

'No Confession? Nothing to Debate!'

During a recent conversation with two friends, I learned that some covenant theologians complain that since there is no definitive new-covenant theology Confession, they cannot really engage in any serious debate with those of us who stand for that theology. In essence, they say: 'You can't be serious. We don't know what you believe. There is nothing to debate. Until you have a Confession, that's the end of the story!'¹

Hence the title of this article: 'No Confession? Nothing to Debate!'

Now this conversation was sparked off because of something I had written in my recent *Redemption History Through Covenants*:

We who overtly advocate new-covenant theology must not repeat the mistake of many in the past and turn any Confession – any Confession, even one of our own – into a shibboleth.² If any of us should be silly enough to try to capture new-covenant theology in some definitive, final statement, so that it becomes, as covenant theology has, set in concrete, then we would be working directly against the very spirit of new-covenant theology. One of its features – to my mind, its leading feature – is that it tries to come to Scripture unfiltered by any system or Confession. Every believer, in a sense, must do this for himself. To turn new-covenant theology into a system would be a contradiction in terms.³

This, apparently, caused no little stir, arousing the complaint with which I opened this article. Well, if this is how things stand, and covenant theologians demand a definitive new-covenant

¹ The conversation in question can be found on the following link: Incidentally, all my work can be found at davidhjgay.com

² A shibboleth is a word or phrase used to distinguish those inside a group from those outside, a mantra that is repeated so often that it almost becomes meaningless – except to separate those who are 'in' from those who are 'out'. It derives from Judg. 12:5-6.

³ My *Redemption History Through Covenants* p12

Confession before they are willing to have a serious debate about the issues, then they will have a long wait if they want to debate with me. I won't be signing such a Confession any time soon. Let me explain, and let me say why I am taking the trouble to write about it now.

Although I have, in part, dealt with it in a previous article,⁴ because this sort of comment raises a very important issue, I think I should return to it. Why? Because it lies at the very heart of the debate about new-covenant theology. You see, as I understand God's mind revealed in the Bible, believers, in their formulation of doctrine and practice, should start with Scripture, not with a Confession, however good and venerable that Confession might be, however sanctified by tradition. Moreover, I, myself, came to adopt (what I later – much later – discovered to be) new-covenant theology as a direct result of trying to expound Scripture in a regular teaching ministry within a local church. I had, for many years, been an advocate of covenant theology, but when preaching through Hebrews I found my system severely challenged, especially, at that time, in Hebrews 3 and 4. A little later, when preaching through Galatians, and seeing what some covenant theologians had to do to maintain their position in light of the apostle's doctrine, I simply could not go on advocating covenant theology. It did not stand the scrutiny of Scripture. I had a choice: either I could maintain my system and warp Scripture, or I could maintain Scripture and let my system go. I had to do the latter.⁵ In truth, there was no choice. What I am saying is, I am a new-covenant theologian, not because of any Confession, but because I must let Scripture speak with its own voice, and not speak to me filtered by any statement of man. Not, I hasten to add, that I ignore the great Confessions, but Scripture must be paramount.⁶

And that is at the heart of my quarrel with covenant theologians over this complaint of theirs. They can only engage in serious debate with people like me if we both have our

⁴ See my “‘New-Covenant Theology Isn't Monolithic’”.

⁵ For more, see ‘My Testimony’ in both video and audio.

⁶ I do not claim that I always meet my own rubric. Alas, we all are prone to gloss Scripture when long-held, cherished principles are challenged.

respective Confessions to defend and attack? Really? If so, it reminds me, I must say, of the days of old when the bigwigs would nominate a champion to do their fighting for them. Is it really true that ‘I won’t let my Tweedledum take the stand until you can put up your Tweedledee’!

