

## *Sowing a Small Seed*

Paul, writing to the Galatians, gave them his testimony:

For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. For you have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone; nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia, and returned again to Damascus (Gal. 1:11-17).

As Saul of Tarsus, the apostle had been born and lived in Judaism. The more he heard of Christ, the more he hated him, and the more vehemently he persecuted him by laying cruel hands on his church (Acts 8:3; 9:4-5; 22:4-5,7-8; 26:9-11,14-15; 1 Cor. 15:9; Gal. 1:23; Phil. 3:6). But Christ had stopped him in his tracks, confronting him outside Damascus. Saul had been converted:

You have heard of my former life in Judaism, how I persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it. And I was advancing in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers. But when... [God] was pleased to...

Saul had been a dyed-in-the-wool Jew, his life had been in Judaism, he had been advancing in Judaism – indeed, he had been an exemplary Jew according to the righteousness of the law (Phil. 3:6,9), when God called him by his grace and converted him to Christ. In short, the Lord brought him out of

Judaism and openly placed him into ‘the church of God’.<sup>1</sup> Before his conversion, he had persecuted the church of God; after his conversion, he was a member of the church of God, one who spent his life preaching the gospel to advance the glory of God in the church (Eph. 3:20-21).

So what? We all know this like the back of our hand! Why make such a song and dance about it? Why write an article on it? Paul was a converted Jew; he no longer persecuted the church of God – he was a member of it! So what? Very good, no doubt, but hardly worth an article is it?

Wait a minute!

Here we meet one of those little scriptural asides which seem so trivial in themselves, yet – when seen in their proper light – punch far above their weight. Little sins cast long and deep shadows, and little asides can convey massive truth.

What am I talking about?

Covenant theologians – especially infant baptisers – like to claim that the two covenants – the old and the new, the Mosaic covenant and the new covenant – are really one and the same covenant, being, in fact, virtually one with the Abrahamic covenant. Indeed, they like to argue that all these covenants (and the Davidic) are really nothing more than different administrations of the one covenant of grace.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, they say, Israel was the church in the old covenant. As a further consequence, they go on to claim that infant baptism replaces circumcision. These wrong-headed

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<sup>1</sup> As one of the elect, as are all the elect, from eternity he had been in the church in God’s decree. The elect are actually in the church only as they trust Christ. See my *Eternal Justification: Gospel Preaching to Sinners Marred by Hyper-Calvinism*.

<sup>2</sup> It is, of course, far more complicated than this. For one thing, covenant theologians are not agreed among themselves about the Mosaic covenant. See my *Christ Is All: No Sanctification by the Law*; ‘Covenant Theology Tested’.

claims have caused – and still do cause – immense spiritual damage to millions, damage which can be eternal.

Since I have written at large in these issues,<sup>3</sup> all I want to do at this time is to sow a tiny seed, hoping that it might germinate, grow and burst its way through the confessional concrete which keeps so many from coming to a scriptural understanding on these vital matters.

Let us get down to brass tacks.

Paul was born a Jew and was advancing in Judaism. According to covenant theologians, therefore, he was born a member of the church of God, sealed in it by his eighth-day circumcision (Phil. 3:5). Indeed, he must have been an exemplary member of the church. Yet he tells us that while he was a Jew, while he was advancing in Judaism, he persecuted the church of God.

So was he persecuting his own people, the Jews?

Of course not! As a Jew, he was persecuting believers.

You see the point?

Paul only entered the church of God by conversion. Israel never was the church of God. The church did not come into existence until Christ established the new covenant. Birth does not qualify for membership of the church of God (John 1:11-13). These are obvious – but vital – scriptural facts.

Covenant theologians, alas, fly in the face of these biblical facts.

Take Louis Berkhof. Writing on the Sinaitic covenant, Berkhof was categorical: ‘In a large measure Church and State became one. To be in the Church was to be in the nation, and

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<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, my *Infant Baptism Tested*; ‘*A Gospel Church*’: *A Warning*; *Clarity Dispelling Confusion: S.W.Lynd on the Abrahamic Covenant*; “‘*A Gospel Church*’: *A Warning*’.

*vice-versa*, and to leave the Church was to leave the nation'.<sup>4</sup> What a manifestly false assertion! The nation of Israel the church? Matthew Henry, commenting on Mark 2:23 where it is recorded that the disciples ate the corn on the sabbath, said: 'What a poor breakfast Christ's disciples had on a sabbath day morning, when they were going to church!' Going to church? They must have had a remarkably long journey that sabbath. The church was not even founded at the time. And what a mongrel mix up – the sabbath and the church! Nevertheless, there is the claim – the church is the same in both Testaments, in both covenants, infant baptisers say. John Calvin frequently talked in such terms.<sup>5</sup> As did Dick Lucas when preaching on the Old Testament. Sadly, some Baptists agree with them; Erroll Hulse, for instance, who said: 'The gospel Church is not a different Church from that which existed in the Old Testament period!'<sup>6</sup>

Nonsense; loose, dangerous nonsense!

