

Covenant Theology, Christ & Covid

Let me explain how I came to write this article.¹

In late July 2021, an American friend sent me an internet video link to a Reformed site which promotes puritanical doctrine.² In this particular video, the presenter vehemently enforces the thesis of C.Matthew McMahon's book *Christ Commanding His Coronavirus to Covenant Breakers*,³ taking the title and stridently pressing it home. As can be seen, the burden of the book (and, therefore, the video) is that Christ is using Covid to curse the world on account of covenant-breakers: specifically, evangelical churches have broken the covenant, and Christ has responded by sending Covid as a world-wide curse.

Madness and worse!

But it is not only the doctrine itself which I am concerned about; of even deeper concern to me is its effect upon those who hear it. So passionately do I feel about it, so vehemently do I oppose what is being so dogmatically asserted, I want to do what I can to explode it, explode it biblically. But before I get to that, I want to expose what underpins this appalling proposition. The presenter didn't mince his words; neither will I.⁴

¹ I first produced an audio – 'Christ & Covid' (see my sermonaudio.com page). I am indebted to Patricia Williams who turned it into a typescript which proved invaluable in producing this article. For the arguments which underpin my claims see, in particular, my *Christ*.

² 'A Puritan's Mind and Puritan Publications'.

³ C.Matthew McMahon: *Christ Commanding His Coronavirus to Covenant Breakers*, Puritan Publications, Crossville, 2020.

⁴ While, as always, in writing on the subject I have had to probe further into the underlying principle of what I am trying to deal

It is no accident that this assertion is found on a Reformed website. The fact is, the doctrine in question is just the latest in the long list of ruinous doctrines and practices to come out of Reformed Christendom. That stable will give rise to this kind of work. Why? Because of its theology; to be precise, covenant theology. It is the covenant theology undergirding Reformed Christendom which facilitates the proclamation of the unscriptural doctrine that Christ is using Covid to curse the world because evangelicals are breaking the covenant.

I am not saying, I hasten to add, that all covenant theologians argue this way. Of course not! But I am saying that the presenter of the video, and the author of the book he is promoting, can only argue as they do because of the fundamentals of the covenant theology which governs their understanding of Scripture. Indeed, I go further: strictly speaking, that theology – if its advocates are consistent – must lead to the pernicious teaching in question.

Strong stuff! Let me make good my claim.

God deals with men through covenants.⁵ The two major covenants that we are concerned with here are the Mosaic covenant given to Israel, and given only to Israel, at Sinai (Ps. 147:19-20; Rom. 3:1-2; 9:4-5; see also Deut. 4:1 – 6:25; Mal. 4:4), and the new covenant established by Christ in his incarnation, life, death on the cross, resurrection, ascension, and the outpouring of his Spirit at Pentecost. At the last supper, when he inaugurated a perpetual remembrance of himself and his work on the cross – perpetual, that is, through this new age until he returns – Christ made it clear that he was bringing in a new covenant in his blood (Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:17-34).

These two covenants – the Mosaic and the new – are discontinuous. It is true that there is a measure of continuity

with, I have retained my original sense of revulsion over the video's teaching.

⁵ See my *Redemption*.

between them: Christ himself is that continuity. He is revealed throughout the Old Testament, written large in the old covenant, promised in the prophets, illustrated in types, shadows and silhouettes, all of which pointed Israelites to their coming Messiah, the one who would fulfil all in the new covenant, and be the reality of those shadows in the experience of believers (Luke 24:25-27,44-46; Col. 2:16-17; Heb. 8:5; 10:1). Thus, by fulfilling the old covenant (Matt. 5:17-18) – which God always intended to be temporary (Gal. 3:23-25)⁶ – Christ rendered it obsolete (Heb. 8:13).

Consequently, while there is some continuity between the two covenants, their discontinuity is far greater. The new is a truly *new* covenant, radically different in vital respects from the old.⁷ This discontinuity of the covenants – in particular, the newness of the new covenant – should never be blurred. When the discontinuity and the newness are blurred, the consequences are disastrous.⁸

Yet this is precisely what covenant theologians do; they mingle the two covenants into one, which they call ‘the covenant of grace’. Under their scheme, the two covenants are essentially continuous; any difference between them is

⁶ See my *Three*.

⁷ John Calvin, in his *Commentary* on Luke 22:20, stated: ‘By the epithet “new” [Christ] intended to show that the ancient figures [of the old covenant] now cease, and give way to a firm and everlasting covenant. There is an indirect contrast, therefore, between this mystery [of the new covenant] and the shadows of the law’. Calvin, because of his theological construct – his presupposition about the oneness of the two covenants – tried to limit this to what he called ‘the ceremonial law’. In my *Christ* I have dealt with this Reformed escape-route (one of several) to circumvent the plain teaching of Scripture. The fact is, Christ established a radically new covenant – root and branch. He did not buff up or resuscitate the temporary old covenant. See the parable of the wineskins (Mark 2:21-22). The writer of Hebrews is categorical: Christ has rendered the old covenant – all of it, not just not some so-called ‘ceremonial part’ – obsolete (Heb. 8:13).

