

NEW-COVENANT ARTICLES
VOLUME SEVEN

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

Assurance in the New Covenant.

Baptist Sacramentalism: A Warning to Baptists.

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

Christ is All: No Sanctification by the Law.

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

Fivefold Sanctification.

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

Grace Not Law!: The Answer to Antinomianism.

Infant Baptism Tested.

No Safety Before Saving Faith: Septimus Sears, John Gadsby and the Gospel Standard Added Articles.

Sabbath Questions: An open letter to Iain Murray.

The Gospel Offer is Free (second edition).

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

The Pastor: Does He Exist?

The Priesthood of All Believers: Slogan or Substance?

New-Covenant Articles

Volume Seven

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

Hebrews 8:6,13

David H.J.Gay

BRACHUS

BRACHUS 2015
davidhjgay@googlemail.com

Scripture quotations come from a variety of versions

All my books, kindles, sermons, audio books, articles and videos
can be found by searching the internet under David H.J.Gay

Contents

Note to the Reader.....	7
New-Covenant Theology: A Summary.....	9
The Temple and the New Covenant.....	11
Two Sticks and Three Books	41
Was Isaiah a Preparationist?	51
Legal Assurance	65
New-Covenant Assurance.....	95
The Spirit's Work in Conversion	117
The Spirit's Continual Witness to the Believer.....	133
The Spirit Witnesses... to What?	143
Hans Denck: The Inner and the Outer Word.....	159
Who's Your Husband?	173

Note to the Reader

This is the seventh 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.

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.

The Temple and the New Covenant

Introduction

Nobody can question the paramount importance of the temple within the old covenant. What is not so commonly appreciated, however, is the fact that the temple has a vital role to play today – in the new covenant.¹ But, whereas in the old covenant the temple was a physical building, in the new covenant the physical has entirely disappeared, leaving no role whatsoever for any special buildings; rather, the temple now serves as a motif. But this in no way signals a diminishing role for it. Quite the reverse! With the change of covenants, the truth is, the temple's role has been enhanced. Nevertheless, at first glance, the fact that the temple still makes any contribution – let alone an important contribution – to our understanding of the new covenant is somewhat surprising. After all, Christ, in his life, death and resurrection, fulfilled the old covenant, and thus rendered it obsolete and abolished it, bringing the law, with all its shadows (including the temple, and all that went with it), to its God-appointed end (Rom. 10:4; Gal. 3:19-25; Col. 2:16-17; Heb. 7:18,22; 8:7,13; 10:18). The temple's destruction in AD70 (completed in AD135) trumpeted the end of those shadows more dramatically than any other event. As Christ had predicted: 'There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down' (Matt. 24:2; Luke 19:41-44). The old covenant was over. It had been rendered obsolete and abolished by Christ. The fall of the temple graphically symbolised this. As did God's immediate tearing down of the temple curtain (Matt. 27:51).

Nevertheless, as the apostolic writings make clear, the temple motif continues into the new covenant, and still has a vibrant role to play, and, as such, has a great deal to teach us as believers today. If we want to fully appreciate the glories of the new

¹ Indeed, I have to confess this applied to me until recently, when I read James M. Hamilton's *God's Indwelling Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Old & New Testaments*, B&H Publishing Group, Nashville, 2006.

The Temple and the New Covenant

covenant – all that Christ is to us, all that Christ has done for us, all that Christ is doing in us – we must get to grips with the importance of the temple within the old covenant. And to do that, we must go back to the old covenant, and properly understand its role in those days. By getting to grips with the part the temple played in the old covenant, we will be able to see more clearly the glories, the privileges and the attendant responsibilities which accrue to the temple in the new covenant – those glories, privileges and responsibilities which belong to us, as believers, even now, as members of Christ.

That being said, we must remember that although the temple lives on despite the end of the old covenant, staggering changes did take place with the setting up of the new covenant. How important is this caveat! The switch in the temple is on a par with the corresponding change in the sabbath, the priesthood, the sacrifices, the feasts, and so on. All have come to an end with the fulfilment of the old covenant, and yet all live on as paradigms or motifs within the new covenant.² But none of the shadows retain the form they had in the days of the old covenant. Alas, many forget this, or ignore it, and cling to the shadows, and want believers to treat them as part of a hybrid old/new covenant. In particular, this can be seen in the way many believers treat the sabbath. This approach is utterly unscriptural. Alas, where such teaching gets a grip, it carries a high price-tag. Those teachers who insist on keeping old-covenant shadows, even in a modified way, are inflicting heavy damage on believers, both individually and corporately.³ They not only impose heavy burdens upon

² The same can and must be said about the law in its entirety.

³ It is nothing new. It all began in the days of time of the apostles. The law men of those days fixed on circumcision and dietary laws (Acts 15:1,5), even though circumcision was not strictly a part of the law; by that time it had become such in popular culture (John 7:22). This is why Paul dealt with it so often (see, for instance, Rom. 2:25-29; 3:30; 4:9-16; 1 Cor. 7:18-19; Gal. 2:3-5,11-14; 5:2-12; 6:12-15; Phil. 3:2-4). The later Fathers took up the idea of going to the old covenant, extending it with a vengeance, with enormous cost to subsequent generations of believers. For more on all this, see my *Christ; Infant; The Pastor; Sabbath Questions*; and so on.

The Temple and the New Covenant

them, but they diminish their appreciation of Christ and the glories of the new covenant. It should stop at once.

The fact is, although there is a measure of continuity between the old and new covenants, there is a massive discontinuity between them. *This must not be glossed over or ignored.* The disjoint in the covenants, the contrast between them, is a vital biblical principle, written large across Scripture. Take just one passage, out of many, to make the point. I refer to Jeremiah's prophecy of the new covenant:

Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a *new covenant* with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, *not like* the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbour and each his brother, saying: 'Know the Lord', for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more (Jer. 31:31-34).

As we know, Jeremiah was speaking of the new covenant to be brought in by Christ (Heb. 7:11 – 8:13; 10:1-18; Luke 10:23-24; 24:44; Acts 3:18; 1 Pet. 1:10-12). Let these words sink in: 'This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant... If that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second... In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away' (Heb. 7:22; 8:7,13). Clearly, we are reading of an unmistakable disjoint in the covenants, an unbridgeable contrast between them, a contrast which arises out of the radical newness of the final covenant.

Getting this disjoint wrong, trying to argue that the two covenants are really one and the same, maintaining that they are nothing but different administrations of the one covenant, is the fundamental fault with covenant theology. That system, invented in Germany in the late 16th century, holds many believers in

bondage, inflicting heavy damage upon them, not least in the life of the *ekklēsia*.⁴

This discontinuity in the covenants is due entirely to the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ came into the world under the law (Gal. 4:4), fulfilled every aspect of the old covenant, and thus removed it by bringing in the new (Heb. 7:18-19,22; 8:1-13; 10:15-18). In Christ, all the shadows of the old covenant – including the temple – were brought to their full and God-intended fruition, he himself being the believer’s priest, the believer’s sacrifice, the believer’s sabbath, and so on (Rom. 10:4; Col. 2:16-17; Heb. 8:5-6; 9:23-28; 10:1,5-14). And, as I say, in nothing is this more true than the temple, in its change of role.

In this article, I want *briefly* to set out these changes in the role of the temple. Then I will indicate some areas where a *full* development of the thesis would be profitable – hoping to encourage all believers to reach a better appreciation of Christ’s glorious accomplishments, all of which belong to us as members of the new covenant.

This how I propose to go about my task. First I will set out the importance of the temple in the old covenant. Then I will turn to the promises of the new covenant – as found in the prophets – and show how they spoke of a continuing role for the temple; indeed, that they spoke of an enlarged role for the temple. Next, I will look at the life of Jesus, both as to his actual presence in the temple, and what he had to say about its role in the new covenant. After which I will delineate the part played by the temple in the new covenant. Finally, I will flag up some areas where this study can help us to come to a greater understanding and appreciation of our position as believers in Christ in the days of the new covenant.

The temple in the old covenant

God sanctified Israel. What does this mean? The root meaning of ‘sanctification’ is ‘separation’. First, in eternity God chose Israel to be his people (Deut 7:6-8; 10:15; Ps. 135:4; Isa. 45:4), as his

⁴ See the previous note.

firstborn son (Ex. 4:22-23), thus separating Israel from all other people. Then, at the appointed time (Acts 7:17), according to his promise (Gen. 15:13-21), he delivered the children of Israel from Egypt, making them into a nation, forming them into his own special people (Ex. 19:3-6; Deut. 7:6; 26:16-19; Ps. 114:1-2). Within a few weeks of the exodus, God gave Israel his law – something he did for no other people (Deut. 4:1 – 6:25; 7:6-11; Ps. 147:19-20; Rom. 3:1-2; 9:4-5), thereby clearly distinguishing Israel from all other nations (Eph. 2:14-15) – *all* nations, not merely Egypt. In addition, and in particular, in the Wilderness of Sin (Ex. 16:1,23), confirming it at Sinai (Ex. 20:8-11; Neh. 9:13-14), he gave Israel the sabbath as the great, the unique, the distinctive marker which would further separate them from all the nations (Ex. 31:13-17; Ezek. 20:12,20).⁵

This is what we must understand by the word ‘sanctified’. God ‘sanctified’ Israel; that is, he separated his chosen people, Israel, by delivering them from Egypt, by forming them into his special, holy people,⁶ and by giving them his law – in particular, the sabbath.

But this was not all. As the climax of the old covenant, its crowning blessing, God, having liberated his people from Egyptian slavery, announced that he would dwell among them; specifically, and amazingly, that he would dwell among his people in a tent or tabernacle. Think of that! Almighty God would dwell in a tent! In a tent, I ask you! In pursuance of his promise, God commanded Moses to construct this tabernacle, with all its furnishings, apparatus and concomitants, as a copy of the true, heavenly tabernacle (Ex. 25:40), and to do so in every respect

⁵ See my *Sabbath Questions* pp93-103.

⁶ Not that all Israel was saved. Israel was elect as a nation, but not every Israelite was elected to everlasting salvation. See Rom. 9:6-18. The sanctification of Israel typified, foreshadowed, the saving of the elect by Christ: ‘The “redemption” or “salvation” of Israel was only a shadow of the real salvation in Christ in the new covenant. Deliverance from Egypt was not “salvation” in the full sense; it was only a shadow of the believer’s redemption in Christ, his deliverance from sin, law and death. Everything about Israel’s deliverance from Egypt firmly pointed to the reality; namely, Christ’ (taken from my *Sabbath Questions* p72).

down to the last detail (Heb. 8:5), thus showing that, although the *reality* of his presence was in the spiritual or heavenly realm, the earthly tabernacle would serve as a copy of that eternal reality.

And so it was that God, in the tabernacle, dwelt among his sanctified people. The tabernacle would be the place where he displayed his glory to them (Ex. 40:34-35), the place where he would receive their sacrifices, where he would give them guidance in all their travels (Ex. 40:36-38), where he wanted Israel to deposit the ark (chest or box) of the covenant, that ark to contain the tables of the law of the covenant with the book of the law alongside it, above which he would meet with his people at the mercy seat (Ex. 25:16-22; 31:18; 32:15; Deut. 9:9-15; 10:3-5; 31:26 Heb. 9:4). Thus, all God's dealings with Israel centred on the tabernacle, his dwelling place among his people. God further signalled this by giving precise stipulations regarding the order of Israel's camp around the tabernacle, especially in that the people had to be close to it, but not too close (Num. 2:2ff). Moreover, once the tabernacle had been set up, God made it clear that he would be worshipped by Israel only in his dwelling place, the tabernacle. And nowhere else (Deut. 12:5-7).

In all these ways, the tabernacle was connected directly with Israel's sanctification, distinguishing Israel, separating Israel, from all other people. The tabernacle represented this separation, this sanctification. The two went together. It is no exaggeration to say that the tabernacle represented the apex of that sanctification. The tabernacle, therefore, symbolised all that God had promised to Israel, all that God was to Israel, and all that made Israel a people distinct from all others. Of Israel, it could be truly said: 'Behold, a people dwelling alone', rightly 'not counting itself among the nations' (Num. 23:9). And at the very heart of this separation, God dwelt among his people, making the tabernacle his abode.

Even so, the tabernacle was only a temporary tent – portable above all – fit for a nomadic people travelling through a hostile wilderness. Whenever God gave the signal, Israel had to break camp, and move on. But even here, Israel, in obedience to God's most exact instructions, had to take special care over the dismantling of the tabernacle, its transport and re-erection. All

had to be done in the precise, prescribed order, and by the right people (Num. 3:1 – 4:49). After all, even though the tent was only temporary, it *was* God's dwelling place among his people. As such, it had to be revered. As God commanded Israel: 'You shall keep my sabbaths and reverence my sanctuary: I am the Lord' (Lev. 26:2).

Once the need for portability had passed, however, once Israel enjoyed a settled peace within the promised land, the time was ripe for the replacement of the portable tabernacle, first by David's tent, and then by the erection of a permanent temple on the hill of Zion at Jerusalem. Yet this, too, was God's purpose – as he had made clear right from the start (Deut. 12:8-14). Thus, at the appointed time, the temple replaced the tabernacle as a special marker and privilege for Israel (Rom. 9:4), the place where God dwelt among his separated people.

God could not have made the position any clearer. The tabernacle, and then the temple which superseded it – above all, the temple – was at the very heart of Israel's relationship with God, the place where God dwelt, the place where God reigned, the place where God was worshipped, the place of sacrifice, and the place where God demonstrated his people's sanctification or separation from the world. So much so, it is well-nigh impossible to over-state the importance of the temple within the old covenant. Indeed, it could be said that the temple virtually stood for the sum and substance of the old covenant (1 Kings 8:22-66; Ps. 9:11; 11:4; 22:3; 73:17; 80:1; 84:10; 132:7-9,13-18; 150:1; Jer. 17:12; Joel 3:16-17,21; Hab. 2:20; Zech. 2:10-13).

And even when the children of Israel languished under God's judgement, and thus were forcibly separated from their land and, therefore, were separated from the temple, when they were denied access to it and its ministry, the very act of praying towards Jerusalem and the temple continued to hold meaning and hope for them in their sorrows (1 Kings 8:46-51; Ps. 137:1-6; Dan. 6:10; Jonah 2:4,7). God, through Jeremiah, had encouraged them in this reverence for the temple (Jer. 31:23).⁷ Then again, God could

⁷ The book of Lamentations concerns the destruction of Jerusalem, the nation and, of course, the temple.

offer no greater symbol of his anger with Israel than to destroy the temple (Jer. 26:1-6). Short of turning it into an idol, a superstitious slogan (Jer. 7:1-4), Israel had to hold the temple in the highest regard (Ps. 137:6). Sadly, the nation did not always remember this caution (Ezek. 23:38), committing the worst of sins in this regard by setting up their idols in the temple (Jer. 32:30-35).⁸ But, as I say, short of idolatry, no praise was too high for the temple. As Jeremiah declared, even though Israel merited God's wrath, and God used Babylon to deploy that wrath, he was, nevertheless, determined to avenge Babylon's desecration of his temple (Jer. 51:11).

In light of this, nobody should question the paramount importance of the temple in the old covenant. To remove any remaining doubt, one needs only to weigh the account of David's desire to replace the tabernacle (his tent) with a permanent and glorious temple (2 Sam. 7:1-2), and all that followed from that; namely, God's promise that Solomon would build a house for him (2 Sam. 7:12-13), the actual building of the temple (1 Kings 6:1ff), the magnificence of the completed building with all its furnishings, crowned as it was by the entrance of the glory of the LORD (1 Kings 7:13 – 8:11), followed by Solomon's address to the people (1 Kings 8:12-21) and his prayer of dedication (1 Kings 8:22-53), his benediction of the people (1 Kings 8:54-61), and the offering of an immense number of sacrifices at the time (1 Kings 8:62-66), all being crowned by God's solemn warning about the temple if his people forsook him (1 Kings 9:1-9). If that does not set the glory of the temple within the old covenant in its proper perspective, nothing will.

Nevertheless, despite all that I have said about the glory of the temple and its importance within the old covenant, God, through the prophets, made it very clear that the old covenant, itself, was temporary and would be replaced by a new covenant, the new covenant fulfilling and abolishing all that the old had foreshadowed. Naturally, this inevitably included the sabbath, the priesthood, the sacrifices and all. Not least, it included the temple.

⁸ But even in his judgement for that, God spoke of mercy (Jer. 32:36-44; 33:1-26).

The Temple and the New Covenant

Magnificent as was, the temple was only a picture, a shadow, an external representation of the eternal spiritual reality of the heavenly temple, serving as a shadow during the age of the old covenant. So much so, although I have called the temple 'permanent', it was anything but. As, in God's purpose, the old covenant was temporary, lasting until Christ (Gal. 3:19-25), so the temple. It was destroyed by the Babylonians, re-erected under Ezra and Nehemiah supported and encouraged by the restoration prophets, but it was finally destroyed in AD70 (completely so in AD135).

The reason for the temple's final destruction is patent. With the establishment of the new covenant, the old was fulfilled, rendered obsolete and, therefore, abolished. The signal for this was Christ's great cry of triumph on the cross: 'It is accomplished!' (John 19:30). The immediate tearing down of the temple veil, 'at that moment' (Matt. 27:51), was but the first step in this process. The ending of the old covenant, and the setting up of the new, was so utterly irreversible a step that, following the climactic events of Christ's death and resurrection, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, believers would have no use for temple worship and sacrifice or priesthood; such practice would have been an abomination.⁹ The old had gone; the new had been

⁹ The first disciples could use the building for their own purposes, not least to evangelise (Acts 2:46; 3:1ff; 5:42), but even then they rapidly moved out from the temple courts (Acts 1:12-14; 4:23; 12:12). From that time on, we do not read that they made any further use of the temple ministry. Old-covenant observance did not cease at a stroke, of course. There is clear New Testament evidence that grey areas existed for a time. See for example Acts 21:17-26. In brief, this passage, which merits more study than this article will allow, stands out as almost unique (but see Acts 18:18) in the biblical record. I am convinced that there were special reasons for Paul's action; regarding it as the norm would be a big mistake. The fact is, just as the temple veil was torn down (Matt. 27:51), so, in reality, the temple, the sacrifices, the altar, the temple, the priesthood all came to an end, all having been fulfilled and abolished by Christ. The sabbath is no exception to this principle. The fact that the apostles used the sabbath to evangelise the Jews, does not mean they were sabbatarians. Just as Jesus, eating with prostitutes, profligates and cheats, did not become one, neither did Paul become a sabbatarian by

brought in (Rom. 7:4-6; 2 Cor. 3:6-11; Gal. 3:19 – 4:7; Heb. 7:18-22; 8:1-13; 10:1-22). This, let me stress, represented no change of mind on God's part, for all had been foretold, over and over again, by the prophets in the old covenant (Luke 10:23-24; 24:44; Acts 3:18; 1 Pet. 1:10-12).

And it is now time to look at those prophecies. But before that, let me list the points I wish to carry forward. When we think of the temple in the old covenant, we must keep in mind its role as the place where God dwelt among his people, the place where he received their worship and sacrifice by means of the priesthood, the place where he dispensed his law, the place where he revealed his glory. While I do not suggest that these things exhaust the significance of the temple for Israel in the old covenant, they are the most salient for my purpose.

The temple in the promise of the new covenant

Four hundred and thirty years after God gave his promise to Abraham (Gal. 3:17), he brought in the law as a supplementary measure, adding it to the Abrahamic promise, intending that the law should serve as a temporary measure for Israel, to last until the coming of the Seed (Rom. 5:20; Gal. 3:16-25), the one who would fulfil and abolish it. The fact is, God had never intended the old covenant to be his final word. Through Moses, God let Israel know that he had a fuller revelation to make by a coming, greater prophet (Deut. 18:15,18-19). It was through the later prophets, however, that God spelled out the explicit terms of the new covenant which would replace the old (Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 36:24-38; see also Isaiah 56:1-8; 60:1-22; 61:1-11; 62:1-12; 66:1-2; Jer. 3:14-18).¹⁰

attending the synagogue or going to a meeting by the river on that day (Acts 13:5,14; 14:1; 16:13, and so on). He went to preach the gospel! 'Going to church', whatever that may mean, does not make somebody into a Christian!

¹⁰ See 'The Prophets and the New Covenant'. Incidentally, judging by the weight he gave to the subject, I think it could well be said that Ezekiel was 'the prophet of the temple', the temple which God himself described as 'my treasured place' (Ezek. 7:22).

The Temple and the New Covenant

By these prophecies (Luke 10:23-24; 24:44; Acts 3:18; 1 Pet. 1:10-12), Israel was told to expect earth-shattering changes with the end of the old covenant, and the start of the new. Inevitably, of course, the temple would be caught up in this tectonic alteration. It could not escape; it had to go. It is not without significance that Haggai, one of the prophets concerned with the re-building of the temple for Israel in the closing centuries of the old covenant, was used by God to be the main prophet to make this clear (Hag. 2:6-9,21-23).

How would the temple be changed with the end of the old covenant and the establishment of the new? What did the prophets foretell? What staggering changes did they predict? For a start, they predicted that God would no longer dwell in the temple at Jerusalem, but directly and immediately within his people (Ezek. 36:27). Consequently, no longer would his people have to assemble at Jerusalem to meet with him (Joel 3:17-21; Mal. 1:11). The physical temple, built on the physical mount Zion in the physical Jerusalem, would no longer hold any importance. In fact, the new temple, in the new covenant, just like the new priesthood, sacrifices, altar and sabbath, would be entirely spiritual (Gal. 4:21 – 5:1, especially 4:25-26; Heb. 12:22-24).

Even so, as they were bound to do, in delivering their prophecies the prophets continued to make use of all the shadows of the old covenant. In particular, the prophets used the temple (and Jerusalem/Zion) as a motif to say that the holy mountain of Jerusalem and the house of the God of Jacob would be the focus of pilgrimage for all the nations, including, therefore, the Gentiles, the temple would be the place to find the Messiah, and whence he would issue his law (Isa. 2:1-5; 27:13; Mic. 4:1-2; Mal. 3:1-4). In the new covenant, Jerusalem would be the centre of the world, and the city's new name would be: 'The Lord Is There' (Ezek. 48:35); that is, God himself would dwell there (Ezek. 5:5; 40:1 – 46:24). The new temple would be the place where men would find God. One passage must suffice:

My servant David shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall walk in my rules and be careful to obey my statutes. They shall dwell in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob, where your fathers lived. They and their children

The Temple and the New Covenant

and their children's children shall dwell there forever, and David my servant shall be their prince forever. I will make a covenant of peace with them. It shall be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will set them in their land and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in their midst forevermore. My dwelling place shall be with them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Then the nations will know that I am the Lord who sanctifies Israel, when my sanctuary is in their midst forevermore (Ezek. 37:24-28).¹¹

Speaking from the standpoint of the prophets, how could both be true? How could it be that, within the new covenant, God would not dwell in the temple at Jerusalem, the temple would be removed, *and yet* Jerusalem, along with the temple, would be the focus of attention for all the new-covenant people throughout the world? How could these things be reconciled? And when would such things come to pass? Who would bring it in? And how? No wonder the prophets scratched their heads about these things (Luke 10:23-24; 1 Pet. 1:10-12).

With the benefit of hindsight – now that Christ has come and brought in the new covenant, and the Spirit, through the apostles (John 16:12-15) has made all things clear in Scripture – we can now see that all would come to pass through Christ. In the fullness of the time he had appointed (Gal. 4:4), the Father would send his Son into the world. With the coming of Christ, the promised day would dawn. Light would come into the world (John 1:1-9). Christ (the revelation to be completed through his apostles) would explain all things. Darkness would give way to light (Isa. 9:1-2; John 12:35-36). As Christ would declare: ‘The law and the prophets [that is, the age of the law and the prophets] were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached’ (Luke 16:16). Significantly, Jesus would open his own ministry in the darkest place, the north (Matt. 4:12-17; Mark 1:14-15). But even before that, Jesus would be taken to the temple. Then it could be said that the kingly priest in the order of Melchizedek (Gen. 14:18-20; Ps. 110:4; Zech. 3:1-8; Heb. 6:30 – 7:28) had come to his temple (Mal. 3:1), and that he was about to

¹¹ See also Isa. 28:16; 48:2; 52:1; 62:1-5; Amos 9:11-15; Zech. 8:19; 12:11-14; 14:16-21. This language, clearly, is ‘temple-speak’.

The Temple and the New Covenant

shake all things (Heb. 12:18-29); not least, he was about to fulfil and remove the old covenant (2 Cor. 3:6-11), and bring in the new. As the angel said to Mary:

You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end (Luke 1:31-33).

And as Mary said in her song:

He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever (Luke 1:54-55).

And as Zechariah, in his song, made clear:

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us; to show the mercy promised to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our father Abraham, to grant us that we, being delivered from the hand of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. And you, child, [that is, John the Baptist] will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace (Luke 1:68-79).

In this way the prophets prepared Israel for the coming of the Messiah.

Jesus and the temple

I will deal with this under two headings. First, I will set out Christ's physical or personal connection with the temple. And then I will turn to his pronouncements concerning the temple, and

the temple allusions he used when speaking of himself within the new covenant.

Jesus actually in the temple

The birth of Jesus' precursor, John the Baptist, was announced in the temple (Luke 1:5-22). With the coming of the Messiah, the Lord had come – literally – to his temple (Mal. 3:1), he, the 'long-expected Jesus',¹² having been born as a Jew under the law (Gal. 4:4). From infancy, he was presented, according to the law, at the temple, and attended its festivals (Luke 2:21-52).¹³ In his ministry, Jesus told cleansed lepers to go (to the temple) to show themselves to the priest and offer the required gift as a testimony to the Jews (Matt. 8:4; Luke 17:14). He not only submitted himself to the law of the temple, but he taught – daily, at times – in its precincts (Matt. 26:55; Mark 11:17; Luke 19:47; 22:53; John 18:20), even taking the law (and, literally, a whip) into his own hands, to show his authority over the temple by dramatically cleansing it (Matt. 21:12-17; Mark 11:15-17; Luke 19:45-46; John 2:13-17).¹⁴ Whatever else may be said about Christ, clearly he was a man of the temple. No man had a higher view of the building and all it stood for (Matt. 23:16-22; John 2:16-17).

Jesus' allusions to the temple

Not only did Jesus submit to temple ordinances, not only did he teach within its courts, but he had a great deal to say *about* the temple. In particular, he made it clear that he was bringing the physical temple to its end, in that he himself was now the embodiment of all that the temple stood for, foreshadowed, pictured and represented. From now on he himself would be the temple.

'Christ is the temple'. This theme figured so prominently in our Lord's ministry, and is, therefore, of such importance, I want to develop the point, especially from the Gospel of John. Right from the start of his Jerusalem ministry, Jesus made it perfectly

¹² The hymn by Charles Wesley: 'Come, thou long-expected Jesus,/ Born to set thy people free'.

¹³ Indeed, Luke 2 could be called a chapter of the temple.

¹⁴ The event is recorded in all four Gospels, please note.

clear that he was going to be the new temple (John 2:19-22). Years later, John, when writing his Gospel, showed that he had grasped the significance; indeed, John's Gospel is the only one to record Christ's statement. And note how he placed Jesus' cleansing of the temple near the beginning of his record, not – as the other three writers – at the end. Why? Surely because he saw its significance and wanted to stress it. How did he begin his Gospel? Do not miss its temple (tabernacle) overtones: in Christ's incarnation, his coming into this world as the word-made-flesh, Jesus 'tabernacled' among men in order to manifest the glory of God (John 1:14-18). Again, Jesus described himself (John 1:51) as the new Jacob's ladder, the new Bethel, the new house of God (Gen. 28:12-19); in short, as the new temple. As befitting his role as the temple (tabernacle) (Ex. 40:34-38; Lev. 26:11-12; Ezek. 43:7; Joel 3:17; Zech. 2:10), God's glory, God himself, Christ claimed, dwelt in him (John 10:38; 14:10).

Not only is Jesus the temple: he is the temple's sacrificial Lamb of God to atone for sin (Isa. 53:7; John 1:29,36; Acts 8:32; 1 Pet. 1:19; Rev. 5:6,8,12; 6:1; 7:9-10;14,17; see also 2 Cor. 5:21). Indeed, he is the Passover lamb (1 Cor. 5:7). In preparation for the actual feast in his day, Jesus cleansed the temple before it began, even as he was speaking of himself as the temple (John 2:13-23).

And what of the temple apparatus? In all that now follows, do not miss the temple (tabernacle) language and overtone (see Ex. 25:1 – 31:18; 35:1 – 40:38; Heb. 9:1-10). Jesus is the water of life (John 4:10-14; 7:37-38; Rev. 7:17; 21:6; 22:1,17; see Ezek. 47:1-12; Zech. 14:8). He is the effective laver (John 3:5; Eph. 5:26; Tit. 3:5; 1 Pet. 3:21). He is the living bread (John 6:35,48-51). He is the true light (Matt. 17:2; John 1:4-9; 3:19-21; 8:12; 9:5; 12:35-36,46; see Eph. 5:14; 2 Tim. 1:10; Heb. 1:3; 1 John 2:8). Christ is all (Col. 3:11). When Jesus attended the feasts he made it clear that he was the reality of the shadow they were observing – the feast of Tabernacles (John 7), the feast of Lights (John 10) and the Passover (John 2,6,12-19). Nor must we forget the temple overtones of Christ's prayer as the great high priest; namely, the indwelling presence and power of God (John 17).

In light of all this, it is no wonder that Christ could declare: 'I tell you, something greater than the temple is here... For the Son of Man is lord of the sabbath' (Matt. 12:6-8, and on), clearly referring to himself, and all he would accomplish. Matthew Poole: 'The temple was but a type of me'.¹⁵ Do not miss the sabbath context. As Bengel observed: 'The temple gives way to Christ, the sabbath to the temple; therefore, the sabbath to Christ'.¹⁶

Was the temple not the place where the law was kept and administered? Was the law not at its very heart in the holiest place of all beneath the mercy seat? Well, then, Christ, as the temple, would fulfil this vital role and thus render this old-covenant shadow obsolete, he being 'the Word made flesh' (John 1:14). Had the prophets not foretold that the law would go out from Zion (Isa. 2:3; Micah 4:2)? Well, then, Christ was the great and final prophet (Luke 7:16; Heb. 1:1-2), the prophet that Moses had promised (Deut. 18:15,18-19), and, as such, throughout his ministry, he repeatedly set out his own law for his people – from his Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5 – 7) to his extended discourse at the foot washing (John 13 – 16). Moreover, in his final commission to his disciples, he commanded them, empowered by his authority and Spirit, to go into all the world and preach his gospel for the conversion of sinners, and preach his gospel, as his law, to those converts for their obedience (Matt. 28:18-20; Mark. 16:15-16; Luke 24:47-49; Acts 1:8). As for the physical temple, Christ made it plain that he was bringing it, as a central part of the old covenant, and along with that covenant, to its God-appointed close. From the time of the inauguration of the new covenant, worship would no longer be confined to any particular locality, certainly not to the temple at Jerusalem. From now on, there would be no holy places or sites or buildings (Luke 7:16; John 4:19-26). Since he, himself, would be the temple (John 2:19-22), no longer would men talk of having to go to the literal

¹⁵ Note the 'but'.

¹⁶ Some see in Jesus' reaction to the temple tax (Matt. 17:24-27) an illustration that Christ's people, exempt from that tax, are set free from the Mosaic law.

Zion (Ps. 27:4) – Emmanuel, God in Christ, himself was with his people (Matt. 1:23).

The old temple was to be abolished: Jesus warned the Jews that their house would be left desolate (Matt. 23:38).¹⁷ As he immediately went on to explain, not one of the temple's stones would be left on another (Matt. 24:1-2). The Jews did not miss the point.¹⁸ So deeply were they offended by what he said, so stung by it, they grasped with both hands the chance which presented itself at his trial, and made full use of 'the temple' to get their own back, and clinch the guilty verdict they were determined to obtain (Matt. 26:60-61). Not content with that, they continued to use 'the temple' to taunt him in his agony on the cross (Matt. 27:39-40; Mark 15:29-30). And where did Judas take his blood money? Back to the temple (Matt. 27:5)! It is not insignificant that it was the temple authorities who accused Christ (Luke 23:10; John 19:6), and it was the temple guards who had their hand in arresting him (John 18:3).

It can come as no surprise then, to read that both Christ and the early disciples were accused of speaking against the temple or insulting it, desecrating it (Matt. 26:61; Acts 6:13-14; 21:28; 24:6) – almost certainly because of their attitude to the physical temple. The believers preached Christ and, therefore, inevitably, they preached the end of the old covenant, including the law and the temple. On hearing this, the Jewish authorities were reminded of the smart they had endured under Christ. Here it was, all over again! So when the Jews accused Stephen, not the least point in their attack was his preaching of Christ and the end of the temple (Acts 6:13-14). In his defence, while stressing the temple's importance, Stephen highlighted the temple's inadequacy under the old covenant (Acts 7:44-50), great though it had been in the days of the old covenant. In effect, he was telling the Jews that the temple had reached, could only have reached, its full glory in the new covenant in Christ. As John put it: 'The Word became

¹⁷ In saying this, he was surely including the city and, especially, the temple.

¹⁸ The authorities were also afraid that the Romans would destroy the temple if they did not put a stop to Jesus (John 11:48).

flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth' (John 1:14).

Getting ahead of ourselves for the moment, is it significant that the first apostolic miracle was performed at the gates of the temple (Acts 3)? I don't think it was just any old place. It seems that God was using the believers and their use of the temple to provoke the Jews (see Acts 5:20-21,25,42), just as Christ had done over the sabbath issue, times without number (see, for instance, Luke 5:36 – 6:11; 13:10-17; 14:1-6; John 5:1-18, and on; John 9:14). Treating Acts 6:1-7 as an aside, as it is, the miracle (and all that came from it) leads on directly to Stephen in Acts 6 and 7.

It is time to look, in a little more detail, at the apostolic explanation of the temple's role as a motif in the new covenant.

The new covenant and the temple

As Christ himself explained, all this, and much more, would be made clear to the apostles by the direct revelation of the Spirit (John 16:12-15), who would, in turn, set out these principles in the fullest and clearest detail for all time for all believers. And what do the apostles tell us? In accordance with God's eternal purpose, and in line with the prophets, Christ, at the appointed time, fulfilled and abolished the law, the old covenant, by establishing the new (Rom. 7:4-6; 2 Cor. 3:6-11; Gal. 3:19 – 4:7; Heb. 7:18-22; 8:1-13; 10:10-22), fulfilling the prophecies (Acts 15:13-18, for instance), especially the prophecy given by Moses concerning the great Prophet (Acts 3:22; 7:37; Heb. 1:1-2). Thus, all the shadows were brought to their intended end as Christ established their reality (Col. 2:16-17), including the priesthood, the sacrifices, the sabbath *and the temple itself*. In the new covenant, the temple, Zion and Jerusalem are all spiritual (Gal. 4:25-26; Heb. 12:18-24).¹⁹ As a consequence, the writer to the Hebrews could say:

¹⁹ Take the prophecy of Zion in Isaiah 28:16. Do not miss the contrast between Sinai and Zion (or Jerusalem) (Rom. 9:33; 10:11; 11:26; Gal. 4:24-27; Heb. 12:22-24; 1 Pet. 2:6-8).

The Temple and the New Covenant

Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water (Heb. 10:19-22).

As the temple was the centre of the old covenant, so it is in the new. And just as the Aaronic priesthood was at the heart of the old covenant, so the priesthood of Christ is at the heart of the new covenant (Heb. 7:11-22). Now, Christ is the temple, the dwelling place of God, the house of God (1 Cor. 3:9-17; 6:19-20; 2 Cor. 6:14-18; Eph. 2:18-22). Not only that. In this new-covenant temple and priesthood, believers, too, are priests. Moreover, as the Father sent the Son, so now the Son sends his disciples (John 17:18-21; 20:21). As the Father worked in and through the Son, so the Son, through the Spirit (John 5:19; 14:16-23), works in and through believers (John 15:26-27; 16:12-15), they being united to him as the branches to the vine (John 15:1-8), being married to him – since in him they have died to the law (Rom. 7:4-6). His people now form a spiritual nation of kingly priests under Christ as the great king, prophet and priest.²⁰

Herein lies the radical newness of the new covenant: Christ is the temple, the law, the covenant, the priest, the altar, the sacrifice. And, in turn, by his indwelling Spirit, Christ makes his people (both corporately and individually) the temple and priests, enabling them to offer spiritual sacrifices well-pleasing to God,²¹ with Christ himself as the great high priest over the house of God. As God dwelt in the temple, so Christ dwells in his people by his Spirit (John 14:15-18, 25-27; 15:1-8, 26; Rom. 8:9; Eph. 2:22; 1 John 3:24; 4:13). Access to God is now totally independent of place or building (Heb. 4:14-16; 10:22; 12:22-24). As James Hamilton put it:

²⁰ Of course, some of the above applied exclusively to the apostles, but not all of it.

²¹ See my *The Priesthood*.

