to whom another is wholly joined, and to whose power and influence he is subject... So used in the writings of Paul and of John particularly of intimate relationship with God or with

³⁷ Femi Adeyemi: 'The New Covenant Law And The Law Of Christ' in *Bibliotheca Sacra* (Oct.-Dec. 2006) pp440-441. See Daniel B.Wallace: *Greek Grammar Beyond The Basics*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1996, p113.

³⁸ Fee p430.

Christ, and for the most part involving contextually the idea of power and blessing resulting from that union’.

According to W.E.Vine, *ennomos* means “‘lawful, legal”, literally “in-law”, or, strictly, “what is within the range of law”, [and] is translated “lawful” (Acts 19:39) of the legal tribunals in Ephesus. Or “under law” in relation to Christ (1 Cor. 9:21)... not merely the condition of being under “law”, but the intimacy of a relation established in the loyalty of a will devoted to his Master’.

In addition, take *teleō*, ‘to do just as commanded, to accomplish, fulfil’ (Thayer), including : ‘It is accomplished’ (John 19:30). Compare that with *enteleō*, ‘to order, command to be done, enjoin’ (Thayer). I say the same applies to *ennomos*.

What is more, look at Romans 2:12-15. Literally: ‘For as many as without law (*anomōs*)... without law (*anomōs*)... and as many as in law (*en nomō*)...’.³⁹ Do not miss the *en nomō*. Not a million miles away from *ennomos*, is it? And in the context of Romans 2:12-15, when Paul spoke of those *en nomō* he was referring to Jews, those under the Mosaic law.⁴⁰ Jews were *en nomō* (the law of Moses); believers are *ennomō* (the law of Christ). Yet again, take Romans 3:19: ‘Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law’; literally, ‘to those in the law’, *tois en tō nomō*.⁴¹

So, yet again, I disagree with Braye – this time when he says that “‘under” is not correct [but] the idea conveyed here is in-ness, not “under””.⁴² He is making a dichotomy and a distinction where none exists. Having done that, he goes on to build far too much on it, and ends up with an unbiblical conclusion; namely, that the believer is not under the law of Christ, when the opposite is the case. The believer, by reason of his union with Christ,

³⁹ *anomōs* is an adverb, though not always translated as such.

⁴⁰ Of course, those under any law who break that law will be judged by that law. But the point I am making is that *en nomō* means under law, in law, governed by law, ruled by law, subject to law. I say the same applies to *ennomos*.

⁴¹ And so it goes on: *ek nomou*, literally ‘out of law’ (Rom. 4:14), or *ek tou nomou*, literally ‘out of the law’ (Rom. 4:16); that is, speaking of those who ‘live by the law’, ‘adhere to the law’.

⁴² ‘Five Reasons’.

being ‘in Christ’, is in-lawed to Christ. And this means that he is under the law of Christ, intimately bound to Christ as his loving slave-master. The believer yields a willing obedience to his Saviour’s law. But he most definitely is under it.⁴³

And there is something else we should bear in mind. This is the only place in the entire Bible where the word *ennomos* is used in this form. As a consequence, it would not be wise to build a massive case on this single use, especially if it ends up flying in the face of the context (and parallel passages) – where the slavery involved in being ‘under law’ is clearly the main thrust of the apostle’s argument. Indeed, slavery is stronger than merely being ‘under law’.

Moo:

The Christian is no longer bound to the Mosaic law; Christ has brought its fulfilment. But the Christian *is* bound to ‘God’s law’ (1 Cor. 9:20-21; cf. ‘God’s commands’ in 1 Cor. 7:19 and 1 John *passim*). ‘God’s law’ is not [now], however, the Mosaic law, but ‘Christ’s law’ (1 Cor. 9:20-21; Gal. 6:2), because it is to Christ, the fulfiller, the *telos* of the law (Rom. 10:4), that the Christian is bound... Failure to observe this distinction [between the law of Moses and the law of God] has resulted in considerable confusion and misunderstanding.⁴⁴

On 1 Corinthians 9:20-21, Moo:

Paul’s point... is that he as a Christian is not subject to the rule and authority of the Mosaic law, but he willingly gives up that freedom, and conforms to that law when evangelising Jews... Paul wants to guard against any idea that he has no more obligations to the law of God. Indeed, while not being ‘under the law’, he recognises a continuing obligation to ‘God’s law’, in the form of ‘Christ’s law’ (the Greek is *ennomos Christou*). The conceptualisation of this text provides as neat a summary of my view [Moo’s, and mine – DG] of the law as the New Testament

⁴³ I am convinced that those I oppose here make a mountain out of the molehill of the absent *hupo*. As I have said, in 1 Cor. 9 Paul is speaking of the believer under the law of Christ but avoiding the pitfall of likening that law to the law of Moses. But, as I say, he is not really arguing about the law in 1 Cor. 9, but talking about evangelism.

⁴⁴ Moo: ‘The Law’ pp217-218, emphasis his.

affords. It suggests that ‘God’s law’ comes to his people in two forms: to Israel in the form of ‘law’, *torah*, and to Christians in the form of ‘Christ’s law’. Here we find the ‘new-covenant theology’ emphasis on two contrasting covenants worked out in terms of two different ‘laws’. But the key question remains: How different are they?

To answer this question, [Moo said], we return to Galatians [in particular, to Gal. 5:13 – 6:2]. To recapitulate: ...The teaching of the New Testament on the matter of the law of God is neatly summarised in the distinctions that Paul draws in 1 Corinthians 9:20-21: the law of Moses, the *torah* (‘law’ simply), was given to the people of Israel to govern them until the coming of the Messiah; since his coming, the people of God are governed by the ‘law of Christ’. Biblical law, in other words, is firmly attached to the temporal two-covenant structure that is the hallmark of ‘new-covenant theology’.⁴⁵

In short, 1 Corinthians 9:19-23 teaches that the believer *is* under the law of Christ.

Galatians 5:1

The context is king. In the allegory of Sarah and Hagar (Gal. 4:21-31), we are expressly told that the law on Mount Sinai was a covenant of bondage, in contrast to another covenant (Gal. 4:21,24-27); namely, the Abrahamic covenant fulfilled in the new. The covenant represented by Hagar is the law, the Mosaic covenant. Writing to those who desired ‘to be under the law’ – that is, the Mosaic law – Paul directed his argument against the Judaisers who wanted believers to go under that covenant. That covenant, being a covenant of bondage, he would have none of it:

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. Freedom! Liberty! LIBERTY! But what is this freedom? Freedom from sin, death

⁴⁵ Moo: ‘Galatians’ pp20,27.

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and the law; in particular, here, the law, the law of Moses, not excluding the possibility of pagan law (Gal. 4:8-11; Col. 2:6-23).

Do not miss the word play on 'yoke'. 'The yoke of bondage' or 'slavery' is the Mosaic law (Acts 15:10; Gal. 4:24) (or, pagan law, of course), and this is contrasted to Christ's 'easy' yoke and 'light' burden (Matt. 11:28-30), Christ's law.⁴⁶ The royal law of liberty (Jas. 1:25; 2:8), the law of Christ, is no 'yoke of bondage'!

Paul is teaching that believers cannot possibly be progressively sanctified by the law of Moses. But this is no problem. After all, believers are not under the law of Moses. His point is that they should never entertain the suggestion that they should go back to it (or to pagan law). Believers, united to Christ, are released from the law of Moses, the law of bondage, having died to it. They no longer live in the age of law, but in the age of the Spirit and grace. So don't go back to the law of Moses, that yoke of bondage!

Clearly, none of this has a word to say against the claim that the believer is under the law of Christ. Braye's categorical deduction that the believer is not under the law of Christ is wrong. Galatians 5:1 has nothing to say on that score. Nothing at all!

But we can go further. While there are risks in arguing from silence, nevertheless the fact that Paul does not rule out submitting to the law of Christ at this point is, in itself, not without significance. 'Don't go to the law of Moses', he said. 'You are free'. Now if he knew that believers are under no law whatsoever, freed from all law, why did he not go directly for the root of the tooth, and not merely content himself with the crown? What I mean is, if he had said: 'Don't listen to these Judaisers and go to the law of Moses. After all, you are free from all law. So, when I come to talk about the law of Christ in a short while, remember you are not even under that law. You are free from all law, under no law, not even the law of Christ. Consequently, don't go back to any law'. How simple, how unequivocal that

⁴⁶ Incidentally, do not miss the parallel with 1 John 5:3: 'This is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome'. I will return to 1 John.

would have been! But he did not say anything of the sort! I don't build anything on this silence, but I notice it.

In any case, as I have shown, Paul is blunt: believers are not under Moses' law, the law of bondage, and must never listen to teachers who urge them to go under it. But that has nothing to say about the believer and the law of Christ.

Now glance at the way the apostle proceeds in Galatians 5 and 6. Having dealt with justification by faith and not by the law (Gal. 5:2-12), Paul moves on :

For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. For the whole law [of Moses] is fulfilled in one word: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'... But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh... But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law [of Moses]. Now the works of the flesh are evident... But the fruit of the Spirit is... And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If [since] we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit... Fulfil the law of Christ (Gal. 5:13 – 6:2).

The contrast, the argument, could not be clearer: the believer is no longer under the Mosaic law, but in the Spirit, and by 'walking in the Spirit', 'keeping in step with the Spirit', he must and will fulfil the law of Christ.⁴⁷ As John G.Reisinger put it: 'What does it mean to "walk in the Spirit"? Walking in the Spirit is nothing less than walking in obedience to the revealed will of God in Scripture'.⁴⁸ And that is the law of Christ. 'A natural consequence of walking in the Spirit [is that it] fulfils the law of Christ'.⁴⁹

In light of Galatians 4:21 – 5:1, the link between 'the believer' and 'the law of Christ' is highly charged, to say the least. The Galatians would have got the point! We know the sort of thing the Judaisers were telling them about the law of Moses: '*It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law*

⁴⁷ Gal. 6:2 could be a statement or a command, but this is immaterial to the question in hand. See below.

⁴⁸ John G.Reisinger: *Studies in Galatians*, New Covenant Media, Frederick, 2010, pp408-409.

⁴⁹ Reisinger p432.

of Moses' (Acts 15:5). The Galatians would have recognised what Paul was telling them: 'It is necessary... to keep the law of Christ'.

The word 'fulfil' (Gal. 6:2) is vital here. But before I move on to that verse, let me quote Moo with reference to what we have seen thus far:

'Under law' designates the status antithetical to the status of the believer. To be 'under grace', free children of God, 'led by the Spirit', means to be living in the new age of redemption, and no longer in the old age that was characterised by, and dominated by, the law... Life in the Spirit is put forward by Paul as the ground of Christian ethics, in contrast to life 'under law'.⁵⁰

'Under law' here, in the context, clearly means 'under the Mosaic law'. The believer is not under Moses' law. But this certainly does not signify that life in the Spirit rules out being under the law of Christ! The apostle has not even mentioned the law of Christ at this stage. Moo went on:

[But] if Christians are no longer 'under the law',⁵¹ what will guide and empower their conduct? Paul answers in terms of the Spirit and (surprisingly, perhaps) the law [of Moses]. Christians enjoy the indwelling presence of the Spirit. By 'walking' by the Spirit (Gal. 5:16) and 'keeping in step with the Spirit' (Gal. 5:25), believers will develop those character traits that should mark God's people... In Galatians 5:14, [the apostle] proclaims that 'the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbour as yourself"'. How does the love command of Leviticus 19:18 'fulfil' the law? It may mean simply that [love] is so central to the law that one is not really obeying the law if love is not present. Paul highlights love, not to displace the law in any sense, but to point to its true meaning and essence. But the language of 'fulfil' suggests [it does more than suggest!] that Paul means something [far] more radical than this. Vital to understanding Paul's perspective on the law is to recognise a principal distinction in his writings between 'doing' and 'fulfilling' the law [of Moses]. Nowhere does Paul say that Christians are to 'do' the law, and nowhere does he suggest that

⁵⁰ Moo: 'The Law' p215.

⁵¹ Note Moo's view, as mine, 'the law', 'the law of Moses'.

any but Christians can ‘fulfil’ the law [of Moses].⁵² ‘Doing’ the law refers to that daily obedience to all the commandments that was required of the Israelites. ‘Fulfilling’ the law, on the other hand, denotes that complete satisfaction of the law’s demands that comes only through our identification with Christ (Rom. 8:4) and our submission to that commandment which Christ put at the heart of his new-covenant teaching: love. It is the love of others, first made possible by Christ (hence the ‘new’ commandment, John 13:34), that completely satisfies the demand of the law. The other reference to ‘law’ in this concluding section of Galatians comes in Galatians 6:2.⁵³

Exactly! And ‘that other reference to “law”’ is, of course, in utter contrast to the law of Moses; it is the law of Christ.

Galatians 6:2

If [since] we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit... and so fulfil the law of Christ (Gal. 5:25 – 6:2).

The Judaisers were pressing the Galatian believers to keep the law of Moses, to go *under* it, and the Galatians were hankering after it. Paul, arguing his case resolutely, tells his readers that they are released from the law of Moses (along with pagan law), and must on no account go back to it. Does that leave them lawless? Not a bit of it! As he tells them, they are not under the law of Moses but must fulfil the law of Christ; in other words, that they are under the law of Christ.⁵⁴

Let me explain. By ‘fulfilling the law of Christ’, the apostle is, in fact, speaking of believers obeying that law. In truth, it is

⁵² We may go further. In every believer, by Christ’s work, by ‘the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus’, ‘the righteous requirement of the law [of Moses] [is] fulfilled’ (Rom. 8:2-4).

⁵³ Moo: ‘Galatians’ pp20-21.

⁵⁴ In what follows, as I have said, it does not matter whether we should read Gal. 6:2 as a command or a statement; on the issue in hand, it amounts to the same thing: believers are under the law of Christ. To avoid cluttering the text of my article, I will stick to ‘command’. If any reader prefers it in the statement form, he can make the necessary adjustment in the article. In any case, ‘let us keep in step with the Spirit’ *is* a command. ‘Let us’ is not a suggestion!

stronger than that, much stronger. Paul does not use *plēroō*, ‘to fulfil’, as did Matthew concerning Christ (Matt. 5:17), as he might well have done, since it would have been more than enough to make the point. Why would *plēroō* have done? Because Christ came to fulfil the law of Moses: ‘Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have not come to abolish [them] but to fulfil (*plērōsai*) [them]’ (Matt. 5:17), he declared. And to do that, he had to come *under* the law of Moses: ‘God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born *under* the law (*hupo nomon*)’ (Gal. 4:4); in other words, Christ was under the law to submit to it, and obey and keep it. ‘Fulfilling the law’ inevitably involves ‘being under the law’. Thus the believer is under the law of Christ and has to fulfil it; because he has to fulfil it, he must be under it.⁵⁵ In other words, *plēroō* would have been perfectly adequate for Paul’s purpose.

But, in fact, he uses *anaplēroō*, ‘to fill to the brim, to fully satisfy, to observe perfectly’.⁵⁶ The case could not be more strongly made. The believer is most definitely under the law of Christ, and he has to carry it out to the full, keep it thoroughly. He has to fulfil it entirely. He is obligated to obey that law. He is to copy his Master, Christ. As Christ, filled with the Spirit (Matt. 12:18; Luke 4:18; John 3:34; Acts 10:38), came under the law of Moses in order to fulfil it, so the believer has the Spirit and is under Christ’s law in order to fulfil it by walking in the Spirit. ‘Just as Christ’ is a powerful new-covenant argument (John 13:15,34; 15:12; 17:18; Eph. 5:2,25, and so on). It underlies Galatians 5:25 – 6:2.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ In Rom. 8:1-4, Paul is dealing with justification leading to progressive sanctification. But that passage does not undermine the point I have made concerning Gal. 6:2. In fact, it strengthens the claim that the law of Christ involves both the inward work of the Spirit and the Scriptures.

⁵⁶ Thayer.

⁵⁷ Christ, of course, completely fulfilled the law; believers, in their progressive sanctification, do not. Nevertheless, they must aim for perfection, full maturity, complete likeness to Christ (Matt. 5:48; 2 Cor. 13:9,11; Eph. 3:19; 4:13,21-24; Phil. 3:12-16; Col. 1:28; 4:12; Heb. 13:21; Jas. 1:4; 2 Pet. 3:18).

Now for the obvious but frequently ignored fact: Galatians 6 is the climax of the letter. In light of this, the juxtaposition of ‘the law of Christ’ and ‘the Israel of God’ (Gal. 6:2,16), carries great weight. The old Israel was under the old law of Moses; the new Israel is under the new law of Christ.⁵⁸

None of this, of course, in any way diminishes the absolute necessity of the inward working of the Spirit. As I say, according to the apostle, this fulfilling of the law of Christ is only possible to those who keep in step with the Spirit. Galatians 5:25 – 6:2 captures the believer’s experience of the law of Christ in a nutshell. The believer, obeying Scripture (here, an apostolic command), walking in the Spirit, fulfils Christ’s law. In other words, the law of Christ is not reduced to a list of external commands, with those commands having to be kept by believers in their own power! The believer’s obedience is only possible by the inward work of the Spirit. Therefore, I agree with Braye, but with one important change, when he states:

The new law differs in its very essence and nature [from the old law]. The new law is not a list of words – commands, imperatives, statutes, or instructions – expressed externally on tablets of stone (or on a page).

Here is the way I would put it:

The new law differs in its very essence and nature [from the old law]. The new law is not *merely* a list of words – commands, imperatives, statutes, or instructions – expressed externally on tablets of stone (or on a page).

But I would go on to make sure that people got the full picture:

But neither is it the inward work of the Spirit *without* those external commands, imperatives, statutes and instructions, or with them *tacked on the outside of* Christ’s law.

As the believer keeps the apostolic command to fulfil the law of Christ, he will, since he lives by the Spirit, keep in step with the Spirit (Gal. 5:25). *And it is equally true the other way round:* as he walks in the Spirit, he will obey his Master’s revealed will,

⁵⁸ See my *Christ* pp314-320,552-554.

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including his commands, as recorded and issued by the apostles in Scripture. Both dovetail perfectly. It is not either/or; it is both. The believer has the Spirit *and* is under the Scriptures, the apostolic commands; he is under those commands *and* the Spirit writes those commands in his heart.

As Graeme Goldsworthy put it:

The sanctification of the Christian is... in one sense automatic. We cannot take hold of Christ by faith for our justification without the Holy Spirit. It is the same Holy Spirit that both enables the sinner to believe the gospel and also works in us the fruit of sanctification. In another sense, sanctification is not automatic in that the Spirit works through our minds and wills. All the admonition and exhortation in the Bible is God's way of involving us in the [progressive] sanctifying work of the Spirit. To be human is to be responsible. To be Christianly human is to respond with mind and will to the gospel with good works... [Take] Philippians 2:6-11... Here we see sovereignty and responsibility knit together in such a way that the outworking of salvation day by day – good works – is immediately the result of human effort, but ultimately the work of God in us... What Christ did for us has its outworking in all believers as sanctification. What we already are in Christ... begins to take shape in our experience as the Holy Spirit conforms us more and more to the reality which is in Christ. The Christian struggle is against the world, the flesh and the devil. When Paul concludes the Ephesian letter... (Eph. 6:10-18), he does not take up a new subject. The practical matters of daily life in a hostile world are the spiritual warfare against principalities and powers. In urging us to put on the full armour of God, Paul is not departing from the perspective that is constantly his; namely that, by standing firm and clinging to the truth of our justification, we live the life of sanctification.⁵⁹

And then Wayne Grudem:

The role that we play in [progressive] sanctification is both a passive one in which we depend on God to sanctify us, and an active one in which we strive to obey God and take steps that

⁵⁹ Graeme Goldsworthy: 'The Gospel in Revelation' in *The Goldsworthy Trilogy*, Paternoster, Milton Keynes, reprinted 2014, pp238-239,281-282.

will increase our sanctification... Unfortunately today, this passive role in sanctification... is sometimes so strongly emphasised that it is the only thing people are told about the path of sanctification. Sometimes the popular phrase: 'Let go, and let God' is given as a summary of how to live the Christian life. But this is a tragic distortion of the doctrine of sanctification... [There is the] active role which we are to play... There are many aspects to this active role that we are to play in [progressive] sanctification... It is important that we continue to grow both in our passive trust in God to sanctify us and in our active striving for holiness and greater obedience in our lives. If we neglect active striving to obey God, we become passive, lazy Christians. If we neglect the passive role of trusting God and yielding to him, we become proud and overly confident in ourselves. In either case, our [progressive] sanctification will be greatly deficient. We must maintain faith and diligence to obey at the same time. The old hymn wisely says: 'Trust and obey, for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey'.⁶⁰

So I say again: The believer has the Spirit *and* is under the Scriptures, the apostolic commands; he is under those commands *and* the Spirit writes those commands in his heart. If this is not so, we shall be left judging every case of right and wrong by motive and not by action. What a terrible thought! If the law of Christ has no external Scriptures at its heart, what is the objective standard by which to judge this 'walking in the Spirit'? Have we simply to accept the rightness of any believer who retorts that the Spirit moved him to act in such and such a way? What happens to church discipline under such a system? And that is only one question.⁶¹

In order to illustrate the point, consider this recent written conversation. A man was questioned about what he had written:

⁶⁰ Wayne Grudem: *Systematic Theology...*, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, 1994, pdf link pp655-657.

⁶¹ How will we distinguish between the Spirit and the flesh, the Spirit and Satan? After all, we know he can disguise himself as an angel of light (2 Cor. 11:14). How will we decide between two professing believers who urge diametrically opposed courses of action, each claiming that they are led by the Spirit?

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You said: ‘If all things are lawful to Paul, all things are permitted – even sexual immorality’. What in the world did you mean by that statement? How do you reconcile this statement with your affirmation that Christians should attempt to follow and conform to the exhortations in the New Testament?

The answer came back:

[For Paul] the ultimate arbiter is Christ in him. He does not always have time to open his Bible if he has forgotten a verse, to see what he should do! He walks by the Spirit and knows that whatsoever is not of faith is sin.

Really? On this ground, if a professed believer parried a reprimand by saying the Spirit had moved him to the action in question, and that he had faith enough to believe it was right, what the proper answer would be, I am at a loss to imagine.⁶²

Furthermore, if the Spirit has inwardly given believers everything necessary, why did the Spirit ensure that they have the external, written Scriptures? Are they a luxury, or an essential? Are they merely useful, or a necessity? Are they Christ’s advice for the believer, or are they Christ’s royal law of the believer’s liberty (Jas. 1:25; 2:8)?

I am convinced that both the written word and the inward Spirit are essential, and bound together. Nowhere is my position better exemplified than in 1 John 2:

⁶² In a further response, the writer explained: ‘It depends on the definition of sin. I suggested that, for those under the law, sin is the transgression of that law. So if you can find a law that says: “Sexual immorality is a sin”, then to those under that law it is a sin, and they have *ipso facto* broken that law. However for those not under law, but who are led by the Spirit, as Paul was, what the law says is irrelevant (in that immediate context)’. There then followed a nuanced discussion on 1 Cor. 6:12,18. For my part, in this I see a failure to distinguish things indifferent and commands. I repeat a note in the Introduction; namely, in another discussion, this same writer stated: ‘The spirit has pre-eminence over the written word, or the letter’. Even if we replace ‘spirit’ with ‘Spirit’ it sounds little better! Do not miss the confusion in the unscriptural link (the virtual equivalence) between ‘the written word’ and ‘the letter’.

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You have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge. I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and because no lie is of the truth... I write these things to you about those who are trying to deceive you. But the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie – just as it has taught you, abide in him (1 John 2:20-27).

A superficial reading of this text could lead to the view that the Spirit is all, and there is no need of any human or external teaching. And yet that cannot be! If that were the case, John would have no need to write and tell these believers what they already knew perfectly well by the inward work of the Spirit. John's words are not merely useful; they are vital. The apostles were blessed with direct revelation. We are not. We have revelation through the apostles as recorded in Scripture.

Getting back to Galatians, as Moo said:

The interpretation of the phrase 'law of Christ' is central to my [Moo's and mine – DG] argument. Unfortunately, Paul provides little contextual information.⁶³ We have, however, already noticed that Paul uses similar language in 1 Corinthians 9:21, where, the context suggests [it makes it plain!] 'the law of Christ' is distinguished from the Mosaic law. Coupled with the claim that Christians are no longer 'under the (Mosaic) law', this makes it unlikely [this is far too weak] that the 'law of Christ' is the Mosaic law interpreted and fulfilled by Christ. Rather, the phrase is more likely [to be] Paul's answer to those who might conclude that his law-free gospel provides no standards of guidance for believers. On the contrary, Paul says, *though no*

⁶³ Is it because the early believers knew full well what the apostle was talking about? Was it obvious to them? Would they not, quite naturally, think that what the apostle was writing was an integral part of Christ's law? Certainly, he had taken great pains to establish his apostolic credentials right at the start of the letter (Gal. 1:1 – 2:21). And this is general throughout the New Testament. Witness the number of times he goes out of his way to establish and maintain his apostolic authority, and speak of the apostolic foundation of the church (1 Cor. 3:10-11; Eph. 2:19-22; 3:5, and so on). Notice the way Peter later speaks in exalted, but proper, terms of Paul's writings (2 Pet. 3:15-16).

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longer directly responsible to Moses' law, Christians are bound to Christ's law.

I pause. This is the point: 'Though [they are] no longer directly responsible to Moses' law, Christians are bound to Christ's law'. In other words, they are under Christ's law. Exactly so.

Moo went on:

In what does this 'law' consist? Since... Galatians 5:14..., the demand for love [must be] a central component of the 'law of Christ'. But it is unlikely that Paul confines the law to this demand alone [certainly not!], for, as we have seen, Paul also stresses in this context the fruit-bearing ministry of the Spirit. Coupled with the centrality of the Spirit in Paul's teaching about what it means to live as a Christian, this strongly suggests [it is stronger than that!] that the directing influence of the Spirit is an important part of this law of Christ... Jeremiah 31:31-34... Ezekiel 36:26-27. It is more difficult to determine whether the law of Christ includes specific teachings and principles... I think it highly probable [it is certain!] that Paul thought of the law of Christ as including within it teachings of Jesus and the apostolic witness, based on his life and teaching.

Moo, in part, quoting Richard N. Longenecker:

The law of Christ 'stands in Paul's thought for those prescriptive principles stemming from the heart of the gospel (usually embodied in the example and teachings of Jesus), which are meant to be applied to specific situations by the direction and enablement of the Holy Spirit, being always motivated and conditioned by love'.

Does the 'law of Christ' include Mosaic commandments? Of course. We may expect that everything within the Mosaic law that reflected God's 'eternal moral will' for his people is caught up into and repeated in the 'law of Christ'.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Douglas J. Moo: 'The Covenants and the Mosaic Law: The View from Galatians', Affinity Theological Study Conference: *The End of the Law?*, February, 2009, pp20-22, emphasis mine. On the whole, a fine statement, but, as so often, Moo could have been stronger at certain points. As for Longenecker, the Mosaic commandments are frequently used by Christ and his apostles, but they are always nuanced, used as a paradigm, and never as straight rules. As before, see my 'The Law on the Believer's Heart'.

As Adeyemi put it:

The identity of *nomos* in Galatians 6:2 is shaped by the genitive qualifier, *tou Christou*. This may be a genitive of source, suggesting that this 'law' comes from Christ. In this sense *nomos* in Galatians 6:2 is 'the standard set by Christ' for believers to follow as a new standard or system of conduct... The... form of *nomos* and the genitive phrase *tou Christou* affirm the distinct nature of this 'law' as coming specifically from Christ.⁶⁵

Braye, I submit, is wrong. Galatians 5 and 6 confirm that the believer really *is* under the law of Christ.

1 John 3:4

I quote the entire paragraph to give the context, highlighting the critical words:

See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure. ***Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness (anomia); sin is lawlessness (anomia).*** You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin. No one who abides in him keeps on sinning; no one who keeps on sinning has either seen him or known him. Little children, let no one deceive you. Whoever practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous. Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God. By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor is the one who does not love his brother (1 John 3:1-10).

⁶⁵ Adeyemi pp440-441. See Wallace p113.

The relevant Greek is *ho poiōn tēn hamartian, kai tēn anomian poiei; kai hē hamartia estin anomia*; literally, ‘practices sin also lawlessness practises; and sin is lawlessness’. Here we reach the crux of the text for our purposes. Now *anomia* can mean ‘the condition of one without law – either because he is ignorant of it, or because he has a certain law and is violating it and showing contempt for it’.⁶⁶ The word bears these alternative meanings in Scripture. How can we decide? By the context, as always; always by the context.

In certain contexts, the words *anomia*, *anomos* and *anomōs* speak of being destitute of the law in question, whatever that law may be. Let me give three examples.⁶⁷

Take Acts 2:23. Peter, preaching Christ, told the Jewish crowd on the day of Pentecost: ‘You have taken [him] by lawless hands, have crucified [him], and put [him] to death’ (NKJV; see also ESV). The Jews were responsible for crucifying Christ but, to do the dirty work, they used Roman hands, Gentile hands, ‘lawless hands’. The NASB, translating the phrase, ‘by the hands of godless men’, has a marginal note: ‘Lawless hands, or, men without the law; that is, heathen’. The NIV correctly notes: ‘Of those not having the law (that is, Gentiles)’. Peter, steeped in Jewish thought, was using the phrase, ‘lawless men’, in the Jewish sense. The men he was talking about were ‘men without the law’. That is to say, they were law-less, outside the law of God, the law of Moses; they were Gentiles. The Jews boasted that they had the law of Moses. They were the only people to have it (Deut. 4:7-8,32-34; Ps. 147:19-20; Rom. 2:14; 3:1-2; 9:4; 1 Cor. 9:20-21). All the rest were ‘law-less’. So, as Peter said, Christ was crucified by the Jews (who had the law of Moses) making use of the Gentiles (who did not have the law of Moses, the without-the-law people) to do the work. See also Matthew 20:18-19; and Galatians 2:15, where ‘Jews by nature’ are contrasted with ‘sinners of the Gentiles’ or ‘Gentile sinners’ (NIV).

⁶⁶ See Thayer.

⁶⁷ In these cases, it would be better to describe those involved as law-less and not lawless; that is (Moses’) law-less.

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‘Sinners’ and ‘Gentiles’, in such a context, means those who are law-less, outside the law of Moses, beyond the pale.

As Leonard Verduin put it: The ‘lawless’ men of Acts 2:23 were not:

...lawless in the sense of ‘wicked’, but ‘lawless’ in the Jewish sense – ‘without the law’.⁶⁸ In other words, they were law-less... The Jews prided themselves on being law-havers, the only people to whom God had given his law; this put all the rest in the ‘lawless’ category... [Christ was crucified by the Jews who used] the Gentiles, the without-the-law people... [as] their tool.⁶⁹

Now for the second text, 1 Corinthians 9:21. I have already looked at it. Here are the relevant words: ‘To those outside the law (*anomois*) I became as one outside the law (*anomos*) (not being outside the law (*anomos*) of God but under the law of Christ’; literally, ‘to those without law (*anomois*) as without law (*anomos*) (not being without law (*anomos*) to God...)...’. The Gentiles did not have the law of Moses; they were, in that sense, law-less. They were outside the Jewish pale.

And then Romans 2:12: ‘For all who have sinned without the law (*anomōs*) will also perish without the law (*anomōs*)’. Clearly, the apostle is referring to the Gentiles who, though they were sinners, did not have the law of Moses. In that sense, they were law-less. They were outside the Jewish pale.

So much for the first meaning of the words in question: law-less.

But, of course, in other contexts, the words *anomia*, *anomos* and *anomōs* speak of having a certain law, but showing contempt for it, and violating, breaking or transgressing it, whatever that law may be. Here are some examples:

Then will I declare to them: ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness (*anomial*)’ (Matt. 7:23).