⁸ See, for instance, my *Public Worship*.

merely one of administration. Consequently, they argue, Israel was the old-covenant church, the church in existence under the law, while the *ekklēsia* is the new-covenant church, the gospel church.⁹ Because of this, they say, the terms of the old covenant apply directly to the *ekklēsia*. Note my use of ‘directly’. Of course, properly nuanced in Christ as set out in the post-Pentecost Scriptures, all Scripture – not just the law – applies to the *ekklēsia*.¹⁰ But this is a far cry from saying that the terms of the Mosaic law apply directly today!

While it was Thomas Aquinas in the medieval Roman Catholic Church who set out some of its essentials, and it was John Calvin who developed the details of the Reformed system,¹¹ it was only in the years just after Calvin’s death, that covenant theology proper was invented.¹² Taken up by the Puritans, it was fixed in the Westminster Confession of Faith, since when it has exercised a huge, dominating influence over millions, including many who have not formally adopted the Westminster Confession as the definitive and final word in theology: many – if not most – believers, having little understanding of the biblical covenants, have unknowingly suffered – to a greater or lesser degree – from the grievous effects of the fundamentals of that theology, and millions still do.

What am I talking about?

From the time of the Fathers, priestcraft, clericalism, sacerdotalism, sacramentalism, infant baptism leading to

⁹ See my *Gospel*. The church (*ekklēsia*) is, of course, a new-covenant phenomenon. See my *Christ; Infant*.

¹⁰ See, for instance, my ‘No Mixture’ on my sermonaudio.com page.

¹¹ Calvin was reared in the medieval Church, and his dependence on the Fathers is proverbial. See my *Infant*.

¹² This is simplistic. In fact, there is no such thing as ‘covenant theology’; rather, there are covenant theologies, or different schools of covenant theology.

infant baptismal regeneration, State Churches, enforcement of religion by the magistrate, and so on, have wreaked havoc and deluded a countless number through the reign of Christendom. While its zenith in the West has been Romanism, Christendom has played a huge rôle in evangelical development. As a result, the *ekklēsia* has long been critically infected with Judaism tinged with paganism.¹³

Because, on the basis of their theology, covenant theologians apply the old covenant and its law directly to the *ekklēsia*, Reformed Christendom is not exempt from this criticism: it is precisely this that has led to McMahon's appalling claim that Christ is using Covid to curse covenant-breakers.

Let me prove it.

I start with the blurb of McMahon's book:

This work expounds on Scripture, and outlines, from a biblical point of view, why Christ has sent his Coronavirus to covenant-breakers in his church. The thesis is that the world-wide virus (and other calamities which are building and exploding in our day) are here primarily for Christ's church; his disobedient, covenant-breaking church. This is a difficult and saddening time for many people. At the time this work was written, almost 689,000 people have died worldwide from the Coronavirus (158,000 in the US), and the Lord is adding more and more calamity to our country on top of the horrors of prolonged and disease-ridden death. All of it is calamity upon calamity. It's actually 'calamity' that God promises his covenant-breaking church if they do not repent... Taken from Leviticus 26, this work expounds and describes the following: that pestilence is a sign from Christ to his church... what the nature of Christ's afflicting providences are, and a number of other subjects related to the plague, especially if the church does not repent, that they [*sic*] are daring Christ to do his worst against them in their spiritual indifference.

Where does the idea that Christ is using Covid to curse covenant breakers come from? As the blurb says, from

¹³ See my *Infant; Pastor; Public Worship; Public Worship Notes*.

Leviticus 26, which, of course, is right at the heart of the old covenant! Under the Mosaic covenant, it is true, the children of Israel were repeatedly told that if they kept the covenant – obeying all the law (not just the ten commandments) that God gave them and only them at Sinai – they would enjoy unlimited material prosperity – health, long life, good harvests, success in war, *etc.* But they also knew that if they failed to keep the covenant and its law, God would curse them: they would suffer immeasurable loss, disease, destruction and, eventually, deportation into captivity. In addition to Leviticus 26, see for instance Deuteronomy 28.

As for Israel, it all went wrong from the start. Even at Sinai, even as Moses was on the mountain receiving the law, the people waiting in the valley below were engaged in an orgy of idol worship. From that low point, Israel's general course was downward. In his last address to Israel, Joshua, who clearly detected the way the wind was blowing, voiced his premonition of Israel's apostasy after his death – and, as Judges makes clear, he was proved only too right. In the centuries that followed, as Israel repeatedly deserted the covenant, God judged his people, punishing them for their sin in accordance with his warning, but then, in his mercy, sending prophet after prophet to warn the people and urge repentance, usually to no avail – or, at best, with a temporary return to the covenant. At long last, both kingdoms were taken into captivity under the curse of God. God was keeping Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 and the like.

Now, according to McMahon's book, it is the church's turn!

The question is: how does Leviticus 26 and similar passages apply to believers, to the *ekklēsia*, today?

We know that 'prosperity-gospel' preachers apply such promises directly to believers: obey God and limitless material blessings will be yours! Those who want to make believers dig deep into their pockets make use of the

principle: tithe till it hurts, and God will reward you in return (Mal. 3:6-12).¹⁴

Now for the curses! McMahon's book uses Leviticus 26 to declare that since the church has forsaken God and broken his covenant (that invented one covenant of grace that embraces the old and the new covenants, McMahon means), Christ is using Covid to curse believers and the churches, and inevitably, of course, the world.

