

The Long Night

Introduction

For the last thirty years or more, there has been a public debate among Christians over the relative merits and de-merits of covenant theology as opposed to new-covenant theology. As I write (in February 2015), this debate is being pursued with vigour. And I, for one, am delighted. Indeed, I have taken part in it.¹ But I suspect that many of the believers who know of this discussion might be dismissing it as being of academic interest only, an absorbing pastime for those who like a theological ding-dong, but of little or no practical importance. If so, they could not be making a bigger mistake! The fact is, the debate in question concerns matters which lie at the very heart of the gospel. Indeed, the issues involved cannot be confined to believers. They have vital consequences for all mankind.

As I have noted, in various ways I have tried to argue the biblical case for new-covenant theology. In this article I want to draw an important lesson from history. No! Don't switch off! History need not be boring. Indeed, no believer should ignore history. Read the Old Testament and see what Israel had to do with their history of what God had done for them in the past, and what happened when they failed to remember it (Exod. 12:26-27; Josh. 4:6-7; Judg. 2:10-12; 6:7-10; 1 Sam. 10:18; 1 Kings 18:36; Ps. 44:1; 77:5,11-12; 78:2-4; 106:6-7,13,21-23; 143:5; 145:4,10-12). And then, of course, we have the Acts. The Spirit did not record that history for nothing! No, the study of God's dealings in the affairs of men is not an optional extra for God's people.

As for the question in hand, by the time of the Reformation, for over a 1000 years western Europe had been in bondage to a system invented by the Fathers. The Fathers had mistakenly gone back to the old covenant, taken the priestly principles of that

¹ See my books (Amazon and Kindle), and my discourses, articles and videos under David H J Gay Ministry (which may be found on sermonaudio.com; christmycovenant.com; youtube.com).

covenant, and applied them directly to their churches. Further, they had also gone to the pagans and taken their principles, bringing them into their system; in particular, they adopted the idea of the 'sacrament'. Then again, they had looked to the political machinations of the Roman Empire. By combining these disparate ideas, the Fathers had forged Christendom. It was tragedy, a sinful tragedy, a tragedy of massive proportions. From the time of the Fathers, western Europe would be cast into Christianised darkness. The rest of the world, of course, was left to languish in pagan gloom.

Early in the 16th century, the Reformers took a huge step back towards the new covenant. *Post tenebras lux* – 'After darkness, light' – summed it up. But... sadly, that's not the whole story. True, the Reformers did recover the new covenant on the question of justification by faith. They failed, however, to go the whole hog, and left many 'rooks to return to their nests', as John Calvin would later speak of it when accusing the English of failing to reform fully. Alas, Calvin, himself, with many others, retained the medieval system of sanctification under the law, and, by and large, held onto old-covenant principles in the matter of the priesthood of all believers, especially as it concerns *ekklēsia* life. Consequently, after the Reformation, clericalism still reigned. In addition, the Reformers held onto infant baptism, thus failing to get back to the new-covenant principle of the dipping of believers upon profession of faith. Linked very closely to this, they also retained the idea of baptismal regeneration instead of baptism's true status as an illustration of the inward spiritual work which has already occurred in the one baptised. And all this was bolstered by Reformed theologians in Germany who invented what became known as covenant theology. Theologians will always rise to justify any practice!

Of course, the Reformers did not go unchallenged. Rome fought back, and this goes a long way towards explaining why the Reformers held onto old-covenant principles as tenaciously as they did. They felt the sting of Rome's accusations, but instead of using the new covenant to stave off such criticisms, the Reformers (like Rome) maintained kept their grip on the old covenant. In addition, the Reformers were challenged from the

other wing by the Anabaptists who stoutly called them to a full return to the new covenant. The Reformers responded virulently, becoming even more entrenched over such matters as infant baptism. Of course, some fringe Anabaptists did their cause no good by their sinful excesses, but in the main their arguments on the need to return to the new covenant were sound, solid and scriptural.

The upshot was, the Reformers, despite the invaluable contribution they undoubtedly made towards reversing the long centuries of decline under Rome, nevertheless failed to secure a thorough return to the new covenant. Instead, they forged a Reformed Christendom, an old-covenant/new-covenant hybrid. It was a grievous mistake, and it cast a long, deep and lasting shadow, one which, to this day, deprives many of full light and liberty in Christ.²

And this is why the debate over new-covenant theology *versus* covenant theology is always of vital interest to every believer. Never more so than today. And it explains why, in this article, I want to take a brief look at the time before the Reformation. I want to trace out what happened when men imported the old covenant into the new. For while covenant theology is a vast improvement on Romanism, nevertheless it is only if we can see a full return to new-covenant principles that we shall recover the full liberty of the gospel. To encourage this return and recovery is why I write.

