

## Conclusion

How should believers respond to the new covenant which Christ set out in the upper room? We are helped to answer that question by facing up to another. How should Israel have responded to the covenant God gave them at Sinai through Moses?

Israel knew what was required. The old covenant and its law required undivided love to God and obedience to his word. (To give particular passages would extend this book beyond measure; it was the truth that was repeatedly hammered home by the law and by the prophets). Israel should have prized the covenant that uniquely belonged to them and them alone. Israel needed no-one to teach them the score, but God had laid it on the line right at the beginning:

If you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex. 19:5-6).

And before they had received the covenant and its law, the children of Israel had sworn heartfelt devotion:

All that the LORD has spoken we will do (Ex. 19:8).

Of course, being the day of the old covenant, all this was heavy on the word ‘do’:

What is written in the law?... ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbour as yourself’... Do this, and you will live (Luke 10:25-28; see Rom. 10:5).

Now let me take this further: how *did* Israel respond to their covenant? Was their response to their covenant something which we believers should emulate today in our response to the new covenant? Or does Israel’s response serve as a solemn warning to us believers today?

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Nobody need scratch their head in trying to answer that last question. Paul gave us the emphatic answer: Israel's sins serve as a signal warning to us believers today:

For I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ. Nevertheless, with most of them God was not pleased, for they were overthrown in the wilderness.

Now these things took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did. Do not be idolaters as some of them were; as it is written: 'The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play'. We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer. Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it (1 Cor. 10:1-13).

And we also know that:

...whatever was written in former days [that is, especially the history of Israel in the days of the old covenant] was written for our instruction (Rom. 15:4).

'Our learning'? Paul meant believers in his day – and ever after, until the end of time – during 'the last days'.<sup>1</sup> The first

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<sup>1</sup> 'The last days' started with the first coming of Christ (Heb. 1:1-2). Peter knew he was in 'the last days' when he preached at Pentecost (Acts 2:16-17). John could say 'it is the last hour' (1 John 2:18). 'The last days' or the 'latter times' or 'the last time' or 'these last times' all refer to the gospel age (1 Tim. 4:1; 2 Tim. 3:1; 1 Pet.

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believers – whether they were Jews or Greeks – although they were living in the days of the new covenant had to learn from Israel’s history; and so do we! We have not grown out of it!

The general principle, I remind you, is:

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

Clearly, believers – in the apostle’s day and now – have to learn from Israel’s history. How did Israel respond under the old, Mosaic covenant? For most of the time, badly. What can we learn from their sins, their mistakes, their failures, their history?

May I be permitted a personal statement at this point?

I have grown weary of the endless wrangling about the minutiae of the law. It seems to me that many believers who have seen the discontinuity between the two covenants, nevertheless love endlessly to engage in chewing over words and concepts such as ‘moral’, ‘natural’, and the like, trudging over the same ground again and again. Many seem to spend their lives contributing to countless threads on social media, arguing the pros and cons of the niceties, forever debating the technicalities of the change in the covenants.

In short, too often the new covenant is treated as a piece of china, a mathematical theorem, a chess gambit, or a cryptic crossword clue – nice to walk round and discuss, but in reality something divorced from real life. Some social-media addicts seem to live two lives; they have a virtual existence immersed in theological, covenantal-detail; and a real life (which is, perhaps, less real to them than the virtual) where Christendom rules the roost. It is as though the upper room

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1:20; 2 Pet. 3:3; Jude 18). Christ has come ‘at the end of the ages... to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself’ (Heb. 9:26); ‘the ends [fulfilment] of the ages have come’ upon us (1 Cor. 10:11).

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has no real impact on their actual personal and corporate experience. It is all neatly confined to a detached, cerebral ding-dong.

Don't get me wrong. There is need to probe into the fine print of the new covenant. Yes. There is need to quash the arguments of covenant theologians, and to expose the futility of the clever ploys they use to circumvent plain passages of Scripture, yes. Dispensationalists, too, need to hear the scriptural rationale behind the discontinuity between the two covenants, yes. And I have thrown my two mites into the scale on such things. But the truth is, we need to do far more than we do to apply the doctrine of the new covenant to our personal, individual and corporate lives as believers

Can anybody deny that, by the ravages of Christendom – the Fathers going back to the old covenant and imposing it upon the new – the *ekklēsia* is in a dreadful state, and we need to get things reformed?<sup>2</sup> I think not! Such a reform is long overdue; indeed, it is a matter of urgency. Again, individual believers – and I do not exclude myself – need to live in the spirit (above all, in the Holy Spirit – see Galatians 5:16,25) of the new covenant, and be increasingly transformed into Christ's likeness (Rom. 8:28-30; 12:2; 2 Cor. 3:17-18; Eph. 4:12-16; Col. 3:10; 1 John 4:17). This is why I am tired of arguing about mere technicalities while the real issues are disappearing down the drain. Talk about rearranging the deck chairs on the *Titanic* – after it has smacked into the iceberg, and is bow-down, shipping water!

