

What About Today?: General

Why rake all this up now? Why not let it stay buried in the past, quietly sleeping in oblivion? Talk about poking a sleeping dog!

The answer is simple. It may be unpopular to say it, but I raise the issue now because the pressure to bring the law into the new covenant – which inevitably breaks Christ’s wineskins-parable by inserting the old covenant into the new – has not faded into oblivion. It has not been lost in the past. It is not quiescent. It has not gone away. It is alive and kicking. And the damage it inflicted 2000 years ago, it is still inflicting today. Even as I write and you read.

For a start, as I have hinted throughout the book, when the Fathers rolled up their sleeves, it wasn’t long before bishops, in league with emperors such as Constantine and Theodosius, forged the monstrosity known as Christendom. Imposing the old covenant mixed with paganism on the *ekklēsia* was an integral part of that grim step. During the subsequent 1700 years, Christendom has shown no sign of disappearing. Quite the opposite.¹ We are – all of us – inevitably and deeply tainted by that disastrous step.²

In addition, in certain quarters, the law is explicitly and implicitly propagated in sermon after sermon, vehemently advocated in book and article after book and article, pressed on believers on countless blogs, in any number of videos, and, of course, in those Reformed Confessions which maintain their iron grip on a great many who occupy Reformed pews, pulpits, conference platforms and publishing houses.

¹ See my *The Pastor; Infant; Battle*; Appendix 2 ‘Christendom’ in my *Relationship*. See earlier note, where I quote 1 Tim. 4:1-3; 2 Tim. 3:1-8; 4:3-4.

² See my ‘A Tale of Two Coronations: Farcical & Real’ on my sermonaudio.com page; see my *Royal*.

Moreover, even those who dwell in non-Reformed circles are not entirely immune. We cannot pretend that law-preaching is not still with us. Alas, it is all-too prevalent. Calvin's threefold use of the law is still being proclaimed with vigour.³

What is more – and this is the real answer – we don't have the option of ignoring it. We have no choice; that is, if we are going to be serious readers of Scripture – even more, if we are going to be serious in our submission and obedience to Scripture in matters of all belief and practice. We have to come to terms with the contemporary manifestation of the teaching of the *pseudadelphoi*. We dare not bury our heads in the sand, treating the false brothers and their doctrine as a museum piece, something suitable for a seminary lecture or an academic discussion concerning a short-lived spat which arose in the early *ekklēsia*, one which was dealt with by the apostles – especially Paul – and died out. That would be stupid; it would be criminal; it would fly in the face of history; even worse, it would be a retreat from reality, a dereliction of our duty as believers. The Fathers, the medieval Church, the Reformers, the Puritans, and many evangelicals in the past (including those not particularly Reformed) – whether they realised it or not – to a greater or lesser extent took up the baton of the false brothers, and, by their ministry, adulterated the new covenant with the old. And it's not just in the past tense: the same can be said about today. The teaching is still with us. Like it or lump it, we are forced to face this issue. We have no choice. It is thrust upon us.

Facing it, of course, raises awkward questions, embarrassing questions. Who doesn't shy away from asking – and, above all, answering – those questions? What questions? The law teachers are active. And how! Well then, are they within the

³ See, my *Christ*. For an example of it, see R.C.Sproul: 'The Threefold Use of the Law'. The law restrains sin, prepares men for Christ, and – the crowning glory of the law – it is an essential 'whip' lashing the believer – 'a lazy ass' – to progressive sanctification. That's Calvin's threefold use of the law in a nutshell. And it is wrong. See my *Christ*.

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churches today or outside? If they are outside, should we pull up the drawbridge, retire into the keep, insulate ourselves, pulling the blanket over our heads, letting the law-men stew in their own juice, hoping against hope that they might go away? We might, if so minded, join a militant throng and wave an occasional placard, but never where contemporary teachers are concerned, if they come within the fringes of respectability. No! Throw stones at those who are well clear of us, preferably those who lived 500 years ago. Thus we make sure of doing no real harm to those 'on our side'. So much for those outside.