If so, then, as I have said, this means that such people will never engage with me. You see, I am unable to reach an absolute, definitive, final, unchangeable statement on what I understand the Bible to teach about the new covenant. Is it any wonder? In this life, I never will come to a full understanding of the limitless glories of Christ in the new covenant, and the benefits which accrue to me through my participation in that covenant by faith in the Redeemer. Why, eternity will be too short to exhaust its vastness! And, make no mistake, that is what we are talking about – not some academic debate about a few texts. We are talking about the gospel of Christ, and of all that he accomplished in the eternal decree of God, of all that he accomplished according to the will of his Father, and of all this applied by the sovereign Spirit to the elect. If any man is daft enough to think that he can contain that ocean-fullness – the triune God’s eternal purpose gloriously accomplished in Christ – in any confessional thimble, I despair of him!

In other words, as a believer I think it right – and, in particular, it is my approach in all this – to be constantly exploring Scripture by the Spirit, always willing to adjust my understanding in light of what I read and come to understand from the word of God, as guided by the Spirit. I am convinced that Christ himself (John 14:26; 16:13-15) gives me the warrant for this stance.⁷ Moreover, I take my view of the gospel, not from any Confession, but from the Bible. I should have thought this was stating the obvious for every believer! While I am willing (and anxious) to test my view against the teachings of men, even so, primarily – and ultimately – I am bound by what I see, under the teaching of the Holy Spirit, in Scripture. I am not bound by any Confession or system.

⁷ I know that the primary fulfilment of Christ’s promise is found in the apostolic writings, but I am also convinced that every believer has the Spirit to guide him in understanding Scripture.

In saying this, I am propounding nothing new, of course. Take John Robinson. We all know that in 1620 he told his friends, when they were setting sail for the New World, that God had yet more light – fresh light – to break out from his word. He grieved that too many stopped where Luther or Calvin had left them. Admitting that these were great and good men, even so, he argued, they did not grasp all the truth, and, therefore, it is quite wrong for us not to be willing to disagree with or go beyond Luther or Calvin when the Spirit shows us new things from Scripture.⁸

Why stop at 1620? If Robinson had been speaking in 1720, he would have included, and with good reason, along with Luther and Calvin, the men of Westminster, the men of the Savoy Declaration, and the men who drew up the 1689 Particular Baptist Confession. In 1720, he would have been primarily speaking of the Westminster documents, and the documents which relied heavily upon them. He would have said that too many are not prepared, when Scripture directs them, illuminated by the Spirit, to move beyond the Westminster Confession. And he would rightly have deplored such a mind-set.

1620? 1720? What about 2016? Far too many people today think that the men of Westminster set out, for all time, the definitive statement of the faith. And everything – everything – must be judged by that standard. Appalling! I do not apologise for the word.

And yet, covenant theologians – staunch advocates of the Westminster documents and their progeny – tell us repeatedly that the Westminster documents are but subordinate standards, that the ultimate authority is Scripture! Indeed, consistency demands that they do so. The Westminster Confession tells them as much:

The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.⁹

⁸ See my ‘A Thanksgiving Day Thought’.

⁹ Westminster Confession 1:10.

But in my experience – and I know that I’m not alone – when we, as new-covenant theologians, try to engage with covenant theologians, almost invariably they turn to their Confessions. Indeed, as my opening paragraph makes clear, until we have, shall we say, the Wakkieville Confession of New-Covenant Theology, some – if not many – covenant theologians will continue to dismiss any serious examination of the points we raise: ‘We cannot discuss the issue with you. You have no Confession. In any case, whatever Confession you come up with, it’s bound to disagree with the Westminster (or the 1689). And that’s enough for us’.

Hmm! I am reminded of an episode in the life of Christ:

And when [Jesus] was come into the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people came unto him as he was teaching, and said: ‘By what authority do you do these things? And who gave you this authority?’ And Jesus answered and said unto them: ‘I also will ask you one thing, which if you tell me, I likewise will tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John, whence was it? From heaven, or of men?’ And they reasoned with themselves, saying: ‘If we shall say: “From heaven”; he will say unto us: “Why did you not then believe him?” But if we shall say: “Of men”; we fear the people; for all hold John as a prophet’. And they answered Jesus, and said: ‘We cannot tell’. And he said unto them: ‘Neither will I tell you by what authority I do these things’ (Matt. 21:23-27).

