

Peter Masters’ Muddle over the Covenants Part 1

In this short piece, I want to engage with the first of two articles by Peter Masters in the *Sword and Trowel* 2016: Issue 2: ‘God’s Parallel Covenants’. The second, ‘Sinai Was Not An Administration Of The Covenant Of Grace’, which had been ‘first published in 1983 [in the *Sword and Trowel*], was abridged and adapted from John Owen’s *Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*’, and which Masters republished to support his case in the first. Both articles, in turn, were ‘drawn from the 2016 Tabernacle School of Theology’.¹

I will set out my response in two parts, in two articles of my own. In the first, I will deal with Masters’ article in general terms, while in the second I will deal with a specific, significant issue he raises.

Let me say at once, in his article Masters makes some good and important points. I especially commend the fact that he draws attention to the vital doctrine of the covenants. In this, he has done believers a good service. So strongly do I feel about this matter, let me repeat a question I have asked in other works: the doctrine of the covenants – do you ever think about it? If John Bunyan was right – and, alas, I am sure he has put his finger on the spot – many contemporary believers never think about the covenants at all. As he said:

If² one should ask you what time you spend, what pains you take, to the end you may understand the nature and difference of these two covenants [old and new], would you not say, if you should speak the truth, that you did not so much as regard

¹ *Sword and Trowel* 2016: Issue 2, pp3-10,33-37. It can also be found online.

² Bunyan had ‘set the case’.

whether there were two or more? Would you not say: ‘I did not think of covenants, or study the nature of them’?³

For most believers, sadly, too right! And yet, as God has made plain in Scripture, the doctrine of the covenants is one of the most important matters the Bible deals with.

So far, so good. Masters raises a subject that demands serious thought. I am afraid, however, that he displays considerable muddle over it. And this, alas, makes for serious confusion.

He gets off to a bad start by his willingness to accept some of the fundamental tenets of covenant theology, doing so without scriptural justification (except by way of few proof texts for part of what he claims). In fact, of course, he is left with no choice; the fundamentals of covenant theology are beyond scriptural justification, in that they are philosophical concepts imposed on Scripture. I refer to such things as ‘the covenant of works’, ‘the covenant of grace’, ‘the covenant of grace in the Godhead in eternity past’, ‘the moral law’, and so on. None of these can be justly established from Scripture.⁴ What is more, the covenant theology of the Confessions – full-blown in the Westminster, somewhat muted in the 1689 Particular Baptist – is never far beneath the surface of his article. It is not without significance that we get a considerable way through his article before we come across the telling: ‘Turning to the pages of Scripture’. None too soon, is my response! Theology – both covenant and systematic – undergirds everything. But Masters knows he is treading on thin ice: he gives the game away when he uses such phrases as ‘the *so-called* covenant of works’, revealing that, while he himself is not happy with the terminology, he is willing to go along with it. Indeed, he is not shy about giving us his reason for this: ‘Because it has become most generally known as...’. Here he echoes the abject words of the Westminster Confession with its ‘commonly called the covenant of grace... this law, commonly called moral’.⁵ See also the 1689 Particular

³ John Bunyan: *The Doctrine of Law and Grace Unfolded*. See my *John Bunyan: Antinomian, New-Covenant Theologian, or...?*

⁴ See my ‘Covenant Theology Tested’.

⁵ Let me explain my use of ‘abject’. When justifying a point, we ought to be given Scripture, not the views of theologians. For that is what is

Baptist Confession for similarly weak language. All this clearly displays covenant-theologians' (past and present) admission of the signal lack of scriptural support for what they assert with such confidence in both Confessions with regard to the covenants. The same applies to Masters.

Masters also wrongly believes that Adam was given the law of Moses.⁶ But how weakly he makes his claim! He says: 'Although the word "covenant" first appears in Genesis 6:18... the Bible shows that... [the covenant] of works [was] characterised by the great command and warning of... Eden, and subsequently in the time of Moses by the law'. Leaving aside 'covenant of works', what about 'characterised'? Masters' use of this word exposes yet again his justified lack of confidence about what he asserts. A little later he says: 'In the time of Moses, at Sinai, the covenant of works [by which Masters means the Mosaic covenant, the law] would be reiterated by God'. No! It would not! It would not be *reiterated*.⁷ It was *given* to Israel at that time, and given uniquely to Israel at that time. It had not been given to Adam. I simply cannot understand how men can go on making such wild – though dogmatic – claims, when we know that the law, the Mosaic covenant, was given uniquely – uniquely, I stress, as does Scripture – to Israel in order to separate them from all other people (Deut. 4:1 – 5:33; 7:8-12; Ps. 147:19-20; Rom. 2:12-14; 9:4; 1 Cor. 9:20-21). And we know that the sabbath, which played a pivotal role in the law, the Mosaic covenant, and the life of Israel, was a distinguishing sign separating Israel from all others (Ex. 31:13-17; Ezek. 20:12-24). As I say, in light of such evidence, I fail to see how any covenant theologian – of whatever stripe – can continue to say that the law

being said here. These things are 'generally known' by covenant theologians. This is not only a circular argument, but the wrong basis altogether for the fundamentals of such a far-reaching system!