⁶⁸ Note Verduin’s proper use of ‘the’ law.

⁶⁹ Leonard Verduin: *The Anatomy of a Hybrid: A Study in Church-State Relationships*, The Christian Harmony Publishers, Sarasota, 1992, p71.

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The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers (*anomian*) (Matt. 13:41).

You are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness (*anomias*) (Matt. 23:28).

He was numbered with the transgressors (*anomōn*) (Luke 22:37). Blessed are those whose lawless deeds (*anomia*) are forgiven, and whose sins are covered (Rom. 4:7).

Just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to lawlessness (*anomia*) leading to more lawlessness (*anomian*), so now present your members as slaves to righteousness leading to sanctification (Rom. 6:19).⁷⁰

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness (*anomia*)? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? (2 Cor. 6:14-16).

That day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness [some mss, *hamartias*, 'of sin'; others, *anomias*, 'of lawlessness'] is revealed, the son of destruction, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. For the mystery of lawlessness (*anomias*) is already at work. Only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. And then the lawless one (*anomos*) will be revealed (2 Thess. 2:3-8).

The law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless (*anomois*) and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who strike their fathers and mothers, for murderers, the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is

⁷⁰ How can anybody be *more* without law than without it? *more* law-less than law-less? They can, of course, be *more* lawless; that is, *more* sinful, showing *more* contempt for, and violation of, the law they are under. Omitting the 'more' (literally not in the Greek, but obviously the apostle's meaning), does not alter the case. To be law-less is to be law-less. Take a line; it is either straight or it is not. It cannot be *more* straight.

contrary to sound doctrine, in accordance with the gospel of the glory of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted (1 Tim. 1:9-11).

Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness (*anomias*) and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works (Tit. 2:13-14).⁷¹ You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness (*anomial*) (Heb. 1:9).⁷²

I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins [and their lawlessnesses (*anomiōn*)] no more (Heb. 8:12).

I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds [*anomiōn*] no more (Heb. 10:17).⁷³

Righteous Lot, greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked (for as that righteous man lived among them day after day, he was tormenting his righteous soul over their lawless (*anomois*) deeds that he saw and heard)... (2 Pet. 2:7-8).

In all the above, the issue is not which law is being referred to in any particular passage. That, at this stage, is immaterial. Rather, the issue is that the words *anomia*, *anomos* and *anomōs*, in these passages, mean breaking the law which the people in question are under; any law. Law-breaking in this context is sin, and *vice-versa*. That is what the words *anomia*, *anomos* and *anomōs* are referring to: men violating, showing contempt for, the law that they are under.

Richard Chenevix Trench:

While *anomos* is once at least in the New Testament used negatively of a person without law, or to whom a law has not been given (1 Cor. 9:21)... [and] of the greatest enemy of all law, the Man of Sin, the lawless one (2 Thess. 2:8), [nevertheless] *anomia* is never... the condition of one living without law, but always the condition or deed of one who acts contrary to law... Thus the Gentiles, not having a law (Rom. 2:14) might be charged with sin, but they, sinning without law (Rom. 2:12;

⁷¹ Christ did not need to die to redeem us from any lack of law. All he had to do was issue that law, give it to us! It was our law-breaking, our sin, that made redemption essential.

⁷² If the word ought to be *adikian*, this verse plays no part in this debate.

⁷³ Note the same Greek word in Heb. 8:12 and 10:17, where it is translated 'sins' and 'lawless deeds', respectively.

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3:21), could not be charged with *anomia*. It is true, indeed, that, behind that law of Moses which they never had, there is another law, the original law and revelation of the righteousness of God, written on the hearts of all (Rom. 2:14-15).⁷⁴

William Edwy Vine:

anomos ‘without law’, also denotes ‘lawless’ [see] Acts 2:23; 2 Thessalonians 2:4,8; [see] 2 Peter 2:8 where the thought is not simply that of doing what is unlawful, but of flagrant defiance of the known will of God.

anomia, akin to *anomos* is most frequently translated ‘iniquity’ (2 Thess. 2:7)... In 1 John 3:4... the real meaning of the word [is] ‘everyone that does sin (a practice, not the committal of an act) does also lawlessness; and sin is lawlessness’. This definition of sin sets forth its essential character as the rejection of the law, or will, of God and the substitution of the will of self.⁷⁵

As I say, the context must determine which of the two meanings is correct in any particular passage.

So what about 1 John 3:4? The context could not be plainer; that is why I quoted it from verse 1 to verse 10. Here are the relevant words: ‘Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness (*anomia*)... sins... sin... sinning... practices righteousness is righteous, as he is righteous... sinning... sinning... the works of the devil... sinning... sinning... practice righteousness’. John is not talking about mere *possession* of a law, or lack of it, but the *practice* of actual sinning and actual righteousness, the doing of works, obedience or disobedience to the law in question. These people are not law-less, but lawless; they are kicking over the traces, showing contempt for the law in question, the law which they are under. They have a law, they are under that law, they are obliged to obey it, but they break it, they do not keep it. We are talking about contempt of law, violation of law, transgression of law.

⁷⁴ Richard Chenevix Trench: *Synonyms Of The New Testament*, section 66.

⁷⁵ W.E.Vine: *Expository Dictionary Of New Testament Words*. Vine, ‘an English biblical scholar, theologian, and writer... traces the words of the Bible... back to their ancient *koinē* Greek root words and to the meanings of the words for that day’ (Wikipedia).

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I say this not because all the major translations agree – but they do! – but because the context absolutely demands it. John is not concerned with possession of the law in question. He takes that for granted, as a given. All men are under one law or another.⁷⁶ Rather, he is concerned with a man's attitude to the law in question; in particular, his doing (or otherwise) of that law. Unrighteousness, sin, wickedness, in this connection is not a man's lack of law; it is failure to keep the law, whatever that law may be.

And as for the 'law' in question, just read the entire letter: it is full of commands and instructions and imperatives concerning Christ and his gospel. The very word 'commandment' comes seven times in the letter. It is impossible to miss the overtones of John 12:47-50; 13:1 – 16:33. John's words in 1 John 3:1-10 could almost be coming directly from the mouth of Christ himself. In the context, it is patent that John means the law of Christ – he can only mean the law of Christ. He never mentions the law of Moses once in his entire letter. And in the context of 1 John, it is clear that John is telling believers that they have to keep the law that they are under. He is urging them to obey that law, he is commanding them to keep it. I cannot read his words in any other way. As the apostle says elsewhere in his letter:

By this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments. Whoever says, 'I know him', but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected. By this we may know that we are in him: whoever says he abides in him ought to walk in the same way in which he walked (1 John 2:3-6).

Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome (1 John 5:1-3).

He certainly raises his doctrine to the highest possible pitch:

⁷⁶ As before, see my 'All Men Under Law'.

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The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil. No one born of God makes a practice of sinning, for God's seed abides in him, and he cannot keep on sinning because he has been born of God. By this it is evident who are the children of God, and who are the children of the devil: whoever does not practice righteousness is not of God (1 John 3:8-10).

Now, although the phrase is not mentioned, this can only be the law of Christ. No other law will fit the bill. As I hinted, John had remembered Christ's discourse in John 12:47-50; 13:1 – 16:33 (brought in any case to his memory by the Holy Spirit in accordance with Christ's promises – John 14:26; 16:12-15). Christ's commands, his law, are synonymous in this context, and obedience to the law of Christ (the commands of Scripture) is proof positive of the inward work of the Spirit. To claim to be led by the Spirit and yet not obey Scripture is a contradiction in terms.

In short, although the believer is not under the law of Moses, he is not law-less; he is under the law of Christ. And he is obligated to keep it. The believer really is free – in particular, set free from sin (Rom. 6:22), and free from the law of Moses (Gal. 5:1). But liberty is not licence. There is a rule for believers to live by. They are 'under law towards Christ', that 'perfect law of liberty'. They are ruled by 'the law of Christ', following 'this rule', 'walk[ing] by the same rule', having taken Christ's 'easy yoke', being taught by the Spirit 'to observe all things' which Christ commanded (Matt. 11:28-30; 28:20; 1 Cor. 9:21; Gal. 6:2,16; Phil. 3:16; Jas. 1:25; 2:12). Obedience to that law is essential.

If we cite the entire context of 1 John 3:4, the position could not be more explicit:

You have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge. I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and because no lie is of the truth... I write these things to you about those who are trying to deceive you. But the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie – just as it has taught you, abide in him... See

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what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are... Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure. Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness (1 John 2:20-27; 3:1-4).⁷⁷

The law of Christ, once again, virtually in a nutshell! In short, the believer *is* under the law of Christ, and this comprises the inward work of the Spirit *and* the external, written Scriptures.

And this passage is not unique. Consider Paul's letter to Titus. Note his opening emphasis upon his apostolic authority for issuing binding instruction, rule and command for Titus, in the first instance, then, through him, the believers in Crete, and then for all believers through this age:

Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth, which accords with godliness, in hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began and at the proper time manifested in his word through the preaching with which I have been entrusted by the command of God our Saviour (Tit. 1:1-3).

Having laid the foundation, the apostle proceeds to set out detailed instruction. Titus has to appoint elders in every church, every one of whom 'must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it' (Tit. 1:10). Titus himself has to 'teach what accords with sound doctrine' (Tit. 2:1), he has to 'urge' (Tit. 2:6), to 'declare these things; exhort and rebuke with all authority. Let no one disregard you' (Tit. 2:15), 'remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient...' (Tit. 3:1), 'to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote

⁷⁷ The theme continues in 2 and 3 John. Notice how many times John speaks of 'truth'. 'Truth' is inward (2 John 2), but clearly, by his use of 'command', 'walk in obedience to commands', 'teaching of Christ', it is also objective.

themselves to good works' (Tit. 3:8). 'Older women... are to teach what is good, and so train the young women' (Tit. 2:3-4). In short: 'Let our people learn to devote themselves to good works' (Tit. 3:14).

And yet, with all that, the apostle, in the same letter, can declare:

The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works (Tit. 2:11-14).

Once again, we have the combination of the inward work of God's grace, this grace teaching believers from within, coupled with the outward apostolic command which has to be enforced by local elders in the *ekklēsia*, with believers mutually instructing and edifying one another, all the while taking responsibility for their own personal obedience, and all of it set out in the compass of the Scriptures.

Conclusion

Nothing that I have said in this article should be taken as casting any personal reflection on the integrity or practice of those who hold the view I have been trying to refute. I say this, not for the men in question – they know me too well to suspect any such thing – but for those who are observing this, as it were, from a distance. It is their exegesis, not the men themselves, that I have criticised. For the reasons I have given, I say their exegesis is faulty. Naturally, bad exegesis leads to a wrong conclusion. And a wrong conclusion inevitably leads to serious consequences. And, in this case, the consequences, I fear, are severe indeed. I have been conscience-driven to speak about what I see as the tendency, the appearance, the seeming-ness of their view, and where, if not checked, it might lead in the years to come. I wish I

had not needed to write this article. Yet I have felt compelled to do it.

I am thinking of the rising generations – yes, plural – and about the effect, the likely effect, as I see it, of these views on them. It is not merely what is said (or, often more important, what is not said), but the big picture, the overall impression. How is this novel teaching likely to be heard and used by those not sufficiently sophisticated to grasp all its technical nuances? And I include myself in saying that; this new view is too subtle for me, I am afraid.⁷⁸ My main concern is that those who, in years to come, not grasping – or not bothering with – all the nuances, will eagerly latch onto the notion of ‘no law’, ‘no rule’, ‘no commandment’ in the law of Christ, and run with it. And run where?

Consequently, while we preach our liberty in Christ, while we stress the inward power of the Spirit, let us not forget to stress our obligation and responsibility to obey our Master, and our accountability to him for every thought, word and deed (Matt. 12:36-37; Rom. 2:16; 14:10; 2 Cor. 5:10, and so on). Let us make sure we give due weight to such warning passages as Hebrews 2:1-3; 6:4-12; 10:19-39. Let us not forget Christ’s solemn words of warning (John 15:1-8) lying, as they do, right at the heart of his extended discourse in John 12:47-50; 13:1 – 16:33. Let us not forget that the majority (if not all) the warnings given by Christ, in his lifetime, were to professing believers. This is a vital part of the big picture of the New Testament. Unless we are crystal-clear in what we say on such issues, there is a real danger of unbridled talk of liberty degenerating into licence. Similarly, an excessive unbalanced emphasis on the inevitability of the Spirit’s inward work in the believer might well lead to antinomianism or the

⁷⁸ As one example of the sort of thing I mean, take the very recent article, ‘The Law of Christ’ (christmycovenant.com), by John Dunn. He opens: ‘Whatever may be said about the law of Christ, it must be acknowledged that it does not mean that the saints are now under the tutelage/enslavement of a new body of covenanted legal regulations sprinkled with blood, as was the old-covenant community, with blessings/cursing contingent upon their conditional obedience’.

notion of perfectionism.⁷⁹ These disgraceful aberrations have occurred, even in apostolic days. We should fear Jude 4 worse than the plague: ‘For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation, ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ’.

Since the view I have been addressing has, to me at least, all the appearance of driving a wedge between the Spirit and the word in the law of Christ, I have spoken of the centrality and necessity of Scripture to the law of Christ. But just because I have stressed the written word, this must not be taken as an indication of any weakening of my commitment to the inward work of the Spirit. It is not the Spirit *or* the word; it is both at one and the same time. But in this article I have had to stress the place of Scripture.

Then again, the law of Christ, I am convinced, speaks of who Christ is, of what Christ approves. But how can we know what that is? By the Spirit directly, or by the Spirit through the written word? Surely we only know Christ, who he is, and what he approves, by what he has established through his apostles by the Spirit in the Scriptures. Consequently, we dare not suggest anything which might even hint at a divorce between Christ and the written word. On the contrary, we must jealously guard, at all costs, the indissoluble link between the two, right at the heart of the new-covenant law of Christ.

I also want to lay emphasis on the fact that the believer’s obedience to the commands of Scripture takes the form of a duty, an obligation, a definite act of intention, will and obedience on the believer’s part. True, this obedience is only possible by the power of the Spirit, but the believer does not live a life of obedience to Scripture as some sort of reflex or subconscious response to the Spirit. The believer’s progressive sanctification is not monergistic.⁸⁰ This does not in any way imply walking in the

⁷⁹ Will it end up with the Orwellian “‘Law” bad; “Spirit” good’ and so encourage believers to adopt Situation Ethics?

⁸⁰ Monergistic sanctification states that the believer’s progressive sanctification is the work of God through the Holy Spirit alone, as

power of the flesh. I am talking precisely in the terms which the apostle himself uses:

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

I know the advocates of the view I am criticising will protest that they do emphasise obedience to written Scripture. I fully acknowledge the fact. But this is so vital a matter, I must stress my concern yet again. It is the *tendency* of words which is so important here. We all know that it is not what people are told or read; it is what they think they are hearing or reading. True, in the end, the responsibility lies with the hearer and reader, but the publisher, the writer or the preacher has to do all he can to make sure his hearers and readers do not get the wrong end of the stick. I take my own medicine, I hasten to add.

But I go further; there is no smoke without fire. Whatever their protests, these writers do give the very definite impression, at least to me, that they are driving a wedge between the internal Spirit and the external word. Unless they are prepared to use words such as ‘command’ and ‘law’ and ‘rule’ when talking about the law of Christ, despite their protests to the contrary, they are giving the impression, to put it no stronger, that they regard such conformity as a tack on, an ‘alongside’, and not something absolutely integral to the law of Christ.⁸¹

opposed to synergistic sanctification, which argues that the human will cooperates with the Spirit.

⁸¹ In correspondence with one who disagrees with me on this issue, this is what he wrote: ‘All of Scripture serves to teach us and to provide guidance and instruction on what living as those who are united to Christ is supposed to look like because we are yet imperfect. This does not mean we must not obey what Christ commands us. But our drive to obey comes from within’. I agree – *except* – I would strengthen it by bringing in the sense of obedience under the law of Christ. After all, however occasional the phrase may be in Scripture, ‘the law of Christ’ is a scriptural phrase! So I would re-word my correspondent’s statement: ‘All of Scripture serves to teach us and to provide guidance and

I also think that they, while rightly emphasising the discontinuity of the covenants, are failing to stress sufficiently the continuity of Scripture. The contrast that is drawn in the New Testament between the letter and the Spirit is primarily eschatological. Whereas the law of Moses was written on stone, the law of Christ is written on the heart. Yes, but the Scriptures remain a constant throughout. How often Christ quoted them to the Jews who also would have seen no gap between them and the stone tablets. In the new covenant, we must not divorce the inward work of the Spirit from the external written Scriptures.

Yet again, I think I can hear the howls of disbelief and protest. Yes, I grant that they do speak of the necessity of obedience to Scripture, but, as I keep saying, I am thinking of the tendency down the line. And that, I am afraid, compels me to say that their doctrine is dangerous; dangerous because it flows from a wrong exegesis.

In what follows, I am not, I hasten to add, trying to taint anybody by association. Perish the thought! But there is nothing new under the sun. In writing this article, I have been reminded of the Anabaptist controversy between the mainstream and the Spiritualists, who stressed the inward Spirit to the detriment of the external word.

And not only the Anabaptists. I feel I have been engaging in something like a re-run of the antinomian controversy in the UK in the 1640s,⁸² during which, in 1647, Thomas Collier published the second edition of his *The Exaltation of Christ in the Days of the Gospel*. He dealt with those who argued that since ‘Christ has promised to write his laws in the hearts of his people, and that they shall be all taught of God, and that he would send his Spirit which would teach them all things, [then] for those thus taught of God, it is too legal for them to walk by Scripture’. Collier replied.

instruction (***and governance and rule as an integral part of Christ’s law***) on what living as those who are united to Christ is supposed to look like because we are yet imperfect. This does not mean we must not obey what Christ commands us. But our drive to obey comes from within’. *This is no splitting of hairs!*

⁸² I am speaking historically here when I talk about the antinomian controversy.

He agreed ‘that God makes this promise good, [and] he writes his law in the heart where he once comes in a way of grace’. Yes, but it was his opponents’ conclusion that he did not like. So he wrote against it: ‘God... puts his Spirit in [his people], makes them fully willing to walk according to the rule of Scripture, for the Spirit and the word do answer [correspond with] each other’. Collier talked much of ‘the rules of Christ... the rule of Scripture... this rule... the rules of Scripture... Those whom Christ teaches, he teaches to walk according to the rules that he prescribes [for] them’. Collier went on to say that such men as he was writing against can fail to ‘rightly divide between law and gospel, between legal rules and gospel rules... the rules of Christ’, and between the two covenants.⁸³ I fear I am reading something very like this today. And that is why I have written.

And then there is the old Keswick concept of sanctification: ‘Let go, and let God’. Once again, while my opponents might well protest that, since they state that Scripture must be obeyed, there should be no danger of such an aberration, alas, I am not so sanguine.

In summary, then, as I have shown, the view that I have been contesting leans on translations which, on more than one occasion, and on key texts, go against the mainstream translators. Those who are minded to adopt this new view should, at the very least, be aware of the fact. If I adopted a minority translation, a translation adopted by no major translation, I would be prepared to do so, prepared to take the full consequences of my action, *but I would give a very serious health warning to all who might follow me*. I also repeat that the view in question stems from faulty exegesis, and leads to a conclusion that is strikingly at variance with the overall impression given to us when we look at the big picture of Scripture.

I hope nobody thinks me too big for my boots when I say that I have written out of love for my brothers with whom I disagree. I have also written out of love for the watching, wondering and bewildered saints, both in the New Covenant Grace group and the

⁸³ Collier pp88,91-93. I am grateful to Chris Hanna for giving me a pdf of Collier’s book, and drawing my attention to the relevant section.

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wider public. Furthermore, I have written out of love for sinners, unbelievers. But above all, I have written out of love for Christ and his truth. I believe I can say all this with a sincere heart. Please forgive the inordinate length of this article. It is the seriousness of the matter that has moved me to make my position as clear as I can.

Finally, I close with David's words, nuanced, of course, by the new covenant:

Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day. Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies, for it is ever with me. I have more understanding than all my teachers, for your testimonies are my meditation. I understand more than the aged, for I keep your precepts. I hold back my feet from every evil way, in order to keep your word. I do not turn aside from your rules, for you have taught me. How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth! Through your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way (Ps. 119:97-104).⁸⁴

Nothing would please me more than the thought that all of us who advance new-covenant theology could join our hands, our hearts and our voices, and echo David's words, and do it with as much vehemence as we extol our liberty in Christ by the inward working of his Spirit. I pray that my article may further this end. I have written for it. I have certainly *not* written to stoke the fire of controversy which is already burning too fiercely.

⁸⁴ See my *Psalm 119*.

John Berridge On Progressive Sanctification

John Berridge (1716-1793) was, as Nigel R. Pibworth put it, an ‘individual’, one who demonstrated ‘a singular spirituality’.¹ One-time Senior Fellow at Clare College, Cambridge, in 1755 Berridge was installed as the Anglican incumbent in the village of Everton on the borders of Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Huntingdonshire. Even so, he was, as yet, unconverted. At that time, he held to – and preached – salvation by works and the acceptance of orthodox theology. Towards the end of 1757, however, he was converted. Let his epitaph, which he himself prepared, tell the story – as it does to this day in the churchyard at Everton, where it speaks to all who will read and heed it:

Reader art thou born again?
No salvation without a new birth.
I was born in sin Feb. 1716
Remained ignorant of my fallen state till 1730
Lived proudly on faith & works for salvation till 1754
Admitted to Everton vicarage 1755
Fled to Jesus alone for refuge 1756²
Fell asleep in Christ Jan. 22nd 1793.

Berridge, now converted, was soon branded as a Methodist. I do not mean in the denominational sense; I am using the term as in the mid 18th century, as it applied to Berridge and his fellow-Methodists at the time – men such as George Whitefield, the Wesley brothers, William Grimshaw, John Fletcher and the like.³

¹ See Nigel R. Pibworth: *The Gospel Pedlar: The Story of John Berridge and the Eighteenth-Century Revival*, Evangelical Press, Welwyn, 1987; *The Letters of John Berridge of Everton: A Singular Spirituality*, Joshua Press, Kitchener, 2015. For this article, I have lightly edited my *Bread From Berridge's Bakery* pp 55-72.

² This date is wrong. It should be 1757. See Pibworth: *Letters* p21.

³ ‘Methodist preachers were notorious for their enthusiastic sermons and often accused of fanaticism. In those days, many members of England’s Established Church feared that... doctrines promulgated by the

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In his enthusiasm for preaching the gospel, Berridge refused to be confined to his own pulpit. Breaking the rules of the State Church, he itinerated widely in his local counties, preaching in the open air, in barns, in kitchens and the like. He also supported other preachers – financially, sacrificially – in furthering this spread of the gospel. As a result, in time, independent churches, Nonconformist churches, sprang up as a direct consequence of these labours.

But Berridge was not only at home when preaching to the labouring classes in the villages. Selina Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon, recognised his talents, and made extensive use of him, not least to preach the gospel among the upper classes and the fashionable in London and Bath. Berridge would also spend the winter months (when the unmade roads were unfit for his itinerating travels) preaching in the capital, taking Whitefield's place when he was unwell or away preaching.

Berridge, it goes without saying, met with fierce opposition for all this. Just one example must suffice. John Green, Master of Corpus Christi, and Dean of Lincoln, attacked Berridge on the grounds that:

1. Berridge relied on the supernatural; his work was 'unreasonable'.
2. His preaching of free grace and election was welcomed by the poor because it gave them inflated notions of their interest in heaven.
3. Berridge preached justification by faith alone.
4. His 'easier' gospel encouraged antinomianism.

Methodists – such as the necessity of a new birth for salvation, of justification by faith, and of the constant and sustained action of the Holy Spirit upon the believer's soul – would produce ill effects upon weak minds'. 'During the 18th century... Methodists... were accused of blind enthusiasm, a charge against which they defended themselves by distinguishing fanaticism from "religion of the heart". Such "enthusiasts" looked for the demonstration of the Spirit in power'. Remember, 'the word "enthusiast" was originally used to refer to a person possessed by a god' (Wikipedia). Do not miss the idea of 'possession': 'a man possessed'.

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I leave Berridge's fascinating story there, but I heartily recommend Pibworth's books. In his latest volume, he has done the evangelical world an immense service by his prolonged labours in collecting, thoroughly editing, annotating and publishing his subject's letters. Of course, Berridge's language is quaint, and his humour dry. But as Pibworth's chosen title puts it, in reading the letters we are brought face to face with 'a singular spirituality'. I personally have been challenged, rebuked and encouraged by reading Berridge's letters.

And that is why I want to introduce the man to a wider audience. On reading the letters, I have come across gems on a variety of topics. Berridge's valuable observations, I am convinced, should be more widely known. He has a great deal to say to us today, and say on vital aspects of the spiritual life; in particular, in this article, 'progressive sanctification'.

Having published works on progressive sanctification, and seeing it is such a hot potato, I was delighted to see how Berridge dealt with this vital topic. Before I quote him, I need to point out that when Berridge speaks of 'sanctification', he is referring to that aspect of sanctification commonly known as 'progressive sanctification' – the believer's growth in grace and Christ-likeness. Furthermore, when he rightly links this progressive sanctification with the believer's justification, I would extend this to the believer's positional sanctification in Christ at the point of faith.

I begin by looking, not at Berridge's letters, but his books.

When dealing with the issue of progressive sanctification, Berridge started with the futility of cobbling together the two covenants – that is, the old and the new⁴ – and arguing that while the believer is not justified by the law of Moses, even so he is under that law (or, the ten commandments, the so-called 'moral law') which acts like a whip to drive him to progressive

⁴ The Reformed mistakenly argue for the oneness of these two covenants.

sanctification. This is frequently claimed, and it is quite wrong.⁵ And Berridge said so – in his own striking way:

This [new] covenant is too glorious for nature to behold; she shrinks from the dazzling sight, fears woeful consequences from it, and, trembling for morality, beseeches the vicar to marry Moses unto Jesus, and couple the two covenants. From this adulterous alliance springs the spurious covenant of faith and works, with a spruce new set of duties, half a yard long, called legally evangelical, or evangelically legal, unknown to Christ and his apostles, but discovered lately by some ingenious gentlemen.⁶ However, Jesus does not thank [the] old [heart]⁷ for her fears. He has promised in his covenant to provide a new heart, and good feet, as well as justification and pardon; and what he promises he will perform. Jesus does not want [need] the staff of Moses; nor will the master of the house suffer [tolerate] an alliance with his servant... Now the blessings of this [new] covenant were all purchased by Jesus, and are lodged in his hand to dispose of – free pardons to bless a guilty sinner, free grace to sanctify his [heart],⁸ with full power to lead him safe to Canaan... For a century past the noble building of God's grace has been shored up with legal buttresses: Moses is called in hastily to underprop his master, Jesus.

Berridge asked what the effect of this is. Does preaching the law of Moses or man-made rule produce godliness? It does not! As Paul told the Colossians:

You, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by cancelling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands [that is, the law – DG]. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him.

⁵ See my *Christ*.

⁶ John Calvin and his followers, especially the Puritans, all depending on Thomas Aquinas. It is still going on to this very day.

⁷ Berridge had 'nature'. I do not agree with 'two nature' teaching. Berridge was speaking of the unregenerate man, the unregenerate heart, the disposition, attitude, mind and will of the carnal man.

⁸ See the previous note.

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That is what Christ has accomplished and what every believer profits from in Christ. Now for the relevant consequence:

Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a Sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ... If [since] with Christ you died to the elemental spirits of the world, why, as if you were still alive in the world, do you submit to regulations: ‘Do not handle, Do not taste, Do not touch’ (referring to things that all perish as they are used) – according to human precepts and teachings? These have indeed an appearance of wisdom in promoting self-made religion and asceticism and severity to the body, but they are of no value in stopping the indulgence of the flesh (Col. 2:13-23).⁹

There is only one way for the believer to reach the essential end of progressive sanctification. Berridge set out what he saw as the right way:

Everyone who is born of God is made to hunger for implanted holiness, as well as thirst for imputed righteousness. They want a *meetness* for glory, as well as *title* to it, and they know they could not bear to live with God, unless renewed in his image. Heaven would not suit them without holiness, nor could they see the face of God without it.

I think – think – Berridge was saying that while the believer has Christ’s imputed righteousness, he now longs to be holy in his life and experience. Excellent. Nevertheless, the way he expressed himself is confused. The believer is not seeking imputed righteousness, thirsting for imputed righteousness; he already has Christ’s righteousness imputed to him by reason of his union with Christ which brings him immediate and full justification and positional sanctification. Incidentally, no unbeliever is seeking imputed righteousness.¹⁰

But now Berridge got it spot-on, and was clarity itself:

Where imputed righteousness is... received by the Spirit’s application, it produces love to Jesus, tender love with gratitude.

⁹ None of this obviates the fact that the believer is under the law of Christ, which includes Scripture. See my *Believers*.

¹⁰ See the chapter: ‘To an Enquirer’ in my *Bread*.

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And this divine love not only makes us willing to obey him, but makes us like him; for God is love. Christian holiness springing from the application of imputed righteousness is a glorious work indeed, far exceeding moral decency, its thin shadow and its dusky image. It is true devotedness of heart to God, a seeking of his glory, walking in his fear¹¹ and love, rejoicing in him as a reconciled Father, and [being] delighted with his service as the only freedom. Full provision is made for this holiness in the new covenant, and Jesus the noble King of Israel bestows it upon his subjects.¹²

First class! And it exactly squares with the way Paul immediately follows the negative with the positive in his letter to the Colossians. Having got rid of the negative – attempted progressive sanctification by obedience to human regulation, to mere external rules – the apostle then moves to the positive:

If [since] then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory. Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. On account of these the wrath of God is coming. In these you too once walked, when you were living in them. But now you must put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all (Col. 3:1-11).

¹¹ There is a wrong ‘fear’ – as produced by Calvin’s whip, for instance. There is a right ‘fear of God’, associated, as here, with ‘love’. The two ‘fears’ are the proverbial chalk and cheese.

¹² John Berridge: *The Christian World Unmasked: Pray Come and Peep*, in *The Works of... John Berridge...*, edited by... Richard Whittingham, Old Paths Gospel Press, Choteau, pp291-292,295-296,337-338, emphasis his.

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In other words, the believer, by the Spirit, has a duty to obey the law of Christ in Scripture, all the while looking to Christ. And so on to the end of the letter. This is the apostolic way of progressive sanctification.

And not only that. One of the glorious provisions of the new covenant is that Christ not only bestows his Spirit on every believer to indwell him, but the indwelling Spirit rules and moves the saint to love apostolic teaching and obey apostolic commands, and thus be progressively sanctified (Rom. 6:14-23; 7:4-6; 8:1-4, for instance). To use the technical terms, progressive sanctification is not monergistic but synergistic. Monergistic sanctification states that the believer's progressive sanctification is the work of God through the Holy Spirit alone, as opposed to synergistic sanctification, which argues that the human will cooperates with the Spirit.¹³ As Paul puts it, addressing the Philippians:

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

Berridge composed a hymn on the glorious theme:

*A sinner's claim to heavenly bliss
Rests on the Lord's own righteousness;
Our legal debts he came to clear,
And make a title full and fair.*

*Yet holiness the heart must grace,
A meetness for his dwelling-place;
No filthy souls in heav'n appear;
They cannot breathe in holy air.*

*The faith that feels the Saviour's blood,
And finds in Christ a title good,
Rebellious lusts will conquer too,
And build the soul divinely new.*

¹³ See below and my *Believers*.