This is as harebrained a leap, based on the same (or at least similar) theology, as the imposition on the *ekklēsia* of clericalism, hierarchy, sacramentalism, sacerdotalism, infant baptism (and thereby infant-baptismal regeneration), enforcement of religion by the magistrate, and so on. It is just the latest entry in this catastrophic catalogue.

This is the material point. This nonsense stems, not from Scripture, but from covenant theology imposed on Scripture.

It is vital to grasp this. The blurb claims that McMahon is expounding Scripture:

This work expounds on [*sic*] Scripture, and outlines, from a biblical point of view...

If only! But this is not what McMahon does. He starts with Scripture *ruled by covenant theology*. He says so, and says it explicitly:

All of Leviticus is set in the context of God's covenant of grace.¹⁵

That is, Leviticus 26 is not allowed to speak in its scriptural context but as pre-determined by covenant theology. Hence it is not long before we read:

¹⁴ Mark 10:23-31 must surely be understood spiritually – a hundred literal mothers, a hundred literal houses?

¹⁵ McMahon p8, in the chapter entitled 'Pestilence is a Sign from Christ to His Church'.

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This gracious covenant [that is, the Reformed-invented covenant of grace] is where Christ can be found if the people heed his prescriptions precisely in the administration of this covenant. Blessings and curses are joined with an evangelical grace... What will God do to his church? He will bring a curse on them for breaking his covenant.¹⁶

What mongrel covenant is this? ‘Blessings and curses are joined with an evangelical grace’, and all in one covenant of grace!¹⁷ John 1:17 explodes this:

The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (John 1:17).

The strongly-contrasting ‘but’ is clearly implied:

The law was given through Moses; [but] grace and truth came through Jesus Christ.¹⁸

This contrast is John’s point! As it was Paul’s when he was writing on a connected issue:

If it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace (Rom. 11:6).

McMahon, however, acting in direct contradiction of this principle, is showing himself to be the latest teacher to mix law and grace in one so-called covenant of grace.

The lesson – the warning – is clear: start with a theology, force Scripture into that theology, and disaster ensues. This is precisely what we have here.

The confusion involved in this system, and the dire consequences it produces, are unmissable. For a start, we have the door opened wide to the dreadful doctrine of salvation by works – a merited, earned salvation. What else can it do? The Mosaic covenant was a works covenant; Israel would be saved by perfect obedience:

¹⁶ McMahon pp8-9.

¹⁷ See ‘Part Two: The Reformed Case’ in my *Christ*.

¹⁸ See my *Christ*.

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It is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified (Rom. 2:13).¹⁹

Israel... pursued a law that would lead to righteousness... For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them (Rom. 9:31; 10:5).

Yes, the law was a works covenant, and salvation was obtainable through perfect obedience to the law.²⁰ But Israel could not provide the perfect justifying-works which God demanded under the old covenant: this was precisely ‘what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do’ (Rom. 8:3; see also Acts 13:39; Gal. 3:21; Heb. 7:18). Indeed, far from the people of Israel being saved under the law, the law inevitably condemned them:

Whatever the law says it speaks to those [that is, Israel] who are under the law [of Moses], so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world [Jew and Gentile] may be held accountable to God [the Gentiles being guilty (as Paul has already proved), even though they do not have the law of Moses]. For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin (Rom. 3:19-20).

¹⁹ Consider: ‘The LORD dealt with me according to my righteousness; according to the cleanness of my hands he rewarded me. For I have kept the ways of the LORD, and have not wickedly departed from my God. For all his rules were before me, and his statutes I did not put away from me. I was blameless before him, and I kept myself from my guilt. So the LORD has rewarded me according to my righteousness, according to the cleanness of my hands in his sight’ (Ps. 18:20-24). Commentators, needless to say, have spilled much ink over this, but whatever is made of it, the point still stands: the old covenant was a works covenant. Applying the passage to the Messiah fits hand in glove with the fact that Christ’s perfect submission to the law to merit salvation for his people. See my *Imputed*.

²⁰ Take Ezek. 18:1-32; 33:12-20.

The fact is, Israel was on a hiding to nothing, as Paul, quoting Joel 2:32, explained:

Israel who pursued a law that would lead to righteousness did not succeed in reaching that law. Why? Because they did not pursue it by faith, but as if it were based on works... Being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes. For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them. But the righteousness based on faith says: '...if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved... For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved... everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved' (Rom. 9:31 – 10:13).

As the apostle said to the Galatians:

All who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written: 'Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the law, and do them'. Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for 'The righteous shall live by faith'. But the law is not of faith, rather 'The one who does them shall live by them'. Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us – for it is written: 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree' – so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith (Gal. 3:10-14).