Recalling Israel's failure over their covenant, let us remember these solemn words:

What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said: 'See, this is new'? It has been already in the ages before us (Eccles. 1:9-10; see also Eccles. 2:12; 3:15; 6:10).

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<sup>2</sup> See my *The Pastor; Infant; Battle*; Appendix 2 'Christendom' in my *Relationship*.

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Israel was given the old covenant at Sinai. But with their calf-making under Aaron (Ex. 32:1-35), they smashed it before ever they received it! And it wasn't long before the experts got to work, beavering away at all the fine detail, and warmly arguing with each other about the niceties of the covenant and its law. Meanwhile, Israel was going to the dogs. Literally so!<sup>3</sup> Plunging into paganism, the covenant was ruined; committing spiritual apostasy, Israel forsook God and established their own system, endlessly arguing about it among themselves. Meanwhile, they carried on performing the institutional. And they thought all was hunky-dory. But God hated it. Hear him:

What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the LORD; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of well-fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats.

When you come to appear before me, who has required of you this trampling of my courts? Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and the calling of convocations – I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause.

Come now, let us reason together, says the LORD: though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool. If you are willing and obedient, you shall eat the good of the land; but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be eaten by the sword; for the mouth of the LORD has spoken (Isa. 1:11-20).

Thus says the LORD concerning this people: 'They have loved to wander thus; they have not restrained their feet;

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<sup>3</sup> Putting 'dogs' into a Bible search-engine is enlightening.

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therefore the LORD does not accept them; now he will remember their iniquity and punish their sins’.

The LORD said to me: ‘Do not pray for the welfare of this people. Though they fast, I will not hear their cry, and though they offer burnt offering and grain offering, I will not accept them. But I will consume them by the sword, by famine, and by pestilence’ (Jer. 14:10-12).

God’s people would not listen; therefore he sent both Israel and Judah into captivity. Even after Judah’s belated return from exile, God still had to complain about his people’s continued apostasy (see Ezra and Nehemiah), and he used the post-exile prophets, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi to rebuke the nation over its sin and to encourage the people to return. Even so, God had to issue this terrible indictment, even after the return from exile:

Oh that there were one among you who would shut the doors [of the temple], that you might not kindle fire on my altar in vain! I have no pleasure in you, says the LORD of hosts, and I will not accept an offering from your hand (Mal. 1:10).

The prophets (including John the Baptist) and Christ issued repeated calls and warnings to Israel. But all in vain; the people and their leaders carried on regardless:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe the mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel! (Matt. 23:23-24).<sup>4</sup>

Now when the Pharisees gathered to him, with some of the scribes who had come from Jerusalem, they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed. (For the Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they wash their hands properly, holding to the tradition of the elders, and when they come from the marketplace, they do not eat unless they wash. And there are

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<sup>4</sup> Read the entire chapter!

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many other traditions that they observe, such as the washing of cups and pots and copper vessels and dining couches).<sup>5</sup> And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him: ‘Why do your disciples not walk according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with defiled hands?’ And he said to them: ‘Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written: “This people honours me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men”. You leave the commandment of God and hold to the tradition of men’.

And he said to them: ‘You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God in order to establish your tradition! For Moses said: “Honour your father and your mother”; and: “Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die”. But you say: “If a man tells his father or his mother: Whatever you would have gained from me is Corban”’ (that is, given to God) – then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus making void the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And many such things you do’ (Mark 7:1-13).

Behold, your house is forsaken (Luke 13:35).

And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying: ‘Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade around you and surround you and hem you in on every side and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation’ (Luke 19:41-44).

So much so, even the temple was doomed:

You see all these [glorious temple buildings], do you not? Truly, I say to you, there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down (Matt. 24:2).

As I have said, I have tried to argue for the doctrine of the new covenant. But I know that the short time I have left to me

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<sup>5</sup> Some manuscripts omit ‘dining couches’.

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must be spent on facing up to the practicalities of being under the new covenant. Individuals – I address myself first of all – must be transformed into Christ-likeness; our corporate assemblies must recover the principles, ethos and ambience of the *ekklēsia*. This is what the theology of the new covenant is about – or should be. Moses did not give Israel the tablets as a museum piece. Christ did not give us a crossword puzzle to solve. He came, he lived, he died, he was buried, he rose again, he ascended, he poured out his Spirit, and he intercedes for his people – all that, for far more than giving believers an excuse for a good chinwag! The new covenant is to be lived! It is to be experienced!