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*And where no work of grace is wrought,
Nor holiness with hunger sought,
Such barren souls for all their boast,
Are sinners dead, and sinners lost.*

*May Jesus' grace to me convey
Much pow'r to watch, and will to pray,
Much seeking of the things above,
Much store of faith, and fruits of love.*

*More broken-hearted let me be,
And more devoted unto thee;
More sweet communion with thee find,
And more of all thy heavenly mind.¹⁴*

And another:

*The sinner's Friend a Surety stands,
Pays legal debts with his own hands,
And pays them all for me;
He perfect lives, and painful dies,
And law and justice satisfies,
Not for himself, but me.¹⁵*

*By Christ's obedience fully paid,
A soul in law is righteous made;
For what can justice say?
When every debt is well discharg'd,
The debtor sure must be enlarg'd,
And sing and march away.*

*Yet also Jesus, by his grace,
Gives meetness for his dwelling place,
And sanctifies the heart;
His peace creates the tempers¹⁶ kind;
And love, to all good works inclin'd,
Fills up the Christian part.*

¹⁴ See my *Hymns* number 44, taken from John Berridge: *Sion's Songs or Hymns*, in *The Works of... John Berridge...*, edited by... Richard Whittingham, Old Paths Gospel Press, Choteau.

¹⁵ Berridge had 'but thee'.

¹⁶ 'Temper', as in disposition, attitude, frame of mind.

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*Then let my Lord impute to me
His own obedience full and free,
As title to his bliss;
And let his Spirit too implant
All Christian graces that we want,
As pledge of happiness.¹⁷*

As Berridge said elsewhere:

For Christ comes not with pardon alone... but he brings also a spirit of life and power.¹⁸

Berridge, of course, understood the need for the written word alongside the inner witness of the Spirit:

The apostles also give many rules to direct the walk of faith, and often couple faith with love or obedience.¹⁹

So they do! In other words, as I explained above, progressive sanctification is synergistic. The believer has the responsibility, duty and privilege of obeying God's word, and the Spirit moves him to love this obedience, and gives him the grace to produce it.²⁰

Two more of Berridge's hymns on progressive sanctification:

*Does conscience lay a guilty charge,
And Moses much condemn,
And bring in bills exceeding large?
Let Jesus answer them.*

¹⁷ My *Hymns* number 45; Berridge: *Sion's Songs*.

¹⁸ John Berridge: *Observations on Passages of Scripture*, in *The Works of... John Berridge...*, edited by... Richard Whittingham, Old Paths Gospel Press, Choteau, p161.

¹⁹ Berridge: *Unmasked* p307. Oddly, in light of the above, Berridge still thought 'Jesus Christ explained the moral law... for a rule of life to believers... It becomes a rule of life in the Mediator's hand', and he was using 'the moral law' in the usual Reformed sense (Berridge: *Unmasked* pp306,336-337). See also John Berridge: *Outlines of Sermons*, in *The Works of... John Berridge...*, edited by... Richard Whittingham, Old Paths Gospel Press, Choteau, pp134-135; *Observations* p182.

²⁰ See my *Believers*.

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*He paid thy ransom with his hand,
And every score²¹ did quit;
And Moses never can demand
Two payments of one debt.*

*Now justice smiles on mercy sweet,
And looks well reconciled,
Joined hand in hand they go to meet
And kiss a weeping child.*

*But ask the Lord for his receipt,
To show the payment good,
Delivered²² from the mercy seat,
And sprinkled with his blood.*

*The law will not thy feet enlarge,
Nor give thy conscience rest,
'Til thou canst find a full discharge
Locked up within thy breast.*

*The sight of this will melt thine heart,
And make thy eyes run o'er;
A happy pardoned child thou art,
And heaven is at thy door.²³*

And another:

*The law demands a weighty debt,
And not a single mite will bate:
But gospel sings of Jesus' blood,
And says it made the payment good.*

*The law provokes men oft to ill,
And churlish hearts makes harder still;
But gospel acts a kindly part,
And melts a most obdurate heart.*

*Run, run,²⁴ and work, the law commands,
Yet finds me neither feet nor hands;
But sweeter news the gospel brings;
It bids me fly, and lends me wings.*

²¹ That is, 'charge'.

²² That is, 'handed down'.

²³ See my *Hymns* number 58; Berridge: *Sion's Songs*.

²⁴ Berridge had 'Run, John,'.

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*Such needful wings, O Lord, impart,
To brace my feet and brace my heart;
Good wings of faith and wings of love
Will make a cripple sprightly move.*

*With these a lumpish soul may fly,
And soar aloft, and reach the sky;
Nor faint nor falter in the race,
But cheerly work, and sing of grace.²⁵*

I now turn to the letter Berridge wrote to John Thornton on August 18th 1773. In the course of his letter, Berridge addressed the subject of progressive sanctification. He opened the subject thus:

I trust the Lord has taught me to hate sin, and to hunger after righteousness, yet I am often seeking after holiness in such a manner as stiffens my heart, brings a dry and lean soul, and makes my eyes lose the sight of Christ's salvation. This convinces me there is a mystery in the manner of obtaining [progressive] sanctification that we are not soon acquainted with. We are apt to consider [progressive] sanctification as a separate work from justification, following after it, and wholly independent of it, whereas they seem to be connected works, and inseparable from each other, one resulting from the other.

I pause. Berridge was clearly speaking from his heart and experience – not only during his unregenerate days, but even now that he was converted. Furthermore, he was speaking scripturally, hitting the nail right on its head:

The clearer sight we get of Christ, and the sweeter views we have of our adoption, the more our hearts are filled with love, joy, peace, and all the fruits of the Spirit, which is [progressive] sanctification. When Jesus gives a clearer view of his dying love, he always accompanies that view with the graces of the Spirit. The heart is filled at the same time with pardon and holiness, with justification and sanctification, so that if we desire to be holy, we must seek to be happy in the Saviour's love, must seek a clear evidence of our adoption,²⁶ and labour to keep it

²⁵ My *Hymns* number 59.

²⁶ In the context, I interpret this to mean that we should cultivate the sense of our adoption in Christ. This is right.

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clear. As our views of Christ are more cloudy and discouraging, our bosoms will be more barren of heavenly [influences or feelings].

Berridge then dealt with a common mistake. Many confuse natural ('constitutional' was his word) 'pleasant' characteristics with progressive sanctification. Not so, said Berridge:

A man may be constitutionally meek as the lamb, constitutionally kind as the spaniel, constitutionally cheerful as the lark, and constitutionally modest as the owl, but these are not [progressive] sanctification.

So what, where – who! – is the source of the believer's progressive sanctification? Berridge:

No sweet, humble, heavenly [influences or feelings], no sanctifying graces are found but from the cross. Jesus says: 'He that eats my flesh and drinks my blood has (or possesses) eternal life' [John 6:54]. [Here Jesus] shows how eternal life (which must comprise the whole of spiritual life) is obtained; namely, by eating his flesh and drinking his blood – that is, by feeding on his atonement. Thus all divine life, and all the precious fruits of it – pardon, peace and holiness – spring from the cross... Get holiness by clear views of the cross, and find eternal life by feeding on the Saviour's flesh and blood. Was not a lamb sacrificed every morning and evening in the Jewish temple? And was not this intended to show us that we must feed on Christ's atonement every day, and derive all our life, the life of peace and holiness, from his death?

Berridge then showed his pastoral heart and skill:

Upright people are often coming to me with complaints, and telling me that since they received pardon, and have been seeking after [progressive] sanctification (as a separate work) their hearts are become exceeding dry and barren. I ask them how they find their heart when Jesus shows his dying love. They tell me, full of peace, and love, and every heavenly [influence or feeling]. Then I answer, Jesus hereby shows you that holiness as well as pardon is to be had from the blood of the cross.

Berridge went on:

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Labour therefore to get your conscience sprinkled every day with the atoning blood, and [progressive] sanctification will ensue of course... When Jesus only gives a smile, and seals some promise on the heart, though it be not the seal of pardon, it occasions a sweet transforming change in the soul.

He then issued a warning:

And all fancied [progressive] sanctification, which does not arise wholly from the blood of the cross, is nothing better than Pharisaism, and if persisted in, will end in Pharisaism. For when [progressive] sanctification is considered as a separate work from justification, and wholly independent of it, by and by it is considered as a justifying work itself, and men profess and preach they are first to be justified by the blood of Christ, and then by their own obedience.

As Berridge so rightly said, getting this wrong – taking our eye off Christ alone – will not lead to progressive sanctification, but produces legalism. Berridge himself, of course, in his unregenerate days, had long laboured under such a delusion and preached it for justification. No more! Nor did he preach it for progressive sanctification. As he said, once again clearly speaking from his heart:

Oh... if we would be holy, we must get to the cross, and dwell there; else notwithstanding all our labour and diligence, and fasting and praying, and good works, we shall be yet void of real [progressive] sanctification, destitute of those humble, sweet, and gracious [influences or feelings] which accompany a clear view of the cross.

Berridge had another warning:

But mere doctrinal knowledge will not give us this view; it only proceeds from a lively faith wrought in us by the Prince of life. A legal spirit helps forward our mistake in the matter of [progressive] sanctification. We would fain... separate [progressive] sanctification from justification, that we may make merit of it, as the Foundry people do.²⁷ Whereas, if they are inseparably connected, and both pardon and holiness spring from

²⁷ Berridge was referring to those who met at the Old Foundry, Moorfields, which was the headquarters of John Wesley's work.

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the blood of the cross, the root of merit is dug up thereby, and Christ is all in all.

And that is not all:

Another thing confirms our mistake, which is that all heavenly graces are called fruits of the Spirit. Hence we conclude that pardon must spring peculiarly from the blood of the cross, and holiness be a separate work of the Spirit. But though all gracious [influences or feelings] are the Spirit's fruits, yet that fruit is bestowed at the foot of the cross – eternal life is found at Calvary by eating the Saviour's flesh and drinking his blood.

As he drew to the close of his letter, Berridge expressed his prayerful desire for his reader and family:

May the Lord Jesus bring and keep you and yours at the cross, to see and sing the wonders of redeeming love, till you are called up higher to sing eternal praise with all the saints.²⁸

And may God grant that this shall be the effect of these extracts on all who read them.

Let me quote two hymns to emphasise the excellent point Berridge was making. The first is by Fanny Crosby:

*Jesus, keep me near the cross;
There a precious fountain,
Free to all, a healing stream,
Flows from Calv'ry's mountain.*

Refrain:

*In the cross, in the cross
Be my glory ever,
Till my raptured soul shall find
Rest beyond the river.*

*Near the cross, a trembling soul,
Love and mercy found me;
There the bright and morning Star
Shed His beams around me.*

²⁸ Pibworth: *Letters* pp197-201.

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*Near the cross! O Lamb of God,
Bring its scenes before me;
Help me walk from day to day
With its shadow o'er me.*

*Near the cross I'll watch and wait,
Hoping, trusting ever;
Till I reach the golden strand,
Just beyond the river.*

And the second by Walter Shirley and James Allen:

*Sweet the moments, rich in blessing,
Which before the cross we spend.
Life and health and peace possessing
From the sinner's dying Friend.*

*Here we rest in wonder, viewing
All our sins on Jesus laid;
Here we see redemption flowing
From the sacrifice he made.*

*Here we find the dawn of heaven
While upon the cross we gaze,
See our trespasses forgiven,
And our songs of triumph raise.*

*Oh, that, near the cross abiding,
We may to the Saviour cleave,
Nought with him our hearts dividing,
All for him content to leave!*

*Lord, in loving contemplation
Fix our hearts and eyes on thee
Till we taste thy full salvation
And thine unveiled glory see.*

A few months later, on 14th January 1774, Berridge wrote to John Thornton again, and raised the same subject:

Now, when Jesus opens a sinner's eyes, to behold the multiplied guilt of his ignorance, unrighteous conduct, and unholy heart, and of his lying under a law curse thereby, he quickly flies to the Surety for relief. And when by faith he is enabled to view a finished salvation, and steadfastly to rely upon the Surety, redemption is found; he feels the sprinkled blood, the love of

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God is poured into his heart, which hallows it, making self-denial an easy yoke and obedience a cheerful service.

What a vital truth! Berridge was now speaking of the believer's progressive sanctification, and showing how this is accomplished as he looks to Christ and his grace to him. In other words, not only is the sinner converted by looking to the crucified Christ, but by the same means the converted sinner – now a saint – is progressively sanctified. And, it surely goes without saying, the believer does not keep his eye on Christ as a mere spectator, but as one who has a personal and felt interest in Christ and what he has done for, in and to him. As the apostle declared:

Through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Gal. 2:19-20).

In other words, the believer's progressive sanctification is brought about as he keeps his mind on his positional sanctification and justification in Christ (Col. 3:1-11). And, as Berridge said, this looking to Christ by the believer is not a one-off:

And while believers keep simply looking to a crucified Christ, and the eye of faith is kept open, love and peace flow on sweetly like a river, and the heart becomes more lowly, more childlike, and more devoted unto God. By feeding *only* and daily on the flesh and blood of Christ eternal life springs up in them as a well of water.²⁹

Excellent! As the sinner trusts Christ and his grace, he is saved – justified and positionally sanctified – and as the believer keeps his eye on Christ and his grace, so he is progressively sanctified.

In a letter to John Thornton 17th November 1784, Berridge spoke of the believer's folly – and worse – of attempting to grow in practical holiness without keeping his eye on Christ, for both

²⁹ Pibworth: *Letters* p223, emphasis original.

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motive and power. This letter, too, I have already quoted, but it bears repeating:

When grace enters a bosom, Jesus becomes the darling of the heart, the joy and trust of it, and all obedience without this only nourishes self-righteousness and self-applause, and will end in shame and woeful disappointment... When Christ becomes a sinner's chief joy, self is felt the chief of sinners... This is regeneration, the new heart that makes a child of God; and without this, all convictions of sin and present reformation will come to nothing.³⁰

Excellent!

On 16th April 1777, Berridge wrote a letter to 'a fellow-preacher', in which he packed a handful of gems into a tiny packet:

Has not Christ made full atonement for all believers' sins – past, present and to come? If he has made complete atonement, we may still go [to him?] with a blush – indeed, a confident blush – for pardon, notwithstanding [our] repeated and aggravated provocations. And we shall dishonour Christ, and wrong our own soul, if we go not. But suppose, through unbelief and fear, we dare not venture to go. Can this mend the matter? Will it not rather beget grudgings against God as an austere Master, and stir up enmity against him as a consuming fire?

Berridge then moved to progressive sanctification, and raised an issue which is with us to this very day: to bring the believer to practical holiness, do we preach law, whip and rule, with fear of punishment, or do we preach loving obedience to Christ on the basis of our position in Christ? Many, alas, choose the former. Berridge set out the truth by a series of questions:

Which is most apt to kindle repentance, shame, love and kindly obedience? Is it a dread of invincible wrath, or an assurance of pardon through the riches of divine grace?

Clearly, Berridge knew it was the latter.

He then gave his experience:

³⁰ Pibworth: *Letters* pp335-336.

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This morning I had a sweet view, in the Spirit's light, of believing in Christ for righteousness, not only without – but against – all comfortable feeling, and clearly saw that it was not apt to stifle repentance of sin and harden the conscience, but to melt the heart of a pilgrim, and quicken his feet, and furnish his mouth with praise. And though graceless souls... will convert all meat into poison, yet a gracious heart must be fed with the food of grace notwithstanding.³¹

I spoke of a handful of gems in this letter. Here they are: Berridge's pastoral concern and sound counsel for anxious believers; the way that the preaching of Christ and free grace, and looking to Christ and free grace, produces spirituality; the tendency of the natural man to abuse free grace. May I not accommodate the words of Winston Churchill: 'Rarely can so much have been packed into so few words'.³²

I now turn to an undated letter Berridge wrote to an unnamed man, probably a fellow-preacher of the gospel, in which he put his finger right on the spot: Christ not only justifies, but he sanctifies – both positionally and progressively. Berridge put it in the personal, speaking of himself – but, of course, he was speaking for every believer:

I truly need a physician within as well as without: Christ and his blood and righteousness to justify and acquit, and the blessed Spirit to [progressively] sanctify and cure the inward diseases of my soul. For what would it avail a condemned malefactor to be pardoned and acquitted of his crimes, if he had the jail distemper [fever] upon him [still],³³ and was to die by it? Indeed, God never justifies but he sanctifies [both positionally and progressively – here the latter is Berridge's point]. Election is God's [secret] mark to know his children by. Calling and [progressive] sanctification are our marks, by which we come to know that we ourselves are his elected children.

³¹ Pibworth: *Letters* pp265-266.

³² In a speech on 20th August 1940, speaking of the part played by the fighter pilots in the Battle of Britain, Churchill declared: 'Never in the field of human conflict was so much owed by so many to so few'.

³³ In other words, he was still going on in the same old way, still not cured of his addiction to sin.

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I pause. In part, Berridge got this wrong. The believer's personal assurance stems first from the witness of the Spirit, supported by progressive sanctification; not the other way round. On the other hand, other believers can only know that someone else is elect by observing their progressive sanctification. These two aspects of assurance are distinct, and that distinction must be maintained. Many get this wrong, and suffer much anxiety because of it.³⁴

Berridge went on, advising his fellow-preacher how to address believers with the gospel – yes, how to address *believers* with the gospel:

Oh then set forth the work of the Spirit in a rebellious will, a blind understanding, a hard heart, a stupid conscience and vile affections.

Alas, in saying this, Berridge painted too gloomy a picture. While the believer is far from perfect in himself, to describe him as 'rebellious, blind, hard, stupid and vile' is going too far.³⁵ Nevertheless, as he continued, Berridge was right to speak of his – and every believer's – need of:

...the work of the Spirit... renewing and sanctifying all these powers, and so proving it [that is, professed conversion] to be truly the work of God and not of man. This gospel sanctification I need and earnestly desire.³⁶

But, of course, it's not just that the believer needs the Spirit for all this. Every believer has the Spirit, given to him by Christ at the point of conversion, and given to him for this very purpose.³⁷

I opened this article by saying that progressive sanctification is a hot potato. In my view, Berridge's words need serious consideration by believers today.

³⁴ See my *Assurance*.

³⁵ Contrary to many, Rom. 7:14-25 does not justify it, as I noted earlier.

³⁶ Pibworth: *Letters* p422.

³⁷ See my *Fivefold*; *Positional*.

Christ the Covenant?

Consider this prophecy from Isaiah:

Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his law. Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people on it and spirit to those who walk in it: 'I am the Lord; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. I am the Lord; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols. Behold, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth I tell you of them' (Isa. 42:1-9).

The relevant words are these: 'I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations'. To whom was God speaking? We need be in no doubt. In the New Testament, Isaiah 42 is quoted of Christ:

Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles. He will not quarrel or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets; a bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not quench, until he brings justice to victory; and in his name the Gentiles will hope (Matt. 12:18-21).¹

¹ See also Matt. 3:17; 17:5; Mark 1:11; Luke 4:18-21; 9:35; John 3:34.

Christ the Covenant?

Christ is the covenant. As Isaiah said again in his prophecy: 'I will keep you and give you as a covenant to the people' (Isa. 49:8).²

Christ is the covenant; that is, Christ is the new covenant. In this brief article I want to ask how we should understand this. And there is need, since some new-covenant theologians interpret this prophecy in a way which leads to far-reaching consequences, radical consequences, unbiblical consequences. For reasons which will become apparent, I will call their interpretation 'the mystical view'.³ Before we adopt this view, we must make sure that its interpretation of the prophet is right. In this, as in all things, we need the Berean spirit (Acts 17:11), searching the Scriptures to verify every claim. And that is what I want to do here.⁴

Let Chad R. Bresson make the mystical case. Speaking of the believer, Bresson declared:

All behavioural norms, including those detailed in the decalogue, are ultimately defined by and expressed in the person and work of Jesus Christ.⁵

Very good. As far as it goes. However, although I would not fault a man for a word, notice what Bresson did *not* say. While he spoke of the person and work of Christ, he failed to mention the words, the teaching, the commands of Christ. And this was a very serious omission. Christ was a preacher, a teacher, a prophet. Indeed, Moses made this very point (Deut. 18:15-18). Bresson's omission (if an omission can do such a thing) cast a long shadow. I take note of his 'ultimately': yes, the believer's standard is

² All those I engage with in this article agree with me that this is Christ, not Israel.

³ I could call it 'the personified view' or 'the enfleshment view'. By 'mystical', I do not mean 'mystery'. Of course, the union of the believer with Christ is a mystery, but the mystical here is the real danger of thinking in terms of absorption of the human into the divine.

⁴ Not that I give the full arguments behind what I say. For that, see my works, especially *Christ*; 'Believers Under the Law of Christ'.

⁵ Chad Richard Bresson: 'Christ, Our Covenant: A Brief Survey'.

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‘ultimately’ Christ, but Christ and his commands are inseparable, and both he and they are spelled out in Scripture, and only in Scripture; especially, in accordance with Christ’s promise (John 16:12-15), the post-Pentecost writings, where ‘the person and work [and words] of Jesus Christ’ are fully explained and expounded. *Christ, his person, his work, his words and the Scriptures are inseparable.* The fact that Bresson failed to mention this, let alone stress it, was, as I say, a very serious omission.

To move on: Bresson argued that the ideas of ‘covenant’ and ‘law’ cannot be separated.⁶ Consequently, when speaking of the new covenant, he concluded that to say that ‘Christ is the covenant’ is the same as saying that ‘Christ is the law’ of that covenant. And since we know that in the new covenant God writes his law on the heart (Jer. 31:33), this means that Christ himself is written on the believer’s heart. So, for the believer, according to Bresson, Christ is written on the heart, Christ is the law, Christ is the covenant. Or, rather, the Holy Spirit, the indwelling law of Christ, is the law of Christ. Thus the law of Christ is a person – the Holy Spirit:

The Holy Spirit is the indwelling law of Christ, causing new-covenant members to obey Christ the law in conformity to his image... The Holy Spirit... dwells in believers to guide their steps and conform them to Christ. Just as the old-covenant community was structured by written revelation which centered in Moses, so the new-covenant community is ordered by the ‘law of Christ’ as personified and incarnated in the person of Jesus Christ, applied by the Holy Spirit, and given in the writing of the apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:20). The indwelling Holy Spirit, the law written on the heart, is the norm for Christian living.

I pause. This paragraph is confusing. On the one hand, the law of Christ (that is, the person of Christ) is ‘given in the writing of the apostles and prophets’, and yet, on the other hand, these writings

⁶ Bresson: ‘Christ, Our Covenant: A Brief Survey’. See Zachary S. Maxcey: ‘Picture-Fulfilment New Covenant Theology: A Positive Theological Development?’ I understand that those who formerly used ‘picture-fulfilment’ to describe their position no longer like this terminology.

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are not the believer's norm; that vital role belongs solely to 'the indwelling Holy Spirit, the law written on the heart'. Not only that, Christ himself is the law. So, which of the three is it? According to Bresson, the written revelation has given way to the inward Spirit and Christ, and this, not Scripture, is the believer's norm. We learn of Christ in the Scriptures, yes, but while those Scriptures tell us about Christ (and his law – the two being the same), while they inform us, they are not part of the law of Christ itself; rather, 'the Holy Spirit is the indwelling law of Christ'.

This is a radical statement. Is it right? At the very least, Bresson has switched attention away from the Scriptures, fixing it almost exclusively on the inward work of the Spirit, on the person of the Spirit. While, during the time of the old covenant, the norm for Israel was the written law, for Bresson, now, in the new covenant, the norm for the believer is the inward Spirit. Thus the believer's standard, the norm of Christian living, is subjective, not objective.

'The Holy Spirit is the indwelling law of Christ'. Is this right? True, the Spirit indwells the believer (John 14:17; Rom. 8:11), but where, in Scripture, are we told that the Spirit is the law of Christ? We read of 'the law of the Spirit of life' in contrast with 'the law of sin and death' (Rom. 8:2), certainly, but I know of no place which states (or even hints) that the Spirit himself is the law of Christ, or is the believer's norm. The Spirit regenerates sinners, gives them a new heart, and rules, governs and motivates them to obey Scripture, yes. Believers, no longer being under Mosaic or pagan law,⁷ are under the Spirit's regime, under the law of liberty, the law of Christ, yes, but this does not mean that the Spirit, himself, is the law of Christ.

Then again, while Bresson was right to say that believers are 'ordered by the law of Christ' – I would say '*under* the law of Christ' (1 Cor. 9:20-21)⁸ – where do we read that the Holy Spirit is the law, 'is the norm', for believers? Scriptural obedience producing Christ-likeness (Rom. 8:29), not the Spirit, is the

⁷ Of course it is a part of Christ 's law that the believer is subject to the State's law (Rom. 13:1-7). But we are talking of the spiritual realm.

⁸ See my 'Believers Under the Law'.

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believer's norm. If Bresson had been right, the apostles would never have written Scripture in the form they did – with countless commands, spelling out what is required of believers. The Spirit would be doing the job, working in each believer's heart. The apostles would never have needed to write the way they did.

Again: Did the old-covenant revelation 'centre in Moses'? Moses was the mediator, the agent (Gal. 3:19) who *delivered* the law to Israel, yes, but was the law 'centred' in Moses? Not that I have ever read in Scripture. Is this a big point? Well, in saying this Bresson was effectively preparing the ground for what was to come.

Bresson: 'The law of Christ [is] personified and incarnated in the person of Jesus Christ'. Yes, Christ is the law for the believer – that is, he is the believer's standard, and his work for them is their motive for attaining that standard – but Bresson was going much further than this when he argued that Christ himself is the law, and is so actually, in that he is the law personified. The truth is, Bresson, speaking of the law of Christ, was yet again moving the focus away from Scripture. Indeed, it wasn't long before he was explicit:

Because Christ has obeyed the law on behalf of his people and has become a law for his people, unlike the external Mosaic law, the law of Christ as the Spirit applied to the redeemed is able to effect and enable the obedience and love that is in accord with Christ's obedience and love. For the new-covenant church, the law of God is no longer an external standard that demands compliance with the will of God. The law of Christ as the indwelling Spirit is now an internal person who causes and inclines us to obey God from the heart... Christ is now the objective standard by which all holiness in the Christian life is measured. The progression of history to a final new covenant guarantees the 'law of Christ', as personified and incarnated by Jesus Christ, and applied by the Spirit who is written on the heart, to be sufficient for the church.⁹

⁹ Chad Richard Bresson: 'What Is New Covenant Theology?' Do not miss the gloss. The Spirit is not written on the heart; the law of Christ is (Jer. 31:33).

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Let me deal first with Bresson's use of 'objective'. When he said that 'Christ is... the objective standard by which all holiness in the Christian life is measured', he did not mean that the law of Christ is objective, since he had already stressed that this law is internal, not external. If Bresson *had* argued that the law of Christ is objective, and had worked out that principle, I would not be engaging with him in this article.

Now for the thrust of the extract above: Bresson argued that Christ is the law, and the law of Christ, applied by the Spirit, 'effects' and 'enables' the believer's obedience. And this led on to the crunch: 'For the new-covenant church, the law of God is no longer an external standard that demands compliance with the will of God. The law of Christ... as personified and incarnated by Jesus Christ, and applied by the Spirit who is written on the heart, [is] sufficient for the church'. In other words, the law of Christ is Christ himself, and this law is entirely inward, and it is this inward law, not Scripture, that is the believer's standard.

These are far-reaching claims which carry large consequences. I agree with Bresson – the law of Moses is not the believer's rule, while the law of Christ certainly is – but, contrary to Bresson, the law of Christ, the law of God for the believer, is found in Scripture as well as being written on the believer's heart. The objective nature of the law of Christ must be maintained.

We must be clear about where we have reached. There can be no doubt that Bresson's mystical approach seriously threatens the authority of Scripture by removing it from the law of Christ, having made the law of Christ entirely inward and subjective. Do not miss 'the law of God is no longer an external standard that demands compliance with the will of God. The law of Christ as the indwelling Spirit is now an internal person who causes and inclines us to obey God from the heart'. As we saw earlier, according to Bresson, 'the Holy Spirit is the indwelling law of Christ, causing new-covenant members to obey Christ the law in conformity to his image... The Holy Spirit... dwells in believers to guide their steps and conform them to Christ'. Little wonder, then, if this teaching gains ground, believers will no longer regard themselves as being under any obligation to obey Scripture, no longer having to make any effort to obey Scripture; rather, they

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will reason that the inward Christ and his Spirit is all they need, and all they are accountable to – if, indeed, ‘accountable’ is still on the agenda.¹⁰ They will look upon Scripture as a source of information, certainly, but Scripture will not be the objective authority which reveals the required norm or standard for their obedience.

Moreover, it is important not to miss Bresson’s passive emphasis in all this. The inwards law ‘effects’ and ‘enables’, ‘causes’ and ‘inclines’ the believer’s obedience. As Bresson went on to say:

Christ is ‘the LAW we need to obey’ since he (and no longer the decalogue), in and of himself, is the standard by which all holiness is measured. The stone tablets have been exchanged for a person, a person who has fulfilled and now incarnates the tablets. Not only has he imputed that work to those who could never obey the law and were under its condemnation, in that imputation he has placed a new law on the heart, the Spirit, to conform us to the incarnation of the tablets.

I thoroughly endorse Bresson’s point that the law of Christ is not the decalogue. But, bearing in mind what I have already set out from his works, when I read Bresson saying that the Spirit is the law of Christ, and the Spirit, written on the heart, conforms the believer to Christ, I, at least, am left with the unmistakable impression that the believer’s submission to Scripture as part of the law of Christ has gone. Let me underline the passivity here. While I unreservedly agree that the Spirit ‘causes and inclines’ believers ‘to obey’ and ‘conform’ them to Christ, Bresson’s lack of emphasis on the believer’s responsibility to obey Scripture, coupled with his (to put it mildly) lack of emphasis on the believer’s accountability to God for failure to obey, is highly charged, to say the least.

Bresson proceeded to drive home his point:

The transfiguration... cannot be understated in consideration of Christ as the law incarnate. We do not simply obey Christ

¹⁰ See below.

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because he is the lawgiver, though he is surely that.¹¹ When that voice that shakes the foundations of the heavenly temple booms out: ‘This is my beloved Son, listen to him’, it’s not merely in the context of Moses. The gloriously transfigured Messiah descends that mount not merely as the new Moses, the ultimate lawgiver, but as the new law... Unlike Deuteronomy 33, the new Moses descends the Sinai of transfiguration empty handed. Why? Because the former code has been incarnated in a person... He also descends empty handed because there is no new code to deliver. The entire paradigm for obedience has been flipped on its head.

I pause again. Of course, Christ came down from the mount of transfiguration ‘empty handed’. Unlike Moses, Christ did not ascend the mountain to receive the law, the revelation from God. He had come from heaven bringing that revelation. Indeed, he himself is the revelation, the word (John 1:1-2,14). Do not miss Christ’s repeated references to ‘my commandments’, ‘my words’, ‘my teaching’ and the like (John 12:47; 13:34; 14:15,21,23, for instance). Whereas Moses was the messenger, and only the messenger of his covenant, Christ is the message as well as the messenger of the new covenant (John 1:17; see also Heb. 3:1-6).

But, according to Bresson, the believer is under no external ‘code’: ‘The former code has been incarnated in a person [that is, Christ]’ who has ‘no new code to deliver’. Indeed, ‘the entire paradigm for obedience has been flipped on its head’, which means, I suppose, that unlike Israel in the old covenant, believers have no written law to obey. But this is wrong. Christ delivered no new code to his disciples? What about Matthew 5 – 7 and John 12:47-50; 13:1 – 16:33, for a start? I have just mentioned Christ’s repeated ‘my commandments’. Now where do we discover these discourses, these commandments, this revelation? In our hearts? Or in Scripture? Are we ruled by the subjective or the objective? by feelings or revealed facts?

