

## *Christ the Covenant?*

Consider this prophecy from Isaiah:

Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my Spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to the nations. He will not cry aloud or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a faintly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his law. Thus says God, the Lord, who created the heavens and stretched them out, who spread out the earth and what comes from it, who gives breath to the people on it and spirit to those who walk in it: 'I am the Lord; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness. I am the Lord; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols. Behold, the former things have come to pass, and new things I now declare; before they spring forth I tell you of them' (Isa. 42:1-9).

The relevant words are these: 'I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations'. To whom was God speaking? We need be in no doubt. In the New Testament, Isaiah 42 is quoted of Christ:

Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles. He will not quarrel or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets; a bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not quench, until he brings justice to victory; and in his name the Gentiles will hope (Matt. 12:18-21).<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See also Matt. 3:17; 17:5; Mark 1:11; Luke 4:18-21; 9:35; John 3:34.

Christ is the covenant. As Isaiah said again in his prophecy: ‘I will keep you and give you as a covenant to the people’ (Isa. 49:8).<sup>2</sup>

Christ is the covenant; that is, Christ is the new covenant. In this brief article I want to ask how we should understand this. And there is need, since some new-covenant theologians interpret this prophecy in a way which leads to far-reaching consequences, radical consequences, unbiblical consequences. For reasons which will become apparent, I will call their interpretation ‘the mystical view’.<sup>3</sup> Before we adopt this view, we must make sure that its interpretation of the prophet is right. In this, as in all things, we need the Berean spirit (Acts 17:11), searching the Scriptures to verify every claim. And that is what I want to do here.<sup>4</sup>

Let Chad R. Bresson make the mystical case. Speaking of the believer, Bresson declared:

All behavioural norms, including those detailed in the decalogue, are ultimately defined by and expressed in the person and work of Jesus Christ.<sup>5</sup>

Very good. As far as it goes. However, although I would not fault a man for a word, notice what Bresson did *not* say. While he spoke of the person and work of Christ, he failed to mention the words, the teaching, the commands of Christ. And this was a very serious omission. Christ was a preacher, a teacher, a prophet. Indeed, Moses made this very point (Deut. 18:15-18). Bresson’s omission (if an omission can do such a thing) cast a long shadow.

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<sup>2</sup> All those I engage with in this article agree with me that this is Christ, not Israel.

<sup>3</sup> I could call it ‘the personified view’ or ‘the enfleshment view’. By ‘mystical’, I do not mean ‘mystery’. Of course, the union of the believer with Christ is a mystery, but the mystical here is the real danger of thinking in terms of absorption of the human into the divine.

<sup>4</sup> Not that I give the full arguments behind what I say. For that, see my works, especially *Christ is All: No Sanctification by the Law*; ‘Believers Under the Law’.

<sup>5</sup> Chad Richard Bresson: ‘Christ, Our Covenant: A Brief Survey’.

I take note of his ‘ultimately’: yes, the believer’s standard is ‘ultimately’ Christ, but Christ and his commands are inseparable, and both he and they are spelled out in Scripture, and only in Scripture; especially, in accordance with Christ’s promise (John 16:12-15), the post-Pentecost writings, where ‘the person and work [and words] of Jesus Christ’ are fully explained and expounded. *Christ, his person, his work, his words and the Scriptures are inseparable.* The fact that Bresson failed to mention this, let alone stress it, was, as I say, a very serious omission.

To move on: Bresson argued that the ideas of ‘covenant’ and ‘law’ cannot be separated.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, when speaking of the new covenant, he concluded that to say that ‘Christ is the covenant’ is the same as saying that ‘Christ is the law’ of that covenant. And since we know that in the new covenant God writes his law on the heart (Jer. 31:33), this means that Christ himself is written on the believer’s heart. So, for the believer, according to Bresson, Christ is written on the heart, Christ is the law, Christ is the covenant. Or, rather, the Holy Spirit, the indwelling law of Christ, is the law of Christ. Thus the law of Christ is a person – the Holy Spirit:

The Holy Spirit is the indwelling law of Christ, causing new-covenant members to obey Christ the law in conformity to his image... The Holy Spirit... dwells in believers to guide their steps and conform them to Christ. Just as the old-covenant community was structured by written revelation which centered in Moses, so the new-covenant community is ordered by the ‘law of Christ’ as personified and incarnated in the person of Jesus Christ, applied by the Holy Spirit, and given in the writing of the apostles and prophets (Eph. 2:20). The indwelling Holy Spirit, the law written on the heart, is the norm for Christian living.

I pause. This paragraph is confusing. On the one hand, the law of Christ (that is, the person of Christ) is ‘given in the writing of the

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<sup>6</sup> Bresson: ‘Christ, Our Covenant: A Brief Survey’. See Zachary S. Maxcey: ‘Picture-Fulfilment New Covenant Theology: A Positive Theological Development?’ I understand that those who formerly used ‘picture-fulfilment’ to describe their position no longer like this terminology.

apostles and prophets’, and yet, on the other hand, these writings are not the believer’s norm; that vital role belongs solely to ‘the indwelling Holy Spirit, the law written on the heart’. Not only that, Christ himself is the law. So, which of the three is it? According to Bresson, the written revelation has given way to the inward Spirit and Christ, and this, not Scripture, is the believer’s norm. We learn of Christ in the Scriptures, yes, but while those Scriptures tell us about Christ (and his law – the two being the same), while they inform us, they are not part of the law of Christ itself; rather, ‘the Holy Spirit is the indwelling law of Christ’.