The Temple and the New Covenant

[Corporate] worship takes place wherever the people of God assemble, for they are his temple (Matt. 18:20). No longer must believers pilgrimage to Jerusalem three times a year (Deut. 16:16). Christians have no [physical] altars of sacrifice in specific places (Gen. 12:8; 13:4; 26:25), and the New Testament does not designate certain locations as 'holy places' (Gen. 28:17-22). Old-covenant believers longed for Jerusalem (Ps. 137:5-6) and specifically the temple (Ps. 122:1). New-covenant believers long for no holy place on earth; they worship wherever God puts them (Acts 14:24-25; [16:25], and long for Jesus' return and his heavenly city (2 Tim. 4:8; Heb. 11:16; Rev. 22:17,20).²²

Believers are the light (Matt. 5:14; see also 2 Cor. 4:4-6; 6:14; Eph. 5:8-10; Phil. 2:15; 1 Thess. 5:5; 1 Pet. 2:9).²³ In short, Exodus 19:6 has been fulfilled in 1 Peter 2:4-10 and Revelation 1:6; 5:10; 20:6. I quote:

[Israel] shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex. 19:6).

As [sinners coming to faith] 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. For it stands in Scripture: 'Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame'. So the honour is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe: 'The stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone', and: 'A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence'. They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy (1 Pet. 2:4-10).

To [Christ] who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to

²² Hamilton p165.

²³ See how many references there are to light, the sun, and so on, in Revelation.

The Temple and the New Covenant

him be glory and dominion forever and ever... You have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth... They will be priests of God and of Christ, and they will reign with him for a thousand years (Rev. 1:6; 5:10; 20:6).²⁴

In light of all this, can we not read the words of Psalm 84 in a new-covenant sense?

How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts! My soul longs, yes, faints for the courts of the Lord; my heart and flesh sing for joy to the living God. Even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow a nest for herself, where she may lay her young, at your altars, O Lord of hosts, my King and my God. Blessed are those who dwell in your house, ever singing your praise! Selah. Blessed are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion. As they go through the Valley of Baca they make it a place of springs; the early rain also covers it with pools. They go from strength to strength; each one appears before God in Zion. O Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer; give ear, O God of Jacob! Selah. Behold our shield, O God; look on the face of your anointed! For a day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of wickedness. For the Lord God is a sun and shield; the Lord bestows favour and honour. No good thing does he withhold from those who walk uprightly. O Lord of hosts, blessed is the one who trusts in you.

Isaac Watts produced more than one setting of it. Here is a sample:

*How pleasant, how divinely fair,
O Lord of hosts, thy dwellings are!
With long desire my spirit faints
To meet th'assembly of thy saints.*

*My flesh would rest in thine abode,
My panting heart cries out for God;
My God! my King! why should I be
So far from all my joys and thee?*

²⁴ I do not accept the millennial interpretation of these verses. Note also the frequency of the 'the temple' in Revelation (Rev. 3:12; 7:15; 11:1-2,19; 14:15,17; 15:5-6,8; 16:1,17; 21:22). Thus the Revelation might well be called the Ezekiel of the New Testament.

The Temple and the New Covenant

*The sparrow chooses where to rest,
And for her young provides her nest;
But will my God to sparrows grant
That pleasure which his children want?*

*Blessed are the saints who sit on high
Around thy throne of majesty;
Thy brightest glories shine above,
And all their work is praise and love.*

*Blessed are the souls who find a place
Within the temple of thy grace;
There they behold thy gentler rays,
And seek thy face, and learn thy praise.*

*Blessed are the men whose hearts are set
To find the way to Zion's gate;
God is their strength, and through the road
They lean upon their helper God.*

*Cheerful they walk with growing strength,
Till all shall meet in heav'n at length,
Till all before thy face appear,
And join in nobler worship there.*

*Great God, attend, while Zion sings
The joy that from thy presence springs:
To spend one day with thee on earth
Exceeds a thousand days of mirth.*

*Might I enjoy the meanest place
Within thy house, O God of grace,
Not tents of ease, nor thrones of power,
Should tempt my feet to leave thy door.*

*God is our sun, he makes our day;
God is our shield, he guards our way
From all th'assaults of hell and sin,
From foes without and foes within.*

*All needful grace will God bestow,
And crown that grace with glory too!
He gives us all things, and withholds
No real good from upright souls.*

The Temple and the New Covenant

*O God, our King, whose sov'reign sway
The glorious hosts of heav'n obey,
And devils at thy presence flee,
Blessed is the man that trusts in thee.*

Application

I want to flag several applications of this doctrine. But I stress 'flag'; to expand on these points would turn my article into a book.

1. We should make more use of this doctrine in our worship

For instance, we should make more use of the temple theme in our hymns. I have already given a sample of the sort of thing I mean. Here are a couple more. Joseph Irons:

*See, my soul, a structure rising
From the wreck of Adam's race,
'Midst ten thousand foes, despising,
'Tis the work of sov'reign grace:
Blessed temple!
Here Jehovah shows his face.*

*By eternal love contrivèd,
Built with precious polished stones,
All its glory is derivèd
From the blood which there atones:
In this temple,
God himself our worship owns.*

*Here's the ark, the priest, and altar,
Incense, bread, and holy fire;
Sacrifice for each defaulter,
All that God and heaven require:
Sacred temple,
God and man thy walls admire.*

*O my soul, art thou united
To the temple of the Lord?
Then he is in thee delighted,
And thou shalt his love record:
In his temple
Be his holy name adored.*

The Temple and the New Covenant

William Matson:

*God is in his temple,
The almighty Father!
Round his footstool let us gather;
Him with adoration,
Serve, the Lord most holy,
Who hath mercy on the lowly.
Let us raise
Hymns of praise
For his great salvation:
God is in his temple!*

*Christ comes to his temple:
We, his word receiving,
Are made happy in believing.
Lo! from sin delivered,
He hath turned our sadness,
Our deep gloom, to light and gladness.
Let us raise
Hymns of praise,
For our bonds are severed:
Christ comes to his temple!*

*Come and claim thy temple,
Gracious Holy Spirit!
In our hearts thy home inherit;
Make in us thy dwelling,
Thy high work fulfilling,
Into ours thy will instilling;
Till we raise
Hymns of praise,
Beyond mortal telling,
In the eternal temple!*

Hymn singing is only one way in which this theme should be used, of course. The principle extends right across the board to include all aspects of ‘worship’. A proper understanding of the new covenant, and, in particular, of the temple within that covenant, would put pay to misguided talk of ‘before and after worship’. ‘Worship’ does not begin at, say, 11:00, and conclude at 12:30, or whatever; the believer is engaged in ‘worship’ 24/7. We, as believers, are always priests, always serving God and one

another as priests, mutually engaging in sacrificial ministry, and doing so in every place.

2. The priesthood of all believers

I make two points under this heading.

First, when I wrote my *The Priesthood of All Believers*, I admitted the paucity of direct scriptural references to this important subject. While this is still true, I have now come to see that the temple motif has a large role to play in this regard. It really does give substantial scriptural ground for the priesthood of all believers.

Secondly, we must guard against Christendom's insidious influence here. For Christendom also has its temples, priests and priesthood, but these owe far more to the old covenant than the new. This is not at all surprising since Cyprian went to the old covenant to introduce the notion of priesthood and clergy into the *ekklēsia*.²⁵ The legacy has been severe, the fall out grim. For the last 1800 years, believers have suffered from the priesthood of a *few* believers – the clergy – and this has led to priestcraft and sacerdotalism, with disastrous consequences for millions. Coming closer to home, it is worse than useless to trot out the church confession – ‘We believe in the priesthood of all believers’ – and then run our affairs virtually ignoring it, or worse. Hence the subtitle of my *The Priesthood of All Believers: Slogan or Substance?* Israel was warned against chanting and trusting in slogans: ‘This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the Lord’ (Jer. 7:4). The truth is, we, as believers, do not attend temples; we are the temple. We do not delegate our worship to priests; we are the priests of the temple. And we are the sacrifice, and offer spiritual sacrifices, but not for atonement, of course. We have and are all this in Christ, who is at once both our great high priest and our one effectual sacrifice for atonement.

3. No special places

We must rid our self of the notion of ‘holy places’. ‘Where do you worship?’ usually means: ‘Which church building are you

²⁵ See my *The Pastor*.

attending?’ This is quite wrong. A proper understanding of the new covenant, and, in particular, of the temple within that covenant, would put pay to all such inflated views of ‘the sanctuary’. Every place where believers assemble, every individual believer, is God’s sanctuary. We, as believers, are always priests, always serving God and one another as priests, mutually engaging in sacrificial ministry, and doing so in every place.

4. Progressive sanctification

The temple motif plays a large part in the believer’s progressive sanctification.²⁶ We, as believers, form a house for God, and that house ‘grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In [Christ we] also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit’ (Eph. 2:21-22). Note the ‘grows’. This must not be confined to numbers; quality is also involved. As has been said:

The growth of the church is not mere increase of members or size; the growth is [of] a temple, of which the character is holy, and it is in the Lord... The... church is a holy temple, dedicated to God, purified by his Spirit...²⁷

John Gill:

This growth may be understood also of an increase of those who are openly laid in the building, of their spiritual growth into their Head, Christ, and of an increase of grace in them... And this building grows unto an ‘holy temple’, the... church state, called a

²⁶ ‘Positional sanctification’ is the perfection the believer has in the sight of God 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 immediately and permanently 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 in my arguments on all this in my forthcoming book on sanctification.

²⁷ *Pulpit Commentary*.

The Temple and the New Covenant

‘temple’, in allusion to the [old-covenant] temple at Jerusalem, whose materials were stones made ready and hewn before they were brought thither, and whose magnificence, beauty and glory were very great... It was the place of public worship, and of the divine abode, and was a very significant emblem of the church of God (see 2 Cor. 6:16)... ‘Holy’... set apart for holy uses, and internally sanctified by the Spirit of God... [displayed] by external holiness of life, and conversation in the members of it. And this is said to be ‘in the Lord’, which phrase may refer to the word ‘grows’, and denotes that growth and increase, both of persons and grace, the church has in and from the Lord Jesus Christ; or to the word ‘holy’, and intimates that the holiness of the church, and every member of it, is also in and from the Lord; or to the word ‘temple’, which is built for him to dwell in.

Granted that every believer is perfect in God’s sight (justification and positional sanctification), having been united to Christ at the point of faith, nevertheless holiness of life in the believer’s subsequent pilgrimage is essential. Indeed, in the new covenant, every believer has the Spirit, he who motivates and enables the child of God to grow in spiritual likeness to Christ. Yet again, the apostolic commands, being an integral part of the law of Christ, stir the believer to this holiness. All this is spoken of so clearly in passages such as, for instance, Romans 6 – 8, leading to Romans 12 and on, the apostle using sacrificial language to enforce the point (Rom. 12:1).

All this, surely, is motive enough for us, as the Lord’s temple, to seek to be holy and to grow in the knowledge and likeness of Christ (1 Pet. 1:15-16; 2:4-12; 2 Pet. 3:18), to be a dwelling fit for God – and this in both an individual and a corporate sense. A proper sense of the role of the temple would serve as a proper corrective to any tendency in the churches to be distracted into financial, corporate advance and growth, or willingness to become centres of fun and entertainment or amusement. For, as the apostle makes plain, God desires a *holy* house.

And that takes us on to the next application.

5. Separation

I have spoken of the application of the temple theme to progressive sanctification and separation. I take it a stage further. We are the called-out ones and we must show it in our life –

individually and corporately. We must not take all pleasant ‘temple-bits’ of Scripture, leaving the rough end of the stick for Israel. No Gentiles were allowed in the inner courts of the temple (Acts 21:28-29; 24:6). Corresponding to this, the fact that the *ekklēsia* is the Lord’s temple, has a sharpness about it as well as a sweetness, a warning as well as comfort. It is not called the *ekklēsia* for nothing! None but the consistent regenerate should be part of it. 1 Corinthians 5 serves as a standing example of the application of this principle. Do not miss the sacrificial tone of the apostle’s instruction in this passage (1 Cor. 5:6-8).

And this takes us on to the next application.

6. The Lord’s presence in his temple is essential

Just as the tabernacle might be built according to God’s specification (Ex. 40:1-33), but it was nothing until the glory of the Lord entered it (Ex. 40:34-38), the same goes for the *ekklēsia* today. We must fear the departure of God above all things. For God’s departure will follow if we depart from him. I speak both individually and corporately.²⁸ To think such a thing is impossible is to take the first step down the slippery slope. We must learn from the example of Israel, and not repeat their mistake (see the book of Judges, for instance). We know the Lord will not tolerate it when Ichabod has to be written over his house and people because of sin (1 Sam. 2:22 – 4:22). See 2 Corinthians 6:14 – 7:1. The best commentary on this can be found in Christ’s words to the seven churches (Revelation 2 & 3).

Without the presence of Christ we can do nothing, we are nothing but an empty shell. Jesus declared:

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart

²⁸ I know saying this raises problems but I take the warning passages (Heb. 2:1-4; 6:4-8; 10:26-39; 12:14) at face value.

from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full (John 15:1-11).

7. The temple motif should play an important role in our gospel ministry

And I mean our ministry both to the saved and to the lost. As we have seen, the prophets predicted that the law would go from Zion to the uttermost part of the world. We can be in no doubt as to the new-covenant meaning of this. Christ made it plain:

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).

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

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).

It is no accident that Jesus showed, by means of a parable, that forgiveness is found in the temple (Luke 18:10-14). And surely the temple's daily sacrifice speaks of the necessity of, and the accomplishment of, the continual cleansing power of Christ to wash from all sin, while the Passover and day of atonement speaks of his one great offering for sin (John 13:5-11; Eph. 5:25-

27; Heb. 10:10:10,14;1 John 1:7,9). As the psalmist told us, anxieties are cleared in the sanctuary (Psalm 73). In our ministry, we should hold out these glories, and their like, to all. Christ is to be offered to sinners, and preached to saints, for Christ, by his Spirit through the gospel, both convicts, converts and saves sinners, *and* sanctifies and edifies saints.

In saying this, I am, of course, not going back on my observations against institutional Christendom. I confine my remarks here entirely to the true new-covenant application of all this. By that I mean two things. *First*, the individual sinner must come to Christ in repentance and faith. If he does so come, he can rest assured that Christ will wash him free of all sin, and bring him into the full liberty of the gospel. *Secondly*, the Lord's assemblies are to be the main vehicle for the advance of the gospel in the world – or ought to be. 'The Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved' (Acts 2:47). I take this 'addition' to be more than an increase in numbers. In the context, the converts were devoted to, glued to, addicted 'to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers' (Acts 2:42). Furthermore, forgiveness and love should be a hallmark of the *ekklēsia*. This, too, should be a vital part of our ministry (see John 13:35; 2 Cor. 2:6-11; 7:12-13; Gal. 6:1; Eph. 4:32; 2 Thess. 3:15; 1 John 3:14; 4:20, and so on).

Conclusion

I hope I have done enough to justify my claim that the temple does indeed play a vital part in the new covenant. As I said, I have merely flagged areas where further study and development of the theme would be profitable to us all – especially that we might all learn to experience and practice its principles, both individually and corporately. The benefit would be enormous, and God would be glorified.

Two Sticks and Three Books

In one of his lectures, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, addressing his students, gave them some good advice:

In all probability, sensible conversation will sometimes drift into controversy, and here many a good man runs upon a snag. The sensible minister will be particularly gentle in argument. He, above all men, should not make the mistake of fancying that there is force in temper, and power in speaking angrily. A heathen who stood in a crowd in Calcutta, listening to a missionary disputing with a Brahmin, said he knew which was right though he did not understand the language – he knew that he was in the wrong who lost his temper first. For the most part, that is a very accurate way of judging. Try to avoid debating with people. State your opinion and let them state theirs. If you see that a stick is crooked, and you want people to see how crooked it is lay a straight rod down beside it; that will be quite enough.¹

Well, on this occasion I intend to follow Spurgeon's suggestion. I, as a new-covenant man, have a controversy with covenant theologians. They, following John Calvin, claim that the believer is under the law as his perfect rule, which law they whittle down to the ten commandments, calling it 'the moral law'. They further say that the law is a whip to beat believers, as lazy asses, into progressive sanctification. Preachers, therefore, must preach the law to drive the believer to live a life of Christ-likeness.

I disagree. I disagree very strongly. I say the believer is not under the law, that he has died to the law, and that he has died to the law in order to be married to Christ. In other words, I assert that John Calvin and his covenant-theologian followers could not be more wrong on this matter.

I have published extensively on this important disagreement, discoursed on it, and produced several video clips. But in this article I simply want to lay down two sticks side by side, and let

¹ C.H.Spurgeon: 'The Minister's Ordinary Conversation' (*Lectures To My Students* Vol.1).

you, reader, judge which of the two is straight, and which is crooked; that is, which is scriptural, and which is not. First, I will let Calvin make his case (the covenant-theology stick), and then I will take Scripture (the new-covenant-theology stick) and lay it down alongside Calvin's.

The covenant-theology stick

Calvin:

The third use of the law (being also the principal use, and more closely connected with its proper end) has respect to believers in whose hearts the Spirit of God already flourishes and reigns. For although the law² is written and engraved on their hearts by the finger of God, that is, although they are so influenced and actuated by the Spirit, that they desire to obey God, there are two ways in which they still profit from the law. For it is the *best* instrument for enabling them daily to learn with greater truth and certainty what that will of the Lord is which they aspire to follow, and to confirm them in this knowledge... Then, because we need not doctrine merely, but exhortation also, the servant of God will derive this further advantage from the law: by frequently meditating upon it, he will be excited to obedience, and confirmed in it, and so drawn away from the slippery paths of sin... The law acts like a whip to the flesh, urging it on as men do to a lazy sluggish ass. Even in the case of a spiritual man, inasmuch as he is still burdened with the weight of the flesh, the law is a constant stimulus, pricking him forward when he would indulge in sloth... It cannot be denied that it [the law] contains a perfect pattern of righteousness... one perpetual and inflexible rule... The doctrine of the law... remains... that... it may fit and prepare us for every good work... The general end contemplated by the whole law [is] that man may form his life on the model of the divine purity... The law... connects man, by holiness of life, with his God... [It is] one perpetual and inflexible rule... The law... is given for the regulation of the life of men, so that it may be justly called the rule of living well and righteously... By the word 'law'... we understand what peculiarly belonged to Moses;

² Calvin was here begging the question as to which law is written on the heart in the new covenant. The 'law' in question is the law of Christ, not the law of Moses. See my *Christ* pp299-321,543-555; 'The Prophets and the New Covenant' and 'The Law on the Believer's Heart'.

Two Sticks and Three Books

for the law contains the rule of life... and in it we find everywhere many remarkable sentences by which we are instructed as to faith, and as to the fear of God. None of these were abolished by Christ... The law is the everlasting rule of a good and holy life... The law... not only contains a rule of life as to outward duties, but... it also rules their hearts before God and angels... The law acts like a whip to the flesh, urging it on as men do to a lazy sluggish ass... a constant stimulus, pricking him forward.³

The new-covenant-theology stick

First I will quote a few of the many passages of Scripture which make the case:

Sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law 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... 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... 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,

³ John Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, A New Translation by Henry Beveridge, James Clarke & Co., Limited, London, 1957, Vol.1 pp309-311,356; *Calvin's Commentaries*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1979, Vol.3 Part 1 p196; Vol.22 Part 1 p167; Vol.21 Part 1 p119; Vol.15 Part 2 p220.

Two Sticks and Three Books

who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (Rom. 6:14-18; 7:4-6; 8:3-4).

You are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. Such is the confidence that we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are sufficient in ourselves to claim anything as coming from us, but our sufficiency is from God, who 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. 3:3-11).

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).

If a law had been given that could give life, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. But the Scripture imprisoned everything under sin, so that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. Now before faith came,⁴ we were held captive under the law, imprisoned until the coming faith would be revealed. So then, the law was our guardian⁵ until Christ came, in order that we might be justified by faith. But now that faith⁶ has come, we are no longer under a guardian (Gal. 3:22-25).

Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise. Now this may be interpreted

⁴ That is 'the faith', before the gospel, before Christ, came. See my 'Three Verses Misunderstood'.

⁵ Better, 'child custodian'.

⁶ That is, 'the faith'. See earlier note.

Two Sticks and Three Books

allegorically: these women are two covenants. One is from Mount Sinai, bearing children for slavery; she is Hagar. Now Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia; she corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother... Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now. But what does the Scripture say? 'Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman'. So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman. For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery... 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 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... If we live by the Spirit, let us also keep in step with the Spirit (Gal. 4:21 – 5:1,13-16,25).

Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second. For he finds fault with them when he says: 'Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. For they did not continue in my covenant, and so I showed no concern for them, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds,⁷ and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall not teach, each one his neighbour and each one his brother, saying: "Know the Lord", for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more'. In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the

⁷ The 'law' in question is the law of Christ, not the law of Moses. See earlier note.

first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away (Heb. 8:6-13).

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 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).

As I say, this is the merest sample of a host of passages which establish new-covenant theology.

In my view, these two sticks, laid side by side, clearly show that Calvin is wrong. The believer has been released from the law, died to the law and been married to Christ in order to produce a life of holiness to the glory of God. The law is not the believer's perfect rule. The law is not a whip, a whip which has to be brandished to drive the believer, as a lazy ass, into progressive sanctification.

But then... I would say that wouldn't I?

So let me take another straight stick – actually three straight sticks – to make the point again. I do so by a very brief look at three New Testament books.⁸

I refer first to 2 Corinthians. The church at Corinth was in a shocking state. It needed urgent, desperate reformation of behaviour, both in private and in public. In short, the Corinthians needed to get a grip on sanctification, both as individuals and as a church. The question is: How did the apostle set about it? Did he scourge the Corinthians? He did not! He was concerned to 'spare'

⁸ I have drawn what follows from my *Christ* pp264-265.

them. He did not stand over them, whip in hand: 'Not that we have dominion over your faith', he said (2 Cor. 1:23-24). Reader, as you peruse the following, pick up the tone, read the apostle's heart, and ask yourself if you think Paul was a whip-master over Corinthian whipping-boys, or was he trying to move them by Christ and love:

O Corinthians! We have spoken openly to you, our heart is wide open. You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted by your own affections. Now in return for the same (I speak as to children), you also be open... Open your hearts to us. We have wronged no one... I do not say this to condemn; for I have said before that you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together... We have been comforted in your comfort... I speak not by commandment, but I am testing the sincerity of your love... And in this I give advice... I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened... Now I, Paul, myself am pleading with you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ... I beg you that when I am present I may not [have to] be bold with that confidence by which I intend to be bold against some, who think of us as if we walked according to the flesh... Oh, that you would bear with me... I am jealous for you with godly jealousy... I fear, lest somehow... your minds may be corrupted... Did I commit sin in humbling myself that you might be exalted...? Why? Because I do not love you? God knows!... I will not be burdensome to you... I will very gladly spend and be spent for your souls; though the more abundantly I love you, the less I am loved. But be that as it may, I did not burden you (2 Cor. 6:11-13; 7:2-3,13; 8:8-13; 10:1-2; 11:1-11; 12:14-16).

Paul was no whip-master to the Corinthians. Nevertheless, they had such! Paul could say to the Corinthians: 'You put up with it if one brings you into bondage... if one strikes you on the face' (2 Cor. 11:20). Such teachers, who, significantly for my present purpose, were law men, tried to hit them into line. What did Paul think of it? 'To our shame, I say that we were too weak for that!' (2 Cor. 11:20-21). In saying this, Paul, of course, was being ironical. It was not a question of weakness. He had no intention whatsoever of hitting the Corinthians. Even when things had reached a tragic state of carnality at Corinth, still Paul asked: 'What do you want? Shall I come to you with a rod, or in love and a spirit of gentleness?' (1 Cor. 4:21). The gospel answer is

obvious, surely. I know, as a last resort, discipline is necessary (1 Cor. 5; 2 Cor. 13:2-3), but how can the way of sanctification be by whip and stick? How far removed it is from the law of Christ. ‘Therefore I write these things being absent, lest being present I should use sharpness, according to the authority which the Lord has given me for edification and not for destruction’ (2 Cor. 13:10).

I said I would look at three books; now for the second: Paul’s letter to Philemon, a small book, often passed over – but, as for the matter in hand, a gem. Paul wanted a certain course of action from Philemon. He wanted a godly, sanctified response. How did he go about it? What use did he make of the law to move Philemon? None whatsoever. Did he whip him? He did not! Why, Paul did not even command him! He refused to do so. As he said:

Though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting, yet for love’s sake I rather appeal to you... I appeal... Without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary... Yes, brother, let me have joy from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in the Lord. Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you knowing that you will do even more than I say... The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen (*passim*).

Finally, the apostle, writing to the Thessalonians:

We were gentle among you, just as a nursing mother cherishes her own children. So, affectionately longing for you, we were well pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God, but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us. For you remember, brethren, our labour and toil; for labouring night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, we preached to you the gospel of God... You know how we exhorted, and comforted, and charged [implored] everyone of you, as a father does his own children, that you would walk worthy of God who calls you into his own kingdom and glory... Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Thess. 2:7-12; 5:23).

Two Sticks and Three Books

I realise, of course, that a father sometimes has to use the rod on his wilful child (Prov. 13:24; 19:18; 22:15; 23:13-14; 29:15-17). But any true father, surely, only reaches for the rod as the last resort. What is more, the loving father regrets its use. He only employs the rod because he has to. In a sense, he feels defeated when using it. Surely, reader, love is the real motive, the true spur, the proper attitude in all of this? No good father wants to produce a child who is afraid of him, a son who obeys in order to avoid another lashing with the whip, does he? That were to produce a cringing, cowering slave. The aim, surely, is to produce a mature and loving son, one who gladly obeys from the heart; more, one who is able to decide wisely for himself. And if this is true in the case of family relationships, how much more so in the gospel.

These three letters show us the New Testament way of bringing about godly obedience. And that, most definitely is not by the law. I can only suggest, reader, that as you read the New Testament you look out for such things. Once you start to notice them, you will find they are written large across the sacred page. And that is why I am an advocate of new-covenant theology.

Was Isaiah a Preparationist?

Introduction

Isaiah knew how to address sinners with the gospel, and God has left a record of him doing it. The prophet, therefore, is a very useful guide for us: we have much to learn from him in this important matter. Now was he a preparationist? That is the question I wish to answer in this article.

This is not an academic matter. The Reformed tell us that we cannot preach the gospel to sinners until we have preached the law to them and so prepared them for Christ. In this they are following John Calvin. And they are mistaken. Grievously, this Reformed emphasis upon the necessity of preaching the law to sinners to prepare them for Christ – preparationism – is a severe hindrance to the free preaching of the gospel. So much so, I am convinced that it is only those who act in accordance with new-covenant principles who can reach full biblical freeness in their addresses to sinners.¹

Calvin certainly taught preparationism by the law:

First, by exhibiting the righteousness of God – in other words, the righteousness which alone is acceptable to God – [the law] admonishes every one of his own unrighteousness... convicts, and finally condemns him. This is necessary, in order that man... may be brought... to know and confess his weakness and impurity... So soon... as he begins to compare [his own powers] with the requirements of the law, he has something to tame his presumption. How high soever his opinion of his own powers may be, he immediately feels that they pant under the heavy load, then totter and stumble, and finally fall and give way. He, then, who is schooled by the law, lays aside the arrogance which formerly blinded him... After he is forced to weigh his conduct in the balance of the law, renouncing all dependence on [his] fancied righteousness, he sees that he is at an infinite distance

¹ See my works for the arguments behind what I say here. In particular, for this article I have lightly edited the second chapter of my *Offer*. Although my book is a reply to Ella's work, it stands on its own.

Was Isaiah a Preparationist?

from holiness... In the law we behold, first, our impotence; then, in consequence of it, our iniquity; and, finally, the curse as the consequence of both... To this effect is the apostle's declaration, that 'by the law is the knowledge of sin' (Rom. 3:20). By these words, he only points out the first office of the law as experienced by sinners not yet regenerated.

But, according to Calvin, the law has contrasting effects on the reprobate and the elect. The former might well 'give up all hope and rush headlong on despair... owing to their obstinacy'. The law's effect on the elect, however, is altogether different. God uses it to bring them to Christ. His purpose is:

That divesting themselves of an absurd opinion of their own virtue, they may perceive how they are wholly dependent on the hand of God; that feeling how naked and destitute they are, they may take refuge in his mercy, rely upon it, and cover themselves up entirely with it; renouncing all righteousness and merit, and clinging to mercy alone, as offered in Christ to all who long for it and look for it in true faith... Augustine... writes... 'The law orders, that we, after attempting to do what is ordered, and so feeling our weakness under the law, may learn to implore the help of grace... The utility of the law is, that it convinces man of his weakness, and compels him to apply for the medicine of grace, which is in Christ... God enjoins what we cannot do, in order that we may know what we have to ask of him... The law was given, that it might make you guilty – being made guilty, might fear; fearing, might ask indulgence... The law was given, in order to convert a great into a little man – to show that you have no power of your own for righteousness; and might thus, poor, needy, and destitute, flee to grace'.²

This is preparationism, and it is quite wrong. Even so, it was adopted and expanded by the Puritans, and has become received wisdom for many. As I say, it is not a theological nicety. By thinking about Isaiah and his approach to sinners, I want to explore the question further.

Since I shall be using one or two technical terms, let me define them:

² John Calvin: *Calvin's Institutes of the Christian Religion*, A New Translation by Henry Beveridge, James Clarke & Co., Limited, London, 1957 Vol.1 pp304-307.

The free offer is the invitation to all sinners to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, promising them salvation if they do, even though Christ's atonement was neither intended for all, nor accomplished for all.

Duty faith is the duty, the obligation, the responsibility, of all sinners to trust Christ. The gospel preacher must command all sinners to believe.³

So, was Isaiah a preparationist? Did he think that before he could call sinners to saving faith, he had to get them 'fit' for it by preaching the law to them? Remember, he was an old-covenant prophet to Judah, so it would have been perfectly natural for him to use the law when speaking to his usual hearers. But the prophet did not confine his addresses to Judah. God used him to speak to all men everywhere, and so lay down a pattern of gospel preaching for us today. Take, for instance, Isaiah 55 – as clear an example of gospel preaching as anybody could wish. As such, therefore, Isaiah must be a model for us in the days of the new covenant in our addresses to sinners. We, of course, should be even more clear and direct than he in pointing our hearers to Christ, but God has surely left us the record of Isaiah's approach to sinners as a challenge, encouragement and instruction to us in our day, as we seek to fulfil the Lord's standing commission:

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).

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

³ Please note, it is not the duty of an unconverted sinner to believe that Christ died for him in particular; his duty is to trust Christ. In any case, the sinner cannot know the former until he has done the latter; and even if he could, he would be exercising historical faith, accepting a fact, when what is required is saving faith, reliance upon Christ.

Was Isaiah a Preparationist?

To help us in this, we have more than Isaiah's preaching, of course. For a start, we have the apostolic example, linked with God himself:

God... gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. Working together with him, then, we appeal to you not to receive the grace of God in vain... 'Behold, now is the day of salvation' (2 Cor. 5:18 – 6:2).

And, of course, we have the apostle's testimony as to his own practice:

I... declared first to those in Damascus, then in Jerusalem and throughout all the region of Judea, and also to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds in keeping with their repentance (Acts 26:19-20).

Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we [seek to] persuade others (2 Cor. 5:11).

It is not without significance that when, in Romans 10, Paul quoted heavily from Isaiah, he reached a climax with the prophet's declaration of God's own approach to Israel: 'All day long I have held out my hands to a disobedient and contrary people' (Rom. 10:21 from Isa. 65:2). So said God. And this surely sets the scene.

And now for a closer look at Isaiah's preaching

I am not thinking of Isaiah 55, but of Isaiah 45:22. In the name of God, the prophet issued this command:

Look to me, and be saved, all you ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other (Isa. 45:22)

As George M. Ella rightly pointed out, the verse 'has to do with salvation and that on a world-wide scale'. So far so good. He went on: 'Two things must be noted, however. Rather than

Was Isaiah a Preparationist?

salvation being offered here, God is commanding. The people are ordered to assemble (verse 20), tell, bring (verse 21) and look (verse 22). They are told what will happen if they obey and what will happen if they do not obey. Those that disobey will be ashamed and confounded (verses 16,24), and those that obey will be saved (verses 17,22). Here we have a clear testimony to the fact that God's call to the world is a discriminating call'.⁴

Ella was right to draw attention to the commanding aspect of the verse and its context. But he was wrong to say Isaiah 45:22 is a *discriminating* call. This is precisely what it is not! It is a *universal* call; it is totally *indiscriminate*. It is addressed to 'all you ends of the earth'. The gospel, I hasten to add, *is* discriminating. Most definitely it is! The Spirit effectually works in the elect as he applies the benefits of the particular redemption accomplished by Christ according to God's decree. But this is not the issue in Isaiah 45:22. God through the prophet was giving the universal call and command of the gospel to all sinners. God is highly discriminate in whom he works, but totally indiscriminate as to whom he commands to look to him and be saved.

Notice that the verse includes a promise, while the context (Isa. 45:24) includes a warning. As Ella noted, sinners 'are told what will happen if they obey and what will happen if they do not obey'. They are promised salvation if they look. This is nothing less than what I understand by the free offer.

Let me take a closer look at it.

Who is speaking? It is God. What is the call? It is a command to sinners to look to God, to look spiritually, to look expectantly to him, to come to him, to trust him; in short, to believe. What is promised to sinners? It is salvation. God promises everlasting salvation from all sin, not a mere temporal or general welfare or deliverance. The context makes it clear: 'Israel shall be saved by the LORD with an everlasting salvation; you shall not be ashamed or disgraced for ever and ever' (Isa. 45:17).⁵ To whom

⁴ Ella: *The Free Offer* pp26-27.

⁵ As to the question of 'Israel', in my *Christ* I look at the way the New Testament interprets and applies such prophecies. See also my article:

Was Isaiah a Preparationist?

is the call made? It is to all the ends of the earth. And what preparation does Isaiah demand or preach for in his hearers? None! None whatsoever!⁶

Isaiah 45:22 shows us that every sinner in the world is commanded to look to God for salvation, to look in faith and be saved, all without any hint of law-preaching to ‘fit’ them for Christ. If not, words have lost all meaning. Here we have nothing less than God’s own call to sinners, his command to all sinners to believe. And because God commands every sinner to look to him and be saved, every sinner has the right or warrant to call upon the name of the Lord. What is more, every sinner is obliged to believe. This, in short, is duty faith. If it is not the duty of sinners to obey God and look, they do not sin by not looking. Yet, as Ella said, ‘they are told what will happen... if they do not obey’. Quite! They will face judgement and condemnation (Isa. 45:24). As Christ said: ‘He who believes in [the Son] is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God’ (John 3:18). ‘He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him’ (John 3:36).

And this, I repeat, is what I understand by the free offer of the gospel. Here God promises salvation – he offers it – to all who look. ‘Look to me, and be saved, all you ends of the earth!’ But what is it to look? It is to believe: ‘The LORD said to Moses, “Make a fiery serpent, and set it on a pole; and it shall be that everyone who is bitten, when he *looks* at it, shall live”. So Moses made a bronze serpent, and put it on a pole; and so it was, if a serpent had bitten anyone, when he *looked* at the bronze serpent, he lived’ (Num. 21:8-9). Now this *looking*, Christ calls *believing*:

‘The Prophets and the New Covenant’. But the issue does not arise here since Ella and I agree that Isa. 45:22 is the gospel call.

⁶ Of course, if you drag the net wide enough you can find allusions to some of the commandments in the previous verses, but in the prophet’s actual address to the men of all nations, there is no preparationism. I have no objection, of course, to using the law (as any part of the Bible) in addressing sinners, but this is a far cry from ‘a law work’ being essential to fit men for Christ.

Was Isaiah a Preparationist?

‘As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, even so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever *believes* in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever *believes* in him should not perish but have everlasting life... He who *believes* in him is not condemned’ (John 3:14-18). ‘Whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved’ (Joel 2:32; Acts 2:21; Rom. 10:13); but the sinner can only call on Christ, will only call on him, if he savingly believes: ‘How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed?’ (Rom. 10:14). ‘The gospel’ has to be ‘mixed with faith’ in those who hear it (Heb. 4:2). This is a vital element of duty faith. The sinner who believes has ‘obeyed the gospel’ (Rom. 10:16), while the sinner who refuses to believe is disobedient (Heb. 3:18-19 with 4:6,11). (See also Rom. 1:5; 6:17; 10:21; 11:20,23,30-32; 15:18; 16:26; 2 Thess. 1:8; Heb. 5:9; 1 Pet. 1:2,21-22; 2:7-8; 3:1; 4:17).

In addressing ‘all you ends of the earth’, God indiscriminately calls out to all men without distinction, to all men everywhere. There is, I repeat, no suggestion of a preparatory work first. The invitation or command is addressed to men merely as created human beings (Isa. 45:12). God, as Creator, invites and commands all his created subjects. Furthermore, the universal scope of the command is made very clear by Isaiah 45:23: ‘Every knee shall bow, every tongue shall take an oath’. There is no exception to this. Since every sinner will bow the knee (Isa. 45:23; Rom. 14:11-12; Phil. 2:9-11), every sinner is commanded to look (Isa. 45:22). Both are universal in extent; there is no exception. It will not do to interpret ‘all the ends of the earth’ as meaning ‘all nations without distinction’; it means all *men* without distinction. It is not merely the nations who will bow the knee; men, as individuals, will bow the knee. Likewise, God does not call nations to look to him; he calls men as individuals. Both salvation and judgement are personal and individual, and thus God commands all men to believe, men simply as men, sinners as sinners. God created all men, and all men will have to bow the knee to him; therefore all men, all sinners without exception, are invited, called and commanded by God to look to him and be saved.

Was Isaiah a Preparationist?