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Plenty of water has gurgled under the bridge during the 2000 years since that last Passover in the upper room, but what Christ did, and what he asserted, on that occasion really did signal a watershed in the history of the world. And we need to think about the change it marked – and actually introduced. And think deeply. We cannot simply shrug our shoulders and move on. John 13 – 17 records a pivotal, literally epoch-changing, moment in history. Historic is the word. And we must come to grips with it – *and its consequences*. Because those consequences affect us all.

Alas, getting to grips with the significance of what went on in the upper room is far from easy. In fact, I fear, it's well-nigh impossible. We can read those chapters – John 15:1-11, in particular – we can preach our sermons and write our books on what we find there, and quote selected verses – and go on doing it – and yet remain totally unaware that we are inevitably looking, as it were, through a glass wall. And no ordinary glass wall, at that. The passage of light through this particular wall utterly distorts what we think we are seeing. Indeed, we may not even see much that is earth-shattering – if anything at all – in John 15:1-11. The hall of mirrors at the



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end of the pier can't hold a candle to it!<sup>6</sup> The wall in question, of course, is Christendom.

I speak of Christendom. What do I mean by it? I am referring to the time of the Fathers (roughly the second to the fifth centuries) – the time when those theological philosopher-politicians ruled the churches. For a variety of reasons, the Fathers adulterated the new covenant, the *ekklēsia*,<sup>7</sup> in particular – by going back to the old covenant and making that the norm and pattern for the new. In so doing, they were acting directly against Christ's teaching in his parable of the wineskins (Matt. 9:16-17), and the events at the Passover meal in the upper room, what he said and did at that time, and how he prayed after the supper (John 13 – 17). In short, the Fathers were replacing the new-covenant revelation with a Judaised Christianity, replacing the age of the Spirit with the reign of a legal religion based on Moses. This took a fatal turn when the Roman emperors got involved. Under Diocletian (284-305), believers had suffered horrendous persecution, but with the reign of the so-say converted Constantine (324-337), followed by the reign of Theodosius (379-392; 392-395), Christianity (patristic-style) became the State Religion of the Empire. In this way, the political/religious conglomerate known as Christendom was formed.<sup>8</sup> A Judaised Christianity, enforced by Roman law, had now become the norm; dissension spelled 'heresy'.

And it is through this invisible – but very real – wall that we all read Scripture. I call the wall 'invisible' because Christendom thought and practice has been the all-embracing norm for such a long time that most believers are scarcely aware of its existence. Christendom is the norm, OK! But

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<sup>6</sup> A 'hall of mirrors' is a room lined with distorting mirrors to provide amusement to those who look at themselves weirdly reflected in the warping glass. 'Can't hold a candle to' means 'to fall far short of', 'can't compare with'.

<sup>7</sup> I would go further and include major parts of the gospel itself.

<sup>8</sup> See my *The Pastor; Infant; Battle*; Appendix 2 'Christendom' in my *Relationship*.

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most of us scarcely realise that Christendom has utterly distorted the new covenant for us. In particular, Christendom has a devastating effect on our understanding of the upper-room event, and how what happened there, and what was said there, should govern spiritual life. Let me put it bluntly: Christendom *ruins* the way we read the Bible, not least our understanding and experience of the new covenant. None of us is free from Christendom's cloying influence. What an amazing spectrum Christendom has produced: from gaudy, Romish smoke-and-mirrors to Evangelical party-cum-mall; from boring, institutional, dry-as-dust Reformed to happy-clappy Charismaticism – and all shades in between. You pays your money and takes your choice; all predilections catered for. Meanwhile, the new covenant – which was brought about at such tremendous cost lies in tatters.

To bring this home, let us never forget John's opening remarks, the preface to his account of the upper room:

Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end (John 13:1).

And how he demonstrated that love! He let them into the essence of the new covenant, promising them that the Spirit would expand, explain and expound it all to them in due course. Further, he allowed himself to be taken, nailed to the tree, suffer and die to redeem his own, rise again, ascend, launch his mediatorial ministry, bestowing the Spirit upon all his children.

Alas, the equivalent of Jeremiah's lamentation has to be sung today:

How the gold has grown dim, how the pure gold is changed!  
The holy stones lie scattered at the head of every street. The precious sons of Zion, worth their weight in fine gold, how they are regarded as earthen pots, the work of a potter's hands! (Lam. 4:1-2).

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A gross liberty it may be, but I cannot help but accommodate the prophet's complaint – it so aptly sums up what I feel:

How the gold has grown dim, how the pure gold is changed!  
The [principles of the new covenant] lie scattered at the head  
of every street. The [principles of the new covenant], worth  
their weight in fine gold, how they are regarded as earthen  
pots, the work of a potter's hands! (Lam. 4:1-2).