As for the mountain comparison, we read of Jesus going up ‘on the mountain’ – not the mount of transfiguration – where ‘he opened his mouth and taught’ (Matt. 5:1-2); he taught his law, he

¹¹ This is right. Christ is the lawgiver. But Bresson was not conceding that the Scriptures are integral to Christ’s law.

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did not receive it. And on the mountain of transfiguration, God, from the cloud, declared: ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him’ (Matt. 17:5), saying it in the presence of Elijah and Moses (representing the prophets and the law). No wonder then that after the cloud had melted away, ‘they saw no one but Jesus only’ (Matt. 17:8). On both occasions, on both mountains, Jesus the lawgiver is manifest. And since believers have to listen to Christ, obey Christ, where can they hear his word today?

Moreover, Bresson displayed a fundamental misunderstanding over this matter of ‘the code’. Paul is explicit: The believer does not serve ‘in the old way of the written code [or the letter]’. He writes:

My brothers, you... have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God. For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code [or the letter] (Rom. 7:4-6).

God... has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses’ face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory (2 Cor. 3:5-11).

Now what does the apostle mean when he speaks of ‘the code’? From the *context* of these passages (Romans 6:1 – 7:6; 2 Corinthians 3:5 – 4:6), it is clear that when Paul talks of ‘the code’ or ‘letter’ he is referring to the age of the old covenant, the time when unregenerate Israel was under an external law, written

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in stone and in the book of the law. The believer does not belong to that old age. Just as Paul, speaking of himself and all believers, could say that God 'has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son' (Col. 1:13), so it is true that God has transferred believers from the old age to the new. And as stark and real as the contrast is between darkness and light, so is the tremendous contrast between the two ages.

We must be clear about this contrast. It is vital. In the old covenant, the law of that covenant was entirely external, written on stone and in the book of the law; in the new covenant, the law of that covenant is internal, written on the heart (Jer. 31:33), as well as written in Scripture. This is one contrast. But there is further, though intimately connected, contrast. The old covenant was with unregenerate Israel, whereas in the new covenant, every believer, is of necessity, regenerate; that is, every believer has a new heart, a new mind, a new spirit, a new will (Ezek. 36:25-27). And it is this newness of the heart, the inward aspect of the law of Christ, which constitutes the great contrast between the new and old covenants. And it is at this point that great care is needed. While the overwhelming issue is one of contrast, there is a measure of continuity between the covenants, and one aspect of the continuity lies in the external nature of the law in both ages. But whereas in the old covenant the law was entirely external, in the new covenant the law is written both internally and externally; that is, in the believer's heart and in Scripture.

And when we read that in the new covenant the law is written on the heart, we are, of course, not to think in literal terms. Believers have not undergone some form of heart surgery with a physical inscription of the law on the physical heart. Rather, speaking spiritually, the Spirit gives the sinner a new heart, and by means of that new heart, the child of God is given a love for Christ's law, a delight in it, a desire to treasure and keep it. God, by his Spirit, moves him thus:

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within

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you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules (Ezek. 36:25-27).

The believer, therefore, gladly takes the words of David who, being in the new covenant by anticipation, expressed it in this way: ‘Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day’ (Ps. 119:97).¹² The believer says this of Scripture because Scripture, as nuanced by apostolic teaching, is the law of Christ, and God has given him a heart to love that law.

As a result – and this is the pertinent point – believers, obeying Scripture from the heart, by the Spirit from a renewed heart, in union with Christ, can, by no stretch of the imagination, be likened to unregenerate Israel trying to keep a purely external law, in the power of the flesh. I cannot stress this too strongly. This is the contrast.

In Romans 7:4-6 and 2 Corinthians 3:5-11, the apostle was not for a moment suggesting that the believer is not under written Scripture – especially post-Pentecost Scripture. After all, Paul was writing such at the very time he was setting out his doctrine!¹³ What he was saying is that the believer is no longer in the old age, no longer attempting to obey the relevant law with an unregenerate heart, in the power of the flesh. This is the point. This is the contrast. This is what Paul was talking about when he said that believers do not serve ‘in the old way of the written code’ (Rom. 7:6).

Bresson took his doctrine further: Christ is the law, and this law, being entirely internal, ‘causes’ and ‘effects’ the believer’s conformity to Christ. I have already drawn attention to this. Bresson re-stated the claim, yet again effectively removing the necessity of the believer’s submission to Scripture, removing the sense of obligation and responsibility for scriptural obedience, and accountability for failure:

As this incarnate law [Christ] descends the Sinai of transfiguration, he descends to finish his work in his own person of breaking the tyranny of the law... and in doing so, descends as

¹² See also Ps. 119:47-48,113,127,163,165. For the way to understand these statements, see my *Psalm 119*.

¹³ See also 1 John 2:20-21,27 for the same point.

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a law that will cause his people to conform to his standard, his image... The law written on hearts of flesh comes to dwell among his people, even as the lawgiver, law, and judge begins his rule from the heavens. This isn't simply an exchange of code for code. The new law written on hearts of flesh causes conformity to the image of the Son. This 'law' is alive, doing what the old code could never do... effecting transformation in those who are 'under' it.

This is so important, I must highlight the relevant words: the law of Christ 'causes' and 'effects' the believer's obedience. I do not deny – indeed, I glory in the fact – that the Spirit motivates and enables the believer to obey, but Bresson, by stressing God's activity and arguing against the *rule* of Scripture, has ended up in an unscriptural position: the believer is passive.

Notice, further, Bresson's use of quotation marks for 'law' and 'under'. Why? Those who advocate the mystical view are anxious to avoid all talk of the believer being 'under the law of Christ', especially when Scripture is put at the heart of that law (along with the work of the Spirit). But, as I have shown,¹⁴ Christ's law is a real law, a more penetrating law than the Mosaic law, and the believer *is* under it! Bresson, however, by his use of quotation marks, was yet again chipping away at these vital principles.

He continued:

And what of the imperatives that are so dominant in the old-covenant schema? The imperatives of the new covenant don't 'replace' the old code. Christ himself replaces the code and then implants himself in his people via the Spirit on hearts of flesh. The imperatives are the means by which Christ through his Spirit is conforming us to the image of God in his Son. Yes, even the smattering of old-covenant code which appear in the New Testament, even those moral principles in the backdrop of the decalogue, no longer have the same function as they did in the old covenant. They cannot simply be listed in the same way as code (Christ himself is the code, applied to the heart by the Spirit).

¹⁴ See my 'Believers Under Law'; 'The Penetrating Law of Christ'.

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True it is that the law of Christ is not a mere ‘list’, but this does not mean that it is not objectively written in Scripture. Nobody could accuse any apostle of writing a mere list! Nevertheless, the apostles spelled out hundreds of commands and principles which the believer has to work out and apply in particular and ever-changing circumstances – work out, apply *and obey*. Even though Bresson recognised that there are ‘imperatives of the new covenant’, and although he agreed that the believer has a ‘code’, he maintained that this ‘code’ is entirely inward, and thus, as before, left no place for the Scriptures in that ‘code’ or law. Moreover, if Bresson is right, the believer is no longer actively submitting to Scripture, but is passively living out the inward work of the Spirit – or, more precisely, the Spirit is working it out through him. Christ, by his Spirit, is responsible, not the believer: ‘The imperatives are the means by which Christ through his Spirit is conforming us to the image of God in his Son’. As I have explained elsewhere,¹⁵ this is getting close to hyper-Calvinism, or the Keswick teaching of ‘Let go, and let God’.¹⁶ Indeed, it is not far removed from quietism.¹⁷

Bresson went on:

The imperatives... are no longer external, but internal, being worked out of us in the transformation of the Spirit. We work out the imperatives of the new covenant, we do the imperatives because conformity through them to the image of Christ is who we are. To suggest that the imperatives are new code replacing old code is pulling an old paradigm into the new, when in fact, the very nature of commands and imperatives in the new covenant has been changed.

Yes, as Bresson did agree, believers ‘work out’ commands, they ‘do the imperatives’, but the truth is, he claimed, these commands

¹⁵ ‘The Obedience of Faith’.

¹⁶ ‘Obedience isn’t acquiescence to an external demand, but the manifestation of an inward reality’ (Chad Richard Bresson: ‘The Incarnation of the Abstract: New Covenant Theology and the Enfleshment of the Law’). ‘Manifestation’ by whom? Does the Spirit manifest it? Or does the believer manifest it by his active obedience to Scripture, moved by the Spirit?

¹⁷ ‘Abandonment of the will as a form of religious mysticism’.

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or imperatives are really ‘worked out of [them by] the Spirit’. As I say, according to this – when coupled with Bresson’s relegation of Scripture (at best) to the sidelines – the believer’s conformity to Christ really amounts to little more than a passive experience of the Spirit working within him. The believer becomes a virtual spectator watching the Spirit (and/or Christ) produce Christ-likeness in and through him:

Thus, Christ’s descent from Sinai transfiguration and his ascent to his throne must change everything we ever thought about law, law-keeping and imperative-obeying. Christ the King is Christ the law. The very fingers that carved out the words in the tablets have now taken on flesh and have become the word imprinted by the Spirit on the heart... The one who became a new covenant for his people now creates covenant-keepers through his Spirit who produces covenant-keeping. The new *torah*, who is both the original lawgiver and perfect lawkeeper, produces obedience in those who are indwelt by the Spirit, the law written on the heart... This is the new covenant. Things are not the same.¹⁸

And yet, as we know, God’s promise in the new covenant is explicit: ‘I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules’ (Ezek. 36:27). Who needs these ‘statutes’ and ‘rules’ – the believer or the Spirit? Who needs to be ‘careful’? And who has to walk in obedience to God’s statutes and rules? Yes, the Spirit causes the believer to obey Scripture, but it is the believer himself who knows he must be careful to obey and who, by God’s grace, does obey.

In what follows, note Bresson’s use of Isaiah 42:6. His case depends on his mystical interpretation of the prophet.¹⁹ Do not miss the opening ‘because’:

Because Christ has become a covenant for his people and the Spirit has descended to indwell Christ’s people as the law written on the heart, there is an altogether new dynamic inherent to the question of new-covenant ethics. No longer do imperatives find their impetus from without as was true of the Mosaic code... but from within. The nature of the command itself is no longer external, but internal. Obedience isn’t

¹⁸ Chad Richard Bresson: ‘Christ, the New Torah’.

¹⁹ Why did he not quote an apostle making the case?

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acquiescence to an external demand, but the manifestation of an inward reality.

I agree that the believer's 'impetus' is internal, and not external, but this inward 'impetus' directs the believer to obey Scripture, and thus to conform him to Christ. Not for Bresson, however:

[Since] the law is a person [that is, Christ] [it] means [that] the law of the new covenant is not encoded in external imperatives or principles.²⁰

Finally, we come to the ultimate in this mystical interpretation of Isaiah 42:6. According to Steve Fuchs:

When we understand Christ to be the law, we are really saying the Spirit of Christ... Christ becomes law, a law which causes righteousness to be manifest in his people, by indwelling them as Holy Spirit. He and the Spirit are one, and in the same way we are made one in nature with them by their indwelling us.²¹

What? Are we, as believers, 'made one in nature with [Christ and his Spirit] by their indwelling us'? This is nothing less than downright mysticism, not to say deification. I do not find this in Scripture. Believers 'share in Christ' and 'the Holy Spirit' (Heb. 3:14; 6:4), yes, and they are made 'partakers of the divine nature' (2 Pet. 1:4), yes, but this does not mean they are one in nature with Christ and the Spirit, deified.²² This mystical teaching, however, gets close to the Finnish school:

Christ himself is life, righteousness and blessing, because God is all this in nature and substance. Therefore justifying faith means participation in God's essence in Christ.²³

²⁰ Quoted by Maxcey.

²¹ See previous note.

²² As once we were 'in Adam', so now we are 'in Christ' (Rom. 5:12-19; 1 Cor. 15:22,48-49). C.H.Spurgeon: 'We become partakers of the divine nature... in any sense anything short of our being absolutely divine' (sermon number 551).

²³ Tuomo Mannerman, quoted by J.Todd Billings: 'The Contemporary Reception of Luther and Calvin's Doctrine of Union with Christ: Mapping a Biblical, Catholic and Reformational Motif' in R.Ward

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There is another possibility:

Docetism... produces distorted thinking about the subject of holiness or sanctification. The human element in our Christian life is played down in favour of the life of Christ (his purely divine life) being lived in and through us. In popular jargon, 'Let go, and let God' sometimes means that human effort has no place in holy living. The believer in effect is not only being divinized, but is actually being absorbed into the being of God. The real distinction between God and man which was established in creation is blurred. So, to quote another popular cliché, the believer is only a suit of clothes that Jesus wears!²⁴

A summary of the points at issue

According to the mystical view, believers should understand that:

'Christ is the covenant' (Isa. 42:6 and 49:8), and he is so literally.

Christ (and/or his Spirit) constitutes the law of Christ, and he does so personally and really.

The law of Christ is entirely inward.

The written Scriptures are not part of the law of Christ.

Union with Christ means that they and Christ have one nature. In other words, they are deified.

They are passive in their obedience. Their obedience is entirely by Christ or his Spirit. They observe Christ working through and in them by his Spirit. This is the way of conformity to Christ.

These far-reaching conclusions are clearly contrary to the countless apostolic appeals, exhortations, commands, arguments and instructions which we find in the post-Pentecost Scriptures, urging, demanding and calling believers to be proactive, as responsible men and women under God, in their progressive

Holder (editor) *Calvin and Luther: The Continuing Relationship*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Gottingen, 2013, pp166-167.

²⁴ Graeme Goldsworthy: 'Gospel and Wisdom' in *The Goldsworthy Trilogy*, Paternoster, Milton Keynes, reprinted 2014, p373.

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sanctification. Let me take one verse to make the point. There is no possibility of passivity about this command:

Strive... for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord (Heb. 12:14, ESV).

Make every effort... to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord (NIV).

I hasten to add that in saying this I do not for a moment deny that this obedience is only possible by the work of God within the believer:

Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen (Heb. 13:20-21).

But it is not either/or. It is both:

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

As Jameson-Fausset-Brown explained:

‘Salvation’ is ‘worked in’ (Phil. 2:13; Eph. 1:11) believers by the Spirit, who enables them through faith to be justified once for all; but it needs, as a progressive work, to be ‘worked out’ by obedience, through the help of the same Spirit, unto perfection (2 Pet. 1:5-8). The sound Christian neither, like the formalist, rests in the means, without looking to the end, and to the Holy Spirit who alone can make the means effectual; nor, like the fanatic, hopes to attain the end without the means... God makes a new heart, and [yet] we are commanded to make us a new heart; not merely because we must use the means in order to the effect, but the effect itself is our act and our duty (Ezek. 11:19; 18:31; 36:26).²⁵

²⁵ See also the extracts from Graeme Goldsworthy: ‘The Gospel in Revelation’ in *The Goldsworthy Trilogy*, Paternoster, Milton Keynes, reprinted 2014, pp238-239,281-282 and Wayne Grudem: *Systematic*

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As I say, the conclusions which come from the mystical interpretation of Isaiah 42:6 (and Isaiah 49:8) contradict the overwhelming weight of Scripture. So much so, it is staggering to think that they depend on two texts (in truth, one text) which no New Testament writer ever interprets in this mystical way. Indeed, they depend on two texts which no New Testament writer ever uses to expound the glories of the new covenant and the law of Christ. Above all, they depend on two texts ('Christ the covenant') which no New Testament writer even quotes!²⁶

So what of Isaiah 42:6 and 49:8?

Edward J. Young pointed out that 'covenant' and 'light' are closely connected: 'Those who receive the covenant at the same time receive light, and those to whom the light comes have thereby participated in the covenant'. As Christ is the covenant, therefore, so he is the light. Now just as Christ is not a literal light, just as the prophet's description of Christ as 'a light' is figurative, so with 'a covenant'. Moreover, the prophet did not actually predict that Christ would be the covenant. Do not miss the 'as' in 'I will give you as a covenant for the people, [as] a light for the nations': Christ was given as a covenant, as a light: 'I have come into the world as a light' (John 12:46, NIV). In other words, once again, we should be thinking in figurative terms. Of course, it is perfectly correct to say that Christ is the new covenant as long as we understand it figuratively or symbolically, and not literally. This, however, is not to imply that the prophecy lacks any fullness. As Young put it:

The language is striking, for the servant is actually identified as a covenant... That the servant is identified with the covenant of course involves the idea of his being the one through whom the covenant is mediated, but the expression implies more. In form it is similar to our Lord's: 'I am the resurrection and the life' (John

Theology..., Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, 1994, pdf link pp655-657, in 'Believers Under the Law of Christ'.

²⁶ The New Testament quotes Isa. 42, as I have noted, but it never uses either text to argue Christ as 'the covenant'. Indeed, when Paul and Barnabas quote Isa. 49:6 (Acts 13:46-49), they leave out the reference.

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11:25], or the phrase in Isaiah 49:6: ‘To be my salvation’. To say that the servant is the covenant is to say that all the blessings of the covenant are embodied in, have their root and origin in, and are dispersed by him. At the same time, he is himself at the centre of all blessings, and to receive them is to receive him, for without him there can be no blessings... Moses was a mediator of the [old] covenant, but the servant *is* the [new] covenant.²⁷ In New Testament terms, this means that they to whom God sovereignly bestows the grace of salvation receive the servant himself. Parallel to the expression ‘covenant of the people’ is the phrase ‘light of the Gentiles’. Not merely does the servant bring light or lead into light, but he is himself is the light. Light is a figurative description of salvation (Isa. 49:6).²⁸

Let me repeat the vital words: ‘To say that the servant is the covenant is to say that all the blessings of the covenant are embodied in,²⁹ have their root and origin in, and are dispersed by him. At the same time, he is himself at the centre of all blessings, and to receive them is to receive him, for without him there can be no blessings’. In other words, as the apostle put it: ‘Christ is all, and in all’ (Col. 3:11). Thus, in accordance with Luke 24:27,32 and 1 Peter 1:10-12, Isaiah’s prediction of Christ in the new covenant, Christ as the sum and substance of the new covenant, led to Colossians 3:11 as the apostolic summary of his prophecy. When writing to the Ephesians, Paul spelled it out in more detail:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly

²⁷ Compare: ‘Consider Jesus... who was faithful to him who appointed him, just as Moses also was faithful in all God’s house. For Jesus has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses – as much more glory as the builder of a house has more honour than the house itself... Now Moses was faithful in all God’s house as a servant, to testify to the things that were to be spoken later, but Christ is faithful over God’s house as a son’ (Heb. 3:1-6).

²⁸ Edward J. Young: *The Book Of Isaiah*, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1972, Vol.3 pp119-121, emphasis his. Young (p278) referred the reader to the above for his comments on Isa. 49:8.

²⁹ By ‘embody’, Young surely meant something like ‘unite, gather together, be the sum of’, not ‘give it a bodily form’.

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places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory (Eph. 1:3-14).

But this is a far cry from the mystical view. I stress again that the prophet's language is figurative, poetic. As Young said: 'Light is a figurative description of salvation (Isa. 49:6)'.

The Pulpit Commentary:

The covenant between God and his people being in Christ, it is quite consistent with Hebrew usage to transfer the term to Christ himself, in whom the covenant was, as it were, embodied.³⁰ So Christ is called 'our salvation' and 'our peace', and again, 'our redemption' and 'our life'. This is the ordinary tone of Hebrew poetry, which rejoices in personification and embodiment. A prose writer would have said that the servant of the Lord would be given as the mediator of a covenant between Jehovah and his people.

In other words, 'Christ is the covenant' means that Christ is the mediator of the covenant. The prophet was expressing himself figuratively, poetically.

John Gill enlarged on this:

³⁰ See previous note.

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Christ is... the representative of his people in [the covenant], the surety, mediator, messenger, and ratifier of it, the great blessing in it, the sum and substance of it. All the blessings and promises of it are in him, and as such he is 'given'.

Once again, in the apostle's words: 'Christ is all' (Col. 3:11).

C.H.Spurgeon, preaching on Isaiah 49:8, opened by speaking of Christ as the mediator and surety of the covenant. He went on:

And I doubt not, we have also rejoiced in the thought that Christ is the sum and substance of the covenant; we believe that if we would sum up all spiritual blessings, we must say: 'Christ is all'. He is the matter, he is the substance of it; and although much might be said concerning the glories of the covenant, yet nothing could be said which is not to be found in that one word: 'Christ'.³¹

It is at this point that the mystical teaching leaves the rails. Its mistake becomes patent the moment we think of transubstantiation. I am sure we can all hear echoes of Martin Luther insisting on the literal reading of the text: 'This *is* my body' (Matt. 26:26). For the papist, this means that the priest holds the very flesh of Christ in his hands. For Luther it meant consubstantiation, the very flesh of Christ in the bread. Both have got it wrong. The same goes for the mystical view of Isaiah 42:6.

As soon as we apply the mystical interpretation to parallel statements such as Christ is the branch, the stem of Jesse, the root of David (Isa 4:2; 11:1,10; Jer. 23:5; 33:15; Zech. 3:8, 6:12; Rev. 5:5), the lamb (John 1:29,36), a horn (Luke 1:69),³² the bread (John 6:33-35,48,51,58), the vine (John 15:1,4-5), the light (Matt. 4:16; Luke 2:32; John 8:12, 9:5; 12:35-36,46), the lion (Rev 5:5), the door or sheep gate (John 10:7-9), the shepherd (John 10:11,14), its wrongness becomes as clear as noonday.

How can we literally eat the flesh and drink the blood of Christ (John 6:48-56)? The Jews took this deliberately (John 6:52), and most of the disciples found it 'hard' (John 6:60,66). Christ, of course, was speaking spiritually, figuratively, not

³¹ Sermon number 103.

³² "'Horn" symbolises strength' (NIV footnote).

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literally (John 6:63).³³ In the very early days of the church, do not forget, pagans chose to interpret all this literally, and so could claim that the believers were cannibals. It seems to me that in these days some new-covenant theologians are adopting an interpretation that these critics would have eagerly latched onto.

Bresson, speaking for those of like-mind with himself, is sensitive to criticism from other new-covenant theologians:

While this [mystical] group has nowhere denied the necessity of obedience in the Christian experience of the new-covenant member, the existence of obligation between kingdom-citizen and the King [Christ], or the command and demand nature of the New Testament imperatives, there has been a persistent drumbeat of criticism from others in the new-covenant theology movement that the incarnational and objective approach to new-covenant ethics is... inherently antinomian... As awareness of the views expressed by this... [mystical] group have increased... so too has the volume of rhetoric aimed at cementing [classic] new-covenant theology's affirmation of command, demand, and obedience.³⁴

I am securely in this critical group, and I remain unrepentantly critical of the mystic view. Let it be understood that I am not accusing Bresson and his friends of antinomianism. Do not miss the 'inherently'. I am concerned with long term consequences. We surely realise that it is not only what we say, but what people think we say, what people hear, that counts. What people bring to our words, and then take away with them, carries more weight than what we intend to say. We need to keep this in mind at all times, and do what we can to prevent our hearers and readers getting the wrong impression, and drawing the wrong conclusions. Hence the 'inherently'.

But, as I have made clear in this article, I have further criticisms of the mystical view in addition to that of inherent antinomianism. So much so, I am fully committed to do all in my power to maintain classic 'new-covenant theology's affirmation

³³ How often men go wrong here. Take John 2:19-22; 3:3-15; 4:13-15; 6:34,52.

³⁴ Chad Richard Bresson: 'The Incarnation of the Abstract: New Covenant Theology and the Enfleshment of the Law'.

of command, demand, and obedience'. The believer is under the law of Christ, and that law is objectively revealed in Scripture. Moreover, the believer is responsible for obedience and is accountable for any disobedience. In saying this, I do not in the least draw back from what I have declared concerning the perfection and freedom from condemnation that the believer has in Christ,³⁵ nor do I retract what I have said about the absolute necessity of the Spirit's motivating power and grace; the believer can only obey, will only obey, Scripture because he has a new heart and the Spirit motivates him to Christ-likeness. And I have written this article as part of my contribution to the upholding of this scriptural balance.

Conclusion

Believers are under Christ as slave-master (Rom. 6:11-23), are united to him in marriage, in order to bear children for his praise (Rom. 7:1-6), are joined to Christ as branches to the vine (John 15:1-8), 'share in Christ' and 'the Holy Spirit' (Heb. 3:14; 6:4), and are made 'partakers of the divine nature' (2 Pet. 1:4), but none of this is literal.

Those who, with Bresson, advocate the literal reading of 'Christ is the covenant', run the risk (to put it no higher) of making Christ the believer's actual law, making that law to be entirely inward, and thus removing the Scriptures from the law of Christ, and, in so doing, at the very least play down the demand for the believer's accountable submission to the objective law of Christ in Scripture. This can only lead to a passive view of the believer's conformity to Christ. I have certainly met evidence of it.

But we know that the Spirit gives the elect a new heart in regeneration (writing Christ's law on the heart), unites them to Christ by faith, and moves them to obey Scripture (Phil. 2:13) to grow in likeness to Christ. There is nothing passive about progressive sanctification. As Christ still commands all his disciples:

³⁵ See, for instance, my *Fivefold*, *Four*.

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You call me teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am... I... your Lord and teacher... have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you... If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them (John 13:13-17). A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another (John 13:34). Believe... in me... believe me (John 14:1,11). If you love me, keep my commandments (John 14:15). He who has my commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves me (John 14:21). He who does not love me does not keep my words; and the word which you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me (John 14:24). Abide in me (John 15:4). This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you (John 15:12). You are my friends if you do whatever I command you (John 15:14). These things I command you, that you love one another (John 15:17).

And Christ continues to rule his people by Scripture. As Isaac Watts put it:

*Praise to the goodness of the Lord,
Who rules his people by his word.*

In conclusion, while I reject the mystical view, 'Christ is the covenant' does indeed convey a glorious truth, one which needs trumpeting abroad: Christ is the sum and substance of the new covenant. 'Christ is all' (Col. 3:11).

Decision Time for New-Covenant Theologians

This article consists of the unedited Introduction to my *Believers Under the Law of Christ*; hence the references to that volume. Let me explain why I have published this material separately under this title. While some might think my use of ‘decision time’ a bit dramatic, that I am wrong to polarise the issue in hand, or that I am wrong even to raise it, I beg to differ. A division of opinion among new-covenant theologians exists: I am not making that division by addressing the issues involved. And since the question is of great importance, one with far-reaching consequences, which consequences will not go away by wishful thinking or ignoring them, playing the ostrich is not an option. Then again, although I concentrate on new-covenant theology, I know that similar discussions are taking place elsewhere – not excluding among the Reformed. Indeed, there is nothing new under the sun: this debate has raged, more than once, long before our time. Nevertheless, I feel my responsibility to address current trends as they arise within my own circle. Hence the book and this article. And although this article is, as I say, an introduction to the book, it does, I think, stand on its own. I publish it in the hope that it may help crystallise the issue, and encourage many to look further into this vital topic.

Ever since the Reformation, knowingly or not, the overwhelming majority of evangelicals¹ have held a view of the Mosaic law (if they have had any view at all) which has been formed largely by John Calvin’s doctrine of its threefold use; namely, that the law (that is, the law reduced to the ten commandments, the so-called ‘moral law’) restrains sin, prepares sinners for Christ, and serves

¹ But not all; there have been ‘new-covenant theologians’ of one sort or another through all those centuries, and before. See my ‘New Kid on the Block?’ New-covenant theology is, of course, biblical.

as both the whip and the perfect rule for the believer's progressive sanctification.²

During the 1980s, however, things began to change. God raised up an increasing number of teachers who, going directly to Scripture unfiltered by the Reformed Confessions, began to expound the full glories of Christ in the new covenant. The succeeding years have witnessed an explosion in the amount of valuable material on this vital subject. And this recovery – I use the word advisedly – of the biblical theology of the new covenant, has been an enormous blessing to an increasing number of believers. The Holy Spirit surely has been at work, and many can testify to the scriptural liberation, assurance and sense of joy they have found in Christ and his gospel through this resurgence of what has become known as new-covenant theology.

In recent years, however, as has happened before during the long history of the church, some have allowed the pendulum to swing too far; indeed, some have encouraged it to swing too far. We recognise the danger, do we not? When people discover what is to them a new idea, they often become over-zealous and over-emphasise the point. I certainly feel the temptation! In recent years, alas, some who have discovered the distinction between law and gospel have stressed it to the detriment of other aspects of truth.

Rightly rejecting the believer's bondage under the Mosaic law as found in Calvin's teaching, and rightly emphasising the believer's liberty in Christ, the inward writing of God's law – the law of Christ – on the heart, along with the power of the indwelling Spirit, some new-covenant theologians have so stressed these glories that they have been in danger of playing

² The sinner, on coming to faith, is united to Christ and is justified and positionally sanctified. Thus, in God's sight, in Christ he is accounted or made righteous, free of sin and condemnation, and perfectly separated unto God. See, for instance, 1 Cor. 1:2,30; 6:11; Eph. 5:25-27; Heb. 10:10-18; 13:12. In his Christian life, he has to work out his perfection in Christ, and he will be moved to do so by the Spirit under the direction of Scripture; this is his progressive sanctification or holiness of life. But this, alas, is imperfect. The believer will only be absolutely sanctified in the eternal state. See my *Fivefold*.

down other – equally scriptural – aspects of the believer’s life in the new covenant. By stressing the believer’s liberty and laying too little stress on ‘law’ in ‘the law of Christ’,³ by emphasising the Spirit’s work at the expense of the believer’s obligation, duty and accountability for determined and voluntary obedience to Scripture, and by stressing the inward written law of God and the work of the Spirit, while at the same time asserting that the written Scriptures are not an integral part of Christ’s law, they have ended up in an unscriptural place.⁴

In addition, and in tandem with this, some deny the concept of progressive sanctification. They virtually make justification and sanctification one and the same.⁵ This is a serious mistake. For Scripture teaches us that believers are not only justified and positionally sanctified, but that they must be progressively sanctified; that is, they must be transformed into Christ-likeness in their actual lives. Take just one passage to make the point. Peter, addressing believers, commanded them:

Therefore, preparing your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ. As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written: ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’ (1 Pet. 1:13-16).

As John Gill said, this refers to:

...external holiness, holiness of life and conversation, in all the parts and branches of it, both with respect to God and men, in matters both of religion and civil life... To be holy in this sense is an imitating of God, a copying of him... walking worthy of him, who has called us to his kingdom and glory, and walking

³ Or none at all, even denigrating the concept.

⁴ Consider this from one advocate: ‘The spirit has pre-eminence over the written word, or the letter’. Even if we replace ‘spirit’ with ‘Spirit’ it sounds little better! Do not miss the confusion in the unscriptural link between ‘the written word’ and ‘the letter’; indeed, their virtual equivalence. This is wrong. I will deal with it.

⁵ If not making regeneration, justification and sanctification one and the same. They are connected but distinct. See my *Fivefold* pp35-39.

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worthy of that calling wherein we are called, and a following of God, as dear and obedient children, and what is according to his will, and what he directs unto and requires.

Believers must not be ‘conformed’ (either passively or actively) to their pre-conversion way of life, but they must ‘prepare their minds for action’ and so be transformed (compare Romans 12:2) to be holy in likeness to God himself. Take the word ‘holy’, *hagios*. God is ‘holy’ (1 Pet. 1:15-16), and believers – or, rather, saints, those who have been sanctified by the Spirit (1 Pet. 1:2) (*hagiasmō*) – have to be ‘holy’ (*hagioi*) because God is ‘holy’ (*hagion* and *hagios*). So the sanctified have to be sanctified, the ‘holified’ have to be ‘holified’; that is, the positionally sanctified have to be progressively sanctified. And as for the progressive nature of this sanctification, see how Peter takes his concept of believers being ‘obedient children’ (1 Pet. 1:14) having been regenerated (1 Pet. 1:23), and almost immediately develops it in terms of their growth and continual edification:

Put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander. Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation – if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good. As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 2:1-5).

