

New-Covenant Theology: New Kid on the Block?

You must have heard something like this:

New-covenant theology? Must be wrong! It was only dreamed up in the 1970s, wasn't it? Doesn't that make it the latest in the line of Mormons, Seventh Day Adventists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and all the other hare-brained schemes? Steer well clear of it!

This is the kind of cheap jibe that new-covenant men and women have come to expect from the Reformed. And, speaking for myself, I have no difficulty living with it. I say this because I want to make it clear that I am not writing out of anguish, desperately trying to defend myself. Nor am I, strictly speaking, trying to persuade dyed-in-the-wool covenant theologians. The truth is, I fear they are so locked in their system that it will take something far more potent than this little article to shake them out of their complacency. No! I don't have the 'professional' covenant theologians in mind at this time.

Rather, I am concerned with – and concerned for! – the growing number of believers who know that something is wrong in their spiritual experience, something is wrong in today's churches, and have come to understand that covenant theology bears some responsibility for it. I want to help those believers who are suffering under a sense of bondage because they are being taught by men who insist on the law as the perfect rule of life for progressive sanctification. Some – perhaps many – of these believers would like to break free. And they are seriously attracted by what they know of new-covenant theology. They like its scriptural ring. But they are fearful. When they hear Reformed taunts and sneers – such as those above – they are afraid to commit themselves to a course which is so obviously wrong because it's so novel. After all, if nobody thought of new-covenant theology for two thousand years...

These are the very people I wish to help. To that end, I am going to respond to the jibe under three headings:

1. New-covenant theology is all so new! So what?
2. New-covenant theology is all so new! At best those who say this are showing a crass ignorance of history. If not, they are deliberately perpetrating a lie.¹
3. New-covenant theology is all so new! Such an accusation, even if it were true – which it is not! – misses the point. What is the real issue?

1. So what?

I wonder how many times the jibe has been used in the past? Did the Papists taunt Martin Luther, Ulrich Zwingli and John Calvin with it? What was the answer then? And what's the answer now? 'Where was your face before you washed it?'

Incidentally, when was covenant theology invented?² And how did its inventors cope with the jibe?

2. It's a lie

New-covenant theology did not begin last week! Have the Reformed never heard of the early Plymouth Brethren and the Gospel Standard Strict Baptists of the mid 19th century? Never heard of the so-called antinomians in both New and Old England in the 17th century? Never heard of the 16th century Anabaptists – some of whom pre-dated Calvin? Never heard of the early

¹ Do not miss the fact that just in case this jibe fails to stick, covenant theologians also accuse new-covenant people of repeating the antinomianism of past centuries – thereby showing that they know that new-covenant theology is not the Johnny-come-lately they make it out to be!

² Although Johann Heinrich Bullinger (1504-1575) was probably the first to publish a work containing the concept of federal salvation, Kaspar Olevianus (1536-1587) was its inventor, in Germany, when he and Zacharias Ursinus (1534-1583) drafted the final version of the Heidelberg Catechism (1562). William Ames (1576-1633) was the leading British exponent of covenant theology, which dominated the Westminster Confession of the Presbyterians (1643-1646) and the Savoy Declaration of the Independents (1661).

Fathers, particularly of the 2nd century? I refer, of course, to the writings of such men on the place of the law in the life of the individual believer, and the proper use of the old covenant in the life of the *ekklēsia*.³ As I say, if the Reformed haven't heard of such men and their works, then they are simply displaying their ignorance. And if they have heard of them, then, by making the jibe, they are showing their malice and worse. Indeed, they are breaking the 9th commandment.

Let me remind you of the sort of thing the early Brethren, the Gospel Standard Strict Baptists, the Antinomians, the Anabaptists and the early Fathers wrote about the law, and show you that new-covenant theology is anything but the new kid on the block. Indeed, new-covenant theology is far older than covenant theology! Let me prove it.

Just to say that in these extracts, I am not dotting every 'i' or crossing every 't'. Nor am I saying that this is all such men wrote about the old covenant and the law. No! But they did write this! And I am merely demonstrating that these men could well be described as 'new-covenant theologians', long before the term had been invented. In other words, new-covenant theology, as such, was not invented in the 1970s. What matters is not the terminology, but the principle.

The early Brethren

Let J.L.Harris speak for them:

The believer is not... without law to God, but that rule [the law] that subsisted between the Lord and the servant [does] not apply to this new relationship... Many a Christian... [however] does not stand fast in that liberty wherewith Christ has made him free: 'For you are all children of God by faith of Jesus Christ'. And, not rejoicing in the liberty of sonship, they [do not] see... their calling to be to walk as 'obedient children, not fashioning themselves according to their former lusts in their ignorance, but as he who has called them is holy, so are they to be holy in all manner of conversation'. They still look to the law [of Moses] as their rule, and 'receive the spirit of bondage again to fear', questioning... the extent of the obedience

³ Alas, later Fathers went back to the old covenant and imposed it on both individual believers and the *ekklēsia*, with disastrous consequences. See my *Pastor*.

required, instead of returning the answer of a willing heart unto a loving Father. The law deals in formal enactments, but the Spirit, who is liberty, [deals] more in the application of some great and acknowledged principles. What law could accurately define the measure and quality of the obedience of a child to a parent?