What is more, God issues this call to sinners without any qualification. He does not address awakened sinners; he does not address repentant sinners; he does not address the elect. He addresses all sinners everywhere. God does not say: 'Look to me, and be saved, all you *sensible* sinners on the earth', 'all you *repentant* sinners', 'all you *elect* sinners'.⁷

Nor does the fact that God has not decreed the salvation of all men stop him commanding *all* sinners to look, nor does it remove their obligation to believe. This is not at issue. Speaking of the gospel call, David J.Engelsma was right to say: 'The call makes known [even] to [the reprobate] what they ought to do, not what God wills to do with them'. 'The reprobate... have an obligation to believe on Jesus Christ, even though they are unable to do so'.⁸

Moreover, God does not content himself with merely *commanding* or *inviting* sinners; he condescends to *argue* with them. He gives reasons to persuade and encourage them to believe and be saved, including his sovereignty and uniqueness (Isa. 45:5,18,21). And since it is God who issues this command or invitation, obviously it must express his pleasure and revealed will.⁹ In other words, it is God's will that all sinners should be freely called to come to him for salvation, and it pleases him when they do come.

⁷ 'Sensible' sinners are the regenerate who, conscious of their sin and need of salvation, repent, and desire Christ. They are, therefore, demonstrating that they must be elect. Lest I should be misunderstood, although I speak against preparationism, I am convinced a sinner must be convicted of his sin, and will be convicted of his sin, before he comes to Christ, but his conviction is not the warrant for his being invited to come. He is invited because he is a sinner, and he must come as a sinner; but he will only come when he is a sensible sinner.

⁸ David J.Engelsma: *Hyper-Calvinism & The Call of the Gospel: An Examination of the 'Well-Meant Offer' of the Gospel*, Revised Edition, Reformed Free Publishing Association, Grand Rapids, 1994, pp87,121. Engelsma was here speaking of the call in general; he was not referring to Isa. 45:22, which he did not mention in his book. Although I agree with Engelsma on the point in question, his book, alas, was against the free offer.

⁹ Here is the link between duty faith and God's desire (the two parts of my *Offer*.

Was Isaiah a Preparationist?

Notice, God gives this command to sinners through the lips of a man; in this instance, the prophet. Thus it is the duty of gospel preachers to give this free invitation to sinners in the name of God, to issue such an indiscriminate call to sinners in the preaching of the gospel. The preacher has to command all sinners to look. What is more, he does not have to ask himself if his hearers are elect or prepared or awakened or sensible or repentant before he can invite them. He does not have to worry himself as to whether or not God has decreed to save them. He does not have to ask himself if Christ has died for them. In any case, he can ask as much as he likes; he will get no answer! In fact, these are questions he has no right to ask. God will not tell him! All the preacher has to worry about is to be sure his hearers are human beings. As long as they are, they are sinners, and God is pleased to command and invite all of them to salvation in the gospel. Therefore it is the preacher's duty and privilege to address his hearers as such, and call them to saving faith. Those who say it is wrong to invite all sinners indiscriminately, condemn both God and his prophet. When J.H.Gosden, for instance, dismissed the giving of indiscriminate calls to sinners, saying it is 'misleading for ministers indiscriminately to scatter invitations among a mixed congregation',¹⁰ he was in effect castigating God. For God went much further than to scatter an indiscriminate invitation among a mere congregation; he himself did it to the entire world, to every man, woman and child on the planet! As Stanley Delves said:

We [here] get a call to all the ends of the earth without any restriction or definition. It extends everywhere and to all people. For as sin extends to the ends of the earth, and there are no parts and no people exempt from the common evil of sin and ruin, so the power of the gospel extends equally to the ends of the earth. There are no parts and there are no people exempt from that gracious word – 'Look to me and be saved'.¹¹

¹⁰ J.H.Gosden: *What Gospel Standard Baptists Believe: A Commentary on the Gospel Standard Articles of Faith*, Gospel Standard Societies, Chippenham, 1993, p122.

¹¹ Stanley Delves: *Forest Fold Pulpit*, The Stanley Delves Trust, 1980, p65.

Was Isaiah a Preparationist?

Edward J. Young:

It might seem... that for the heathen there remained nothing but destruction. Such is not the case, for an invitation of mercy is extended to them. They are not to continue in their former ways but are to turn from them. The verb suggests a turning away from something and a turning to something; a true conversion. Conversion is similarly presented in the New Testament (*cf.* 1 Thess. 1:9; Acts 14:15; 15:19)... The reference is to men individually. If the ends of the earth turn unto God, it is only because the individual men who make up the ends of the earth have themselves turned. There is a stress upon individual conversion. The invitation to turn... is couched in the imperative, and thus the responsibility of the individual is set forth... [But,] although God here commands men to turn to him, it does not follow that he gives to all who hear the command the power and ability to obey... It is God who commands; and man, the creature, has the responsibility of obeying. The phrase ‘the ends of the earth’... includes all who dwell upon the earth... [There is a] close relationship between true conversion and the universality of the gospel message. The two imperatives belong together; the first, as has often been pointed out, is hortatory [urging an action], and the second promising. The thought is, ‘turn to me and you will surely be saved’.¹²

God, Calvin observed, ‘invites the whole world to the hope of salvation... He therefore commands all “to look to him”, and to the precept adds a promise... The Lord... invites all without exception to come to him... The Lord therefore stretches out his hand, in order to rescue all and point out the method of obtaining salvation’.¹³ In saying this, Calvin effectively hammered a large nail into his preparationism’s coffin.

John Gill properly maintained that God calls sinners to look to Christ, to believe on him, assuring them that all who look will be saved. So said Gill. Excellent! But he ruined all by introducing a qualifying adjective and a mood change to the verb: ‘And

¹² Edward J. Young: *The Book of Isaiah*, Vol.3, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 1972, pp215-216.

¹³ John Calvin: *Calvin’s Commentaries*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1979, Vol.8 Part 1 p425.

therefore *sensible* sinners *may* safely look to him, and venture their souls on him'.¹⁴

This falls short of the facts. For a start, sensible sinners not only *may* look to Christ – they can and they do! Coming to the verse itself, Isaiah 45:22 is not addressed to sensible sinners; it is addressed to sinners. And it does not stop at saying that sinners *may* look to Christ and be saved. There is no *may* about it! It says that all sinners *ought* to look and be saved. God commands them to do it. This is what the text says. Where did Gill find the notion of sensibility in the verse? A new twist, indeed, to 'seeing the invisible'! Sadly, by his talk of sensibility, Gill cut out the encouraging aspect of the verse for all men. He did more; he killed off its insistence on universal responsibility. All sinners ought to look to God, since God commands them to. Most seriously of all, Gill effectively silenced the note of urgency. God commands all men to look to him, but Gill made men look at themselves to see if they are sensible. And when God commands all men to look to him, obviously he means they should look at once (Isa. 55:6; 2 Cor. 6:2). Look now! Gill, driving men to test themselves to see if they are sensible, makes them embark on what can often be a long drawn-out process of self-examination. When Gill said God calls sinners to look to Christ to be saved, 'that men may be saved by him; and it is the will of God, not only that men should look to him, but that whosoever sees him, and believes in him, should not perish, but have everlasting life',¹⁵ he was right. Why did he ruin it by introducing the idea of sensibility? Of course, only sensible sinners will come, but the passage deals with God's command, not his secret working within the soul of the elect sinner. There is not an atom of sensibility or fitness in the text. Nothing of the sort is required for the gospel invitation or command.¹⁶

¹⁴ John Gill: *Gill's Commentary*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1980, Vol.3 pp943-944, emphasis mine.

¹⁵ Gill: *Commentary* Vol.3 p943.

¹⁶ If Gill's view of Isa. 45:22 was inadequate, Gosden's was frankly ridiculous: 'Perhaps ["the ends of the earth"] intends the realisation in the experience of each individual child of God of the end of all his natural resources with respect to his religion. God brings his people

Was Isaiah a Preparationist?

And this, of course, touches on one of the dreadful consequences of preparationism: it sets sinners on looking within themselves instead of looking to Christ.¹⁷ Furthermore, it introduces a dreadful note of delay at the point of conversion, when scriptural addresses stress the urgency, the immediacy, of repentance and faith. It is hard to see John the Baptist tolerating any delay with his talk of ‘flee from the wrath to come’ (Matt. 3:7); nor the psalmist with his: ‘Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and you perish in the way, for his wrath is quickly kindled’ (Ps. 2:12). And so on.¹⁸

Let Thomas Goodwin bring this article to a close:

Christ, under the simple and absolute consideration of being a Saviour, is represented to us in the promises as the object of our faith: ‘Look unto me, and be saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is none else’ (Isa. 45:22). Christ is there spoken of, as appears from what follows in verse 23. He is set forth as the only Saviour... and we see him as such nakedly proposed to our faith, as these words show, ‘Look unto me...’. We have a place parallel to this in the New Testament: ‘And this

there, brings them to realise that there is nothing for them but destruction, ruin, despair, and eternal woe, except God saves them’ (S.F.Paul: *Memorial of John Hervey Gosden*, 1965, pp172,175). I suspect he got the idea from Philpot pp177-178. B.A.Ramsbottom, disagreeing with what I had written, took the same line as Gosden when he reviewed the first edition of this present book: “‘The ends of the earth’ can be spoken of as sinners who feel left out or far off – not necessarily “every person without exception”” (B.A.Ramsbottom: ‘Review’ of Gay, David H.J.: *The Gospel Offer is Free in the Gospel Standard*, Luton, March 2005, p95). Might I ask how Gosden’s and Ramsbottom’s suggestions would apply to Deut. 33:17; 1 Sam. 2:10; Job 28:24; 37:3; 38:13; Ps. 2:8; 22:27; 48:10; 59:13; 65:5; 67:7; 72:8; 98:3; 135:7; Prov. 17:24; 30:4; Isa. 24:16; 40:28; 41:5,9; 42:10; 43:6; 48:20; 49:6; 52:10; Jer. 10:13; 16:19; 25:31; 31:8; 50:41; 51:16; Dan. 4:11; Mic. 5:4; Zech. 9:10; Matt. 12:42; Luke 11:31; Acts 13:47; Rom. 10:18? Note, particularly, the nine references in the context of Isa. 45:22.

¹⁷ In my works, I have fully documented these and other depressing consequences of preparationism for both saints and sinners.

¹⁸ I know of no biblical address to sinners which allows any sense of delay.

Was Isaiah a Preparationist?

is the will of him that sent me, that everyone who sees the Son, and believes on him, may have everlasting life...' (John 6:40). He that sees the Son, *i.e.* with a spiritual light, so as to believe on him. These are acts purely acting upon him as he is the Christ and a Saviour. And the believing on that object requires no conditions first to be looked at by him who is to believe. And Christ had proposed himself... in like manner [in] John 3:14-15... We have another instance of his being declared and set forth as a Saviour [in] 1 Timothy 1:15... The words are a bare proposal of him, wherein he is set forth as the immediate object to a sinner's faith. His being a Saviour, and his intent to save sinners of this world... is nakedly declared... The apostle... means that it deserves hearty welcome and receiving by faith. And of this faith on Christ the apostle had proposed himself an example in the preceding verse [1 Tim. 1:14], so that this faithful saying had been the ground of his own faith.¹⁹

In short, Isaiah 45:22 is God's command to all sinners to trust Christ. It teaches duty faith. To answer my original question: Isaiah was not a preparationist.

¹⁹ Thomas Goodwin: *Of the Object and Acts of Justifying Faith* in *The Works of Thomas Goodwin*, Vol.8, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1985, pp216-217.

Legal Assurance

The New Testament, it is clear, does not describe the believer as a ‘wretched man’, but speaks of him as one who enjoys ever-increasing glory, liberty and assurance.¹ And this, of course, should be the lot of every believer today. Many Reformed disagree. They think that Romans 7:14-25 represents the believer at his most spiritual, and that most believers never get full assurance; some even think that most believers don’t deserve it! They also argue vehemently that the believer is under the law of Moses (usually whittled down, without the slightest justification, to the ten commandments, the so-called ‘moral law’) for progressive sanctification.² It’s my contention that all this is connected, and explains why so many believers, reared under such a legal system, find themselves in bondage, fear and doubt, often for years, if not decades, if not all their lives. Indeed, many Reformed men preach, teach and write in ways which positively encourage doubt and introspection, fear and lack of assurance. Some even glory in the fact that they make believers anxious! And it’s not only where the law is openly and statedly preached. The teaching of legal assurance – or that which leads to it – casts its shadow far wider than that.

¹ For this article, I have lightly edited my *Assurance* pp71-95. You are advised to read this article before ‘New-Covenant Assurance’.

² By ‘progressive sanctification’, I mean the believer’s 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. I will set out in my arguments on all this in my forthcoming book on sanctification.

Let me set out what I am talking about.³

In summary, through his over-reaction to Rome,⁴ John Calvin went too far in making assurance the essence of faith. Assurance is the concomitant of faith, not its essence.⁵ In making assurance the essence of faith, however, Calvin avoided the disastrous consequences which his later-Puritan followers produced. Whether or not in the process he crushed any broken reeds or snuffed out any smoking flax eternity will declare.

Moving on to the Puritans: while the early Puritans largely followed Calvin closely on assurance, the overwhelming majority of later Puritans did not. In one respect – assurance not being the essence of faith – they were right, but in making progressive sanctification the way of assurance they were wrong. The consequences of this mistake have been heavy indeed. They are with us to this day, bringing fear and doubt to so many,⁶ since far more people are influenced by the later-Puritan view of assurance

³ Although I will talk about ‘the Reformed’, clearly not all Reformed teachers take the same line throughout. Some do not go along with the Confessions they talk so highly of, so I am able to quote them speaking scripturally on this issue.

⁴ Rome denies even the possibility of assurance: ‘No one can know with a certainty of faith... that he has obtained the grace of God’ (‘The Council of Trent’ (documentacatholicaomnia.eu). ‘If anyone says that man is absolved from his sins and justified because he firmly believes that he is absolved and justified, or that no one is truly justified except him who believes himself justified... let him be anathema’. ‘If anyone says that a man who is born again and justified is bound *ex fide* to believe that he is certainly in the number of the predestined, let him be anathema’. ‘If anyone says that he will for certain, with an absolute and infallible certainty, have that great gift of perseverance even to the end, unless he shall have learned this by a special revelation, let him be anathema’ (canons 14-16) (ewtn.com).

⁵ See my *Assurance* pp117-118. Calvin’s over-reaction parallels the way his detestation of the Anabaptists blinded him, and drove him even further into infant baptism. See my *Infant*.

⁶ Take full account of the subtitle to Joel R.Beeke: *The Quest for Full Assurance: The Legacy of Calvin and His Successors*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1999.

than they realise.⁷ Indeed, some, who would be horrified to be thought Puritan, nevertheless, *are* later-Puritan on assurance (or rather the lack of it) – without an inkling that it is so. Hearing the howls of disbelief, let me make good my case.

I begin with the New England antinomian crisis (1636-1637), the main players being, on the one side, Thomas Hooker and Thomas Shepard, and, on the other, Anne Hutchinson and John Wheelwright.⁸ John Cotton tried to steer a middle path between the two – and got away with it, but only by the skin of his teeth – while Henry Vane the Younger, who also played his part, decided to sail back across the Atlantic to England. The story is far more complicated than I can explore here, but in essence Hooker and Shepard heavily emphasised the law in preparing the sinner for Christ and in sanctifying the saint, and urged tests of sanctification (and therefore, of course, the work of the law) for assurance. Hutchinson and Wheelwright stoutly resisted this, stressing the freeness of grace in Christ in conversion and sanctification, and the inner witness of the Spirit for assurance.⁹

⁷ It is invidious to give examples – they are legion! – but here are a few. Charles Hodge: *A Commentary on the Second Epistle to the Corinthians*, The Banner of Truth Trust, London, 1963, pp305-306; Robert L.Dabney: *Discussions: Evangelical and Theological*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1967, Vol.1 pp214-228; *Systematic Theology*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1985, pp611,698-713.

⁸ See ‘Preparationism in New England’.

⁹ Sadly, Cotton believed in eternal justification (Richard Bauckham: ‘Adding to the Church – During the Early American Period’ in *Adding to the Church*, The Westminster Conference, 1973, p45). For the arguments against this hyper-Calvinistic error, see my *Eternal*. But on assurance, Cotton was right. He argued that ‘the first, the primary evidence of regeneration [is] not any aspect of [progressive] sanctification, but purely the witness of the Spirit in the heart of the regenerate man... Cotton... held that the primary evidence was the witness of the Spirit enabling a man to receive and hold in faith the unconditional promise of God’s free grace to the elect, that in fact saving faith itself was the first and sufficient evidence of regeneration’ (Bauckham p45). See D.D.Hall, in David D.Hall (ed): *The Antinomian Controversy, 1636-1638: A Documentary History*, Duke University

For their pains, they were banished. This controversy spilled over into Old England.

Back in England, the Particular Baptist, William Kiffin, came into doubt through reading Thomas Hooker's *The Soul's Preparation for Christ* – a Puritan classic on preparationism, the necessity of preaching the law to prepare sinners for Christ. Kiffin was helped out of his grief by the preaching of John (not to be confused with Thomas) Goodwin who showed him that legal preparationism was wrong. Indeed, Goodwin's preaching, as John Coffey said:

Contrasted sharply with the bleak emphasis on legal preparation... and self-scrutiny that echoed from some Puritan pulpits... His was a message designed to calm the tortured souls who sought counsel from Calvinist pastors.¹⁰

And so to the Westminster Assembly and its documents – documents which have exerted enormous influence down the centuries, and do so to this very day, some putting them almost on a par with (if not exceeding) the Bible itself! The Westminster documents are heavy on law.¹¹ This is no surprise since one of the main purposes in setting up the Assembly was to deal with antinomianism (both real and imagined) in England.¹² The solution it came up with was to put Calvin's law system into full effect. And how!

Now listen to the Westminster Confession on assurance. Take first, assurance as to the Bible being the word of God:

Press, (2nd revised edition), 1990, *passim*. Remember all this was played out in 'the antinomian crisis' raging at the time.

¹⁰ John Coffey: *John Goodwin and the Puritan Revolution...*, The Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 2006, pp52-54. Incidentally, many praise the Puritans as fine physicians of the soul. No doubt they were, but not a few of their patients were diseased though their physicians' own teaching!

¹¹ Out of 196 questions, the Larger Catechism has more than 60 on the law, a staggering ratio for the age of the new covenant.

¹² See my *Four 'Antinomians'*.

Our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the word in our hearts.¹³

Excellent! But what about assurance of salvation?

This certainty is not a bare conjectural and probable persuasion grounded upon a fallible hope; but an infallible assurance of faith founded upon the divine truth of the promises of salvation, the inward evidence of those graces unto which these promises are made, the testimony of the Spirit of adoption witnessing with our spirits that we are the children of God, which Spirit is the earnest of our inheritance, whereby we are sealed to the day of redemption.¹⁴

And then, for our purposes, the punch line:

This infallible assurance does not so belong to the essence of faith, but that a true believer may wait long, and conflict with many difficulties, before he be partaker of it.

While I agree that assurance is not the essence, but a concomitant, of faith,¹⁵ it is how the Westminster statement goes on that makes for trouble. Proof texts offered to establish this struggle for assurance are 1 John 5:13; Isaiah 1:10; Mark 9:24; and Psalms 77 and 88. Whether or not those texts really do establish the Assembly's assertions, reader, I leave for you to decide. I know what I think!

Here is a clear parting of the ways with Calvin; in fact, Westminster flatly contradicts the Reformer.¹⁶ What is more, the believer who takes Westminster as definitive *can* be assured, but he may have to wait long for it, and the path to it may be fraught with difficulties. Indeed, he must be prepared never to get it! And remember, reader, that millions of believers have taken, and many still do take, the Westminster as authoritative. Millions, therefore, are on the high road to lack of assurance before they

¹³ 1 John 2:20,27; John 16:13-14; 1 Cor. 2:10-12; Isa. 59:21.

¹⁴ Heb. 6:11,17-9; 2 Pet. 1:4-5,10-11; 1 John 2:3; 3:14; 2 Cor. 1:12,21-22; Rom. 8:15-16; Eph.1:13-14; 4:30.

¹⁵ See 'Calvin on Assurance'.

¹⁶ Despite the reconciliation attempted by some – see Gerald L.Chrisco: 'Theology of Assurance within the Marrow Controversy' (rts.edu).

start. Since ‘they drank in Puritan divinity with their mothers’ milk’,¹⁷ no wonder they grew up with the consequences. Feed a child on the wrong diet, and the effects may well be permanent. As for Timothy, we know that, under the tutelage of his mother and grandmother, he had been reared on a diet of Scripture, and this led him to salvation (2 Tim. 1:5; 3:14-17). Is it beyond the realms of possibility to think that somebody reared, from pre-conversion days, on a diet of law, assurance by progressive sanctification and assurance an experience only for the elite, might present symptoms of fear and doubt? The same may be said, of course, of those who are under the 1689 Particular Baptist Confession, one which is almost identical to the Westminster.

John Owen (a man of the Savoy Declaration which depended heavily on the Westminster Confession) went even further than Westminster. Believer, if you want to be kept awake at nights, read Owen on assurance just before you switch out the light! Hear him:

Very few on gospel grounds do attain to [assurance]... It is a great and rare thing to have forgiveness in God discovered [made known] unto a sinful soul.

Owen spoke of someone who testified to twenty years’ struggle with ‘trials, difficulties, temptations, [he had] wrestled with... before [he eventually] obtained it’. Owen: ‘It is the duty of every believer to labour after an assurance of a personal interest in forgiveness’. Clearly, however, he must not expect it to come easily, if at all, since it is rarely attained. Owen himself struggled with it for five years.¹⁸ He offered three main reasons for this

¹⁷ Calvin on 2 Tim. 1:5, speaking of Timothy: ‘He had been educated from his infancy in such a manner that he might have sucked godliness along with his milk’.

¹⁸ John Owen: *A Practical Exposition upon Psalm 130...* in *The Works of John Owen*, Vol.6, The Banner of Truth Trust, London, 1966, pp386,413-414,431,508-509, emphasis mine. In his earlier works – two catechisms – Owen had thought of assurance as an integral part of faith. Beeke surmised as to the reason for his change of view. Was it the Westminster documents or his own experience coupled with that of the people to whom he preached? (Beeke p166). Either, it seems to me,

difficulty: ‘The constant voice of conscience lies against it’; ‘the law lies against this discovery’; ‘inbred notions that are in the heart of man about God’s holiness and vindictive justice’ lie against it.¹⁹ Don’t miss number two!

Thomas Brooks was another Puritan to put a grim prospect before his readers:

Now though this full assurance is earnestly desired, and highly prized, and the want of it much lamented, and the enjoyment of it much endeavoured after by all saints, *yet it is only obtained by a few*. Assurance is a mercy too good for most men’s hearts, it is a crown too weighty for most men’s heads. Assurance is *optimum maximum*, the best and greatest mercy; and therefore God will only give it to his best and dearest friends... Assurance is that ‘tried gold’ (Rev. 3:18)... God only gives to tried friends. Among those few that have a share or portion in the special love and favour of God, there are but a very few that have an assurance of his love. It is one mercy for God to love the soul, and another mercy for God to assure the soul of his love.²⁰

Not much hope here, then! Hardly any at all! Heaven on earth? Maybe – but only for the few. I wonder where Brooks found the scriptural warrant for telling believers that ‘assurance... [is] only obtained by a few... [it being] too good for most’ believers. Indeed, I ask myself why Brooks wrote his book – a book describing a wonderful experience for believers, but one which the majority of them will never get, even after a life-time of desperate searching for it, since they are not good enough for it! It would seem tantamount to cruelty on Brooks’ part, taunting the overwhelming majority of believers with the golden apple always just out of reach! I wonder why such a book is thought to be worthy of publication today – unless, of course, it is to bolster the Reformed emphasis on law. Do the publishers *want* believers to

gives the game away! We must be men of Scripture before men of Confession or experience.

¹⁹ Owen pp387,389,431, emphasis mine.

²⁰ Thomas Brooks: *Heaven on Earth: A Serious Discourse, Touching a Well-Grounded Assurance* in *The Works of Thomas Brooks*, Vol.2, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1980, p335, emphasis mine. Also in paperback, 1961.

be miserable? Hardly a recommendation for their law system, is it?

Richard Baxter:

For those doubts of my own salvation, which exercised me many years, the chiefest causes of them were these... because I could not distinctly trace the workings of the Spirit upon my heart *in that method which Mr Bolton, Mr Hooker, Mr Rogers, and other divines describe...* I was once [inclined] to meditate on my own heart... I was continually poring either on my sins or wants, or examining my sincerity.²¹

A hundred years later, Jonathan Edwards trod the same path. At one stage, he doubted his ‘interest in God’s love and favour... because’, he said, ‘I cannot speak so fully to my experience of that preparatory work, *of which the divines speak...* [and] I do not remember that I experienced regeneration, *exactly in those steps*, in which divines say it is generally wrought’. Later, he felt some relief concerning his ‘trust and affiance in Christ, and with delight committing of my soul to him, *of which our divines used to speak*, and about which I have been somewhat in doubt’. Yet, later again, he still had to wonder: ‘Whether I am now converted or not’. Even so, he vowed to use ‘for helps *some of our old divines*’.²² In other words, Edwards was in a hole and proceeded to dig deeper, using the same tools as got him into the hole in the first place!

Asahel Nettleton, a man greatly used of God in the Second Great Awakening in New England, was ‘exceedingly cautious in speaking about his belief that he was accepted of God’. So much so, he had a very low opinion of his standing before God: ‘The most that I have ventured to say respecting myself is that I think it possible I may get to heaven’.²³

Then we have John Newton:

²¹ Richard Baxter: *The Autobiography of Richard Baxter*, J.M.Dent & Sons Ltd., London, 1931, pp10,113, emphasis mine.

²² Jonathan Edwards: *Diary*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Revised and Corrected by Edward Hickman*, Vol.1, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1974, xxiv,xxxv,xxxvi, emphasis mine.

²³ Bennet Tyler and Andrew Bonar: *Asahel Nettleton: Life and Labours*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1975, p30.

Legal Assurance

*'Tis a point I long to know,
Oft it causes anxious thought;
Do I love the Lord, or no?
Am I his, or am I not?*

*If I love, why am I thus?
Why this dull and lifeless frame?
Hardly, sure, can they be worse,
Who have never heard his name!*

*Could my heart so hard remain,
Prayer a task and burden prove;
Every trifle give me pain,
If I knew a Saviour's love?*

*When I turn my eyes within,
All is dark, and vain, and wild;
Filled with unbelief and sin,
Can I deem myself a child?*

*If I pray, or hear, or read,
Sin is mixed with all I do;
You that love the Lord indeed,
Tell me: Is it thus with you?*

*Yet I mourn my stubborn will,
Find my sin a grief and thrall;
Should I grieve for what I feel,
If I did not love at all?*

*Could I joy his saints to meet,
Choose the ways I once abhorred,
Find, at times, the promise sweet,
If I did not love the Lord?*

*Lord, decide the doubtful case!
Thou who art thy people's Sun;
Shine upon thy work of grace,
If it be indeed begun.*

*Let me love thee more and more,
If I love at all, I pray;
If I have not loved before,
Help me to begin today.*

Yes, Newton got some sort of relief, and some measure of assurance, but hardly a ringing endorsement of the biblical position, is it?

D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones thought that ‘many Christian people have only known this [sealing, assurance] just before their death’.²⁴

James Sawyer: ‘In San Diego in November, 1989, at the Evangelical Theological Society annual meeting, Dr John MacArthur was asked when a believer could be assured of his salvation; his reply was that such assurance could be had only after death’.²⁵ There is an element of truth in this, of course, but as it stands it surely misrepresents the New Testament.

I need not labour the point. Do not miss the full implications of the title Joel R.Beeke chose for his large volume on the subject: *The Quest for Full Assurance*. Reader, if you seek assurance by the Reformed route, you must prepare yourself for a long and arduous search, one which, in all probability, will be in vain. Gird your loins up, grit your teeth: months, maybe years, of nail-biting – if not white-knuckled – doubt and fear lie ahead! If I may accommodate the words of Brutus (according to William Shakespeare): ‘All the voyage of [your] life is [almost certain to be] bound in shallows and in miseries’.

We don’t need further evidence from Confessions, sermons and books. Too many believers can read the signs of this anxiety all too clearly in their own hearts, even though they may not realise where it has all come from. Those locked in this system know only too well that they are in trouble. Many may just be resigned to a life of doubt. Some may even regard their doubt as a mark of the highest spirituality – and so get some kind of relief that way!

Some saints cannot even face it. One Lord’s day morning, I had just started to preach a sermon on Romans 8:33-34, when a lady (a believer, married to a full-time gospel worker) got up and

²⁴ D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones: *An Exposition of Ephesians 1:1-23. God’s Ultimate Purpose*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1978, p299.

²⁵ Taken from M.James Sawyer: ‘Some Thoughts On Lordship Salvation’ (bible.org).

left the meeting. After the service, the local leaders assured me that this was not unexpected since (unknown to me) the lady had long wrestled with lack of assurance. Alas! If only she had remained! She might have been helped – even brought out of her condition. Walking out of a sermon on such a passage was the last thing she should have done.²⁶

This case is far from isolated. I know that many believers are in bondage and fear. Liberty and joy ought to be the lot of believers (2 Cor. 3:17-18; Gal. 5:1,13; 1 Pet. 1:8, for instance), but too often, it is not. Hence my book. I hope that what I write here might help some impoverished believers break free of their desperate plight.

What is the thinking behind all this legal assurance?

The doctrine undergirding legal assurance

The common view of assurance today – if it's thought about at all! – has three steps or levels, each rising in importance. *First*, the believer rests himself upon the bare word of God. The Scriptures promise that if I believe I shall be saved (Acts 16:31); I do believe; therefore I am saved.²⁷ *Secondly*, the believer tests his life by various evidences spelled out in Scripture – in 1 John, for instance. I love the brothers; therefore, I must be saved (1 John 3:14). And, *thirdly*, there is the direct evidence of the inner witness of the Spirit (Rom. 8:16), the sealing of the Spirit (2 Cor. 1:22; Eph. 1:13-14; 4:30), the 'anointing' (2 Cor. 1:21-22; 1 John 2:20,27). 'He who believes in the Son of God has the witness in himself' (1 John 5:10). And we have the repeated experience of

²⁶ For a short address on the passage, see my 'Christ, Not Law, Banishes Fear'; *Grace*.

²⁷ Modern Sandemanians often stop here. See my *Assurance* pp16-17. A Sandemanian thinks saving faith is nothing more than mental assent. If a sinner accepts the facts of the gospel, he is saved. To talk about the heart, or feelings, is to introduce works, and ruin the grace of God in salvation. Sandemanianism was developed by the Scotsmen, John Glas (1695-1773) and his son-in-law, Robert Sandeman (1718-1771), more especially the latter. It is not a mere historical aberration. Rather, it is, forgiving the oxymoron, very much alive, and wreaking massive damage.

‘being filled with the Spirit’ (Luke 1:15,41,67; 4:1; Acts 2:4; 4:8,31; 6:3,5; 9:17; 11:24; 13:52; Eph. 5:18).

This, I say, is the way most Reformed (evangelical) teachers today speak of assurance – defining it in these three steps, *and in this order*. And they usually place the third step beyond the reach of most believers.²⁸ Let me prove it.

Take Lloyd-Jones:

This [that is, the inner witness] is the highest form of assurance possible; there is nothing beyond it. It is the acme, the zenith of assurance and certainty of salvation!

Lloyd-Jones started with the first level:

There is a form of assurance which is derived from deduction from the Scriptures. That is the form of assurance which most Christians seem to have, and many believe it is the only form of assurance.

Lloyd-Jones moved on to the second form of assurance; namely the tests of 1 John:

That takes you a step further than the first one; it is better than the first one. The first was merely believing the bare word of God [Sandemanianism!], but now you have examined your life

²⁸ I am glad to record that Erroll Hulse, for one, questioned it. ‘A well-grounded assurance is based firstly on the inward witness of the Holy Spirit testifying to sonship. Secondly, and no less essentially, it is based on a spiritual life which is in harmony with sonship, not one or the other, but both together’ (Erroll Hulse: *The Believer’s Experience*, Carey Publications, Haywards Heath, 1977, p121). I would nuance this by changing Hulse’s second ‘based’ to ‘verified’ – especially with regard to others, since a sanctified life is the only way one can be assured about another person. I will come back to this. Again, Hulse had to struggle to get to this position seeing he had started so badly in his chapter: ‘No Genuine Experience Without the Law’ (Hulse pp67-70). Iain H.Murray steered a middle course through the Reformed minefield, while trying hard to defend the standard position (Iain H.Murray: ‘Assurance of Salvation’ in *The Old Evangelicalism...*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 2005, pp167-200). He, too, advocated preaching the law to sinners, and to saints for their sanctification (Iain H.Murray pp8-15,23-37,47-54,64,69,91).

and you are sure that you are not merely saying these things in a theoretical or intellectual manner; you are really living them.²⁹

And then he reached the peak:

But there is a third step... [Rom. 8:16]. This is entirely the action of the Holy Spirit himself. I do nothing about it; it is entirely 'given'. It is solely and exclusively what he does to me... It is the Spirit himself who does it. We do no deducing here. It is not the result of syllogism [deduction], or of argumentation. It is the Spirit himself doing it to me... This testimony of the Spirit with our spirit [is] this highest possible form of assurance.³⁰

This is typical of the teaching of many today. But what is the biblical ground for this order? None! None whatever! It is pure invention, a template imposed on Scripture. Oh! Many say it (and peer repetition is bewitching – teacher repetition, even more so), but what *scriptural* proof do they offer? As I showed, the New Testament speaks often and repeatedly of every believer having the Spirit and, therefore, having assurance – and all without having to go through the drawn-out process of introspection, probing one's progressive sanctification.

Take just one example: Romans 8. Nobody can question that this chapter speaks of the believer's assurance; notice, the *believer's* assurance, not the apostle's or that of some favoured few. How did the early believers get this assurance? Those at Rome had it long before this chapter, of course, but Paul surely put his finger on it when he declared:

If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ... Those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you [believers, all of you] did not receive a spirit that

²⁹ I expose the wrongness of this in my *Assurance* pp137-154; 'John Turned Upside Down'.

³⁰ D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones: *Romans: An Exposition of Chapter 8:5-17. The Sons of God*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1974, pp302-305,309. See also his 'Sandemanianism' in *The Puritans: Their Origins and Successors*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1987, pp187-188; *God's* pp262-263. Oddly – since he was so strong against Sandemanianism – Lloyd-Jones, of all people, did not seem to see the connection between the above and Sandemanianism.

makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry: ‘Abba, Father’. The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory (Rom. 8:9,14-17).

The point is this: Where, in Romans, did Paul put any tests to believers so that they might obtain assurance? That is, where in the letter to the Romans, did Paul urge the believers to look at their works to see if they were really converted? Nowhere! There is not a single test for assurance in the entire book of Romans. Is there one in Ephesians? In Thessalonians?

Take that last. There is a place for assurance by works. Oh? Yes! Paul was assured of the Thessalonian believers’ election (1 Thess. 1:4), he was convinced of it. How? By the effect the gospel had in their lives; in other words, the apostle argued their election from the evidence of their conversion and sanctification. There is no other way, of course. The Spirit never bears witness with our spirit that someone else is a child of God!

Calvin, commenting on Philippians 1:6:

It is asked, however, whether anyone can be certain as to the salvation of others, for Paul here is not speaking of himself but of the Philippians. I answer, that the assurance which an individual has respecting his own salvation, is very different from what he has as to that of another. For the Spirit of God is a witness to me of my calling, as he is to each of the elect. As to others, we have no testimony, except from the outward efficacy of the Spirit; that is, in so far as the grace of God shows itself in them, so that we come to know it. There is, therefore, a great difference, because the assurance of faith remains inwardly shut up, and does not extend itself to others. But wherever we see any such tokens of divine election as can be perceived by us, we ought immediately to be stirred up to entertain good hope.

But this is not the real question! Where are we told that the Thessalonians got *their own* assurance by probing their progressive sanctification? Where do we read of them being commanded to search *their* works to discover if *they* were true believers?

Moving on to the ‘sealing of the Spirit’, Lloyd-Jones was unequivocal. He defined ‘sealing’ as ‘authenticity and authority, ownership, and security and safety’.³¹ ‘It means that we can be authenticated, that it can be established by intelligible signs that we are indeed the children of God, heirs of God, and joint-heirs with our blessed Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ’;³² in a word, assured. But do not miss the ‘can’. Much grief lies buried in that small word. He went on: While ‘you cannot be a Christian without receiving the Holy Spirit’, nevertheless ‘one can be a Christian without the sealing of the Spirit’. And though he admitted that he was flying in the face of ‘the prevailing common teaching’,³³ Lloyd-Jones was adamant that he was right. One of his arguments (in addition to the support of some Puritans!) was that the translators of the AV ‘deliberately introduced’ – his words – the word ‘after’ in Ephesians 1:13,³⁴ showing that they were convinced sealing was a later experience, after conversion. ‘Are we to seek this sealing? My answer, without any hesitation’, said Lloyd-Jones, ‘is that we should most certainly do so’. But, he warned, this is no easy task or one which is quickly over: ‘Prepare the way... mortify... cleanse yourselves... put into practice the virtues... labour at it... pray for this blessing... be desperate for it’. Alas, however, according to Lloyd-Jones, ‘many Christian people have only known this [sealing, assurance] just before their death’.³⁵

But where are we told this in the New Testament? Where are we told of any New Testament believer who was seeking assurance, the witness, sealing or anointing of the Spirit? Where are we told that it is the duty of believers to discover if they are converted and so be assured? In Puritan literature, we find plenty, but where in Scripture?