This is a radical statement. Is it right? At the very least, Bresson has switched attention away from the Scriptures, fixing it almost exclusively on the inward work of the Spirit, on the person of the Spirit. While, during the time of the old covenant, the norm for Israel was the written law, for Bresson, now, in the new covenant, the norm for the believer is the inward Spirit. Thus the believer’s standard, the norm of Christian living, is subjective, not objective.

‘The Holy Spirit is the indwelling law of Christ’. Is this right? True, the Spirit indwells the believer (John 14:17; Rom. 8:11), but where, in Scripture, are we told that the Spirit is the law of Christ? We read of ‘the law of the Spirit of life’ in contrast with ‘the law of sin and death’ (Rom. 8:2), certainly, but I know of no place which states (or even hints) that the Spirit himself is the law of Christ, or is the believer’s norm. The Spirit regenerates sinners, gives them a new heart, and rules, governs and motivates them to obey Scripture, yes. Believers, no longer being under Mosaic or pagan law,<sup>7</sup> are under the Spirit’s regime, under the law of liberty, the law of Christ, yes, but this does not mean that the Spirit, himself, is the law of Christ.

Then again, while Bresson was right to say that believers are ‘ordered by the law of Christ’ – I would say ‘*under* the law of Christ’ (1 Cor. 9:20-21)<sup>8</sup> – where do we read that the Holy Spirit is the law, ‘is the norm’, for believers? Scriptural obedience

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<sup>7</sup> Of course it is a part of Christ’s law that the believer is subject to the State’s law (Rom. 13:1-7). But we are talking of the spiritual realm.

<sup>8</sup> See my ‘Believers Under Law’.

producing Christ-likeness (Rom. 8:29), not the Spirit, is the believer's norm. If Bresson had been right, the apostles would never have written Scripture in the form they did – with countless commands, spelling out what is required of believers. The Spirit would be doing the job, working in each believer's heart. The apostles would never have needed to write the way they did.

Again: Did the old-covenant revelation 'centre in Moses'? Moses was the mediator, the agent (Gal. 3:19) who *delivered* the law to Israel, yes, but was the law 'centred' in Moses? Not that I have ever read in Scripture. Is this a big point? Well, in saying this Bresson was effectively preparing the ground for what was to come.

Bresson: 'The law of Christ [is] personified and incarnated in the person of Jesus Christ'. Yes, Christ is the law for the believer – that is, he is the believer's standard, and his work for them is their motive for attaining that standard – but Bresson was going much further than this when he argued that Christ himself is the law, and is so actually, in that he is the law personified. The truth is, Bresson, speaking of the law of Christ, was yet again moving the focus away from Scripture. Indeed, it wasn't long before he was explicit:

Because Christ has obeyed the law on behalf of his people and has become a law for his people, unlike the external Mosaic law, the law of Christ as the Spirit applied to the redeemed is able to effect and enable the obedience and love that is in accord with Christ's obedience and love. For the new-covenant church, the law of God is no longer an external standard that demands compliance with the will of God. The law of Christ as the indwelling Spirit is now an internal person who causes and inclines us to obey God from the heart... Christ is now the objective standard by which all holiness in the Christian life is measured. The progression of history to a final new covenant guarantees the 'law of Christ', as personified and incarnated by Jesus Christ, and applied by the Spirit who is written on the heart, to be sufficient for the church.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Chad Richard Bresson: 'What Is New Covenant Theology?' Do not miss the gloss. The Spirit is not written on the heart; the law of Christ is (Jer. 31:33).

Let me deal first with Bresson's use of 'objective'. When he said that 'Christ is... the objective standard by which all holiness in the Christian life is measured', he did not mean that the law of Christ is objective, since he had already stressed that this law is internal, not external. If Bresson *had* argued that the law of Christ is objective, and had worked out that principle, I would not be engaging with him in this article.

Now for the thrust of the extract above: Bresson argued that Christ is the law, and the law of Christ, applied by the Spirit, 'effects' and 'enables' the believer's obedience. And this led on to the crunch: 'For the new-covenant church, the law of God is no longer an external standard that demands compliance with the will of God. The law of Christ... as personified and incarnated by Jesus Christ, and applied by the Spirit who is written on the heart, [is] sufficient for the church'. In other words, the law of Christ is Christ himself, and this law is entirely inward, and it is this inward law, not Scripture, that is the believer's standard.

These are far-reaching claims which carry large consequences. I agree with Bresson – the law of Moses is not the believer's rule, while the law of Christ certainly is – but, contrary to Bresson, the law of Christ, the law of God for the believer, is found in Scripture as well as being written on the believer's heart. The objective nature of the law of Christ must be maintained.

