

A Must-Listen Podcast

I am talking about the podcast produced by the Collective Cast, 5th September 2017: ‘Against New-Covenant Theology with Jim Renihan’. Here is the blurb attached to it:

On this episode of the Collective Cast, Josh and Jason bring on Dr James ‘Jim’ Renihan to talk about New-Covenant Theology vs. Covenant Theology from the right [that is, I presume, correct according to the Collective Cast] (Baptist Covenant Theology) [point of view]. Dr James Renihan is the President of the Institute of Reformed Baptist Studies.

I start by paying tribute to the balanced, fair way this conversation is conducted. Renihan rightly speaks of the difficulty – actually, the impossibility – of talking about new-covenant theology as a single entity. It is not. I myself have freely admitted this, making the point that this is not its weakness; quite the reverse.¹

Even so, before I get to my main point, there are one or two misleading implications, misunderstandings or errors of fact that need to be put right.

Who ‘cuts off’ the Old Testament? I don’t.² I don’t know of any new-covenant theologian who does. New-covenant theologians have nothing to do with Marcion’s dismissal of the Old Testament.³

New-covenant theology did not begin in America in the 1970s.⁴

New-covenant theologians are not immoral because they do not use the term ‘the moral law’.

Now for my main point. As I said in a previous article – ‘A Must-See Debate’ – any discerning listener tuning into this podcast

¹ See my ‘New Covenant Theology Isn’t Monolithic’.

² See, for instance, my ‘Separation Essential: No Mixture! Deut. 22:9-11’.

³ Marcion flourished about AD144. He rejected the Old Testament.

⁴ See, for instance, my ‘Covenant Theology – New Kid on the Block?’

would gain much from it. Why? Because, as so many times with covenant theologians (of whatever stripe), Renihan and his friends cannot help giving the game away. Whatever the rights and wrongs of new-covenant theology, the main feature that distinguishes new-covenant theologians from covenant theologians is that whereas the former read Scripture unfiltered by man-made constructs – theology, confessions, catechisms or tradition – covenant theologians simply cannot shake themselves free of such things. They cannot stop themselves talking about theology, confessions, catechisms or tradition. In this podcast for instance, ‘theological construct’ plays a dominant role in the defence of covenant theology. This, of course, comes as no surprise, because covenant theology is, from first to last, a man-made construct imposed on Scripture. All talk of ‘the covenant of grace’, ‘the covenant of works’, ‘the moral law’, ‘the tripartite division of the law’, and so on, is glaringly non-scriptural. Such language cannot be found in the Bible. This, in itself, should make all its advocates pause for thought. Of course, the ideas – though not the language – may be scriptural, but this needs proof, not bald assumption or assertion based on a ‘theological construct’ or confession. I am not arguing against the use of the language as such; it is the ideas behind the language that matter. If the concepts of covenant theology can be established from Scripture, well and good. Otherwise the invented jargon can only confuse, with consequent detrimental effect on those who adopt it.

I will not stop to argue that it is not only the language of covenant theology that is unscriptural, but its very principles, having done so in many works.⁵ No, my aim here is much more limited; limited, but, even so, highly significant. It is basic. I challenge the advocates of covenant theology to allow themselves, for once, to read Scripture unfiltered, and let Scripture speak without being adjusted by the ideas of mere men, uninspired men. I am not saying that we should ditch all theology, burn every confession, forget every tradition, but I am

⁵ See, above all, my *Christ Is All: No Sanctification by the Law*. See also ‘The Covenant that Never Was’; ‘Covenant Theology Tested’.

saying that we must always judge such things by Scripture; not the other way round. We must establish our position from Scripture, and then turn to the works of men. This would seem self-evident, to say the least. But covenant theologians conspicuously fail at this point. They begin with the theological construct, and then ransack the Bible for proof texts to try to bolster their system. Look at the Westminster and 1689 Confessions for a start.