Again:

[The believer's] liberty makes him not lawless to God... It is indeed blessed liberty into which we are called as children of God, but it is a high and holy responsibility. 'Be therefore followers (imitators) of God *as* [emphasis mine] *dear children* [emphasis his], and walk in love'. The perfectness of the Father's love is the only standard proposed to the children: 'Be... perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect'. Just in proportion as the relationship is raised in dignity from that of a servant to that of a son, so is the standard of obedience raised also. The law might tend to tutor the flesh, but the Spirit alone [can] serve God. 'If you are led of the Spirit you are not under the law', and this applies to the law as a rule of life; for... this passage is not concerning justification, but Christian conduct: 'This I say then: Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfil the lusts of the flesh'... Jesus... [was] made under the law, meeting every one of God's requirements, even fulfilling all righteousness... He had the right and title to have entered into life, because he had kept the commandments... Freedom from the yoke of bondage is not that we may be without law to God, but that we may be obedient children... The consideration of the remainder of the apostle's statement, as to a Christian being 'under law to Christ', will most plainly prove that he is in no sense whatever under *the* [emphasis his] law. 'The law is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for unholy and profane'.⁴

Commenting on 1 Timothy 1:8, Harris observed:

[The law] may be used lawfully as the expression of God's mind with respect to a variety of actions. It may be used lawfully too as exhibiting any great principle of divine conduct; as such the apostle uses it, when insisting on children obeying their parents in the Lord, where he shows that there was in the law an express promise to obedient children. So again he uses it lawfully when he presents it as the general expression of the Divine mind, that labour is entitled to support [1 Cor. 9:8-9]... If we [do not use it in this way] we deprive ourselves of the benefit of God's own expressed mind on a great

⁴ J.L.Harris: *Christian Witness*, Plymouth, January 1835, pp39-41.

variety of subjects, and therefore of that wisdom which comes from above. But fully allowing all this, I would assert that the believer who proposed to himself the law for his rule would constantly be walking disorderly as a disciple of Christ. It was given by Moses for a specific purpose... 'It made nothing perfect'... We are under law to Christ, not to Moses.⁵

Harris again:

Let it ever be borne in mind, that because we are called to liberty, even the liberty of sons, because we are already made the household of God, and have our mansions prepared in it, that the Lord Jesus as head over that house, claims our allegiance to him. It is because we belong to heaven that he exercises this authority over us, in order that we may walk worthy of our high and holy calling. It is because we are sons, and if sons then heirs, heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, that the Son who has made us free, shows us how to use that freedom in service to the Father.⁶

Thus it is clear that in the second quarter of the 19th century, the early Brethren were speaking in terms consistent with what we now know as 'new-covenant theology'.

The Gospel Standard Strict Baptists

William Gadsby (1773-1844) responded to Andrew Fuller (who had used the name 'Gaius' in a work advocating the law as the believer's rule of sanctification. Gadsby knew he had to answer the charge that he (Gadsby) was decrying the ten commandments. This he did. More, he took that charge back to where it really belonged; namely, to Fuller (Gaius) himself, and all like him:

Who objects to the perfection of the ten commandments? I know no one who does except Gaius, and men like him. I believe the law to be holy, and the commandment holy, just, and good, a perfect transcript of the perfections of God; and it stands as a perfect rule of life *to all that are under it* [emphasis mine], and that too in its primitive purity, *without any alteration whatever* [emphasis mine]. Surely Gaius has forgotten himself. It is *he* [Gadsby's emphasis] that objects to its perfection, for he tells us, 'that as a covenant, it is dead to the believer'.

⁵ Harris pp41-42.

⁶ Harris p46.