The long night

The Reformation, when it came, though imperfect, was one of God's great interventions in the history of the world. He openly showed his power in the affairs of men in order to liberate them from Rome's tyranny, and thus glorify his name, advance the good of his people, and bring about the free preaching of the

² I have fully argued and documented all this in several of my works. See, especially, my *Battle for the Church: 1517-1644*; *The Pastor: Does He Exist?*; *The Priesthood of All Believers: Slogan or Substance?*; *Infant Baptism Tested*; *Baptist Sacramentalism: A Warning to Baptists*. See also numerous articles.

gospel to the salvation of sinners. Everyone has heard of Martin Luther. But long before Luther nailed his theses to the door at Wittenberg in 1517, many others had raised their voices, and shed their blood in their determination to hold to the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ as revealed in the New Testament. And there was need, desperate need.

For the gospel had been well-nigh lost by the corruption which began soon after the last of the apostles had died (if not before), which corruption and apostasy eventually culminated in the towering domination of the Papacy over western Europe. True, at one time the Papacy had been weakened through its schism – there were two simultaneous Popes at one time, and then three – but for more than a 1000 years the Papacy ruled – terrorised – the west. There were pockets of resistance, but Rome's dominion was all-embracing. Indeed, the Papacy held Europe captive in a darkness which could be felt. Pause to think of the millions who perished in the Dark Ages, perished without the simplicity of the gospel of Christ. Sentimental folk may stand in awe of the splendour of medieval architecture with its statuary and stained glass, they may grieve over the loss of its sung liturgy and hallowed ritual, and long for its return, but the religion it represented exacted a price beyond computation for millions.

Nevertheless, though the days were dark, there was money, and lots of it, to be made by those on the look out for it in medieval Europe. Oh yes. The Catholic Church and the merchants of the earth were made fabulously rich by their trade with and through each other in those days. Trade? In what? Very much along these lines:

Merchandise of gold and silver, precious stones and pearls, fine linen and purple, silk and scarlet, every kind of citron wood, every kind of object of most precious wood, bronze, iron and marble; and cinnamon and incense, fragrant oil and frankincense, wine and oil, fine flour and wheat, cattle and sheep, horses and chariots, and bodies and souls of men (Rev. 18:12-13).

Do not miss that last: the merchants of the earth and Babylon the Great traded in the 'bodies and souls of men'. Think of it! Life was cheap under the reign of medieval Rome, but misery was plentiful, while hope was in desperately short supply. Oh, a

pretended salvation, a purported salvation, a ‘salvation’ dispensed by the Roman priesthood, could be had – at a price! But the soul-saving gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ – the only means of salvation which every human being desperately needs – was well-nigh buried under a welter of corruption, paganism, superstition, ignorance, and mumbo-jumbo dispensed for centuries in a dead language which the vast majority (including many of those who administered the system) did not understand. Rome perpetuated her hold over the souls of men by keeping the Bible locked in a language few could read. Millions, therefore, were born, eked out their wretched existence, and died in total spiritual darkness, cut off from the Lord Jesus, denied access to his mercy. And the misery, though things ebbed and flowed, dragged on in this way for well over a 1000 years. Think of it!

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In the New Testament, we read that the early believers, travelling far and wide, preached³ the gospel to all and sundry – commanding, inviting, urging, exhorting sinners, seeking to persuade them to repent and trust Christ for salvation, warning them that if they refused they would perish. Some who heard the gospel did refuse; some procrastinated; but some – thousands – obeyed the gospel, repented and believed. All such were baptised by immersion, and thus added to the new body which Christ had set up – the *ekklēsia*. From now on there were two groups in the world; the *ekklēsia* and the rest. Men were either believers or unbelievers; subjects of the kingdom of light or subjects of the realm of darkness. Believers could say: ‘The Father... has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son’ (Col. 1:12-13). The words of the prophet had been fulfilled, and the old order of things had been well and truly shaken (Hag. 2:6-9, 21-23; Heb. 12:18-29). Christ, by his own work, and through his people, by his Spirit had ‘turned the world upside down’ (Acts 17:6).