The sting is in the tail. The Jews might say that they *could* not say, but Jesus knew – and let them know that he knew – that it was not a question of *could* not but *would* not: they would not face up to his question. They dodged it!

And this highlights the serious underlying point here. We are not ruled by a Confession – any Confession – are we? Our faith is not founded on the statements of men, is it? We believers are men and women of Scripture, are we not? We believe what we believe because the Bible says it, don’t we? The idea that nobody can take the claims of new-covenant theology seriously until that theology has a Confession is not only ludicrous; it is utterly wrong!

Consider this well-known scriptural statement:

[The] Jews [in 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).

Paul was teaching in the synagogue in Berea. His hearers were weighing his teaching, not by any Confession drawn up by the rabbis, however august such a Confession might have been, but by searching the Scriptures, and doing so day in and day out. Do not fail to see that Luke records this, not simply as a fact. Oh no! He trumpeted it as a commendation of these Bereans! Now what's good enough for Paul and the Bereans listening to him – that is, if it was scripturally commendable for the apostle's hearers to weigh his teaching in the light of Scripture¹⁰ – surely it must be good enough for believers today. It ought to be the way believers deal with anything that challenges their present understanding of the faith. In particular, it must show covenant theologians how to react when confronted by new-covenant theology. After all, they have no text, do they, which says something along these lines: 'Covenant theologians are more noble because they daily search new-covenant theology, and search and weigh it by the Westminster or 1689 Confession'?

I find Calvin's comment on Acts 17:11 most interesting:

They did only examine Paul's doctrine by the rule and square of the Scripture, even as gold is tried in the fire; for the Scripture is the true touchstone whereby all doctrines must be tried.

Do not miss his 'only'. The touchstone is Scripture and *only* Scripture. That is what Calvin said. How about it, you Reformed men and women? Was Calvin right? If so, will you do what he advocated and, in particular, will you examine new-covenant theology 'by the rule and square of... Scripture' ?

Calvin had more to say:

The faithful must judge of every doctrine no otherwise than out of, and according to, the Scriptures, having the Spirit for their

¹⁰ He was not writing Scripture at the time, please note.

leader and guide... For when the Spirit of God commends the men of Berea, he prescribes to us a rule in their example.¹¹

Do not miss his ‘no otherwise’ nor his ‘the Spirit of God... prescribes to us a rule in their example’.

Granted that in saying this Calvin was rebutting the Papists and their love of Councils, even so, the principle – which comes through loud and clear – stands:

Therefore, let this remain as a most sure maxim, that no doctrine is worthy to be believed but that which we find to be grounded in the Scriptures. The Pope will have all that received without any more ado, whatsoever he blunders out at his pleasure. But shall he be preferred before Paul, concerning whose preaching it was lawful for the disciples to make inquisition?... Every man is called to read the Scriptures. So likewise, making of search does not disagree with the forwardness of faith.

Let me restate Calvin’s words – and it is quite proper so to do – adapting his wise counsel to the case in hand:

Therefore, let this remain as a most sure maxim, that no doctrine is worthy to be believed but that which we find to be grounded in the Scriptures. The Reformed will have all received – without any more ado – whatsoever they set out in their Confession. But shall that Confession be preferred before Paul, concerning whose preaching it was lawful for the disciples to make inquisition?... Every man is called to read the Scriptures. So likewise, for believers to search the Scriptures – and not the Confession – is right according to the Scriptures.

So, may I ask the Reformed who sympathise with the complaint I began with (and who could be more Reformed than Calvin?): ‘Will you take Calvin’s prescription – better, as he himself put it, the Holy Spirit’s prescription – will you take Calvin’s counsel seriously when it comes to new-covenant theology?’ If so, when?