At the start of the new covenant, at Pentecost, Peter, also quoting Joel 2:32, had declared:

It shall come to pass that everyone who calls upon the name of the Lord shall be saved (Acts 2:21).²¹

No sinner will be saved by obedience to the law; salvation only comes to sinners who call upon Christ alone under the

²¹ Moreover, Joel was not the only prophet who had told Israel. See, for instance, Isa. 55:1-13.

gospel – and in no other way (John 6:68-69; 14:6; Acts 4:12):

We know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified... If righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose (Gal. 2:16-21).

But Christ did not die for no purpose! Indeed, Christ became a man under the law in order to earn salvation for his people (John 10:11; Rom. 8:1-4; Gal. 4:4). And he accomplished it (John 19:30; 2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Pet. 3:18).²²

The point is that covenant theology – mixing the old and new covenants into one covenant of grace (and works) – always leaves itself open to salvation by works,²³ and, on the other side of the coin, God’s curse for failure to keep the so-called covenant of grace.

And it is this theology that has enabled McMahan to write his book, and this website to promote the fearful doctrine in it.

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But it is not simply a question of theology; people are affected. I am not addressing this subject now in order to move pieces on a theological chess board. I have a pastoral concern. The doctrine in question is not only ludicrously wrong, based on a man-invented system of theology; it is

²² For the full argument, see my *Imputed*.

²³ Some covenant theologians, recognising problems with their system, try to get round them by the most tortuous logic. See Thomas Boston’s arguments in my *Christ* pp69-73,90-91,365-366,383-384. Let me suggest some more food for thought. If Lev. 26 should be applied literally to the *ekklēsia*, why not Ps. 150? Would covenant theologians like their church services to be enhanced by trumpets, lutes, tambourines, harps, dance, strings and pipes, sounding cymbals and loud clashing cymbals? Do they sing Ps. 109:1-20 with relish? And so on.

utterly *cruel*. Imagine telling an afflicted sinner – believer or unbeliever – dying of Covid, that he is dying in this way because, being a covenant-breaker, he is under the curse of Christ! Or, if put more generally, that since Christ is cursing covenant-breakers, anybody suffering from Covid is inevitably caught up in the calamity – even though that person, personally, might not be guilty. Or are covenant-keepers insured against Covid?

In short, if Christ is sending Covid as an indiscriminate curse because evangelicals are covenant breakers, who is McMahan addressing? Is he informing Covid sufferers that their plight is because evangelicals are sinning? or is he appealing to evangelicals to bear in mind that their sin is causing grief to millions who have nothing to do with the covenant?

Incidentally, Calvin – yes, Calvin, please note all who take McMahan’s line based on covenant theology²⁴ – was blunt about it, and those who promulgate it:

He is a blind and wicked judge who decides as to the sins of all men by the punishments which they now endure.²⁵

In any case, who can claim that he keeps the covenant? Take the sabbath. Does any covenant theologian keep the sabbath *precisely as the law demanded*? Let me stress this: I am not asking whether any covenant theologian keeps the sabbath as glossed by theologians using a clever escape route.²⁶ No! I repeat: Does any covenant theologian keep the sabbath *precisely as the law demanded*? If not, what of the curse for sabbath-breakers (Ex. 31:14-15)?²⁷

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²⁴ I stress the connection because covenant theologians usually treat Calvin as the virtual fount of wisdom.

²⁵ Calvin in his *Commentary* on Luke 13.

²⁶ See my *Christ*.

²⁷ See my *Sabbath Questions; Sabbath Notes; Essential*.

This doctrine is not only cruel; it is utterly at variance with the spirit of the new covenant. Mark its clash with this:

Jesus went throughout all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction. When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples: ‘The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest’ (Matt. 9:35-38).

Did Christ dismiss the crowds – let alone curse them – as covenant-breakers?

Then again, while I acknowledge the question that exists over manuscripts in the following extract – even if the words indicated by my use of [...] are omitted – the sentiment is plain:

And it came to pass, when the time was come that [Jesus] should be received up, he steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem, And sent messengers before his face: and they went, and entered into a village of the Samaritans, to make ready for him. And they did not receive him, because his face was as though he would go to Jerusalem. And when his disciples James and John saw this, they said: ‘Lord, will you that we command fire to come down from heaven, and consume them, even as Elijah did?’ But he turned, and rebuked them[, and said: ‘You do not know what manner of spirit you are of. For the Son of man is not come to destroy men’s lives, but to save them’] (Luke 9:51-55).

In light of this, how it is possible to argue that Christ is now sending Covid as a curse?

Surely John 3:16-17 puts the issue beyond doubt. Have the advocates of McMahan’s doctrine ever let Christ’s words sink in? Or are they content to explain them away with the usual glosses?²⁸ What am I talking about? Just this:

²⁸ Such as ‘the world’ means ‘the world of the elect’.

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For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

This new-covenant age is not marked by God's cursing sinners – by Covid, or anything else – but by his willingness, his desire, to see sinners saved.²⁹

Look at Christ's approach to disobedient Jerusalem. If anything shows the love of God for sinners, this does:

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! (Matt. 23:37).

True, Christ would judge them:

See, your house is left to you desolate (Matt. 23:38).