This podcast exposes all this to perfection. Yes, we are given plenty of ‘theological construct’, ‘traditionally speaking’, citation of Calvin’s threefold use of the law, and so on, but a signal lack of Scripture. Where do we find any exposition of Galatians, Romans 6 – 8, 2 Corinthians 3, Philippians 3, and the like? Yes, Hebrews 7 and 8 are briefly discussed, but, alas, only to dismiss the glorious truth taught in these two chapters by calling on the usual Reformed conjuring trick of dividing the law from the covenant.⁶ But, speaking scripturally, a covenant and its law cannot be divided. Actually, it cannot be done in everyday affairs. But above all, to say that the law stands independent of its covenant is unscriptural.⁷ The consequence of this is that the plain doctrine of Hebrews 7 and 8 is swept aside by an unscriptural ploy, depriving believers of one of their greatest privileges in Christ in the new covenant. How sad!

One thing, however, towers above all: the tripartite division of the law is absolutely key in this debate. Indeed, it is absolutely key to covenant theology, full stop! Without this construct, covenant theology does not have a leg to stand on. I am sure Renihan fully appreciates this. So much so, he highly recommends Philip Ross’ *From The Finger of God: The Biblical and Theological Basis for the Threefold Division of the Law* as providing, from his perspective, the clinching – that is, the scriptural – justification for the tripartite division of the law. I am delighted! From Renihan’s point of view, I must say, it is an unwise choice, but I thank him for it. Nothing could better make my case. Nothing.

⁶ For more such tricks, see my ‘The Law: Reformed Escape Routes’.

⁷ See my ‘What God Has Joined... Covenant and Law Inseparable’.

Before I explain, let me say a word or two on this tripartite division of the law. The Reformed say that the law can be divided into three parts – the moral, the ceremonial and the civil. They further claim that Christ has abolished the second and third parts, leaving the moral law – the ten commandments – as ‘the law’. Thus, they radically alter the meaning of ‘the law’ and are left with less than 1% of it, and yet still call it ‘the law’, and argue as though this is what the apostles were doing when they wrote Scripture. The apostles, of course, were doing nothing of the sort!

The tripartite division of the law is not merely a clever device. Oh no! It is a most powerful tool for covenant theologians to make Scripture fit their preconceived theology.⁸ There is, however, a fatal flaw with it. It is unscriptural! The Bible never makes such a division. Never! Certainly the Jews never did. So where did it come from?

It is a traditional assumption taken over from an invention of the medieval Church. In particular, it came from that ‘prince of schoolmen’, Thomas Aquinas, the orthodox theologian *par excellence* of the Roman Catholic Church, whose influence even today in Protestantism, let alone Romanism, is greater than ever. Forming his views by drawing upon Aristotle, Augustine, Paul, classical antiquity, Arabs and medieval Jews – what a combination! – Aquinas devised a system which, though sophisticated, was vague and obscure. It is his labelling of the ten commandments as ‘the moral law’ which has come to play such an important role in Reformed theology. Sensitive to Papist accusations over antinomianism, the Reformers countered by using Aquinas’ tripartite division of the law, claiming that believers are under the moral law for progressive sanctification. So much for the background.

Taking up where I left off, I was claiming that Renihan, by referring to Ross’s book as setting out the scriptural proof of the tripartite division of the law, has shot himself in the foot. Let me prove it.

Listen to Ross himself as he ‘admits’ his failure:

⁸ See my ‘Reading the Bible’.

No single passage of Scripture clearly states the threefold division of the law. It cannot be demonstrated by... appeal to a particular Scripture, only by a progressive reading of the Old and New Testaments as the coherent source of Christian theology. Theologians, churchmen and believers who read Scripture in that way were justified in receiving the threefold division of the law as the 'orthodox' position. They did not yield blind allegiance to an untested ecclesiastical dogma, but gave thoughtful acceptance to the threefold division of the law with its practical-theological implications. They embraced it as catholic doctrine because it is biblically and theologically valid. They were right to do so. And we are not ashamed to follow.⁹

What a frank admission by the author, himself, of a book which claims to give us the *biblical* basis of the tripartite division of the law! It is not Scripture, but theologians and their theology, their dogma, that is called on to do the job, and all is sanctioned by succeeding generations buying into the received wisdom handed down to them! Q.E.D., I think?¹⁰