C.H.Spurgeon was far better:

³¹ Lloyd-Jones: *God’s* p245.

³² Lloyd-Jones: *God’s* p248.

³³ I am not so sure – if you include the huge number of believers who never even think about it, and are never taught about it!

³⁴ Quite wrong. See my *Assurance* pp29-31.

³⁵ Lloyd-Jones: *God’s* pp248-249,266,294-300.

A well-grounded assurance [makes a man] the most active worker in the field, the most valiant warrior in the battle, and the most patient sufferer in the furnace! There are none as active as the assured!... If God should say to your soul: 'I am your salvation', and if you [knew]... that you were a child of God, do you think it would make you unholy? Do you think it would make you negligent? No, I think I see the tears in your eyes, as you reply: 'I would do anything for him; I would live for him; I would die for him, to show how I love him who loved me'. Ah, poor soul, if you believe in Christ now, that will be true! If you will cast yourself on Jesus now, you shall be forgiven! There shall be no sin left in God's book against you; you shall be absolved, acquitted, delivered, cleansed and washed. And then you shall prove in your experience that assurance does not make men sin, but that assurance of pardon is the very best means of making men holy, and keeping them in the fear of God!...

There is a certain breed of Calvinists, whom I do not envy, who are always jeering and sneering as much as they can at the full assurance of faith. I have seen their long faces; I have heard their whining periods, and read their dismal sentences in which they say something to this effect: 'Groan in the Lord always, and again I say, groan! He who mourns and weeps, he who doubts and fears, he who distrusts and dishonours his God, shall be saved'. That seems to be the sum and substance of their very un-gospel-like gospel!... Notice that David would not be satisfied unless his assurance had a divine source. 'Say unto my soul' [Ps. 35:3]...

Nothing short of a divine testimony in the soul will ever content the true Christian. The Spirit of God must himself, after a supernatural sort, speak to our consciences, and to our hearts. Gracious God!... speak yourself, with your word of truth, and wisdom, and say to me, even to me: 'I am your salvation!'³⁶

When preaching through Romans, on reaching Romans 8:15 Lloyd-Jones made a dramatic switch in his application of the apostle's words. Notice how, from, say, verse 9 to verse 14, Paul

³⁶ 'Full Assurance' (sermon number 384). I used this extract as part of the epigraph for my *Assurance*. Despite that from Spurgeon, I do not see this in Ps. 35:1-3: 'O LORD... say to my soul: "I am your salvation"'. David was praying for reassurance in face of bitter attack, even though he had this assurance (Ps. 62:2). In any case, neither verse is in the New Testament, and we are speaking about assurance in the new covenant.

speaks in terms of ‘you’ and ‘we’. Clearly, he is speaking to and of all believers – as Lloyd-Jones agreed, by applying the words to all believers. Suddenly, however, Lloyd-Jones switched, and started restricting the apostle’s ‘you’ to some special believers:

The ‘Spirit of adoption’ is not essential to salvation, for a person can be a Christian and yet know little or nothing about this Spirit of adoption.³⁷

Lloyd-Jones supported his mistaken interpretation of Romans 8:15 by pointing out that if it is true that every believer has the witness of the Spirit, then it follows that professing believers who do not have that witness cannot be converted. And this, of course, could shatter *true* believers. He deduced, therefore, that not every believer has the witness of the Spirit.³⁸

In reply, I say four things. *First*, Lloyd-Jones was making the bad mistake of allowing experience (if not feelings) govern his interpretation of Scripture. *Secondly*, Lloyd-Jones may well have been right about some professors. Professors can be unbelievers – witness his own and his wife’s testimony.³⁹ *Thirdly*, as I have

³⁷ Lloyd-Jones: *Sons* p246. Lloyd-Jones admitted he had ‘the majority of the... Reformers... Luther and Calvin in particular’ against him. In what followed, to justify his claim, Lloyd-Jones offered the Westminster Confession, but no scripture. A significant part of *Sons* is taken up with historical lectures rather than preaching. Again: ‘The Reformers were... men who believed in possessing assurance of salvation... Do you believe in assurance of salvation as the Protestant Reformers did?... Those Protestant Reformers said that a man is not truly saved unless he had assurance!... Whenever the church is powerful and mighty and authoritative, her preachers and ministers have always been men who speak out of the full assurance of faith, and know in whom they have believed. It was for this reason that the martyrs could smile... and go gladly to the stake; they knew that from the stake they would wake in heaven and glory and see him [Christ] face to face! And they rejoiced in the assurance of salvation!’ (D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones: *Knowing The Times...*, The Banner Of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1989, pp100-101. Even so, Lloyd-Jones still ploughed on. Incidentally, once again he let the cat out of the bag: his view on assurance was not governed by Scripture but by experience.

³⁸ Lloyd-Jones: *Sons* pp246-247.

³⁹ See my *Infant* pp289-295.

been careful to explain elsewhere,⁴⁰ true believers can lose their assurance. Just as in Galatians and 1 John, men can be taken into spiritual bondage through wrong teaching, so here; the legal teachers themselves have produced the lack of assurance by their law teaching! A lack of assurance, therefore, does not necessarily indicate an unconverted state. Moreover, there is such a thing as false assurance. And that takes me to the *fourth* thing I want to say by way of reply to Lloyd-Jones. The obverse of his position can only mean that all who say they are assured must be truly converted. But the unregenerate can be quite secure, and there is always the Sandemanian problem! To sum up: we must always start with Scripture, and fix on that, before we turn to experience, feelings or logic.

Getting back to Ephesians, having left the road on ‘the sealing of the Spirit’ (Eph. 1:13-14), it’s no wonder that Lloyd-Jones went even further astray as he moved on to the following verses (Eph. 1:15-23), and asked this question: ‘What is it that [the apostle] has in mind’? Listen to Lloyd-Jones’ answer! He immediately plunged into ‘tests’:

[Paul]... supplies us with tests which we can [he really meant ‘must’] apply to ourselves. How do we know we are Christians?⁴¹... What are our grounds for thanking God that we are Christians?... The mere fact that we think we are Christians is not enough⁴²... There must be some test. If we are to have real and solid assurance, then we must have some valid tests to apply; and fortunately for us the apostle provides them for us here.⁴³

He does not! Paul tells the Ephesians that he is praying for them that they might enjoy all that they have in Christ! Lloyd-Jones was doing what so many do today; he was turning the gospel into law! Let Paul speak for himself. See, reader, if you think Paul

⁴⁰ See my *Assurance*.

⁴¹ I agree with the next sentence: ‘How can others know we are Christians?’

⁴² No – but the witness and sealing of the Spirit is no ‘mere fact’.

⁴³ Lloyd-Jones: *God’s* p314.

was setting out a series of tests by which the believer should measure himself in order to get assurance:

You... were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession – to the praise of his glory. For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is like the working of his mighty strength, which he exerted in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way (Eph. 1:13-23).

I fail to see that Paul was here setting out tests whereby believers could and should search themselves as to the reality of their experience.⁴⁴

John Stott, referring to Lloyd-Jones' exposition of these verses – that it is a special experience reserved for just the elite – rightly stated of that interpretation and assertion:

My anxiety is whether the biblical texts have been rightly interpreted. I have the uneasy feeling that it is the experiences which have determined the exposition. For the natural reading of Romans 8:14-17 is surely that *all* believers are 'led by the Spirit' (Rom. 8:14), have 'received a [the] Spirit of adoption' (Rom. 8:15), and cry 'Abba, Father' as the Spirit himself bears witness to them that they are God's children (Rom. 8:16) and therefore also his heirs (Rom. 8:17). There is no indication in these four

⁴⁴ See my short address on the passage: 'Trinitarian Experience'.

verses that a special, distinctive or overwhelming experience is in mind which needs to be sought by all though it is given only to some. On the contrary, the whole paragraph appears to be descriptive of what is, or should be, common to all believers. Though doubtless in differing degrees of intensity, all who have the Spirit's indwelling (Rom. 8:9) are given the Spirit's witness too (Rom. 8:15-16).⁴⁵

Excellent, though I would strengthen Stott's words. I am sure that Lloyd-Jones did allow experience to govern exposition. Indeed, he said so – pointing out that the 'natural reading' means that those who don't receive such a witness are not true believers. Again, I would stiffen Stott's use of 'appears' in the following: 'The whole paragraph appears to be descriptive of what is... common to all believers'.⁴⁶ It is – in the New Testament!

And now for Jonathan Edwards. As I have showed, we know that he experienced prolonged and recurring grief over his doubt. As you may well imagine, he had the doctrinal thinking behind his lack of assurance well and truly worked out. But just listen to it! Let Edwards' words sink in! As his editors noted, Edwards, in his sermon: 'I Know That My Redeemer Lives', which he preached in October 1740, showed he had departed from George Whitefield⁴⁷ on assurance: 'Edwards emphasises that it is only

⁴⁵ John Stott: *The Message of Romans...*, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, 1994, p236, emphasis his. Referring to Lloyd-Jones' heavy dependence on the testimony of those who claimed to have remarkable experiences, Hulse rightly spoke of Lloyd-Jones' 'story-telling rather than exposition' (*Reformation Today*, no.84, 1985, p13, in Andrew Atherstone and David Ceri Jones (eds.): *Engaging With Martyn Lloyd-Jones: The Life and Legacy of 'the Doctor'*, Apollos, Nottingham, 2011, pp123-130).

⁴⁶ Notice my omission of 'or should be'.

⁴⁷ George Whitefield wrote to John Wesley after the latter had published his sermon on predestination, stating: 'For these five or six years, I have received [not 'I *did* receive'] the witness of the Spirit [I have made it upper case – DG]. Since then, blessed be God, I have not doubted a quarter of an hour of having a saving interest in Jesus Christ. But with grief and humble shame I do acknowledge I have fallen into sin often since that' (John Gillies: *Memoirs of The Life of... George Whitefield...*, New Haven, 1812). What about the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists with whom Whitefield was closely associated? Howell Harris, though he lost

through long-term manifestation and practice of “holy fruits” that the believer can achieve assurance – but never any absolute certainty – of salvation’. As he himself declared: ‘Another thing that is requisite to assurance is frequent and strict self-examination... Christians should be often examining themselves’.⁴⁸

Six years later, Edwards wrote his *Religious Affections*, in which he spoke about ‘the witness of the Spirit’:

That which many call the witness of the Spirit, is no other than an immediate suggestion and impression of that fact, otherwise secret, that they are made the children of God, and so that their sins are pardoned, and that God has given them a title to heaven.

his sense of assurance for a while, as Evans noted, ‘was adamant that assurance was the essence of saving faith’. This was a mistake; see my *Assurance* pp117-118. He asked Whitefield to write on the subject, promising to translate the work into Welsh. ‘It is much wanting’, he told him. But Whitefield didn’t comply. William Williams translated Ralph Erskine’s *The Assurance of Faith*. In the societies, the first question was: ‘Do you know that you believe?’ Evans: ‘It is clear that the Welsh Methodists were being taught that assurance was the Christian’s birthright’. Although Harris and Daniel Rowland had some disagreement over the matter, in a sermon reported by Harris, Rowland ‘showed that all the saints had a witness... and that all [might] doubt for a time, but don’t abide in it. It is a mark of the hypocrite to be easy without testimony’. An anonymous critic noted that Rowland and Whitefield agreed on ‘election... regeneration.. and personal assurance of salvation’. Evans observed that the 1742 rules showed that their ‘hallmark was, unashamedly, assurance of salvation’ (Eifion Evans: *Daniel Rowland...*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1985, pp89,111-115,12,146,157,184-185,191,252-253). Lloyd-Jones on Harris’ conversion, quoting Harris himself: ‘I know my sins have been forgiven’, went on: ‘Howell Harris was now converted, he knows that his sins are forgiven, and he has lost his burden’ (D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones: ‘Howell Harris and Revival’ in *The Puritans: Their Origins and Successors*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1987, p285.

⁴⁸ Wilson H.Kimmsach, Kenneth P.Minkema and Douglas A.Sweeney: *The Sermons of Jonathan Edwards: A Reader*, Yale University, 1999. xxxii, p160.

Do not misread Edwards here: he was being utterly dismissive! Referring to his grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, Edwards was pleased to say that though in his younger days Stoddard had believed the above, latterly he had come to see that ‘the Spirit discovers [reveals] the grace of God in Christ, and thereby draws forth special actings of faith and love, which are evidential; but it does not work by way of testimony’. Edwards, analysing the ‘error’, argued that it missed the essential point; namely, *evidence*. In the following, I highlight the relevant words – and glosses:

When God sets his seal on a man’s heart by his Spirit, there is some holy stamp, some image impressed, and left upon the heart by the Spirit, as by the seal upon the wax. And this holy stamp, or impressed image, exhibiting clear *evidence* to the conscience, that the subject of it is the child of God, is the very thing which in Scripture is called ‘the seal of the Spirit’, and ‘the witness’ or ‘*evidence* of the Spirit’. And this mark enstamped by the Spirit on God’s children, is his own image. That is the *evidence* by which they are known to be God’s children.

This is vital. Edwards has radically shifted the biblical position – the direct witness of the Spirit – to assurance based on evidence; namely, progressive sanctification. He did this by ‘correcting’ Paul! The apostle said ‘witness’; Edwards said ‘evidence’. The plain fact is a witness *gives* evidence; it is not *the* evidence! Edwards made his tampering with Paul abundantly plain in his comments on Romans 8:16:

When [the apostle] speaks of the Spirit giving us ‘witness’ or *evidence* that we are God’s children, [he is referring to the Spirit’s] dwelling in us, and leading us, as a spirit of adoption, or of a child, disposing us to behave towards God as a father... So that the witness of the Spirit... is far from being any whisper, or immediate suggestion; but is that gracious, holy *effect* of the Spirit of God in the hearts of saints, the disposition and temper [spirit, attitude, frame of mind] of children, appearing in sweet child-like love to God, which casts out fear. It is plain that the apostle speaks of the Spirit... as dwelling in the hearts of saints, as a gracious principle, in opposition to the flesh... It is ‘perfect love’, or ‘strong love’ only, which so witnesses or *evidences* that we are children, as to cast out fear, and wholly deliver from the

spirit of bondage. The strong and lively *experiences* of evangelical, humble love to God, give clear *evidence* of the soul's relation to God, as his child... The Spirit of God gives the *evidence*, by infusing and shedding abroad the love of God, the spirit of a child, in the heart; and our spirit, or our conscience, receives and declares this *evidence* for our rejoicing. Many mischiefs have arisen from that false and delusive notion of the witness of the Spirit, that it is a kind of inward voice, suggestion, or declaration from God to a man, that he is beloved, pardoned, elected, or the like... It is to be feared that multitudes of souls have been eternally undone by it [ruined by this delusion]⁴⁹... The 'witness' or seal of the Spirit consists in the *effect* of the Spirit of God in the heart, in the implantation and *exercises* of grace there, and so consists in *experience*... In these *exercises* of grace in practice, God gives witness, and sets to his seal, in the most conspicuous, eminent, and *evident* manner... And when the apostle speaks of the 'witness' of the Spirit, in Rom. 8:15-17, he has a more immediate respect to what the Christians *experienced* in their *exercises* of love to God, while suffering persecution, as is plain by the context.

Is it? Edwards referred to their 'sufferings' (Rom. 8:18), calling them 'persecutions'. I agree that the apostle moves on to persecutions at the end of the chapter, but it stretches the elastic beyond breaking point to read all that back into 'the witness of the Spirit'. The witness of the Spirit helps believers in their trials and sufferings, but those sufferings, and the believer's attitude under them, are not part of the Spirit's witness.

Edwards tackled those who objected to his teaching on the grounds that it is 'a legal doctrine... [which] magnifies works, and tends to lead men to make too much of their own doings, to the diminution of the glory of free grace'.⁵⁰ But so it is, and so it

⁴⁹ Jonathan Edwards: *The Religious Affections...*, American Tract Society, New York, p128.

⁵⁰ Jonathan Edwards: *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, at hopefaithprayer.com, Vol.1 pp1248-1253,1410,1427. See also Vol. 1 pp1212,1237-1239,1244,1254,1287,1295,1506,1722,1726, and Vol.2 pp97,1041,1229,1234, 2310,2398. Edwards did better, but still did not reach the biblical position, when he wrote: 'Hence we learn, that our experience of the sufficiency of the doctrine of the gospel to give peace of conscience is a rational inward witness to the truth of the gospel.'

does!⁵¹ While I agree that justification by faith leads to progressive sanctification in works – of that there is not the slightest doubt – we are talking, as Paul was talking in Romans 8:15-17, about the witness of the Spirit, not the witness of our works. Clearly, Edwards had fundamentally shifted the focus from the biblical position – the witness of the Spirit – to the witness of evidences of life, the witness of works. And this, of course, leads directly to introspection and lack of assurance – as it did, do not forget, in his own experience! Moreover, as I have shown, Edwards called his hearers and readers to frequent self-searching over the matter.

And what a strange childhood he must have had! Evidently he never knew he was the child of his parents until he could see that he really loved them! What is more, how could he have ever fully accepted that he was indeed his father's child – was his love for his father ever 'perfect' (his own word)? There is truth in all he

When the mind sees such a fitness in this way of salvation, that it takes off the burden that arises from the sense of its being necessarily bound to punishment... it is a strong argument... not a thing of mere human imagination. When we experience its fitness to answer its end, this is the third of the three that bear witness on earth [1 John 5:6-8]. The Spirit bears witness, by discovering [revealing] the divine glory, and those stamps of divinity that are in the gospel' (Vol.2 p1567). 'The filial Spirit, or Spirit of the Son, or Spirit of adoption, is a principle that, so far as it prevails, excludes and renders the saints incapable of fear, or a legal principle, or spirit of bondage (1 John 4:18)... It is in Christians a principle of love, of childlike confidence and hope... It cries: "Abba, Father". It evidences to them their being the children of God, and begets that trust and assurance that renders them incapable of a legal principle (Rom. 8:15-16)... Being led by the Spirit of the Son of God, as a Spirit of adoption, is inconsistent with a state of bondage, [just] as sonship is inconsistent with servitude: "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty" (2 Cor. 3:17)' (Vol.2 p2105). 'Christians are the children of God, as partaking with Christ, the only-begotten Son, in his sonship... And Christians, being the children of God, are honoured of God as such. They are sometimes[!] owned as such by the inward testimony of the Spirit of God... "The Spirit bears witness with our spirits that we are the children of God"' (Vol.2 p2311).

⁵¹ See 'Preparationism in New England'.

says as regards secondary evidence when faith is tested,⁵² and in demonstrating the reality of our profession to others, yes, but as for it being a fair representation of the apostle's words, it is anything but! Try Edwards' treatment on, say, justification by faith in Romans 3 and 4!

Moving on to A.W.Pink: Pink, in part quoting Baxter, was another to call for self-searching for assurance:

A reliable and satisfactory assurance can only be attained or reached by means of a thorough self-examination.⁵³ 'O therefore, Christians, rest not till you can call this rest your own. Sit not down without assurance. Get alone, and bring your heart to the bar of trial: force it to answer the interrogatories put to it to set the qualifications of the saints on one side, and the qualifications of yourself on the other side, and then judge what resemblance there is between them. You have the same word before you, by which to judge yourself now, as you shall be judged by at the great day. You may there read the very articles upon which you shall be tried; try yourself by these articles now. You may there know beforehand on what terms men shall then be acquitted or condemned. Try now whether you are possessed of that which will acquit you, or whether you are in the condition of those that will be condemned; and accordingly acquit or condemn yourself. Yet be sure you judge by a true touchstone, and mistake not the Scripture description of a saint, that you neither acquit nor condemn yourself by mistake'.⁵⁴

Here you have it. Introspection and evidence are the keys to assurance!

John Murray kept to the beaten track; he had *five* 'grounds of assurance': 'An intelligent understanding of the nature of salvation... The recognition of the immutability of the gifts and calling of God... Obedience to the commands of God... Self examination... The inward witness of the Holy Spirit'. Note where Murray placed the witness of the Spirit. Furthermore, he was explicit in placing the other 'grounds' between the believer

⁵² See my 'John Tuned Upside Down'.

⁵³ This denigrates the Spirit's witness to the edge of blasphemy!

⁵⁴ A.W.Pink: 'Assurance' (spurgeongems.org), quoting Baxter's *The Saint's Everlasting Rest*.

and his assurance: ‘The direct witness of the sonship of believers must never be divorced from the other activities of the Spirit in the sanctification of all believers’. Quite right! But – and what a ‘but’ – Murray showed where, in his opinion, the weight must fall:

This progressive conformity to the image of God’s Son is [the] authentic witness to the recognition that their alignments are not with the world that lies in the wicked one, but with the kingdom which is righteousness and peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit.⁵⁵

In short, Murray was saying that the real ground of assurance is progressive sanctification. A far cry, is it not, from the New Testament?

John Piper did not stray from the Puritan path, listing *twelve* aspects of the way believers get assurance. The third (citing 2 Cor. 13:5): ‘Assurance cannot neglect the painful work of self-examination’. The tenth (citing Ps. 40:1-3): ‘We must often wait patiently for the return of assurance’. The eleventh (1 Tim. 6:12): ‘Assurance is a fight to the day we die’. And the last (citing Rom. 8:16 and 1 John 5:10-11) – the last, mark you: ‘Assurance is finally a gift of the Spirit’.⁵⁶

I deal with 2 Corinthians 13:5 elsewhere and show that Piper got it wrong.⁵⁷ As for Psalm 40:1-3, did Piper make a fair application of David’s words? I think it far more likely that David was speaking of his conversion, or delivery from some trial – but I see no suggestion that he was struggling over assurance. As for 1 Timothy 6:12, I fail to see that it justifies Piper’s heading.

And then we come to John Macarthur:

I think it’s fair to say the pulpit is *rightly* the creator of anxious hearts. That’s part of the duty of the preacher – to make the heart anxious. Why? So that, as 2 Corinthians 13:5 says, you examine yourself to see whether you’re in the faith. [It] would be a breach

⁵⁵ John Murray pp270-274.

⁵⁶ ‘Helping People Have the Assurance of Salvation’ (desiringgod.org). Another on the same website was entitled: ‘The Agonizing Problem of the Assurance of Salvation’. What an uninviting title! Beeke’s ‘Quest’ is bad enough!

⁵⁷ See my *Assurance* pp155-162; ‘Misreading Paul’.

of ministerial responsibility, it would be a forfeiture of the duty we have before God, to let people live comfortably and [have] an illusion about their true spiritual condition... The pulpit is to be a purveyor of a message that creates anxious hearts... Where there is that strong preaching, there will be a battle with assurance. And I'll tell you something, it's not bad to have that; it's good because how else are we drawn to the important issue of self-examination?⁵⁸

Bear in mind that Macarthur was saying this to believers – not to the ungodly – and doing so in a sermon to give them assurance! Preachers, I agree, must preach so as to awaken and disturb *unbelievers* – but, as I say, Macarthur was here trying to help believers who are afraid and lacking assurance. Fantastic!

I would not be misunderstood. I am not saying that preachers should never disturb believers. Of course not! 2 Timothy 3:16, on its own, is more than sufficient to put a stop to that kind of talk. No! What is more, I define preaching as ‘a confrontation’ (Ezek. 16:2; 20:4; 22:2; 23:36),⁵⁹ and I deplore the fact that many

⁵⁸ ‘Why Christians Lack Assurance’ (gty.org), emphasis mine. Macarthur said more, of course, but he did say this.

⁵⁹ But many versions have ‘judge’ instead of confront. Nevertheless, ‘confront’ is the right word. How often the prophets proclaimed *against* people for their sins. The complaint of the people against Jeremiah was that he proclaimed against them (Jer. 1:18; 25:30; 26:11-12,20; 28:8). He was, of course, doing as God himself and as God commanded him (many verses). As for the verses from Ezekiel, Calvin commented: Judging ‘embraces within itself all reproaches and threats. On the whole, since they acted deceitfully, and by no means proposed to submit themselves to God, hence he uses this bitterness: “What! are they worthy of your judging them? that is, of your contending with them?”’ For the prophet’s duty is to argue with sinners, to threaten them, and to cite them to God’s tribunal. God, therefore, pronounces them unworthy of such disputing, because they are not only deaf, but, hardened by abandoned obstinacy’. John Gill: ‘Will you not reprove and correct them, judge and condemn them, for their sins and wickedness?... Will you do your work and office as a prophet? Have you courage enough to do it? Will you rebuke and reprove?... Will you examine her [Israel’s] case, judge truly, and condemn her, as you ought to do? Have you inclination to take this affair in hand? Then be directed to it, as follows:... You shall show her all her abominations; lay them before her;

preachers steer as far away as possible from challenging believers, let alone upsetting or offending them. But, surely, when a man is deliberately setting out to remove a believer's fears over assurance, the last thing he should be doing is making believers harrow themselves, asserting that his job is to make them anxious.

When all this is played out in today's culture of inclusivism at all costs, we might well end up with preachers making saints anxious and, at the same time, lulling the unconverted to sleep! I know what MacArthur was doing, but in rightly trying to disturb 'the carnal Christian', I wonder how many *true and sincere believers* he made – and continues to make – unnecessarily anxious! Sawyer commented:

[MacArthur] contends: 'When a man obeys God he gives *the only possible evidence* that in his heart he believes God'. Elsewhere, MacArthur notes that since salvation is a work of God, it is God who produces the fruit of salvation in us, noting that any professed salvation which lacks any of the elements of salvation is to be found wanting from a biblical perspective. *The practical effect of such teaching is to suspend assurance of salvation* (not salvation itself) upon performance – works. The net effect is to destroy the confidence that the believer is commanded in Scripture to have before God. The dynamic of assurance espoused by Dr. MacArthur has its roots deep in the tradition of the Puritans and the Scottish Calvinists. The Scots referred to this process as: 'The Practical Syllogism'. The Puritans called it: 'The Reflex Action'. By whatever name, the process is the same. The believer is denied direct access to the Saviour for assurance. Instead he must look inside and complete

convict her of them; show her the evil of them, and the punishment they deserve; every kind of sin she was guilty of. For, as for particular acts, it was impossible to reckon them; those sins that were the most flagrant, and most frequently committed, and which were abominable to the Lord, and rendered her so in his sight, are intended. This you ought to do... Do as follows... declare unto them their abominations, their abominable sins, their murders, adulteries, and idolatries. Set them in a true light before them, in all their aggravated circumstances, that, if it can be, they may be brought to a true sight and sense of them, to repent of them, be ashamed of them, loathe them, confess them, and forsake them'. See my 'Confronting The Cultures'; 'The True Minister:1'.

Legal Assurance

the syllogism: 'The Scripture tells me that he who believes shall be saved. If upon examining myself I find fruits of righteousness in my life, I may then complete the syllogism But I believe, therefore I shall be saved'. However, such a doctrine lays the ground of assurance solely within ourselves causing the believer to rely more on his own works for assurance, than on the work of Christ on our behalf. The ultimate result of such teaching is uncertainty.⁶⁰

I leave the extracts there.

So much for legal assurance. Give me the New Testament variety, every time!

⁶⁰ Sawyer.

New-Covenant Assurance

According to the New Testament, everyone who believes God's promise in the gospel, and trusts Christ, has the Spirit.¹ He must have the Spirit (John 14:17; Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 12:13). He could only have believed by the power of the Spirit (John 6:44; Eph. 2:8). Furthermore, the Spirit having enabled the sinner to believe, then indwells him (John 14:17; Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 3:16; 1 John 4:13), taking away his fear, giving him the spirit of sonship, enabling him to call God his Father, sealing him, anointing him, and witnessing with his spirit that he is indeed a child of God, having adopted him into his family. In this way, the believer is assured, and given inexpressible joy and glory, with an increasing sense of it (Rom. 8:9-17; 2 Cor. 1:21-22; 2 Cor. 3:18; Gal. 3:26 – 4:7; 5:1,13; Eph. 1:13-14; 4:30; 1 Pet. 1:8; 1 John 2:20-27; 3:24; 4:13; 5:6,9-11, for instance). All this was true of New Testament believers.

For the majority of believers today, however, talk like this is virtually a foreign language; worse, it is a foreign experience, at least consciously speaking. Indeed, even to talk like this is almost certain to bring the dismissing retort: 'Charismatic!' If so, let me remind you, reader, of the apostle's warnings: 'Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption' (Eph. 4:30).² 'Do not put out the Spirit's fire' (1 Thess. 5:19).³ And fire, warmth, the burning heart, is precisely

¹ For this article, I have lightly edited my *Assurance* pp97-113. You are advised to read 'Legal Assurance' before reading this article.

² John Gill: Believers grieve the Holy Spirit 'especially when they entertain any undervaluing [thoughts] of Jesus Christ, whose glorifier he is'.

³ Matthew Henry: 'We quench the Spirit if we do not stir up our spirits, and all that is within us, to comply with the motions of the good Spirit'. Calvin: 'The meaning... is: "Be enlightened by the Spirit of God. See that you do not lose that light through your ingratitude". This is an exceedingly useful admonition... We must, therefore, be on our guard against indolence, by which the light of God is choked in us... It is our part to ask from the Lord, that he would furnish oil to the lamps which

what the downcast disciples experienced on the road to Emmaus when Christ revealed himself to them through the Scriptures (Luke 24:32). And it is this warmth which believers should have today. Sadly, however, most believers seem to have lost it.

For some, assurance has become largely a matter of the mind, little to do with the heart. Too often, having been presented with facts, mere facts, facts which we believe – that is, assent to them, or, in the words of N.T.Wright,⁴ ‘learn our lines and join in the drama’ – we end up with so-called ‘assurance’; *and that, for many, is as far as it goes*. And this, if assent is all it is, is not saving. Many preachers, wishing to avoid this sorry state in their hearers, instruct converts to pore over their works, promising them the possibility (but not the probability or likelihood) of assurance after years of struggle. Rarely, these days, does the teacher speak of the inner witness, the burning heart. Too often, as I say, any mention of an emotional heart-warming, or talk of the Spirit’s inner witness, sealing or anointing, is frowned upon as charismaticism – and dismissed.

How is it that New Testament believers enjoyed this assurance, yet many of us today do not? There is no doubt about it. The weakening of our hold on the new covenant – to put it no stronger – is a major contributing factor in this. More! It’s not our hold on the new covenant which is wanted; it’s the new-covenant’s grip on us! Many today, however, instead of sitting

he has lighted up, that he may keep the wick pure, and may even increase it’. Gill thought the apostle may have been referring to ‘the graces of the Spirit, which may be compared to light, and fire, and heat, to which the allusion is in the text: such as faith, which is a light in the soul, a seeing of the Son, and an evidence of things not seen; and love, which gives a vehement flame, which many waters cannot quench; and zeal, which is the boiling up of love, the fervency of it; and spiritual knowledge, which is also light, and of an increasing nature, and are all graces of the Spirit. And though these cannot be totally extinguished, and utterly put out and lost, yet they may be greatly damped. The light of faith may become dim, and the flame of love be abated, and that wax cold. The heat of zeal may pass into lukewarmness, and an indifference of spirit. And the light of knowledge seem to decline instead of increasing’.

⁴ N.T.Wright: ‘Believing and Belonging’ (ntwrightpage.com).

under those who preach the gospel, are listening to men who preach law: either overtly, the Mosaic law (usually whittled down, without scriptural warrant, to the ten commandments, which they call ‘the moral law’); or incipiently, by issuing a cataract of recipes, rules and regulations. In this way, many believers are being taught into doubt, introspection, bondage and sadness. By law preachers I mean those who mistakenly preach the law to sinners to so-say prepare them for Christ, and bring them to him, who then go on to preach the law to saints to make them progressively sanctified,⁵ and hence to gain some sort of assurance. And all the while they should be preaching Christ – preaching Christ to sinners and saints, preaching Christ for every grace.

It is not just me saying it. I get it from Paul. He said that ‘Christ is all’ (Col. 3:11). Listen to him, speaking when he was languishing in prison, and could not preach – in the usual sense of the word. He knew that others, outside the prison, were taking advantage of his confinement. Some were rubbing salt into his wounds. Others, emboldened by his example, were preaching more fearlessly than before. And Paul rejoiced! Why? Whether men were preaching to mock and hurt him, or were preaching to follow his example, the apostle rejoiced, because, as he said, ‘the word of God’ is preached, ‘the gospel’ is preached; above all, as he said: ‘Christ is preached’ (Phil. 1:12-18). Is this not clear enough? Christ is preached! This is what made the apostle tick, this is what made him rejoice. We must, therefore, preach Christ!

⁵ By ‘progressive sanctification’, I mean the believer’s 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. I will set out in my arguments on all this in my forthcoming book on sanctification.

If this is not sufficiently convincing, consider Paul's declaration to the Corinthians:

We preach Christ crucified... Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God... Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God – that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption... I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified (1 Cor. 1:23-24,30; 2:2).

As the apostle went on to tell them: 'Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!' (1 Cor. 9:16). Do not miss the point: this was Paul's consistent practice, whether addressing sinners or saints. He always preached Christ; he never preached anyone or anything else! He did not preach a creed. He did not preach a confession or a catechism. He preached the word of God, the Scriptures. And that means he preached Christ, for Christ is in all the Scriptures (Luke 24:27,32). See 1 Corinthians 15:1-11. Paul preached Christ as Lord (2 Cor. 4:5). Christ, not law! He did not preach the law to Gentile unbelievers,⁶ and he never preached the law to believers. He would mention the law to them (Rom. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:14; Eph. 6:1-4), and use it as an illustration or paradigm (model or pattern), yes, but he always preached Christ. Take those very verses. Read the passages which precede and follow them. What do you find? The apostle never allowed his use of the law to compromise his focus, his theme: Christ! As he told the Ephesian elders:

You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that

⁶ The apostles used the law when addressing unconverted Jews, since the Jews were familiar with it. But they were prepared to use anything to illustrate what they were saying. The fact that they never used the law when addressing Gentile unbelievers showed their wisdom – why use something of which their hearers knew nothing? More, it makes my point. Gentiles were converted to Christ without the use of the law. It cannot be necessary therefore, to preach the law to the unconverted. The law does not prepare sinners for Christ. In any case, sinners do not need to be prepared or made fit for Christ!

they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus... I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me – the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace... I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God... I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified (Acts 20:20-32).

There is a direct connection between this kind of preaching and the way sinners were converted and enjoyed assurance in New Testament days. And I say there is a connection, today, between legal preaching and our lack of assurance.⁷ The last day will declare it.

In short, assurance comes, not by harrowing introspection, raking over one's progressive sanctification, but by the witness of the Spirit. This is the apostolic testimony.

But what about these passages (in 1 and 2 Corinthians, 2 Peter and 1 John) which call the believer to self-examination, and the like, in order to assure himself? Don't they fly in the face of what I have asserted? They do not!⁸

What about: 'Work out your salvation with fear and trembling' (Phil. 2:12)? Surely, seeing believers have to 'fear' and 'tremble', they can hardly be said to be assured, can they? This, of course, is to completely misread the apostle's meaning in that verse. Look at its context for a start. Paul is saying that believers are never to become smug, self-confident and careless. He's not remotely calling believers to doubt their assurance in Christ!

John Calvin, commenting on the verse, spoke of the Papists who:

...pervert this passage so as to shake the assurance of faith, for the man that trembles is in uncertainty. They, accordingly, understand Paul's words as if they meant that we ought, during

⁷ It could even be that 'conversion' is a casualty of today's preaching. This is no idle concern. Preaching law, especially in its incipient form, can so easily produce conformity and not conversion – fatal!

⁸ For my reasons, see my *Assurance* pp137-177.

our whole life, to waver as to assurance of salvation. If, however, we would not have Paul contradict himself, he does not by any means exhort us to hesitation, inasmuch as he everywhere recommends confidence and full assurance. The solution, however, is easy, if anyone is desirous of attaining the true meaning [of the passage] without any spirit of contention. There are two kinds of fear; the one produces anxiety along with humility; the other hesitation. The former is opposed to fleshly confidence and carelessness, equally as to arrogance; the latter, to assurance of faith. Further, we must take notice, that, as believers repose with assurance upon the grace of God, so, when they direct their views to their own frailty, they do not by any means resign themselves carelessly to sleep, but are by fear of dangers stirred up to prayer. Yet, so far is this fear from disturbing tranquillity of conscience, and shaking confidence, that it rather confirms it. For distrust of ourselves leads us to lean more confidently upon the mercy of God. And this is what Paul's words import, for he requires nothing from the Philippians, but that they submit themselves to God with true self-renunciation.

Calvin's words ought to be weighed – not least by those who profess to hold him in high regard: 'Believers [must] repose with assurance upon the grace of God', and not 'direct their views to their own frailty'; that is, their progressive sanctification.

Let me spell out what is at stake, and what is NOT at stake, in all that I have said.

Let me start with the negative. Progressive sanctification is not at issue. Progressive sanctification, godliness of life is essential. If a professing believer is not sanctified in his life-style, he is showing that he is not justified or positionally sanctified. While progressive sanctification does not contribute to our justification or positional sanctification, it is an essential and inevitable concomitant and outcome of both. In all their letters, the apostles wrote to believers, and urged them to greater godliness – in line with the categorical assertion that progressive sanctification is essential and inevitable for the true child of God (2 Cor. 5:17). Thus, if a man has no interest in progressive sanctification, he is demonstrating that he is not saved. There can be no happiness

without holiness, since ‘without holiness no one will see the Lord’ (Heb. 12:14). Progressive sanctification is essential.

Progressive sanctification is also necessary for other believers to recognise the converted: there is no promise that the Spirit will bear witness with your spirit that I am converted. I can only show you that by my life:

By their fruit you will recognise them. Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit... Thus, by their fruit you will recognise them (Matt. 7:16-20).