I pause. Gaius [Fuller] was badly adrift here in more than one way. The Bible never says the law has died; it is the believer who has died to the law (Rom. 7:4-6; Gal. 2:19). To let Gadsby go on:

Now, if the law was originally a perfect rule, how comes it to pass that it must undergo so painful an operation as death to constitute it a rule? If this is not treating the law with contempt, it will be difficult to know what is... To say that the condemning power of the law is taken away, so that, though the believer cannot keep it, it does not condemn him, positively robs the law of its authority and perfection... For what is a law without power to inflict punishment on transgressors? If this is not making void the law, what is? for I read of no penalty annexed to the law of works, but that of a curse.⁷

Listen to Gadsby again, this time exposing the futility of trying to distinguish between the law as a covenant and the law as a rule: In the Sermon on the Mount, he said:

[It] is beyond a doubt... the Lord points out the authority of the law. [First] to convince his disciples of their impossibility of keeping it; but in all that he says upon the subject, he never once mentions any difference between the law as a covenant of works and a rule of conduct, but speaks of it in its fullest sense... therefore evident it is, that such men, who preach the law as a rule of conduct to believers, are the men who break the commandments, and teach men so, by saying it is dead as a covenant, and that its condemning power is taken away; which is as much as to say, the law is your perfect rule of conduct, but if you fall short of obedience, it has no power to hurt you. If this be not sporting with the law, I am at a loss to know what is... Who is it that deprecates the law – the man that, by a precious faith in Jesus Christ, gives it its full demand, and so establishes it; or the man that first kills it, and then takes it for a perfect rule of conduct, and gives it but a partial obedience at best? The latter must be the man that deprecates the law.⁸

⁷ Gadsby pp7-8,12. I am referring to *The Works of the Late Mr William Gadsby, Manchester, in Two Volumes*, Vol.1, London, 1851, the 1870 edition. On the numbering of the pages in Gadsby, note that after the Preface, there is *A Memoir* with page numbers 7-144. Then follows a Preface followed by the *Works* with page numbers 5-315. I have cited this volume as Gadsby with page numbers, but not indicated the section.

⁸ Gadsby p16.

Gaius (Fuller) had asked: ‘Are believers at liberty to profane the sabbath?’ By raising the issue of the sabbath, Fuller, no doubt, had thought he had floored his opponents. The Reformed constantly refer to the sabbath today. It seems to be the touchstone of orthodoxy – and more! But, in fact, Fuller had bitten off more than he could chew! Gadsby was rightly scornful in reply. He pointed out that in the fourth command, God demands the keeping of the *seventh* day. He asked:

Now, are we at liberty to work on the *seventh* day, and set apart the *first* day for worship, and yet the law remain a perfect rule of conduct? Does the law allow us to reverse its commands, so that when it says *the seventh* is the sabbath, and *in it* you shall *not* work, are we to understand by such terms, that the seventh is *not* the sabbath, and in it we *are* to work? If the law, as a perfect rule of conduct, allows us liberty to reverse its commands, it follows that when it says [we are not to kill, steal and bear false witness]... that we *are* at liberty to kill, steal and bear false witness... Does it not appear that those men who enforce the law of works as a perfect rule of conduct to believers, while they can reverse the fourth command, open a wide door for all ungodliness? I wonder how Gaius could ask the above question, and not blush at the same time, seeing he is the man that thinks we *are* at liberty to profane the sabbath!⁹

Gadsby again:

The apostle says, as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse, and this is the ceremonial law, think you? Surely not; for that preached Jesus [in shadows]. The curse, or the sentence of death, is in the law of works. A man must do violence to his own understanding before he can think this is the ceremonial law.¹⁰

Once again, as we can see, 19th century men spoke in clear new-covenant terms.

Let us go back another 200 years.

The Antinomians

I take Tobias Crisp (1600-1643) as typical. Crisp drew attention to the outcome of the teaching of law men:

⁹ Gadsby pp12-13, emphasis his.

¹⁰ Gadsby p69.

You will observe, where such legal observances are required to application of justification,¹¹ there is an hundred times more poring on such qualifications, than on Christ and his free grace; the thoughts, cares and passions are infinitely more racked and intense about *them*, than *him*; *their* absence, or presence, work more strongly by far on the spirit and affections, than *his* presence, or *his* absence; Christ in a manner is forgotten and neglected in comparison of *them*; almost all comfort, and all peace, stand upon *their* presence.¹²

How relevant all this is today. Reformed teachers can be strident in their demands for a law work before coming to Christ – even before preaching Christ! They should listen to men like Crisp and not ostracise him. Sinners ought to be made to look, not to themselves in any way, not to the law, but to look to Christ – and to do so at once and for everything.

Crisp:

This desperate shelf [reef] of preaching a different doctrine to the apostle's, which will swallow up all such [sinners?'] mercilessly; and let us choose rather to lie under the heavy censure of men, with the apostle himself, than to lie under his curse, by giving the freeness of grace its own due dimensions, without stinting it to the pleasure of men, for fear of a licentious abuse of it. In Paul's time, men were apt to wrest and abuse free grace to libertinism, as now, yet he feared not to impart to them to the full the good pleasure of Christ for all that. Some while they are busy with the whip to keep off dogs, fetch blood at the hearts of children with their ceaseless cautions, and then rejoice to see them in their spiritual afflictions, which I think is an inhuman cruelty. Some say men grow very presumptuous by such liberty preached... I grant that we ought not to preach continuance in sin that grace may abound, which cannot be truly inferred from this doctrine; for there is a vast difference between Christ's showing grace [to sinners] in the worst condition, and an allowing of men to wallow in sin still.