The fundamental aspect of the disaster was introduced about 1800 years ago, when the Fathers imposed the old covenant on the new. This rapidly led to the replacement of Christ as the vine by the Church/State conglomeration. Cyprian's dictum: 'There is no salvation outside the Church',<sup>9</sup> set the tone, and set it early. It wasn't long before the pope in Rome arrogated to himself the title-deeds of the global corporation. Thus Christendom became a massive tree, with the pope as the trunk, the priests as the leading branches, leaving the laity as the leaves fluttering in the breeze. The Reformers thought that all this tree needed was some judicious pruning,<sup>10</sup> whereas the Anabaptists rightly argued that the tree needed grubbing up, virtually starting afresh. Sadly, post-Reformation, Protestants have been left with a barely-modified Romanism.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Cyprian's *Letter LXXII*. Cyprian died in 258.

<sup>10</sup> Calvin reinforced Cyprian's notion: 'Beyond the pale of the Church no forgiveness of sins, no salvation, can be hoped for' (John Calvin: *Institutes* 4.1.4).

<sup>11</sup> I quote C.H. Spurgeon from my *Battle*: 'Unholy compromises are the fashion of the day; an infusion of honest blood is needed, greatly needed. Men are growing utterly careless as to religious truth, because they see the servants of God and the votaries of Baal associated in the same church, and worshipping [together]. Sincere loyalty to God brooks not this confederacy with idolaters. Errors were suffered to remain in the National Church for peace sake, and now they have become dominant... It is... clear that every error of doctrine or ordinance is as mischievous as a prophet of Baal, and should not be endured. The world is wide, and men are only responsible to God for their beliefs; but the church should not, within her borders, suffer falsehood to propagate itself. Christians

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Let me give some examples – selected out of a countless number of possibilities – to illustrate what I am talking about.

Take Reformed infant-baptisers. Patristic, Judaised thinking has seriously – catastrophically – affected them. Let me explain. Playing down – almost removing – the biblical discontinuity of the old and new covenants, treating them merely as ‘different administrations of one covenant of grace’,<sup>12</sup> the Reformed have a free hand to pick and choose

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have no right to associate themselves with any church which errs in its teaching. If we see that gross error is rampant in a church, and we join it in membership, we are partakers of its sins, and we shall have to share in its punishment in the day of visitation. It is utterly false that it does not matter to what church we belong. It matters to every man who has a conscience and loves his God... What a blessing it would have been in Luther’s time if the Reformation had been carried out completely! Great as the work was, it was, in some points, a very superficial thing, and left deadly errors untouched. The Reformation in England was checked by policy almost as soon as it commenced... The trees, which were only lopped, begin to send out their branches again, and the errors which were allowed to occupy a secondary place by permission, now come to the front... The only way in which our conscience can be kept clear before God, so that we can walk with him in light, is that we abhor every false way, and renounce everything which is not of God and of the truth. ‘To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them’ [that is, in the new covenant, Scripture]. When will Christians see this? The Bible, and the Bible alone, is said to be the religion of Protestants, but the statement is a terrible lie; the most of Protestants believe a crowd of other things over and above what is taught in the Bible; they practice ordinances destitute of scriptural authority, and believe doctrines which are not revealed by the Holy Ghost. Happy will the churches be when they shall cast off the yoke of all authority apart from the Scriptures... Away with the commandments of men... A thorough purgation is needed; a root and branch reformation is imperatively necessary’ (C.H.Spurgeon sermon 1058).

<sup>12</sup> As I have already noted, witness the miserable amount of space and weight Louis Berkhof gave to the new covenant in his *Systematic Theology*, The Banner of Truth Trust, London, 1959 (see my *Christ*).

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the bits which suit their purpose. Thus, when they want to justify their sprinkling of babies, where do they start? Start, I emphasise. Time and again, in my experience, they do what is fundamental to their thinking: they turn to the Old Testament. On infant baptism – not to say, baptismal regeneration of babies, male and female – they start with the time even before the revelation of the old covenant! They turn to Abraham (who lived even *before* the Mosaic covenant)<sup>13</sup> and circumcision.<sup>14</sup> I ask you! Whatever did Abraham know about what the new covenant teaches about the dipping of believers upon profession of faith? And why this talk of babies? Well, of course, Abraham (aged about a hundred) and his sons (Ishmael thirteen, Isaac eight days), and all the males in his household (Gen. 17:23-26; 21:4), were circumcised. But what does the new covenant say about circumcising boys and sprinkling babies (male and female) of believers? Where does it make that gigantic connecting-link between all the males in Abraham's household and all the babies born to... ? Ah, well, that's a question, is it not? Who exactly, under this system, is to be sprinkled? And why? If you think the answers to those questions are easy and straightforward, you are seriously mistaken.<sup>15</sup> What a mess! – and all stemming from not understanding the significance of the upper room!