Progressive sanctification also serves as a secondary confirmation for believers who have, for some reason or another, lost their assurance.⁹

No believer is perfect in this life. Sinless perfection, this side of glory, is found only in Christ.

Every believer will suffer persecution, meet trouble, be faced with temptations, come into affliction, and have questions, difficulties and doubts.

None of that is at issue.

And now for the positive. Assurance is primarily by the witness of the Spirit, not by progressive sanctification. It is a fact – a fact, I say – that every believer in the New Testament, at conversion, was joined to Christ, included in Christ, had his spirit of fear removed, received the Spirit of adoption, and had the witness of the Spirit. Every believer had all this, and had it *before* any progressive sanctification could possibly have taken place. And this means that New Testament believers were assured, not by their progressive sanctification, but by the witness of the Spirit.

Yes, through bad or false teaching – maybe in other ways too – some New Testament believers lost their assurance, but the apostles did not write to tell them that this was what they must

⁹ For Calvin on this, see my *Assurance* pp148-150; ‘John Turned Upside Down’.

expect! They didn't tell them that only a favoured few ever get assurance, and most of them get it only on their death-bed!¹⁰ No! Far from encouraging them to go on struggling with their doubt, they wrote to restore those doubting believers to their former joy, and restore them at once, there and then.¹¹ And they did it, above all, by taking them back to Christ and free grace. This is the very thing Paul did when addressing the Galatians: he took them back to where they began and where they had left the right road (Gal. 3:1-5; 4:15-16). One thing is certain: no apostle ever sought to 'help' doubting believers by preaching introspection and law.

Calvin's comments on Paul's demand to the Galatians – 'I would like to learn just one thing from you' (Gal. 3:2) – are pertinent here:

[The apostle] now proceeds to support his cause by additional arguments. The first is drawn from their experience, for he reminds them in what manner the gospel was introduced among them. When they heard the gospel, they received the Spirit. It was not to the law, therefore, but to faith,¹² that they owed the reception of this benefit. This same argument is employed by Peter in the defence which he makes to his brethren for having baptised uncircumcised persons (Acts 10:47). Paul and Barnabas followed the same course in the debate which they maintained at Jerusalem on this subject (Acts 15:2,12).

Here is the material point: the Galatian believers had received the Spirit at their conversion, *and they knew it and felt it*. So much so, the apostle could call upon that fact in taking them back to the joy they had lost through the law men. Likewise, it was the evidence of the gift of the Spirit in others that enabled Peter, Paul and Barnabas to speak of *their* conversion.¹³

¹⁰ See my *Assurance* pp71-95; 'Legal Assurance'.

¹¹ See my *Assurance* pp137-154; 'John Turned Upside Down'.

¹² Calvin: "'Faith" is here put, by a figure of speech, for the gospel, which is elsewhere called "the law of faith" (Rom. 3:27), because it exhibits to us the free grace of God in Christ, without any merit of works'. While there is truth in this, the subjective use of 'faith' is in the context (Gal. 3:14).

¹³ It might be that the gift of the Spirit in the above cases referred to the 'extraordinary', but Calvin, while not rejecting this view, took the

Note Calvin's ringing statement: 'When [the Galatians] heard the gospel, they received the Spirit. It was not to the law, therefore, but to faith [that is, the gospel], that they owed the reception of this benefit'. This is of the utmost importance bearing in mind the context of the letter: the law teachers, and the havoc they were causing at Galatia, the damage they were inflicting upon the believers there.

I would only add that Calvin's observation applies to more than the start of the Christian life. It is not under the law, or by the law, that sinners come to Christ. It is not under the law, or by the law, or by looking to the law, that believers get assurance and go on to progressive sanctification, but by the Spirit, under the provisions of the new covenant. Paul had progressive sanctification in mind when he wrote to the Galatians in order to refute the law teachers and to enforce the new covenant. He well knew that only Christ, by his Spirit, in the new covenant can produce vital godliness in the believer. The law cannot do it. And that is why, in his conversion, the believer has died to the law: he has died to the law so that he can be married to Christ and so produce spiritual fruit (Rom. 7:4-6). And that is why the new covenant, and not the law, was the ministry that the apostle gloried in (2 Cor. 3:1 – 4:6). And that is why the new covenant must be our ministry. The law will not prepare sinners for Christ; the law will not bring sinners to Christ; the law will not assure believers or make them progressively sanctified.

In all this, do not miss the vital connection between the gift of the Spirit and Christ's accomplishment in establishing the new covenant. More, do not miss the fact that the gift of the Spirit is a *direct consequence* of Christ's triumph in fulfilling the old covenant and bringing in the new. As Peter told the Jews on the day of Pentecost:

reception of the Spirit to be the 'ordinary', quoting Eph. 1:13 in support. In the Galatians' case, Calvin was right. See Gal. 3:14. Calvin: 'It was enough for Paul's purpose, that the Galatians knew that the power of the Holy Spirit... had accompanied Paul's doctrine, and that believers were variously endowed with the gifts of the Spirit for general edification'.

Jesus of Nazareth... being delivered by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death; whom God raised up, having loosed the pains of death, because it was not possible that he should be held by it... This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses. Therefore being exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he poured out this which you now see and hear (Acts 2:22-33).

It was just as Christ had promised: ‘He who believes in me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water’. John left us in no doubt as to what Christ meant: ‘But this he spoke concerning the Spirit, whom those believing in him would receive; for the Holy Spirit was not yet given, because Jesus was not yet glorified’ (John 7:38-39). The conclusion is obvious. In these days of the new covenant, Jesus, being glorified, now bestows his Spirit upon his elect in order that ‘the blessing of Abraham might come upon the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, that we [who believe] might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith’ (Gal. 3:14). And we know that the Spirit always glorifies Christ, not himself:

When he, the Spirit of truth, has come, he will guide you into all truth; for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak; and he will tell you things to come. He will glorify me, for he will take of what is mine and declare it to you (John 16:13-14).

Consequently, our part in all this is clear: as the apostle told the Galatians, we must keep in step with the Spirit (Gal. 5:25). Every preacher, therefore, ought to take heed to what Calvin said when commenting on 1 John 5:13-14 – and do it! I stress the relevant passage:

But we ought to observe the way in which faith is confirmed, even by having the office and power of Christ explained to us. For the apostle says that he wrote these things, that is, that eternal life is to be sought nowhere else but in Christ, in order that they who were believers already might believe, that is, make progress in believing. *It is therefore the duty of a godly teacher, in order to confirm disciples in the faith, to extol as much as*

New-Covenant Assurance

possible the grace of Christ, so that being satisfied with that, we may seek nothing else.

Believers who are instructed to look to their progressive sanctification for assurance, are, therefore, being seriously misdirected. They are traversing an unscriptural track. Misguidedly struggling to gain assurance by probing their works, they are on a course which is bound to leave them in constant suspense. Who can say his progressive sanctification is perfect? Who has enough progressive sanctification? Who can say his progressive sanctification is good enough for assurance? Sadness and bondage must be the result for any sensitive, thinking believer.

Let me illustrate by my own experience. When I was a young believer, I knew I didn't blaspheme, I wasn't committing adultery, I wasn't getting drunk, I never drank. 'I'm a good, spiritual man!', I might have thought. But it wasn't long before I began to see things in a very different light. And now, many years later, I certainly know that's not all there is to it – no, not by a long chalk! There are sins, maybe greater sins, which are more secret, more inward: pride, arrogance, jealousy, bitterness, grudge-bearing, impatience, covetousness, prejudice, resentment, and the like. Am I guilty of them? And what about motive? I preach. Why do I preach? Do I preach faithfully? Do I preach to myself first? Do I always take my own medicine? Where's my heart? How's my heart? What about hypocrisy? And so on and on. Do you see what I mean? In the beginning, it's drunkenness and blasphemy and external sins. Now, it's... I'll never get to the end of it! In myself, I'm a sinner through and through, and if I look within, what do I see? Do I see enough spirituality? Do I have sufficient evidence to show me that I am a believer, that I am a *true* believer, a *sincere* believer, a *strong* believer, a *consistent* believer, a believer with progressive sanctification good enough to make me certain that I'm a true believer? Speaking for myself, I simply cannot discover any hope for assurance by my progressive sanctification. So much for me. Reader, what about you?

But if, following the path marked out by the apostles, the believer is taught and encouraged to look to Christ, Christ bearing

witness in his heart through his Holy Spirit, the Spirit bearing witness to Christ, and glorifying him to the believer, bearing witness to all the glories the believer has in his free justification and positional sanctification in Christ, well, then assurance is the result!

Take Richard Baxter and his testimony as to the way legal preaching brings bondage. Not only that! Listen to him pointing to the remedy:

For those doubts of my own salvation, which exercised me many years, the chiefest causes of them were these... because I could not distinctly trace the workings of the Spirit upon my heart in that method which Mr Bolton, Mr Hooker, Mr Rogers, and other divines describe... I was once [inclined] to meditate on my own heart... I was continually poring either on my sins or wants, or examining my sincerity... *but now, though I am greatly convinced of the need of heart-acquaintance... yet I see more need of a higher work, and that I should look often upon Christ, and God, and heaven, [rather] than upon my own heart.*¹⁴

And what about: ‘And the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit’ (Acts 13:52)? I have no doubt about the reason! Doesn’t the New Testament teach that God decreed the salvation of his elect in eternity past, that he sent his Son into the world to live and die for them in order to save them? Doesn’t it teach that the elect, having been brought by the Spirit to repentance and faith, are perfectly, fully and absolutely justified and positionally sanctified – free of sin and clothed with the righteousness of Christ, without fault or stain, and utterly beyond condemnation? And doesn’t it teach that the believer, contemplating Christ, contemplating his own perfection in Christ, is moved to seek to live to the glory of the triune God who planned, accomplished and applies salvation to him? Doesn’t it teach that when the believer gets to glory, God will reward him for his good works done out of his gratitude to God for his love, grace and mercy?¹⁵ Doesn’t the New Testament teach that the believer has died to

¹⁴ Richard Baxter: *The Autobiography of Richard Baxter*, J.M.Dent & Sons Ltd., London, 1931, pp10,113, emphasis mine.

¹⁵ Not that the works merit salvation, of course, but they do bring reward.

sin, law and death, and is alive to God, fruitful to God, liberated and empowered, and has ever increasing glory and unspeakable joy, and has it now? And, in the midst of all this, immediately at the point of faith and union with Christ, doesn't the Spirit bear witness with the believer, seal him and anoint him? Doesn't all this bring assurance? And doesn't all this feed on itself? A *gracious* circle, indeed!

As William Hammond put it:

We are not to live upon the [progressive] sanctification that is wrought in us, but the [positional] sanctification that is in Christ. Otherwise, we shall live upon the streams instead of the fountain... They are truly happy who live by the faith of the Son of God. Blessed are they who see Christ their all in all, and who see nothing at all, indeed, and desire to see nothing at all but Christ alone. While the eye of the soul is steadily fixed on Christ, that soul is perfectly happy, so happy that it cannot be happier, unless in the full fruition of Christ in glory. But the moment we take our eye off from Christ, and look after something else beside the Lord Christ, that moment, I say, our souls are unsettled, confused and distressed. We then become quite uneasy, and utterly miserable; nor can we find any comfort or satisfaction till we return to our rest; that is, to Christ... Never turn your eye from Christ any more, but keep looking to him continually. Behold him as the author and finisher of your faith; look upon him as the alpha and omega, the first and the last, the beginning and end of your salvation (Heb. 12:1; Rev. 1:8,11). And look at nothing else, either within you or without you, but Christ; for in him you are complete (Col. 2:10); in him you are perfect (Col. 1:28); in him you are washed, in him you are sanctified, in him you are justified (1 Cor. 6:11). He is made unto us of God, wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption (1 Cor. 1:30). In him we are perfect and entire, wanting nothing (Jas. 1:4). And this is properly Christian perfection, because indeed this perfection is not inherent in us, but it subsists in Christ, and is ours only by virtue of our union with Christ. Every Christian, truly so called, is one with Christ (1 Cor. 6:17), and therefore purifies himself even as he is pure (1 John 3:3). He is righteous even as he [Christ] is righteous (1 John 3:7). He is merciful as God is merciful (Luke 6:36). He is

New-Covenant Assurance

holy as God is holy (1 Pet. 1:15-16). He is perfect as his Father which is in heaven is perfect (Matt. 5:48).¹⁶

Reader, are you looking to the law – or to Christ? Are you looking to your works for assurance – or to Jesus? Are you a preacher? Do you preach Christ? Preach him, not law! Preach Christ! As William Gadsby expressed it:

*Immortal honours rest on Jesus' head;
My God, my portion, and my living bread;
In him I live, upon him cast my care;
He saves from death, destruction, and despair.*

*He is my refuge in each deep distress;
The Lord my strength and glorious righteousness;
Through floods and flames he leads me safely on,
And daily makes his sovereign goodness known.*

*My every need he richly will supply;
Nor will his mercy ever let me die;
In him there dwells a treasure all divine,
And matchless grace has made that treasure mine.*

*O that my soul could love and praise him more,
His beauties trace, his majesty adore;
Live near his heart, upon his bosom lean;
Obey his voice, and all his will esteem.*

And Horatius Bonar:

*I bless the Christ of God,
I rest on love divine,
And with unfaltering lip and heart,
I call this Saviour mine.*

*His cross dispels each doubt,
I bury in his tomb
Each thought of unbelief and fear,
Each lingering shade of gloom.*

¹⁶ William Hammond: 'A Preface, Giving Some Account of a Weak Faith, and a Full Assurance of Faith; and Briefly Stating the Doctrine of Sanctification; and Showing a Christian's Completeness, Perfection, and Happiness in Christ' in *Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, W. Strahan, London, 1745, xxi-xxiv.

New-Covenant Assurance

*I praise the God of peace,
I trust his truth and might;
He calls me his, I call him mine,
My God, my joy, my light.*

*In him is only good,
In me is only ill;
My ill but draws his goodness forth,
And me he loveth still.*

*'Tis he who saveth me,
And freely pardon gives;
I love because he loveth me;
I live because he lives.*

*My life with him is hid,
My death has passed away,
My clouds have melted into light,
My midnight into day.*

To those who still doubt, and still wonder how all this could cure them of their lack of assurance, let me try once more. The witness of the Spirit with your spirit – how and what does he witness to? Christ! Now then tell me: What do you think of Jesus? What has the Spirit enabled you to think and say about Jesus? Is he precious to you? Peter is adamant: ‘To you who believe, [the Lord Jesus Christ] is precious’ (1 Pet. 2:7). Let me put it the other way about: ‘Those who believe call Jesus precious’. Jesus is precious. Can you say that? You can? Can you say: ‘Jesus is precious to me’? You can? Well... how can you say that – except by the Spirit? ‘I tell you that no one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says: “Jesus be cursed”, and no one can say: “Jesus is Lord”, except by the Holy Spirit’ (1 Cor. 12:3). We are not teaching parrots! Nor am I taking Wright’s advice and teaching you to ‘learn your lines’! Now then, will you give up following the prescription of the law men, and believe the apostles instead? Will you now agree that God’s Spirit has borne witness with your spirit, glorifying Christ to you, making him precious to you? In your heart, do you not know that Jesus is precious? Can you not now *say* that Christ is yours and you are his? *Will* you not say it? Surely you can now say and sing:

New-Covenant Assurance

*Mine, mine, mine,
I know thou art mine.*

You may feel you have to say: ‘I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!’ (Mark 9:24), but you can, at least, now say that you believe. Will you?¹⁷

I would address all hyper-Calvinists in the same vein. It is not presumption to take this road. If you persist in following your teachers and trotting out the pejorative word, remember to whom you are saying it! Not me! Peter!

Christ is precious to you? Then listen to John Newton, writing on the question posed by Christ : ‘What do you think about the Christ?’ (Matt. 22:42):

*What think ye of Christ? is the test
To try both your state and your scheme;
You cannot be right in the rest,
Unless you think rightly of him.
As Jesus appears in your view,
As he is beloved or not;
So God is disposed to you,
And mercy or wrath are your lot..*

If, in Newton’s words, you ‘think rightly’ of Jesus, if Jesus is precious to you, only the Spirit of God could have taught you thus (John 6:44-47). And only the Spirit could have taught you to agree with Peter: you could go to no one else but Christ, for, as you know, he alone has the words of eternal life (John 6:67-69).

Jesus is precious to you? Then listen to C.H.Spurgeon:

¹⁷ It has been put to me that in saying this I am returning to assurance by evidences. Not so. John, writing to those who have lost their assurance, appeals to the evidences of regeneration – evidence that a third party has to use – to take them back to joy. Yes, he first argues his case doctrinally, primarily making emphatic testimony to the anointing with the Spirit – but he also is prepared to fall back on these secondary supports. By extension (living with that which was unknown to John – Christendom – that monstrosity which has wrought such grief and havoc these past 1800 years), I am doing something similar (see 1 John 1:7-10; 2:23; 4:2-3,15-16; 5:1-5,10-13,20-21). See also my *Assurance* pp137-154; ‘John Turned Upside Down’.

You cannot see Christ by mere reason, for the natural man is blind to the things of the Spirit... You will never get to see the real Christ who is precious to believers except by a personal act of faith in him. The Holy Spirit has removed the scales from the eyes of the man who believes... Our sense of Christ's preciousness... is a proof of our possessing the faith of God's elect – and this ought to be a great comfort to any of you who are in the habit of looking within. If you enquire within yourselves: 'Is my faith worked in my soul by the Holy Spirit?' you may have a sure test. Does it magnify Christ? If it makes Christ inexpressibly dear to you it is the faith of God's elect.

Spurgeon moved on to help his hearers nurture their sense of assurance:

May God grant you to have more of it! Christ becomes growingly precious to us as our faith grows. If you have faith in Christ but do not exercise it every day he will not be very precious to you. But if your faith keeps her eyes fixed on him, she will more and more clearly perceive his beauties. If your soul is driven to Jesus again and again – if your faith anchors in him continually – then he will be, indeed, more and more precious to you. Everything depends upon faith. If you doubt Christ, he has gone down fifty per cent in your esteem. Every doubt is a Christ crucifier. Every time you give way to scepticism and critical questioning you lose a sip of sweetness... The Christian that disputes loses spiritual food. In proportion as you believe with a faith which is childlike, clear, simple, strong, unbroken – in that proportion will Christ be dearer and dearer to you! I recommend you to keep the door of your mind on the chain in these days – for those tramps and vagrants called doubts are prowling about in every quarter – and they may knock at your door with vile intent. The first thing they say, when they are at a good man's door, is: 'I am an honest doubt'. That which so loudly calls itself honest has good need to fabricate for itself a character. The most honest doubt is a great thief – the most of doubts are as dishonest as common housebreakers. Keep doubt out of the soul or you will make small progress in the discovery of the preciousness of Christ. Never entertain a thought that is derogatory to Christ's person, or to his atoning sacrifice. Reckon that opinion to be your enemy which is the enemy of the cross of Christ. Do not suffer your faith to diminish even in the least degree. Believe in Christ heartily and unsuspectingly! If you have a doubt as to whether you are a saint – you can have no

question that you are a sinner – come to Christ as a sinner and put your trust in him as your Saviour! It is wonderful how a renewed confidence in Christ's saving grace will bring back all your joy and delight in him, and sometimes do it at once... God grant you, dear brothers and sisters, by faith, to know the preciousness of Christ – for only to you that believe is he precious! To you that doubt, to you that mistrust, to you that suspect, to you that live in the land of hesitation he is without form or comeliness – but to you that believe without doubt he is precious beyond all price.¹⁸

Martin Luther was another who did what he could to help believers avoid getting into doubt, or bring them out if they had been plunged into it. This was his sound – biblical – advice:

Train your conscience to believe that God approves of you. Fight it out with doubt. Gain assurance through the word of God. Say: 'I am all right with God. I have the Holy Ghost. Christ, in whom I do believe, makes me worthy...'...

I pause. Luther was right. This is what the Bible teaches. As believers, we must learn to speak to ourselves, in order to remind ourselves of the truth; we have to think biblically about ourselves. As Paul, writing to the Romans on another issue at that time, told them: 'Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus' (Rom. 6:11). 'Count yourselves'? 'Consider yourselves' (NASB); 'Reckon yourselves' (AV, NKJV). The verb is *logizomai*,¹⁹ a rich word derived from *logos*, 'reason in terms of speaking or thinking', meaning 'to reckon inwardly, count up or weigh the reasons, to deliberate, by reckoning up all the reasons, to gather or infer, to meditate on with a view to obtaining something, to suppose, deem, judge, to think', and so on.²⁰ Let me list some examples of the various ways in which it is used:

They *discussed* it among themselves and said... (Mark 11:31).

¹⁸ Sermon number 2137.

¹⁹ A favourite word of Paul. He used it 27 times (not counting quotations) whereas the rest of the New Testament uses it only four times.

²⁰ Joseph Henry Thayer: *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Ninth Printing 1991.

New-Covenant Assurance

I *consider* that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us (Rom. 8:18).

So then, men ought to *regard* us as servants of Christ (1 Cor. 4:1).

Not that we are competent in ourselves to *claim* anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God (2 Cor. 3:5).

I beg you that when I come I may not have to be as bold as I *expect* to be toward some people who *think* that we live by the standards of this world (2 Cor. 10:2).

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – *think* about such things (Phil.4:8).

Paul counselled believers to think, to reason, to reckon in this way; in other words, to apply the truth to themselves, to their consciences. Luther was right, therefore. This is how we, as believers, should treat all gospel truth: we should think in this way, reason in this way, consider ourselves in the light of it, apply it to ourselves, talk to ourselves about it, talk to others about it: ‘Train your conscience to believe that God approves of you. Fight it out with doubt. Gain assurance through the word of God. Say: ‘I am all right with God. I have the Holy Ghost. Christ, in whom I do believe, makes me worthy’.

If I may illustrate. As I understand it, artificial hearing aids pick up all sounds and give them equal weight. In our natural hearing, however, the brain distinguishes the sound it wishes to hear. So it is here. In all the clamour of law, progressive sanctification, calls for introspection, the harrowing quest for assurance and the agonising search for it, with which we are bombarded, we must learn to distinguish the still small voice of the Spirit. And the more we discern his voice, the more we train ourselves to listen to him, the more we reason in this way, the more we read Scripture in this way, the more we hear preaching on this theme, the more we talk to ourselves in this way, then the more distinctly we shall hear the Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are indeed the children of God.

To let Luther go on:

Let the law, sin, and the devil cry out against us until their outcry fills heaven and earth. The Spirit of God outcries them all. Our feeble groans: ‘Abba, Father’, will be heard of God sooner than the combined racket of hell, sin, and the law... Let us not fail to thank God for delivering us from the doctrine of doubt. The gospel commands us to look away from our own good works to the promises of God in Christ, the Mediator... Let us never doubt the mercy of God in Christ Jesus, but make up our minds that God is pleased with us, that he looks after us, and that we have the Holy Spirit who prays for us... The apostle always has Christ on the tip of his tongue... He talks of Christ continually. As often as he speaks of righteousness, grace, the promise, the adoption, and the inheritance of heaven, he adds the words ‘in Christ’, or ‘through Christ’, to show that these blessings are not to be had by the law, or the deeds of the law, much less by our own exertions, or by the observance of human traditions, but only by and through and in Christ.²¹

Charles Wesley, speaking of the Holy Spirit:

*True witness of my sonship, now
Engraving pardon on my heart,
Seal of my sin in Christ forgiven,
Earnest of love, and pledge of heaven.
Come, then, my God, mark out thine heir;
Of heaven a larger earnest give;
With clearer light thy witness bear,
More sensibly within me live;
Let all my powers thine entrance feel
And deeper stamp thyself the seal.*

Let the apostle have the last word. Reader, while not remotely claiming to be standing in his boots, I have written as I have because as Paul declares:

I want you to know what a great conflict I have for you [at Colossae] and those in Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh, that their hearts may be encouraged,

²¹ Luther commenting on Gal. 4:6-7. Luther was ambiguous as to whether assurance is essential, but, according to R.L.Dabney, he was more scriptural than Calvin. See Joel R.Beeke: ‘Martin Luther on Assurance’ (biblicalstudies.org.uk). Alas, as so often with Luther, he wrongly linked this to baptism.

being knit together in love, and attaining to all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the knowledge of the mystery of God, both of the Father and of Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. Now this I say lest anyone should deceive you with persuasive words. For though I am absent in the flesh, yet I am with you in spirit, rejoicing to see your good order and the steadfastness of your faith in Christ. As you have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving. Beware lest anyone cheat you through philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the basic principles of the world, and not according to Christ. For in him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily; and you are complete in him, who is the head of all principality and power... Christ is all, and is in all (Col. 2:1-10; 3:11, NKJV).

The Spirit's Work in Conversion

To be specific: What is the Holy Spirit's work in the sinner, leading to, and at the point of, his conversion? And then: What is the Holy Spirit's immediate work in the newly-converted believer?¹

The Holy Spirit's work in the unbeliever leading to conversion

Conversion. What does the Bible mean by it? We must not take this for granted. Since poor – not to say, false – teaching can and does damage believers over this matter of assurance,² we must be clear what we are talking about when we speak of conversion. The truth is, inadequate handling of the souls of men *at the point of conversion* leads to serious residual trouble for the believer. Going wrong here is akin to the kind of serious damage that can be caused by defective care at a natural birth.

Consider Ephesians 1:13-14. What can we learn about conversion from these two verses?

You also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession – to the praise of his glory.

First of all,³ we have to hear the word of truth, the gospel of salvation. Let me underline this. It has to be the gospel that we

¹ For this article, I have lightly edited my *Assurance* pp33-44. You are advised to read 'The Spirit's Work in Conversion', 'The Spirit's Continual Witness to the Believer' and 'The Spirit Witnesses... to What?' in this order.

² See 1 John, for instance.

³ I would not be misunderstood. Although, in trying to be a useful teacher (simple, but not simplistic), I spell out the Spirit's work in some kind of sequence, the Spirit is sovereign, and his works are beyond human explanation and tabulation (John 3:8). I do not, therefore, want to

The Spirit's Work in Conversion

hear, and we have to hear it. It must, therefore, be the *gospel* – not law – that has to be preached. When I say ‘preached’, it could be standing in a pulpit, but it could be in a multitude of other ways: a mother talking to a child on her lap or by her knee, a father witnessing to his son, a neighbour talking to a friend, a college student talking to a fellow-student, a conversation at the bus stop, in a supermarket, and so on. We must overcome the insidious persistence of institutional Christendom, with its subversion and ruination of new-covenant principles and practices. We must not allow it to rob us of them.

But, speaking more particularly of what is commonly thought of as ‘pulpit work’, how little gospel preaching there is today! Not only do we too often hear something other than the gospel, but too often we are fed on lectures and not preaching. We have historical lectures, lectures on doctrine, lectures on theology, lectures on creeds, lectures on Confessions, lectures on personal relationships and self-fulfilment, lectures on social matters... and I don’t know what else! We must follow the apostle and preach the gospel. And what is it to preach the gospel? It is to preach Christ:

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

When I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel! (1 Cor. 9:16).

By setting forth the truth plainly... our gospel... the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ... We... preach... Jesus Christ as Lord (2 Cor. 4:2-5).

This – the preaching of the gospel – is what converted sinners at Ephesus, Corinth and Rome. It wasn’t preaching the law! It wasn’t a talk on personal relationships, it wasn’t a talk on self-fulfilment, it wasn’t a historical lecture. It was the preaching of Christ to them as sinners. That was what brought them to Christ. And, as we know, ‘Christ is all’ (Col. 3:11).

give the impression that I am able to tie down the un-tie-down-able, or encapsulate the ineffable.

The Spirit's Work in Conversion

If we do not preach the gospel, and preach it properly, we can damage sinners as they come to faith, *and that damage can afflict them for the rest of their pilgrimage*. This fact alone is sufficient to show that we must avoid the common misconception that teaching for the saints is difficult, but preaching to sinners is a doddle. Not only do I abhor the notion that we should not preach the gospel to saints – we should always preach the gospel (Acts 20:20-21, 24-27; Rom. 1:1; 1 Cor. 1:17; 2:2; 9:16; 2 Cor. 4:5; Gal. 1:1, and so on) – bringing sinners to Christ needs sensitive care. Much damage can be caused by poor handling at this most sensitive point.

Returning to Ephesians: Paul went on: ‘You heard the word of truth’. You *heard* it. What does that mean? Does it mean we have to hear with the ear? Well, that’s the first thing we have to do – we have to hear it. Yet even here we need to be clear. A man might be deaf, and yet he can still hear the gospel preached. Is that possible? Yes! He can read the text. In some way or another the word can reach him. Even if, as occasion may demand, it is without being spoken! Oh, yes! See 1 Peter 3:1-2. Even so, see 1 Peter 3:15-17. In short, by whatever means, the word must reach the sinner.

But that’s just the start. When Paul said ‘hear’, he was going much further than physical hearing. The sound must go deeper than the ear. I’m afraid that many, when they listen to preaching, hear it only physically. Their minds are miles away: they’re thinking about the golf match, the bowling tournament, their holiday, what they can have for lunch, what they’re doing tomorrow, what’s on the television, or whatever. The truth has reached the ear, and that’s all. When Paul says: ‘You heard the word of truth’, he means that it penetrated their ear and got into their mind.

Yet even this is not enough. I’m afraid that many stop there. They think that it’s enough for the truth to reach the mind, and that’s all there is to it.⁴ *But this is not saving*. A man may assent

⁴ A Sandemanian thinks saving faith is nothing more than mental assent. If a sinner accepts the facts of the gospel, he is saved. To talk about the heart, or feelings, is to introduce works, and ruin the grace of God in

to the truth, and not be saved. The truth must reach the heart, the will, the emotions, the very centre of the man. The truth must reach the soul.

And it must be appropriated. The sinner has to believe, to trust Christ. Saving trust in Christ is essential.⁵ As Paul put it: 'The Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me' (Gal. 2:20). 'I have heard the truth', he says. 'I knew it was right. But, above all, I believed, I knew, I felt, it was for me. I trusted Christ. And now I know that Christ is mine'. The sinner has to hear about Christ, and believe the gospel record, yes, but saving faith is more than 'believing the record'. The sinner has to call upon Christ, to trust Christ: 'believing', 'hearing', 'receiving', 'welcoming', 'trusting' Christ – it's all the same. And 'trust' lies at the heart of conversion.

As Joseph Hart said, true belief is more than notion:

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

Yes, indeed! The sinner has to know the truth, *and feel it*. And this is precisely what the Spirit brings about. The Spirit enables the sinner to trust Christ.

Now, at the very moment the sinner believes, in the act of believing, something remarkable takes place, something secret, but nevertheless real: he is included in Christ (Eph. 1:13). What is this being 'in Christ', a phrase written large across the New Testament? The GNB translates the phrase excellently as 'union

salvation. Sandemanianism was developed by the Scotsmen, John Glas (1695-1773) and his son-in-law, Robert Sandeman (1718-1771), more especially the latter. It is not a mere historical aberration. Rather, it is, forgiving the oxymoron, very much alive, and wreaking massive damage. I hope soon to publish my work on the subject.

⁵ More is involved: conviction, repentance and so on, but Eph. 1:13-14 concentrates on 'faith'.

The Spirit's Work in Conversion

with Christ'. 'In Christ' is union with Christ. This is the great theme of the new covenant. Believers are in Christ, united to Christ.

What does that mean? It means that as God views his Son, so he views the believer. Just let that sink in! As God sees his Son, he sees the believer. But Christ is perfect! That's how God sees the believer! There is no condemnation to any man who is in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:1). He has passed from death to life (1 John 3:14). He is out of Adam and in Christ (Rom. 5:12-21; 1 Cor. 15:22,45). He has been transferred out of Satan's realm into the kingdom of Christ (Col. 1:13). As Christ is to the Father – loved, perfect, sinless – so is the believer: he is without spot or wrinkle or stain or any such thing in his sight (Eph. 5:27; Heb. 10:14). The believer is completely free of sin before God. All the sinner's sin has been laid on Christ (Isa. 53:6; Gal. 3:13), and all Christ's righteousness has been accounted to the believer (Rom. 3:22; 1 Cor. 1:30; 2 Cor. 5:21). This is what Paul means by telling believers they are 'included in Christ'. Other passages speak of Christ being in the believer. Just so! The believer is united to Christ, one with Christ. And having begun a good work in the believer, God will go on perfecting it, even to the day of Christ Jesus (Phil. 1:6). This is the gospel. And the gospel has to be taught and preached in order to bring sinners to Christ. As Paul told the Corinthians:

Christ... [sent] me... to preach the gospel... For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God... God [is] pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe (1 Cor. 1:17-18,21).

What role does the Spirit play in all this? An absolutely vital role! Paul made this the acid test: 'If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ' (Rom. 8:9). He explained: 'No one who is speaking by the Spirit of God says: "Jesus be cursed"', and no one can say: "Jesus is Lord", except by the Holy Spirit' (1 Cor. 12:3). The gift and work of the Spirit are essential.

But all is well: Christ promised to give his Spirit for this very work: 'I will pour out my Spirit', he said, Peter declaring the

The Spirit's Work in Conversion

same on the day of Pentecost (see Acts 2:17-18). As the apostle went on to tell his enquirers during that same discourse:

Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call (Acts 2:38-39).⁶

Christ's promised Holy Spirit comes to the sinner in order to regenerate him – that's how the sinner believes. No sinner can believe until the Spirit gives him life and the will to believe (John 6:44-45). The sinner, being dead, will never come to me, said Christ, and all men are dead in sins by nature (Eph. 2:1-3). Sinners have to be regenerated, born again before they can believe. The dead can't believe, the deaf can't hear, and the blind can't see, but Christ can do the impossible! As he physically raised the dead man, made the blind man see, opened the ears of the deaf, and enabled the man to stretch out his withered arm, so spiritually: by his Spirit, Christ makes the spiritually dead live, the spiritually blind see, the spiritually deaf hear, the spiritually lame leap (Isa. 35:5-6). He regenerates them by his Spirit. As Jesus told Nicodemus:

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

As Paul reminded Titus, speaking of all believers:

[God] saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Saviour (Tit. 3:5-6).

⁶ That there is more in this promise than I speak of here, I freely admit. See my *Baptist*.

The Spirit's Work in Conversion

That's just the start. In regenerating the sinner, the Spirit works yet more grace in him; he convicts him of his sin, and the glories of Christ and his work:

When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgement: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgement, because the prince of this world now stands condemned (John 16:8-11).

Christ, having regenerated the sinner, and convicted him of his sin by his Spirit, gives him the grace to believe:

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast (Eph. 2:8-9).⁷

Thus the Spirit comes to the unregenerate sinner, regenerates, convicts him, and brings him to Christ, to trust in Christ.

This, then, is the Spirit's work in conversion. William Matson:

*Lord, I was blind: I could not see
In thy marred visage any grace;
But now the beauty of thy face
In radiant vision dawns on me.*

*Lord, I was deaf: I could not hear
The thrilling music of thy voice;
But now I hear thee and rejoice,
And all thine uttered words are dear.*

*Lord, I was dumb: I could not speak
The grace and glory of thy name;
But now, as touched with living flame,
My lips thine eager praises wake.*

*Lord, I was dead: I could not stir
My lifeless soul to come to thee;
But now, since thou hast quickened me,
I rise from sin's dark sepulchre.*

⁷ Christ gives grace to believe *and to repent* (Acts 5:31). Repentance is essential (Luke 24:47; Acts 2:38).

The Spirit's Work in Conversion

*Lord, thou hast made the blind to see,
The deaf to hear, the dumb to speak,
The dead to live; and lo, I break
The chains of my captivity.*

So much for the Spirit's work in the unbeliever leading him to conversion.

In thinking of the believer's assurance, this work of the Spirit in the unbeliever must not be skipped. No sinner can have biblical comfort and assurance until he has first been regenerated, come under conviction of sin, and been converted to Christ: conviction of sin before conversion, and conversion before comfort.

All this would seem self-evident. But today it is not! Contemporary Sandemanians⁸ are in danger – to put it no stronger – of claiming assurance without conviction and conversion. *Mental assent to certain facts (even gospel facts) is not saving.* So I say again: conviction of sin before conversion, and conversion before comfort. I go further. The Spirit who convicts and converts the unbeliever, is the same Spirit who assures the believer: *conviction and conversion by the Spirit will lead to comfort by the Spirit.*

Now for the work of the Spirit in the newly-converted believer, leading him to assurance.

The Holy Spirit's work in the believer leading to, and producing, assurance

The Spirit's work does not stop with regeneration, conviction, faith and conversion. As the sinner believes, something else happens to him. *And this is the material point.* As he believes, the believer is joined to Christ, included in Christ: 'You also were included in Christ... having believed' (Eph. 1:13). As I have explained, through his union with Christ, the believer stands as Christ in the sight of God. All that Christ is, all that Christ has done, all that Christ has, is made over and accounted to the

⁸ See earlier note.

believer. And this transaction, of course, is carried out by the Spirit.

But even this does not exhaust the Spirit's work in the believer at conversion. As the sinner believes, he is not only included in Christ, but he is marked in Christ, sealed in Christ, sealed with the Spirit, anointed by the Spirit, the Spirit bearing witness to him and with him that he is indeed a child of God. In fact, the Spirit himself is the seal, the guarantee, the deposit and foretaste of the eternal glory which is eternally prepared for him as a child of God. The believer, therefore, having the Spirit, must have the work of the Spirit, *including the witness of the Spirit*, within himself: if any man is not regenerate, does not trust Christ, does not have the seal, does not have the Spirit of Christ, he doesn't belong to him (Rom. 8:9).