And what about Calvin’s *Institutes* – which, as he told us, we have to regard as his settled position on doctrine (and surely,

¹¹ Calvin also dismissed the Papist arrogance that we can only hold as truth what the Church says is truth. Of course, he was talking about the Roman Church – but the same also applies to the Reformed Church. Sauce for goose and all that.

therefore, his settled practice)?¹² Granted, yet again, he was rebutting the Papists, the principle still stands:

Whenever the decree of a council is produced, the first thing I would wish to be done is, to examine at what time it was held, on what occasion, with what intention, and who were present at it.

Let me do as before:

Whenever the Westminster Confession is produced, the first thing I would wish to be done is, to examine at what time it was held, on what occasion, with what intention, and who were present at it.

Well, that's easy! We know that the Westminster Assembly was overwhelmingly made up of Presbyterians, leavened by a handful of Independents. Baptists were excluded. And we know that the Assembly was convened expressly to deal with Antinomianism, both real and so-called,¹³ and that is why the documents have such a legal twang about them.¹⁴ Now all that, according to Calvin, is very important. Such information, he declared, would help him frame his opinion about the Confession.

He went on:

Next I would bring the subject discussed to the standard of Scripture. And this I would do in such a way that the decision of the council should have its weight, and be regarded in the light of a prior judgment, yet not so as to prevent the application of the test which I have mentioned.

¹² Calvin: 'I have endeavoured [here in the *Institutes*] to give such a summary of religion in all its parts... Having thus... paved the way, I shall not feel it necessary, in any Commentaries on Scripture which I may afterwards publish, to enter into long discussions of doctrine... In this way, the pious reader will be saved much trouble and weariness, provided he comes furnished with a knowledge of the [*Institutes*] as an essential prerequisite... seeing that I have in a manner deduced at length all the articles which pertain to Christianity' (Calvin: *Institutes* 'The Epistle to the Reader' and 'Subject of the Present Work' in his prefixed explanations for the work dated 1539 and 1545).

¹³ See my *Four 'Antinomians' Tried and Vindicated*.

¹⁴ See my 'The Law and the Confessions'.

In other words, as before, Calvin's principle was that while he would duly listen to the Confession, above everything else he would subject it to the scrutiny of Scripture. Scripture always trumps the Confession. That is, according to Calvin.

Quoting, as so often he did, Augustine, he continued:

In this way, councils would be duly respected, and yet the highest place would be given to Scripture, everything being brought to it as a test.

Thus, according to the Reformer, the Confession would be respected, but Scripture would be supreme. What is more he would subject the Confession – and any discussion of the points it raised – to Scripture.¹⁵

Again:

Wherefore, let no names of councils, pastors, and bishops (which may be used on false pretences as well as truly), hinder us from giving heed to the evidence both of words and facts, and bringing all spirits to the test of the divine word, that we may prove whether they are of God.

As before:

Wherefore, let not the Westminster Confession (or those Confessions that came from it)... hinder us from giving heed to the evidence both of words and facts, and bringing all spirits to the test of the divine word, that we may prove whether they are of God.¹⁶

If anybody should object and complain that I have played fast and loose with Calvin, and that he would never have included the Westminster Confession in his strictures, then all I can say is that I have a higher regard for the Reformer's integrity than they have! Surely he knew the biblical principle of motes and logs did he not?

In conclusion: How about it my Reformed friends? Can we not, with Bible in hand, discuss the assertions of new-covenant theology – assertions which you so much dislike – subjecting

¹⁵ All the above may be found in Calvin's *Institutes* 4.9.8.

¹⁶ Calvin's *Institutes* 4.9.12.

them to the light of Scripture – Scripture, mind you, not any Confession – and doing so on the basis of passages and not just proof texts?¹⁷ With apologies to Charles Dickens: I am sure I speak for many new-covenant theologians when I say we are willing.¹⁸ Are you?

¹⁷ Proof texts, alas, being the Westminster way!

¹⁸ In Dickens' *David Copperfield*, 'Barkis is willin' is the message he wants David to take to the lady he would like to marry.