Again:

¹¹ That is, *in Crisp's terms*, before a sinner may trust Christ. The biblical position is that the sinner's coming to Christ is an application *for* justification, not *of* it.

¹² For the sad experience of both Richard Baxter and Jonathan Edwards, see my article 'Legal Assurance' (the eDocs link on David H J Gay sermonaudio.com).

Beware of men that come in sheep's clothing, pretending to lay a sure foundation by laying it deep... while indeed they are ravenous wolves, tearing and racking poor souls, frightening and torturing poor consciences about the matter of justification. I speak not against the utmost discovery [making plain] of the sinfulness of sin, to make it odious to men, but [I do speak against it] for requisites, and I know not what qualifications (besides faith in Christ alone) to justification.¹³

Again:

To be called a libertine is the most glorious title under heaven; take it for one that is truly free by Christ. To be made free by Christ, in proper construction, is no other but this, to be made a libertine by Christ; I do not say, to be made a libertine in the corrupt sense of it, but to be one in the true and proper sense of it. It is true, indeed, that Christ does not give liberty unto licentiousness of life and conversation... A licentious liberty is nothing else but this... when men turn the grace of God into wantonness, and abusing the gospel of Christ, continue in sin that grace might abound... Christ who has redeemed from sin and wrath has also redeemed from a vain conversation... All that have this freedom purchased by Christ for them have also the power of God in them, which keeps them [so] that they break not out licentiously.¹⁴

Again:

The end of that free love of God, in giving salvation, or the inseparable fruit which follows from this grace [is] it teaches to deny ungodliness... Wheresoever the grace of God brings salvation, it is not bestowed in vain, but inclines the heart to new obedience, and makes him fruitful in his life, in all well-pleasingness... You must understand in what sense good works... are necessary attendants on free grace; necessary they are... consequently... They necessarily follow the free grace of Christ, in that God in Christ has engaged himself to establish and set up obedience in the heart and life of such on whom he entails salvation by grace, as appears in Isaiah 35, 40, 41 and Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 20. Now where God himself has inseparably joined salvation and a holy life, and has promised the one as well as the other, they must of necessity go together; for what

¹³ Tobias Crisp: *Christ Alone Exalted*, Old Paths Gospel Press, Choteau, Vol.4 pp226-228,230-232, emphasis mine.

¹⁴ Crisp Vol.1 pp122-123.

God has joined together, who can separate? No man can disjoin what [God] has united.¹⁵

Again:

And now, if any persons [reading this] have an evil opinion of the grace of God, as a thing of dangerous consequence, as a licentious doctrine, let them learn... to mend their minds, and correct their judgements, knowing that the Holy Spirit is of another mind: that the revealing of the grace of God is the best way to take men off from sin; so far is it from letting loose the reins to break out into all manner of sinfulness.¹⁶

Thus we discover that new-covenant theology was alive and well in the mid 17th century.¹⁷ New kid on the block?

We can go back even further – to the 16th century.

The Anabaptists

Take Balthasar Hubmaier (1480?-1520):

Believed forgiveness of sins is the true gospel which cannot be without the Spirit of God, for the Spirit of God makes the word [of God] alive. Faith is a work of God (John 6:29). For by faith the law of sin and of death becomes a law of the Spirit (Rom. 8:2). For what was impossible to the law, God has fulfilled through Jesus Christ so that the righteousness demanded by the law might be fulfilled in us who now walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.¹⁸

Hans Denck (c1495-1527):

¹⁵ Crisp Vol.4 pp124-127.

¹⁶ Crisp Vol.3 pp186-187.

¹⁷ For more from Crisp, and other men, see my *Four*; ‘Preparationism in New England’ (the eDocs link on David H J Gay sermonaudio.com; christmycovenant.com).

¹⁸ Balthasar Hubmaier: ‘On the Christian Baptism of Believers’, in *Balthasar Hubmaier: Theologian of Anabaptism*, translated and edited by H.Wayne Pipkin and John H.Yoder, Herald Press, Scottdale, 1989, p106. Taken from W.R.Estep: ‘Law and Gospel in the Anabaptist/Baptist Tradition’, in *Grace Theological Journal*, 1991, pp189-214 (taken from biblicalstudies.org.uk).

