

A Breath of Fresh Air Wanted

A Brief Review of McGrane on NCT

Let me explain my title.

Kevin McGrane wrote a series of articles which were published in *The Gospel Magazine*, which he then expanded to produce a book that was published by The Gospel Magazine Trust in 2018, entitled *New Covenant Theology Weighed and Found Wanting*.

Kevin Bidwell (minister of Sheffield Presbyterian Church) opened his highly-approving review of McGrane's book in the *Evangelical Times* (April 2019) by saying: 'To read this book was like a breath of fresh air'.

Really?

As I will argue, whatever else may be said about McGrane's book, 'fresh air' it is not. By briefly challenging the thesis behind McGrane's book, I will explain.

Let me say straight away that I have a personal interest. Not only am I an advocate of New-Covenant Theology, but McGrane has done me the signal honour of including my name in a list of those he considers the principal exponents of New-Covenant Theology. Indeed, he has flattered me even more by treating me as its leading UK exponent. Leaving that to one side, I pay tribute to the compliment he has paid me with his thorough and extensive reading of my works. He has certainly done his homework, and I commend him for it.

Moreover, I am grateful to him in another way. In my experience, when I engage with others about their work, even sending them my manuscripts, they make no response – not even an acknowledgement. The fact is, booting my work into the long grass is probably the best way of closing down the argument. But McGrane has, off his own bat, read my material and offered a detailed response. And I sincerely thank him for it.

Of course, in so doing, he has taken a risk. So pernicious does he consider my works, and so plainly does he make his feelings about them known, it might well be that unbiased readers of his book will have their curiosity sufficiently aroused by his denouncements to encourage them to read my works in context and in full for themselves, not simply taking McGrane's digest or opinion as the last word. I certainly hope so.

Now to get down to brass tacks.

What was McGrane trying to prove? His chosen title should tell us, shouldn't it? I remind you of that title: *New Covenant Theology Weighed and Found Wanting*. New-Covenant Theology weighed. Yes, but what scale or measure was McGrane using to weigh New-Covenant Theology? What did he weigh it against? New-Covenant Theology found wanting – by what standard?

Take the front cover of McGrane's book. It has a diagram of a balance scale with two pans – one down, the other up. While strangely – incongruously – both pans are empty, the implication is clear: New-Covenant Theology is light; it cannot match the weight in the other pan. But the question is: What is in the heavy pan? What has McGrane weighed New-Covenant Theology against? We are not told on the front cover. I guess most people would assume it to be Scripture, but if they do, they are making a very serious mistake. McGrane has weighed New-Covenant Theology, not against Scripture, but against logic; to be precise, against the logic of the theology undergirding the documents produced by the Westminster Assembly in the 1640s. Unfortunately, McGrane failed to make this clear in his front-cover title and diagram.

But not to worry. As soon as we get into the book itself, all becomes clear. As he says on the first page:

This work does not purport to be an exhaustive analysis of New Covenant Theology; neither is it primarily a defence of Reformed theology. An enterprise to do justice to either of those aims would result in a work longer and more systematic than the present. What the Reformed faith teaches is clearly set out in its confessions of faith and catechisms, as well as in works of

systematic theology. In the Reformed church generally, office bearers are required to subscribe [to] a confession of faith, and there is therefore a presumption that a Reformed presbyter will be teaching a body of divinity that is publicly known and stated. His doctrine may be considered Reformed only insofar as it accords with Reformed standards, and not otherwise. The situation is entirely different with New Covenant Theology: there are no widely accepted confessions or catechisms of this movement, nor are there works anything like approaching a systematic theology, nor are there any common subscriptions; indeed, there is significant resistance to all of these.¹

A little later, he explains:

We have focused on the unreasonableness of NCT and the fallacious nature of its attacks on Reformed theology: if the doctrines of NCT are unreasonable and illogical then there are no satisfactory grounds to believe they are true; and if NCT's attacks upon Reformed theology are misinformed or fallacious then there are no grounds to believe they have any substance or weight.²

Thus it is clear: the logic and reasonableness of the theology of the Westminster documents is the standard.

But just pause for a moment. Think about this making of human logic – and human logic, man's system, man's theology, is what we are talking about – the shibboleth; just think about what McGrane said:

If the doctrines of NCT are unreasonable and illogical then there are no satisfactory grounds to believe they are true.