We must be clear about where we have reached. There can be no doubt that Bresson's mystical approach seriously threatens the authority of Scripture by removing it from the law of Christ, having made the law of Christ entirely inward and subjective. Do not miss 'the law of God is no longer an external standard that demands compliance with the will of God. The law of Christ as the indwelling Spirit is now an internal person who causes and inclines us to obey God from the heart'. As we saw earlier, according to Bresson, 'the Holy Spirit is the indwelling law of Christ, causing new-covenant members to obey Christ the law in conformity to his image... The Holy Spirit... dwells in believers to guide their steps and conform them to Christ'. Little wonder, then, if this teaching gains ground, believers will no longer regard themselves as being under any obligation to obey Scripture, no longer having to make any effort to obey Scripture; rather, they

will reason that the inward Christ and his Spirit is all they need, and all they are accountable to – if, indeed, ‘accountable’ is still on the agenda.<sup>10</sup> They will look upon Scripture as a source of information, certainly, but Scripture will not be the objective authority which reveals the required norm or standard for their obedience.

Moreover, it is important not to miss Bresson’s passive emphasis in all this. The inwards law ‘effects’ and ‘enables’, ‘causes’ and ‘inclines’ the believer’s obedience. As Bresson went on to say:

Christ is ‘the LAW we need to obey’ since he (and no longer the decalogue), in and of himself, is the standard by which all holiness is measured. The stone tablets have been exchanged for a person, a person who has fulfilled and now incarnates the tablets. Not only has he imputed that work to those who could never obey the law and were under its condemnation, in that imputation he has placed a new law on the heart, the Spirit, to conform us to the incarnation of the tablets.

I thoroughly endorse Bresson’s point that the law of Christ is not the decalogue. But, bearing in mind what I have already set out from his works, when I read Bresson saying that the Spirit is the law of Christ, and the Spirit, written on the heart, conforms the believer to Christ, I, at least, am left with the unmistakable impression that the believer’s submission to Scripture as part of the law of Christ has gone. Let me underline the passivity here. While I unreservedly agree that the Spirit ‘causes and inclines’ believers ‘to obey’ and ‘conform’ them to Christ, Bresson’s lack of emphasis on the believer’s responsibility to obey Scripture, coupled with his (to put it mildly) lack of emphasis on the believer’s accountability to God for failure to obey, is highly charged, to say the least.

Bresson proceeded to drive home his point:

The transfiguration... cannot be understated in consideration of Christ as the law incarnate. We do not simply obey Christ

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<sup>10</sup> See below.

because he is the lawgiver, though he is surely that.<sup>11</sup> When that voice that shakes the foundations of the heavenly temple booms out: ‘This is my beloved Son, listen to him’, it’s not merely in the context of Moses. The gloriously transfigured Messiah descends that mount not merely as the new Moses, the ultimate lawgiver, but as the new law... Unlike Deuteronomy 33, the new Moses descends the Sinai of transfiguration empty handed. Why? Because the former code has been incarnated in a person... He also descends empty handed because there is no new code to deliver. The entire paradigm for obedience has been flipped on its head.

I pause again. Of course, Christ came down from the mount of transfiguration ‘empty handed’. Unlike Moses, Christ did not ascend the mountain to receive the law, the revelation from God. He had come from heaven bringing that revelation. Indeed, he himself is the revelation, the word (John 1:1-2,14). Do not miss Christ’s repeated references to ‘my commandments’, ‘my words’, ‘my teaching’ and the like (John 12:47; 13:34; 14:15,21,23, for instance). Whereas Moses was the messenger, and only the messenger of his covenant, Christ is the message as well as the messenger of the new covenant (John 1:17; see also Heb. 3:1-6).

But, according to Bresson, the believer is under no external ‘code’: ‘The former code has been incarnated in a person [that is, Christ]’ who has ‘no new code to deliver’. Indeed, ‘the entire paradigm for obedience has been flipped on its head’, which means, I suppose, that unlike Israel in the old covenant, believers have no written law to obey. But this is wrong. Christ delivered no new code to his disciples? What about Matthew 5 – 7 and John 12:47-50; 13:1 – 16:33, for a start? I have just mentioned Christ’s repeated ‘my commandments’. Now where do we discover these discourses, these commandments, this revelation? In our hearts? Or in Scripture? Are we ruled by the subjective or the objective? by feelings or revealed facts?

As for the mountain comparison, we read of Jesus going up ‘on the mountain’ – not the mount of transfiguration – where ‘he opened his mouth and taught’ (Matt. 5:1-2); he taught his law, he

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<sup>11</sup> This is right. Christ is the lawgiver. But Bresson was not conceding that the Scriptures are integral to Christ’s law.



did not receive it. And on the mountain of transfiguration, God, from the cloud, declared: ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him’ (Matt. 17:5), saying it in the presence of Elijah and Moses (representing the prophets and the law). No wonder then that after the cloud had melted away, ‘they saw no one but Jesus only’ (Matt. 17:8). On both occasions, on both mountains, Jesus the lawgiver is manifest. And since believers have to listen to Christ, obey Christ, where can they hear his word today?

Moreover, Bresson displayed a fundamental misunderstanding over this matter of ‘the code’. Paul is explicit: The believer does not serve ‘in the old way of the written code [or the letter]’. He writes:

My brothers, you... have died to the law through the body of Christ, so that you may belong to another, to him who has been raised from the dead, in order that we may bear fruit for God. For while we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, aroused by the law, were at work in our members to bear fruit for death. But now we are released from the law, having died to that which held us captive, so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit and not in the old way of the written code [or the letter] (Rom. 7:4-6).