Whoever has received the new covenant of God, that is, in whose heart the law was written through the Holy Spirit, is truly righteous. Whoever supposes he will accomplish keeping the law through the book, ascribes to the dead letter what belongs to the living Spirit.¹⁹

Sebastian Franck (1499-c1543) complained of:

Wolves, the doctors of unwisdom, apes of the apostles, and antichrists [who] mix the New Testament [covenant] with the Old [covenant]... and from it prove [the legitimacy of]... [the] power of magistracy... [the] priesthood; and praise everything and ascribe this all forcibly to Christ... And just as the popes have derived all this from it, so also many of those who would have themselves called evangelicals hold that they have nobly escaped the snare of the pope and the devil, and have nevertheless achieved... nothing more than that they have exchanged and confounded the priesthood of the pope with the Mosaic kingdom... If [that is, since] the priesthood cannot be re-established out of the old law, neither can [Christian] government... be established according to the law of Moses.

In all this, Franck listed the sabbath along with circumcision, kingship, temple and sacrifices, as old-covenant externals and shadows fulfilled and rendered obsolete by Christ.²⁰

Dietrich Philips (c1560): ‘True ministers... rightly divide the word of God between the Old and New Testaments [covenants], between the letter and the Spirit’. Philips was scathing about the use of Mosaic laws to ‘exercise dominion over the consciences of men’. Taking up Deuteronomy 13:5, ‘that God through Moses commanded that the false prophets be put to death’, he pointed out the obvious:

If, according to the Old Testament [covenant] command, false prophets were to be put to death [today – as of course they were in

¹⁹ Hans Denck: ‘Concerning the Law of God’, in *The Spiritual Legacy of Hans Denck*, translated by Clarence Bauman, p145. Taken from W.R.Estep: ‘Law and Gospel in the Anabaptist/Baptist Tradition’, in *Grace Theological Journal*, 1991, pp189-214 (which may be found on biblicalstudies.org.uk).

²⁰ Sebastian Franck: *A Letter to John Campanus (1531)*, in *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers: Documents Illustrative of the Radical Reformation*, edited by George Huntston Williams, SCM Press Ltd., London, 1957, pp151-152.

Philips' days, by Romanists and Reformers, who both were masters at applying the old covenant to the church!], then... likewise the higher powers would be obliged to put to death not only the false prophets but also all image worshippers, and those who serve idols, and who counsel other people to commit sacrilege (Ex. 22:18), and all adulterers, and all who blaspheme the name of the Lord, and who swear falsely by that name, all who curse father and mother, and profane the sabbath (Ex. 20:7; Deut. 27:16); for they are all alike condemned to death by the law as well as the false prophets are... God through Moses had commanded to kill the false prophets; that is a command of the Old and not the New Testament [covenant]... In all false and anti-Christian congregations these [following] things are not found: namely, no real new birth; no real distinction between law and gospel, that brings forth fruit, and by which people truly repent and are converted from unrighteousness unto the living God (Matt. 3:8; Luke 3:8); no true knowledge of the eternal and only God, who is life eternal, the fullness of wisdom and of righteousness, that is manifested by the keeping of the commandments of God (John 17:3...); no true confession of the pure, holy and spotless humility; no scriptural baptism or Lord's supper; no Christian washing of the feet of saints (John 13:5-17) in the quietness of true humility; no key to the kingdom of heaven; no evangelical ban or separation [that is, church discipline]; no shunning of the temples of idolatry nor false worship; no unfeigned brotherly love; no God-fearing life nor keeping of the commands of Christ; no persecution for righteousness' sake. All these ordinances and evidences of true Christianity are found in no anti-Christian congregations in correct form, but everywhere the reverse and opposite.

Yet the fact is, 'all things have become new through Jesus Christ (Rom. 7:6); the oldness of the letter and of the flesh has passed away, and the upright new being of the Spirit has been ushered in by Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 5:17)'.²¹

The Anabaptist Waterland Confession of 1580, the second Mennonite (Anabaptist) Confession:

The intolerable burden of the Mosaic law with all its shadows and types was brought to an end in Christ and removed from the midst of

²¹ Dietrich Philips: *The Church of God* (c.1560), in *Spiritual and Anabaptist Writers: Documents Illustrative of the Radical Reformation*, edited by George Huntston Williams, SCM Press Ltd., London, 1957, pp235-237,240-243,253-256.

his people... A man... regenerated and justified by God through Christ, lives through love (which is poured out into his heart through the Holy Spirit) with joy and gladness, in all good works, according to the law and precepts and customs enjoined on him by God through Christ.²²

So much for the 16th century. New-covenant theology the new kid on the block?

And now let us go to the start of the 2nd century.