This is what I understand by progressive sanctification.⁶

All this, I fear, is under threat. The debate centres on the role of the Scriptures in the law of Christ, whether the believer is under that law, and whether the believer is passive or active in his progressive sanctification, if, indeed, such a thing exists. For my part, I assert that the believer *is* under the law of Christ, that the Scriptures *are* at the heart of that law, that progressive sanctification *is* both a reality and a necessity, and that the believer *is* responsible and accountable for it. In saying this, I do

⁶ Compare, for instance, Rom. 6:19,22; 12:1-2; Eph. 4:17ff; 1 Thess. 4:3-4,7; 5:23; Heb. 12:10,14; 2 Pet. 3:17-18. For the argument, see my *Fivefold, Positional*.

not, of course, deny the essential power of the Spirit to produce this progressive sanctification. Moreover, this power of the Spirit is not only necessary for the believer's progressive sanctification; in the provisions of the new covenant, Christ gives his Spirit to all his elect. As they are regenerated by the Spirit, united to Christ by faith, justified and positionally sanctified, they are transformed, given a new heart, mind, spirit and will to love and serve Christ by obeying his commands. And this ensures their fruitfulness to the glory of God. See, for instance, Ezekiel 36:25-27; Romans 6:1 – 7:6; 8:1-17.

I freely admit that 'the law of Christ', as a phrase, is rare in Scripture,⁷ and that Christ and the apostles do not often speak in terms of 'law' when addressing believers. But this is not the end of the story. How about 'command', 'commandment', 'rule' and 'instruct'? And when the apostles use 'ought' or 'let', when they 'beseech', 'insist', 'implore', 'exhort' or 'urge', make no mistake: they are commanding! And none of this begins to exhaust the countless imperatives which come thick and fast from the apostles. Nobody can read the New Testament and be left in any doubt that believers are men and women under authority – the authority of Christ, revealed in Scripture by the Spirit through the apostles.

With regard to the objection over the rarity of the phrase, 'the law of Christ', in Scripture, let me quote the answer I gave in my *Christ is All*:

The phrase, 'the law of Christ', appears but once in Scripture.⁸ So it does. In Galatians 6:2. But very close parallels appear in other places: 'The law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus' (Rom. 8:2); 'under law towards Christ' (1 Cor. 9:21) or 'Christ's law' (NIV)... 'The ten commandments' appears as a phrase but three times in the Bible, and 'new covenant' but four. What conclusion should we draw from *that*? We are told 'we have the mind of Christ', but once (1 Cor. 2:16). The same goes for 'the Spirit of Christ' (Rom. 8:9), 'the sufferings of Christ' (2 Cor.

⁷ But the same may be said of 'the ten commandments', 'the new covenant' and 'the Lord's supper'.

⁸ How many times did Paul use the phrase 'the law of Moses'? Once only (1 Cor. 9:9).

1:5), ‘a letter of Christ’ (2 Cor. 3:3), ‘the gospel of the glory of Christ’ (2 Cor. 4:4), ‘the power of Christ’ (2 Cor. 12:9), ‘the word of Christ’ (Col. 3:16),⁹ ‘partakers of Christ’ (Heb. 3:14), and so on. I am not for a moment suggesting that these phrases are not important, that their equivalent does not appear elsewhere, or – above all – that the ideas they encapsulate are not written large in Scripture. I am simply showing that this first objection to ‘the law of Christ’ is puerile. I am also claiming that although ‘the law of Christ’, as a phrase, is rare, its principles dominate the New Testament. For those who are still hesitant, many things which, though not *explicitly* stated in Scripture, are, nevertheless, true. They can be – and are – properly deduced from Scripture. After all, words and phrases such as ‘the trinity’, ‘unconditional election’, ‘particular redemption’, ‘the righteousness of Christ’ or ‘Christ’s righteousness’, ‘the free offer’, ‘duty faith’, ‘believer’s baptism’, ‘progressive sanctification’, ‘church membership’ and ‘closed communion’ don’t appear at all in Scripture. What are we to deduce from *that*? Surely, we should ask that whether or not the phrase appears in Scripture, does the idea?... Many... will quite happily use such phrases as ‘personal Saviour’, ‘open-air work’, ‘quiet time’, ‘pastoral ministry’, ‘theological college’, ‘Bible college’ or ‘seminary’, ‘Sunday school’, ‘mission’ or ‘missionary’, ‘evangelism’, ‘covenant of works’, ‘covenant of grace’, and ‘Confession of faith’, perhaps without realising that they appear nowhere at all in Scripture. Do they all appear in Scripture as concepts? [The answer is No!] To sum up: What now of the objection about the infrequency of ‘the law of Christ’? What is more, this phrase *does* appear in Scripture. So, if what I have said about it is wrong, what *does* it mean?

Of course, ‘liberty’ and ‘freedom’ are powerful aspects of the new covenant, *but* ‘duty’, ‘obligation’, ‘command’ and ‘law’ are *no less*. To accommodate the words of Christ in Matthew 23:23, those I am writing against should have stressed the one and not neglected to give equal weight to the other.¹⁰

⁹ But see Rom. 10:17 (NIV, NASB); ‘the word of God’ (NKJV).

¹⁰ ‘Contrary to much teaching that wants to pit relationship against word and obedience, the inspiration and application of the written word is no less a work of God and the Spirit than the expression of his indwelling presence’ (David J. Gilliland: ‘New Covenant Theology: Is There Still a Role for the Imperatives?’), being a paper at the Providence Theological

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Before I go on, let me repeat what I have just said, so important is it. In this book I am stressing the believer's responsibility to live a godly life under the law of Christ as revealed in Scripture; that is my purpose in writing at this time. But in doing this, I am not in the least going back on what I have said on countless other occasions; the motive, the spring and spur for this holiness of life is the person and work of Christ in the power of the Spirit. Scripture makes it as plain as plain can be that it is as believers set their minds and hearts on Christ that they are enabled by the Spirit to live to the glory of God. The spiritual life is not produced by rule and fear under the Mosaic law (*à la* Calvin with his whip). See, for example, 2 Corinthians 3:18 and Colossians 3:1-17. And that is but two of scores and scores of examples I could choose to make the point. Even so, where do we find the teaching, the instruction, the command that we should set our hearts on Christ? In Scripture, of course! And that is why I deplore any move – however slight – away from maintaining that Scripture is central to the law of Christ. I want to do all I can to ensure that there is not the slightest shift in the biblical balance between, on the one hand, the inward work of the Spirit within believers, and, on the other, the external Scriptures. It is both.

C.H.Spurgeon did not get everything right on all things all the time, but he certainly knew the scriptural balance between the internal and the external, between the Spirit and the Scriptures. Listen to him on the internal work of the Spirit enabling the believer to live experientially in union with Christ:

I do not know a better epitome of Christian experience than this. This is the daily walk of a true child of God. If he lives after any other sort, then he lives not a Christian's life at all! Christ living in us, ourselves living upon Christ and our union to Christ being

Seminary Doctrinal Conference, 2011, p8). See the entire paper. Gilliland returned to the subject a year later, broadening the discussion, in 'The New Heart, The New Covenant, and Not So New Controversies: A Critique of the Modern "Grace Movement"', being a paper at the Providence Theological Seminary Doctrinal Conference, 2012.

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visibly maintained by an act of simple faith in him – this is the true Christian’s life.¹¹

Excellent! The maintenance of the spiritual life is down to the believer’s union with Christ. So said Spurgeon. I agree! But now listen to him on the external, the Scriptures. When preaching on ‘To the law and to the testimony; if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them’ (Isa. 8:20), Spurgeon declared:

When men leave the sacred book of revelation, ah! my friends, where do they go? We find that in Isaiah’s time they went to strange places... Oh! that we may each of us be more wise, that we may not forsake the good old path, nor leave the way that God has prepared for us... Search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life, and these are they that testify of Jesus Christ. I feel at this particular crisis of religious affairs, it is imperative upon the Christian minister to urge his [hearers] to hold fast the doctrines of the truth – the words of God... What better advice can the minister give in such times as these? To what book shall he commend his hearers? How shall he keep them fast? Where is the anchor which he shall give them to cast into the rocks? or where the rocks into which they should cast their anchor? Our text is a solution to that question. We are here furnished with a great answer to the inquiry: ‘To the law and to the testimony; if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them’...

Remember, also, to bring the preachers of the gospel to this standard... Some men always believe like the last speaker... The reason [for] that is because the mass of people do not lay hold upon what is said, but upon how it is said: and if it is said smartly, said prettily, and said forcibly, that is enough for them, though it be a lie... Now, the Christian... does not care about how the man says it; it is the thing that is said that he cares about. All he asks is: ‘Did he speak the truth?’... It is not what I say, but what my God says, that you are demanded to receive. Put myself and put all my brethren into the sieve; cast us each into the fire; put us into the crucible of truth; and what is not according to God’s word must be consumed like dross.

¹¹ Exposition of Gal. 2:19-20, sermon number 2370. This, of course, is by the Spirit (Gal. 3:1-5). Remember, verse and chapter divisions are not inspired but are imposed, and often artificial and misleading.

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There is another class of men quite contrary to those I have referred to. These men are their own preachers; they believe no one but themselves... These persons, if they hear a truth preached, judge of it not by the Bible, but by what they think the truth ought to be... Bring, then, I beseech you, your own thoughts and your own sentiments to the touchstone of the truth; for ‘if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them’. And just do the same with all books that you read... It is God’s word that breaks the fetters and sets the prisoner free; it is God’s word instrumentally that saves souls; and therefore let us bring everything to the touchstone. ‘To the law and to the testimony; if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them’.¹²

In short, as Spurgeon put it: ‘Search all questions, try all by the word of God’.¹³

And finally:

It is not the letter which saves the soul; the letter kills many senses, and never can it give life. If you harp on the letter alone you may be tempted to use it as a weapon against the truth, as the Pharisees did of old, and your knowledge of the letter may breed pride in you to your destruction. It is the spirit, the real inner meaning, that is sucked into the soul, by which we are blessed and sanctified. We become saturated with the word of God, like Gideon’s fleece, which was wet with the dew of heaven; and this can only come to pass by our receiving it into our minds and hearts, accepting it as God’s truth, and so far understanding it as to delight in it. We must understand it, then, or else we have not read it aright.

Having issued that vital warning, Spurgeon came to this:

Love your Bibles. Keep close to your Bibles... Oh, love your Bibles and search them! Take them to bed with you, and when you wake up in the morning... Oh, cling you to Scripture. Scripture is not Christ, but it is the silken clue which will lead you to him. Follow its leadings faithfully... When you have received regeneration and a new life, keep on reading, because it will comfort you. You will see more of what the Lord has done for you. You will learn that you are redeemed, adopted, saved,

¹² Sermon number 172.

¹³ Sermon number 15.

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sanctified. Half the errors in the world spring from people not reading their Bibles... It will be for your nourishment, too. It is your food as well as your life. Search it and you will grow strong in the Lord and in the power of his might. It will be for your guidance also. I am sure those go most right who keep closest to the book.¹⁴

As I say, Spurgeon got the balance between the inward and the outward, between the Spirit and the Scriptures, right. It is not one or the other; it is both.

I am grieved that it is necessary for me to write about what I see as a threat to this vital principle of the scriptural union between the internal and the external. But write I must. Warm sentiment is no protection against error. Yes, it is ‘nicer’ to be ‘positive’, and there is nothing new in the demand for ‘smooth [or pleasant] things’ (Isa. 30:10),¹⁵ but sometimes the alarm has to be sounded. I am persuaded that this is one such occasion.

I acknowledge that those I write against would endorse all I have just quoted from Spurgeon, but even so it is the tendency of their doctrine that carries the threat I speak about. And I am thinking of the long-term consequences.

How has this threat come about? I suggest, in part at least, it is because of a faulty exegesis of a handful of major passages of Scripture. And I lay weight on ‘passages’. Proof-texting is useless for coming to a sound exegesis; the context and the big picture are vital.¹⁶ The advocates of this new view founder not only on

¹⁴ Sermon number 1503.

¹⁵ See also 1 Kings 22:8,13-14; Jer. 6:14; 23:17; Amos 7:10-13; Rom. 16:18; 2 Tim. 4:3-4. Christ was not wanted was he? See Luke 8:37; 13:31. I can feel the anguish in the apostle’s words: ‘Have I then become your enemy by telling you the truth?’ (Gal. 4:16). John Gill: Paul ‘spoke publicly, plainly, honestly, fully, and faithfully, boldly, constantly, and with all assurance, consistently, and in pure love to their souls, and yet it brought on him their anger and resentment. Telling the truth in such a manner often brings many enemies to the ministers of Christ – not only [among] the men of the world, profane sinners, but professors of religion, and sometimes such who once loved and admired them’.

¹⁶ Let me illustrate the danger of ignoring context. Infant baptisers, wrenching 1 Cor. 7:14 out of its context, build an enormous castle in the air. But as the context makes clear, in a marriage under the

the minutiae of key verses, but in failing to give sufficient weight to the context of those verses. In particular, they miss the big picture.

What I am talking about is not an abstruse nicety, fit only for those who like a good theological knockabout. *Every* believer must be thoroughly grounded in the biblical principles which govern his life in Christ. This is essential. The fact is, I fear that the consequences of the mistake I am addressing, if allowed to go uncorrected, will be very serious. I dread the thought that, if this new teaching gains ground, coming generations may repeat the calamities of former years and fall into the twin errors of antinomianism and perfectionism, or else get close to the old Keswick mantra of ‘Let go, and let God’, quietism¹⁷ or Situation Ethics when talking about progressive sanctification – if, indeed, progressive sanctification is still on the agenda!

As Douglas J. Moo put it:

At the opposite extreme from moralism [here, sanctification by our own efforts] is what we might call the ‘magical’ view of the Christian life... We find sincere and dedicated believers who fall into this trap. They write books and present seminars, all with the basic thrust that the key to the victorious Christian life is simply letting our new redeemed natures take their course. ‘Let go, and let God’ is the slogan. The indicative [what God tells us he has done] is given pride of place in this approach, and is often presented as an alternative to legalism or moralism.¹⁸ But the magical view gives insufficient emphasis to the reality of the imperative [what God commands us to do]. God commands us to act, and the very fact that Paul’s letters are peppered with commands shows that obedience is not automatic... Thus we

circumstances envisaged by the apostle a believer may rest assured that his children are not tainted, are not inferior, and carry no stigma. It has nothing to do with the spiritual standing of the infant in the sight of God, and has not the remotest connection with baptism. Above all, it offers no justification whatsoever for baby sprinkling.

¹⁷ ‘Abandonment of the will as a form of religious mysticism’.

¹⁸ One advocate of the new view asked how I would like it if somebody said: ‘Your view is narrowly law-focused and leads to legalism and a law-keeping religion devoid of Christ’. When challenged by a third party, he said he was speaking ‘hypothetically’.

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need to listen to and respond to the commands of Scripture. Particular trouble is the tendency of Christians to think that the indicative is all they need... Paul goes on to make clear that our enjoyment of eternal life is contingent on our obedience (Rom. 8:12-13).¹⁹

Furthermore, I can see close similarities between this new teaching in connection with progressive sanctification and the fundamental error in the hyper-Calvinistic view of conversion, with its denial of duty faith.

As for the long term consequences, I reject any suggestion that I am making a fuss about nothing. When a train passes over points, it takes one route or another, and, depending on which track (or ‘road’ as the professionals call it) the train takes, the passengers will end up in very different places. But at the points, the difference will be minuscule. Let me try another illustration. When on the high moors, I have often stepped across damp patches in the moss, so small that it would be an exaggeration to call them anything other than moist peat, dribblets at most. But within a few miles, those dribblets will become a deep, wide and fast flowing tidal river leading to the ocean. Large oaks come from small acorns. Do I need to spell the lesson out? Apparently I do.

What is more – in this regard, perhaps above all – we surely realise that it is not only what we say, but what people think we say, what people hear, that counts. What people bring to our words, and then take away with them, carries more weight than what we intend to say. In my works, I do all I can to prevent any mistake here. Sad to say, the proponents of this new view do not seem sufficiently to weigh these two points – the large consequences which stem from small beginnings, and the power of unguarded words. In some cases, they do not even seem to see their likelihood!

So critical is this matter, I say it again, I feel obliged to do what I can to uphold the scriptural balance at the heart of the new covenant, one which plays a vital role in the believer’s

¹⁹ Douglas J.Moo: *The NIV Application Commentary: Romans*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 2000, p216.

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progressive sanctification; namely, the balance between the Spirit and the Scriptures. Indeed, the balance (inadequate word!) is between Christ the Word (John 1:1-2,14; Rev. 19:13), the Spirit-breathed word in Scripture (Matt. 4:4; 2 Tim. 3:16), and the life-giving words of Christ by the Spirit (John 6:63,68). Balance? Nothing must be allowed to mar *the union* between Christ, the Spirit and the Scriptures.

As Joseph Hart put it:

*Say, Christian, would'st thou thrive
In knowledge of thy Lord?
Against no Scripture ever strive,
But tremble at his word.*

*The Scriptures and the Lord
Bear one tremendous name;
The written and the incarnate Word
In all things are the same.*

Hence this book.

Let me explain how I propose to go about my task.

I gather together a series of my articles on the law and the believer, the most important of which for my present purpose is 'Believers Under the Law of Christ'. I follow this with 'One Command or Many in One?', 'The Obedience of Faith', 'Hans Denck: The Inner and the Outer Word', 'Antinomianism Reformed and Mystical' and 'Christ the Covenant?' – all written in response to the tone of a number of Facebook posts which were advocating the new position. These six articles form the first section of this present volume. In these articles, I refer to some of my other pieces on both the law of Moses and the law of Christ, and these make up the rest of the book. Thus I arrive at my threefold division:

The Argument

The Law of Moses

The Law of Christ

Alas, my chosen method inevitably means that this book is somewhat disjointed, incomplete and not so well-structured as it ought to be, with a measure of overlapping material. Nevertheless, accepting these drawbacks, I hope the benefit of gathering these articles in one volume might make a contribution, however small, to the maintenance of the biblical position on the believer and the law of Christ. I certainly pray it may be so.

One last thing. I can well imagine a reader scratching his head and wondering what this is all about. Why this fuss? Hasn't a cat got four legs? Yes. Does it need 350 pages to prove it? No. So why does it take that many pages to prove something so self-evident as the fact that the believer is under the law of Christ, with the Scriptures at the heart of that law? I agree! It doesn't! When I open my Bible and read of the comparison and contrast between Moses and Christ (Deut. 18:15-18; John 1:17), and when, in reading of how Jesus went up 'on the mountain', where 'he opened his mouth and taught' (Matt. 5:1-2), I can hear unmistakable echoes of Moses ascending Mount Sinai to receive his law from God for Israel, and when I read of Jesus saying: 'You have heard that it was said to those of old... but I say to you... (Matt. 5:21-22,27-28,31-32,33-34,43-44), and when I read the way in which Matthew rounds off that discourse (Matt. 7:28-29), and when I read of Jesus, addressing his disciples in his final great discourse which is so full of his commandments (John 12:47-50; 13:1 – 16:33), saying: 'A new commandment I give to you' (John 13:34), and when I meet countless apostolic commands to me as a believer in the post-Pentecost Scriptures, and when I read of 'the endurance of the saints' – 'those who keep the commandments of God and hold to the testimony of Jesus', 'those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus' (Rev. 12:17; 14:12)... then I need no more. If Jesus, the greater Moses of the new covenant, issues his commandments, his law, to his people, then it really does indeed seem self-evident that believers must be, can only be, under the law of Christ. And where shall we find that law? The very fact that all these statements have come from Scripture would seem, once again, to make the answer self-evident. So, reader, if this paragraph convinces you that the believer *is* under the law of Christ, and

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that the Scriptures *are* at the heart of his law, and that the believer *is* responsible and accountable for obedience to Christ in that law by his Spirit, then you really have no need to plough through the next 340 pages of my *Believers Under The Law of Christ* proving that this particular cat does, after all, have four legs.

Glass Eyes and Wooden Legs in 17th Century New England A Warning

Introduction

Infant baptisers always have to face the issue – the problem – of church membership. Of course, if they grossly abuse the parable of the tares (Matt. 13:24-30), the problem seems to disappear. They just end up with what they think is right: ‘mixed churches’ comprising believers and unbelievers.¹ They expect – and their system produces – churches which are composed of members, some of whom are regenerate and baptised as babies,² some of whom are adults who have been baptised as babies but are unregenerate, and some of whom are baptised babies but who give no evidence one way or the other concerning regeneration. What a mixed multitude! This inevitably leads on to the idea of visible churches. The Westminster Confession, Chapter XXV, puts it this way: ‘The visible church... consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children’.³

But infant baptisers still have to come to terms with the obvious and inevitable result of such a system; namely, that with the passage of time, the balance is almost certain to tip towards the unbelieving element. History shows that it always does – given time.

¹ It is more than knowingly. R.L.Dabney, without batting an eyelid, was prepared to issue this challenge: ‘Cannot that which is worldly, in the true sense, be in the visible church?’ (R.L.Dabney: *Systematic Theology*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1985, p785).

² The baby baptism we are thinking of usually involves sprinkling, which is unknown in Scripture; ‘baptism’ means ‘dipping’, ‘plunging’. See my *Infant*.

³ *The Confession of Faith* and other documents of the Westminster Assembly, The Publication Committee of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, 1967, p107.

Some infant baptisers, wanting to avoid this, try to do something about it, but if they stick with infant baptism and covenant theology they will always fail. To justify my claim, and to use it as a warning to those contemplating the adoption of infant baptism, I want to look at the way the 17th century settlers in New England tried to cope with the problem – and the spiritual disaster to which it led.

The hope

In the 1630s, the New England settlers were determined to set up pure churches (only the regenerate as members) in their new land;⁴ they had had more than enough of the mixed churches in Old England.⁵ On reaching the New World, they rightly demanded marks of regeneration in prospective church members. They would only receive those who were, in their terms, visible saints; that is, those who could give good evidence of an experience of saving grace and a life consistent with that profession; any who later proved hypocrites were to be removed. Thomas Shepard, for instance, though he admitted ‘that there is and will be a mixture of close hypocrites with the wise-hearted virgins in the purest churches’, nevertheless was clear. He urged ‘all the churches of the Lord Jesus, here planted in these western parts of the world, to maintain your church chastity and virginity;

⁴ For this article, I have lightly edited my *Infant* pp246,277-286,298-299.

⁵ As above, by ‘mixed churches’, so-called ‘visible’ churches, I am speaking of churches which are knowingly made up of believers and unbelievers, this being regarded as acceptable, even right and advantageous by those who advocate such. It is utterly unscriptural. I fully accept, of course, that those who insist on a totally regenerate membership do not always attain it – but they deplore the fact, and do all they can to put it right. Not all the churches in Old England at that time were mixed – the Anabaptists, for instance – but, it goes without saying, the would-be settlers, while they were still in Old England, would never have dreamed of touching them or their ilk with a barge-pole. Once in New England, however, they wanted to form *infant-baptising* churches composed only of those who were regenerate. They had had more than they could take of ‘mixed churches’. *This* is what I am referring to.

you have a name of it abroad, pure, chaste, virgin churches, not polluted with the mixtures of men's inventions, not defiled with the company of evil men; pure ordinances, pure people, pure churches... Look you maintain it'. But he had a warning: 'Few churches retain their purity long... In the last days, carnal security either is, or will be, the universal sign of virgin churches... This is the temper [spirit, state] of the body [bulk] of the churches'. Even so, this did not mean the New England churches should accept it. He spoke of 'that diligent and narrow search and trial, churches here do, or should, make of all those whom they receive to be fellow-members with them... None have [a] right to Christ and his ordinances but such as shall have communion with Christ at his coming to judge the world; hence, if we could be so eagle-eyed as to discern them now that are hypocrites, we should exclude them now; as Christ will [when he comes], because they have no right [to be members]; but [although] that we cannot do [that is, we cannot find every hypocrite]... Yet let the churches learn from this to do what they can for the Lord now'. For the fact is, 'the ruin of a church may be the letting in of... one ill member'. 'One man or woman secretly vile, which the church has not used all means to discover [uncover, expose], may defile a whole church'.⁶

So far, excellent. But...

The problem

But these Puritans, for all their desire for pure churches, established a built-in contradiction right at the start; they baptised (sprinkled) babies, accepting them as members!⁷ Of course, in

⁶ Thomas Shepard: *The Ten Virgins*, Tyndale Bible Society, Florida, pp32,78,144,241; Edmund S.Morgan: *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 1963, p114. Shepard preached *The Ten Virgins* from 1636 to 1640. The dates are all-important.

⁷ It was (and is) more complicated than that. Richard Mather: 'We do not believe that baptism makes men [babies] members of the church, nor that it is to be administered to them that are outside the church, as the way and means to bring them in, but to them that are within the church,

their zeal for purity,⁸ they would baptise only babies born to church members; they had had more than enough of the promiscuous infant-baptism they had left behind in Old England.⁹ Naturally, since they had large families, many baptisms followed, and thus the churches grew. True, these baptised infants, although church members, were barred from the supper until they gave evidence of a saving experience for themselves; even so, they were members.

But time has a habit of passing. Men and women grow old and die, even the godly. Baptised babies who are church members grow up, and, whether or not they prove to be elect, in turn they marry and have children. Thus, grandchildren were born to the original settlers in New England; in their turn, they had children; and so on. Now it is a sad but undeniable fact – whatever claims men make about the covenant and infant baptism – not all who are baptised as infants prove to be elect when they reach adulthood. So it turned out in New England. However pure the original church, however sound and powerful the preaching and teaching, however rigorous the catechising, however strongly the parents pressed upon the growing children the profession they

as a seal to confirm the covenant of God unto them' (Perry Miller: *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1961, p87; but see Robert Middlekauff: *The Mathers: Three Generations of Puritan Intellectuals, 1596-1728*, Oxford University Press, London, 1971, p75).

⁸ I do not intend any note of scorn. I am a stickler for pure churches myself.

⁹ The Presbyterians in Old England who, if they had gained power, would have baptised babies virtually indiscriminately, were shocked by the (initial – see below) exclusiveness of their friends across the ocean. In New England, Thomas Hooker felt the force of their arguments, and would have liked to have baptised more widely, but he could not break free from the covenant theology and New England culture in which he was trapped. See Miller pp84,87,89; Morgan pp119-120. As for Old England, in the Westminster debates, as Edmund Calamy reported, 'many of the Assembly' showed their hand when it was reported that they 'will baptise the children of those they will not admit [to the Lord's supper]' (Robert S.Paul: *The Assembly of the Lord...*, T.&T.Clark, Edinburgh, 1985, p439).

had ‘made’ as babies at the font, not all baptised babies came to saving faith in adulthood; no, not even in New England in the days of Thomas Hooker, John Cotton and Thomas Shepard!

The question was: What to do with *them*? In particular, what to do with their *children*? After all, the young adults in question had been baptised as infants and become church members, but now, when they were having children, they themselves could not give evidence of saving grace; therefore, they were barred from the supper. But what about their babies? Should they be baptised and become church members? Indeed, should the unregenerate adults be allowed to remain as church members? If not, when should they be expelled? Were they, after all, in the covenant? And what about their infants? If the parents were expelled, should the babies still be baptised, or expelled? Were they in the covenant, or what? And what now of the teaching they all had received and imbibed – concerning the purity of the church and its maintenance? To keep a pure church, expulsion ought to take place. But when, and who, and on what grounds?¹⁰

The second generation of New Englanders were forced to wrestle with such problems. Edmund S.Morgan:

Given both infant baptism and the restriction [broadening!] of church membership to visible saints, it was impossible for the Puritans, either to evade the questions..., or to answer them without an elaborate casuistry that bred dissatisfaction and disagreement. The history of the New England churches during the 17th and 18th centuries was in large measure a history of these dissatisfactions and disagreements.¹¹

¹⁰ The trouble arose because promises made to Abraham and the nation of Israel were applied to the church. The churches of New England were not nations; they certainly were not the nation of Israel. In Israel, a circumcised boy was an Israelite – whether he was good or bad – he was an Israelite. The folly of infant baptism and ‘the covenant’ is to say a baptised baby is regenerate, or will be, or to work on that basis.

¹¹ Morgan pp128-129. Miller, speaking of the way the Presbyterians in England viewed the goings-on in New England: ‘The system pretended to admit none but saints... but if they retained the children and grandchildren, will they not have to embrace the doctrine of “baptismal regeneration”?’ And if they cut them off, will they not have to acknowledge that saints do not persevere...? New England had walked

The problem dodged

The New Englanders needed to sort it out, but failed to do so. True, the Cambridge Platform of 1648 properly denied the idea that the citizens of a parish are church members – quite right! It is unscriptural.¹² But that synod, although it had been asked to deal with the issues raised above, left them unresolved, pretending there was no problem, and so abandoned the churches without a chart upon a rising sea. Most churches shut their eyes to the predicament, allowed the non-regenerate adults to remain as members, and baptised their babies. The problem was compounded in 1657 when some Connecticut churches relaxed their stress on purity of membership, and recognised the parish churches of England as true churches, saying that members of such churches, ‘coming into New England, had a right to all church privileges, though they made no profession of a work of faith and holiness upon their hearts’. Meanwhile, their home-grown problem did not go away; rather, it naturally increased.¹³

It could not go on. It had to be resolved.

The problem ‘solved’ – the half-way covenant

And, at last, the problem was solved. That is to say, it was *fudged*. In 1662, the New England synod declared that parents could have their infants baptised even though they themselves were unconverted – as long as they themselves had been baptised

into a trap [of its own making]; could it get out?’ (Miller p89). For Samuel Rutherford’s sneer, see Miller p78. I give credit, of course, to these misguided Puritans for trying to discipline. What a contrast to the foolish notion – not unheard of today – based on a misguided interpretation of Matt. 7:1 – that it is wrong to ‘judge’ in this matter. But I am commenting on the folly of trying to discipline so-called ‘*visible*’ saints according to biblical principles set out for true believers. It is a mistake – it is impossible – to apply spiritual principles to carnal men. My advice for those who are tempted to repeat the mistake is: When in a hole, stop digging!

¹² It comes from Constantine.

¹³ Let me state the obvious: the numbers produced by natural generation can never be fewer than the numbers produced by spiritual regeneration.

as infants, were not scandalously wicked, and were prepared to assent to certain statements of fact they were supposed to have believed when they were babies. These parents were to be regarded as church members – but without full rights, of course. It was nothing but a fudge; the membership afforded to these parents was a kind of half-way membership – and came to be known as the half-way covenant.

The fudge – the half-way covenant – examined

As Miller pointed out, ‘half-way covenant’ was a misnomer. The unregenerate *were* church members, but the covenant was now split into two, the external and the internal, the covenant of the church and the covenant of God. Instead of a ‘half-way covenant’, it was a ‘double-covenant way’. In other words, the unregenerate were in one covenant but not the other;¹⁴ in short, it was a ‘two-sort membership’ – two sets of qualifications leading to two sorts of members.¹⁵ It could be argued that it was in fact a ‘three-sort membership’ – regenerate adults, baptised as babies, taking the supper, in both covenants; unregenerate adults, baptised as babies, not taking the supper, in one covenant; and baptised babies, not taking the supper, whose regenerate/unregenerate state was as yet undetermined, in one/two covenants!