Paul's testimony proves it to be nonsense. As a circumcised Jew before his conversion, he was a fully-paid up member of Israel! Israel was not the church!

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<sup>4</sup> Louis Berkhof: *Systematic Theology*, The Banner of Truth Trust, London, 1959, p298.

<sup>5</sup> Take, for instance, this: 'When the army of the Assyrians laid siege to the holy city Jerusalem, who was it that made such havoc among them as compelled them to raise the siege, but the angel who was appointed at that time for the defence of the Church?... [God] rejected the tribe of Ephraim; not that he cast them off for ever, or completely severed them from the rest of the body of the Church, but he would not have the ark of his covenant to reside any longer within the boundaries of that tribe... We know that when the anger of God is extended over the whole body of the Church, as the good and the bad are mingled together in her, the former are punished in common with the latter, even as Ezekiel, Jeremiah, Daniel, and others, were carried into captivity... Without a signal and extraordinary interposition on his part, no hope could be entertained of the restoration of the Church' (John Calvin commenting on Ps. 78:44,67; 79:10-11).

<sup>6</sup> Erroll Hulse: *The Restoration of Israel*, Henry E. Walter, Ltd., Worthing, 1968, p26.

Consider the other disciples of Christ. According to infant baptisers, Christ's disciples were members of the church before they met Christ. After all, they were in the covenant, they were circumcised, they belonged to the nation of Israel; hence they were members of the church, according to infant baptisers. Presumably, on regeneration leading to faith they became members again. But the point is this: if they were members of the church before they met Christ, why did Christ say that he had chosen them 'out of the world' (John 15:19)? According to infant baptisers he had chosen them out of the church!

Take the thousands of Jews who were converted, as recorded in Acts. If those Jews had been properly admitted to the church (Israel) by birth and circumcision – or as proselytes by choice and circumcision – why did they have to be openly admitted to the church all over again by baptism following their profession of faith in Christ? Why were Jewish converts – who had been circumcised – baptised? Indeed, why, if circumcised, are they today?

Foolishly, we may permit ourselves a little smile as we think of the way covenant theologians – infant baptisers, in particular – struggle to maintain their position. But a moment's reflection will wipe the smile away. Think of the way covenant theologians warp Scripture to justify their claims! Think of the delusion and its cost for millions! Think of how many are pinning their eternal hopes on their infant baptism. They are repeatedly taught – and so they come to think – that they are somehow or another right with God because they were sprinkled as a baby, or because their father or mother was 'in the covenant', and they were baby-sprinkled with that in mind!<sup>7</sup> And the entire fandango is based on their gross misunderstanding of the covenants!

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<sup>7</sup> I have not moved much in infant-baptist circles, but when preaching in one of their strongholds, I had a new experience. I met an unbeliever (aged about 60) who thus far had been impervious to the gospel, precisely on this basis: 'My father was in the covenant!'

Such men and women talk about being ‘in the covenant’; or ‘under the covenant’.<sup>8</sup> I hope this tiny seed I have sown will make them think again. I hope it will provoke them to start questioning the theology which prevents them from reading Scripture unfiltered by their Confession. More, I hope they will stop talking about being ‘in the covenant’ by reason of birth and baby sprinkling, and start talking about – and experiencing – being ‘in Christ’ by faith. Let’s have no more talk about being ‘under the covenant’; rather, we all must start to think in terms of being ‘under the blood and righteousness of Christ’ by faith.

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was his reply to all offers of mercy and the direst of warnings. Indeed, so I was told, he liked nothing better than a strong sermon on judgment! His believing son, rightly, was seriously concerned about it. This experience, as I say, was new to me. I ask those who do move among infant-baptisers: ‘Is it an isolated case?’

<sup>8</sup> I was standing with fellow-speakers at a Reformed conference for a group photograph. The birth of my grandson had been announced at the meeting that morning. I felt a nudge in my side. A Reformed minister hissed in my ear: ‘Get him under the covenant, brother; get him under the covenant’. As I recall it now, I wish I had asked: ‘On your principles, isn’t he already under the covenant?’ Or is there a difference between being ‘*in* the covenant’ and *under* it?