The early Fathers

Take Justin Martyr (AD110-165), who wrote to the Jew, Trypho. From Justin's *Dialogue*, chapter 11, I quote the passage dealing with 'The Law Abrogated; the New Testament [Covenant] Promised and Given by God':

We do not trust through Moses or through the law; for then we would do the same as yourselves [that is, the Jews]. But now – for I have read that there shall be a final law, and a covenant, the chiefest of all, which it is now incumbent on all men to observe, as many as are seeking after the inheritance of God. For the law promulgated on Horeb is now old, and belongs to yourselves [the Jews] alone; but this [final law, the new covenant] is for all universally [that is, Jews and Gentiles]. Now, law placed against law has abrogated that which is before it, and a covenant which comes after in like manner has put an end to the previous one; and an eternal and final law – namely, Christ – has been given to us, and the covenant is trustworthy, after which there shall be no law, no commandment, no ordinance. Have you not read this which Isaiah says: 'Hearken unto me, hearken unto me, my people; and, you kings, give ear unto me: for a law shall go forth from me, and my judgment shall be for a light to the nations. My righteousness approaches swiftly, and my salvation shall go forth, and nations shall trust in mine arm' (Isa. 51:4-5)? And by Jeremiah, concerning this same new covenant, he thus speaks: 'Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah; not according to the covenant which I made with their fathers, in the day that I took them by the hand, to bring them out of the land of Egypt' (Jer. 31:31-32). If, therefore, God proclaimed a new covenant which was to be instituted, and this for a light of the nations, we see and are

²² William L. Lumpkin: *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, Judson Press, Valley Forge, revised edition 1969, pp41-43,49,57.

persuaded that men approach God, leaving their idols and other unrighteousness, through the name of him who was crucified, Jesus Christ, and abide by their confession even unto death, and maintain piety. Moreover, by the works and by the attendant miracles, it is possible for all to understand that he [Christ himself] is the new law, and the new covenant, and the expectation of those who out of every people wait for the good things of God. For the true spiritual Israel, and descendants of Judah, Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham (who in uncircumcision was approved of and blessed by God on account of his faith, and called the father of many nations), are we who have been led to God through this crucified Christ, as shall be demonstrated while we proceed.

And then chapter 34:

For where it is said: 'The law of the Lord is perfect', you do not understand it of the law which was to be after Moses [that is, Christ's law], but of the law which was given by Moses, although God declared that he would establish a new law and a new covenant.

Irenaeus (AD120-202), *Against Heresies*, Book 4, chapter 4:

Since, then, the law originated with Moses, it terminated with John as a necessary consequence. Christ had come to fulfil it: wherefore 'the law and the prophets were' with them 'until John'. And therefore Jerusalem, taking its commencement from David, and fulfilling its own times, must have an end of legislation when the new covenant was revealed.

Again, Book 4, chapter 12:

But that this is the first and greatest commandment, and that the next [has respect to love] towards our neighbour, the Lord has taught, when he says that the entire law and the prophets hang upon these two commandments. Moreover, he did not himself bring down [from heaven] any other commandment greater than this one, but renewed this very same one to his disciples, when he enjoined them to love God with all their heart, and others as themselves. But if he had descended from another Father, he never would have made use of the first and greatest commandment of the law; but he would undoubtedly have endeavoured by all means to bring down a greater one than this from the perfect Father, so as not to make use of that which had been given by the God of the law. And Paul in like manner declares: 'Love is the fulfilling of the law' (Rom. 13:10) and [he declares] that when all other things have been destroyed, there shall remain 'faith, hope, and love; but the greatest of all is love' (1

Cor. 13:13) and that apart from the love of God, neither knowledge avails anything (1 Cor. 13:2) nor the understanding of mysteries, nor faith, nor prophecy, but that without love all are hollow and vain; moreover, that love makes man perfect; and that he who loves God is perfect, both in this world and in that which is to come. For we do never cease from loving God; but in proportion as we continue to contemplate him, so much the more do we love him.

As in the law, therefore, and in the gospel [likewise], the first and greatest commandment is, to love the Lord God with the whole heart, and then there follows a commandment like to it, to love one's neighbour as one's self; the author of the law and the gospel is shown to be one and the same. For the precepts of an absolutely perfect life, since they are the same in each testament [covenant], have pointed out [to us] the same God, who certainly has promulgated particular laws adapted for each; but the more prominent and the greatest [commandments], without which salvation cannot [be attained], he has exhorted [us to observe] the same in both.

Again, Book 4, chapter 13:

[Christ] did not teach us these things as being opposed to the law, but as fulfilling the law, and implanting in us the varied righteousness of the law. That would have been contrary to the law, if he had commanded his disciples to do anything which the law had prohibited. But this which he did command – namely, not only to abstain from things forbidden by the law, but even from longing after them – is not contrary to [the law], as I have remarked, neither is it the utterance of one destroying the law, but of one fulfilling, extending, and affording greater scope to it... Now all these [precepts], as I have already observed, were not [the injunctions] of one doing away with the law, but of one fulfilling, extending, and widening it among us; just as if one should say, that the more extensive operation of liberty implies that a more complete subjection and affection towards our liberator had been implanted within us. For he did not set us free for this purpose, that we should depart from him (no one, indeed, while placed out of reach of the Lord's benefits, has power to procure for himself the means of salvation), but that the more we receive his grace, the more we should love him. Now the more we have loved him, the more glory shall we receive from him, when we are continually in the presence of the Father.