But do not miss the point. The people of Jerusalem would not be cursed with an outbreak of plague or Covid as a result of breaking the so-called covenant of grace; nor, even, would their judgment be grounded on their breaking the Mosaic covenant. Even though the new covenant – superseding the old covenant – had not yet been established, the people's condemning sin was their refusal to trust Christ. That is what Matthew 23:37-38 teaches. And so do these passages:

Whoever does not believe [in Christ] is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil... Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him (John 3:18-19,36).

²⁹ See my *Offer*. See also my *Public Worship* where I argue out John 4:23. See also my *Public Worship Notes*.

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You refuse [are unwilling] to come to me that you may have life (John 5:40).

[The Spirit] will convict the world concerning sin... because they do not believe in me (John 16:8-9).

Unbelief, refusal to trust Christ, wilful suppression of the knowledge of God (Rom. 1:18-32) – not the breaking of a Reformed covenant – is the cardinal sin.

What is more, let us never forget, Christ died to redeem sinners from the curse of the law:

Christ redeemed us [believers can say] from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us (Gal. 3:13).

So how can a gospel preacher, addressing sinners in distress, tell them that their calamities are God's curse for breaking an invented covenant?

I have found no biblical evidence to show that any new-covenant preacher ever took McMahan's line.

Finally, in this section, think how McMahan's doctrine might well produce an element of pride in its advocates, and lead them to gloat over the sinner's doom: 'You are breaking the covenant; hence you are being cursed! We haven't got Covid. So...'. Compare that with Paul's attitude:

For three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears (Acts 20:31).

The love of Christ controls us... God... gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God (2 Cor. 5:14,18-20).

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).

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McMahon's doctrine is not only *cruel* and at variance with the new covenant; it is *simplistic*; it is crass. It is impossible to judge God's purpose in providential prosperity or loss. It is simplistic to conclude that afflictions and tribulations are a sure sign of God's curse.³⁰ I have no doubt that the overwhelming majority of covenant theologians recognise this, and would deplore McMahon's thesis. At least, I hope so! I am sure they would agree with John Flavel, the Puritan, who wisely entitled his book *The Mystery Of Providence*, and with William Cowper who exclaimed how God:

*Moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants his footsteps in the sea,³¹
And rides upon the storm.*

After the death of Jacob, his father, Joseph allayed his brothers' fears by telling them that though they had meant to do away with him, God had intended it all for good (Gen. 50:15-21). If Joseph, languishing in Egypt's prison, had tuned into the equivalent of the website I am writing against, or read McMahon's book, he would have learned that his troubles were a sure sign of God's curse, when, in fact, it was the way God was working out his glorious purpose for good in the next stage of his redemption history revealed through covenants.

Did Job suffer because he was under God's curse, or because he was signally recognised – distinguished – by God as a good man? God called him 'my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil' (Job. 1:8; 2:3). His sufferings were not a sign of God's curse; the very opposite, in fact! The truth is, McMahon would have been sitting, his

³⁰ I have already quote Calvin: 'He is a blind and wicked judge who decides as to the sins of all men by the punishments which they now endure'.

³¹ 'Your way was through the sea, your path through the great waters; yet your footprints were unseen' (Ps. 77:19).

book in hand, not with Job, but with his so-called comforters, giving them ammunition to fire at God's servant!

Then we have the writer of Psalm 73 agonising over the prosperity of the wicked in this life. God cursing sinners was not the psalmist's issue.³²

And what about the Jews who boasted that they had 'never had it so good' as when they were brazen in idolatry? Listen to them:

All the men who knew that their wives had made offerings to other gods, and all the women who stood by, a great assembly, all the people who lived in Pathros in the land of Egypt, answered Jeremiah: 'As for the word that you have spoken to us in the name of the LORD, we will not listen to you. But we will do everything that we have vowed, make offerings to the queen of heaven and pour out drink offerings to her, as we did, both we and our fathers, our kings and our officials, in the cities of Judah and in the streets of Jerusalem. For then we had plenty of food, and prospered, and saw no disaster. But since we left off making offerings to the queen of heaven and pouring out drink offerings to her, we have lacked everything and have been consumed by the sword and by famine' (Jer. 44:15-18).

But let me take this to the highest level of God's mysterious providence: Christ on the cross and his cry of 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Matt. 27:46). Of course Christ was cursed of God as his people's sin-bearer (Gal. 3:10,13), but he was not cursed as a covenant-of-grace-breaker!

This website's childish approach offers an easy, black and white explanation of affliction (and prosperity), but however tempting it might be to adopt it, it is not the way God works:

It is the same for all, since the same event happens to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to him who sacrifices and him who

³² See also Jer. 12:1.

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does not sacrifice. As the good one is, so is the sinner, and he who swears is as he who shuns an oath. This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that the same event happens to all (Eccles. 9:2-3).

I used the word ‘childish’. Let me illustrate with a story against myself. When I was newly-converted, I engaged in street evangelism, with many young louts³³ pressing round me as I spoke to them about Christ. In my youthful silliness – or, perhaps, exuberance would be a more sympathetic way of expressing it – it would sometimes cross my mind how easy it would be if everybody who was converted turned green: then I would know who to approach and who not – if only God would make it clear-cut!

God doesn’t work that way:

My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD (Isa. 55:8).