The tortuous change of mind of Richard Mather, who lived through the crisis – having reached New England in 1635, and dying in 1669 – will illustrate the point. Its ins-and-outs are, for me at least, very difficult to unravel, but as I understand it, this is the road he travelled: In 1636, Richard Mather was uncertain about baptising the infants of unregenerate members, and was convinced hypocrites should be removed from the church. By 1645, however, he had changed his mind about infants; from now on, it was not the fitness of the parents – that is, their evident spirituality – which qualified the infants for baptism, but it was the fact that they, the parents, (and the children themselves?) were in the covenant, even though they gave no evidence of it in

¹⁴ Miller p96.

¹⁵ Middlekauff pp55-56.

their lives. So Richard Mather argued. But which covenant was he talking about? On the question of unbelieving adults who applied for membership, Mather refused to budge, differing from Shepard, who now thought it better to include ten hypocrites and not exclude one believer (despite what he had written earlier. I remind you, reader: ‘The ruin of a church may be the letting in of... one ill member’. ‘One man or woman secretly vile, which the church has not used all means to discover, may defile a whole church’). Mather thought it better to keep out many believers rather than admit one hypocrite; he would never adopt Cotton’s (and others’) view¹⁶ that hypocrites have their uses in the church.

Even so, as time passed, he had to compromise; he wanted a pure church, but the system itself produced unregenerate members. And so he ended up accepting what at one time he would never have dreamed of: ‘The church must remain as pure as possible, but it must also recognise that while some of its members would be able to demonstrate their graciousness, others would not. Some would possess qualifications for the Lord’s supper; others would not. Some would be truly holy, though men would never be able to identify them with absolute certainty; others, whatever evidence they gave or withheld, would be unregenerate’.¹⁷

But Richard Mather was uncomfortable. As Robert Middlekauff noted:

Late in his career, [Richard Mather] conceded that grace did not inevitably show itself. He made this sad concession to reality in the defence he made of the half-way covenant. But his preaching to his flock does not seem ever to have accommodated this reality.

And:

Among his last words to [his son] Increase was a plea that the children of New England should be baptised and brought into the church.¹⁸

¹⁶ See below.

¹⁷ Middlekauff pp35-57; see also Miller pp87-100.

¹⁸ Middlekauff pp74-75.

How did this differ from promiscuous baptism?

Let me anticipate my conclusion at this point. Where is there any such weaving and wavering in the New Testament? I quite understand the lack of discussion about the motor car in the New Testament; it wasn't invented! But sinners were converted in those days; they married and had children; and so on; and we know that not all who professed faith and became church members proved to be true believers. In other words, the people of the New Testament were very much like 17th century New Englanders (and us), and met the same problems as they did (and we do). *But where in all the New Testament is there any discussion of the logic of covenant theology and its application to the problem of babies and their baptism?* The silence says far more than a thousand words from me. I can think of only one reason for the silence.

The fudge 'justified'

The fudge of the half-way covenant having been adopted – not without some disagreement – much work was now done by the theologians to argue the case,¹⁹ and to drum up evidence²⁰ from the works of the founding fathers (many of whom had by this time died) to 'prove' that they would have supported such a

¹⁹ And theologians will always provide the theology (or at least some logic or formula) required to 'justify' a practice. The logic in this case, however, as always with infant baptism, was mind-boggling. Consider the following. On the question of applying 'the seal of baptism' to babies of parents who were unfit for the supper, one of the 'solutions' was to talk of *jus ad rem* ('right to the thing') as opposed to *jus in re* ('a right in the thing')! (Cotton Mather: *The Great Works of Christ in America...*, Vol.2, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1979, p303). See also Mather pp304-305 for talk of an 'explicit' covenant and an 'implicit' covenant. I wonder how many parents at the time really comprehended the difference between *jus ad rem* and *jus in re*? I wonder how many of the growing children got it?

²⁰ Which was not lacking. Naturally, with the passing of time (*the great test!*), the founders had themselves seen the warning signs – but, as I have noted, the dates must be watched.

resolution. But this, of course, involved a 180 degree shift!²¹ The now-dead Shepard, as I have already shown, had once strongly argued for the removal of hypocrites. Now another manuscript of his was dug out and published – to argue the contrary! This work showed that despite all Shepard had said at an earlier time – when the churches were starting out on their course – he had later argued that a true church could have ‘many chaffy hypocrites and often profane persons’, and that this was no bad thing, he thought; good could come of it.

Let me ‘explain’. On the utterly mistaken premise ‘that one and the same covenant, which was made to Abraham in the Old Testament, is for substance the same with that in the New; and this, under the New Testament, the very same with that of Abraham’s under the Old’, Shepard wrote of what he called the double covenant – the parent’s and God’s, the external and the internal covenant, the elect and the church seed. He saw nothing wrong in all the members of a believer’s household – whether ‘visibly godly or the children of such’, the children, both ‘good and bad’ – being church members. Federal holiness covered it all, according to Shepard; the children may be unbelievers, of course, but even so be ‘federally holy’. What if these children grow up profane? They are still church members ‘until they are cast out’, but for this they must ‘positively reject the gospel’, otherwise ‘they are to be accounted of God’s church’. As I say, all was based on the covenant with Abraham. Shepard admitted such churches would be ‘mixed with many chaffy hypocrites, and often profane persons’, but he thought all is well since ‘ordinarily God gathers out his elect’ from such ‘profane and corrupt churches’. And so on, and on.²² Shepard’s entire treatise should

²¹ This explains the glaring contradictions in the works of these New England teachers. In their early days they were dogmatic for purity in the churches; later, they were all for compromise and tolerance of the unregenerate as members. The dates, as I keep repeating, are all-important in works of this period.

²² Iain H. Murray: *The Reformation of the Church: A collection of Reformed and Puritan documents on Church issues*, selected with introductory notes, The Banner of Truth Trust, London, 1965, pp379-405.

be read. *That*, in itself, should give infant baptisers pause for thought.

John Cotton spoke to the same effect as Shepard. He tackled this question of church members who have no grace in them. Some left the church, thereby proving they were not true members, he said. But he had to face up to the certainty that ‘there are some who continue faithful friends to the church, and never fall off’. Although they ‘have no truth of grace in them’, nevertheless they remain church members – what of *them*? Cotton was prepared to assert that ‘they have the place of members, but they are not true members’, and he was willing to keep them. To make his reasoning clear(!), he provided an illustration. He likened the church to a man with a glass eye or a wooden leg. Unconverted church members play the part of that glass eye or wooden leg, Cotton maintained! ‘So such may be ornaments and supports of the church, but yet not true members’, he declared.²³

Reader, is this not a fantasy world? Frankly, it is madness. What is more, think for a moment of the spiritual state, the spiritual danger, of those wretched unregenerate glass-eye-or-wooden-leg church members. Speaking spiritually: Allowing for a moment that they may be a benefit to the church – though I stoutly deny it – think of the curse the church has been to them! Some church ‘ornaments’ end up in hell! Who helped to send them there? Where is the Scripture for all this?

The final ‘solution’

The controversy over the half-way covenant was ‘ended’ by Increase Mather’s change of mind – at first he was against the half-way covenant, but in 1675 he produced, in addition to a work of his own, manuscripts from the founders, including his father and father-in-law (Richard Mather and John Cotton), to show that they too would have been half-way covenant men; indeed, that they all had anticipated some such scheme to get

²³ John Cotton: *An Exposition of First John*, Sovereign Grace Publishers, Evansville, 1962, p225.

round the problem!²⁴ The capitulation of such a large and important figure, gave the *hoi polloi* all the sanction they needed to settle down, easy in conscience, to a life of respectable carnality, and still be church members and have their babies baptised. Naturally – literally so – they gratefully accepted Increase Mather’s pronouncement. The consequences for thousands will only be known at the day of judgement.

This invention was the only way the New England churches could ‘reconcile’ infant baptism and the attempt to preserve a

²⁴ For the part played by Increase Mather, see Middlekauff pp85-86,113-138; Miller pp94-109,227. Increase Mather wanted a pure church, and at the 1662 synod argued for the restriction of baptism to the babies of members in full communion. But five or six years later, he accepted the idea of the half-way covenant, because he felt he could still hold to church purity, and because he was forced to recognise that if the children of the unregenerate were not baptised, the churches would decline in membership. Increase had come to see one of the fundamental flaws in the practice of infant baptism. It is, so its advocates maintain, a seal. See my *Infant* pp where I show that baptism is not a seal. I ask infant baptisers: You say baptism is a seal. A seal of what? For the believer it is a seal, so it is said, of his initiation into Christ; for the child, it is a seal, so it is said, of what? Of his initiation into Christ, or into the *promise* of his initiation into Christ, or of the *desperate hope* of his initiation into Christ? These were the conundrums Increase Mather wrestled with in New England three centuries ago. But they need to be faced by infant baptisers today. Whichever solution is adopted, large consequences are inevitable for church life and beyond. The dates are significant. As I have already noted, Increase’s father, Richard, dying in 1669, urged his son to baptise the infants of New England. As I asked: Was this promiscuous baptism?

When Increase Mather recognised that if there was any slowing in the rate of infant baptism then the churches would inevitably decline in numbers, he was facing up to the obvious – and the well-known. Oecolampadius, in 1527, trying to counter the Anabaptists: ‘If anyone no longer baptises children... then the number of visible Christians will immediately decline. That is a very important consideration’ (Abraham Friesen: *Erasmus, the Anabaptists, and the Great Commission*, Wm. B.Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, 1998, pp67-68). Clearly, the love of numbers, and the justification of practices to keep them up, is not merely a *modern* god! When will believers learn that politicking is not the way, but that Scripture must be the rule, and must be obeyed?

godly church membership. But the fact is, churches – which started out by wanting at all costs to have a pure membership – after about twenty years, found themselves stocked with an increasing number of hypocrites and non-regenerate members, and having to agree that this was right. Indeed, they found themselves baptising babies belonging to unbelieving members – who were members because of their own baptism as infants twenty or thirty years before – but who, if they had presented themselves for membership as an adult, would have been refused.²⁵

The following generations, of course, felt little of such qualms. Being born under the system to parents who were inured to it, they themselves had been baptised as infants, grown up, married, had children, had them baptised... all the while being taught by prestigious ministers to think this was genuine Christianity. No wonder they were lulled into a carnal stupor, careless of their spiritual condition – but vehemently jealous of their church privileges and the social standing this gave them – sleep-walking into eternity.

Conclusion

I raise this episode as a clear warning to those who are setting out on the same course as the early settlers in New England. Such

²⁵ What now of the argument, based on 1 Cor. 7:14, that the baby is baptised because one of the parents is a believer? New England ended up baptising babies where neither parent was a believer! The Puritans of Old England attacked the whole affair, as might be expected. But both sets of Puritans vented their spite on the Anabaptists, the Puritans of New England being the more vitriolic. There seems to be a principle here. The Anabaptists wanted pure churches; the Puritans of New England wanted pure churches but had to live with, and try to justify, the failure of their system; the Puritans of Old England accepted mixed churches as the norm and right. The principle? The closer somebody gets to what he wants – but fails because of a systemic fault in his approach – the more critical he gets of those who more nearly get the desired result by using the right system. ‘Attack’, seems to be the watchword, rather than think about changing – jettisoning – the failed system.

people should look before they leap. For those who believe the New Testament demands a regenerate church membership – and only a regenerate membership – and yet are thinking of adopting infant baptism,²⁶ I say this: It may seem a very easy matter to reconcile the two – *at the start*, where you are now. But take a glance twenty or thirty years down the road. By then the infants being baptised today will be producing their own children. What if those parents are not regenerate? Will they be church members? Will the church baptise their babies? Will *they* be members? Glance a further twenty or thirty years; your grandchildren will be bearing children. What then? The events in New England tell us of the in-built contradiction between infant baptism and the striving after a regenerate church membership. Reader, you may feel it does work in your present circumstances. But the start of the process – and it is a process – is not the time to test the *effects* of infant baptism. You have to wait twenty, forty years and beyond. *Now* is the time, of course, to test the *principles* of infant baptism, and to test them by Scripture. But the grievous *effects* of infant baptism will take *time* for them increasingly to impose themselves on *experience*. Which they will do. Do not let the lessons of this historical episode be lost on you. Are you prepared to contemplate your grandchildren in churches with many ‘chaffy hypocrite’ members, some of whom may well be elders and ministers? Are you content to think of them as ‘glass-eye-or-wooden leg ornaments and supports of the church’? Whatever you do, do not adopt Hezekiah’s policy.²⁷ Hezekiah? Yes. Amazingly, Hezekiah was relieved that the disaster he was told of would come only after his time: ‘At least there will be peace and truth in my days’ (Isa. 39:8), he said. But what about the days – and not so far off, at that – when what you are doing now will lead inevitably to what I have described here?

You may question my use of ‘inevitably’. Of course, in your case all the babies baptised now, and in every following generation, may be elect, and so will be regenerated. Or, it may

²⁶ And this is the first mistake – see my *Infant*.

²⁷ Nor Pilate’s (Matt. 27:24). Pilate, of course, was working on a very different principle to Deut. 21:6-8.

be, the churches will expel the unregenerate – though how and whom and when has to be thought about long before the time arrives – and preserve a regenerate membership – and the people may accept perhaps many such expulsions without too much fuss, and without wanting their babies baptised. But these are large ‘hopes’. What if those who were once in the covenant do not accept that they are no longer? And what if they want their babies baptised? Which New Testament passage will you turn to in order to discover how the apostles dealt with this problem?

Things could only get worse in New England. And they did! Middlekauff:

By confining church membership to those believers giving evidence of their conversions, the founders of New England had strongly endorsed experimental religion. After them, their sons had striven valiantly to maintain their fathers’ faith, yielding only to half-way membership when the people proved incapable of undergoing any but the most perfunctory religious experience. And the grandsons, addressing churches empty of believers, but full of hypocrites, felt themselves standing on the edge of the abyss as their generation spurned gracious experience in favour of carnal experience.²⁸

In the following article, I will look at the 18th century legacy of all this as it was played out in the life of Jonathan Edwards and the events at Northampton, Massachusetts.

²⁸ Middlekauff p279.

Jonathan Edwards, Infant Baptism and Church Membership: A Warning

Introduction

In the previous article,¹ I showed that when the original settlers reached New England in the 1630s they were determined to set up infant-baptising churches which consisted of regenerate members only, and which would sustain this principle in the future. Nevertheless, they knew that this would not be easy. They would have to be vigilant, and remove any members that showed they were unregenerate. Their preachers, Thomas Shepard in particular, warned them from the pulpit and with his pen that they would have to carry out this painful discipline if they were to maintain the original purity of their churches.

It did not take long, however, before their hopes lay in ruins. Why? Because, with the passing of time, the New England churches came up against the inevitable problem which all infant baptisers have to face with their view of ‘the covenant’;² namely, how to cope with the fall out of infant baptism. Even if they took the painful step of removing from membership those adults who remained unregenerate – despite the fact that they had been baptised (sprinkled) as infants, and who, therefore, were in some way or another ‘in or under the covenant’ – what were they to do with *their* children? Were *those* infants in the covenant? Could *they* be baptised? Could *they* be church members? And, with the passing of a few more years, what about *their* children? And so on. Who was ‘in the covenant’ and who was not? And what did this mean for church life?

After a protracted series of tortuous arguments and counter arguments, by the end of the 17th century these New England churches were baptising in a virtually promiscuous way under the

¹ For this present article, I have lightly edited my *Infant Baptism Tested* pp267-268,286-289.

² I say ‘view’ but the fact is there is a spectrum of views of what ‘the covenant’ is and what ‘being in the covenant’ means.

terms of the fudge known as ‘the half-way covenant’, and, more or less, keeping all and sundry as church members in some form or another. As a result, those churches, which the founders had hoped would be maintained as entirely regenerate, now comprised a mixture of regenerate and unregenerate members, some infant, some adult, some of whom could take communion, and some not. It was a shambles. And worse.³

Solomon Stoddard at Northampton

In 1670, Solomon Stoddard (1643-1729) became the minister at Northampton, Massachusetts, in a church that was thoroughly enmeshed in the New England way. In fact, Stoddard was to play a major role in the way things developed in the 18th century. And develop they did!

Stoddard, along with ‘many other great divines’, trying to grapple with the consequences of infant baptism and ‘the covenant’, came to the remarkable conclusion that ‘even excommunicated persons are still members of the church of God; and some suppose, the worshippers of Baal in Israel, even those who were bred up such from their infancy, remained still members of the church of God’. So wrote Jonathan Edwards, commenting on the New England way. Edwards added that some even held that Papists who continue to practise their idolatry and superstitions ‘still are in the visible church of Christ’.⁴ It takes one’s breath away! Excommunicated members, Baal worshippers and practicing Papists still members of ‘the visible church’. And all depending on the unscriptural principles of infant baptism and ‘the visible church’.⁵

³ See my ‘Glass Eyes and Wooden Legs in 17th Century New England’.

⁴ Jonathan Edwards: *An Humble Inquiry into the Rules of the Word of God Concerning the Qualifications Requisite to a Complete Standing and Full Communion in the Visible Christian Church* in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, Vol.1, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, reprinted 1976, p434. Edwards’ title says it all! See below.

⁵ The visible church? The Westminster Confession, Chapter XXV, puts it this way: ‘The visible church... consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children’ (*The*

By 1707, the ‘venerable Stoddard’ had published his view that the non-sanctified could take the Lord’s supper; two years later he declared that the table is open to those who ‘be destitute of a saving work of God’s Spirit on their hearts’.⁶ He distorted the supper into ‘a saving ordinance’, hoping that as the unregenerate broke bread they might be converted! When all the time, Scripture pronounces a severe condemnation on unworthy partakers (1 Cor. 11:27-33). The New England ministers were giving the people the tools to break Scripture and bring themselves under the condemnation of God!

These downward steps, of course, ruined church life, and ruined many of the men and women caught up in it. From then on, the unconverted would have their say in the discipline of the church, including that of the converted members! Not only was this a spiritual impossibility, it confirmed many in their carnal ways, and contributed directly to their damnation.

Naturally – as night follows day – the next step was to allow unconverted men into the ministry. Indeed, Stoddard argued that unconverted ministers could perform certain duties lawfully.

As a result of all this:

The difference between the church and the world was vanishing away. Church discipline was neglected, and the growing laxness of morals was invading the churches. And yet never, perhaps, had the expectation of reaching heaven at last been more general, or more confident... The hold of truth on the consciences of men was sadly diminished. The young were abandoning themselves to frivolity, and to amusements of dangerous tendency.⁷

Confession of Faith and other documents of the Westminster Assembly, The Publication Committee of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, 1967, p107).

⁶ Stoddard and the Mathers (Increase and Cotton) were at daggers drawn over these matters, although a kind of peace was patched up. See Robert Middlekauff: *The Mathers: Three Generations of Puritan Intellectuals, 1596-1728*, Oxford University Press, London, 1971, pp115-138; Perry Miller: *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1961, pp226-289,467.

⁷ Joseph Tracy: *The Great Awakening*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1976, pp3-8.

Reader, that was written of the churches of New England in the early 18th century; could the same not be written about not a few churches of Old England (and elsewhere?) in this generation?⁸ And, let me remind you, even though the founders had started out with such high ideals, and their preachers had preached with vehemence for vigilant purity, and ‘occasional revivals... and the preaching of sound doctrine’ had slowed the pace of decline in New England, none of this – nor any Confession of faith – stopped the grievous decline. Those today who admit that the problem of tolerated carnality exists in our churches, but cling to the hope that revival or sound preaching will sort it all out for us, are grievously mistaken. We need sound preaching and revival, yes, but nothing will replace the proper ordering of our churches, the proper – biblical – discipline of ourselves. Nothing! And while we cannot organise a revival, we can and must put our house in order. I do not appeal for one or the other – we need both. Let us do our duty before it is too late.

It is a sad catalogue I have put before you, is it not? I do not say that those who hold to infant baptism must inevitably come to such a pitiful state, and I admit that many so-called Baptist churches are rotten at the core, and are no churches at all.⁹ But I do say – it is undeniable! – that the unscriptural doctrine and practice of infant baptism was at or near the root of the troubles in New England. Nor can it be gainsaid that infant baptism *per se* did nothing to put a stop to the wicked fandango. Nor will it today.

And so to Edwards himself.

⁸ In this comment, and the ones like it which follow, I am speaking of evangelical churches whatever their practice on baptism.

⁹ Increasingly, such churches are becoming little more than social clubs. I challenge all such: get rid of the extra-scriptural social activities you have introduced to boost attendance, to ‘evangelise’ and produce ‘fellowship’, and return to Acts 2:42 and the spirit of discipline required by the apostle in 1 Cor. 5, and see how many attenders remain.

Enter Jonathan Edwards

Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), Stoddard's grandson, was born into this system, and in 1727 he became assistant minister to his grandfather. In due course, Edwards followed his grandfather as the full minister at Northampton. And he carried on where his grandfather had left off.

But...

The main details of what happened during the next few years can be summarised thus:

In the 1740s, Edwards was having a difficult time at Northampton, as he was trying to face up to the legacy of the previous hundred years. He wanted to bring the church away from the unscriptural position it had adopted down the years in the way it took in and kept members, and administered the Lord's supper. Members were received without evidence of personal, saving faith; baptism (sprinkling) when an infant, lack of scandal, and a measure of head knowledge of the Christian religion was considered sufficient. Thus the inevitable 'church within a Church' was established.¹⁰ Communion – which Christ clearly intended as a memorial for participation by true believers only – had been turned into a disgraceful farce.

Edwards had had more than enough of the sorry business. He wanted reformation. Coming to see that the church was in a shocking condition, Edwards deplored that 'a considerable number... have woefully deceived themselves'. And they had not been unaided in their self-deception: their theologians had given them the tools with which to destroy themselves! Edwards recognised it, and admitted his responsibility. But now he had woken up!

By 1744, he was convinced that something had to be done. The Northampton church must return to the New Testament

¹⁰ For more on this, see *Battle* pp170-173. I always have difficulty over church and Church. In general, I try to keep the lower case to its biblical use, *ekklesia*, while the upper case refers to its man-made, Christendom corruption.

order. Mere sincerity and acknowledgement of general Christian principles were not enough. He wanted a credible profession of saving faith, and he proposed that the church should stop the knowing admission of the unregenerate. He acknowledged, of course, that some unconverted people would get in – they did in New Testament days – but not knowingly (Jude 4).¹¹

Even so, Edwards' view still fell short of the New Testament. He continued to allow baptised infants 'to be in some sort members of the Christian church', and he continued to divide the church into those members who are 'in complete standing', as opposed to those who are not. Thus the unscriptural notion of 'full' membership did not die at Northampton, even under the ministry of Jonathan Edwards. Indeed, it is alive and kicking in contemporary churches, many churches of whom have 'a church within a Church'. Furthermore, Edwards, failing to comprehend how infant baptism impinges upon – dominates – church life, side-stepped the issue when he wrote on the qualifications for membership and participation in the Lord's supper. He did not seem to appreciate that infant baptism was an integral part of the problem he was dealing with. He ought to have done. After all, he had admitted that baptised infants might easily grow up destitute of grace, but even so he thought it was 'generally allowed' that they should 'not be cast out of the church'.¹² It may be that Edwards was correct in speaking for the general view of infant baptisers, both then and now, but he was most decidedly out of step with the New Testament, which knows nothing of infant membership.

Despite the compromises, Edwards still failed in his attempt to reform the Northampton church. It is hard to imagine how the result could have been different; at least a majority of the members were unconverted. To ask them to vote for the introduction of New Testament principles was like asking turkeys to vote for Christmas (or, rather, Thanksgiving)! Edwards was forced to admit defeat, painfully confessing in his farewell

¹¹ Edwards lxi, p453; Iain H. Murray: *Jonathan Edwards*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, reprinted 1992, pp274-275,335-336.

¹² Edwards p434.

sermon: ‘I have reason to fear I leave multitudes in this large congregation [it was more than seven hundred] in a Christless state’.¹³ Edwards’ biographer made a terrible but true comment when he remarked that to expect the unregenerate to return to the New Testament was asking them ‘to relinquish the only resting place which human ingenuity had discovered, in which an unconverted person might – for a time at least – remain unconverted, both securely and lawfully’.¹⁴

I have only one quarrel with that last statement. I object to the word ‘had’. I am writing this article because, sadly – horrifically – this sort of thing is no quirk of history. Human ingenuity continues to devise and use methods to find resting places for unconverted men and women. The appalling truth is, these resting places are churches so-called, and the human ingenuity in question is being used by the leaders of those churches.

Edwards belatedly came to the view that when churches knowingly admit the unconverted to membership and the Lord’s supper, the church is exposed to the gravest danger. But it is far worse than that. When churches move away from the New Testament, eventually the gospel testimony is ruined, and this will lead to the damnation of sinners. Above all, the glory of God is tarnished. Credit is to be given to Edwards for the stand he made – even though it was too little, too late – and for the price he was willing to pay. Oh! that all who read this were willing to face the issues squarely and answer the questions which they pose – answer them now as they will one day have to answer before God. I agree with Edwards when he said that the devil knows how important this matter is: ‘I believe the devil is greatly alarmed by the opposition made to the lax doctrine of admission to the Christian church’.¹⁵ He is indeed. My readers, let us arise and greatly alarm the devil in our generation!

¹³ Edwards ccv; Murray p338.

¹⁴ Murray p339.

¹⁵ Edwards cxxxiii; Murray p347.

Martyn & Bethan, Infant Baptism and Church Membership: A Warning

When D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones became a minister in Aberavon, South Wales, in the 1920s, the Presbyterian Church Secretary was E.T.Rees.¹ Although Mr Rees was a member of the church, and a church officer, he was unconverted. He knew absolutely nothing of regeneration, nothing at all – neither in theory nor in practice. It is said that he ‘believed in a type of evangelical religion, but he was later to feel that he had been as ignorant of the doctrine of regeneration as Nicodemus’.²

I say this is an example of the inevitable outcome of the practice of infant baptisers. I fully acknowledge that Baptist churches can have unregenerate members and officers. I unreservedly accept that. I deplore it, but I cannot, I do not, I dare not, deny it. I do not claim that Baptist churches are completely pure. Not at all! I go further. I say again that even the New Testament churches were not perfect in this respect; I know that even the apostles were deceived at times. Jude complained of those who ‘crept in unnoticed’ (Jude 4).

But there is a world of difference between that and the knowing connivance at unregenerate members. I hope I have made myself clear – I am not throwing stones at infant baptisers from the vantage of a Baptist position which supposedly produces flawless churches. Not for a minute. But – and this is the point – the practice of infant baptism itself actually encourages and produces and justifies churches which have unregenerate members. Infant baptisers fully expect to have unregenerate church members and they try to cope with it. Robert Lewis Dabney was quite prepared to own it when he asked this

¹ For this article, I have lightly edited my *Infant Baptism Tested* pp289-295.

² Iain H.Murray: *D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones*, Vol. 1, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1982, p164.

rhetorical question: ‘Cannot that which is worldly, in the true sense, be in the visible church?’³

Mr Rees must have been one among hundreds, must he not? The church at Aberavon was not the only Presbyterian Church that had unregenerate members in the 1920s, was it? Reader, I put it to you, his experience was a direct result of the system. But, and in stark contrast, the New Testament churches did not cope with this sort of membership. They disciplined, they excommunicated in order to keep a regenerate membership, a membership which behaved consistently with that regeneration. Churches must not *expect* to have unregenerate members. They must not even tolerate them. ‘By their fruits you will know them’ (Matt. 7:20). There should be no unregenerate church members. It is a contradiction in terms.

To proceed with the experiences of Lloyd-Jones who, of course, became a minister in the midst of all this. As I have implied, E.T.Rees was not alone; Mrs Lloyd-Jones was in exactly the same spiritual condition. She, too, was a member of the Presbyterian Church, but she was unregenerate. What is more, she did not understand that she needed to be regenerated! What a condemnation of the system. It is said:

Having attended church and prayer meetings from childhood, Bethan Lloyd-Jones had always believed that she was a Christian... in a sense she had always feared God; her life was upright, and yet she knew that she had no personal consciousness of the forgiveness of sins, no sense of inward joyful communion with Christ.⁴

³ R.L.Dabney: *Systematic Theology*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1985, p785. A visible church is a church knowingly containing both the regenerate and unregenerate, invented by infant baptisers to try to cope with the fall out of infant baptism. See my *Infant* pp237-276. The Westminster Confession, Chapter XXV, puts it this way: ‘The visible church... consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children’ (*The Confession of Faith* and other documents of the Westminster Assembly, The Publication Committee of the Free Presbyterian Church of Scotland, 1967, p107).

⁴ Murray p166.

That is a tragic though honest statement. But it should cause no surprise. It is not to be wondered at if Mrs Lloyd-Jones always believed she was a Christian. Notice the words ‘from childhood’. She had been treated as a Christian from birth. Is this not exactly what many in the Presbyterian Church think they are supposed to do – tell their children that they are Christians from birth? This, they think, is the right way to deal with what they like to call ‘covenant children’. It is no idle question, therefore: What if baptised children actually do believe what their teachers and parents keep telling them? Bethan Lloyd-Jones did! What is more, for membership, the Church merely demands an appearance of soberness, and so on. Can infant baptisers wonder if sober, steady and respectable but unregenerate people do become church members, church officers, or even ministers themselves? Their very own system has produced it.

But as if these cases were not enough to prove what I am trying to say, what of Lloyd-Jones himself? When he reached his teens, his minister in the Calvinistic Methodist (Presbyterian) Church suggested – *suggested* mark you! – that the young man and his two brothers might like to join the church. So that is what he did. He professed faith and became a communicant member of the church. Then at the age of eighteen he became Sunday School Superintendent at the Charing Cross Road Church. In what spiritual condition was he? He had been baptised as an infant. He had been brought up in ‘the pale of the Church’. He had professed faith. He was outwardly decent and respectable. He was developing into a useful Church officer, showing signs of promise. In short, he was an ideal member of the Presbyterian Church. It has been written that ‘he was certainly conditioned to think of himself as a Christian... [seeing it] as a God-appointed process in virtue of which we become Christians by family ties and by church connections’. The truth is, however, ‘he had never been a Christian at all’.⁵

I pause at this point just to emphasise the words, ‘at the suggestion of the minister’, ‘certainly conditioned’, ‘in virtue of’, and ‘family ties and by church connections’. I repeat the point I

⁵ Murray p57.

am making. No church can infallibly claim to be free of deceivers and the deceived, but admitting that is a far cry from what I am criticising. The Presbyterian infant baptism system encourages church membership by unregenerate men and women who are conditioned to think of themselves as Christians by virtue of their birth – their family or church connections. It is actually part of the deceiving process, deceiving unregenerate sinners. And it is wicked.

To proceed. Many years later, when he was giving a series of lectures on preaching, Lloyd-Jones referred to this time in his experience and confessed:

For many years I thought I was a Christian when in fact I was not. It was only later that I came to see that I had never been a Christian and became one. But I was a member of a church and attended my church and its services regularly. So anybody assuming, as most preachers did, that I was a Christian was making a false assumption. It was not a true assessment of my condition. What I needed was preaching that would convict me of sin and make me see my need, and bring me to true repentance and tell me something about regeneration. But I never heard that. The preaching we had was always based on the assumption that we were all Christians, that we would not have been there in the congregation unless we were Christians. This, I think, has been one of the cardinal errors of the church especially in this present century.⁶

⁶ D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones: *Preaching and Preachers*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, reprinted 1973, p146. Here we meet that bewitching preoccupation, ‘one of the cardinal errors’ – inclusivism! That is, believers and unbelievers all mixed together in the life of the church, with unbelievers made to feel at home with the regenerate, engaged in what is supposed to be spiritual life in the *ekklēsia*. Today, inclusivism seems to be the determining policy of most evangelical churches. Everything has to bow down at its altar. Nothing must be said and done in any way to cause the slightest offence to the unregenerate, to ‘drive the fish away’. Quite the opposite! Judging by their discourses, many preachers treat all and sundry as believers. From the opening remarks of a service – often bright and breezy – to the closing chat (often about yesterday’s football, the latest shopping bargain, or last week’s holiday; rarely about spiritual matters) over a cup of tea, what used to be called ‘divine service’ has been reduced, in many cases, to little more than

These words carry far more weight than any of mine. Their criticism is far more powerful. Some may dismiss my criticisms of the infant baptism system as coming from one who stands aloof. Be that as it may, the words I have just quoted come from one who was right at the heart of it. Look at what it did for him. It would seem fair to say that he was converted in spite of the system, not by means of it. This is what ‘presumptive regeneration’ comes to.⁷ He was presumed to be a Christian – by his family, by the church and by his ministers; above all, by himself! It was tragic.