Mention 'covenant' in the hearing of the Reformed. What springs to their mind? In all likelihood, they are thinking, not about one of the biblical covenants – principally, Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic or new – no! The Reformed mind almost inevitably latches onto the Reformed theological-construct – 'the one covenant of grace'. Can I dare to hope that this look at the upper room might encourage some Reformed to drop their theological template, and let the biblical context decide?

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<sup>13</sup> 'Moses gave you circumcision (not that it is from Moses, but from the fathers [that is, Abraham])' (John 7:22).

<sup>14</sup> See my *Infant*; 'Reformed Infant Baptismal Regeneration' in my *New-Covenant Articles Volume Fourteen*.

<sup>15</sup> See my *Infant*.

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If so, they will find that the post-Pentecost Scriptures nearly always refer to either the old covenant or the new – the covenant from God brought by Moses to Israel, or the covenant brought by Christ for his people. Once the Reformed have grasped which it is, new scriptural – as opposed to confessional – vistas will open before them!

Again, mention the word ‘law’ to the Reformed. What are they immediately thinking of? The law of Moses, which they conveniently shave down to the ten commandments, and even those they seriously recast.<sup>16</sup> Have they never understood that the believer is living in the time of Christ, in the age of the Spirit, not in the time of Moses (John 1:17, for instance)? Have they never grasped that Christ fulfilled and rendered obsolete the old covenant (Matt. 5:17; Gal. 3:19-26; Heb. 8:13)?<sup>17</sup> Do they not know that the believer is under the law of Christ, not the law of Moses (1 Cor. 9:20-21, for instance)? Do they not realise that the believer is indwelt by the Spirit, that he must walk in the Spirit, keeping in step with the Spirit, governed and moved by love, not fear (Gal. 5:13 – 6:2, for instance)?

More generally – speaking of Christendom in the round – where does the idea of ‘the minister’, ‘the pastor’, the one-man-band sermoniser doing all the teaching in the *ekklēsia*, with the overwhelming majority silent simply absorbing what comes over the pulpit desk, come from. In other words, we are talking about the clergyman (call him what you will) and his special responsibility and duty on behalf of, and for, the laity: where does he come from? Have we never taken on board the new-covenant principle of the priesthood of all believers?

And where does ‘the sanctuary’, ‘the house of God’, and attendance at such, come from? Where does ‘going to church’

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<sup>16</sup> See many of my works, especially my *Christ; Clearing; Sabbath Notes; Sabbath Questions; Essential Sabbath; Horne*.

<sup>17</sup> See my *Three; Clearing*.

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come from?<sup>18</sup> Have we never grasped that believers are the temple of the Spirit? That whenever and wherever believers meet, Christ is there (Matt. 18:20)? Do we not accept that in the new covenant there is no ‘sacred space’?

Where does the religious observance of days, months, and seasons come from?

In every case, the Fathers or their acolytes carry the can!

Such aberrations of the new covenant – and this selection, to put it mildly, has been far from exhaustive – are pure Christendom-speak. In this way, the new-covenant gospel has been adulterated by – if not replaced by – a Judaised hybrid-religion. It is as though Christ never spoke about the wineskins or gave his disciples a new (completely fresh, different) covenant! Why did Christ become incarnate? Why did he live among sinners, enduring ‘such hostility against himself’ from them (Heb. 12:3)? Why did he go to the cross? Why did he rise, ascend and pour out his Spirit? To bring about Christendom?

And what of pre-millennialists who regard prophecies of the new covenant – prophecies such as Jeremiah 31:31-34 – as really speaking of – and awaiting – fulfilment in a Jewish thousand-year kingdom centred on Jerusalem, established after the return of Christ, and which will end in disaster? And clinging to this view despite Hebrews 8:6-13; 10:12-18?

If only the upper-room event had been properly understood and acted on by the Fathers!

If only the upper-room event was properly understood and acted on by us!

I have said we need to get to grips with the new covenant; it would be better to put it the other way about: we need to let the new covenant get a grip on us.

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<sup>18</sup> See my *Attracting*.

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For my present purpose, I want to concentrate on Christendom's ruinous effect on the Lord's supper, ruinous when viewed in light of the new covenant. After all, it was in the upper room, where Christ, in setting up the new covenant, instituted the ordinance as an integral – if not, leading – part of that covenant. Consequently – it is glaringly obvious to say it, but, all the same, let me say it – our observance of the Lord's supper ought to – better, must – take full account of the upper room, and thoroughly reflect all the new-covenant principles which Christ laid out on that occasion, and which were so fully developed by the Spirit through the post-Pentecost writers. Grievously, Christendom has inflicted immense damage on the supper. I am not now referring to the obvious fatal mayhem caused by Rome with its priestly offering of the mass, and all the diabolical consequences involved in their nonsensical metaphysics of transubstantiation. No! I am coming closer to home; much closer. I am talking about what I might call Protestant observance – not excluding evangelical observance – of the supper. Christendom has wreaked havoc with that! It is still doing so!