⁶ See my 'The Covenant That Never Was'.

⁷ It was reinstated at Sinai (Horeb) (Ex. 34) after Moses smashed the tables following Israel's breaking of the law even before they had been given it, and repeated at Moab (Deut. 5, 29 and 30) before Israel entered the land. But it was not reiterated in Ex. 20! As for Deut. 29 and 30, an examination of that passage will form Part 2 of this article.

(including the sabbath) was given to all men in Adam in Eden. To assert it makes a nonsense of plain Scripture. Masters repeats this fundamental mistake.

Nevertheless, he is excellent when he rejects the one-covenant-in-two-administrations theory so beloved of many covenant theologians.⁸ Speaking scripturally, there are two covenants in this debate; on the one hand, the old, Mosaic covenant, and, on the other, the new covenant. And Scripture contrasts these two. It simply does not allow any wriggle room for saying that they are but one covenant dressed in different frocks. Masters gets this right. And it is important.

Further, Masters is right to call attention to the 17th-century Baptists who resolutely stood against the covenant theology of the Puritans. I am delighted he does so. I myself have written on these men, and others.⁹ They were, and in some quarters still are, dismissed as heretics – antinomians – because of their views on the covenants and the law, but the boot is on the other foot, in that covenant theologians play ducks and drakes with the Mosaic law. Although they did not get it all right,¹⁰ these so-called antinomian writers produced plenty of valuable material on the covenants, much of which is yet to be presented in an accessible form to this and succeeding generations. I place a premium on this task. It would do much good in the present theological climate. Just as the Anabaptists and their works have been brought in from the cold, to the great advantage of the cause of Christ, so the same would be said of the 17th-century Baptists, if only their work were better known.

The first issue for Masters is to argue that the Mosaic covenant was the covenant of works and not the covenant of grace. He also wants to maintain that the two covenants (of law and of grace) are

⁸ See my 'Covenant Theology Tested'.

⁹ See my work Robert Purnell, Thomas Collier, John Bunyan in my *Purnell on the New Covenant; Collier on the New Covenant; Exalting Christ: Thomas Collier on the New Covenant; John Bunyan: Antinomian, New-Covenant Theologian or...?* See also my work on Tobias Crisp, William Dell, John Eaton, John Saltmarsh in my *Four 'Antinomians' Tried and Vindicated*.

¹⁰ See my *Exalting; Collier; Bunyan*.

in contrast, ‘opposites’. I am allowing his use of covenant-theology terminology. Now the truth is, Scripture makes it as plain as a pikestaff that the Mosaic covenant was a works covenant, whereas the new covenant is a grace, a gospel, covenant. John put it succinctly: ‘The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ’ (John 1:17). End of debate! Or should be! So, allowing his faulty terminology, Masters is right to distinguish the two covenants, law and grace, old and new.

But, alas, because he has bought into covenant theology, he does not understand that the two covenants in Scripture are not, as he would have it, the covenant of works and the covenant of grace, but the old, Mosaic, covenant and the new covenant established by Christ. And this is not just a question of words. The Mosaic covenant was certainly a works covenant, but covenant theology’s terminology clouds the issue, with dire consequences, some of which Masters recognises, and wants to avoid. For instance, not maintaining the contrast between the old and new covenants, combining them into one, leads to infant baptism and unregenerate church membership.¹¹

So far then, the verdict on Masters’ article must be, alas, like the curate’s egg, good in parts.¹² Let me explain. In covenant theology, ‘the covenant of works’ was the so-called covenant made with all men in Adam. As I have already said, this is a myth.¹³ And by ‘the covenant of grace’, covenant theologians mean the so-called covenant made in the Godhead in eternity, restated at various stages in human history. This, again, is not what Scripture teaches. What I have set out, of course, is simplistic; covenant theology consists of a spectrum of views.¹⁴ But it shows the essential stance of covenant theology. Masters takes a hybrid position on this. But, as I say, he does see the inherent danger of covenant theology. Hence, my assessment of good in parts.

¹¹ See my *Infant Baptism Tested*.

¹² A *Punch* cartoon in 1895 when the bishop apologises that the curate’s egg is bad. The obsequious curate replies that it is good in parts.

¹³ See my ‘The Covenant That Never was’.

¹⁴ See my ‘Covenant Theology Tested’.

Now for the crux of Masters' muddle.

Masters wants to establish that 'these two covenants, in a way, run parallel with each other throughout history', starting in Eden. Do not miss Masters' self-confessed insecurity at this point. What does he mean with his 'in a way'? He is convinced that from Eden the covenant of works and the covenant of grace have run, and are running, in parallel. So why 'in a way'?