³ By ‘preaching’, I am thinking not only of ‘pulpit work’. See my *The Priesthood of All Believers; Pastor*.

Until that time, societies had been homogeneous, ‘sacral’; that is, all the citizens were incorporated into their particular society (whether pagan or Jewish) at birth by the performance of a rite or ceremony at the hands of a recognised priest, and were ‘sustained’ and ‘nourished’ in the system by repeated priestly acts. In this way, everybody automatically became part of their society, lived in it and died in it. Indeed, death was the only way out – either natural, or violently enforced as punishment for any who dared to challenge its over-arching homogeneity.

But Christ, by founding his *ekklēsia*, put an end to all that. By setting up his own kingdom, his spiritual kingdom (John 18:33-37), his unique kingdom with its own distinctive way of entrance, he destroyed forever the old oneness. Through the regenerating grace and power of his Holy Spirit, sinners came to individual, personal and voluntary repentance and faith in Jesus as Saviour and Lord. In this way, the Lord Jesus Christ translated these sinners out of the realm of darkness into *his* kingdom.

Thus, from the day of Pentecost, thousands – by being born again, and coming to repentance and faith in Christ and demonstrating it by obedience to him in baptism – were quitting their native society to join this separate, distinct society – the *ekklēsia*. No longer thinking of themselves principally as citizens of any earthly realm, they knew and confessed themselves to be citizens of Christ’s heavenly kingdom. ‘Our citizenship is in heaven’ (Phil. 3:20; see also Eph. 2:19), they declared, even though such a profession brought down upon them the wrath of the sacral society they had forsaken. Rejecting Caesar as spiritual Lord, they submitted to Christ as their king, acknowledging *him* as their sovereign Lord, their ruler, their law-giver in the spiritual realm. And when Caesar’s (or any earthly ruler’s) law clashed with that of Christ, it was Christ whom they would obey (Acts 4:18-20; 5:27-29). And Caesar didn’t like it! He, in company with other earthly rulers (Acts 5:33), did not like it at all!

Christ, with his gospel, by fulfilling the old covenant and bringing in the new, had brought about a massive cleavage in the human race:

Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man

against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household (Matt. 10:34-36).

Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law (Luke 12:51-53).

Sacral society, whatever form it took, reacted to this upstart kingdom within its very bowels – the citizens of this new-fangled realm who were daring to challenge its universal uniformity, daring to defy its arrogated power. Reacted to them? It hated them! It persecuted them to death. More precisely, it persecuted *Christ* in his members (Acts 9:5; 22:8; 26:14). For Christ, by his gospel, had opened the last and decisive phase in the war which had begun with God's pronouncement in Genesis 3:15, and which will last until he returns in glory to judge the world, end all sin and rebellion, and establish eternal righteousness in a new heaven and a new earth (2 Pet. 3:13).

Things continued thus for about 300 years. During those centuries, the great universal sacral society of the time, the Roman Empire, more-or-less continued to persecute the *ekklēsia* – this minority outcast and upstart society – for daring to challenge its monolithic all-embracing power. The Empire demanded conformity – or else. In the 4th century, however, a catastrophic change took place in the relationship between the two kingdoms.

After a period of toleration of the *ekklēsia* under the Emperor Constantine (following his so-called conversion), during the reign of Theodosius I, the State and the Church were fused to form a new monolithic sacral society which replaced the old pagan sacralism, yet retaining and adopting the old pagan principles. The Catholic Church, Christian sacralism, Christendom, had been invented. It was a satanic master-stroke.

Remember, as I said, all societies are sacral and have their rites of passage, *all* of them. Christendom (the new sacral society) took over the Latin name – the *sacramentum* – given to the

initiating rite of the old pagan sacral society, and ‘Christianised’ it. Hence ‘sacrament’ passed into Church vocabulary and practice, where it reigns, for many, supreme to this very day. Christendom applied the term to its own invented initiating rite – the ‘baptising’ of infants. The Church claimed that by this sacrament of infant ‘baptism’ it effectively conveyed regenerating grace to infants, thereby making them Christians. This, of course, was a staggering and appalling – diabolical – corruption of the New Testament symbol of believer’s baptism following faith. And in three ways: sprinkling or effusion had replaced dipping; infants, instead of believers, were being dealt with; and baby sprinkling was performed for the *conveying* of grace rather than the dipping of believers as a *representation* of the grace *they had already experienced*. In short, baptism, in the hands of the Church, had effectively come between the sinner and Christ, confining the souls of men to the keeping of the ‘tender mercies’ of Mother Church, to the power of her priests, and leaving the masses destitute, entirely at the Church’s disposal. In time, the second ordinance of Christ was also corrupted. The Lord’s supper was turned into a sacrament, and then into the sacrifice of the Mass with, eventually, its unintelligible and blasphemous doctrine of transubstantiation.