God’s ways not ours? Consider how God uses the weak to overcome the mighty; the foolish, the wise (1 Cor. 1:18 – 3:19); he even uses evil to bring about his ultimate plan, without condoning or authorising sin, or excusing sinners (Gen. 50:20; Acts 2:23-24; Jas. 1:13-15). His justice cannot always be seen at once.

Another thing: if Covid is God’s curse on covenant-breakers today, was the so-called Spanish ‘flu an earlier example?³⁴

³³ ‘Teddy boys’ was the contemporary term: they dressed in Edwardian style.

³⁴ ‘The 1918 influenza pandemic was the most severe pandemic in recent history. It was caused by an H1N1 virus with genes of avian origin. Although there is no universal consensus regarding where the virus originated [it was probably a duck farm in the USA], it spread worldwide during 1918-1919. In the United States, it was first identified in military personnel in spring 1918. It is estimated that about 500 million people, or one-third of the world’s population, became infected with this virus. The number of deaths was estimated to be at least 50 million worldwide, with about 675,000 occurring in the United States’ (‘Centers for Disease

Was Asian 'flu (which, incidentally, I contracted in the 50s)? Will the next influenza mutation be another? What about asthma, smallpox, polio? The list is endless. Who decides?

Let me end this section with some words from C.H.Spurgeon:

God many times works contrary to outward likelihoods... Divine providence is to be read backward. Joseph was made a slave – that he might be made a favourite. Who would have thought that... the dungeon had been the way to the court, error is [as?] a means to clear truth, and bondage makes way for liberty? Thus have we found sickness work for our health – and poverty promote our wealth. Our worst days have turned out to be our best days; and our low estate has lifted us on high. When storms come, we may welcome them, for they bring blessing on their wings. But when our calm is long and deep, we ought to be on our watch, lest stagnation and disease should come of it!³⁵ Science talks of curing by likes; but the heavenly physician heals both by likes and by contraries. In fact, he bends all things to his gracious purpose! To judge his proceedings is folly and ingratitude. What can we know? Especially what can we know of his design and purpose – while his work is yet on the anvil? Our judgments at their best are only moderated foolishness. We are neither prophets nor sons of prophets, and it would be wise if we would no more speculate upon the results of his divine operations – but firmly believe and patiently wait until the providence comes to the flower and to the seed, and God becomes his own interpreter!³⁶

Control and Prevention' website). Total World War 1 casualties amounted to about 40 million, half being deaths.

³⁵ Richard de Courcy or Augustus Toplady: 'Whene'er becalmed I lie,/ When wind and storm subside,/ Then to my succour fly,/ And keep me near thy side;/ For more the treacherous calm I dread/ Than tempests bursting o'er my head'. Alternative lines 2-4: 'And storms forbear to toss,/ Be thou, dear Lord, still nigh,/ Lest I should suffer loss'.

³⁶ C.H.Spurgeon: *Flowers from a Puritan's Garden*; clearly he had William Cowper in mind: 'His [God's] purposes will ripen fast,/ Unfolding ev'ry hour;/ The bud may have a bitter taste,/ But sweet will be the flow'r.

* * *

Now I want to be clear: I am fully persuaded that we, all of us – every member of the entire human race – have fallen in Adam, and consequently we are all by nature already condemned under the wrath of God, under the curse of sin and death, and heading for eternal punishment. Physical death is the one inevitable for all, without exception. Everybody knows it. Experience confirms it. The Bible asserts it, and tells us why: death entered the human race through Adam's fall, each of us is a sinner from conception, and so every last one of us will die (Gen. 2:16-17; 3:1-24; Ps. 51:5; Rom. 5:12-21; 1 Cor. 15:21-22; Eph. 2:1-3). Whether from Covid, old age, cancer, cardiac arrest, a car, train or plane crash, shipwreck, or whatever, death is certain. For all the human race.³⁷

Furthermore, I know that in addition to his judgments upon Israel for their departure from the covenant (to which I have already referred), Scripture records how, on occasion, God has visited men with signal, catastrophic judgments for sin. Space forbids a detailed examination of, say, the flood (Gen. 6 – 8), the death of Nadab and Abihu (Lev. 10:1-2), the execution of the sabbath-breaker (Num. 15:32-36), the deaths of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-11), of Herod (Acts 12:20-23), and in the church at Corinth (1 Cor. 11:27-32). Yes, on occasions such as these, God has signally demonstrated his power – as well as right – to curse. All the same, it is clear that, for instance, in the days of the old covenant not every sabbath-breaker was immediately put to death, nor, in these new-covenant days has every hypocrite met a violent and sudden end on the spot, and there have been dreadful abuses of the Lord's supper which have not

Blind unbelief is sure to err,/ And scan his work in vain;/ God is his own interpreter,/ And he will make it plain'.