But, of course, the believer has it all because he has Christ through the Spirit, and 'Christ is all' (Col. 3:11). To complete the picture: all this is in Christ, for 'Christ is all, and is in all' (Col. 3:11). In *himself*, the believer is a sinner, but in *Christ* he is perfect in the sight of God, and marked as a child of God, and has the witness of the Spirit bearing witness with his spirit that he is indeed in Christ, a child of God. Christ has taken away his sin, and the Spirit takes away his fear: the sinner is free from sin, law, death and fear – and the Spirit tells him so.

Let me trace this out a little more fully. The question is: How does the Spirit assure the believer? Jesus told us what the Spirit would do in and to the believer. I say 'would do'; now it is 'will do', even 'does'! Every believer has the Spirit (John 7:39; 14:17; Acts 10:47; Rom. 8:9-17; 1 Cor. 2:12; 3:16; 6:19; 2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5; Gal. 3:2,14; 4:4-7; 5:5,16-26; 6:8; Eph. 1:13-14,17; 2:22; 4:30; 1 Thess. 4:8; 1 John 2:20,27; 4:13; 5:6-11), but this cannot be in order to regenerate him, since he is a believer already, and so must be regenerate.

So what does the Spirit do in every believer? Christ made it clear that it is the Father's will that all men (believers now – and all men in the day of judgement – Philippians 2:10-11) must glorify Christ, that they should 'honour the Son just as they honour the Father' (John 5:23). And it is precisely at this point that the Spirit works in the believer, bearing witness in and to

The Spirit's Work in Conversion

him. Paul could say: 'The Son of God... loved me and gave himself for me' (Gal. 2:20). Where did he get such assurance? Can there be any doubt? The Spirit bore witness with his spirit, giving him his sense of sonship and adoption.

Christ promised the Spirit to every believer:

'Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him'. By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified (John 7:38-39).

As Christ went on to say:

I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you... the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you (John 14:16-17,26).

And Christ was explicit as to the Spirit's mission with regard to the believer:

When the Counsellor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me... When he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will take from what is mine and make it known to you (John 15:26; 16:13-15).

And the Spirit's witness with our spirit that we are one of God's children is a vital part of this.⁹ Let me re-quote the relevant scriptures:

⁹ Modern-day Sandemanians, taking faith as assent, argue that the Spirit does not witness *to the believer*, but joins the believer in witnessing *to God* that the believer is indeed a son of God: 'The Holy Spirit bears witness along with our human spirit that we are children of God. But to whom does he bear witness?... Our witness is to God the Father. If the

The Spirit's Work in Conversion

Those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry: 'Abba, Father'. The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ (Rom. 8:14-17).

Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our [your] hearts, the Spirit who calls out: 'Abba, Father'. So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir (Gal. 4:6-7).

You have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth. I do not write to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it and because no lie comes from the truth... As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit – just as it has taught you, remain in him (1 John 2:20-27).

It is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth... We accept man's testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son. Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in his heart. Anyone who does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because he has not believed the testimony God has given about his Son. And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son (1 John 5:6,9-11).

How does the Spirit do this? How does he bear witness to us? What did Paul mean when, on another issue, he said: 'My

Spirit is bearing witness *with* our human spirits, then he, too, must bear witness to God the Father... God the Father is the one to whom our human spirits, and the Holy Spirit, bear witness' (Bob Wilkin: 'Assurance by Inner Witness? Romans 8:16', downloaded from faithalone.org, emphasis his). Why the Father 'needs' this witness, I fail to see. *The believer* needs it! Sandemanians give the impression, at least, that they are determined to avoid any suggestion of heart-feeling, warmth or delight in the believer. What an arid experience! Sadly, because of incipient Sandemanianism, too often 'arid experience' seems to be the norm! Coupled with an emphasis upon law (again, often incipient) things could hardly be worse.

The Spirit's Work in Conversion

conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit', 'my conscience bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit' (NASB) (Rom. 9:4)? According to John Gill, Paul was saying:

Either that his conscience was influenced and directed by the Holy Ghost in what he was about to say, or [that] it bore witness in and with the Holy Ghost, and the Holy Ghost with [it]. So that here are three witnesses called in: Christ, conscience, and the Holy Ghost. And by three such witnesses, his words must be thought to be well established.

I ask again: How does the Spirit bear witness to us and with us? The answer takes us to the very heart of the new covenant. Let me begin at the beginning – with the original, great promise of the new covenant:

All your sons will be taught by the LORD (Isa. 54:13).

'The time is coming', declares the LORD, 'when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them', declares the LORD... 'I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother, saying: "Know the LORD", because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest', declares the LORD. 'For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more' (Jer. 31:31-34).

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you will be clean; I will cleanse you from all your impurities and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. You will live in the land I gave your forefathers; you will be my people, and I will be your God. I will save you from all your uncleanness (Ezek. 36:25-29; see also Ezek. 37:1-28; 39:21-29).

As Christ explained:

All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. For I have come down

The Spirit's Work in Conversion

from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day... No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him, and I will raise him up at the last day. It is written in the prophets: 'They will all be taught by God'. Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me (John 6:37-45).

As the writer to the Hebrews told us:

The ministry Jesus has received is as superior to [that of the priests of the old covenant] as the covenant of which he is Mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises. For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another. But God found fault with the people and said: 'The time is coming', declares the Lord, 'when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord. This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother, saying: "Know the Lord", because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more'. By calling this covenant 'new', he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and ageing will soon disappear (Heb. 8:6-13).

When this priest [Jesus] had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy. The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First he says: 'This is the covenant I will make with them after that time', says the Lord. 'I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds'. Then he adds: 'Their sins and lawless acts

The Spirit's Work in Conversion

I will remember no more'. And where these have been forgiven, there is no longer any sacrifice for sin (Heb. 10:12-18).

And this work and witness of the Spirit in the believer can only lead to joy for the child of God. After all, we know that Christ had the Spirit, and joy through the Spirit. Luke recorded that 'Jesus [was] full of joy through the Holy Spirit' (Luke 10:21), that he 'rejoiced greatly in the Holy Spirit' (NASB). And this, surely, is the experience granted to believers: 'God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us' (Rom. 5:5). This is how 'the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit' (Acts 13:52). Can the believer not join with Mary: 'My spirit rejoices in God my Saviour' (Luke 1:47)? Paul, reminding the Thessalonians of their conversion, could say that they had 'welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit' (1 Thess. 1:6).

And while I do not endorse everything about the way C.H.Spurgeon put it,¹⁰ nevertheless he made a valid point:

Brothers and sisters, let us learn our need of a personal revelation! Let us seek it if we have not yet received it! With a childlike spirit let us seek it in Christ, for only he can reveal the Father to us! And when we have it, let it be our joy that we see him revealing it to others and let this be our prayer, that the God of Jacob would yet bring others unto Christ who shall rejoice in the light of God that has made glad our eyes! The Lord be with you. Amen.¹¹

Naturally, this witness of the Spirit, this sealing of the Spirit, this anointing of the Spirit, must exceed our comprehension, but we are told enough for us to come to an understanding of what we are talking about. It must be so! Believers have it! So let us look into it a little more...

¹⁰ For a start, the believer does not need *to seek* the witness of the Spirit: the Spirit sovereignly witnesses to every newly-converted sinner at the point of conversion. Rather, the believer should *listen to* the Spirit instead of legal teachers.

¹¹ Sermon number 1571.

The Spirit's Work in Conversion

And, in my *Assurance in The New Covenant*, that is precisely what I went on to do. If, reader, you wish to pursue my thoughts on this vital matter, that would be the best place to start.

The Spirit's Continual Witness to the Believer

As I have explained elsewhere,¹ when the sinner is converted, at the point of his conversion the Spirit witnesses to him, seals him, and anoints him, thereby assuring the believer that he is, indeed, a child of God. Let me remind you of the relevant scriptures. They surely speak for themselves:

If anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ... Those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry: 'Abba, Father'. The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory... We... have the firstfruits of the Spirit (Rom. 8:9,14-17,23).

Now it is God who... anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come (2 Cor. 1:21-22).

God... has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come (2 Cor. 5:5).

Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our [your] hearts, the Spirit who calls out: 'Abba, Father'. So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir (Gal. 4:6-7).

You also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of

¹ See my *Assurance* pp23-44; 'The Spirit's Work in Conversion'. You are advised to read 'The Spirit's Work in Conversion', 'The Spirit's Continual Witness to the Believer' and 'The Spirit Witnesses... to What?' in this order.

The Spirit's Continual Witness to the Believer

those who are God's possession – to the praise of his glory... Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption (Eph. 1:13-14; 4:30).

You have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth. I do not write to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it and because no lie comes from the truth... As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit – just as it has taught you, remain in him (1 John 2:20-27).

This is how we know that he lives in us: we know it by the Spirit he gave us (1 John 3:24).

We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit (1 John 4:13).

It is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth... We accept man's testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son. Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in his heart. Anyone who does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because he has not believed the testimony God has given about his Son. And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son (1 John 5:6,9-11).

Nothing could be clearer. If we have been converted, the Spirit witnessed to and with us at the moment of our conversion. I dare to assert this on the authority of God's word. To those who say something like: 'Ah, but experience or the Confessions say...', I have a ready reply: We must not start with our (or others') experience and make Scripture fit that; we must begin with Scripture, and conform or change everything else – our systems, our Confessions, our practice and ourselves – to comply with the word of God.² And as the above extracts show beyond a vestige

² 'When tackling this subject [as every other], we must not start with our experience and try to make Scripture fit that. Rather, we must start with Scripture, discover what that teaches, and then apply what we have learnt from God's word to our lives. Far too many teachers – not excluding some of the greatest – wrongly take the first course. Little

of doubt, the Spirit witnesses to every believer at the point of conversion.

But that is far from being the end of the story. In this article I want to take this witness of the Spirit a little further. I now want to show that this witness is not a one-off experience, something done and dusted. Right from the moment of our conversion, the Spirit witnesses with our spirit, yes. But not only that. The Spirit goes on maintaining this witness throughout our entire earthly pilgrimage. It is a continual experience for us.³

How do we know this? By Paul's use of verbs: 'You did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry: "Abba, Father". The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children' (Rom. 8:15-16). We *received* (aorist tense) the Spirit at conversion (Rom. 8:15); that is, we received the Spirit as a one-off experience, with abiding effect. And it is as we *cry* (present tense, we go on crying), that the Spirit *bears witness* or *testifies* (present tense, the Spirit goes on witnessing), with us. In other words, the reception of the Spirit is an initial experience with abiding results. The Spirit resides in us, constantly carrying out his ministry within us: at conversion the Spirit removes our fear, confirms us as sons, enables us to call God our Father, and witnesses to us that we are Christ's, *and he continually goes on doing the same throughout the rest of our days*. In short, we are talking about a moment-by-moment authentication to our spirits, the Spirit assuring us, leading us to God through Christ and confirming our standing in Christ. Likewise, the Spirit seals us and anoints us, both the seal and the anointing being permanently ours, and continually ours.

And it is not only a question of the apostle's use of verbs. There is no break anywhere in Paul's statement in Romans 8:15-16, no suggestion of one. There is no break in the text, and there is no interlude between the believer's experience of the removal of his fear, his realisation that he is free to address God as his

wonder that they get themselves, and their hearers and readers, into serious difficulties' (quoted from my *Assurance* p21).

³ For this article, I have lightly edited my *Assurance* pp44-50.

Father, his sense of sonship, and the witness of the Spirit. It is all one instantaneous and yet continuous episode, one encounter with God through Christ by the Spirit. It starts at conversion, and it abides. The Spirit deals with us in this way at the beginning, and he never stops dealing with us in this way. It is a present, not merely historical, experience for us.

Let me illustrate. While crossing the Atlantic, John Wesley, in contrast to his own sense of fear, had been deeply challenged by the courage and confidence displayed by the Moravians in the violent storm through which they had passed. On reaching Savannah, Georgia, he opened his heart to August Spangenberg, seeking his help. The Moravian responded: 'I must first ask you one or two questions'. Spangenberg wanted to know if Wesley was truly converted: 'Have you the witness within yourself? Does the Spirit of God bear witness with your spirit, that you are a child of God?' Wesley was stumped. 'Do you know Jesus Christ?' Spangenberg asked. Wesley replied: 'I know he is the Saviour of the world'. 'True', came the reply, 'but do you know he has saved you?' The best Wesley could say was: 'I hope he has died to save me'. Spangenberg: 'Do you know yourself?' Wesley: 'I do'. But, as Wesley later recorded in his Journal: 'I fear they were vain words'.

Spangenberg had shown Wesley that the Spirit's witness in bringing assurance was a mark of true faith. But now for the vital nuance. Pay careful attention to Spangenberg's questions (I am not playing with words): '*Have* you the witness within yourself? *Does* the Spirit of God bear witness with your spirit, that you *are* a child of God?' He did not ask: '*Did* you *have* an explosive one-off experience of the witness within yourself? *Did* the Spirit of God, in some sort of dramatic experience, bear witness with your spirit, that you *were* a child of God?'

⁴

⁴ George Whitefield reinforced this point when, in his letter which he wrote to John Wesley after the latter had published his sermon on predestination, he stated: 'For these five or six years, I have received [not 'I *did* receive'] the witness of the Spirit [I have made it upper case – DG]. Since then, blessed be God, I have not doubted a quarter of an hour of having a saving interest in Jesus Christ. But with grief and humble shame I do acknowledge I have fallen into sin often since that' (John

This is of such importance, I must stress it. Some look upon assurance, the witness of the Spirit, as a striking, one-off vision, sensation, mystical experience or whatever.⁵ D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones, for one, certainly gave that impression, advocating the kind of experience he and various others – whom he cited, on more than one occasion and at length⁶ – had enjoyed. *But this is not what the apostles were speaking of.* According to Scripture, the witness of the Spirit is a continual experience, an ever-present witness with our spirits, the Spirit continually taking away our fears, continually enabling us to call God our Father.

This witness of the Spirit is not to be likened to having one's appendix removed. A better comparison is with the way our ductless glands work, with the way we breathe, or with the beating of our pulse, something which is going on all the time, and – when all is well – free of dramatic sensation. The illustration, I confess, is poor, but we must get away from the

Gillies: *Memoirs of The Life of... George Whitefield...*, New Haven, 1812). For more from Whitefield, see my Assurance pp87-88,121-123).

⁵ Gospel Standard Strict Baptists are mistakenly waiting for a manifestation of their eternal justification (actual justification in eternity past) as one of the elect, this being their 'conversion' and assurance rolled in one (see my *Eternal; No Safety*. As can be seen from the Gospel Standard Articles, the witness of the Spirit is the very acme of Christian experience: 'We believe that there are various degrees of faith, as little faith and great faith ; that when a man is quickened by the blessed Spirit, he has faith given him to know and feel that he is a sinner against God, and that without a Saviour he must sink in black despair. And we further believe that such a man will be made to cry for mercy, to mourn over and on account of his sins, and, being made to feel that he has no righteousness of his own, to hunger and thirst after Christ's righteousness; being led on by the Spirit until, in the full assurance of faith, he has the Spirit's witness in his heart that his sins are for ever put away'. Unfortunately, J.H.Gosden in his definitive commentary on the articles, when commenting on the article in question (number 35), said nothing about the witness of the Spirit.

⁶ See, for instance, D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones: *Preaching and Preachers*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1971, pp315-324; *Joy Unspeakable*, Kingsway, Eastbourne, 1984, pp105-107,112-113,125; *Romans: An Exposition of Chapter 8:5-17. The Sons of God*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1974, pp315-360.

notion of assurance as some sort of vivid one-off explosion, a crisis, or the switching on of a light, and hold to the idea of a continual basking in the enjoyment of the warming rays of the sun.

If we do look upon the witness of the Spirit as some sort of mystical occurrence or dramatic encounter, we run the risk of relying on that experience. If so, we will be placing our confidence entirely in the wrong place, and on the wrong object; namely, on experience, rather than on Christ. This is a mistake of immense proportions. The Spirit bears witness to Christ – to Christ – not to himself, not to his gifts, nor to some phenomenon or incident which we look back on.

The same may be said of conversion. We must not draw our assurance from the circumstances of our conversion. As I said, assurance does not arise from the historical; it arises in the ‘today’, the present, the here and now. It’s not what happened to me on a certain date (which I may know – or think I know!). What really matters is the preciousness of Christ to me at this very moment, and the reality of my walk with him today. Peter tells us: ‘To you who believe, [the Lord Jesus Christ] is precious’ (1 Pet. 2:7). He does not say that Christ *was* precious to you on a certain date – maybe long in the past – as an experience you look back upon with fond and somewhat faded memory, *and that is all*. Christ became precious to you then, yes, but he *is* precious to you *now*. This is assurance.

There is a parallel with Christ’s ordinances: baptism and the Lord’s supper. Both are symbolic. Both speak of Christ and the believer’s relationship to him. Baptism represents and speaks of the sinner’s conversion, his union with Christ as he comes to faith.⁷ And baptism is undergone once by the believer, and once only: he is dipped, immersed, as a representation and declaration of his union with Christ and of his being washed in the blood of Christ. But the believer observes the Lord’s supper repeatedly – ‘as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup’ (1 Cor. 11:26,

⁷ Rom. 6:3-4 speaks of the believer’s actual union with Christ by spiritual baptism. Although Paul is not speaking about water baptism in that passage (see my *Hinge*), water baptism certainly represents it.

NKJV) – and this speaks of his constant feeding upon Christ, his unending rest in Christ, his continual cleansing in the blood of Christ (1 John 1:9).⁸ Thus the believer is saved at his conversion, and is being saved continually.⁹ It takes the two ordinances to fully speak of this once-for-all and yet conscious moment-by-moment experience of salvation in, through and by Christ. That, of course, is why Christ gave both of them to us. So it is with the witness of the Spirit. The Spirit is not only given to the sinner in his conversion, and witnesses to him at that time, but, residing with the believer throughout his pilgrimage, he is always actively bearing witness with the believer, always confirming him as a child of God.

To sum up: the believer does not rest on any event – conversion or some supposed mystical experience which he may call ‘the witness of the Spirit’. No! He rests on Christ. He rests entirely and only on Christ for his justification, he rests on Christ for his assurance, he rests on Christ for his sanctification,¹⁰ he rests on Christ for his liberty, he rests on Christ for his glory, he rests on Christ only and entirely for his all: ‘Christ is all’ (Col. 3:11). ‘Christ is all’ is not a slogan. For the believer, it is a reality: ‘Christ is all’.

⁸ This verse is written to believers, don’t forget.

⁹ He is also saved in eternity past in God’s decree, and will be finally and utterly saved in eternity to come (see my *Eternal*).

¹⁰ 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. Now the believer’s progressive sanctification is intimately bound up with his positional sanctification in Christ. Consider the last three chapters of Ephesians, and see how often the apostle links his commands for godliness to the person and work of Christ. See my series: ‘Thoughts On Ephesians’. Alas, the believer’s progressive sanctification is always imperfect. He will only be absolutely sanctified in the eternal state. See my *Fivefold*.

And this is the very area in which the Spirit works. Day by day, he takes of the things of Christ, takes of the person of Christ himself, and makes Christ, and all that belongs to Christ, to be known and felt by the believer. In this way, the Spirit unceasingly enables the child of God to sense the glory of his Redeemer (John 14:16-17,26; 15:26; 16:7,13-15), and to enjoy the thought that Christ is his (John 5:11; Rom. 5:2,11; 14:17; Phil. 3:3; 1 Pet. 1:6,8, for instance). This is the witness of the Spirit. And one of the fruits of the Spirit is joy (Gal. 5:22).

But is there no danger in all this talk of the Spirit? As with every aspect of the new covenant, the answer must be: Yes, of course. Even so, unless we expose ourselves to this danger, to this accusation, we are not thinking and speaking biblically.¹¹ Some believers, however, dwelling on this danger, might raise two objections.

Two objections answered

Is there not a danger in this emphasis on the Spirit? Moreover, what will prevent a believer deluding himself that his own feelings are indeed the witness of the Spirit?

These are serious objections. In reply, we need to remember that I have drawn my doctrine that assurance comes primarily by the witness of the Spirit and not by progressive sanctification – which, I admit will seem to be excessive and strange to many today – directly from the New Testament. I have been quoting the apostles. And the New Testament always speaks of the work of the Spirit in the highest terms, and speaks unequivocally, even to the extent that no member of the new covenant needs a human teacher. Take, for example, these statements – which are true of every believer:

¹¹ Let me explain: preaching free grace always leads to accusation of antinomianism (Rom. 6:1-2). Unless men can accuse us of it, therefore, we are not preaching the gospel properly. Likewise with assurance. Unless men can accuse us of over-emphasising the Spirit, we are not preaching biblically on the matter. We must leave ourselves open to the accusation of antinomianism. See my 'Preparationism in New England'.

The Spirit's Continual Witness to the Believer

No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother, saying: 'Know the Lord', because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest (Heb. 8:11).

You have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth. I do not write to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it and because no lie comes from the truth... As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit – just as it has taught you, remain in him (1 John 2:20-21,27).

Clearly, these verses cannot possibly mean what they appear to be saying at first glance. After all, both John and the writer to the Hebrews were teaching as they were saying it; in fact, they were writing Scripture. But, even so, the promise still stands. And we must not water it down.

And herein lies the key to the answer to the question as to how we are to avoid the pitfall of relying on mere feeling. Do not miss my use of 'mere'. Feeling is essential! There's far too much sterility and dryness about these days! The key to all this, however, is the balance we must maintain between the Spirit and the word. It is not a question of the Spirit or the Scriptures; it is not the Spirit above the Scriptures; it is the Spirit and the Scriptures! Indeed, in the new covenant God gives all his people the Spirit, he writes his law – the gospel, Christ – on their hearts, and he, at the same time, gives them the Scriptures. The believer, therefore, is under all three: the Spirit, the law written in his heart, and the Scriptures, all three of them mutually calibrating each other,¹² and all three stirring the believer to assurance and progressive sanctification.

So, how do we know that believers have the witness of the Spirit? Because the Bible tells us so! How are believers able to understand, enjoy and obey the Scriptures, and, above all, find Christ in them? Because they have the gospel, Christ, written on their hearts. How do they weigh their feelings? By the law of

¹² As just *one* example, link Rom. 8:1-4,9 with Gal. 6:2 and 2 Tim. 3:15-16. See my *Christ* pp154,231-232,256, for instance.

The Spirit's Continual Witness to the Believer

Christ in their heart and by the written word. It is the word and the Spirit – not the Spirit above the word. But neither is it the word above the Spirit! It is word and Spirit, the word written on the heart by the Spirit. So, while there is always a danger of coming down on one side or the other – the word or the Spirit – it has to be both.

So much for the objections.

Before I conclude this brief article, let me re-state the case. The Spirit witnesses to every believer, right from the moment of his conversion, and throughout the rest of his days, continually assuring him of his impeccable standing before God in Christ. Naturally, this brings him assurance and all its attendant joys.

The next question that has to be faced is this: What does the Spirit witness to us about? Indeed, is it a ‘what’?¹³

¹³ For my answer to these questions, see my *Assurance* p50.

The Spirit Witnesses... to What?

In previous articles,¹ I have shown that in conversion the Holy Spirit brings the sinner to Christ, and immediately begins to witness to him, assuring him that he truly is a child of God. Moreover, as I have also shown, this witness is not a one-off experience: the Spirit continues to witness with, and to, the believer, granting him assurance throughout his Christian life. Let me remind you of some of the relevant scriptures:

Those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry: ‘Abba, Father’. The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ (Rom. 8:14-17).

Because you are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our [your] hearts, the Spirit who calls out: ‘Abba, Father’. So you are no longer a slave, but a son; and since you are a son, God has made you also an heir (Gal. 4:6-7).

You also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God’s possession – to the praise of his glory (Eph. 1:13-14).

You have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth. I do not write to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it and because no lie comes from the truth... As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is

¹ ‘The Spirit’s Work in Conversion’ and ‘The Spirit’s Continual Witness to the Believer’. The primary source is my *Assurance* pp23-50. You are advised to read ‘The Spirit’s Work in Conversion’, ‘The Spirit’s Continual Witness to the Believer’ and ‘The Spirit Witnesses... to What?’ in this order.

The Spirit Witnesses... to What?

real, not counterfeit – just as it has taught you, remain in him (1 John 2:20-27).

It is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth... We accept man's testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son. Anyone who believes in the Son of God has this testimony in his heart. Anyone who does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because he has not believed the testimony God has given about his Son. And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son (1 John 5:6,9-11).

In this article,² I want to take this further by answering the question: What does the Holy Spirit witness to believers about? Now, as I will show, a large part of the answer to that question lies in the fact that it is not 'What' but...

What, especially, does the Holy Spirit witness to us about?

It's not a 'what'! It's a 'whom!' Christ! As he himself told us, the supreme work of the Spirit is to take of the things of the Lord Jesus and make them known to believers, and so to glorify the Saviour. In other words, by making Christ known to believers, and doing so more and more, the Spirit confirms and assures them of their standing in Christ. He does this by witnessing to them about the person and the name of Christ, his love for sinners, his work for sinners, his blood shed for sinners. But not only that! It gets far more personal, praise God! The Spirit speaks to *us* about the person and the name of Christ, his love for *us*, his work for *us*, his blood shed for *us*. Above all, every believer can say the Spirit witnesses to *me*, and tells *me* of the person and the name of Christ, his love for *me*, his work for *me*, his blood shed for *me*.

By way of example, consider Galatians 2:20, in which Paul shows how he appropriated Christ by the Spirit: 'The Son of God... loved me and gave himself for me' (Gal. 2:20). Now for some further testimonies. Consider the following scriptures:

² For this article, I have lightly edited my *Assurance* pp50-59.

The Spirit Witnesses... to What?

Jesus our Lord... was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification (Rom. 4:24-25).

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God... And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us... God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation (Rom. 5:1-5,8-11).

God, who said: 'Let light shine out of darkness', made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ (2 Cor. 4:6).

You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich (2 Cor. 8:9).

The Spirit takes those scriptures – and all like them – and underscores the personal – to *me*:

Jesus *my* Lord... was delivered over to death for *my* sins and was raised to life for *my* justification (Rom. 4:24-25).

Therefore, since *I* have been justified through faith, *I* have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom *I* have gained access by faith into this grace in which *I* now stand. And *I* rejoice in the hope of the glory of God... And hope does not disappoint *me*, because God has poured out his love into *my* heart by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given *me*... God demonstrates his own love for *me* in this: While *I* was still a sinner, Christ died for *me*. Since *I* have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall *I* be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when *I* was one of God's enemies, *I* was reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall *I* be saved through his life! Not

The Spirit Witnesses... to What?

only is this so, but *I* also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom *I* have now received reconciliation (Rom. 5:1-5,8-11).

God, who said: 'Let light shine out of darkness', made his light shine in *my* heart to give *me* the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ (2 Cor. 4:6).

You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for *my* sake he became poor, so that *I* through his poverty might become rich (2 Cor. 8:9).

And so on. And it is this witness of the Spirit, enabling us to speak in such personal terms, that gives us assurance.

The glory of Christ, the uniqueness of Christ, the fact that Christ is all – is the constant refrain of the New Testament (John 13:31-32; 17:1-5,24; 2 Cor. 4:1-6; Col. 1:27; 3:11; 2 Thess. 2:14; Heb. 13:21; 2 Pet. 3:18, and so on). Right at the start of his public ministry, as Jesus was baptised, God announced: 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased' (Matt. 3:17). The Greeks demanded to see Jesus (John 12:21) – and the Spirit makes sure believers do see him! By the Spirit (John 15:26; 16:13-15), Peter, James and John never forgot the lesson they learned at Jesus' transfiguration. Peter might think of equating Christ with Moses (the law) and Elijah (the prophets), but the Father let him know how mistaken he was, and in no uncertain terms: the cloud immediately descended, blotting everything out. When they could see again, Moses and Elijah had been removed, leaving Christ to stand alone. And then God spoke: 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!' So: 'When they looked up, they saw no one except Jesus' (Matt. 17:5-8). As I say, Peter never forgot it:

We did not follow cleverly invented stories when we told you about the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honour and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the majestic glory, saying: 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased'. We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain. And we have the word of the prophets made more certain, and you will do well to pay attention to it, as to a light shining in a dark place,

The Spirit Witnesses... to What?

until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts (2 Pet. 1:16-19).³

All this speaks volumes. The Spirit's work is to magnify Christ; to magnify Christ, I stress. There's no cult of the Spirit here. We are talking about 'the Spirit of Christ' (Rom. 8:9). There are only two places in all Scripture where the Holy Spirit is called 'the Spirit of Christ': here and 1 Peter 1:11.⁴ Is it not significant that Paul used the phrase – uniquely for him – when leading up to the witness of the Spirit to the child of God? Notice also the parallel expression in the corresponding passage in Galatians: 'Because you are sons, God sent *the Spirit of his Son into our [your] hearts*, the Spirit who calls out: "Abba, Father"' (Gal. 4:6). Nothing could be clearer. The Spirit of Christ bears witness to the believer, and bears witness by pointing him to Christ, and glorifying Christ to him. And this is the believer's assurance, just as the Spirit himself is the believer's seal (2 Cor. 1:21-22; Eph. 1:13-14). 'To [those] who believe, [the Lord Jesus Christ] is precious' (1 Pet. 2:7).⁵

James Dunn:

It is fundamental to this role of the Spirit as the Spirit of sonship that the Spirit is also the Spirit of the Son. Indeed, the Spirit is

³ In his second letter, how many times did Peter mention the Spirit? How many times did he refer to the written word of God (not forgetting allusions)? How many times did he refer to Christ? The answer to the first is once; the second and third, I gave up counting! Notice how Peter brought his letter to a close: 'Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also *wrote* you with the wisdom that God gave him. He *writes* the same way in all his *letters*, speaking in them of these matters. His *letters* contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other *scriptures*, to their own destruction. Therefore, dear friends, since you already know this, be on your guard so that you may not be carried away by the error of lawless men and fall from your secure position. But grow in the grace and knowledge of *our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ*. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen' (2 Pet. 3:15-18). No emphasis on the Spirit, please note.

⁴ But see also 1 Cor. 12:3; 15:45; 2 Cor. 3:18; Gal. 4:6; Phil. 1:19.

⁵ I will return to this scripture.

The Spirit Witnesses... to What?

the Spirit of sonship precisely because [he] is the Spirit of the Son. That is to say, the Spirit for Paul links the believer directly to Jesus; the Spirit defines the person as [a] Christian precisely by establishing this link. And [he] makes this plain by reproducing the prayer relation of Jesus himself with God in believers: like Jesus, believers cry ‘Abba, Father’, and thus attest that they are children of God and joint heirs with Christ (Rom. 8:16-17)... Notable is the interaction of divine Spirit and human spirit. Divine voice and human voice: the Spirit ‘by whom we cry “Abba, Father” [and thereby]⁶ the same Spirit bears witness with our spirit that we are God’s children’ (Rom. 8:15-16); ‘having the firstfruits of the Spirit we ourselves groan within ourselves (Rom. 8:23); ‘the Spirit [himself] intercedes on our behalf with inarticulate groans, and he who searches the hearts knows that is the Spirit’s way of thinking’ (Rom. 8:26-27). In the intensity of prayer and abandonment to God in what would otherwise be total human despair, Spirit speech and heart language become as one.⁷

And 1 Peter 1:10-11 has something to say in this regard:

Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow.

Peter uses the phrase ‘the Spirit of Christ’ when he wants to speak of the Spirit’s work in directing the prophets to... to what? To Christ and his work of salvation. The parallel is unmistakable.

In short: Christ, not the Spirit, is the focus of attention. And this is at the heart of the new covenant. In what follows, do not miss the link between the Spirit and Christ, but, equally, do not miss where the emphasis lies; namely, Christ:

Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit

⁶ Brackets original.

⁷ James D.G.Dunn: ‘Spirit Speech: Reflections on Romans 8:12-17’ in Sven K.Soderlund & N.T.Wright (eds.): *Romans & The People of God...*, William B.Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 1999, pp84,91.

The Spirit Witnesses... to What?

of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. Those who live according to the flesh have their minds set on what that flesh desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the flesh cannot please God. You, however, are controlled not by the flesh but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you. Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation – but it is not to the flesh, to live according to it. For if you live according to the flesh, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive a spirit that makes you a slave again to fear, but you received the Spirit of sonship. And by him we cry: 'Abba, Father'. The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs – heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory (Rom. 8:1-17).⁸

Again, consider the exchange between Jesus and his disciples as he approached the cross. He told them: 'I am with you for only a short time, and then I go to the one who sent me. You will look for me, but you will not find me; and where I am, you cannot come' (John 7:33-34). As his sufferings drew ever nearer, Christ told the crowds: 'You are going to have the light just a little while

⁸ It's not just here. We see the same throughout Romans. Nothing must get in the way of Christ. Not even talk of the Spirit. See Rom. 6:1-12; 12:1 – 15:13. And it's not just Romans!

longer. Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. The man who walks in the dark does not know where he is going. Put your trust in the light while you have it, so that you may become sons of light' (John 12:35-36). He reminded his disciples of the sad news that he was leaving them: 'My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: Where I am going, you cannot come' (John 13:31). On learning of this, the disciples were afraid and sorrowful (John 14:1,27; 16:6,22). But Jesus reassured them. To their amazement (I am sure), his departure would make things even better for them: 'I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you' (John 13:31; 14:18). 'It is for your good [advantage, NASB] that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you' (John 16:7). And the Spirit, once he had come, would never leave them: 'I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you for ever – the Spirit of truth' (John 14:16-17).

There's a depth of meaning in all this. The disciples knew that Christ was the Son of God and spoke the words of eternal life, Peter's confession being poignant in the extreme: 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life' (John 6:68-69). What would they do, how would they manage, without Jesus with them to counsel and teach them? And yet the Lord said it would be better for them after he had gone! The Spirit would come! Whatever could he mean?

Now, whatever a counsellor and companion does, he talks, doesn't he? Have you ever been in a room with somebody who will not speak? I stress the 'will not'. The gentle silence of companionship is precious; the wilful silence of barely disguised enmity or separation is grim. Such silence is not reassuring. It is oppressive, sullen, hurtful. The Spirit does not reside with his people to be silent! And he's more than *with* his people! He is *in* them! As Jesus said: 'He lives with you and will be in you' (John 14:17). And a vital part of his ministry is to bear witness to the believer, to talk to him and with him, giving him the words of eternal life. When Christ said: 'The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you are spirit and

they are life' (John 6:63), coupled with: 'The Spirit of truth... he will testify about me... He will guide you into all truth... He will bring glory to me by taking from what is mine and making it known to you' (John 15:26; 16:13-14), he surely meant that the Spirit would continue Jesus' ministry within believers, even when the Lord was no longer with them in person.

When the two disciples on the Emmaus road were depressed, Jesus joined them and took away their sadness. How? By speaking to them, speaking to them about himself, about his sufferings and his glory, and doing so out of the Scriptures (Luke 24:13-35). This is precisely the way in which the Spirit witnesses to us and with us as believers, and gives us assurance: he shows us Christ, Christ in his sufferings, and present and future glory – and the Spirit makes us know that it is all for us.

Thus the Spirit goes on assuring us, leading us to Christ. It is as we *continue* to see more of Christ, the more the Spirit *makes* us continue to feel and enjoy our interest in the Redeemer, even increasing our joy and sense of glory and enabling us to live more Christ-like in this fallen world: 'Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit' (2 Cor. 3:17-18). Thus we fulfil Peter's command: 'Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever! Amen' (2 Pet. 3:18). This is the Spirit's great work in the believer, day by day.

Anticipating what is to come, relying on evidences, works, progressive sanctification⁹ for assurance is to rely on shifting

⁹ By 'progressive sanctification', I mean the believer's 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

The Spirit Witnesses... to What?

sand. Christ is the believer's assurance! 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever' (Heb. 13:8). 'All may change, but Jesus never'. The Spirit bears witness to Christ, and he bears witness to us about Christ. The weight of the Spirit's witness falls not on the gift – the Spirit – but on the giver – Christ. And herein lies the root of our assurance: Christ! He is the very substance and centre of it all. Of it all, I say.¹⁰ Christ is all!¹¹

As we listen to Paul's prayers for believers, we can surely see the part played by the Spirit in his witness to the children of God:

I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. I pray also that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe... I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power,

this, alas, is imperfect. The believer will only be absolutely sanctified in the eternal state. I will set out in my arguments on all this in my forthcoming book on sanctification.

¹⁰ Take progressive sanctification. Consider the last three chapters of Ephesians, and see how often the apostle links his commands for godliness to the person and work of Christ. See my series: 'Thoughts On Ephesians'.

¹¹ 'Oh, that's verging on antinomianism!' That's how some dismiss what I have set before you, reader: 'Antinomianism!' Let them! Believer, in Christ you *are* sinless in Christ – not in yourself, but in Christ. You *are* marked in Christ. It is because of Christ, and through Christ, and with Christ, that you are marked with a seal. God stamps you with his mark: 'This is mine! This man, this woman, is mine. This believer is my son, my daughter, my child, my adopted child. He has my Son's righteousness clothing him. I see him as righteous as Jesus. I love him immeasurably – as I love my Son. I love him without end. And this child of mine, this sealed and adopted child of mine, shall be brought to everlasting glory'. And it's the work of the Spirit to bear witness of all this to you, believer, and to confirm and assure you of all that you have in the Lord Jesus. He does this by making Jesus more and more precious to you (1 Pet. 2:7).