Again, Book 4, chapter 16:

Moreover, we learn from the Scripture itself, that God gave circumcision, not as the completer of righteousness, but as a sign, that the race of Abraham might continue recognisable. For it declares: 'God said unto Abraham, Every male among you shall be circumcised; and you shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, as a token of the covenant between me and you' (Gen. 17:9-11). This same does Ezekiel the prophet say with regard to the sabbaths: 'Also I gave them my sabbaths, to be a sign between me and them, that they might know that I am the Lord, that sanctify them' (Ezek. 22:12). And in Exodus, God says to Moses: 'And ye shall observe my sabbaths; for it shall be a sign between me and you for your generations' (Ex. 21:13). These things, then, were given for a sign; but the signs were not un-symbolical, that is, neither un-meaning nor to no purpose, inasmuch as they were given by a wise artist; but the circumcision after the flesh typified that after the Spirit. For 'we', says the apostle, 'have been circumcised with the circumcision made without hands' (Col. 2:11). And the prophet declares: 'Circumcise the hardness of your heart' (Deut. 10:16). But the sabbaths taught that we should continue day by day in God's service. 'For we have been counted', says the apostle Paul, 'all the day long as sheep for the slaughter' (Rom. 8:36); that is, consecrated [to God], and ministering continually to our faith, and persevering in it, and abstaining from all avarice, and not acquiring or possessing treasures upon earth (Matt. 6:19). Moreover, the sabbath of God..., that is, the kingdom, was, as it were, indicated by created things; in which [kingdom], the man who shall have persevered in serving God... shall, in a state of rest, partake of God's table...

The laws of bondage, however, were one by one promulgated to the people by Moses, suited for their instruction or for their punishment, as Moses himself declared: 'And the LORD commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and judgments' (Deut 4:14). These things, therefore, which were given for bondage, and for a sign to them, he cancelled by the new covenant of liberty [that is, the new covenant]. But he has increased and widened those laws which are natural, and noble, and common to all, granting to men largely and without grudging, by means of adoption, to know God the Father, and to love him with the whole heart, and to follow his word unswervingly, while they abstain not only from evil deeds, but even from the desire after them. But he has also increased the feeling of reverence; for sons should have more veneration than slaves, and greater love for their father. And therefore the Lord says: 'As to every idle word that men have spoken, they shall render an account for it in the day of judgment' (Matt. 12:36). And: 'He who has looked upon a woman to lust after her, hath committed adultery with her already in his heart'

(Matt. 5:28); and: ‘He that is angry with his brother without a cause, shall be in danger of the judgment’ (Matt. 5:22). [All this is declared,] that we may know that we shall give account to God not of deeds only, as slaves, but even of words and thoughts, as those who have truly received the power of liberty, in which [condition] a man is more severely tested, whether he will reverence, and fear, and love the Lord. And for this reason Peter says ‘that we have not liberty as a cloak of maliciousness’ (1 Pet. 2:16), but as the means of testing and evidencing faith.²³

We have now reached back to the close of the 1st century and the time just after the apostles. Men, in those days, were clearly speaking in terms of what may be fairly described as new-covenant theology. New-covenant theology the new kid on the block?

But, in the end, all that’s irrelevant.

3. What is the real issue?

It does not matter a scrap whether or not ‘new-covenant theology’ as a term, as a phrase, first saw the light of day yesterday, a thousand years ago, or two thousand. What matters, the only thing that matters is this: What does Scripture say? John Robinson hit the nail on the head. He had spotted the root problem in this wrangle about ‘newness’. Listen to him addressing the Leiden church on Friday, the 21st of July, 1620, when they were meeting for their last day together upon earth. They were about to set sail from Holland, *via* England to New England. Robinson lifted up his voice and addressed the whole church for the last time. His words did not die four centuries ago; they sound and resound to this very day. They should be heeded – especially by Reformed men. Drawing his sermon to its close, Robinson declared:

We are now ere long to part asunder, and the Lord knows whether ever we shall live to see one another’s faces. But whether the Lord has appointed it or not, I charge you before God and his blessed angels, follow me no further than I follow Christ; and if God shall reveal anything to you by any other instrument of his, be as ready to