But he was not an isolated case. I urge you, reader, to give due weight to his criticisms. For Lloyd-Jones went on to say that it was not his experience alone, but he had met it many, many times in his ministry. In truth, it was the ‘most common experience in conversation with people’ who approached him after hearing him preach, he said. He had discussed this, and other associated matters, with an old man many years before – how had the church in Wales got like it? How had the spirituality of the church become so poor? The old man referred to the 1859 revival and said:

Before that there had been a distinction between ‘the church’ and ‘the world’. The tests of admission to membership had been very strict, with the result that prior to 1859 there were always a number of people attending public worship and preaching who were listeners and adherents only and had not become members of the church.

As Lloyd-Jones put it:

‘man service’, a cheery social gathering tinged with religion. And if anybody dares to question it...!!! ‘Don’t you believe in evangelism?’! ‘Evangelism’ – a non-biblical word – has become the god of the age. Reader, if you should think that by expressing such sentiments I have no concern over sinners and have no interest in seeing them converted, read my *Offer* and *Amyraut*, or listen to my sermons.

⁷ Some infant baptisers sprinkle babies because they are convinced that they are already regenerate, the infants having been born to a parent (or grandparent...) who is (or was) ‘in the covenant’. Others do it because they are convinced that the sprinkling actually regenerates. Others presume one or the other. See my *Infant* pp228-229.

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This is a most interesting and important point. How rarely does one find this in the church today... The change took place partly as the result of the great movement of the Spirit in revival, and the increasing tendency to regard the baptised children of church members as Christians. The result was that the preachers regarded all the listeners as Christians and stopped preaching evangelistically... It was assumed that everyone was a Christian, and the ministry was devoted entirely to edification, with the result that a generation grew up that had never known the power of the gospel, and never really heard preaching which was likely to convict of sin. As I have said I personally belong to that generation... I was received into the church because I could give the right answers to various set questions; but I was never questioned or examined in an experimental sense. I cannot reprobate too strongly this tendency to assume that because people come to church that they therefore must be Christian, or that the children of Christians are of necessity Christians.⁸

Lloyd-Jones clearly – and rightly – looked back upon his experience with horror. When preaching on Ephesians 4:4-6, he said:

A work of preparation is absolutely essential in us before we can be parts of the church. Much has to be done to the natural man before he can become a member of the body of Christ... Failure to realise this and to remember it accounts for most of the problems in the life of the Christian church today, as it has always done throughout the centuries. The visible church, alas, is composed of many who have never undergone this work of regeneration... There are many and varied ways in which people become members of the visible church. It is sometimes a pure accident of nationality... In other instances it is often a pure accident of belonging to a certain family or to a certain tradition. These are the factors that so frequently operate. Many of us have known what it is to be made a member of a church, not because the Holy Spirit had done anything in us, or to us, but simply because of one of these accidents. When I was personally received as a full member of the Christian church in which I was brought up, I was asked one question only. I was asked to name the brook which our Lord and his disciples had to cross while going from the upper room to the place of trial. I could not

⁸ Lloyd-Jones: *Preaching* pp147,151-152.

remember the answer to that question; nevertheless I was received into full membership of the church. That literally is what happened to me at the age of fourteen. And similar things have happened to many others. Perhaps at a given age the minister or clergyman had a conversation with your parents, suggesting it was time for you as an adolescent to become a full member of the church. You may in addition have attended an instruction or preparation class, or confirmation class. You had no living experience; you did not really know what it was about fundamentally; it was 'the thing to do'. That is what so often happens in the visible church... You can become a member of the visible church in that way; you will never become a member of the body of Christ in that way. Before we can become members of the body of Christ the Holy Spirit has to do a work of definite preparation.⁹ As you are by nature you cannot be bound to the Lord in all his glory and his purity, because by nature you are 'a child of wrath, even as others', 'dead in trespasses and sins'.¹⁰

If ever there was a condemnation of the notion of 'visible churches', this is it. But even so, Lloyd-Jones persisted in thinking and speaking in terms of the 'visible' church. There is no such thing in Scripture. Grievously, many today think and speak in terms of visible churches when they actually belong to churches which are supposed to be based upon the New Testament pattern of church membership. This loose talk must be stopped. If we use wrong words based on mistaken notions today, we shall have the wrong practice itself tomorrow.

These quotations from the experience of Lloyd-Jones express what I have tried to say and they have put it far more eloquently. Reader, please do not dismiss my words as coming from a man with an arrogant, critical spirit – I realise that Baptist churches have their faults; indeed they badly need reform in many of these very areas, including preaching. The discipline, too, in many churches which practise believer's baptism is unspeakably weak

⁹ I would express this differently – bearing in mind the connotations of 'preparationism'. You have to be born again. But Lloyd-Jones' thrust was right.

¹⁰ D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones: *An Exposition of Ephesians 4:1-16. Christian Unity*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1980, pp60-61.

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or non-existent in these days, and it must be put right as a matter of the utmost urgency. But my contention is that the infant baptism system itself tends to produce the terrible results you have just read about. And do not forget, the one who made the assertions was a minister of the Presbyterian Church. I urge all my readers to ponder what he said.

The Place of 'Place' in the New Covenant

OR

The Struggle for Possession of Jerusalem in Light of the New Covenant

Christ came into the world to bring the old covenant to its God-appointed end, including all its shadows – sabbath, tabernacle (temple), sacrifices, priest, altar and feasts. Christ accomplished this by fulfilling those shadows, rendering the old covenant obsolete by establishing the new. Christ himself is the head and substance of the new covenant, the fulfilment, embodiment and reality of all the old-covenant shadows:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished (Matt. 5:17-18).

Now if [since] the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses' face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory (2 Cor. 3:7-11).

In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one [that is, the Mosaic covenant] obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away (Heb. 8:13).

And this means that the believer is not under the old covenant, but released from it, having died to it:

The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (John 1:17).

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You are not under law but under grace... We are not under law but under grace... (Rom. 6:14-15).

My brothers, you also have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God... Now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code (Rom. 7:4-6).

The law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death (Rom. 8:2).

Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes (Rom. 10:4).

Through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God (Gal. 2:19).

Before [the] faith came, we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that [the] faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian, for in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith (Gal. 3:23-26).

Brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman [that is, we are no longer under the law]. For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery (Gal. 4:31 – 5:1).

Therefore let no one pass judgment on you in questions of food and drink, or with regard to a festival or a new moon or a sabbath. These are a shadow of the things to come, but the substance belongs to Christ (Col. 2:16-17).

You have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. For they could not endure the order that was given: 'If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned'. Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said: 'I tremble with fear'. But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge

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of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel (Heb. 12:18-24).¹

As a consequence, it is utterly wrong for believers to take old-covenant principles, practices and shadows, and try to run their lives and the *ekklēsia* by such. Alas, this is frequently done, with disastrous results, both personally and corporately. The Fathers played a major role in this catastrophic step when they went to the old covenant, took its principles, and applied them to the governance of the churches, and, by forging a union between State and Church, constructed a monstrosity – Christendom – with sacramentalism and sacerdotalism at its very heart.² Christendom, which has proved the biggest curse Satan ever inflicted on men, has ruled the roost for the past 1800 years. Millions of men, women and children have lived and died in spiritual darkness and bondage under its tyranny. Millions still do. Believers have to be constantly on the lookout, and be resolute in maintaining their precious position in the new covenant, leaving Christendom to its degenerate self:

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said: 'I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty' (2 Cor. 6:14-18).

¹ As always, it is essential to read the immediate context and also to keep in mind the wider context of the book in question. For my arguments on all this, see my *Christ*.

² See my *Pastor; The Priesthood*.

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Come out of [Babylon], my people, lest you take part in her sins, lest you share in her plagues; for her sins are heaped high as heaven, and God has remembered her iniquities (Rev. 18:4-5).

This last extract is taken from Revelation 18. What a chapter! In the last day, Babylon the great – the great curse of the earth – will fall, with the shattering of all her hopes, and the end of all the expectations of those whose life is bound up with hers. What does God say to his people: 'Come out of her'!

Nothing better illustrates the fact that Christendom has gone to the old covenant – though it was rendered obsolete by Christ – and taken it into the very heart of its system, than Christendom's emphasis on 'place' as something of spiritual importance. And how!

Let me explain what I mean. Adoration of 'place', love of 'holy sites' and the like, is endemic in fallen man. It pre-dates Christendom. Witness the many stone circles, burial mounds, henges and pilgrimage shrines we find throughout the world. Think of the manual labour expended in the construction of such sites. Nobody can deny that veneration (in the sense of reverence) of 'place' comes naturally to natural man. It is a fundamental aspect of paganism. Now Christendom, as is its wont, has cashed in on it. And does so today, and with a vengeance.³

As for Israel under the old covenant, 'place' was important. Indeed, by God's commandment, more than important; it was vital. Israel's temple, God's temple, so ran the law of the LORD, had to be in Jerusalem – and nowhere else. Any attempt to move the centre of worship – the house of God – to Bethel or Dan, for instance, was heinous in God's sight. Jerusalem was the 'place', God declared, and Jerusalem it had to be. All the sons of Israel had to appear at Jerusalem three times every year. When the children of Israel were denied access to Jerusalem, they knew they had to pray towards the temple there, since all acceptable worship took place at Jerusalem, the temple. As countless

³ Rome (as the CEO on Christendom's board) has mastered this 'art' to perfection. Time and again it has shown how adept it is in adopting and adapting pagan principles, absorbing them into its system. But with what detestable results!

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scriptures prove, the temple at Jerusalem (which replaced the tabernacle) was 'the house of God' for Israel.⁴ As a result, 'place' – above all, Jerusalem – was vital in the old covenant.⁵

But what of 'place' in the new covenant? Now that Christ has fulfilled the old covenant and rendered it obsolete by establishing the new, what place remains for 'place'? Nothing could be easier to answer. In these days of the new covenant, 'place' has no place. For the believer, 'place' is utterly irrelevant.⁶ Christ could not have been more explicit. During his conversation with the woman at the well in Samaria, she raised this very point: 'Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. Our fathers worshipped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship'. 'Place' clearly mattered to the Jews and the Samaritans. It definitely mattered to this woman, and it mattered a great deal! It was all a question of 'place'. Was it Jerusalem or Gerizim?

She was in for a surprise, however, a big, big surprise. Jerusalem or Gerizim? Neither! Jesus could not have been more categorical:

Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth (John 4:20-24).

Centuries before, the prophet had predicted this radical change of covenant:

⁴ Though, as Solomon acknowledged, it is impossible to confine God to a building, however magnificent (1 Kings 8:27).

⁵ See, for instance, Deut. 12:5; 16:16; 1 Kings 8:22-66; 12:26-33; 1 Chron. 15:3; 23:25; Dan. 6:10. For more in this vein, put 'Jerusalem' or 'Zion' into any search engine.

⁶ This is not to say the believers may not have treasured life-memories associated with locality. It is the attachment of *spiritual* importance to 'place' that is heinous.

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From the rising of the sun to its setting my name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense will be offered to my name, and a pure offering. For my name will be great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts (Mal. 1:11).

We must get this right. The prophet was not predicting the burning of literal incense. God does not want that under the new covenant!⁷ Malachi's words must be understood spiritually. The prophet was stating that in the coming new covenant there would be no special places, but that true spiritual worship would be offered to God – and received by him – 'in every place'. Whenever two or three – *wherever* two or three – would be gathered in the name of Christ for spiritual purposes, God would be there by his Spirit (Matt. 18:20). That is what Malachi was speaking of.

When Jesus disabused the woman at the well, it is surely unnecessary to point out, he was not *forbidding* worship in Samaria or Jerusalem in the time of the new covenant, or declaring that men would *not* worship at those places. No! Rather, he was making it clear that new-covenant worship would not be *restricted* to those places, that there would be nothing special about those places; indeed, *that in the days of the new covenant 'place' would be utterly irrelevant*. That is what he was stating, and stating loud and clear. What is more, speaking of the time of his inauguration of the new covenant – in his death and resurrection – Jesus announced that 'the hour' for this momentous change was very close, after which time all talk of Samaria or Jerusalem would be out of the question.

Or should be. In the new covenant, God has no interest in 'place'. From the time of Christ's death and resurrection, the clear scriptural requirement is for 'true worshippers [who] will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for', Jesus declared, 'the Father is seeking such people to worship him. God is spirit, and

⁷ Anticipating my conclusion to this article, here is another way in which misunderstanding of, or deliberate breaking of, the scriptural revelation of the new covenant, or going to the old covenant, leads to disastrous consequences for believers and the *ekklēsia*. Look at the abominable corruption that incense burning (and associated practices) has brought about in the church of God.

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those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth' (John 4:23-24). Consequently, since that time all thought of 'place', as special in a spiritual sense, should be anathema to every true believer.

Alas, Christendom has ignored Christ's teaching on this explicit point. Worse still, it has worked directly against it. While Christendom has little to say about what Christ meant by 'spirit and truth', it has a great deal to say about 'place', drawing on both paganism and the old covenant for its doctrine. And many believers today have become grievously tainted in the process. 'Place', for most professing believers today, carries religious old-covenant overtones, heavy ones at that.

Let me illustrate. Take the meeting house. How many believers virtually reverence the meeting house, calling it 'the sanctuary', 'the house of God'! How many believers think in terms of 'the house of God' when they speak about worship, confining worship to what goes on in that 'sacred space'! And by the phrase, 'the house of God', they mean a building, even though, when it talks in new-covenant terms of 'the house of God', Scripture means the *ekklēsia*, the people of God (both individual and corporate):

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple (1 Cor. 3:16-17).

We are the temple of the living God; as God said: 'I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people' (2 Cor. 6:16).

Through [Christ] we both [that is, believing Jews and Gentiles] have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit (Eph. 2:18-21).

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...you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth (1 Tim. 3:15).

Christ is faithful over God's house as a son. And we are his house if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope (Heb. 3:6).

We have a great priest over the house of God (Heb. 10:21).

As you come to [Christ] a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 2:4-5).

It is time for judgment to begin at the household of God; and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? (1 Pet. 4:17).

All talk of a literal building as 'God's house' by believers, therefore, is nothing but a return to the old covenant, abhorrent to God. And it should cease. At once. Believers do not 'go to church' in the sense of travelling to a building; in assembly, they are the church. William Cowper put it this way:

*Jesus, where'er thy people meet,
There they behold thy mercy seat;
Where'er they seek thee, thou art found,
And every place is hallowed ground.*

*For thou, within no walls confined,
Inhabitest the humble mind;
Such ever bring thee where they come,
And going, take thee to their home.*

Does it matter? Of course it does. Anything and everything which undermines the new covenant should be out of the question for believers. Anything and everything which contradicts Christ, and the desire of the Father, however trivial such things may appear in themselves,⁸ must be rejected, root and branch, not least because the consequences of disobedience are devastating. In

⁸ It is 'the little foxes that spoil the vineyards' (Song 2:15).

particular, I am referring to the wrongness of importing old-covenant principles and practices (not to say, pagan principles and practices) into the life of the believer and the *ekklēsia*.⁹

Nothing better illustrates the wrongness of the emphasis on 'place', and the dreadful consequences which follow, than the tortured history of Jerusalem itself.¹⁰ I admit, of course, that Jerusalem's history has been extraordinarily dramatic, and I am not suggesting that every departure from biblical principles will inevitably lead to correspondingly dire results. But the principle stands.¹¹ Any departure from Scripture leads to serious consequences – both in this life and eternity.

Yes, as I have acknowledged, Jerusalem was all-important to God and the Jews during the days of the old covenant. But not in the new! Jerusalem now has no spiritual significance whatever. It is wrong to give it any. For believers today to practically venerate Jerusalem is the utmost folly. And worse. Even so, down the centuries professing believers have got heavily involved in the sordid history of Jerusalem, the stain of which nothing can expunge.

⁹ But did the apostles not refer to the old covenant when writing to believers? Certainly! But every time the apostles quoted the law, the old covenant, they always drew *spiritual* lessons and paradigms. They never imported old-covenant practice into the life of the believer or the churches. Take one example, the Passover: 'Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth' (1 Cor. 5:6-8). Observation of the Passover today should be unthinkable to members of the new covenant. Indeed, it should be repugnant to them. Rather, they should be thinking in terms of their spiritual cleanliness and consecration to God. And this is just one example of scores which would make the point.

¹⁰ This was forcibly brought home to me by Simon Sebag Montefiore's *Jerusalem: The Making of a Holy City*.

¹¹ Very much the same as the precise dramatic circumstances of Paul's conversion at Damascus are not the norm. Nevertheless, unless a man is converted, he will perish (Matt. 18:3).

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Yet Christ could not have been clearer. Having stated that in the new covenant 'place' would hold no spiritual significance (John 4:20-24),¹² it should have caused his immediate disciples no surprise to hear him declare that the temple, having come to its God-ordained end with his death and resurrection, would be destroyed (Matt. 24:1ff) – as it was by the Romans in AD 70. By then, another of Christ's predictions was well on its way to being fulfilled:

Repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high (Luke 24:47-49).

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth (Acts 1:8).

The disciples had to open their gospel ministry in Jerusalem: it was the Jews (Rom. 1:16; 2:9-10), especially the people of Jerusalem, who had witnessed and who (some of them at least) had been responsible for the crucifixion of Christ, who had to be the first to hear of forgiveness.¹³ But this was only the first and very temporary step in the spread of the gospel. The good news had to be taken to all, taken to all the world, in order to fulfil the Lord's command:

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

With the death and resurrection of Christ, therefore, Jerusalem ceased to have any significance in the eyes of God. And that should have been the end of it. But, alas, this was not to be. These

¹² I presume that the disciples heard what Christ was saying to the woman (John 4:27). John must have.

¹³ See John Bunyan's *The Jerusalem Sinner Saved*.

past 2000 years, no place on earth has seen as much conflict as Jerusalem. How many times has the city changed hands, and usually with terrible violence and at immense human cost? How much blood has been shed trying to re-take it? The city is drenched in gore. What treasure has been wasted, and what havoc wreaked, by men determined to keep hold of it? And all for what? For political ends, yes, but in the main for the sake of religion.

Now I can quite understand Jews and Muslims attaching enormous value to 'place' – even to the extent of fighting over Jerusalem. Being outside the new covenant, they make idols of 'holy sites', which, along with the rites, relics and myths associated with such 'places', loom large in their religion. But professing believers? Any emphasis whatsoever upon Jerusalem as a 'place' ought be unthinkable for them. The only Jerusalem that matters to believers is the spiritual Jerusalem – not the literal (Gal. 4:25-26; Heb. 12:22-24).

Sadly – and 'sadly' is not strong enough – far too many professing believers have been emotionally caught up in the diabolical scrabble for Jerusalem, and that because of adoration of 'place'. Yes, adoration! I do not apologise for the word. What a disaster!¹⁴ And as for professing believers being prepared to go to war over Jerusalem for religious reasons,¹⁵ words fail. Alas, down the centuries professing believers have engaged in this titanic death-struggle for possession of Jerusalem with its 'holy sites' and relics. And it all stems from Christendom, with its misuse of the old covenant to bring its principles into the church.¹⁶ The cost, I repeat, has been horrendous – in blood. Even more grievous, the cost to the advance of the gospel in the world

¹⁴ The list of suffering and grief is endless. But more than suffering is involved. Sin is heavily involved. The history is a tale of decadence, madness ('Jewish Syndrome' it is known as), and I know not what. The 'pilgrimage industry' is probably the biggest money spinner for the city. The struggle for Jerusalem has spawned war (the Crimean, for instance) and politicians used it as a pawn in both World Wars. It is needless to point out that war over the city and the land continues to rage, even as I write.

¹⁵ Including rites, relics and myths.

¹⁶ Not to mention the principles and practices of paganism.

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has been grim indeed. Unbelievers have had a field day, pointing the accusing finger at the gospel – to God himself – as a consequence of the endless wars waged over 'place', as believers have too often forgotten the apostolic principle:

Though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds.

Now these 'strongholds' are not garrisons and the like. They have nothing to do with 'place'. They are ideas, systems or philosophies. The business of believers is not to take up physical arms to fight for 'place', but to use spiritual weapons – such as prayer, preaching and the pen – to overthrow anti-gospel cultures:

We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ, being ready to punish every disobedience, when your obedience is complete (2 Cor. 10:4-6).

As for the repeated conquests of Jerusalem, let me list the main dates. This catalogue could be vastly expanded, but as it stands it graphically captures Jerusalem's troubled history. Merely to scan it brings a sense of horror:

Roman Period (AD 70-324)

AD 70: Roman forces destroy Jerusalem and demolish the second temple

AD 135: Jerusalem rebuilt as a Roman city. The Jews expelled

Byzantine Period (AD 324-638)

AD 335: Church of the Holy Sepulchre built

AD 614: Persians capture Jerusalem, destroying most churches and expelling the Jews

AD 629: Byzantine Christians recapture Jerusalem

First Muslim Period (AD 638-1099)

AD 638: Caliph Omar enters Jerusalem and the Jews allowed to return

AD 661-750: Jerusalem ruled under Umayyad dynasty

AD 691: Dome of the Rock built on site of the destroyed Jewish temple

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AD 750-974: Jerusalem ruled under Abassid dynasty

AD 1010: Caliph al-Hakim orders the destruction of synagogues and churches

Crusader Period (AD 1099-1187)

AD 1099: First Crusaders capture Jerusalem following pope Urban's call in AD 1096

Ayyubid Period (AD 1187-1259)

AD 1187: Saladin captures Jerusalem from Crusaders and allows the Jews and Muslims to return

AD 1229-1244: Crusaders briefly recapture Jerusalem twice

Mamluk Period (AD 1250-1516)

AD 1250: Muslim Caliph dismantles walls of Jerusalem and the population rapidly declines

Ottoman Period (AD 1516-1917)

AD 1517: Ottomans capture Jerusalem

AD 1538-1541: Suleiman the Magnificent rebuilds the walls of Jerusalem

British Mandate (AD 1917-1948)

AD 1917: British capture Jerusalem in World War I

Divided City (AD 1948-1967)

AD 1948: State of Israel established. Jerusalem divided between Israel and Jordan

Reunification (AD 1967-present)

AD 1967: Israel captures Jerusalem's old city and Eastern half to reunite the City

To return to my main point: I have used this record of indescribable woe to illustrate – and it is, I believe, a telling illustration – a much wider principle; namely, that it is wrong for believers to go back to the old covenant for their principles and practice, and that the consequences of such disobedience are immense.¹⁷ Any return to the old covenant is an act contrary to

¹⁷ At the risk of wearying you, the same must be said about going to pagans, and drawing on their principles and practices.

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Christ, one which robs the Redeemer of his glory, and brings believers back under that yoke of slavery from which Christ released them. Christ is the believer's sabbath, Christ is the believer's priest, Christ is the believer's sacrifice, Christ is the believer's temple, Christ is the believer's altar. As I have observed, talk of 'place' and its consequences is but just one illustration of the way any deviation from the theology of the new covenant leads to trouble with a capital T. What I have said about the wrongness of 'place' is paralleled by believer's going to the old covenant for their understanding and practice of the principles of sabbath, priesthood, sacrifice, temple, altar.

Let me merely hint at some other areas where this is true:

When they go wrong over the new covenant, believers thereby misread the prophets and so fail to see many of the glories of the new covenant as set out in the prophets, and which are theirs by right in Christ.

To fail to grasp the covenant history of redemption leads many believers to think in terms of national Israel, not realising that the spiritual Israel, 'the Israel of God' – the elect through faith (Gal. 6:16; 1 Pet. 2:9-10) – is the new-covenant fulfilment of the shadow. Likewise, the old covenant promise of land for Israel is realised in the new covenant by the believer's spiritual rest. Getting this wrong, leads many believers to have millennial expectations for a converted national Israel, the supposed return of the Jews to the land, the re-establishment of Solomon's kingdom, with Christ reigning in Jerusalem, along with a re-built temple, complete with sacrifices and all the rest. In this way, the energy and interest of many believers is diverted from Christ and the gospel, and so they end up in a spiritual cul-de-sac. And that puts it mildly.

For sinners, preparationism by the law brings torment for them, sometimes for years, and leads to their lack of assurance if and when they are converted.¹⁸

¹⁸ Preparationism teaches that sinners must be prepared, made fit to receive Christ, and that this is accomplished by preaching the law.

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Not to understand the scriptural locus of the law in the new covenant, or go against it – that is to say, to adopt Calvin's third use of the law (the so-called 'moral law') for progressive sanctification – spells bondage and lack of assurance for countless believers.¹⁹

The notion of 'clergy' as opposed to 'laity', invented by the Fathers when they drew on the old covenant for the governance of the *ekklēsia*, has produced a myriad of errors and losses for believers. As for errors, not least has been priestcraft and sacerdotalism. As for losses, most believers are clueless (practically speaking) about the priesthood of all believers.²⁰

I want to end on a positive note. The theology of the new covenant – shall we call it new-covenant theology, or NCT for short? – must not be thought of as a theological quirk, an isolated, academic subject fit for debate and nothing else. It lies at the very heart of the gospel. Indeed, any deviation from the theology of the new covenant leads to trouble – both for the sinner and the saint – and it robs Christ of his glory. And that is why I write, and try to set out as clearly and forcibly as I can what I see as the biblical doctrine of NCT. And the sum of that is what? 'Christ is All' (Col. 3:11). Place, priestcraft, buildings...? They count for nothing, less than nothing. And worse! Christ is all!

Sinners may trust Christ only after they have been prepared by the law; that is, after the law has sufficiently convicted them of their sin.

¹⁹ John Calvin argued that the law has three uses in the days of the new covenant. The first two state that the law both restrains sin in sinners and prepares sinners for Christ (see previous note). His third use states that the law serves both as a whip to smite lazy asses (believers) into progressive sanctification and is the measure of that sanctification. Calvin's three uses of the law have dominated the Reformed and evangelical world since the mid 16th century, whether his system has been adopted knowingly or not.

²⁰ For my views on all this, see my *Christ; Assurance; Pastor; The Priesthood; Romans II; Essential*; and my forthcoming book on the history of redemption through covenants.

Into the Lions' Den: Christ's Active Obedience Re-Visited

Definitions

Justification by faith is a legal or forensic term. The sinner who trusts Christ is justified; that is, God pardons the guilt of the sinner who trusts Christ, and imputes righteousness to him, constituting him perfect in his sight.

Christ's obedience is both *active* and *passive*.¹ Christ's *active* obedience is his entire life of obedience to his Father's will, including the Mosaic law, from his incarnation to his burial; his *passive* obedience is his suffering and death on the cross under the curse of the law.

To *impute* means to lay to the account of, to credit to. In justification, therefore, righteousness is laid to the account of, credited to, the sinner who believes.²

Righteousness in this context means perfection, uprightness.

And *justifying righteousness*, *Christ's righteousness*, is... Ah! That's what this article is about.

Introduction

When talking about justification, the phrase, 'Christ's righteousness', or its equivalent, appears repeatedly in countless books, hymns, sermons, Confessions of Faith, *etc.*, yet, remarkably, 'the righteousness of Christ', as a phrase, never once

¹ But, as I will explain, I do not like the terms. Nor do I agree with dividing Christ's obedience into distinct parts.

² There are, in fact, three imputations. *First*, Adam's guilt is imputed to all men (Ps. 51:5; Rom. 5:12,18-19; Eph. 2:1-3). *Secondly*, the sin of the elect is imputed to Christ (Isa. 53:4-6; Rom. 8:3-4; 2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 3:13). *Thirdly*, Christ's righteousness is imputed to the elect (Rom. 3:21-26; 5:18-19; 2 Cor. 5:21; Phil. 3:9).

appears in Scripture. As may be imagined, many have held strong opinions about this expression, what it means, and whether or not it is right to use it. Needless to say, nobody – among those I am talking about – questions the sinlessness of Christ; *that* is not the point at issue. Rather, what is this ‘righteousness’, ‘the righteousness of Christ’, that God accounts to the sinner when he believes?

Here we come face to face with the much-debated topic of Christ’s so-called active and passive obedience. In the matter of justification, I take ‘the righteousness of Christ’ to encompass both. In this article I briefly say why.

But before I do let me make it clear that, as I have noted, I do not like the terms ‘active obedience’ and ‘passive obedience’ when applied to the person and work of Christ. For a start, I do not approve of the notion of dividing the obedience of Christ; it is all one. Not only that. Christ was *active* on the cross, in his death. He could categorically state: ‘I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father’ (John 10:17-18). ‘I lay down my life’! This is active! Again, as Christ asked Peter when he was being arrested, and Peter wanted to intervene by force: ‘Shall I not drink the cup that the Father has given me?’ (John 18:11). And his very dying was a voluntary act: ‘Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said: “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!” And having said this he breathed his last’ (Luke 23:46). Consequently, I would like to abandon this distinction between the ‘active’ and ‘passive’ obedience of Christ. ‘Obedience’, by definition, must an act of the will, a determined submission. Therefore, the notion that Jesus was active until the cross, and then passive, is utterly false. We know that right from the start Christ came to fulfil the law (Matt. 5:17).

Nevertheless, since the terms ‘active’ and ‘passive’ are used so frequently when talking about Christ’s obedience, I am forced to fall in with the practice.

This question of whether or not Christ’s active obedience is imputed to the sinner at the point of faith is, to say the least, contentious. Some say it is; others say it is not. And some have

their say with vehemence. Good men are divided over it, strongly divided; indeed, I have friends on each side of the debate. Wisdom might dictate, therefore, that I should keep quiet, offend neither, and so preserve my good name with both. But I think it would be wrong of me not to set out a brief statement of my position. Even so, I know this article will disappoint (no worse than that, I hope!) some of my friends. Of course, I'm not foolish enough to think it is going to cut the Gordian knot. Yet it might help others think through the issue for themselves. Indeed, it might help me. For, if I am mistaken, I need to be shown it; constructive criticism of what I write could set me on the right path. I welcome such, therefore. I am not writing, as it were, with the inflated idea that I will bring all conversation on the subject to a close. Rather, I want to stimulate it.

Many things are not at issue, but what is at issue is this: What precisely is justification? What righteousness, precisely, is imputed to the believer for justification?

Before I start, a few negatives. Because of the sensitivity of this subject, I will quote no man's writing in support of what I say.³ There is plenty to draw on, I assure you, but I refrain. I admit that too many base their case for including the active obedience of Christ in justification (as many other doctrines for that matter) on Confessions and the statements of good men. Parroting *Sola Scriptura* is all very well, but too often the reality is more akin to *Mainly* or *Primarily Confessional*. I will stick to Scripture.