Do not miss my ellipsis. It is deliberate. Now let me remove it. Ross says: 'It [that is, the tripartite division] cannot be demonstrated by simplistic appeal to a particular Scripture'. Ross, in my opinion, is being pejorative here. What is this talk about a 'simplistic appeal to a particular Scripture'? I demand passages of Scripture, not mere texts, to prove any point. Mind you, is it simplistic to assert that the believer, being in Christ, being justified, is beyond all condemnation? Is it simplistic to say that Romans 8:1 puts this beyond all doubt? I must confess that Ross, with his talk of 'simplistic', puts me in mind of a captain of a battleship during the Second World War who was coming under heavy attack; namely, make smoke and get away as fast as possible.

Putting that to one side, Ross, as I have just shown, in his own words, admirably makes my case for me.

For the truth is, as Ross himself admits, his book does not live up to its subtitle. He might talk of setting out the *biblical* basis of the tripartite division, but that is just what he does not do. Rather,

⁹ Ross p353.

¹⁰ Stands for *quod erat demonstrandum*; proof of what was claimed.

he opens by appealing to tradition, not the Bible. In his first chapter ‘A Catholic Doctrine’ – that is, ‘A Universally-Held Doctrine’ – he starts by appealing to the majority opinion of what he calls ‘the church’s most prominent theologians’, drawing on men from both branches of the Catholic Church, East and West, depending on theologians whether Papist or Protestant, both liberal as well as conservative, the Fathers, the Puritans, all of whom, he claims throughout the history of the church have either openly argued for the tripartite division of the law, or else assumed it, and based their theology on that assumption. So much for the *biblical* basis of the tripartite division. Now, whatever this is, it contravenes the Trade Descriptions Act;¹¹ that is, it does not do what it says on the tin. Rather, it reinforces the fact that covenant theology is nothing but a theological construct imposed on Scripture.

Ross trots out the usual covenant-theology’s presuppositions or assumptions. Take one example. He quotes the Westminster Confession to ‘show’ that Adam had the law in the covenant of works. Well! The various Confessions might claim this, I agree, but can we be given the scriptural proof of it?¹²

When it comes to the sabbath, Ross admits it is key to the issue. Very well! If it is true that the tripartite division of the law is challenged by the sabbath – and I certainly do not dissent from the idea since the sabbath is the main marker dividing Israel from all other people, and therefore right at the heart of the law – then Ross (and all covenant theologians) have their work cut out to show that Adam had the sabbath, and all men today are under obligation to observe it. And was the sabbath moral, civil, ceremonial or what? In trying to sort that out, Ross is not able to call on Calvin, is he? See my works on the sabbath for other

¹¹ A UK law which makes it illegal to mislead consumers over goods for sale.

¹² Ross is not alone in doing this, of course. Indeed, they all do it! They can do nothing else! See my ‘Misleading, Sad, Revealing: ‘Relevant Today’ by Jeremy Brooks’. See also my ‘A Lesson from William Tyndale’.

interesting questions for covenant theologians.¹³ The theologians have their system, but where is Scripture?

So much for Ross. But, don't forget, Renihan called upon Ross as one who provides the clinching biblical argument, from his standpoint, for the all-important – vital – the tripartite division of the law.¹⁴

I urge you to listen to this conversation. It is conducted in a good spirit. And it lays bare the basis of covenant theology for all to see. And that basis lies not in not Scripture, but in tradition, theology, confession or catechism. And that is why I am not a covenant theologian. I am delighted that Renihan has set this out so clearly.

Finally, I have not written this article, or recommended listening to this podcast, for the fun of it, or to score debating points. Very, very serious issues are at stake here. If any words of mine can help any believers to come to see the glorious liberty the saints have in Christ in the new covenant, and they then begin to experience the joy that that brings them, their gain will be immeasurable, and my purpose will have been met.

¹³ See my *Sabbath Questions: An open letter to Iain H.Murray; Sabbath Notes; The Essential Sabbath*.

¹⁴ It reminds me of my father who would tell me that if I was supposed to be one of the best of the class at school, he did not want to be shown the worst!