²³ These extracts may be found on ccel.org

receive it as ever you were to receive any truth by my ministry. For I am confident the Lord has more truth and light yet to break forth out of his holy word. I bewail the state and condition of the Reformed churches, who have come to a full-stop in religion, and will go no further than the instruments of their reformation. The Lutherans cannot be drawn beyond what Luther saw; the Calvinists, they stick where Calvin left them. This is a misery much to be lamented; for though they were shining lights in their times, yet God did not reveal his whole will unto them, and if they were alive today they would be as ready to and willing to embrace further light, as that they had received. Keep in mind our church covenant, our promise and covenant with God and one another, to receive whatsoever light or truth shall be made known to us from his written word. But take heed what you receive for truth – examine it well and compare it and weigh it with other scriptures of truth before you receive it. It is not possible that the Christian world should come so lately out of such thick anti-Christian darkness, and that perfection of knowledge should break forth at once.²⁴

This farewell sermon of John Robinson has resonated down the centuries. Its stirring appeal has affected many for good. *He called upon the people to search the Scriptures, to follow all the light which God grants in his word, and not to follow men, or allow their view of Scripture to be restricted by men, even great men, even men which have been much used of God, naming, in particular Luther and Calvin.* It is most remarkable that Robinson emphasised this particular point, and these particular men, in his final sermon to the departing saints.

How is it that many who think highly of the 1620 settlers pay so little attention to Robinson's excellent doctrine? For instance, why do they give the impression (to put it no stronger) that they cannot accept that Calvin, great man though he was, did not see all the truth? Why can they not bring themselves to admit that Calvin was not infallible, that he got some things wrong? Why do they so often try to make out that he was entirely consistent with himself at all times? Let me extend the point. Why do so many

²⁴ I have drawn this from my *Battle for the Church: 1517-1644*. See also my *New-Covenant Articles: Volume Three; Voyage to Freedom*; 'A Thanksgiving Day Thought' (under the eDocs link on David H J Gay sermonaudio.com; christmycovenant.com).

think that the men of Westminster, in the 1640s, with their Confession and other documents, set out the final word for all believers until the end of the age? Why is it that not a few of those who take such a view actually preach the Confession – and not Scripture, as they ought (2 Tim. 4:2)? And when confronted with new-covenant teaching on, say, the law or the discontinuity of the covenants, why are they singularly unwilling to face Scripture, and read it shorn of their confessional-spectacles? I do not say that they should throw the spectacles away, but I am asserting that they should read, interpret and apply their Confession by Scripture, and not the other way round. The same goes for all who treat the Heidelberg Confession, the Savoy Declaration, the 1689 Particular Baptist Confession, the writings of J.C.Philpot or John Nelson Darby... in like manner.

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

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

Clearly, the Spirit demands that believers in all ages – not least, that we today – search the Scriptures, and be ready and willing to submit our minds, hearts and lives to what God has revealed in his word. Christ rebuked the Jews, not for searching the Scriptures, but for not applying them: 'You search the Scriptures... yet...' (John 5:39-40), he complained. As he prayed for his people: '[Father] sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth' (John 17:17). And, as the prophet thundered: 'Should not a people seek their God?... To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them' (Isa. 8:19-20; see also Luke 16:29; 2 Tim. 3:14-17). What Scripture does *not* say is: 'To the Reformers, to the Puritans! Never move beyond them and their great Confessions! Never get beyond covenant theology'.

So, I address any believer who wants to come into the liberty in Jesus (John 8:32,36; Gal. 5:1), but is being hindered, put off, by the taunt that since new-covenant theology is all so new, it must,

of necessity, therefore, be suspect and wrong. To them, I say this: New-covenant theology was *not* dreamed up last week! All down the centuries, men have advocated its leading principles. And they have done so because Scripture teaches it. Search your Bible and see for yourself. And settle it in your mind that God must be true even if this puts some of the greatest teachers the church has ever known in the wrong. Bring every thought into captivity to Christ (2 Cor. 10:5),²⁵ not to covenant theology. Have the courage of your convictions. In the words of the apostle: ‘Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong’ (1 Cor. 16:13). Do not allow yourself to read Scripture by the light of the systems of men – even the greatest of men. If you do, you will fall foul of Christ’s warning against ‘teaching as doctrines the commandments [or precepts, NASB] of men’ (Matt. 15:9; Mark 7:7). In this instance, for ‘commandments’ read ‘systems’. And I, for one, can see the relevance to all this of Paul’s command to Titus: ‘Therefore rebuke them sharply, that they may be sound in the faith, not devoting themselves to... the commands of people who turn away from the truth’ (Tit. 1:13-14). And, writing to the Colossians, the apostle was adamant that they should not allow themselves to be brought into bondage ‘according to human precepts and teachings’ (Col. 2:16-22). The same needs to be said today.

²⁵ The context of 2 Corinthians could not be more apposite: Paul was dealing with the law men at Corinth. See 2 Cor. 3:1 – 4:6.