Really? Any teaching that does not conform to the logical system set out in the Westminster documents is false. That is what McGrane is saying. But surely Scripture must be the ground on which all doctrine must be judged! Isn't this an absolute given? Is logic, human logic, to be the test? Does McGrane insist on human logic when dealing with the seeming paradox between God's sovereignty and human responsibility? Does he demand human logic when trying to reconcile the free offer of the gospel to

¹ McGrane p1.

² McGrane p4.

sinner as sinner, duty faith and particular redemption? All these doctrines are thoroughly scriptural, yet they are incapable of being reconciled by human logic – unless one or other are pared down.³

Logic cannot be the ultimate test.

But there it is. For McGrane, the logic of the theology of Westminster is the acid test.

McGrane certainly sticks to his last. I counted twenty-five references to ‘Reformed’ in his book’s Introduction alone. As for the Index, there are six references to the Westminster Shorter Catechism, eight to Puritans and thirty to Westminster. And so it goes on – see the number of references to ‘covenant of works’, ‘covenant of grace’ and ‘moral law’ – all non-biblical phrases, philosophical inventions beloved of Reformed writers and teachers as essential elements of their system. McGrane builds his case on them. For instance, I counted over seventy-five references to ‘moral law’ in the Index.

Yes, there can be no question but that McGrane keeps to his self-appointed thesis. Even so, I think that he should have been explicit in his title.

But now we know. McGrane starts with the principle that the Reformed faith is defined by the logic of the theology set out in the Westminster documents (and, I suppose, those that are derived from them); in particular, those documents give us the definitive and final word on the law, right down to the end of the age. If any writer or teacher, therefore, has the temerity to say he does not agree with the Westminster men on the law, test his works against the Westminster documents, show that he does not agree with the Westminster men on the law, and hence prove that such a man is in error because he does not agree with Westminster on the law.

There are several things wrong with this.

³ See, for instance, my *The Gospel Offer Is Free; Amyraut & Owen Tested: And Found Wanting*; ‘The Law: Reformed Escape Routes’.

I can, of course, only speak for myself, but I think that the other men marked out by McGrane would agree with me. McGrane's effort is an entire waste of time as far as it concerns me. After all, I say quite openly and repeatedly that I disagree with John Calvin, the Puritans and the Westminster documents on the law. And I openly and repeatedly say why. And the reason? Because of Scripture, and because of the Reformed glosses that have to be wheeled out time and time again to circumvent the plain teaching of Scripture, in order to maintain their covenant theology.⁴

The point is, it does not take a book to prove that a cat has four legs. I am convinced that John Calvin and the Westminster documents are wrong on the law, that they are unbiblical in this regard, and I have said so repeatedly. So what? McGrane has proved the obvious: I don't agree with Westminster on the law.

So while I thank McGrane for reading my works and publicising the fact that I (among others) disagree with the Reformed faith on the law, it seems a bit OTT to write a book to do it!

Then again, not only has McGrane done something which – in my case – is totally unnecessary, but he has used a circular argument. He knows that I disagree with the Reformed on the law. He proceeds with the principle that the Reformed view of the law – as set out by the men of Westminster – is definitive; he then shows the obvious – that I disagree with Westminster on the law; and hence – QED – he 'proves' that I disagree with Westminster. Which takes us back to where we came in.

More important, according to McGrane, all this proves that I must be unscriptural on the law. But is disagreeing with the Westminster documents the unforgivable sin?⁵ Does disagreeing with the Reformed faith mean that my teaching must, therefore, of necessity, be unscriptural?

And this is getting us close to the nub of the question.

⁴ See my *Christ Is All: No Sanctification by the Law*.

⁵ Does McGrane tick every Westminster box? For instance, does he think the magistrate should enforce the Christian religion (presumably, for McGrane, Presbyterianism) on us all, including pagans?

The fact is, McGrane is just the latest in a very long line of Reformed writers⁶ who seem utterly incapable of setting out their views on the law without beginning with, depending on, and concluding with the Westminster documents. Oh yes, they all parrot the mantra that their confessions and catechisms are subordinate standards of faith, they all chant *sola scriptura* (the Scriptures alone for faith and practice), but time and time again their works belie them.

