

Hindsight

Hindsight can be wonderful. It can also be unsettling. But it can also be enlightening. When I started to write this book, I knew I was in for a handful: I was tackling a delicate subject and I knew, mixing my metaphors, I had a thorny path to tread. But in truth I had no idea where the actual writing would lead me. As so often, I learn more by writing than by simply reading. The end result – for me, at least – is that this publication is more important than I could have imagined.

Looking back over the past forty years, I now see – still dimly, but more clearly than I did – that opening paragraph more-or-less sums my whole life during that time. Seeming little decisions and episodes have produced changes I could never have dreamed of. I am talking about the way God has led me, and the effect that this has had upon my life and work as a preacher and writer.

Let me say at once, that when I talk of God leading me, I am not implying that I have been favoured with direct revelation, or that I have known God's will for my life in advance. I speak of God's leading of me (as I now see it in hindsight). Even then, it is not always clear. At the time, the path has often seemed to me to be circuitous at best, contradictory, even chaotic, with little or no sense to it. But God is sovereign, and he has always been working out his purpose, not only for me, but in all things (Job. 42:2; Prov. 16:4; 19:21; Jer. 29:11; Acts 2:23; Rom. 8:28; Phil. 1:6; 2:13, for instance). It's the old illustration of the clock. From the back, all appears a confused and confusing tangle of cogs, wheels and springs, all working against each other. But seen from the front, all is calm, ordered, sure and steady, unruffled.

Without implying that I am in Abraham's class, I feel that what is said about the patriarch fits the bill for me:

Hindsight

Abraham... went out, not knowing where he was going (Heb. 11:8).

Just so. I certainly hadn't a clue where it was all going to end up. But looking back, the pieces of the jigsaw are beginning to fit together.

Having spent decades among the Reformed, my attempt in the 80s to preach through Hebrews and Galatians triggered severe doubts in my mind about the Reformed position. Then, in the 90s, giving a series of history talks on the Puritans, my rose-tinted view of that episode in church history was heavily tarnished by the incontrovertible facts I unearthed and was forced to face. My Reformed credentials were creaking at the seams.

In the first decade of this century, having published (what I now consider to be) my major work on the law, *Christ Is All: No Sanctification by the Law*, I was inevitably drawn into the world of new-covenant theology, and thus into producing a number of works on how the discontinuity of the two covenants – old and new – dominates the preaching of the gospel, *ekklēsia* life, and the experience of individual believers, and everything else, in the new covenant. *Or ought to*. Alas, Christendom has so marred the new covenant that most contemporary believers have little or no appreciation of what it is all about.¹

It goes without saying that my works have been deeply-coloured by my reaction to Christendom, evangelical Christendom; in particular, Reformed Christendom. Inevitably, therefore I have had to expose what I have come to see as the fundamental mistake of the world I have left. Instead of allowing Scripture to speak for itself, although they always stoutly deny it, the Reformed insist on reading the word of God as 'explained' by their Confessions and the theological system behind them. They start with their system,

¹ See my *The Pastor; Infant; Battle*; Appendix 2 'Christendom' in my *Relationship*.

Hindsight

go to the Bible, and – surprise, surprise – end up regurgitating their system. I know this is a risk for us all, but one of my disappointments over recent years has been my failure even to dent the Reformed cycle of system/Bible/system.

But my work has not been confined to protest. I have tried to be positive. Above all, I have tried to keep to one of the chief texts for me: ‘Christ is all’ (Col. 3:11). In connection with this, a considerable amount of my output has been to try to proclaim the rich, positive aspects of biblical teaching on the covenants, stressing the better-ness and superiority of the new covenant over the old (Heb. 7:11-22; 8:6-13). But, of course, this has inevitably meant that I have had to challenge that which I once held dear; namely, Reformed covenant theology, and the teaching of law-men today – of which there is no shortage.

But when I took my first tentative steps on this journey forty years ago... I need to pause. I cannot say ‘when I set out on this journey’, because that would imply an aim. The fact is, I had no idea where my writing (which I had no idea I would do) would take me. Well, when I began this journey, I made a serious mistake, one which I have laboured under ever since. I suppose I thought, if I thought about it at all, that Scripture deals with the covenants and the law as just another doctrinal topic. How wrong I was! In writing this present book, I have come to see that nothing could be further from the truth.

Paul – and it was especially Paul – wrote so much about the law, not because it was an interesting topic, one which tickled his academic taste buds. Not a bit of it! He had to write about the law because some teachers whom he called ‘false brothers’ had infiltrated the early *ekklēsia*, and, by their teaching, they were causing immense harm. The apostle wrote as extensively on the law as he did in order to destroy the error of the false brothers, and thus protect the gospel, safeguard believers, and above all to maintain the supremacy and all-sufficiency of Christ.

Hindsight

What I am trying to say is that by writing this book *False Brothers: Paul and Today*, although it has only just dawned on me, I have, in effect, been going back to square one, and dealing with what should have been my opening salvo in my ongoing effort this past twenty years.

I have no excuse. The penny should have dropped much sooner. Why did Paul write 1 Corinthians 15? Because of false teaching and misunderstanding about the resurrection! Why did he set out 1 Corinthians 11 – 14? Because of disorder in the *ekklēsia*! And so on. Why did he write so much on the law? Because of the false brothers and their doctrine! Why did the writer to the Hebrews write his letter? Misunderstanding over the discontinuity of the covenants, no less, and the consequent danger of undervaluing the new covenant, leading to departure from Christ!

Just one final confession. As I will explain, it was only as I was putting the finishing touches to the manuscript, that, by God's providence, the absolute fundamental in this entire debate dawned on me. This necessitated an extra chapter. And this, of course, has increased the importance of this volume for me.

None of the sacred writers wrote for academics, or doctrinal nerds. It was the every-day sort of believer who they had in mind. They so keenly felt the issues they were dealing with that when they wrote they were prepared to ignore public decorum, and, if necessary, use vehement language to make their point. All of them were passionately wrestling for the glory of God and the souls of men.

I hope, at least to some measure, that can be said of me.