The Fathers' fatal introduction of the pagan notion of 'sacraments'<sup>19</sup> into the new covenant, coupled with their return to the old covenant to impose sacerdotalism onto the *ekklēsia*,<sup>20</sup> inevitably led to widespread priestcraft.<sup>21</sup> But that was not all. Sacramentalism, through its reinforcement by Calvin, has, to a greater or lesser extent, permeated evangelical thinking and practice ever since the sixteenth

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<sup>19</sup> The idea that grace is conveyed to those who observe the rite. This is not confined to the supper; see my *Baptist*.

<sup>20</sup> See my *The Pastor*.

<sup>21</sup> The idea that 'the minister' – however he may be defined – is 'ordained' to convey the grace which is supposed to come through the elements. Sacerdotalism is far more widespread than many allow; it is not confined to Rome or Anglo-Catholics; it may be incipient, but it exists.



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century.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, I am sorry to say that Calvin's highly sacramental view of the supper seems to be gaining ground at the present time.

Not only that. For many, the supper has become something mystical. When the ritual is cluttered with a repeated (*ad nauseam*) liturgy – to say nothing of the flummery of robes, incantations, incense, kneeling and bowings, and all the rest – it becomes a ritual of magic.

Sad to say, I strongly suspect that for most contemporary evangelicals, though they have avoided much of the mystical-sacerdotalism which corrupts the ordinance, even so they have retained a hazy, mystical-sacramental view of the supper. If 'the pastor' or 'the minister' is away, for example, how many churches, ignoring or flouting the priesthood of all believers, do not hold the supper?<sup>23</sup> This may, to some, appear to be straining out a gnat, but 'presiding minister' spells 'priestcraft'. What comes next?

But – again, I strongly suspect – for most evangelicals, supper-observance has become little more than a routine, a tired routine at that, 'something we do' as part of the Christendom cycle, an institutionalised ritual enmeshed in an unwritten liturgy, 'sanctified' by hoary custom, tradition, and whatever else. For many, it has become a stylised, artificial, mechanical performance, with an unwritten liturgy as ritualistic as any to be found in any book of prayers. I confess my own sad sense of failure in this regard. Christ's intention in the supper in the upper room, his clear spiritual purpose in setting up this ordinance for his people for their observance until he returns, has been all-but lost, tangled in Christendom's web. Doctrinal understanding, doctrinal

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<sup>22</sup> See my *Infant* pp213-216,220-227. See Keith Mathison: 'What Is the Lord's Supper', Ligonier Ministries web page; in his article – a '7 minute read' – there are five pieces from the Westminster Larger Catechism, four from the Westminster Confession, and twenty-three references to 'sacrament'.

<sup>23</sup> See my *The Pastor*.

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discernment – even doctrinal interest, curiosity and concern – being at such a low ebb these days, if not actually increasingly discounted – I see little hope anytime soon of a recovery of Christ’s underlying purpose in the ordinance, and freeing it from Christendom’s clutches. With regard to the average evangelical-observance of the supper, it is hard to imagine how anything less like the original atmosphere in the upper room could be produced. From the neat finger-sized cubes of Wonderloaf and little plastic thimbles of red liquid, onwards to all the participants sitting upright in serried ranks facing ‘the presiding minister’ and his helpers behind the table, Christendom has sucked the essence out of the supper, virtually obliterating all the major doctrines Christ raised in the upper room, the very points I have tried to flesh-out in this book.

Take the fundamental concept or essence of the *ekklēsia* – the fundamental concept or essence, I repeat; namely, the spiritual union of all believers, a union in and with Christ, and so with the triune God. Believers are ‘the called-out ones’, ‘the separated ones’, separated from the world (1 Cor. 5:12; 2 Cor. 6:14-18), convinced that ‘the whole world lies in the power of the evil one’ (1 John 5:19; see John 17:14-18; Gal. 1:4); believers are ‘called into the fellowship of [God’s] Son, Jesus Christ our Lord (1 Cor. 1:9), having a common ‘participation [fellowship] in the Spirit’ (Phil. 2:1), enjoying ‘the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit’ (2 Cor. 13:14), absolutely separated from the world, but in union with all others who are in Christ. The New Testament is adamant on this separation of the *ekklēsia* from the world, the maintenance of its distinction from the world. Believers are not to be mixed with the world, cannot be mixed with the world (in biblical terms),<sup>24</sup> and believers’ observation of the Lord’s supper – of all experiences – must reflect this separation.

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<sup>24</sup> See my *Public*.

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Although I have already quoted these two extracts, they bear another insertion here:

Do you not know that you [believers] are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple (1 Cor. 3:16-17).