God... has made us sufficient to be ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter but of the Spirit. For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. Now if the ministry of death, carved in letters on stone, came with such glory that the Israelites could not gaze at Moses’ face because of its glory, which was being brought to an end, will not the ministry of the Spirit have even more glory? For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, the ministry of righteousness must far exceed it in glory. Indeed, in this case, what once had glory has come to have no glory at all, because of the glory that surpasses it. For if what was being brought to an end came with glory, much more will what is permanent have glory (2 Cor. 3:5-11).

Now what does the apostle mean when he speaks of ‘the code’? From the *context* of these passages (Romans 6:1 – 7:6; 2 Corinthians 3:5 – 4:6), it is clear that when Paul talks of ‘the code’ or ‘letter’ he is referring to the age of the old covenant, the time when unregenerate Israel was under an external law, written

in stone and in the book of the law. The believer does not belong to that old age. Just as Paul, speaking of himself and all believers, could say that God 'has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son' (Col. 1:13), so it is true that God has transferred believers from the old age to the new. And as stark and real as the contrast is between darkness and light, so is the tremendous contrast between the two ages.

We must be clear about this contrast. It is vital. In the old covenant, the law of that covenant was entirely external, written on stone and in the book of the law; in the new covenant, the law of that covenant is internal, written on the heart (Jer. 31:33), as well as written in Scripture. This is one contrast. But there is further, though intimately connected, contrast. The old covenant was with unregenerate Israel, whereas in the new covenant, every believer, is of necessity, regenerate; that is, every believer has a new heart, a new mind, a new spirit, a new will (Ezek. 36:25-27). And it is this newness of the heart, the inward aspect of the law of Christ, which constitutes the great contrast between the new and old covenants. And it is at this point that great care is needed. While the overwhelming issue is one of contrast, there is a measure of continuity between the covenants, and one aspect of the continuity lies in the external nature of the law in both ages. But whereas in the old covenant the law was entirely external, in the new covenant the law is written both internally and externally; that is, in the believer's heart and in Scripture.

And when we read that in the new covenant the law is written on the heart, we are, of course, not to think in literal terms. Believers have not undergone some form of heart surgery with a physical inscription of the law on the physical heart. Rather, speaking spiritually, the Spirit gives the sinner a new heart, and by means of that new heart, the child of God is given a love for Christ's law, a delight in it, a desire to treasure and keep it. God, by his Spirit, moves him thus:

I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within

you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules (Ezek. 36:25-27).

The believer, therefore, gladly takes the words of David who, being in the new covenant by anticipation, expressed it in this way: ‘Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day’ (Ps. 119:97).<sup>12</sup> The believer says this of Scripture because Scripture, as nuanced by apostolic teaching, is the law of Christ, and God has given him a heart to love that law.

As a result – and this is the pertinent point – believers, obeying Scripture from the heart, by the Spirit from a renewed heart, in union with Christ, can, by no stretch of the imagination, be likened to unregenerate Israel trying to keep a purely external law, in the power of the flesh. I cannot stress this too strongly. This is the contrast.

In Romans 7:4-6 and 2 Corinthians 3:5-11, the apostle was not for a moment suggesting that the believer is not under written Scripture – especially post-Pentecost Scripture. After all, Paul was writing such at the very time he was setting out his doctrine!<sup>13</sup> What he was saying is that the believer is no longer in the old age, no longer attempting to obey the relevant law with an unregenerate heart, in the power of the flesh. This is the point. This is the contrast. This is what Paul was talking about when he said that believers do not serve ‘in the old way of the written code’ (Rom. 7:6).

Bresson took his doctrine further: Christ is the law, and this law, being entirely internal, ‘causes’ and ‘effects’ the believer’s conformity to Christ. I have already drawn attention to this. Bresson re-stated the claim, yet again effectively removing the necessity of the believer’s submission to Scripture, removing the sense of obligation and responsibility for scriptural obedience, and accountability for failure:

As this incarnate law [Christ] descends the Sinai of transfiguration, he descends to finish his work in his own person of breaking the tyranny of the law... and in doing so, descends as

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<sup>12</sup> See also Ps. 119:47-48,113,127,163,165. For the way to understand these statements, see my *Psalm 119 and The New Covenant*.

<sup>13</sup> See also 1 John 2:20-21,27 for the same point.

a law that will cause his people to conform to his standard, his image... The law written on hearts of flesh comes to dwell among his people, even as the lawgiver, law, and judge begins his rule from the heavens. This isn't simply an exchange of code for code. The new law written on hearts of flesh causes conformity to the image of the Son. This 'law' is alive, doing what the old code could never do... effecting transformation in those who are 'under' it.

This is so important, I must highlight the relevant words: the law of Christ 'causes' and 'effects' the believer's obedience. I do not deny – indeed, I glory in the fact – that the Spirit motivates and enables the believer to obey, but Bresson, by stressing God's activity and arguing against the *rule* of Scripture, has ended up in an unscriptural position: the believer is passive.