And if the teachers are within the camp, should we not react to them as Paul did?

Leaving the teachers to one side for the moment, what about those whom they teach, the taught? Shouldn't they be encouraged to face the issue? Many of the taught, I fear, have simply swallowed the law-doctrine of their law-teachers, taking it as the default position – or, putting it perhaps more accurately, have simply gone along with it, not claiming (or, perhaps, not even trying,) to understand it – being simply overwhelmed by, and carried along by, the theological tsunami behind it. Can John Calvin, the Puritans, the Reformed Confessions, Catechisms and systematic theologies, let alone so many of the super-preachers who dominate present-day Reformed-pulpits and websites, the household names and teachers of Reformed publishing-houses, have got this wrong? Surely not! In any case, as the prophet found in the days of the old covenant, when he had to issue God's complaint against Judah over a similar matter:

An appalling and horrible thing has happened in the land: the prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests rule by their own authority; my people love to have it so, but what will you do when the end comes? (Jer. 5:30-31).⁴

⁴ Compare Mic. 2:11.

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Do many of God's people today love to sit under the ministry of 'a man of God' while making no claim to understand or even be concerned about the theology he promulgates? Well, if that really is anywhere close to the common response, I hope my book will at least sound an alarm in their ears.

But, I am afraid, it is always easier to look the other way, and bite the tongue. And, never forget, to breathe a word against any of the 'chief-men', to raise a whiff of suspicion about their teaching, even to question it or them, even to draw-in breath when facing any in the Reformed galaxy, is to play with fire:

Touch not my anointed ones, do my prophets no harm! (1 Chron. 16:22; Ps. 105:15).

Oh for men such as Paul! And may God bless all such as Luke – those men who actually encourage a questioning, curious spirit. He did:

These [Berean] Jews 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).

If only! Wishing for the moon, I'm afraid.

The problem, of course, is how are we to get back to 2 Corinthians and Galatians? Can we? I can't! It is so easy to forget that things were very different in the past. We can fondly imagine to our comfort that they did things in the same way as we do. Not so! The natural man is always fundamentally the same, of course, but circumstances have changed. And how! So much so, even though we can picture the people in the past living as we live today, this is completely unrealistic, stupid; as it has been said, they did things differently in the past.⁵ Time-travelling those 2000

⁵ Recently reading Malcolm Gaskill: *Witchfinders: A Seventeenth-Century Tragedy*, John Murray, 2006, it was brought home to me just how mistaken I had been in the way I had thought of life in Puritan England. I had instinctively envisaged people going about

years is far from simple; indeed, Christendom, alas, has so muddied the waters that I doubt that it is possible. In the apostolic time, the separation between the *ekklēsia* and the world was pretty-well intact; now, it is increasingly breaking down and, if the present apostasy continues, will soon disappear. So the notion of who is in and who is out (1 John 2:19) is becoming less distinct with every passing month.

Nevertheless, with all those *provisos*, let's get down to it. Where do we find law teachers today? Yes, of course, the cults and their fellow-travellers – not least Seventh Day Adventists, Mormons and Jehovah Witnesses – and Romanists are obvious candidates. Unabashed law-merchants, all of them