The truth is, dropping the terminology of covenant theology, the two covenants, of law and of grace, have *not* run in parallel throughout history. As I have shown elsewhere,¹⁵ all men are under law. The natural man is under the rudimentary law of Romans 2:12-16; Israel was under the law of Moses; believers are under the law of Christ. Only Israel was under the old covenant, the law of Moses, that covenant having been added as a supplementary measure and kept in place for Israel until Christ, the Seed of the Abrahamic covenant, came and fulfilled it, rendering it obsolete, setting up the new covenant (Gal. 3:19-29).¹⁶ Since Calvary (or thereabouts – see below), men are either under that rudimentary law or under Christ in the new covenant, in which case they are under the law of Christ.¹⁷ The old and new covenants have never existed in parallel. They never could exist in parallel.

Of course, sinners were saved during the days of the old covenant and before. None of the above must be construed as saying anything different. Sinners were saved before the new covenant was established by Christ, yes. They were saved by looking ahead to Christ, and trusting him, even though they saw him only in shadows and types. See, for instance, John 8:56 with Genesis 22:13. But the new covenant itself was not established until Christ came and set it up in his fulfilment of the old

¹⁵ See my *Believers Under The Law Of Christ*; 'All Men Under Law'.

¹⁶ See my *Three Verses Misunderstood*.

¹⁷ As before, see my *Believers*. Nevertheless, it is true that when speaking of the natural man, Paul does, on occasion, use 'law' to cover both the rudimentary law and the Mosaic law. See, for instance, Rom. 7:1-6. For more on this see my *Christ Is All: No Sanctification by the Law*.

covenant in his obedience to the law, thus rendering the old covenant obsolete. The two covenants have not run parallel throughout history, existing at the same time. That would have been an impossibility. The Mosaic covenant began at Sinai and ended at Calvary when the new covenant was brought in.¹⁸

The truth is, if Masters is right, and the two covenants – works (old) and grace (new) – have run parallel as he claims, then this represents a severe assault on the scriptural need for Christ, in the fullness of time, at the right, God-appointed time, to be born under the law (Gal. 4:4), fulfil the law (Matt. 5:17-18), and so become its end – that is, its goal and terminus (Rom. 10:4) – by establishing the new covenant.¹⁹ For if Masters is right, and the old and new covenant have been in existence from Eden, the new covenant is not new at all; it has always been in existence. It could never be called ‘new’. It is as old as eternity past, was known to Adam, and has been known ever since. Yet Jeremiah predicted the coming of a *new* covenant, specifically unlike the old, Mosaic covenant (Jer. 31:31-34), which new covenant would come about only in and through Christ’s person, life, death and resurrection (Heb. 8:6-13). Masters must be wrong, therefore.

And, make no mistake about it, the new covenant really is new; it is not an ongoing covenant which has always existed; certainly not a time-worn covenant which has been buffed up.²⁰ The word ‘new’ is a precious word which, in and of itself, destroys Masters’ case.

Hence it is that I say that Masters, though he raises a telling point – the distinction and contrast of the old and new covenants – is muddled about them. He is still a covenant theologian – not quite mainstream, but still firmly in that camp. He wrongly thinks

¹⁸ I say ‘Calvary’, but there is evidence that the new covenant was brought in just before that time (Matt. 26:28). But, perhaps, Christ’s *tetelestai* (John 19:30), ‘it is accomplished’, with the torn veil of the temple (Matt. 27:51), signals it. But I am sure the resurrection and Pentecost also play a part in this.

¹⁹ I am indebted to my friend Steve Guest for drawing my attention to this.

²⁰ See my *Christ*.

that the two covenants, of law and of gospel, have run parallel to each other throughout history. They have not.

To try to make his point, Masters turns to Deuteronomy chapters 29 and 30. He argues that Sinai (Horeb) (Ex. 20 and Ex. 34) and Moab (Deut. 5) speak of the covenant of law, the works covenant, whereas Moab (Deut. 29 and Deut. 30) is the covenant of the gospel, the grace covenant, of which he says: 'It has long been known as the "evangelical covenant", and so it is'.²¹ As a consequence, the two covenants, of law and of grace, run side by side. It has always been thus. So says Masters. I strongly deny it.

This brings the first part of my response to Masters to a close. I leave the remaining key issue for the next part; namely, Deuteronomy 29 and 30. What was the covenant of Deuteronomy 29 and 30? Law or grace?

²¹ I have been unable to verify Masters' claim about the use of 'evangelical covenant'. Indeed, I have been unable to find any historical use of the phrase. I did come across it, however, in one modern book; apart from that, Masters' use is the sole example I have found. I am not saying he is wrong, but I have been unable to verify its use, let alone as applied to Deuteronomy 30.