As night follows day, sacramentalism led to – as it always will lead to – sacerdotalism; that is, priestcraft – the power to convey grace through the sacrament by the hands of a professional appointed to perform the ceremony. And so it proved in the all-embracing State-Church. The new-covenant concept of *ekklēsia* membership through repentance and faith in Christ as Saviour and Lord, followed by baptism and commitment to his *ekklēsia* in a life-long submission to Christ and his law, had been replaced by the sacramental concept of Church membership by infant baptism (sprinkling), sustained by the sacrifice of the Mass, all being ‘effective’ when administered by an ordained priest repeating the right form of words and doing the required actions. More than that, regeneration itself, directly and sovereignly by the Holy Spirit – which Christ said is essential (John 3:3-8) – had been replaced by purported baptismal regeneration at the hands of a priest. In this way, Christendom – the Catholic Church, its priests

and their alleged power of regeneration though infant baptism (sprinkling) – began its long history of shutting millions out from Christ and his salvation.

The monstrosity thus invented was an organisation, not an organism; an institution, not a spiritual body; an inclusive corporation, not an *ekklēsia* – that is, a body of ‘out-called’ ones. This conglomerate gained its ‘shareholders’ by supposed baptismal regeneration, as pagans were thus made into ‘Christians’, even though they remained pagan in mind, heart and practice.

In contrast to Christ’s *ekklēsia*, in which regeneration, followed by saving faith and repentance, ensured that converts abandoned their old paganism (Acts 8:9-12; 19:18-19; 1 Cor. 12:2; 1 Thess. 1:9-10), in the new-fangled Church, baptismal regeneration enabled the ‘converts’ to keep their old paganism and cover it with a veneer of institutionalised ‘Christianity’. As I have said, it was Satan’s master-stroke.

Christendom, shortly to be dominated by the Roman Catholic Church ruled by its Pope – needed a theology to bolster or justify its sacramental system. Cometh the need, cometh the man! Augustine, Christendom’s leading theologian, more than any other man provided the required theology.

What were the marks of this Christendom? One word will sum it up. Darkness! The Bible had given way to fable and philosophy expressed in Church Councils, which were manipulated, behind the scenes, by men versed in political intrigue. Superstition, ignorance, paganism and politicking ruled. Babies were so-say made Christians by sprinkling at the hands of a priest. Real spirituality and true godliness were smothered. The gospel was well-nigh extinguished. Salvation by grace through faith had been obliterated, replaced by salvation through human merit, ‘good’ works, and observance of Church rites. Ceremony and ritual became the order of the day. Prayers were said for the dead. Starting with a gross abuse of the Old Testament – starting with it, I say, by going to the old covenant, and applying its fulfilled and abolished principles (Heb. 7:18-22; 8:13) – and, at the same time, copying the political constitution of the Empire, the Church had invented a hierarchy of governors and presidents,

and cluttered itself with a multiplicity of ridiculous offices and officers attended by all the trappings of titles, pomp, veneration, robes, priesthood and sacrifice. The State and the Church had become entwined, both parties striving for mastery. The Papacy bolstered itself by two huge forgeries – in the year 776, the ‘Donation of Constantine’, and, *circa* 845 the ‘Decretals of Isidore’ – and swept on in its arrogant, arrogated power, carrying practically all before it. Ignorance was the order of the day, not least among the clergy. Men were born, existed and died in fear and misery. Darkness is the word. Gross darkness.

But Christendom did not go unchallenged. Oh no! It was challenged from without. In the 8th century, the followers of Islam (that new-fangled religion recently invented by Mohammed) reached the banks of the Loire in France, and threatened Italy. Meanwhile the Lombards attacked Rome, the Pope escaping only by the skin of his teeth with the intervention of the military might of Charles the Hammer.