their daily lives as a kind of carbon copy of what I had known of the strictest Reformed congregations assembled on a Sunday today, living in houses with studies lined with Reformed volumes. In reality, the culture four centuries ago was very different. The majority of the people eked out a precarious, hand-to-mouth existence, suffering and dying in dire poverty, coping with a disastrously high infant-mortality rate, gripped by a gnawing fear – even terror – of civil war which would rip families apart, facing an agonising death unmitigated by effective medicine, and all in a world of evil spirits, sprites, familiars, witches, superstition, wise-women, and the like. William Perkins, who laid down the governing principles for the conforming Puritans preachers in the days of the Stuarts (see my *Battle* and my 'The Case of the Curious Blind Spot: John Jewel – Model Reformer?', on my sermonaudio.com page), wanted the death penalty for any who practiced witchcraft, however widely defined (McGrath p329). The Puritan minister of Lavenham in Suffolk, 'William Gurnall, though appalled by... [a] confession [of one, Susan Scot, accused of witchcraft]... was at pains to keep the malevolence of the devil before the eyes of his parishioners, without himself losing sight of the fact that there were those who would blame misfortune on witches without searching their own consciences' (Gilbert p86). Whether or not all who heard Gurnall really believed his teaching, and acted upon it, is debatable. As Thomas Hardy, two centuries later, observed in his *Mayor of Casterbridge*, Mr Fall – the wizard Michael Henchard consulted – 'was sometimes astonished that men could profess so little and believe so much at his house, when at church they professed so much and believed so little'.

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– even though their laws, rules and regulations are not remotely confined to the Mosaic law. Oh yes, they are prime candidates. But that’s easy meat. In any case, the issue for Paul was in-house, not outside. He was dealing with professing believers within the *ekklēsia*. He wasn’t dealing with Jews. He wasn’t, in this instance, confronting pagans or advocates of idolatrous religions. Oh no! Such people needed to be converted. Rather, Paul had to square up to the *pseudadelphoi* in-house, within the *ekklēsia*:

...false brothers secretly brought in – who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus, so that they might bring us into slavery (Gal. 2:4).

Or as Jude expressed it when talking about the false teachers he was concerned with:

Certain people have crept in unnoticed (Jude 4).

‘Crept in’? He wasn’t talking about people coming into the sanctuary and sitting in the back pew! Nothing of the sort existed in those days – ‘church attendance’ and such like are Christendom-speak. No, ‘certain people’ had ‘crept in’ among the believers, professing to be believers, looking like believers, talking like believers, (and, in modern terms, dressed like – as locally defined – believers dress, and carrying the acceptable – again, as locally defined – Bible version). Not at all! They had ‘crept in’ so that they might propound their doctrine among the believers. And it was these teachers who had to be confronted. In other words, the very exegesis of Scripture leaves us no option but to make contemporary application within the *ekklēsia*, not outside.

A cautionary note

And it is an important cautionary note! As Alexander Pope said: ‘Fools rush in where angels fear to tread’.

We have to face it: in one way or another, we can all be mistaken, get things wrong, misunderstand Scripture. None of

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us has got all the truth sewn up. Far from it.⁶ I haven't! However we interpret James 3, his words surely have some bearing on this, and should make us cautious, and make us pause before launching forth into criticism:

We all stumble in many ways. And if anyone does not stumble in what he says, he is a perfect man (Jas. 3:2).

As do Paul's words to the Corinthians:

Let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall (1 Cor. 10:12).

We have seen how Paul had to rebuke Peter – yes, even Peter, in spite of Acts 10:1-48; 11:1-18; 15:6-11 – and Barnabas, confronting them over this very issue of the law. These two men got it wrong, badly so! Peter and Barnabas, of all people! I ask you!

Moreover, doctrinal ignorance – while not to be commended – is not the unforgivable sin. Apollos needed instruction in the gospel, but having received it through Priscilla and Aquila, he became a useful teacher (Acts 18:24-28; 1 Cor. 3:5-6,22). And then there were the twelve Ephesian believers who needed instruction, got it, and received it well (Acts 19:1-7).

Again, we dare not forget, let alone fail to act on, Paul's clear instruction to Timothy:

The Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will (2 Tim. 2:24-26).

⁶ Although, just after we were married, my wife and I had moved to a (to us) strange town, when we attended a local assembly on the Sunday, we were grilled by 'the leading brother' over supper that evening. To put it mildly, he and I wouldn't have made good companions on a walking holiday. Eventually, he dismissed what I was saying, and frankly dismissed us, by telling us that he had all the truth. Remarkable!