The Spirit Witnesses... to What?

together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge – that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen (Eph. 1:17-19; 3:16-21).

This is New Testament assurance.

A.M.Stibbs and J.I.Packer will bring this article to a close:

Throughout the New Testament it is taken for granted that Christians are joyfully certain of their standing in God's grace, their sonship in his family, and their hope of his glory – all the good things, in fact, which are spelled out in sequence as belonging to 'us' – Paul and all his Christian readers – in chapter 8 of the letter to the Romans. Whence came this certainty? From the ministry – that is, from the attitudes, convictions and habits which he implanted. It was the Spirit who gave those first Christians confidence and liberty, and made it their deepest instinct to call on God as 'Father'; and, writes Paul: 'When we cry: "Abba, Father"... it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God' (Rom. 8:15f; see also Gal. 4:6)... Earlier in Romans he had written that the love of God, as shown forth at the cross, 'has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us' (Rom. 5:5)... 'By this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit he gave us'... 'By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his own Spirit' (1 John 3:24; 4:13)... Moreover, the gift of the indwelling Spirit, of which Christians become aware in the manner described by discovering the change that the Spirit has wrought in them, is intended to assure Christians of their future resurrection and glory with Christ, no less than their present standing in grace through Christ... (2 Cor. 5:1-5)... (Eph. 1:13f).

Finally, a most important observation made by Stibbs and Packer:

It appears that so far from the present enjoyment of assurance indicating that one is presumptuous, conceited, and self-deceived, the non-enjoyment of it proclaims an unhealthy and sub-normal spiritual condition. It appears, too, that those who oppose the teaching and decry the experience of assurance are

themselves guilty of presumption and conceit, in their audacious preference for anti-scriptural doctrine.¹²

Conclusion

Let me make two points to bring this article to a close, the first by way of a question.

First, why is it, in light of all that we have seen about the believer and the Spirit, so many of today's believers are languishing with a very poor level of assurance? Why are they engaged in a life-long quest for assurance, which, they are led to believe, is almost certain to prove beyond them? Answering that would extend this article beyond its proper limit, of course, but the issue is so pressing, the case so heart-rending, anyone who wants to see how I would respond to those questions should read my *Assurance in The New Covenant* pp61-113.

Secondly, to end this article on a positive note – as it should! – the hall-mark of the new covenant, the distinguishing mark of the new covenant, is the Spirit of Christ's indwelling of the believer (Matt. 22:43; John 14:23; Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 3:16-17; 6:19; 12:3; 2 Cor. 6:16; Gal. 4:6; 2 Tim. 1:14; 1 John 4:2-6,13).¹³ So much so, Paul could speak in this way when taking the Galatians back to their conversion:

O foolish Galatians!... This only I want to learn from you: Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being made perfect by the flesh?... He who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you, does he do it by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? (Gal. 3:1-5).

Notice the way the apostle put it. Referring to the Galatians' conversion, he raised these questions: 'Did you receive the Spirit

¹² A.M.Stibbs and J.I.Packer: *The Spirit Within You: The Church's Neglected Possession*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1967, pp87-89. For comments from other writers in support of what I have set out, see my *Assurance* pp119-136.

¹³ For more on this vital matter, see Gary Shogren: 'Life in the New Covenant'.

by...?’ ‘Having begun in the Spirit...?’ ‘He who supplies the Spirit to you...?’ Clearly, Paul regarded the reception of the Spirit as a hall-mark of conversion, a *sine qua non*. So much so, in his reasoned discourse he could appeal to their reception of the Spirit.

Now, this mighty operation of the Spirit, this staggering condescension of the Spirit – to dwell within men – had been clearly signalled in the prophecies of the new covenant (Isa. 44:3; 55:1; 58:11; Ezek. 36:25-27; Joel 2:28-32). These promises were all accomplished by Christ when he fulfilled the shadows and abolished the old covenant (Matt. 5:17-20; Rom. 8:1-4; 10:4-5; 2 Cor. 3:1 – 4:6; Gal. 3:1 – 4:7; 4:21 – 5:1; Heb. 7:11 – 8:13; 10:1-18), and thus established the new (John 1:33; 4:10; 20:22; Acts 1:4-5; 2:4,16-21,33,38; 8:17; 10:45-47; 11:15-18; 19:2).¹⁴

Peter put it plainly:

Of this salvation the prophets have inquired and searched carefully, who prophesied of the grace that would come to you, searching what, or what manner of time, the Spirit of Christ who was in them was indicating when he testified beforehand the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. To them it was revealed that, not to themselves, but to us they were ministering the things which now have been reported to you through those who have preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven – things which angels desire to look into (1 Pet. 1:10-12).

Can anybody doubt that the indwelling of every believer by the Spirit is one of ‘the glories that would follow’ the sufferings of Christ? May we not make it more personal and say that the Spirit’s indwelling *is* one of the glories of the new covenant today, and for every believer?

And what does the Spirit do when he takes up residence in a man? Many things. He regenerates, he convicts of sin, he brings to faith and repentance, he sets the sinner free from the law of sin and death, he pours out the love of God in the heart of the child of God, he enables him to worship God in spirit and truth, and so on

¹⁴ For my understanding of the link between baptism and the Spirit in some of these verses, see my *Baptist* pp155-244.

The Spirit Witnesses... to What?

(John 3:3-8; 4:23-24; 6:44-45,65;¹⁵ 7:38-39; 12:32;¹⁶ 16:5-15; Rom. 5:5; 8:1-4; Phil. 1:19).

Now, an integral part of the work of the Spirit within the believer is to bear witness to him, taking away his fear, giving him a sense of sonship and adoption, granting him an immediate and lasting assurance (Rom. 8:9,11,14-17,23; 2 Cor. 1:21-22; 5:5; Gal. 4:6-7; Eph. 1:13-14; 4:30; 2 Tim. 1:7; 1 John 2:20-27; 3:24; 4:13; 5:6,9-11).

Do not miss the fact that the witness of the Spirit is all to do with Christ! Take the Galatian passage I just referred to. Notice how Paul opens his questions to his readers: 'O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you that you should not obey the truth, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was clearly portrayed among you as crucified?' (Gal. 3:1). You see, it is Christ! Even as the apostle is speaking of the reception of the Spirit, he turns his readers' eyes onto Christ, onto Christ portrayed as crucified before them, and among them.

This is at the heart of the new covenant: God the Spirit drawing sinners to Christ, uniting them to him, bringing them into everlasting salvation, and assuring them of it. God the Father decreeing the work; Christ, the Son of God, accomplishing it; the Spirit of God applying it; and all of it heading up in the Lord Christ. 'Christ is all' – all in justification, sanctification, glorification. Not least, Christ is all in assurance.

For every believer, therefore, there can be only one conclusion to all this:

If [since] then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. Set your mind on things above, not on things on the earth. For you died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God (Col. 3:1-3).

Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the apostle and high priest of our confession, Christ Jesus... looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross,

¹⁵ Isa. 54:13.

¹⁶ Jer. 31:3; Hos. 11:4.

The Spirit Witnesses... to What?

despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God... Consider him (Heb. 3:1; 12:2-3).

Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and forever. Amen (2 Pet. 3:18).

Hans Denck: The Inner and the Outer Word

Hans Denck was born in Bavaria in 1495 and died of the bubonic plague in Basel in 1527. Although he himself was not happy to be known as an Anabaptist, it is almost certainly right to call him such. But it is equally certain that he was far from being a typical Anabaptist – if ever such a person existed. The truth is, if John Calvin was on the right of the Reformation, to the right of Martin Luther, with the Anabaptists on the left of Luther, then Denck found himself well and truly on their left wing. He was what we might call a Spiritual or Mystic Anabaptist. Indeed, it has been claimed that he was a proto-Quaker. No wonder, then, that he met with criticism – and worse!

Denck, himself, was a gentle man, averse to controversy, non-fanatical, friendly, courteous, modest, very intelligent and passionate. Having graduated from Ingolstadt university in 1519, fluent in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, his first job was to edit a three-volume Greek dictionary. In September 1523, he became headmaster of a school in Nuremberg, married, and he and his wife soon had a child. About this time he was greatly influenced by a mystical book, the *Theologia Germanica*.

After leaving Nuremberg, Denck joined the Anabaptists, being baptised as a believer by Balthasar Hubmaier in May 1526. Within a short while he had published three small works: *Whether God is the Cause of Evil*, *The Law of God*, and *Paradoxa: He Who Truly Loves the Truth*.

W.R.Estep:

[Denck] had a deep appreciation for the Old Testament and, therefore, he and Ludwig Haetzer made the first translation of the Hebrew prophets into German at Worms in the summer of 1527... The original edition was reprinted ten times and was used by both Zwingli (1529) and Luther (1532).

Denck was not in sympathy with Luther over the law of Moses. Estep again:

[Denck's] knowledge of the *torah* and the Hebrew text of the Old Testament, coupled with his understanding of Christianity as primarily discipleship led him to address what he considered a Lutheran misconception of the law in the only major Anabaptist work on the subject. In response to Luther's *Bondage Of The Will*, Denck wrote his *On the Law of God: How the Law is Made Void and Yet Must be Brought to Fulfilment*.

He was further disturbed by what he considered to be the antinomianism – or, at least, the lack of progressive sanctification – in Luther's followers.¹ As Estep explained:

Doubtless Denck's own experience with the Lutheran establishment in Nuremberg and his observations regarding the failure of the Lutheran movement to produce a transformation of life in its followers, motivated him to deal with the subject in the light of his own understanding of the [Mosaic] law, discipleship, and spirituality. Denck says in *Concerning the Law of God* that he has been compelled to write this treatise because of 'half-truths' that some had been led to accept for one reason or another. He charges that the whole world confesses Christ with their lips but deny him with their lives. This, he claims, is based upon the notion that Christ has fulfilled the law [of Moses] and therefore the Christian is delivered from it. However, he quotes Matthew 5:17 to support his position that even though Christ has fulfilled the law, this does not mean that Christians are under no obligation to live exemplary lives just as Christ himself lived.

Denck thought this all stemmed from Luther's misunderstanding of the gospel at this vital point:

The antinomianism that Denck saw in Luther's teachings and in what he considered the unreformed lives of Luther's followers, he declared was a perversion of the gospel due to a misunderstanding of Christ's fulfilment of the requirements of the [Mosaic] law.

To over-simplify a complicated conversation, Denck had an idiosyncratic position on the believer's relationship to the Mosaic law – a sort of halfway house between covenant theology and new-covenant theology. Estep:

¹ Luther himself had serious misgivings about the same. It has not gone away. See my *Battle* pp52-57,168-174.

Denck claims that this rather paradoxical idea of the Christian [being] still under the law [of Moses] while Christ has satisfied its requirements and, therefore, fulfilled the law, is explained by the work of the Holy Spirit in the Christian's life.

Denck warned of legalism based, as he saw it, on 'the dead letter'.² He wrote:

Whoever has received the new covenant of God, that is, in whose heart the law [of Moses] was written through the Holy Spirit,³ is truly righteous. Whoever supposes he will accomplish keeping the law through the book, ascribes to the dead letter what belongs to living Spirit.⁴

Again:

Whoever does not have the Spirit and presumes to find it in the Scripture, seeks light and finds darkness.⁵

Nevertheless, even though Denck could write in such a denigrating way about Scripture, he stood firm on the necessity of holiness of life:

Whoever is born of God will bear witness to the truth. Whoever rejects it will also be rejected by God. Cursed be the one who does not truly love God and does not keep his commandments.

Estep quoted Clarence Bauman:

Denck holds that the letter of the [Mosaic] law is transcended in that its intention is internalised and becomes the rule of Christ within through the power of the Spirit.⁶

² Denck was mistaken. The 'dead letter' or 'killing letter' (Rom. 7:6; 2 Cor. 3:6-11) does not refer to the believer under the law of Christ in Scripture, but to the believer going back under the Mosaic law.

³ Denck was mistaken. The law written on the believer's heart is not the law of Moses but the law of Christ. See my *Christ* pp211-321,481-555.

⁴ See previous note.

⁵ See Ruth Anne Abraham: 'Reclaim the Wisdom of Hans Denck'. Abraham is a contemporary Mennonite advocate of Denck's teaching.

⁶ Clarence Bauman: *The Spiritual Legacy of Hans Denck: Interpretation and Translation of Key Texts*, Brill, Leiden, p16. W.R.Estep: 'Law and Gospel in the Anabaptist/Baptist Tradition', *Grace Theological Journal* 12.2, 1991, pp189-214.

As for the comparison between inner and outer truth, Denck was adamant:

He who truly possesses truth can determine it without Scripture. The scribes [that is, Lutheran theologians] could never attain to this because they did not receive their truth from the truth. From those, on the other hand, who have it in their hearts... the written law was abolished. Not that they may discard it; rather, even though they do not always understand its full testimony, they have truth and righteousness in their hearts by which they are not misled.⁷

There is no doubt that Denck thought that the inner word is the ultimate truth. Scripture is necessary, but only in a secondary sense. Denck valued Scripture, he said, above all earthly treasure, but whereas the Scriptures are temporary – written on paper – it is the inner word that is eternal:

Holy Scripture I hold above all human treasure but not as high as the word of God that is living, powerful and eternal – unattached and free of all elements of this world; for, since it is God himself, it is Spirit and not letter, written without pen and paper so that it can never be eradicated. Therefore, salvation is not bound to Scripture, however useful and good it might be in furthering it... But a devout heart, containing a true spark of divine zeal, is improved through all things.⁸

Moreover, according to Denck the believer's holiness of life arises, not out of an active obedience to Scripture, but by a passive outworking of the inner light. As Mika Ojakangas expressed it:

[For] Hans Denck... not the Bible but the inner truth spoken and written by Christ 'from the beginning until the end of the world in the hearts of men' has supreme authority on earth: 'Wherever it directs me, I will go; and where it prevents me, I will flee'... It

⁷ Malcolm B. Yarnell III (editor): *The Anabaptists and Contemporary Baptists: Restoring New Testament Christianity*, B&H Publishing Group, Nashville, 2013, pp13-14.

⁸ Abraham. See also Amy Hollywood and Patricia Z. Beckman (editors): *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Mysticism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013, p129.

drives me 'without my willing and doing', or, better still, it drives me only when my willing and doing cease, when I hold still and lose myself in the standstill... of the soul.

Ojakangas summarised it thus:

To put it bluntly, these radicals and mystics were Catholics without the Church, and Protestant without the word. Like Catholics, they believed in the spark of God's light operating in every man, but like good Lutherans, they refused to subject this spark to the authority of the Church. Like Luther, moreover, they admitted that the Bible is important, but they believed that Scripture bears witness to God's truth only mediately, whilst the experience of the inner word is its immediate expression. Through this experience the believer becomes free and autonomous.⁹

Wilson Varkey put it this way:

The significance of [Denck's] pneumatology is that he recognised the distinction between the outer and the inner word; that is to say, the word written in the Bible and that which is written in the heart, respectively. He writes: 'I esteem Holy Scripture above all earthly treasures, but not so highly as the word of God which is living, powerful, eternal, free and independent all elements of this world: for as it is God himself, so it is the Spirit and not the letter, and written without pen and paper, so it that can never more be blotted out'. [This] does not mean that Denck rejected the Scripture totally... He asserted that Scripture and law in themselves are holy and good. However, without the help of the Spirit no human being is able to use them correctly... The true believer becomes capable to listen to the whole testimony of the Scripture and to discern everything only by the anointing of the Spirit. The discernment of the law through the letter of the Old and New Testaments can never be achieved without God's Spirit.

This last, of course, is right. No man can grasp or apply Scripture without the Spirit. But it is what Denck went on to deduce that

⁹ Mika Ojakangas: *The Voice of Conscience: A Political Genealogy of Western Ethical Experience*, Bloomsbury Publishing, New York, 2013, p77.

led him so badly astray. He elevated the inner light above the external Scriptures:

[This] proves... that Denck regarded Scripture as an external testimony to an internal truth... He writes: 'All commands, morals, laws, insofar as they are comprehended in the Old and New Testaments, are superseded for the true scholar in Christ, for he has a word written in the heart by which he loves God alone, and according to this he is able to judge what to do and what to leave alone even though he has nothing in writing... It is expounded to him through the anointing of the Holy Ghost'. Denck believed, in opposition to Luther and Calvin, that the Spirit works in the inner being of a person without the precondition of external means... It is the new covenant which is written in the hearts of people by the Spirit... So for him, Scripture is not univocally the word of God, but a 'witness' authenticated by the inner word. On this account... Denck... subordinates the Scripture to the Spirit.¹⁰

Denck thought that there is only one command for the believer; namely, Christ's command to love. Thomas N.Finger spelled out where this led Denck when coupled with his emphasis on the inner word at the expense of the outer:

Denck... reduced the law to loving God alone; when the Spirit wrote this law on hearts, people need not worry about its prescriptions and satisfactions. The inner word revealed God more directly for Hans Denck than outer, biblical words... This elevation of the inner salvation process over its outward, historical mediation, eventually led Denck to Spiritualism.¹¹

Estep on this command to love:

[Denck] puts much emphasis upon the dynamics of the new birth, for, [he] points out, the new man in Christ Jesus is under the compulsion of love to live the Christian life.

Denck himself:

¹⁰ Wilson Varkey: *Role of the Holy Spirit in Protestant Systematic Theology...*

¹¹ Thomas N.Finger: *A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, 2004, pp120,261; see also p50.

Christ not only proclaimed or wrote the law of God externally for his followers, as did Moses. Rather, he speaks and writes it to them in their hearts from the beginning of the world to the end (Heb. 8:10; Jer. 31:33). Whoever has the law in his heart lacks neither path nor feet, neither light nor eyes, nor anything that is necessary to fulfil the will of God... Those who are true pupils of Christ keep the whole Mosaic law, even if they have never read it... Whoever has received the new covenant of God – that is, whoever has the law written in his heart by the Holy Spirit – is truly just (Romans 5 [but *passim*]). Whoever thinks he can bring this about by reading the Bible, and by keeping the law, ascribes to the dead letter what belongs to the living Spirit.¹²

Let Rufus M. Jones sum it all up:

During the first period of his life in Nuremberg, [Denck] was closely identified with the Lutheran movement, but he soon shifted his sympathies, and aligned himself with the radical tendencies which at this period were championed in Nuremberg by Thomas Muenzer... Muenzer read Tauler's¹³ sermons from

¹² Denck had 'spirit'. Hans Denck: *On the Law of God in The Radical Reformation*, edited by Michael G. Baylor, Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp136,142.

¹³ Johannes Tauler (c1300-1361) was a German mystic, a Catholic preacher and theologian. Here is a sample of Tauler's teaching: 'Many men go astray, running after external works and discipline'. 'How very often we may be blinded, to our own hurt, by unnecessary and external works of love, which prevent our perceiving the divine inspiration and our own infirmities. Although such works may have been done in love, both great and godlike, and may not be really evil in themselves, still they are not that which is best and most perfect'. 'For God is a lover of hearts, and communes not with anything that is external. He desires an inner, living, love, which is ever ready to turn to all things that are divine and virtuous, where and in whomsoever they may be found; for there is more truth in such a one than in a man who prays as much as all the rest of the world, and sings so lustily that his song reaches to heaven; or in anything that he can do by fasting, watching, or anything else externally'. 'God himself has set [believers] free... Paul says, that those who are driven or led by the Spirit are under no law'. 'The right foundation of a perfect Christian life does not consist only of external works, though they are a help, but much more of good work in the heart, by which sin is avoided and virtue brought forth' (Johannes Tauler: *The Inner Way*, Methuen & Co., London, 1901, pp60,71,103,105). Arthur

his youth up; in his own copy of these sermons, preserved in the library at Gera, a marginal note says that he read them almost continually, and that here he learned of a divine interior teaching.

Muenzer passed his mystical views on to Denck:

It was Muenzer's teaching of the living voice of God in the soul, his testimony to the reality of the inner heavenly word, which God himself speaks in the depths of man's heart, that won [Denck]... to the new and perilous cause.

Denck's course, alas, was now firmly set towards the mystical, the inward, away from things outward, and he was encouraged in his thinking by another friend:

[Denck] also formed a close friendship with Ludwig Hetzer, who, like Muenzer, taught that the saving word of God must be inward, and that the Scriptures can be understood only by those who belong to the school of Christ.

The fact is:

Already in this Nuremberg period, Denck became fully convinced that Luther's doctrine of sin and justification was an artificial construction, and that his conception of Scripture... was destined to clamp the new-found faith in iron bonds, tie it to outworn tradition, and make it incapable of a progressive and vital unfolding.

Denck did not hide his 'light' under a bushel, and, naturally, he soon found himself in hot water for making his views known:

As a result of this change of attitude, [he] was banished from the city of Nuremberg, January 21, 1525, and from this time until his early death he was homeless and a wanderer. He spent some months – between September 1525 and October 1526 – in Augsburg endeavouring to... give the chaotic movement of

Wollaston (editor): 'His mystical doctrine of the inner and outer, of the letter and the spirit, tended irresistibly towards the overthrow of Catholicism, so far as in his day is consisted in mere formalism and obedience to external rule' (Tauler p12). Yes, no doubt this is true, but it is also impossible to miss how this emphasis on the inward at the expense of the outward could lead to trouble for more than Catholics.

Anabaptism a definite direction, with the main emphasis on the mystical aspect of religion. He hoped to call a halt to the vague socialistic dreams and the fanatical tendencies that put the movement in constant jeopardy and peril,¹⁴ and he was striving to call his brotherhood to an inner religion, grounded on the inherent nature of the soul, and guided by the inner word rather than on 'a new law' set forth in the written word.

Here we reach the crunch point. Denck found himself so stressing the inward that he inevitably played down the external – the Scriptures. Why was he so strong against the believer consciously obeying the law of Christ written in Scripture? Because he thought that those who stress the necessity of obedience to Scripture, obedience to the law of Christ as written in the word, were promoting legalism:

[Denck] was, consistently with his fundamental ideas, profoundly opposed to every tendency to make Christianity a legal religion. His friends, the Anabaptists, were inclined to turn the gospel of Christ into 'a new law', and to make religion consist largely in scrupulous obedience to this perfect law of life. To all this he was radically alien, for it was, he thought, only another road back to a religion of the letter, while Christ came to call us to a religion of the spirit. 'He who has not the Spirit', he wrote, 'and who fails to find him in the Scriptures, seeks life and finds death; seeks light and finds darkness, whether it be in the Old or in the New Testament'. 'He who thinks that he can be made truly righteous by means of a book is ascribing to the dead letter what belongs to the Spirit'.

It surely goes without saying that nobody can be made righteous simply by the word. A sinner has to be regenerated, brought to repentance and faith in Christ, by the Spirit, and so be united to Christ. But, as the New Testament makes abundantly plain, God uses his written word in all this.¹⁵ And the same applies to the

¹⁴ Which would, within a few years, lead to the debacle at Munster. In 1534 some Anabaptists took over the town of Munster, announced the end time had come, and committed horrible sins in the name of Christ. This was an appalling disaster for the Anabaptists as a whole, doing their cause – indeed the cause of God – much harm for many years.

¹⁵ I quote from my *Baptist* p255: "I have begotten you through the gospel", Paul declared (1 Cor. 4:15). How does God bring this about?

believer. Only the Spirit can enable the believer to live to the glory of God, but, yet again, as the New Testament makes clear, in this work the Spirit uses Scripture. Denck faced up to the question in light of his view: ‘So why did God give us the Scriptures?’ His answer is illuminating. Jones:

[Denck] does not belittle or undervalue the Scriptures – he knew them almost by heart and took the precious time out of his brief life to help to translate the prophets into German – but he wants to make the fact forever plain that men are saved or lost as they say ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to a light and word within themselves. ‘The holy Scriptures’, he writes in his dying testimony, ‘I consider above every human treasure, but not so high as the word of God which is living, powerful, and eternal, for it is God himself, Spirit and no letter, written without pen or paper so that it can never be destroyed. For that reason, salvation is not bound up with the Scriptures, however necessary and good they may be for their purpose, because it is impossible for the Scriptures to make good a bad heart, even though it may be a learned one. A good heart, however... is improved by everything, and to such the Scriptures will bring blessedness and goodness’.

There is truth in this, of course – the Scriptures can never, without the Spirit, make men righteous. Nevertheless, the believer must obey God in his word, and so live a holy life before men. Yes, that obedience must be from the heart, by the Spirit, and it can only be by the Spirit, working in those who have come

“Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth” (Jas. 1:18). “The word of truth” certainly means the Scriptures, the gospel (2 Cor. 6:7; Eph. 1:13; Col. 1:5; 2 Tim. 2:15; see also 1 Pet. 1:23 with Heb. 4:12). “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Rom. 10:17). But I think there is something more. “Of his own will... the word of truth” also includes God’s decree, his authoritative command – as his effective word at creation: “God who commanded light to shine out of darkness... has shone in our hearts to give [us] the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 4:6). In short, God uses the preaching of the gospel to regenerate and convert his elect – and he does it in some mysterious, but effective, way like in his fiat at creation: “Let there be light” – “and there was light” (Gen. 1:3). “The law of the LORD [which, in new-covenant terms, is the entire Scripture] is perfect, converting the soul” (Ps. 19:7).

to Christ, but, even so, this obedience is conformity to the objective Scriptures, and not ‘merely’ to the inner word.

Despite his mystical view, despite his emphasis on the inward at the expense of the outward, Denck continued to press believers to godliness:

The Scriptures – the external word – as he many times, in fact somewhat tediously, declares, are witnesses and pointers to the real and momentous thing, the word which is very near to all souls and is written in the heart, and which increases in clearness and power as the will swings into parallelism with the will of God, and as the life grows in likeness to the divine image revealed in Christ. This inward life and spiritual appreciation do not give any ground for relaxing the moral obligations of life. No fulfilling of the [Mosaic] law by Christ, no vanishing of the outward and temporal, furnish any excuse to us for slacking a jot or tittle of anything which belongs to the inherent nature of moral goodness. ‘Christ’, he says, ‘fulfilled the [Mosaic] law, not to relieve us of it, but to show us how to keep it in truth. The member must partake of what the Head partakes’. To love God alone and to hate everything that hinders love is a principle which, Denck believes, will fulfil all law, ancient or modern.¹⁶

Yes, but that one command is worked out in Scripture in a host of commands and principles which believers are duty-bound to apply to their lives, and to do so in a deliberate, resolved, way, and all by the power of the Spirit.¹⁷

Conclusion

The positive

Among the positive lessons we can draw from the life of Hans Denck, I choose three. We need to learn from Denck in these areas, and emulate him in our practice:

¹⁶ Rufus M. Jones: ‘Hans Denck and the Inward Word’ in *Spiritual Reformers in the 16th and 17th Centuries*, Macmillan and Co., Limited, London, 1928, pp17-45.

¹⁷ For my arguments supporting all I say in this article, see my ‘Believers Under the Law of Christ’; ‘The Obedience of Faith’; ‘One Command or Many in One?’

1. The believer must live a life of holiness. Those who are justified and positionally sanctified must show it by their progressive sanctification. Indeed, those who are Christ's, those who have the Spirit, will be motivated by the Spirit to live a godly life to the glory of God.

2. We must beware of a cold, dry – merely legal – view of justification. Notice my use of 'merely'. Justification by faith is forensic, but not only so. We must cultivate a 'felt Christ' and a 'felt justification'.¹⁸ As Joseph Hart put it:

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

Again:

*The faith that unites to the Lamb
And brings such salvation as this,
Is more than mere notion or name,
The work of God's Spirit it is:
A principle, active and young,
That lives under pressure and load;
That makes out of weakness more strong,
And draws the soul upward to God.*

3. We must never minimise the inward work of the Spirit. It is one of the glories of the new covenant. The Reformed too often stress the word at the expense of the Spirit. We who advocate new-covenant theology must never cease to stress that it is both the Spirit and the word, working perfectly in tandem.¹⁹

The negative

There are four warnings I draw from the life of Hans Denck:

¹⁸ See my *Four 'Antinomians'; Assurance*.

¹⁹ See my "'The Law' in 'The Law of Christ'".

1. Denck did not understand that the believer, in his union with Christ, has died to the law of Moses (and pagan law). And this guarantees his progressive sanctification (Rom. 7:4-6; Gal. 2:19-20; 3:1-5,25; 4:1-7; 5:1,13-16,18,25; 6:2). It is only because the Spirit has set him free from the law of sin and death (Rom. 8:1-4), the killing ministry (Rom. 7:6; 2 Cor. 3:6-11), that he can live to glorify God. This we must constantly maintain.

2. Denck went badly astray on the role of the Scriptures. The inward work of the Spirit is vital, writing Christ's law of the believer's heart, yes, but the external Scriptures, inspired by the Spirit, are no less vital. The believer is under the law of Christ, and by the Spirit is enabled to rejoice in the obedience of faith to the Scriptures. As I have noted, the 'dead letter' (Rom. 7:6; 2 Cor. 3:6-11) does not refer to the believer living under the law of Christ in Scripture, obeying it by the Spirit, but to the believer trying to live a spiritual life under the Mosaic law. There is nothing 'dead' or legalistic about the believer obeying the law of Christ written in Scripture by the inward work of the Spirit. In so doing, he is *not* returning to the old covenant.

3. The believer is not passive in his progressive sanctification, but decidedly active. Denck was wrong on this. Neither Christ or the Spirit does our obeying for us. We, ourselves, have to obey Scripture, and, by God's grace, we are moved and empowered to love and obey God in his word. The believer is free from the law of Moses (Gal. 4:21 – 5:1), yes, but he has to walk in the Spirit (Gal. 5:25), and he will, by the Spirit's power, do so; that is, he has to live by the power of the Spirit in obedience to Christ as revealed both within him and in the external Scriptures. In so doing, he fulfils the law of Christ (Gal. 6:2).

4. Denck rightly deplored worldliness in believers, and properly stressed the necessity of progressive sanctification – godliness of life – but, alas, he prescribed the wrong regime to bring it about. As such, he speaks to us in our day. We, too, have to struggle with this issue. We must not repeat his mistake. And this is especially relevant to those of us who advocate new-covenant theology. While we must stress the believer's liberty, and the

inward work of the Spirit, let us, at the same time, and with equal vehemence, stress the believer's responsibility under the word of God. It is not the Spirit or the word; it is both. It is not the inner or the outer; it is both. It is not: 'Let go, and let God!' It is:

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now... 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).

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).

Therefore, beloved, since you are waiting for these, be diligent to be found by him without spot or blemish, and at peace. And count the patience of our Lord as salvation, just as our beloved brother Paul also wrote to you according to the wisdom given him, as he does in all his letters when he speaks in them of these matters. There are some things in them that are hard to understand, which the ignorant and unstable twist to their own destruction, as they do the other Scriptures. You therefore, beloved, knowing this beforehand, take care that you are not carried away with the error of lawless people and lose your own stability. But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen (2 Pet. 3:14-18).

Who's Your Husband?

Everybody has a husband. In fact, everybody is born into this world married to a husband. Moreover, some of us have died to our first husband, the one we were born married to, and we have been married to another husband.

Whatever am I talking about? Where do I get such ideas?

I am talking, of course in spiritual terms, and I get what I say from Scripture.¹ Where? In Romans 7:1-6. Listen to Paul:

Do you not know, brothers – for I am speaking to those who know the law – that the law is binding on a person only as long as he lives? For a married woman is bound by law to her husband while he lives, but if her husband dies she is released from the law of marriage. Accordingly, she will be called an adulteress if she lives with another man while her husband is alive. But if her husband dies, she is free from that law, and if she marries another man she is not an adulteress. Likewise, 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. 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.

The apostle, writing to believers,² tells them that they have died to their first husband – the law – in order to be married to a second husband, a new husband, the Lord Jesus Christ.

¹ For this article, I have lightly edited my *Christ* pp166-171, 453-460. See also 'Romans 7:4-6' and 'The Believer's Marriage' in my series 'New-Covenant Theology Made Simple'.

² He calls his readers 'brothers', having already described them as those who are 'called to belong to Jesus Christ... loved by God and called to be saints' (Rom. 1:6-7). See also Rom. 3:21 – 6:23, noting the apostle's repeated references to his readers' personal experience of Christ.

Who's Your Husband?

From this we learn that all men are born married to 'the law', and many stay married to this husband until the end of their lives. Others, however – in their regeneration, in their coming to trust the Lord Jesus Christ – die to their first husband, and marry Christ. The subject, of course, is conversion.

So when I ask: 'Who's your husband?', I am asking if you are still married to the law, or if you have died to the law and so been married to Christ. I am, in fact, asking whether or not you have been converted. Converted? Have you been born again, regenerated by God's Spirit, the Spirit who has convicted you of your sin, and brought you to repentance and trust in Christ? If so, you have, in your conversion, died to your first husband – the law – and been united in marriage to Christ. So says the apostle.

He is not alone in saying such things. The prophets spoke of the believer's marriage to Christ. Take for instance, the wedding song of Psalm 45, which psalm, not least, is a prophecy of the Messiah, Christ. Addressing Christ's bride-to-be, the psalmist urges her:

Hear, O daughter, and consider, and incline your ear: forget your people and your father's house, and the king will desire your beauty. Since he is your lord, bow to him... All glorious is the princess in her chamber, with robes interwoven with gold. In many-coloured robes she is led to the king, with her virgin companions following behind her. With joy and gladness they are led along as they enter the palace of the king (Ps. 45:10-15).³

As Isaiah declared: 'Your Maker is your husband' (Isa. 54:5).⁴ And God, through Hosea, announced:

³ See 'Christ the Best Husband: Or an Earnest Invitation to Young Women to Come and See Christ' (ccel.org), George Whitefield's sermon on Ps. 45:10-11.

⁴ See 'Christ the Believer's Husband' (biblebb.com), an otherwise excellent sermon by Whitefield, sadly marred, however, by his unscriptural talk of the unbeliever being married to the law as a covenant of works, and the believer having died to the law as a covenant of works but being alive to the law as a rule of life. See below for more in this. On the covenant of works, see my 'The Covenant that Never Was'.

Who's Your Husband?

I will betroth you to me forever. I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy. I will betroth you to me in faithfulness. And you shall know the LORD. 'And in that day I will answer', declares the LORD, 'I will answer the heavens, and they shall answer the earth, and the earth shall answer the grain, the wine, and the oil, and they shall answer Jezreel, and I will sow her for myself in the land. And I will have mercy on No Mercy, and I will say to Not My People: "You are my people", and he shall say: "You are my God"' (Hos. 2:19-23).⁵

The apostle, himself, never tired of the theme. Writing to believers at Corinth and Ephesus, he said:

I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ (2 Cor. 11:2-3).⁶

Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendour, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish (Eph. 5:25-27).

⁵ See Rom. 9:22-33.

⁶ Remember context here. It could not be more relevant to the question in hand. Paul is getting to grips with the law men. Calvin: 'That [Paul's] zeal... was to join [his readers] to Christ in marriage, and retain them in connection with him... All ministers [all believers – DG] are the friends of the Bridegroom... (John 3:29). Hence all ought to be concerned that the fidelity of this sacred marriage remain unimpaired and inviolable. This they cannot do, unless they are actuated [moved] by the dispositions [character, outlook, aims] of the Bridegroom, so that every one of them may be as much concerned for the purity of the church, as a husband is for the chastity of his wife. Away then with coldness and indolence in this matter... Let them, however... take care not to pursue their own interest rather than that of Christ, that they may not intrude themselves into his place, lest while they give themselves out as his friends, they turn out to be in reality adulterers, by alluring the bride to love themselves... We are married to Christ on no other condition than that we bring virginity as our dowry, and preserve it entire, so as to be free from all corruption'.

In short, the believer has died to the law and has been united in marriage to Christ (Rom. 7:4-6).

Nor does this exhaust the relevant New Testament use of marriage and weddings when referring to believers. It was at a wedding in Cana in Galilee that Christ performed his first miracle; that is, he showed his first sign of who he was, and what he was about to accomplish in fulfilling the old covenant and establishing the new (John 2:1-11).⁷ Then we have Christ's repeated use of the picture (Matt. 9:15; 22:1-14; 25:1-13; Luke 12:35-36; 14:8). John the Baptist spoke in such terms (John 3:27-30). Finally, we have the references in the book of Revelation (Rev. 19:6-9; 21:2,9; 22:17).

What should we make of this? Clearly this dying, this release from our first marriage in order to enter into a second marriage, a new marriage with the Lord Jesus, in order to bear spiritual fruit, is of fundamental importance. It is vital that both the unbeliever and the believer should be clear on it.

What do covenant theologians make of Romans 7:4-6?

Well, this is not altogether easy to say. Covenant theologians offer a range of alternative explanations of how they understand the principles of Romans 7:1-6, and, as so often with covenant theologians, things soon get complicated. But let me do my best to summarise the Reformed interpretation of this important passage.

Although I am not sure that they often, let alone always, use the biblical terminology of 'marriage', even so, covenant theologians say that Adam had the moral law written within him, and that all men ever since have been born married to the moral law. By 'the moral law', the Reformed mean the ten commandments. This division of the law, it goes without saying, is patently unscriptural. Moreover, the claim that Adam had the ten commandments before he fell is, to say the least of it, very odd. Whatever did Adam make of commandments against sin

⁷ Do not miss the link with the parable of the wineskins (Matt. 9:16-17), with its proximity to 'the bridegroom' (Matt. 9:15).