As an example, take this which was written about Princeton Theological Seminary, which was founded in 1812:

The name of the seminary is known in all the world. Its chief distinction is its biblical teaching. The ground of its faith is the Bible. Its only question is: 'What has God said?' Its only proof is God's word. Its professors have never reached the point of thinking that they knew more than the Bible. This seminary has always taught that there are but two questions to be considered: (1) Is this the word of God? And (2) What does it mean? This ascertained, there is nothing left but to believe and adore.

Excellent!

But in my article 'Is it Me? Or The Cat Let Out of the Bag', I show how the Seminary signally failed to live up to this claim.

And so it goes on. The Reformed claim to make Scripture the touchstone, but they all fall back on their confessions, catechisms and theology. McGrane does.

And this takes us to a very serious point.

The inescapable truth is that this Reformed blind spot is an inevitable result of the priority they afford their catechisms and confessions. One of the curses of all catechisms and confessions drilled into infants is that such documents naturally – inevitably – assume a superior position to Scripture. Scripture is reduced to

⁶ See, for instance, my 'Is it Me? Or: The Cat Let Out of the Bag'; 'A Must-Listen Podcast'; 'A Must-See Debate'; 'No Confession? Nothing to Debate!'

providing proof texts⁷ to bolster the theology the Reformed want to inculcate.⁸

And that's not all. Proof-texting is virtually a continuation of the approach to Scripture adopted by the medieval scholastics which so appalled William Tyndale when he was a student at Oxford; namely, forcing Scripture into a system of wiredrawn logic, all the while missing the big picture. As Jonathan Kleis put it:

An expectation of 'logic' and 'rationality' is deeply indebted not to Scripture (which... contains many elements which seem to stand in tension or in paradox with each other) so much as to [Christendom's] scholastic heritage. (As an aside, I find it ironic that Calvinists who demand such logical coherency are themselves at odds with Calvin himself, for, as many scholars have noted, a number of tensions exist in Calvin's own writings that he apparently did not think it necessary to resolve...)....⁹ The kind of airtight logical coherency demanded by proponents of classic Calvinist soteriology [that is, way of salvation] when evaluating alternative views is artificial rather than biblical, likely owing more to scholastic history than to inspired Scripture.¹⁰

And all this, as I say, means that the Reformed, by their dependence on proof texts, miss the big picture on the law. When I say 'big picture', I am referring to the reading of such passages – passages, not mere individual verses – as Romans 6:1 – 8:4; 2 Corinthians 3:6 – 4:6; Galatians; Ephesians 2:1-22; Philippians 3:2-16; Colossians 2:9-23, Hebrews, reading them aloud, and reading them in more than one version, weighing them carefully, and doing so without filtering them by any confession.

And this is the crux.

⁷ Proof texts, incidentally, which, in the Westminster documents, not infrequently are irrelevant to the claim being made.

⁸ This is such a common error, reaching much further than the Reformed and the matter of the law. See, for instance, the chapters 'The Fundamental Flaw' and 'What of Scripture' in my *Relationship Evangelism Exposed: A Blight on the Churches and the Ungodly*.

⁹ In fact, Calvin was self-contradictory – see, for instance, my *Infant Baptism Tested; Christ Is All*.

¹⁰ Jonathan Kleis: 'How to Avoid Reading the Bible Like a Scholastic'.

I appeal to all my readers: Let us not pay lip service to taking the Bible as our authority. Let us mean when we say it. Let us be Bereans – in deed as well as in mantra. We know the Bereans:

...received the word [the preaching of Paul and Silas] with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so (Acts 17:11).

We need to make sure the same – exactly the same – can be said of us. Alas, when it comes to addressing vital contemporary questions like the new covenant, the believer and the law, the Reformed fall back on a confession, and let the theological system contained in that confession trump all. Of them it might well be said that they:

...receive teaching, examining the Westminster documents daily to see if these things are so.

If only – if only – the Reformed would not only repeat, but act in accordance with, their confession:

The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.¹¹

Let Scripture speak! Let Scripture speak unfettered by man-made confessions!

Indeed, wasn't this one of the fundamental principles and drivers of the Reformation? Didn't Tyndale give his life blood so that Englishmen could read Scripture for themselves, unfiltered by the priests? Isn't it ironic that Reformed men today so readily fall back to the papist principle which the original Reformers so greatly detested! Substitute 'Council of Trent' for 'Westminster documents' and the principle is the same.¹²

¹¹ Westminster Confession 1.10.