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? For we are the temple of the living God; as God said: 'I will make my dwelling among them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Therefore go out from their midst, and be separate from them, says the Lord, and touch no unclean thing; then I will welcome you, and I will be a father to you, and you shall be sons and daughters to me, says the Lord Almighty' (2 Cor. 6:14-18).

This clear and uncompromising principle of the separation of believers from the world, however, is well down the road to being virtually obliterated among many contemporary evangelicals – let alone in the wider Protestant world. Not least in the supper. What am I talking about? The supper belongs absolutely to believers, and believers only, those who are spiritually united to each other in Christ. But, in many circles today (evangelicals not excluded), the supper is something which occurs as part of 'a normal public church service' where the regenerate and unregenerate sit alongside each other and partake. Oh, the token warning of 1 Corinthians 11 may be repeated (although, I fear, even this is disappearing), but that simply washes over the heads of the hearers.

In addition, for many the supper is fast becoming a socio-religious event – much as dipping (baptism of believers) is becoming little more than a graduation celebration, a mere rite-of-passage, a ticket-of-entry, accompanied by hand-clapping, and the like. Shall we soon be immersing believers

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on profession of faith accompanied by a chorus of party poppers and squeakers?<sup>25</sup> Coupled with evangelism-by-attendance leading to inclusive preaching, all this is furthering the breakdown of the biblical separation between the *ekklēsia* and the world, and trivialising the gospel. I am bound to say that I seriously doubt that we will ever get back to apostolic practice.

I don't want to give the impression that the Lord's supper has only recently suffered abuse. Even in the time of the apostles, corruption of the supper had started. The classic case is that of Corinth.

What was it about the Lord's supper at Corinth which caused Paul concern? Let us listen to him:

When you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For, in the first place, when you come together as a church [*ekklēsia*], I hear that there are divisions among you... When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat (1 Cor. 11:17-20).

Do not miss the apostle's vital point; it sets the tone: 'When you come together as an *ekklēsia*'. Contemporary practice has adjusted this: 'When you come together as a mixed congregation of who knows what' – or cares?

We know that the apostle had to rebuke the believers at Corinth for their divisions and factions (1 Cor. 11:18-19), maybe including pride (1 Cor. 11:19), their lack of mutual love, mutual respect, and sense of unity (1 Cor. 11:20-22), and that consequently they were not discerning the body (1 Cor. 11:29). So bad had things become that Paul spoke of

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<sup>25</sup> I published this on 20th Dec. 23: 'Is this what we are to expect more of in "church services"? BBC screamer (20th Dec. 23): "Theatreland: Why are we seeing more standing ovations?" "The sector as a whole has embraced putting on really entertaining, feel-good work. That's the kind of work that encourages people to get to their feet... Another admitted there was an element of 'peer pressure', before his friend added: 'You're swept along with it, aren't you?'"

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God's 'judgment' as having already broken out within the assembly:

That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died (1 Cor. 11:30).

No wonder the apostle had begun:

In the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse (1 Cor. 11:17).

Oh! The Corinthians were observing the supper – so they thought. But, in reality, they were not! It would have been better if they had not been observing the supper at all!<sup>26</sup> And that was three hundred years *before* the founding of Christendom! My point is that the Corinthians, by their carnal behaviour, were driving a cart and horses through that we have seen Christ doing and saying in the upper room.

Let me quote the definitive apostolic passage in full:

In the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse. For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part, for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognised. When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not.

For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said: 'This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me'. In the same way also he took the cup, after supper,

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<sup>26</sup> Echoes of Isa. 1:11-20; Jer. 14:10-12; Mal. 1:10; Matt. 23:23-24; 24:2; Mark 7:1-13; Luke 13:35; 19:41-44, quoted in opening this chapter.

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saying: 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me'. For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.

So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another – if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home – so that when you come together it will not be for judgment (1 Cor. 11:17-34).

I said that was the definitive passage. But let us never forget, in an earlier passage in the same letter Paul had already laid out a fundamental supper-principle:

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. Consider the people of Israel: are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar? What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he? (1 Cor. 10:16-22).

And in the twelfth chapter of the same book, as we saw earlier, the apostle was still using the picture of the *ekklēsia* as a body to correct disorder in the assembly:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it

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is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all [spiritually] baptised into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and all were made to drink of one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member but of many... Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it. (1 Cor. 12:12-14,27).<sup>27</sup>

As I noted when quoting this passage before, Paul's argument on spiritual gifts (in 1 Corinthians 14) can be thought of in terms of the body.