(such as adultery and theft) before he fell, before he had any concept of 'sin', before there was any woman with whom he could commit adultery, and before there was anybody to steal anything from? And what, I wonder, did he make of a commandment about his father and mother, when he wouldn't have had a clue who such people were? And, if it is true that all men are married to 'the moral law', why is it no tribe by nature has ever kept the sabbath, especially bearing in mind its *essential* observance of rest from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset? And why do we never read of any biblical preacher appealing to 'the moral law' when addressing unconverted pagans? Strange, is it not, if all men really are married to it? But there it is, according to covenant theologians, all men are, by nature, married to the moral law.

Now when sinners come to faith, they die to the law, and marry another husband. Indeed, they have to die to the first husband in order that they might marry the second. So said the apostle (Rom. 7:4-6). What do covenant theologians make of this? They say a mixture of things. You pays your money and you takes your choice, I suppose. They say that believers have died to the law as a covenant; or that they have died to the condemnation of the law; or that they have died to the ceremonial law; or... what? But in any case, whatever it is to which they have died, after their conversion, believers continue to be married (or are re-married) to the moral law as their perfect rule. So say covenant theologians. Once again, I am not sure they often, let alone always, use the apostle's language and talk of 'marriage', but there it is.

What should we make of this rigmarole? Not only is it riddled with unbiblical gloss after unbiblical gloss, but, yet again, I find it very odd. Were pagans ever married to the ceremonial law? If not, how could they die to it? Is the believer guilty of spiritual bigamy – being married to the moral law (after all, this is precisely what being 'under the moral law as the perfect rule' means) and, at the same time, being married to Christ? And which scripture tells us we can distinguish between the law as a covenant and the law as a rule? And doesn't the biblical concept of marriage have 'covenant' at its heart (Mal. 2:10-16)?

So much for covenant theology and Romans 7:4-6.

What do new-covenant theologians make of Romans 7:4-6?

Well, I can speak only for myself, of course. But I am convinced that all men are, by nature, married to the law, in that all men, by nature, have a rudimentary sense of right and wrong written in their conscience (Rom. 2:12-15). They also have the evidence of creation, which evidence they do not fail to notice (Ps. 19:1-6; Rom. 1:18-20), even though they suppress it (Rom. 1:21-32). In addition – and what an addition! – the Jews were singled out by God by being given a far greater revelation: through Moses on Mount Sinai, God gave his law to Israel, and for Israel, alone (Deut. 4:7-8,32-34; Ps. 147:19-20; Rom. 2:14; 3:1-2; 9:4; 1 Cor. 9:20-21). Hence, all men are under the law, married to the law: pagans to the law of nature and conscience, and Jews to the law of nature and conscience, and the Mosaic law. Paul gathers these threads to describe all men as being ‘under the law’, married to the law, by nature.⁸ The sinner, coming to Christ, being converted, dies to the law – to the law full stop, to the law in its entirety – so that he may be united in marriage to Christ, and so come under Christ’s rule and governance, and be endowed with Christ’s Spirit in order to bear fruit within his new marriage, bear fruit as a result of his new marriage, bear fruit to the glory of his new husband.

Do not miss the telling point in all this, the point of high significance. The believer has not died to one law so that he can marry another law. Far from it! He has died to the law in order to be married to Christ – married to Christ, not to any law, not even the law of God! No law, no code, no regulation system could ever

⁸ He does much the same in Gal. 3:21-25; 4:7. See my *Christ* pp38-48,347. I quote: ‘Israel, having the law from Sinai, served as a model – a paradigm – to show how God deals with people under law. The Gentiles, while not under the law of Moses, are nevertheless under some sort of law (Rom. 2:14-15). While Romans 7:4, then, is strictly applicable only to Jewish believers, the principle applies equally to Gentile converts and “their” law’ (*Christ* p48).

Who's Your Husband?

produce the fruit God requires. Not even the law of God. Paul expressly states this fact:

Likewise, 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* (Rom. 7:4).

Only the Spirit of Christ, indwelling the child of God by reason of his union with Christ himself, can produce such fruit. Christ is all, Christ is the believer's husband, Christ is the covenant (Isa. 42:6; 49:8).⁹

And how vital this is. No law, not even God's law to Israel through Moses, can accomplish this glorious end. Only Christ, by his Spirit, because of the Father's sovereign decree, can do it. *Indeed, he has done it.* Paul, in gathering his argument together and pressing it home in Romans 8, makes this point right at the start:

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

⁹ We must not make this mystical, of course. '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. 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' (*Pulpit Commentary* on Isa. 42:6). John Gill: '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"' (*Commentary* on Isa. 42:6). C.H. Spurgeon when preaching on Isaiah 49:8 (sermon number 103), having opened by speaking of Christ as the mediator and the surety of the covenant, 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"'.

Who's Your Husband?

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. 8:3-4).

The argument behind all this is that death ends the legal obligations of marriage (Rom. 7:1-3). Indeed, it ends the marriage state itself. Likewise, the relationship between the sinner and the law ends when the sinner comes to faith in Christ, since by faith the believer is united to Christ in his death and resurrection, having died in and with him (Rom. 6:3-5). Do not miss the 'likewise' or 'so' at the start of Romans 7:4. It is all one continuous argument, with no chapter – let alone verse – division.

The believer, therefore, is no longer married to the law. He is married to Christ. And this means that whereas the unbeliever under the law must submit to the law – as a wife to her husband – the law has no rule, governance or jurisdiction over the believer. He is no longer under it! Indeed, he is dead to it.¹⁰ 'We have been delivered from the law', said Paul (Rom. 7:6). 'Delivered'? The apostle uses a strong word – 'discharged', 'set at liberty', 'set free'. The believers is totally discharged or set free from the law. It has no authority over him any longer, it rules him no more. Just as a man, when he dies, is discharged from all obligations to the law,¹¹ so it is with the believer. He has complete freedom from all obligations to the Mosaic law as a rule of life. He is no longer in covenant with the law. He is at liberty, free from the law, released from the law, free to be married to Christ, and under his rule, under his law, in covenant with him. Indeed, he is not only free to be married to Christ: his marriage to Christ is an inevitable consequence and privilege of his being in the new-covenant. The believer, therefore, is free of the law, is married to Christ, and, as a result, is under his sole governance.

¹⁰ Many confuse the illustration and say the law has died. It has not. The believer has.

¹¹ Once again, it is the merest quibble to point out that an executor has to discharge the debts of the deceased. Paul is not dealing with the law of probate, but with the ongoing life of the believer.

Let me take this a little further

And there is need. We cannot be too much taken up with this glorious theme. To be 'under the law' means far more than 'the law defining something'. But this is claimed. Jonathan Bayes, for instance, grievously watered-down the apostle's teaching: 'Paul's main point has been that in the sphere of the flesh the law has a sin-defining function'.¹² This is worse than nonsense! Paul's *main* point? The apostle was saying a lot more than that! Marriage speaks of far more than 'defining' something. Bayes has degraded Paul's majestic doctrine to the level of the banal. Is this all marriage is: a definition of some sort of condition? Paul was talking about a regime, a jurisdiction, a state, a covenant, a union – a marriage, after all. And this is how we must talk. To be married to the law is to be under the rule of the law, under the rule, the headship or jurisdiction of Moses, in the Mosaic covenant.

And when it comes to the second marriage, in marrying Christ, is the believer to think of this as merely 'defining holiness' for him? To be married to Christ is to be under his rule and headship, in covenant with him, united to him, one with him, to have died with him, to have been raised with him, to have ascended with and to be seated with him in glory. This is how Paul speaks of it (Rom. 6:3-11; 7:4-6; Eph. 2:6,13; 5:22-33), and this is how we, as believers, must think and speak of our new position in Christ.

The illustration must not be glossed away. Its full import must be allowed to stand. Indeed, it must dominate all discussion on the believer and the law. When a man dies and his wife remarries, is she under the authority of her new husband or her old? Certainly not the old! The fact is, her former husband is no longer her husband at all. His death ended that marriage. It would be unthinkable, even ridiculous, if a woman, being remarried after her first husband's death, deferred to the authority of her former

¹² Jonathan F.Bayes: *The Weakness of the Law: God's Law and the Christian in New Testament Perspective*, Paternoster Press, Cumbria, 2000, p117.

(dead) husband. The fact is, that authority does not even exist!¹³ 'No one can serve two masters' (Matt. 6:24); that is, no servant (Luke 16:13) can serve two masters. In all this, we are in the realm of headship, rule, governance, union, covenant. The application is clear. No wife can obey two husbands, one dead and the other alive. No woman can serve two husbands. The fact is, she can have only one husband! She cannot be in covenant with two husbands!

The picture is plain. The unregenerate sinner is married to the law, but when the Spirit regenerates and converts him, he dies to the law, and is united to Christ by faith. From now on, he is no longer under the law, but under Christ; no longer under *its* rule, but under *his* rule. Instead of being in his first, unfruitful marriage – to the law – the believer is now in a marriage – to Christ – in which he produces fruit to God through his union with the Redeemer (Rom. 6:22; 7:4). He is in the new covenant, married to the Lord Christ himself.

And this is the climax of the passage. 'Fruit to God' can be produced only by those who have died to the law. Those who have not died to the law can produce nothing but 'fruit to death': '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' (Rom. 7:5; see also Rom. 8:5-8). So, as long as we are married to the law, we cannot be married to Christ, and thus there is no possibility of being sanctified. For that, our bondage to the law has to cease. Then, and only then, can we start to live a new life in relationship to Christ. The old relationship must end, and this can only happen by death. It is only as we are married to Christ, free from the law, that we can begin to live a life of holiness.

Let me reinforce a vital point. In these verses, we are *not* talking about justification or positional sanctification.¹⁴ We are

¹³ Again, it is the merest quibble to talk of the respect the woman has for her former husband, now dead. As with all biblical illustrations, we must grasp the main point.

¹⁴ In Romans, Paul speaks only of justification. For positional sanctification, see, for instance, 1 Cor. 1:2,30; 6:11; 2 Thess. 2:13; Heb. 2:11; 10:10,14,29; 13:12; 1 Pet. 1:2; Jude 1. The two, of course, are

talking about *the fruits and effects* of justification and positional sanctification; namely, progressive sanctification. Far from teaching that a believer is under the law for progressive sanctification (as covenant theologians), Paul asserts the very opposite. Unless a man is dead to the law, and married to Christ, he will never produce fruit to God; he will never be sanctified. In his first marriage – to the law – he produced sin and death. In his second marriage – to Christ – he produces righteousness. Paul especially underlines the fact that it is the believer's very freedom from the law which enables him to be sanctified. Staying under the law would make it impossible. The truth is, the opposite would occur. Sin would be aroused or excited by the law, and sin being stimulated, death would be the inevitable result. The law, therefore, cannot be the perfect rule for sanctification. It is an utter impossibility! As in Galatians 2:19 and 5:13-18, far from the law being the means of progressive sanctification, holiness of life is only possible to one who is free from the law. It is not merely that the law is *not* the means of sanctification. *Freedom from the law is the only means of sanctification.* Christ has set his people free from the law in order that they might be sanctified.

Phew! Let us pause for breath, and take stock! Read over once again the first six verses of Romans 7 – in more than one version – read them aloud – and just let the apostle's words sink in. Indeed, read over Romans 6:11 – 7:6. If the above is *not* what he is saying – then what *is* he saying? And whatever answer you come up with, go on to verse 7 and ask yourself whether or not your explanation would promote the apostle's question. I will come back to this.

Although this doctrine sounds startling, frightening, shocking to those who hold Calvin's third use of the law – that the law is the believer's perfect rule, a whip to drive him to sanctification – this *is* the plain teaching of the apostle. And the law we are talking about is, I remind you, the Mosaic law, including the ten commandments. As so often, some try to say that Paul is here

different ways of looking at the same glorious truth; namely, the believer's perfection in Christ in the sight of God, free of condemnation and accusation (Rom. 8:1,31-34; Eph. 5:25-27).

speaking about justification, about the penalty, demands and curse of the law, or about the law as a works covenant, claiming that, although the believer has died to the law as a curse, and so on, the law still stands as his rule of life. Paul is saying nothing of the sort! *He says the very opposite!* The believer has died to the law. It is simply not possible to divide or tinker this 'having died' into having died to the *curse* of the law but being alive to its *rule*.

In any case, Romans 7:1-6 is not concerned with justification. Romans 7:4 is saying the same as Romans 6:14, using a different illustration. Neither passage is limited to justification. Paul is not saying that believers are dead to the law as a way of justification. Paul is speaking about the two realms, the two ages – law and grace – in both historical and personal terms. The full force of the eschatological 'but now' (Rom. 7:6) must be grasped. The believer is living in a totally different and new age. He was a slave; he is free. His first marriage has ended; he is re-married. The two states – the former and the present – are totally incompatible. They cannot be cobbled together. The believer is not partly slave (and partly free), partly married to the law (and partly married to Christ). 'But now', thunders Paul (Rom. 7:6), with his sights set on the huge contrast between the new and old age for the believer, 'we have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by'.

Nor is Paul talking about a *misunderstanding* or *misuse* of the law, and contrasting *that* with the Spirit. He is contrasting the old covenant and the new, the old age and the new. The believer is in the new covenant, free from bondage to the law, and thus he will serve God by the Spirit, being in a totally new condition of life (2 Cor. 3:6), and he will bear fruit to God's praise (Rom. 6:22-23). Note the continuing – dominating – role for 'but now' in Paul's argument. Discontinuity and contrast are the words! See Romans 3:21; 5:9,11; 6:22; 7:6; 8:1; 11:30; 11:31 (second 'now' in NIV, NASB); 16:26. The two covenants, in the apostle's argument, could not be more strongly contrasted.

That this is the teaching of Romans 7 is easily proved. As so often with the apostle, in order to drive his point home, Paul asks a question, a question which naturally would be raised by an objector – or doubter – who has understood what Paul is teaching,

but can hardly credit it. The objector asks his question to make sure he has heard Paul aright. I said I would come back to this. Consider the objector's immediate outburst in this case: 'Is the law sin?' (Rom. 7:7). 'Is the law sin?' What a question! But the fact that such a question can be asked – that such a question ought to be asked – and that very question Paul actually *did* ask – proves that Paul *is* equating the reign of sin and the reign of law. Of course the answer to the question is a resounding, No! 'Certainly not! On the contrary... the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good'; it is 'spiritual', declares the apostle (Rom. 7:7,12,13-14,16). But notice what Paul does not say: 'Oh, you have misunderstood me. Of course the law is not sin! How can it be? The believer is still under it as a perfect rule of life!' He says nothing of the sort. In fact, *he says the very opposite*. The believer has died to the law; he had to die to the law in order to be sanctified. Even so, the objector's question needs to be asked, and will be asked of those who teach scripturally on the law. Reformed teaching would never – could never – provoke such a question. If Paul had taught that the believer is married to the law, under the law – whether the moral law or whatever – nobody would have dreamt of asking: 'Is the law sin?' *But he did ask it!* The law is certainly not sin. No, it is not. But neither is the believer under the law.

The position is clear: the saint is no longer under the law (Rom. 6:14; Gal. 3:24-25; 5:18); he is delivered, freed or released from it (Rom. 7:6; 8:2). In fact, he has died to it (Rom. 7:4; Gal. 2:19). Think of that! *Died* to the law. The believer died to the law when he died with Christ (Rom. 6:1-8; Gal. 2:19-20; 1 Pet. 4:1-2). As for Christ himself, after he had died, he was no longer under the law *in any respect*. He died to sin and law (Rom. 6:7-10; 2 Cor. 4:10; 2 Tim. 2:11; 1 Pet. 4:1). 'It is finished' (John 19:30), he cried, speaking of many things, I realise, but not excluding his relationship to the law. He had fully satisfied it, and all its claims were met. He had fulfilled it (Matt. 5:17-18). Christ *fulfilled* the law, I say again. He did not arbitrarily destroy it, demolish it, invalidate it, violate it, explain it away, dismantle it,

or repeal it. He fulfilled it, and therefore completed it.¹⁵ Christ is now not under it. He was once. But, having been born under the law (Gal. 4:4), having lived under it, been cursed and died under it (Gal. 3:13), and then having risen again, he is freed from it (Acts 2:24; Rev. 1:18). Similarly, the believer died with Christ to the law, was freed from it so that he might produce holiness and righteousness (Rom. 7:4), *in order that* he might produce holiness and righteousness. No wonder the apostle declares: 'Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes' (Rom. 10:4).¹⁶

Any serious work on the law will – must – take full account of Romans 6:14 – 7:6. And Romans 7:4-6, the believer's marriage to Christ, marks the climax of the apostle's majestic argument. I freely admit that this doctrine is amazing. But it is the apostle's doctrine, and it is true of every believer. The believer, in Christ, has died to the law so that he can be sanctified. This is what Paul teaches. Calvin, however, in his third use of the law, effectively

¹⁵ See 'The Law the Believer's Rule?'

¹⁶ One 'explanation' of Rom. 7:2-6 is to say a believer has two natures, his old nature has died, leaving his new nature married to the law! This is bizarre. The believer is not a spiritual schizophrenic! He does not have two natures. He is human! Christ alone has two natures. As for the believer, *he* has died – *he*, not his 'old nature' – and *he* – *he*, not his 'new nature' – is married to Christ. Another 'explanation' is to claim that, in Rom. 7:6, Paul was saying believers have been delivered, not from the law of God, the law of Moses, but from another law altogether; namely, the law of sin, which is defined as the law of God taken over by sin. But Paul was speaking about the law, not the law 'taken over' by anything! Another 'explanation' is to say Paul was speaking about the law 'as a script, a mere piece of writing' – the letter (Rom. 2:29) – that is, this writing divorced from the Spirit, and this is what is old, obsolete, and valueless. But when Paul said: 'We have been delivered from the law, having died to what we were held by, so that we should serve in the newness of the Spirit and not in the oldness of the letter' (Rom. 7:6), he meant believers are delivered from *the law*, not a piece of writing read without the Spirit. Paul distinguished between the Spirit and the law, not between the Spirit and the letter, or between two opposing approaches to the law. The believer's spiritual life is maintained and ruled by the Holy Spirit *in contrast to* the rule of the law. See my *Christ* pp200-207, 478-480 for a closer examination of 'the letter'.

says that in order to be sanctified, the believer must be re-married to the law – though on easier terms! Calvin was wrong! And so are all who follow him on the law.

Conclusion

So, reader, who is your husband? You have one! Who is it? If you have never died to the law, then you are still married to it. You can never be married to Christ until you die to the law. And if you are never married to Christ, not only will you never live a holy life to the glory of God: you will perish. You must die to the law and be married to Christ. And the only way that can happen is that you repent of your sin and cry out to Christ to save you – to wash you from your sin in his precious blood, and to clothe you in his righteousness. Do this, and you will be united to Christ in marriage, united to Christ in a covenant that will never end.

Extracts with comments

First, let the Reformed have their say.

The wrong view of the marriage

John Calvin in his *Commentary*:

We must remember that Paul refers here only to that office of the law which was peculiar to the dispensation of Moses; for as far as God has in the ten commandments taught what is just and right, and given directions for guiding our life, no abrogation of the law is to be dreamt of; for the will of God must stand the same forever. We ought carefully to remember that this is not a release from the righteousness which is taught in the law, but from its rigid requirements, and from the curse which thence follows. The law, then, as a rule of life, is not abrogated; but what belongs to it as opposed to the liberty obtained through Christ, that is, as it requires absolute perfection: for as we render not this perfection, it binds us under the sentence of eternal death... The law is so far abrogated with regard to us, that we are not pressed down by its intolerable burden, and that its inexorable rigour does not overwhelm us with a curse.

I will let Douglas J.Moo respond to Calvin's view – 'delivered from the law insofar as it has power to condemn' which has

become 'virtually the "orthodox" view in Reformed theology'. Moo drew attention to Romans 5 – 8 where: 'Paul focuses not so much on the condemnation that comes when the law is disobeyed... as [overwhelmingly! – DG] on the failure of the law to deal with the problem of sin. [Linking] the inability of the law' (Rom. 8:3), the stimulation the law gives 'sin in the person who is "bound" to it' (Rom. 7:4-6), the law's production of sin (Rom. 7:5,8), and its making the sin-problem worse (Rom. 7:9-11,13), Moo went on:

This suggests [too weak – DG] that, as in Rom. 6:14, Paul in Rom. 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... In being released from the law... the believer is, naturally, freed from the condemning power of the law. But we introduce categories that are foreign to Paul – at least at this point – by distinguishing between the law in its condemning power and the law as a 'rule of life'.

Moo issued a necessary warning: From this verse we cannot conclude 'that the law can play no role at all in the life of the believer'.¹⁷ Quite. I, myself, have never said it. Rather, in all my works I keep saying the opposite! What is more, let us stop worrying about what the apostle *did not* say, and concentrate on what he *did* say. The believer has died to the law! *Died* to it! The law no longer rules him. What does *this* say about Calvin's third use of the law?

The Puritan, Samuel Bolton, was at best hesitant on Romans 7:1-3, which verses, he could only grudgingly admit, 'seem to speak'

¹⁷ Douglas J. Moo: *The Epistle to the Romans*, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 1996, pp414-416.

Who's Your Husband?

– seem to speak? They do speak! But let Bolton give his own account. These verses, he alleges:

Seem to speak of the abrogation of the law... That the apostle here speaks of the moral law is evident from the seventh verse [of Rom. 7]; and that believers are freed from it, see the sixth verse and others [Rom. 6:14; 8:2; 10:4, Gal. 3:19; 4:4-5; 5:18; 1 Tim. 1:8-10]. There seems, therefore, to be a great deal of strength in the Scripture to prove the abrogation of the law, that we are dead to the law, freed from the law, no more under the law.¹⁸

How weak, how grudging an admission is this! But grudging or not, it destroys Calvin's third use of the law – which Bolton wanted so much to defend.

John Bunyan took an inadequate view of the matter, an idiosyncratic view:

Once [these husbands]¹⁹ are become dead to you,²⁰ as they then most certainly will when you close with the Lord Jesus Christ, then I say, your former husbands have no more to meddle with you, you are freed from their law... The sum then of what has been said is this, the Christian now has nothing more to do with the law, as it thunders and burns on Sinai, or as it binds the conscience to wrath and displeasure of God for sin; for from its thus appearing, it is freed by faith in Christ. Yet it is to have regard thereto, and is to count it holy, just and good.²¹

Why not let Paul tell us what he told us – and leave it at that?

Thomas Boston:

¹⁸ Samuel Bolton: *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom*, The Banner of Truth Trust, London, 1964, pp52-53.

¹⁹ For some reason Bunyan introduced the plural to allow him to take his idiosyncratic view: the believer has died to his former husbands, namely, 'sin and... righteousness which is of the law'.

²⁰ Why not stick with the biblical expression? The believer has died to the law!

²¹ John Bunyan: *Of The Law and A Christian*, in *The Entire Works of John Bunyan*, edited by Henry Stebbing, John Hirst, London, 1862, p536.

Who's Your Husband?

If you have a saving interest in Christ's death, you are dead with him to the law also... (Gal. 2:19-20)... Our Lord Jesus took on our nature to satisfy the law therein; the whole course of his life was a course of obedience to it, for life and salvation to us; and he suffered, to satisfy it in what of that kind it had to demand, for that effect. In a word, he was born to the law, he lived to the law, and he died to the law; namely, for to clear accounts with it, to satisfy it fully and get life and salvation for us with its good leave. He was 'made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law' (Gal. 4:4-5). And when once it fell upon him, it never left exacting of him, till it had got the utmost farthing,²² and he was quite free with it, as dead to it (Rom. 7:4). In token whereof, he got up the bond, blotted it out, yes, rent it in pieces, nailing it to his cross (Col. 2:14). Now, Christ became dead to it, dying to it in his death on the cross: so that the holiness and righteousness of the man Christ did thereafter no more run in the channel in which it had run before, namely, from the womb to his grave – that is to say, it was no more, and shall be no more for ever, obedience performed to the law for life and salvation²³ – these having been completely gained and secured, by the obedience he gave it from the womb to the grave.

Christ died to the law, and the believer died to the law, says the Scriptures; the believer died with Christ to the law 'as a covenant of works', said Boston, but not as the rule of sanctification. In other words, in effect the believer has *not* died to it! Even so, Boston went on to argue, perfectly soundly: 'Your obedience will run in another channel than it did before your union with Christ, even in the channel of the gospel. You serve in newness of spirit, in faith and love'. Excellent. How strange then to read this from Boston: 'The frowns of a merciful Father will be a terror to you, to fright you from sin'. Boston offered no verse in support. Then he contradicted himself:

²² At the time, the smallest British coin. In the US, the equivalent would be the mill, 0.001 of a dollar.

²³ Note the gloss. If one is dead to the law, one is dead to it – not dead to it merely in certain respects and for certain purposes. Because of his theological system, Boston was limiting his otherwise excellent statement to justification – when, clearly, the scripture he quoted (Rom. 7:4) comes from a passage dealing with progressive sanctification.

Who's Your Husband?

Love and gratitude will prompt you to obedience... You will not continue to serve in the oldness of the letter, as before; at what [which?] time the law was the spring of all the obedience you performed... you being alive to the law, and dead to Christ (Rom. 7:6)... If by faith you wholly rely on Christ's righteousness, the holiness of his nature, the righteousness of his life, and his satisfaction for sin, how is it possible but [that] you must be dead to the law? for the law is not of faith (Gal. 3:12).²⁴

So which is it? Is the believer under the law or the gospel for sanctification? Is he moved to sanctification out of terror, or out of love and gratitude? Is he married to Christ or the law? He cannot be married to both!

The biblical view of the marriage

Colin G. Kruse:

This analogy [Rom. 7:1-6] and its application constitute one of the clearest expressions of Paul's [doctrine] that Christians (Jews as well as Gentiles) are completely freed from all obligations to the Mosaic law as a regulatory norm. Like a person who has died they have been discharged from all obligations to the law... Underlying this notion of freedom from the law is the assumption²⁵ that the period of the law has been brought to an end with the coming of Christ.²⁶

Moo:

²⁴ Thomas Boston: *The Beauties of Thomas Boston: A Selection of his Writings*, edited by Samuel M'Millan, Christian Focus Publications, Inverness, 1979, pp524-526.

²⁵ It is more than an 'assumption'. Paul has asserted it: 'But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it – the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe' (Rom. 3:21-22), for instance. See the vital 'but now', or, in the context, 'now', throughout the New Testament, in such passages as 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. This eschatological point is vital.

²⁶ Colin G. Kruse: *Paul, The Law and Justification*, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, Massachusetts, 1997, pp207-208.

Who's Your Husband?

Paul argues that a person's bondage to the law *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 enables one to enter a new relationship.²⁷

F.F.Bruce:

Death breaks the marriage bond – and death breaks a man's relation to the law. When Paul applies the analogy, we are conscious of a reversal of the situation; the believer in Christ is compared to the wife, and the law is compared to the husband, but whereas in the illustration it was the husband who died, in the application it is not the law that has died, but the believer; the believer has died with Christ – and yet it is still the believer who, no longer bound to the law, is free to be united with Christ. If, however, we put the matter in simpler terms, we can express Paul's meaning easily enough: as death breaks the bond between a husband and wife, so death – the believer's death-with-Christ – breaks the bond which formerly yoked him to the law, and now he is free to enter into union with Christ. His former association with the law did not help him produce the fruits of righteousness, but these fruits are produced in abundance now that he is united with Christ. Sin and death were the result of his association with the law; righteousness and life are the product of his new association; for (as Paul puts it elsewhere), 'the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life' (2 Cor. 3:6)... Such an attitude to the law must have seemed preposterous to many of [Paul's] readers then [adding, somewhat dryly], it has seemed preposterous to many of his readers since.²⁸

Edgar H.Andrews:

Paul's metaphor [of death] is uncompromising. The believer has not died partially to the law, for death is total. He has not died temporally to the law, for death is final. His relationship to the law has not undergone some subtle change; it has been terminated. The believer's subjection to the law, his obligation to

²⁷ Moo pp409,413-414, emphasis mine.

²⁸ F.F.Bruce: *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans...*, The Tyndale Press, London, 1963, pp144-145.

perform its requirements, has been swept away, 'through the body of Christ'. What does this mean? It means two things. First, the believer is freed from the law through the perfect obedience that Christ yielded to the law during his earthly life. Secondly, he is delivered from the punishment for his law-breaking through the death of Christ on his behalf. Thus the law can no longer make any demands upon the believer, either in respect of obedience, or in respect of punishment for transgression. Those demands have been fully and finally met by the man Christ Jesus. Is the believer, then, without law? Not at all. We are not 'without law towards God, but under law towards Christ' (1 Cor. 9:21). The context in which Paul makes this statement makes [it]... clear... that the 'law towards Christ', to which Paul did submit, was something other than the law of Moses.

Andrews went on to quote James Denney:

When the apostle tells us that through the law he has died to the law (Gal. 2:19), or that we have died to the law through the body of Christ (Rom. 7:4), or that we are not under law but under grace (Rom. 6:14)... he means that nothing in the Christian life is explained by anything statutory, and that everything in it is explained by the inspiring power of that death in which Christ made all our responsibilities to the law his own.²⁹

John Murray:

What is this law?... The law... is surely the written law of the Old Testament, particularly the Mosaic law. Paul uses 'law' in this sense (Rom. 3:19; 5:13; 1 Cor. 9:8-9; 14:21; Gal. 3:10,19) and there is no need to look for any other denotation [such as the 'ceremonial' law – DG] here... The law binds a man as long as he lives, and the implication [better, Paul's teaching – DG] is that when he dies that dominion is dissolved... The writing [in Rom. 7:6] may refer to the two tables of stone on which the ten commandments were written or to the fact of the law as contained in Scripture.³⁰

²⁹ Edgar H. Andrews *Free in Christ: The Message of Galatians*, Evangelical Press, Darlington, 1996, pp89,114.

³⁰ John Murray: *The Epistle to the Romans...*, Two Volumes in One, Marshall Morgan and Scott, London, 1974, Vol.1 pp240,246.

Who's Your Husband?

J.C.Philpot:

The first husband is the law, and the second husband is Christ... Which is to be the rule of the wife's conduct when [she is] re-married; the regulations of the first or of the second husband?... When he [the first husband] is dead, have not all his rules and regulations [over her] died with him? And is his wife not entirely liberated from his control? If he is dead to her, she is equally dead to him. All his authority over her has ceased. And what should we think... of a wife who, instead of seeking to please her present husband, was always referring to the rules and regulations of her former partner...?

Philpot graphically contrasted the two husbands – the law and Christ. The first was:

...extremely harsh, [having] ruled [the woman] as with a rod of iron, always keeping her in bondage and terror... a cruel tyrant... Her second husband [is] a most affectionate and loving spouse... Is not the rule of love, as the rule of the second marriage, in every respect superior to the rule of command, which was the rule of the first?... The apostle has so clearly and beautifully opened up the subject... in Rom. 7:1-4... [that] I wish that you might read this portion... in the light of the Spirit, and then you would see how thoroughly dead the believer is to the law, both as a covenant and a rule, by virtue of his union to [Christ].³¹

William Gadsby:

If any poor sinner, who has felt the authority of the law in his conscience and has been condemned by it, and who knows by experience that the letter kills, that the law works wrath, who has been led by the Spirit to the fountain open for sin and uncleanness, and has had the blood of sprinkling applied to his guilty conscience, and thereby has been brought to rejoice in Christ Jesus, knows that his sins are forgiven, and his iniquities blotted out; who has entered into Christ as his rest, and has been enabled by the Spirit to drink of the water of life, and has felt the

³¹ J.C.Philpot: Three letters to 'a minister in Scotland' under Romans 7:4, *The Gospel Standard*, February 1, March 1 and May 1, 1861, pp92-93; republished as: *Dead to the Law: A Series of Letters on the Believer's relationship to the Law*, The Huntingtonian Press, Southampton, March 2000, pp22-23.

Who's Your Husband?

precious bond of love, which has united Christ as his head and him together, cast out fear, and helped him to say with the inspired apostle: 'I, through the law, am dead to the law, that I might live unto God: I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ lives in me' (Gal. 2:19-20); and again: 'But now we are delivered from the law, that being dead wherein we were held, that we should serve in newness of spirit, and not in the oldness of the letter' (Rom. 7:6); I say, should any of this class venture to prove that the believer is dead to Moses, his first husband, and married to Christ; that he is ruled by the precious laws [*sic*] of Christ, his second husband, and thereby vindicate the honour of his dear head, who has redeemed him, and saved him, and made him free; the best character that [legal critics]... can give such a man, is a 'pulpit libertine'...

I am inclined to think that if any woman who has married a second husband were to be told that she must be under her first husband's laws, both she and her husband would treat such an assertion with contempt.³²

Striking the right note on Romans 7:4-6, Gordon D.Fee:

In keeping with the argument of Gal. 5:13-24, both the law and the flesh belong to the past, on the pre-Christ, pre-Spirit side of eschatological realities. The death of Christ and the gift of the Spirit have ended *torah* observance. [To say] that 'the law' to which believers have died is merely 'the law's condemnation'... is to miss the eschatological and covenantal character of much of this language as well as to read into the text something neither Paul says nor implies.³³

D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones on Romans 7:6: "We have been delivered from the law". This is a very strong word... Some translate it as "discharged", "set at liberty", "set free". We are no longer under the law; we have had a complete discharge from it'. Speaking of every believer, Lloyd-Jones continued, the law 'has no authority over him any longer; he has finished with' it. The question is, of

³² William Gadsby: *The Works of the Late Mr William Gadsby, Manchester, in Two Volumes*, Vol.1, London, 1851, the 1870 edition, p6-7, 19.

³³ Gordon D.Fee: *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul*, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, Massachusetts, 1994, p504. Just so! Did he have anybody in mind, do you think?

course, 'in what sense has the Christian been delivered from the law?' First of all, 'the law which held us could not justify us, as we were told back in [Rom. 3:20]. We are freed from that'. So far, so good; all are agreed. Then, and of the utmost significance, he took up the issue over which the Reformed clash with Scripture:

But the point about which the apostle is most concerned here is that we are delivered from the inability of the law to sanctify us. While we were under the law we could never be sanctified. The law can no more sanctify us than it can justify us. While we were held there we could not be joined to the one who can sanctify us as well as justify us. We had no freedom; but now we have been delivered. Now there is the possibility of sanctification. If I can get out of the clutches, as it were, of that first husband, and be joined to another, there is hope for me. There was no hope while I was under the law; but now I am set free. I am delivered from my inability to experience sanctification. This what the apostle is particularly concerned to emphasise.

I break off. Lloyd Jones then had a most intriguing passage: 'But [Paul was] concerned also to emphasise something further... namely, the work of the law in aggravating and inflaming our sins'. 'The law of God always leads to death... the law of God leads to sin; it aggravates it, it inflames [it]... it always produces death'. But, as he said earlier: 'We have been set free from this tendency of the law to aggravate our problem... we have now been delivered from the law'.³⁴

³⁴ D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones: *Romans: An Exposition of Chapters 7:1 – 8:4. The Law: Its Function and Limits*, The Banner of Truth Trust, Edinburgh, 1973, pp85-87,287-294. Note Lloyd-Jones' use of 'our' – 'the work of the law in aggravating and inflaming our sins'. Was he being a little lax here – or was he being precise? Rom. 7:5,7-11 does not refer to the regenerate. Paul, there, was speaking of his pre-regenerate days. The law did not produce sin in him; no, it is good and spiritual (Rom. 7:13-16). But sin used the law to arouse sinful desire in him. It was sin – not the law – which was the cause of the trouble. See Kruse p212. But did Lloyd-Jones deliberately use 'our' – speaking of believers? If so, then in one stroke he has obliterated Calvin's third use of the law. The law produces holiness in the believer (Calvin). The law

Moo:

The antithesis is not between the *misunderstanding* or *misuse* of the law and the Spirit, nor even, at least basically, between the outer demand and the inner disposition to obey, but between the old covenant and the new, the old age and the new... The believer, released from bondage to the law, can [better, will] serve in the new condition created by God's Spirit, a condition that brings life (2 Cor. 3:6) and fruit pleasing to God (Rom. 6:22-23).³⁵

Lloyd-Jones:

Let me put it plainly and clearly. The apostle teaches here that it was essential we should be married to [Christ]; because until we are married to him we shall never bear this fruit. We were married to the law, but the law was impotent; it could not bring forth children (fruit) out of us. But we are now married to one who has the strength and the virility and the potency to produce children even out of us. It is his strength that matters... Here is the real purpose of the marriage; we need one whose seed is so powerful, who can so impregnate us with his own holy nature that he will produce holiness even in us. That is why we are married to him, in order that 'we should bring forth fruit unto God'. His strength is so great, his might is so potent, that even out of us he can bear this progeny of holiness... This therefore is the apostle's argument. He says in effect: You had to be delivered from your marriage to the law before you could produce this fruit. You had to die to that law, that old marriage had to be dissolved, in order that you might be married to this mighty one who can produce the fruit in you. And he says it has happened. The central object of salvation is holiness. I would not hesitate to assert that it is sinful to say that you can stop at justification even temporarily, or say that a man can be justified and not sanctified. It is impossible... You cannot stop at justification... The whole object, the whole movement of salvation is to make us holy. So from the moment we are joined

arouses sin in the believer (Lloyd-Jones)! In any case, let us not forget what Lloyd-Jones said in the previous paragraph: 'We are delivered from the inability of the law to sanctify us. While we were under the law we could never be sanctified'. If that does not sound the death knell for the Reformer's third use of the law, what does?

³⁵ Moo pp421-422, emphasis mine.

Who's Your Husband?

to him the process begins. From the moment of the marriage and the union... his power begins to work... and... we are already bringing forth something of this fruit, which is 'holiness unto God'.³⁶

³⁶ Lloyd-Jones pp66-67.