But the challenge to Rome was not only from without. Right from the 2nd century, the bishop of Rome had flexed his muscles and tried to impose his will on all the Church, but failed. He even excommunicated the eastern Churches because they would not submit to his decree concerning – of all things! – the date of Easter. I ask you! The New Testament forbids the observance of such days (Gal. 4:9-10), and yet, so soon after the last of the apostles had died, bishops and Churches were quarrelling and bitterly dividing over the trappings of such carnalities! Nevertheless, in the west, Rome triumphed and, having got its hands on the levers of power, it would not easily let them slip. Whatever the cost in blood to those who dared to oppose papal tyranny, Rome would maintain its hold.

Even so, voices from within the western Church were raised against her tyrannical rule. Let me cite a few. I speak of Ambrose of Milan in the 4th century; in the 6th century, Laurentius of Milan; in the 7th century, Mansuetus of Milan; Claude of Turin (who died in 827); the Waldensians of the 11th century and beyond; Arnold of Brescia (1110-1155); the followers of the French priest, Peter of Bruys, who lived in the 12th century; the Albigenses, who were crushed in the early 13th century; and two

Englishmen – William Sawtrey (who was martyred in 1401) and John Colet (1466/7-1519);⁴ and many, many more. I am not saying that such protestors reached full gospel light, far from it, but I am saying that they were, at least, flickering candles in the gross and deepening darkness. In truth, they were more than candles. They were beacons. They were glorious lights, warning lights, encouraging lights, lights of hope, lights shining bravely in a dark and dangerous place. All honour to their name and memory! They were men and women ‘of whom the world was not worthy’ (Heb. 11:38). The world? They were men and women of whom the Church was not worthy!

I said voices were raised against sacramentalism and sacerdotalism. Voices? If only it had been their *voices* which had been called upon to protest! Rome fought back against the ‘heretics’. It had to maintain its interests! In 1223, for example, it set up the notorious Inquisition. The ‘heretics’, denying that salvation comes by sacraments under priestly manipulation, suffered ferocious persecution even unto death. No, let me put it bluntly! They were butchered – at the hands of the Roman Church.

But still the protest went on. Take, for instance, the 14th century, with John Wycliffe in England. Later, John Huss in Bohemia made his stand. Let us recall the dying words of Huss. In 1415, being fastened to a stake by a chain around his neck, as he was being consumed in the flames, Huss was moved to cry out: ‘It is thus that you silence the goose, but a hundred years hence there will arise a swan whose singing you shall not be able to silence’.

How prescient were Huss’ dying words. That swan, Martin Luther, nailed his theses to the Church door at Wittenberg in 1517, and the long night was over. At last, the sun had peeped over the horizon.

Conclusion

Thus ends my glance at the long night. But as I say, the Reformation, glorious as it was, failed to recover full new-

⁴ See my *John Colet: A Preacher to be Reckoned With*.

covenant doctrine and practice. The battle to complete the job has been fought ever since – never more so than today. As we approach the 500th anniversary of Wittenberg, let us renew our efforts. Remember it was hammering of a few nails in a wooden door that was instrumental then. Who knows but God might use our feeble labours? Certainly the coming generations – both believers and unbelievers – need the full-flowering of all the glories of the new covenant.

In closing, I urge all believers – and in this I especially address my Reformed friends – I urge them to examine what the Scriptures have to say on the important issues which are raised in this debate over new-covenant theology. I exhort them to do this with an open Bible and, as far as possible, with an open mind uninfluenced by the Confessions and Catechisms framed by covenant theologians; in other words, to be a Berean (Acts 17:11).

In particular, I ask them to consider the following:

The law was given to Israel, and Israel only, as a temporary measure until the coming of Christ, to act as a child-custodian for Israel, and to separate her from all other peoples.

Christ came into the world under the law, fulfilled the law, brought it to its God-ordained end, and thus rendered it obsolete, its purpose having been fully accomplished.

The believer is not under the law, the Spirit having set him free from the law of sin and death.

Nevertheless, as part of all Scripture, the old covenant is of use to the believer as a paradigm, as an illustration of the gospel.

The law is a unity: there is no threefold division.

The law of Christ, Christ himself, by the Spirit, is written on the believer's heart, so that he serves God, not in the old way of the written code, but by the Spirit.

The full-orbed practice of the priesthood of all believers is essential, both for the individual and the corporate life of the *ekklēsia*.

I do not pretend that this list is exhaustive. Even so, these issues warrant – they demand – scriptural study by every believer.