Getting back to 1 Corinthians 10, what did Paul mean when he spoke of those who participate in the supper communing with 'the blood' and 'the body of Christ'? *koinōnia* means 'fellowship, association, communion, joint participation', concerning which Paul compared Jewish, pagan and Christian meals. As Gordon D.Fee observed:

Precisely what [Paul] intended by that term is problematic... The problem has to do with whether Paul's point – or emphasis – is that in sacred meals, one has *koinōnia* with the deity (in the Christian's case, with Christ himself), or with fellow-participants in the meal as they worship the deity by sacrifice and by eating in his/her honour.

I break in. While I certainly do not rule out failure to see past the physical symbols, and meditate by faith on the actual body and blood of Christ, because of Paul's 'there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread' (1 Cor. 10:17), the emphasis would seem to fall on the union between the participants. The body is the body of believers.

Fee again:

The 'fellowship'... was most likely a celebration of their common life in Christ, based on the new covenant in his blood that had previously bound them together in union with Christ by his Spirit... They were thus together in his

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<sup>27</sup> See the previous note. The words I have omitted are concerned with the way the Corinthians were wreaking havoc to the concept of the body – splintering it to pieces, and so on.

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presence, where, as host at his table, he shared anew with them the benefits of the atonement.

Fee explained:

They were by faith looking back... and were thus realising again its benefits... In this way, they shared 'in the blood of Christ'... Thus [the apostle] does not mean that by eating the bread believers have some kind of mystical 'participation in' the 'broken body' of Christ, but, as he clearly interprets in 1 Corinthians 10:17, they are herewith affirming that through Christ's death they are 'partners' in the redeemed community, the new eschatological people of God... He is not... suggesting that they become that body through this meal; in [1 Corinthians] 12:13 he says that happened through their common 'immersion' in the Spirit. Rather, by this meal, they affirm what the Spirit has already brought about through the death and resurrection of Christ.

I am not writing a treatise on the Lord's supper, and I do not want to extend this book so as to detract from the upper-room climacteric I have tried to address. To do that would be to play Christendom's game, and, at the same time – happily to mix my metaphors – to shoot myself in the foot. Avoiding that pitfall, since much contemporary supper-observance runs directly counter to the new-covenant climacteric I have tried to stress, I have felt, at the very least, that I must draw attention to what we have lost. I hope I have raised some consciousness of what we are missing – or, for those who already have a sense of that loss, confirmation of it – in the hearts of some.<sup>28</sup> That is the sum of my very limited and narrowly-defined purpose in this chapter.

My main point can only be the obvious one; our observance of the supper should positively bring home to us repeated

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<sup>28</sup> 'We read to know that we are not alone'. This is thought to be by C.S.Lewis quoting a student who told him this is what his father used to say (source, the film *Shadowlands*). But, so I understand, the screenwriter, William Nicholson, made it up (William O'Flaherty: 'We Read to Know' on the Essential C.S.Lewis website). Whoever coined it, or did not coin it, it is good!



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reminders of Christ himself, his person and his work; as he so clearly stated: ‘Do this in remembrance of me’ (Luke 22:19). Of ME! Let us never forget – or have we got so used to it because of repeated repetition – that Christ is spiritually present with his people whenever they meet (Matt. 18:20; 1 Cor. 5:3-4). Is it not grievous that present-day assemblies of the *ekklēsia*, in particular the times of supper-observance, are becoming openly and unguardedly promiscuous? How does this reflect the presence of Christ? Is it not a travesty of what Christ taught in the upper room?

We, as believers, must be brought into a heightened awareness of our mutual union with Christ and, therefore, which other, and this in terms of our clear separation from the world.

We need to recover a vibrant sense of the newness of the new covenant to which we owe so much.

Finally, the supper should always take our minds and hearts to the coming day when we shall see the visible establishment of Christ’s eternal kingdom in the new earth and new heavens at his return in glory (2 Pet. 3:13).<sup>29</sup> Proper weight should be given to the words of Christ:

Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said: ‘Take, eat; this is my body’. And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying: ‘Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the [possibly new] covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you I will not drink again of this fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father’s kingdom’ (Matt. 26:26-29; see also Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:17-20).

Christendom-observance of the Lord’s supper has little to do with the remembrance Christ set up in the upper room. That event was, as I have said, epoch-changing; how grievous it is

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<sup>29</sup> See my *Undervalued*.

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that contemporary observance of the Lord's supper – along with much else in church life – is, to put it mildly, a far cry from the principles of the new covenant! I can only hope that God might use this book to help some of us come to a better appreciation of the wonders of the new covenant, that covenant which Christ set up in the upper room. Let us never forget that it was in the closing and darkening hours just before his betrayal and crucifixion that Christ said so much about the new covenant. While the upper room does not record Christ's dying words, they are not far off. Dying words are always precious, are they not?

I close with the first and last words of John's record of the upper-room event and Christ's prayer:

Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end (John 13:1).

And the last words of Christ in his prayer:

I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them (John 17:26).

May it be so for us in experience!