¹² Similarly, if Rome would go back to Scripture and not stop with the Fathers, their priestcraft would collapse. Substitute 'Reformed' for 'Rome', 'Westminster' for 'Fathers', and 'the law' for 'priestcraft', and the picture will be in focus.

Of far greater importance, God has made his mind – and our duty – as plain as a pikestaff in Scripture.

Take the old covenant:

You shall not add to the word that I command you, nor take from it, that you may keep the commandments of the Lord your God that I command you (Deut. 4:2).

Everything that I command you, you shall be careful to do. You shall not add to it or take from it (Deut. 12:32).

Be... careful to do according to all the law that Moses my servant commanded you. Do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left (Josh. 1:7)

Every word of God proves true... Do not add to his words, lest he rebuke you and you be found a liar (Prov. 30:5-6).

To the teaching [that is, the law, Scripture] and to the testimony! If they will not speak according to this word, it is because they have no light (Isa. 8:20).

And, taking Christ's words in the period of transition between the covenants as a command, we must 'search the Scriptures' (John 5:39).

Things are no different in the new covenant:

[The Bereans] received the word [the preaching of Paul and Silas] with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so (Acts 17:11).

The sacred writings... are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. 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. 3:15-17).

I warn everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, God will add to him the plagues described in this book, and if anyone takes away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God will take away his share in the tree of life and in the holy city, which are described in this book (Rev. 22:18-19).

I appeal to Reformed teachers: Don't nod your head solemnly at such extracts. Get on and do it! Do it over the question of the law. Reading Scripture through the Westminster documents, using Scripture to proof-text the Westminster documents, falls foul of the above principles. The Reformed need to heed Paul's charge to Timothy:

I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word (2 Tim. 4:1-2).

How solemn a charge is that! How weighty is its introduction! And how poignant when you recall that this is almost certainly Paul's final charge, as recorded in Scripture, before his death (2 Tim. 4:6)!

Yes, indeed, preach the word – not the confession or catechism, nor the theology behind the confession. This is not an empty comparison. I recall John de Witt at a Banner of Truth Minister's Conference bemoaning that the following Sunday he had to preach on the trinity – the next topic in the confession. I say to such men: 'Preach the word', not men's ideas imposed on the word, not systematic theology encapsulated in a confession.

To be specific: What McGrane now needs to do is what I attempted in my *Christ Is All* – take every New Testament passage on law and expound it in its context. As for myself, I might have been wrong on every single passage – I admit it. But at least that is what I did; I tried to expound Scripture in its context. Of course, if being Reformed, if conforming to the Westminster documents, is what counts...

McGrane and I have been facing each other on paper; alas, we have been at cross purposes. We have been talking, but not in the same conversation. We are agreed that the Westminster documents are adamant that the law (at least the ten commandments) are absolutely binding on all men today, and is the believer's perfect rule for progressive sanctification. OK. Fine. McGrane is *pro* Westminster on the law; I am not. OK. Fine. We could go on and include the Reformed insistence of preaching the law to prepare sinners for Christ. OK.

But now let us have the real conversation. What does Scripture say on these matters? Scripture – not a Puritan confession. I have set out my position in a number of books. Will McGrane now do the same? If McGrane really does believe the Westminster documents are subsidiary to Scripture, if he really does believe in *sola scriptura*, let him prove it by giving us a detailed exposition of the law in Scripture in context without any mention of ‘Reformed’, ‘Westminster’, ‘confession’, ‘Puritan’, ‘covenant of works’, ‘covenant of grace’, ‘covenant of redemption’ or ‘moral law’. After all, none of those words or phrases appear in Scripture, so the apostles and their readers must have understood about the law without using such terms. We must be able to do the same. Will McGrane do it?

If so, that will be worth waiting for! When may we expect it?

The fact is, whatever McGrane’s book is, it can hardly be called (as Bidwell) ‘fresh air’. On my reckoning, it is at least 370 years old; and going back to Calvin, we need to add another 100 years; and going back to Aquinas... How about going back 2000 years to Scripture, and sticking with Scripture unfiltered? Will McGrane do that?

Now... wouldn’t that be a breath of fresh air!