³⁷ See my 'The Real Virus', and my 'A Fearful Funeral Text: Yours?' on my sermonaudio.com page.

brought the same immediate consequence as at Corinth.³⁸ What can we deduce from this? I suggest that, instead of trying to formulate a general rule to apply to every situation, rather than make simplistic pronouncements to the effect that every catastrophe (whether to the individual or to the millions) is a mark of God's curse, we should confess our ignorance of the inscrutable mind of God. Further, we should recognise that there may be special circumstances unknown to us in which God exercises his sovereignty. Above all, that we should use the reasoning behind Abraham's prayer when he was faced by God with the impending judgment of Sodom:

Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city. Will you then sweep away the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing, to put the righteous to death with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the judge of all the earth do what is just? (Gen. 18:23-25).

But I also want to make it clear that I know – and assert – that God is sovereign, and he is the first cause,³⁹ even in disaster. Take Job. At the end of the biblical record of Job's suffering, it is recorded that the people:

...showed him sympathy and comforted him for all the evil [that is, the disaster] that the LORD had brought upon him (Job 42:11).⁴⁰

³⁸ Might it not be that God uses signal judgments at the opening of each new epoch in the working out of his eternal decree of redemption?

³⁹ Second causes might be, say, faulty brakes on a car, a driver fainting at the wheel, a tree crashing onto a railway line, an iceberg breaking loose at sea, human error, and such like.

⁴⁰ See my discourse 'Who's in Control?' on my sermonaudio.com page. Job suffered, not by bad luck, not merely by Satan's malice, nor by God's curse, but as part of God's purpose in glorifying himself.

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And God tells us plainly:

The Holy One of Israel... the LORD... is wise and brings disaster (Isa. 31:1-2).

I form light and create darkness; I make well-being and create calamity; I am the LORD, who does all these things (Isa. 45:7).

And as God asked, rhetorically:

When disaster comes to a city, has not the LORD caused it? (Amos 3:6).

The Preacher (Convenor of Assemblies) was sure about it:

The day of prosperity... and... the day of adversity... God has made the one as well as the other (Eccles. 7:14).

And God, without being tainted by sin, is prepared to use false prophets and teachers to fulfil his purpose (1 Sam. 16:4; 1 Kings 22:19-23; Ezek. 14:9; 2 Thess. 2:11).

Yes, God truly is sovereign over everything.⁴¹

I am also fully persuaded that the evangelical world has grievously departed from God's word, and that he is, in large measure, withholding his power, and I have written at length about it.⁴² We are either in a time of judgment or approaching it. This is my conviction.⁴³

Nevertheless, admitting all this is a far cry from saying that God is cursing the world with Covid because believers have broken a man-made system of covenant theology.

⁴¹ See John Calvin: 'On How We Ought to Understand the Providence of God...' in *Treatises Against the Anabaptists and Against the Libertines*, Benjamin Wirt Farley (editor and translator), Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1982, pp244-246. See also Calvin's Institutes 2.16-17.

⁴² See, in particular, my *Evangelicals*.

⁴³ The message of Rev. 2 & 3 is clear enough: 'All the churches will know that I am he who searches mind and heart, and I will give to each of you according to your works' (Rev. 2:23).

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So much for McMahon's approach. Now for my own brief discourse.

My text is found, not in Leviticus 26 misapplied to the *ekklēsia* today, but in the words of the Lord Jesus Christ:

There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And he answered them: 'Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish' (Luke 13:1-5).

The facts can be simply stated. Disasters happen. But when they do, we cannot deduce that those who suffer the dreadful consequences of a catastrophe or epidemic are worse sinners than others who are not so afflicted, and, consequently, that God has cursed them. Specifically, it is not true to say that those who suffer under Covid are worse sinners than the rest of us who do not! Christ himself raises this very principle and deals with it: 'No, I tell you... No, I tell you'.

But can it be argued that God uses events like Pilate's massacre and the falling tower to curse the Galileans and the eighteen in Siloam, respectively, and in an arbitrary way – those who suffer being no more sinful than those who escape?

We need to pause! The very notion that God uses catastrophes to curse the victims is utterly foreign to Christ's words – both literally and, above all, in spirit. It is the crowd who, their words strongly suggest, are vindictive and almost

certainly thinking in terms of ‘curse’.⁴⁴ Christ clearly has another agenda in mind.

Let me explore it.

All men without exception are born under the wrath of God, yes. And all men without exception will have to face God in judgment because of sin, yes. Disease, corruption, catastrophe and death are in the world because of sin, because of the fall of man (Gen. 3:8-24; 5:29; Rom. 5:12-21; 8:18-23; Heb. 6:8), yes. But it is impossible to be specific and say one man is more sinful than another and therefore is being cursed by God with Covid, or whatever. Not only is it impossible; it is utterly wrong. Some sinners will never suffer in a major catastrophe; in fact, some will prosper through life; and this, despite their sin. But this does not alter the fact that all have sinned, that all are condemned in sin under the wrath of God (John 3:18,36; Rom. 1:18; 3:23; 5:1-21; Eph. 2:1-3, and so on).

So far so good. But I haven’t yet reached the crux of Christ’s discourse. Let me do so now.

Notice how Christ moves from addressing sinners in the third person (they, those, them) to addressing his hearers (including all who read or hear his word today) in the second person (you), turning the crowd’s question back upon those who raised it:

Unless *you* repent, *you* will all likewise perish... Unless *you* repent, *you* will all likewise perish.