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His word to the Thessalonians, in the context of ‘admonishing’ the carnal, is clear enough: ‘Be patient with them all’ (1 Thess. 5:14). As is his word to the Corinthians:

Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things (1 Cor. 13:4-7).

And, when we do have to confront professing believers, we surely have to emulate Paul who, as we have seen, could say:

Many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ (Phil. 3:18).

‘Even with tears’. He made his stand out of love – love for God, love for truth, love for God’s people, love for sinners:

Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves to you? It is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ, and all for your up-building, beloved (2 Cor. 12:19).

As for Jews:

I am speaking the truth in Christ – I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit that I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh. They are Israelites... Brothers, my heart’s desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved (Rom. 9:1-4; 10:1).

And we have Paul’s command:

Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God (1 Cor. 4:5).

Yes, fools can rush in – and rather enjoy it, too! Before we leap, we need to look. And look again. Not forgetting to take a

long, steady look into our own heart. Motive can be a terrible thing.

Having said all that, and, it is to be hoped, taken it fully on board, we know we still have to maintain the gospel, hold to it ourselves, and contend for it whenever and wherever we see it threatened:

Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints (Jude 3).

So, let's press on.

Where can we find in-house law-men today?

If it can justly be classed as in-house (I personally have my doubts), a leading candidate must be the Hebrew Roots Movement.⁷ I speak from experience. Not, I hasten to add, that it ever attracted me, or that I ever belonged to it. Far from it! I was repelled by what I met. I hope you will pardon an extended, personal reference: it is the best way I know of showing what I mean.

When, out of the blue, I was introduced to those who were bitten by the teaching of the Hebrew Roots Movement (I was writing my *Christ is All* at the time), my reaction was one of shock, disbelief, horror and – yes – even fear: in one fell swoop, I had been taken back 2000 years and deposited in Galatia! Over the following years, by reason of circumstances beyond my control, though I was utterly repelled by what was going on, and even though I protested and argued against it, I was forced into ever closer acquaintance with the Movement. The pain was exquisite. And this growing, inescapable and bitter experience only added to my sense of personal misery.

⁷ Hebrew Roots teachers claim that Christ did not end the old covenant; the Mosaic law is written on the hearts of believers. But it is not only Hebrews Roots teachers who say the latter; not a few Reformed say the same.

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The more I discovered, the more I was meeting, and meeting in the raw, of the imposition of the old covenant on professing believers, and the wretched agonising anguish this produced for them, my anxiety only deepened. I do not exaggerate! In my experience of the Movement, the more I saw attempts to put its teaching into practice, the more I found that Christ was sidelined and diminished, while Moses (and, not infrequently, a supposed-Moses) became centre stage. It was horrific. I witnessed how those embroiled in it were increasingly enslaved. Lives were ruined. Laws, rules, dates... endless regulations and adjustments. Families were broken by the agonising decisions that were made. I saw sane people try keep up by doing things that smacked of lunacy. Oh yes, the Hebrew Roots Movement is certainly a leading candidate for the contemporary *pseudadelphoi*.

Far closer to home, we have ourselves. We evangelicals in general are all-too prone to fall foul of Paul's rebuke set out in Romans 14:1 – 15:7, unwittingly perhaps, even congratulating ourselves on our spiritual integrity; namely, we can so easily impose law on others, a law made up of human taboos, predilections, rules, regulations and commandments. As a result, we can so easily find ourselves edging close to the *pseudadelphoi*, at least in a practical way. Many evangelicals live in some sort of permanent fear, fear of offending peer-pressure.

But it is the Reformed who most closely fit the bill. And this needs detailed exploration. As a result, I break off at this point and start a new chapter, one devoted to the present-day Reformed and the *pseudadelphoi*.