Notice, further, Bresson's use of quotation marks for 'law' and 'under'. Why? Those who advocate the mystical view are anxious to avoid all talk of the believer being 'under the law of Christ', especially when Scripture is put at the heart of that law (along with the work of the Spirit). But, as I have shown,<sup>14</sup> Christ's law is a real law, a more penetrating law than the Mosaic law, and the believer *is* under it! Bresson, however, by his use of quotation marks, was yet again chipping away at these vital principles.

He continued:

And what of the imperatives that are so dominant in the old-covenant schema? The imperatives of the new covenant don't 'replace' the old code. Christ himself replaces the code and then implants himself in his people via the Spirit on hearts of flesh. The imperatives are the means by which Christ through his Spirit is conforming us to the image of God in his Son. Yes, even the smattering of old-covenant code which appear in the New Testament, even those moral principles in the backdrop of the decalogue, no longer have the same function as they did in the old covenant. They cannot simply be listed in the same way as code (Christ himself is the code, applied to the heart by the Spirit).

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<sup>14</sup> See my 'Believers Under Law'; 'The Penetrating Law of Christ'.

True it is that the law of Christ is not a mere ‘list’, but this does not mean that it is not objectively written in Scripture. Nobody could accuse any apostle of writing a mere list! Nevertheless, the apostles spelled out hundreds of commands and principles which the believer has to work out and apply in particular and ever-changing circumstances – work out, apply *and obey*. Even though Bresson recognised that there are ‘imperatives of the new covenant’, and although he agreed that the believer has a ‘code’, he maintained that this ‘code’ is entirely inward, and thus, as before, left no place for the Scriptures in that ‘code’ or law. Moreover, if Bresson is right, the believer is no longer actively submitting to Scripture, but is passively living out the inward work of the Spirit – or, more precisely, the Spirit is working it out through him. Christ, by his Spirit, is responsible, not the believer: ‘The imperatives are the means by which Christ through his Spirit is conforming us to the image of God in his Son’. As I have explained elsewhere,<sup>15</sup> this is getting close to hyper-Calvinism, or the Keswick teaching of ‘Let go, and let God’.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, it is not far removed from quietism.<sup>17</sup>

Bresson went on:

The imperatives... are no longer external, but internal, being worked out of us in the transformation of the Spirit. We work out the imperatives of the new covenant, we do the imperatives because conformity through them to the image of Christ is who we are. To suggest that the imperatives are new code replacing old code is pulling an old paradigm into the new, when in fact, the very nature of commands and imperatives in the new covenant has been changed.

Yes, as Bresson did agree, believers ‘work out’ commands, they ‘do the imperatives’, but the truth is, he claimed, these commands

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<sup>15</sup> ‘The Obedience of Faith’.

<sup>16</sup> ‘Obedience isn’t acquiescence to an external demand, but the manifestation of an inward reality’ (Chad Richard Bresson: ‘The Incarnation of the Abstract: New Covenant Theology and the Enfleshment of the Law’). ‘Manifestation’ by whom? Does the Spirit manifest it? Or does the believer manifest it by his active obedience to Scripture, moved by the Spirit?

<sup>17</sup> ‘Abandonment of the will as a form of religious mysticism’.

or imperatives are really ‘worked out of [them by] the Spirit’. As I say, according to this – when coupled with Bresson’s relegation of Scripture (at best) to the sidelines – the believer’s conformity to Christ really amounts to little more than a passive experience of the Spirit working within him. The believer becomes a virtual spectator watching the Spirit (and/or Christ) produce Christ-likeness in and through him:

Thus, Christ’s descent from Sinai transfiguration and his ascent to his throne must change everything we ever thought about law, law-keeping and imperative-obeying. Christ the King is Christ the law. The very fingers that carved out the words in the tablets have now taken on flesh and have become the word imprinted by the Spirit on the heart... The one who became a new covenant for his people now creates covenant-keepers through his Spirit who produces covenant-keeping. The new *torah*, who is both the original lawgiver and perfect lawkeeper, produces obedience in those who are indwelt by the Spirit, the law written on the heart... This is the new covenant. Things are not the same.<sup>18</sup>

And yet, as we know, God’s promise in the new covenant is explicit: ‘I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules’ (Ezek. 36:27). Who needs these ‘statutes’ and ‘rules’ – the believer or the Spirit? Who needs to be ‘careful’? And who has to walk in obedience to God’s statutes and rules? Yes, the Spirit causes the believer to obey Scripture, but it is the believer himself who knows he must be careful to obey and who, by God’s grace, does obey.

In what follows, note Bresson’s use of Isaiah 42:6. His case depends on his mystical interpretation of the prophet.<sup>19</sup> Do not miss the opening ‘because’:

Because Christ has become a covenant for his people and the Spirit has descended to indwell Christ’s people as the law written on the heart, there is an altogether new dynamic inherent to the question of new-covenant ethics. No longer do imperatives find their impetus from without as was true of the Mosaic code... but from within. The nature of the command itself is no longer external, but internal. Obedience isn’t

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<sup>18</sup> Chad Richard Bresson: ‘Christ, the New Torah’.

<sup>19</sup> Why did he not quote an apostle making the case?

acquiescence to an external demand, but the manifestation of an inward reality.