And do not miss the universal nature of this:

Unless you repent, you will *all* likewise perish... Unless you repent, you will *all* likewise perish.

⁴⁴ Verging on superstition, I suggest. Take Tudor England, when, if a woman gave birth to a malformed foetus, it was commonly thought this indicated that she had been guilty of some sin. Anne Boleyn is, perhaps, the most famous woman ever to experience this.

The 'likewise' does not mean 'precisely like the Galileans' or 'precisely like the eighteen of Siloam'. Nor does it mean that they will perish in a train crash, in a tsunami, by Covid, or whatever. Rather: 'Unless you repent, you will all likewise – just as certainly, just as irrevocably, just as eternally – perish' And Christ repeats it: 'Unless you repent, you will all likewise – as certainly, as irrevocably, as eternally – perish'.

You may perish in an instant; you may not. Be that as it may, it is certain that you will reach the end of this mortal life and find yourself swept into eternity, and have to stand before God. The way you meet your end is not the issue. The vital point is that you will die and enter eternity. And you need to prepare for this certainty.

How grievous it is to think of the care, time and money which most men and women spend on taking out insurance against mere possibilities and temporalities – risk to home, health, holiday and retirement – when so little thought is given to preparation for the one absolute certainty, and the one which carries the most momentous, eternal consequences – death!

That is why I am addressing you now: Unless YOU repent, reader, you will perish. Indeed, the body will die, and it matters not how, whether it's Covid, or a train crash or what. You may even live a long healthy, happy, peaceful life without much suffering, but the time will come when your body will be turned to dust. It is your eternal destiny that counts. What will happen to you after your death?

* * *

Two trains collided in the Clayton Tunnel on the Brighton line on Sunday, August 25th, 1861, resulting in twenty-three deaths and nearly two hundred severely injured. Just over a week later, on Monday, September 2nd, 1861, a train wreck in Kentish Town Fields claimed sixteen more lives, with over three hundred injured. In response to these two

disasters, and, in particular, in response to those who attributed the disasters to God's curse upon sabbath breakers,⁴⁵ on the following Sunday (September 8th, 1861), C.H.Spurgeon preached a sermon on Luke 13:1-5, entitled 'Accidents, Not Punishments'. What moved him, of course, was not a million miles away, in principle, from McMahan's thesis. Spurgeon opened his first heading thus:

First, then, LET US TAKE HEED THAT WE DO NOT DRAW THE RASH AND HASTY CONCLUSION FROM TERRIBLE ACCIDENTS, THAT THOSE WHO SUFFER BY THEM SUFFER ON ACCOUNT OF THEIR SINS.

It has been most absurdly stated that those who travel on the first day of the week and meet with an accident, ought to regard that accident as being a judgment from God upon them on account of their violating the Christian's day of worship. It has been stated even by godly ministers that the late deplorable collision should be looked upon as an exceedingly wonderful and remarkable visitation of the wrath of God against those unhappy persons who happened to be in the Clayton tunnel. Now I enter my solemn protest against such an inference as that, not in my own name, but in the name of him who is the Christian's Master and the Christian's Teacher. I say of those who were crushed in that tunnel, do you think that they were sinners above all the sinners? 'I tell you all, [No;] but, except you repent, you shall all likewise perish'. Or those who perished but last Monday, do you think that they were sinners above all the sinners that were in London? 'I tell you, No; but, except you repent, you shall all likewise perish'. Now, mark, I would not deny but what there have sometimes been judgments of God upon particular persons for sin; sometimes, and I think but exceedingly rarely, such things have occurred. Some of us have heard in our own

⁴⁵ That is, those who travelled on a Sunday were breaking the Reformed 'sabbath' (yet another consequence of covenant theology). The sabbath was, of course, a Jewish day under the old covenant, lasting from Friday sunset to Saturday sunset. See my *Sabbath Questions; Sabbath Notes; Essential*. Spurgeon himself, alas, thought Sunday, the Reformed 'sabbath', was 'the day of worship'. See my *Public Worship; Public Worship Notes*.

experience instances of men who have blasphemed God and defied him to destroy them, who have suddenly fallen dead; and in such cases, the punishment has so quickly followed the blasphemy that one could not help perceiving the hand of God in it. The man had wantonly asked for the judgment of God, his prayer was heard and the judgment came. And, beyond a doubt, there are what may be called natural judgments. You see a man ragged, poor, houseless; he has been profligate, he has been a drunkard, he has lost his character, and it is but the just judgment of God upon him that he should be starving, and that he should be an outcast among men. You see in the hospitals loathsome specimens of men and women foully diseased; God forbid that we should deny that in such a case – the punishment being the natural result of the sin – there is a judgment of God upon licentiousness and ungodly lusts. And the like may be said in many instances where there is so clear a link between the sin and the punishment that the blindest men may discern that God has made misery the child of sin. But in cases of accident, such as that to which I refer, and in cases of sudden and instant death, again, I say, I enter my earnest protest against the foolish and ridiculous idea that those who thus perish are sinners above all the sinners who survive unharmed...

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Whether or not Spurgeon would have responded to McMahan as I have, I have no doubt that his words fit the bill.

⁴⁶ Spurgeon sermon 408. The repeat is original.