Again, I do not take the position I do, in order to lend support to the advocates of covenant theology. But neither am I going to reject something which covenant theologians teach just because they do teach it. The fact is, whatever may be alleged, I do not take my stance because I am a covenant theologian, or because I am influenced by covenant theology, or because the vestiges of my long-held covenant theology colour my thinking here. Covenant theology has nothing to do with it, as far as I am concerned. In particular, I do not hold to the so-called covenant

³ I do quote Martin Luther – but not to establish my thesis.

of works.⁴ I am a new-covenant theologian. Even so, I do not approach the question because of my system; indeed, new-covenant theology is not a system such as, say, covenant theology. I have no system in mind other than to let Scripture speak.⁵

A common accusation laid against people like me is that we have a theory, and are hunting (in vain) for a text for it. I admit the obvious: there is no plain or explicit text for the inclusion of the active obedience of Christ in justification. Obvious? Of course! If there had been a plain text, there would be no debate. But if an explicit text is absolutely essential in forming doctrine, how will we establish – by an explicit text – that justification is by faith *alone*? Is there such a text? Again, is there an explicit text to prove that Christ, in his sufferings, earned the gift of faith for the elect?⁶ What about the trinity, the pastor (if you hold to such an office), the canon of Scripture, the inclusion of the Song of Solomon in that canon, the cessation of the gifts, Jesus' establishment of Sunday as the Lord's day (if you think he did and think it is)? Can we be given a plain text for such? By the way, do not assume my opinion on any of these topics. I simply ask.

Justification is more than pardon

It seems to me that those who advocate passive obedience (and reject Christ's active obedience) in this matter of justification think that pardon, 'a clean slate', is the equivalent of justification. This is far too weak, and is, to speak frankly, unscriptural. The justified man is positively righteous in God's sight – not merely neutral, innocent, without guilt. He *is* pardoned, of course, but he is also perfect in God's sight – positively perfect, that is. I am deliberately using the tautology to make the point. It is not (merely) that his sins are forgiven: he is constituted righteous

⁴ See my 'The Covenant That Never Was'.

⁵ I acknowledge that I too have my presuppositions. We all do. But I *try* to argue my case from Scripture, not my theology.

⁶ This is vital in the debate over Amyraldianism. See my *Amyraut* pp29-32.

before God. Let me quote some relevant passages to make myself clear:

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 (Rom. 5:19).

Here we have it: by Christ's obedience, the believer is made or constituted 'righteous'. This is far more than being pardoned. Just as those in Adam are made more than merely 'sinful', so those in Christ are made more than merely 'un-sinful'.⁷

Again:

In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them... For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:19-21).

Here we have it: in Christ believers are pardoned – God 'not counting their trespasses against them' – *and* fully righteous – they have become 'the righteousness of God' in Christ.

Again:

We have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all... For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified (Heb. 10:10,14).⁸

⁷ It is commonly said that justification is 'just as if I had never sinned'. Not so! It is just as if I had always fully obeyed God in his law, and pleased him absolutely! And it is more than 'just as if'. In Christ, I *am* completely free of condemnation, having been made, constituted, perfectly righteous – as righteous and pleasing to God as Christ himself. It is not (as it is often said to be) that God (merely) declares me to be righteous. In Christ, he makes me righteous, he constitutes me a righteous man. See my *Four*.

⁸ This 'perfection' speaks of the believer's positional sanctification and the 'sanctification' speaks of his progressive sanctification. The complication arises because of the translators and their use of 'sanctification'. The believer, as he trusts in Christ is counted 'perfect', fully righteous, in God's sight. Sanctification is both positional and progressive. By 'progressive sanctification', I mean the believer's

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Here we have it: by Christ's one offering,⁹ the believer is made or constituted 'permanently perfect'. This is far more than being pardoned.

In the passage where he deals most extensively with the subject of justification (Rom. 1:16-17; 3:21– 5:21), the apostle is clear that righteousness is imputed to the believer; he is not merely pardoned. And that righteousness is called 'the righteousness of God' (Rom. 3:22), it being intimately connected with the person and work of Christ, and received through faith:

I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith (Rom. 1:16-17).

The righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law... the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe... 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 (Rom. 3:21-22,26).

To the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness (Rom. 4:5).

For if, because of one man's trespass, death reigned through that one man, much more will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man Jesus Christ... 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 (Rom. 5:17,19).

imperfect (in this life) outworking of the perfect positional-sanctification he has in Christ by virtue of his union with Christ at his conversion. The sinner, on coming to faith, is united to Christ, and is justified and positionally sanctified. Thus, in God's sight, in Christ he is accounted or made righteous, free of sin and condemnation, and perfectly separated unto God. See, for instance, 1 Cor. 1:2,30; 6:11; Eph. 5:25-27; Heb. 10:10-18; 13:12. In his Christian life, he has to work out his perfection in Christ, and he will be moved to do so by the Spirit under the direction of Scripture; this is his progressive sanctification or holiness of life. But this, alas, is imperfect. The believer will only be absolutely sanctified in the eternal state. See my *Fivefold*.

⁹ This, I grant, seems to clinch the case for the passive-obedience-only school. But if it were that simple, there would be no debate. Read on.

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And it is not only in Romans 1:16-17; 3:21 – 5:21 that we meet with such statements:

Gentiles who did not pursue righteousness have attained it, that is, a righteousness that is by faith (Rom. 9:30).

Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes (Rom. 10:4).

Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption (1 Cor. 1:30).

We know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified... For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God. I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose (Gal. 2:16-21).

That I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith (Phil. 3:8-9).

Although none of these passages use the phrase, 'the righteousness of Christ', nevertheless that is precisely what they are referring to – the righteousness which is imputed to the sinner at the point of faith, the righteousness *of* God, a righteousness *from* God, this righteousness being intimately connected with Christ; in short, 'the righteousness of Christ'. Now this righteousness cannot possibly be Christ's intrinsic righteousness.¹⁰ If it is, why did Christ have to become a man,

¹⁰ Take 'the righteousness of God' in Rom. 1:16-17. On this, Luther movingly commented: 'I had been captivated with a remarkable ardour for understanding Paul in the epistle to the Romans. But up until then it was... but a single saying... "In it the righteousness of God is revealed" – that stood in my way. For I hated that word "righteousness of God", which... I had been taught to understand... the formal... justice... by which God is righteous and punishes sinners and the unrighteous. Though I lived as a monk without reproach, I felt I was a sinner before God with a most disturbed conscience. I could not believe that he was

live under the law and die on the cross? Then again, in his justification, the believing sinner is not so joined to Christ that he is 'Godified' or 'deified'; being a 'partaker of the divine nature' (see 2 Pet. 1:4) does not mean that!¹¹ Nevertheless, he is constituted righteous. Whatever else can this righteousness, the righteousness of Christ, be, therefore, but Christ's complete mediatorial obedience to his Father's will, including the law of Moses, culminating in his sacrifice on the cross, all of which was vindicated by his resurrection?

Christ, himself, is the believer's righteousness

I have already quoted the apostolic assertion: 'Christ Jesus... became to us... righteousness' (1 Cor. 1:30). In his prophecy, Jeremiah, the prophet who more than any predicted the glory of the new covenant (Jer. 31:31-34; Heb. 8:6-13), made it clear that, in the new covenant, Christ himself would be the believer's righteousness:

'Behold, the days are coming', declares the Lord, 'when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in

placated by my satisfaction. I did not love – indeed, I hated – the righteous God who punishes sinners. Secretly, if not blasphemously, certainly murmuring greatly, I was angry with God. Yet I clung to the dear Paul and had a great yearning to know what he meant. Finally, by the mercy of God, as I meditated day and night, I paid attention to the context of the words: "In it the righteousness of God is revealed, as it is written: 'He who through faith is righteous shall live'". Then I began to understand that the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous [man] lives by a gift of God, namely by faith. This, then, is the meaning: the righteousness of God is revealed by the gospel, viz. the... righteousness with which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written: "The righteous one lives by faith". Here I felt that I was altogether born again and had entered paradise itself through open gates. There a totally [different] face of all Scripture showed itself to me. And whereas before "the righteousness of God" had filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love. This passage of Paul became to me a gateway to heaven' (see: 'Preface to Latin Writings [1545]' in *Luther's Works* 34:336-37; WAusg 54.185-86).

¹¹ See also Heb. 3:14; 6:4.

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the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness" (Jer. 23:5-6).

He repeated the point:

'Behold, the days are coming', declares the Lord, 'when I will fulfil the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will dwell securely. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The Lord is our righteousness"' (Jer. 33:14-16).

Christ *himself* is the believer's righteousness (Jer. 23:6; 33:16; 1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Pet. 1:1); that is, Christ and all his work, his whole obedience, constitute the believer's righteousness. So much so, to crown it all, Christ himself is the new covenant (Isa. 42:6; 49:8).¹² Christ's obedience, Christ himself, throughout his life from his birth to his resurrection, culminating in his death, established this righteousness for his elect, which becomes theirs as they come to faith.

Take Philippians 3:8-11. Paul, speaking passionately of 'the righteousness which is from God by faith', explained his meaning: 'Righteousness... which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; that I may know him [Christ]'. That I may know *him*! That's it! This 'righteousness' that Paul needed and found could be summed up in a person: Christ! Christ himself!

And the same goes for every believer: Christ *himself* is the believer's righteousness. The believer is constituted righteous because he is united to Christ, because he is in Christ and Christ is in him. As a believer, Christ is formed in him, lives in him by the Spirit (John 14:23; 15:1-11; 17:23; Rom. 8:9-11; Gal. 2:20; 4:19; Eph. 3:17; Col. 1:27). The true believer must live as Jesus lived (see 1 John 2:6, NIV), and, by the Spirit, he is empowered to grow in Christ-likeness. 'As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me' (John 6:57). In how many ways Scripture

¹² For my view of this, see my *Believers*.

highlights union with Christ! It is such an important concept. No wonder, then, that the phrase 'in Christ' appears so often in the sacred pages.

In short, the believer is righteous, righteous because he is in Christ and Christ is in him. Union with Christ, the believer's union with Christ in his life, death and resurrection, is the key (Rom. 6:1-14; Eph. 2:6).

We know that Christ came into the world expressly to do his Father's will (Heb. 10:5-10), and that included obedience to the will of God expressed in the Mosaic law. Christ, therefore, was born under the law (Gal. 4:4). As a consequence, Christ, in his life, was fully obedient to the commands of the law, and, in his death, suffered its penalty, curse and condemnation. Throughout his life he was obedient to his Father, always pleasing him. As he himself said: 'I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me... I always do the things that are pleasing to him' (John 8:28-29). Always! Not just in his dying on the cross! 'I lay down my life that I may take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This charge I have received from my Father' (John 10:17-18). 'I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment – what to say and what to speak... What I say, therefore, I say as the Father has told me' (John 12:49-50). 'I do as the Father has commanded me' (John 14:31). In this way, both actively and passively, Christ established that righteousness which would justify the elect. God the Father demonstrated his total satisfaction – pleasure – in, by and with this completed work of his Son, and his full acceptance of it, by raising him from the dead, receiving him back in exaltation into glory, crowned in triumph (Ps. 24:7-10; Isa. 52:13; 53:12; Phil. 2:9-11; 1 Tim. 3:16). And all this belongs to the believer because he is 'in Christ'.

Before I develop all this, let me say that there is no question but that the weight of Scripture comes down heavily on Christ's blood-sacrifice as God's justifying act (Rom. 3:24-26; 5:6,8-10; 6:1-10; 7:6; 8:3; 2 Cor. 5:18-21; Gal. 3:13; Heb. 9:12-15,28; 10:1-14; 13:12; 1 Pet. 3:18; and scores of others). As Paul told us,

this is at the heart of the Lord's supper: 'For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death till he comes' (1 Cor. 11:26). Above all, we have the cardinal text: 'As one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men' (Rom. 5:18). That 'one act of righteousness' can only be Christ's sacrifice on the cross, the shedding of his blood. Scripture always lays massive emphasis on the death of Christ, under the curse of the law, as the justifying righteousness which God accounts to the believer. And nothing I write here must, in the slightest way, be taken to indicate that I am in the least degree detracting from Christ's blood-sacrifice.

But this does not mean that Christ's life of obedience to the Father's will under the law of Moses had no place in establishing the believer's justifying righteousness. Just as we must not detract from his blood-sacrifice, so must we not detract from his law-life of obedience. After all, as I have shown, justification is more than forgiveness, more than pardon; it is God accounting righteousness to the one to be justified. There is a negative aspect to all this: the removal of sin, its guilt, condemnation and power. But there is also a positive aspect: the reckoning of righteousness.

The Mosaic law's regulations fully typified this – the offering of a sacrificial victim. The shedding of its blood typified the removal of sin. The victim had to be without blemish (Ex. 12:5; 29:1; and scores more). Christ, fulfilling the law in every aspect, was without blemish (1 Pet. 1:19). His obedience under the law fitted him to be the perfect sacrifice (Heb. 5:9).¹³

Even so, there is more to Christ's life of obedience than to fit him to be the sacrifice. It did of course, but as he told John the Baptist when urging him to baptise him: 'Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness' (Matt. 3:15). In

¹³ And speaking of the sacrifices, in the first five chapters of Leviticus, we read of two types of offering under the old covenant: the sweet-savoured and the non-sweet. The latter typified the work of Christ in bearing both his people's guilt and God's wrath upon them for it; the former, his righteousness offered to justify them (Eph. 5:2). Thus, as in so many matters (sabbath, priesthood, sacrifice, temple, altar, feast, and so on), the old covenant was a shadow of the new.

his baptism, Christ was identified with us. And this is part of his sanctifying of himself for us (John 17:18-19).

And that was just the start of it. The Son of God became a man for the very purpose of living a life of obedience to the law, which obedience culminated in the offering of his body on the cross. And he underwent all this in order to establish the righteousness that would justify his people. True, the penalty of the law was death, but the way of righteousness under the law was: 'Do and live' (Lev. 18:5; Neh. 9:29; Ezek. 20:11,13,21; Rom. 10:5); as Moses declared to the Israelites: 'It will be righteousness for us, if we are careful to observe all these commandments before the LORD our God, as he has commanded us' (Deut. 6:25). '[God] will render to each one according to his works... It is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified' (Rom. 2:6,13). The law was 'the very commandment that promised life' (Rom. 7:10), 'the very commandment that was intended to bring life' (NIV), 'which was to result in life' (NASB). That is to say, if a man kept God's law perfectly, he would merit life – eternal life.¹⁴ In other words, the law had two things to say with regard to sin and righteousness: it issued both precept and penalty. On the one hand, it demanded perfect obedience and promised reward for it, while, on the other hand, it warned and exacted the ultimate penalty for one transgression. Hence, instead of saying that God demanded 'active' and 'passive' obedience to the law, we could speak in terms of 'preceptive' and 'penal' obedience. Christ suffered the penalty of disobedience (though he himself never sinned) (Isa. 53:1-10; Gal. 3:13), and obtained the reward for perfect obedience (Isa. 53:10-12; John 13:31-32; 17:1).

It was for this very reason, as I have said, that Christ was born under the law (Gal. 4:4). This means far more than that he was a Jew. He was, of course, but he was born under the law in order to come under its jurisdiction, and obey it and suffer under it so that he might redeem his people (Gal. 4:5). And this he did perfectly, without sin (2 Cor. 5:21; Heb. 4:15; 7:26), thus earning salvation

¹⁴ Of course, because man is fallen in Adam, the law cannot justify; it is too weak for that (Rom. 8:3).

for his people – his entire obedience culminating in the offering of himself (or the Father's offering of his Son) as a perfect, spotless sacrifice on the cross. He became, therefore, the perfect Saviour for sinners for ever (Heb. 2:10,18; 5:9; 7:28). His entire existence as a man leading up to the cross is also a vital and integral part of this 'righteousness of Christ'. Hence:

Mary... will bring forth a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins (Matt. 1:20-21). God was manifested in the flesh (1 Tim. 3:16). The Word became flesh and dwelt among us (John 1:14). Jesus Christ... was born of the seed of David according to the flesh (Rom. 1:3). You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that you through his poverty might become rich (2 Cor. 8:9). 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... (Gal. 4:4-5). Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross... (Phil. 2:5-8). Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared in the same [their humanity – NIV], that through death he might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage (Heb. 2:14-15). When he came into the world, he said: '...A body you have prepared for me...' "Behold, I have come... to do your will, O God"...'... By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all (Heb. 10:5-10).

When he was twelve, Jesus told his parents that he must be 'about [his] Father's business' (Luke 2:49). And, as we have seen, when he came to John to be baptised, he spoke of fulfilling 'all righteousness' (Matt. 3:15). While we must avoid speculation, we may surely say that, right from his baptism, the Lord Jesus was on that path of public obedience which would lead him inexorably to the cross. And in the years following his baptism, right up to his crucifixion, how often he spoke of the will of his Father, of his doing that will, of his finishing the work his Father

had given him to do (John 4:34; 5:30; 6:38; 9:4; 17:4), culminating in his triumphant cry on the cross: 'It is finished' (John 19:30). Truly, as a 'servant' (Isa. 42:1; 52:13; Matt. 20:28; Phil. 2:7), Christ always kept his vow to his Father (Ps. 40:6-8; Heb. 10:5-9). And God was pleased. So much so, in prophecy Christ could say:

He brought me out into a broad place; he rescued me, because he delighted in me. The Lord dealt with me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands he rewarded me. For I have kept the ways of the Lord, and have not wickedly departed from my God. For all his rules were before me, and his statutes I did not put away from me. I was blameless before him, and I kept myself from my guilt. So the Lord has rewarded me according to my righteousness, according to the cleanness of my hands in his sight (Ps. 18:19-24).

Consequently, although Scripture lays heavy stress on the death of Christ, the shedding of his blood in atoning sacrifice, as the justifying act, it also speaks of his obedience (Phil. 2:8; Heb. 5:8-9; 10:5-14,19-20). 'By one man's obedience many will be made [constituted] righteous' (Rom. 5:19). Without question, this obedience, as I said, culminated in his death (Matt. 26:39; John 10:18; Rom. 5:18-19; Phil. 2:8; Heb. 5:8; 10:10), for 'Christ... offered himself without spot' – 'without blemish' (NASB); 'unblemished' (NIV) – 'to God' (Heb. 9:14). Nevertheless, his life-obedience was essential to that work. When we are told that God sent 'his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin [and thus] he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us' (Rom. 8:3-4), we must not restrict this to Christ's work on the cross, but include his entire life of obedience.

Furthermore, we know that Christ is 'the last Adam' (1 Cor. 15:45). The first Adam failed to obey God, and therefore died, bringing all men down with him by his one act of disobedience, his one sin, his one trespass (Rom. 5:16,18), resulting in a cataract of trespasses (Rom. 5:16), and the reign of death (Rom. 5:17). Christ, 'the last Adam', lived a life of perfect obedience to God his Father, and then offered that perfect life in his one and only sacrificial death to atone for the elect, thus uniting his active

and passive obedience in order to present his people faultless before his Father, enabling them to reign in life (Rom. 5:17), even as kings (1 Pet. 2:4-10; Rev. 1:6; 5:10; 20:6).

Yes, the apostle does speak of Adam and Christ in terms of 'one act' – Adam's one act of disobedience and Christ's 'one act of righteousness' (Rom. 5:18). But there is a contrast which must not be missed. To ruin all and bring the threatened condemnation, one transgression was sufficient; to merit the promised reward, a lifetime of obedience was required. Just as: 'Whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become accountable for all of it' (Jas. 2:10), so to obtain the reward, Christ never once sinned throughout his entire life. One transgression would have ruined all. Consequently, his entire life had to be one of complete obedience.

And then, to crown it all, Christ's entire obedience of life unto death was completely vindicated by his resurrection:

Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted him and given him the name which is above every name... (Phil. 2:5-9).

Now it is far too weak to say that Christ was raised from the dead simply to vindicate his work, or give proof of the justification he had accomplished on the cross, or to demonstrate that God was being fair to Christ in that since he had earned the pardon, so it was only right that he should be raised. The apostle used *dia*, 'for', 'on account of', in both parts of the following sentence. Christ was delivered *dia* our offences, and was raised *dia* our justification:

Righteousness... shall be imputed to us who believe in him who raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was delivered up because of [for] our offences, and was raised because of [for] our justification (Rom. 4:22-25; see also Rom. 8:33-34; 1 Cor. 15:17; 2 Cor. 5:15).

The apostle clearly attributes the same weight and power to the resurrection as he does to the death of Christ as far as justification goes. Christ died for our sins, on account of our sins, to deal with our sins, in order to deliver us from our offences, and likewise he was raised for our justification, on account of our justification, in order to justify us. This passage, on its own, drives a coach and horses through the passive-obedience-only view.¹⁵

I spoke of the resurrection, and the part it plays in justification. How frequently the early preachers included the resurrection! See Acts 2:24,31-33; 3:15,26; 4:2,10,33; 5:30-31; 10:40; 13:30,33-37; 17:3,18,31-32; 23:6; 24:15,21. In addition, I quote the following from my *Particular Redemption and The Free Offer*:

Christ died *for* sinners and was raised again *for* those same sinners (Rom. 4:25 AV, NIV)... *For* whom? Paul could tell believers: 'If Christ is not risen... you are still in your sins' (1 Cor. 15:17). 'But God, who is rich in mercy, because of his great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ... and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus' (Eph. 2:4-6). Christ died *for* – and was raised *for* – the elect, 'for us'. Not only so. The elect died *with* – and were raised *with* – Christ. This takes us to the vital doctrine of union and identification with Christ in his death *and* burial *and* resurrection *and* ascension. The elect died with Christ when he died, *and* were buried with him when he was buried, *and* were raised with him when he was raised, *and* were taken into glory and seated with him (Rom. 6:2-11; 7:4-6; 2 Cor. 5:14-18; Gal. 2:19-20; Eph. 2:1,4-6; Col. 2:11-15,20; 3:1,3; 1 Pet. 2:24; see also John 14:19; Rom. 8:34; 1 Thess. 5:10; 1 Pet. 1:3). Christ 'was delivered up because of our offences, *and was raised for our justification*' (Rom. 4:25), the 'our' being, of course, the elect.¹⁶

Thus, Christ's *entire* work in his obedient life, culminating in his atoning sacrifice, leading to his vindication by the resurrection, all combined to weave that robe of righteousness which

¹⁵ Union is the key, I remind you, and union with Christ involves union with him in his resurrection (Rom. 6:4-8).

¹⁶ My *Particular Redemption* pp28-29; see also my *Amyraut* p157.

justifyingly clothes the believer in the sight of God (Isa. 61:10; Zech. 3:4). Moreover, as the apostle declared – and note the double ‘much more’ – ‘much more than, having now been justified by his blood, we shall be saved from wrath through him. For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by his life’ (Rom. 5:9-10); that is, in his resurrected life.¹⁷

Consider: ‘Christ also has loved us and given himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma’ (Eph. 5:2). Without doubt, the apostle is referring to the sacrificial death of Christ at Calvary. Now look at the context – both immediate and extended (Eph. 4:17 – 6:24). Once again, there is no question; the context is progressive sanctification. Let me quote the verse *in full*: ‘And walk in love, as Christ also has loved us and given himself for us, an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling aroma’. ‘Walk’ is a word of progressive sanctification, practical godliness. The apostle is commanding believers to live a life of love, not only *because* Christ loved them and gave himself for them, but *as – even as, just as* – he loved them and gave himself for them. Believers must live as Christ lived before his death. In light of the point I am making, this tells me that Christ’s obedience, while it was supremely his sacrificial *death*, also included his peerless *life*. In other words, ‘the righteousness of Christ’, which is accounted to the believer for justification, embraces Christ’s entire obedience – both in life and death, both active and passive. Indeed, as I have observed, it is impossible to divide Christ’s obedience in this way; it is all of a piece.¹⁸

¹⁷ Please note that I do not, as many, warp this to argue that this ‘life’ speaks of Christ’s life before the cross, thereby forcing the text to support my thesis. Even so, it does show that Scripture can speak of Christ’s work and life, other than on the cross, as contributing to our salvation.

¹⁸ While I am, myself, firmly convinced that ‘the faith *of* Christ’ (Rom. 3:22,26; Gal. 2:16, twice; 3:22; Eph. 3:12; Phil. 3:9; all in the Greek) should be thought of as ‘faith *in* Christ’ (as NKJV, NIV, NASB – but see NASB margin in Rom. 3:26; Eph. 3:12), and not ‘the faith *of* Christ’

Whatever the rights and wrongs of the note at the end of the previous paragraph, it is my conviction that Christ's lifetime obedience to his Father's will, including his obedience under the Mosaic law, culminating in his sacrificial death, all under the law, constitutes the justifying righteousness for believers – 'the righteousness of Christ'. And this is what is imputed to the believer.

Imputed righteousness

And when the sinner believes – trusts Christ – he receives this perfect righteousness of Christ. It is imputed to him. It is reckoned to him. It is credited to his account. He receives it at once. Upon his believing, he is absolutely justified. This righteousness, being Christ's perfect and unchangeable and unchanging righteousness, never wanes, never alters. It is fixed, absolute, complete, and knows no variation. The perfect righteousness of Christ clothes the believing sinner, and the believing sinner, therefore, is for ever, from the instant he is justified, perfect beyond all condemnation in the sight of God. God sees no sin in him at all. I am not for a moment suggesting that the believer is sinless. I am not talking about progressive sanctification! No! I am concerned here with justification. I am not talking about the sinner's lifestyle, but his standing before God.¹⁹ As the sinner believes, he is at once and for ever free of condemnation, whoever might accuse him, and whatever offence

(AV – except Rom. 3:26), I realise that the point has been debated for centuries, and is still fervently contested today, not least in the debate over the New Perspective. If the 'of' is right – and, as I say, I am not persuaded it is; in fact, I am convinced that it is not – then perhaps 'the faith of Christ' could be thought of as 'the faithfulness of Christ'. As such, it would lend even more weight to the claim for justification by Christ's obedience in life, as well as his obedience in death.

¹⁹ I am not saying, I hasten to add, that there is no connection between the two. Progressive sanctification is an inevitable consequence of justification. See Eph. 2:8-10, for example. See also Col. 1:22-23. No progressive sanctification? No justification! See Heb. 12:14; Jas. 2:14-26.

they might accuse him of (Rom. 8:1,33-34). *Christ* is his righteousness!

Thus the gospel can truly be said to 'establish the law' (Rom. 3:31). All the law's commands were fully met by Christ. All the law's penalties were fully paid by Christ. All the Father's will was accomplished (John 19:30) by Christ who fulfilled the prophet's words: 'The LORD is well pleased for his righteousness' sake; he will exalt the law and make it honourable' (Isa. 42:21).

And this is what I understand by 'the righteousness of Christ', and the imputation of that righteousness to the sinner as he believes.

Finally, to make the point yet again

First:

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 (Rom. 8:1-4).

By Christ's work, 'the righteous requirement of the law' is 'fulfilled in us'; that is, in believers. 'Fulfilled', and 'fulfilled in us'! Clearly, this is something which God in Christ has done *for* and *in* believers, not something to be done *by* believers trying to keep the law. Paul here *describes* believers; he does not tell them to fulfil the law, spelling out their duty. God, by his Son, Christ Jesus, accomplished the fulfilment of the righteous requirement of the law, and it is this perfect obedience of Christ, his righteousness, which is imputed and imparted to believers. Thus Christ fulfilled the law, and believers have fulfilled it in him. Christ's work imputed to them by the Spirit accomplishes their justification. Christ's work being imparted to them by the Spirit accomplishes their progressive sanctification. And it is this

sanctification which is the evidence and fruit of the fulfilment of the righteous requirement of the law in believers in and by Christ.

Note how Paul does not say the law is now 'obeyed' or 'kept' or 'done' by believers – the usual way of talking about keeping the law – but he says that what the law requires is now 'fulfilled' in believers. Note the passive. Note the word itself: 'fulfilled'! – a word of immense significance in New Testament terms. As we have seen, Christ set the tone right at the start: 'Do not think that I came to destroy the law or the prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfil. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled' (Matt. 5:17-18). As Paul said in Galatians 5:13-18, the indwelling Spirit ensures the 'fulfilment' of the law, its goal, end or aim in the believer – which is, to bring about righteousness. The law, though holy, righteous and good (Rom. 7:12), being weak, could not bring about the righteousness that God required. It is the Spirit who has been given to believers in order to effect, to 'fulfil', the law in them, and so establish that righteousness which the law demanded but was unable to produce. The point is, 'the righteousness requirement' of the law demands positive obedience and not (mere) passive suffering. God 'passed over' the sins of Israel in the Passover, he did not visit them in wrath (Ex. 12:1-28). But the death of the sacrificial lamb did not make the Israelites positively righteous in God's sight. Christ our Passover has been sacrificed for us (1 Cor. 5:7), and so, while we have been redeemed by his precious blood (1 Pet. 1:19), our sins have been expiated, yet this still leaves the need for the imputation of positive righteousness. And we know what the law demanded; we have the scriptural mantra regarding the law: 'Do and live; fail to do and die':

You shall follow my rules and keep my statutes and walk in them. I am the Lord your God. You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the Lord (Lev. 18:4-5).

And behold, a lawyer stood up to put [Jesus] to the test, saying: 'Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?' He said to him: 'What is written in the law? How do you read it?' And he answered: 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all

your mind, and your neighbour as yourself'. And he said to him: 'You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live' (Luke 10:25-28).

When [a man] has done what is just and right, and has been careful to observe all my statutes, he shall surely live. The soul who sins shall die... If a wicked person turns away from all his sins that he has committed and keeps all my statutes and does what is just and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die. None of the transgressions that he has committed shall be remembered against him; for the righteousness that he has done he shall live (Ezek. 18:19-22).

[God] will render to each one according to his works: to those who by patience in well-doing seek for glory and honour and immortality, he will give eternal life; but for those who are self-seeking and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness, there will be wrath and fury. There will be tribulation and distress for every human being who does evil, the Jew first and also the Greek, but glory and honour and peace for everyone who does good, the Jew first and also the Greek. For God shows no partiality... It is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified (Rom. 2:6-11,13).

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

All who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written: 'Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, and do them'. Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for: 'The righteous shall live by faith'. But the law is not of faith, rather: 'The one who does them shall live by them' (Gal. 3:10-12).

And then this:

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5:17-20).

And then:

Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes (Rom. 10:4).

Jesus was unique in that he is the only man that has ever lived in order to fulfil the will of God, and that will surely included the keeping and fulfilling of the law. Christ came into the world in order to fulfil it, as he said (Heb. 10:5-9), and he is the only man ever to come with that purpose, and to do it. Since we ourselves can never produce any better righteousness than that of the Pharisees, the only way that our righteousness can exceed theirs is if the righteousness of Jesus is imputed to us. Moreover, Matthew 5:17-20 speaks of far more than *suffering*, even unto *death*, under the law. Indeed, there is no suggestion whatsoever here of any connection between the Pharisees and death. It is all a question of *obedience in life*. Clearly, Christ was talking of positive obedience to the law.

In short, for justification the sinner has to have a righteousness which matched 'do and live', or else he would die. Christ did both the doing and the dying. It seems to me that the passive-obedience-only school captures the sense of the dying and the pardon, but the full biblical position is only reached if we include Christ's active obedience. We then get both the doing and the dying.

Conclusion

Whether, in this article, I have convinced anyone that we should think of both the active and passive obedience of Christ when speaking of justifying righteousness, such is my case. Nevertheless, as I have said, I am open to correction, and I welcome constructive criticism. I also respectfully ask those who still hold the passive-only-obedience position to face a few questions:

1. Is justification pardon or does it include positive righteousness?

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2. If the answer to that question is the latter, then what, *precisely*, is this positive righteousness which is imputed to the believer?
3. Have you taken *full* account of both the *parallel* and the *contrast* involved in Paul's comparison of Adam and Christ?
4. Why, on your scheme, did Jesus have to become a Jew, to be made under the law?
5. Have you taken *full* account of Romans 4:25?
6. In light of that question, do you regard the life of Christ merely a preparation for the cross, and his resurrection merely a vindication of the cross? Or does Christ's life and justification play a bigger role in the believer's justification than you allow?