I agree that the believer's 'impetus' is internal, and not external, but this inward 'impetus' directs the believer to obey Scripture, and thus to conform him to Christ. Not for Bresson, however:

[Since] the law is a person [that is, Christ] [it] means [that] the law of the new covenant is not encoded in external imperatives or principles.<sup>20</sup>

Finally, we come to the ultimate in this mystical interpretation of Isaiah 42:6. According to Steve Fuchs:

When we understand Christ to be the law, we are really saying the Spirit of Christ... Christ becomes law, a law which causes righteousness to be manifest in his people, by indwelling them as Holy Spirit. He and the Spirit are one, and in the same way we are made one in nature with them by their indwelling us.<sup>21</sup>

What? Are we, as believers, 'made one in nature with [Christ and his Spirit] by their indwelling us'? This is nothing less than downright mysticism, not to say deification. I do not find this in Scripture. Believers 'share in Christ' and 'the Holy Spirit' (Heb. 3:14; 6:4), yes, and they are made 'partakers of the divine nature' (2 Pet. 1:4), yes, but this does not mean they are one in nature with Christ and the Spirit, deified.<sup>22</sup> This mystical teaching, however, gets close to the Finnish school:

Christ himself is life, righteousness and blessing, because God is all this in nature and substance. Therefore justifying faith means participation in God's essence in Christ.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Quoted by Maxcey.

<sup>21</sup> See previous note.

<sup>22</sup> As once we were 'in Adam', so now we are 'in Christ' (Rom. 5:12-19; 1 Cor. 15:22,48-49). C.H.Spurgeon: 'We become partakers of the divine nature... in any sense anything short of our being absolutely divine' (sermon number 551).

<sup>23</sup> Tuomo Mannermaa, quoted by J.Todd Billings: 'The Contemporary Reception of Luther and Calvin's Doctrine of Union with Christ: Mapping a Biblical, Catholic and Reformational Motif' in R.Ward

There is another possibility:

Docetism... produces distorted thinking about the subject of holiness or sanctification. The human element in our Christian life is played down in favour of the life of Christ (his purely divine life) being lived in and through us. In popular jargon, 'Let go, and let God' sometimes means that human effort has no place in holy living. The believer in effect is not only being divinized, but is actually being absorbed into the being of God. The real distinction between God and man which was established in creation is blurred. So, to quote another popular cliché, the believer is only a suit of clothes that Jesus wears!<sup>24</sup>

### ***A summary of the points at issue***

According to the mystical view, believers should understand that:

'Christ is the covenant' (Isa. 42:6 and 49:8), and he is so literally.

Christ (and/or his Spirit) constitutes the law of Christ, and he does so personally and really.

The law of Christ is entirely inward.

The written Scriptures are not part of the law of Christ.

Union with Christ means that they and Christ have one nature. In other words, they are deified.

They are passive in their obedience. Their obedience is entirely by Christ or his Spirit. They observe Christ working through and in them by his Spirit. This is the way of conformity to Christ.

These far-reaching conclusions are clearly contrary to the countless apostolic appeals, exhortations, commands, arguments and instructions which we find in the post-Pentecost Scriptures, urging, demanding and calling believers to be proactive, as responsible men and women under God, in their progressive

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Holder (editor) *Calvin and Luther: The Continuing Relationship*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Gottingen, 2013, pp166-167.

<sup>24</sup> Graeme Goldsworthy: 'Gospel and Wisdom' in *The Goldsworthy Trilogy*, Paternoster, Milton Keynes, reprinted 2014, p373.



sanctification. Let me take one verse to make the point. There is no possibility of passivity about this command:

Strive... for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord (Heb. 12:14, ESV).

Make every effort... to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord (NIV).

I hasten to add that in saying this I do not for a moment deny that this obedience is only possible by the work of God within the believer:

Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen (Heb. 13:20-21).

But it is not either/or. It is both:

Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure (Phil. 2:12-13).

As Jameson-Fausset-Brown explained:

‘Salvation’ is ‘worked in’ (Phil. 2:13; Eph. 1:11) believers by the Spirit, who enables them through faith to be justified once for all; but it needs, as a progressive work, to be ‘worked out’ by obedience, through the help of the same Spirit, unto perfection (2 Pet. 1:5-8). The sound Christian neither, like the formalist, rests in the means, without looking to the end, and to the Holy Spirit who alone can make the means effectual; nor, like the fanatic, hopes to attain the end without the means... God makes a new heart, and [yet] we are commanded to make us a new heart; not merely because we must use the means in order to the effect, but the effect itself is our act and our duty (Ezek. 11:19; 18:31; 36:26).<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> See also the extracts from Graeme Goldsworthy: ‘The Gospel in Revelation’ in *The Goldsworthy Trilogy*, Paternoster, Milton Keynes, reprinted 2014, pp238-239,281-282 and Wayne Grudem: *Systematic*

As I say, the conclusions which come from the mystical interpretation of Isaiah 42:6 (and Isaiah 49:8) contradict the overwhelming weight of Scripture. So much so, it is staggering to think that they depend on two texts (in truth, one text) which no New Testament writer ever interprets in this mystical way. Indeed, they depend on two texts which no New Testament writer ever uses to expound the glories of the new covenant and the law of Christ. Above all, they depend on two texts ('Christ the covenant') which no New Testament writer even quotes!<sup>26</sup>

### ***So what of Isaiah 42:6 and 49:8?***

Edward J. Young pointed out that 'covenant' and 'light' are closely connected: 'Those who receive the covenant at the same time receive light, and those to whom the light comes have thereby participated in the covenant'. As Christ is the covenant, therefore, so he is the light. Now just as Christ is not a literal light, just as the prophet's description of Christ as 'a light' is figurative, so with 'a covenant'. Moreover, the prophet did not actually predict that Christ would be the covenant. Do not miss the 'as' in 'I will give you as a covenant for the people, [as] a light for the nations': Christ was given as a covenant, as a light: 'I have come into the world as a light' (John 12:46, NIV). In other words, once again, we should be thinking in figurative terms. Of course, it is perfectly correct to say that Christ is the new covenant as long as we understand it figuratively or symbolically, and not literally. This, however, is not to imply that the prophecy lacks any fullness. As Young put it:

The language is striking, for the servant is actually identified as a covenant... That the servant is identified with the covenant of course involves the idea of his being the one through whom the covenant is mediated, but the expression implies more. In form it

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*Theology...*, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester, 1994, pdf link pp655-657, in 'Believers Under the Law of Christ'.

<sup>26</sup> The New Testament quotes Isa. 42, as I have noted, but it never uses either text to argue Christ as 'the covenant'. Indeed, when Paul and Barnabas quote Isa. 49:6 (Acts 13:46-49), they leave out the reference.

is similar to our Lord's: 'I am the resurrection and the life' (John 11:25), or the phrase in Isaiah 49:6: 'To be my salvation'. To say that the servant is the covenant is to say that all the blessings of the covenant are embodied in, have their root and origin in, and are dispersed by him. At the same time, he is himself at the centre of all blessings, and to receive them is to receive him, for without him there can be no blessings... Moses was a mediator of the [old] covenant, but the servant *is* the [new] covenant.<sup>27</sup> In New Testament terms, this means that they to whom God sovereignly bestows the grace of salvation receive the servant himself. Parallel to the expression 'covenant of the people' is the phrase 'light of the Gentiles'. Not merely does the servant bring light or lead into light, but he is himself is the light. Light is a figurative description of salvation (Isa. 49:6).<sup>28</sup>

Let me repeat the vital words: 'To say that the servant is the covenant is to say that all the blessings of the covenant are embodied in,<sup>29</sup> have their root and origin in, and are dispersed by him. At the same time, he is himself at the centre of all blessings, and to receive them is to receive him, for without him there can be no blessings'. In other words, as the apostle put it: 'Christ is all, and in all' (Col. 3:11). Thus, in accordance with Luke 24:27,32 and 1 Peter 1:10-12, Isaiah's prediction of Christ in the new covenant, Christ as the sum and substance of the new covenant, led to Colossians 3:11 as the apostolic summary of his prophecy. When writing to the Ephesians, Paul spelled it out in more detail:

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<sup>27</sup> Compare: 'Consider Jesus... who was faithful to him who appointed him, just as Moses also was faithful in all God's house. For Jesus has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses – as much more glory as the builder of a house has more honour than the house itself... Now Moses was faithful in all God's house as a servant, to testify to the things that were to be spoken later, but Christ is faithful over God's house as a son' (Heb. 3:1-6).

<sup>28</sup> Edward J. Young: *The Book Of Isaiah*, Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1972, Vol.3 pp119-121, emphasis his. Young (p278) referred the reader to the above for his comments on Isa. 49:8.

<sup>29</sup> By 'embody', Young surely meant something like 'unite, gather together, be the sum of', not 'give it a bodily form'.

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will, so that we who were the first to hope in Christ might be to the praise of his glory. In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory (Eph. 1:3-14).

But this is a far cry from the mystical view. I stress again that the prophet's language is figurative, poetic. As Young said: 'Light is a figurative description of salvation (Isa. 49:6)'.

*The Pulpit Commentary:*

The covenant between God and his people being in Christ, it is quite consistent with Hebrew usage to transfer the term to Christ himself, in whom the covenant was, as it were, embodied.<sup>30</sup> So Christ is called 'our salvation' and 'our peace', and again, 'our redemption' and 'our life'. This is the ordinary tone of Hebrew poetry, which rejoices in personification and embodiment. A prose writer would have said that the servant of the Lord would be given as the mediator of a covenant between Jehovah and his people.

In other words, 'Christ is the covenant' means that Christ is the mediator of the covenant. The prophet was expressing himself figuratively, poetically.

John Gill enlarged on this:

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<sup>30</sup> See previous note.

Christ is... the representative of his people in [the covenant], the surety, mediator, messenger, and ratifier of it, the great blessing in it, the sum and substance of it. All the blessings and promises of it are in him, and as such he is 'given'.

Once again, in the apostle's words: 'Christ is all' (Col. 3:11).

C.H. Spurgeon, preaching on Isaiah 49:8, opened by speaking of Christ as the mediator and surety of the covenant. He went on:

And I doubt not, we have also rejoiced in the thought that Christ is the sum and substance of the covenant; we believe that if we would sum up all spiritual blessings, we must say: 'Christ is all'. He is the matter, he is the substance of it; and although much might be said concerning the glories of the covenant, yet nothing could be said which is not to be found in that one word: 'Christ'.<sup>31</sup>

It is at this point that the mystical teaching leaves the rails. Its mistake becomes patent the moment we think of transubstantiation. I am sure we can all hear echoes of Martin Luther insisting on the literal reading of the text: 'This *is* my body' (Matt. 26:26). For the papist, this means that the priest holds the very flesh of Christ in his hands. For Luther it meant consubstantiation, the very flesh of Christ in the bread. Both have got it wrong. The same goes for the mystical view of Isaiah 42:6.

As soon as we apply the mystical interpretation to parallel statements such as Christ is the branch, the stem of Jesse, the root of David (Isa 4:2; 11:1,10; Jer. 23:5; 33:15; Zech. 3:8, 6:12; Rev. 5:5), the lamb (John 1:29,36), a horn (Luke 1:69),<sup>32</sup> the bread (John 6:33-35,48,51,58), the vine (John 15:1,4-5), the light (Matt. 4:16; Luke 2:32; John 8:12, 9:5; 12:35-36,46), the lion (Rev 5:5), the door or sheep gate (John 10:7-9), the shepherd (John 10:11,14), its wrongness becomes as clear as noonday.

How can we literally eat the flesh and drink the blood of Christ (John 6:48-56)? The Jews took this deliberately (John 6:52), and most of the disciples found it 'hard' (John 6:60,66). Christ, of course, was speaking spiritually, figuratively, not

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<sup>31</sup> Sermon number 103.

<sup>32</sup> "'Horn" symbolises strength' (NIV footnote).

literally (John 6:63).<sup>33</sup> In the very early days of the church, do not forget, pagans chose to interpret all this literally, and so could claim that the believers were cannibals. It seems to me that in these days some new-covenant theologians are adopting an interpretation that these critics would have eagerly latched onto.

Bresson, speaking for those of like-mind with himself, is sensitive to criticism from other new-covenant theologians:

While this [mystical] group has nowhere denied the necessity of obedience in the Christian experience of the new-covenant member, the existence of obligation between kingdom-citizen and the King [Christ], or the command and demand nature of the New Testament imperatives, there has been a persistent drumbeat of criticism from others in the new-covenant theology movement that the incarnational and objective approach to new-covenant ethics is... inherently antinomian... As awareness of the views expressed by this... [mystical] group have increased... so too has the volume of rhetoric aimed at cementing [classic] new-covenant theology's affirmation of command, demand, and obedience.<sup>34</sup>

I am securely in this critical group, and I remain unrepentantly critical of the mystic view. Let it be understood that I am not accusing Bresson and his friends of antinomianism. Do not miss the 'inherently'. I am concerned with long term consequences. We surely realise that it is not only what we say, but what people think we say, what people hear, that counts. What people bring to our words, and then take away with them, carries more weight than what we intend to say. We need to keep this in mind at all times, and do what we can to prevent our hearers and readers getting the wrong impression, and drawing the wrong conclusions. Hence the 'inherently'.

But, as I have made clear in this article, I have further criticisms of the mystical view in addition to that of inherent antinomianism. So much so, I am fully committed to do all in my power to maintain classic 'new-covenant theology's affirmation

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<sup>33</sup> How often men go wrong here. Take John 2:19-22; 3:3-15; 4:13-15; 6:34,52.

<sup>34</sup> Chad Richard Bresson: 'The Incarnation of the Abstract: New Covenant Theology and the Enfleshment of the Law'.

of command, demand, and obedience'. The believer is under the law of Christ, and that law is objectively revealed in Scripture. Moreover, the believer is responsible for obedience and is accountable for any disobedience. In saying this, I do not in the least draw back from what I have declared concerning the perfection and freedom from condemnation that the believer has in Christ,<sup>35</sup> nor do I retract what I have said about the absolute necessity of the Spirit's motivating power and grace; the believer can only obey, will only obey, Scripture because he has a new heart and the Spirit motivates him to Christ-likeness. And I have written this article as part of my contribution to the upholding of this scriptural balance.

### ***Conclusion***

Believers are under Christ as slave-master (Rom. 6:11-23), are united to him in marriage, in order to bear children for his praise (Rom. 7:1-6), are joined to Christ as branches to the vine (John 15:1-8), 'share in Christ' and 'the Holy Spirit' (Heb. 3:14; 6:4), and are made 'partakers of the divine nature' (2 Pet. 1:4), but none of this is literal.

Those who, with Bresson, advocate the literal reading of 'Christ is the covenant', run the risk (to put it no higher) of making Christ the believer's actual law, making that law to be entirely inward, and thus removing the Scriptures from the law of Christ, and, in so doing, at the very least play down the demand for the believer's accountable submission to the objective law of Christ in Scripture. This can only lead to a passive view of the believer's conformity to Christ. I have certainly met evidence of it.

But we know that the Spirit gives the elect a new heart in regeneration (writing Christ's law on the heart), unites them to Christ by faith, and moves them to obey Scripture (Phil. 2:13) to grow in likeness to Christ. There is nothing passive about

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<sup>35</sup> See, for instance, my *Fivefold Sanctification; Four 'Antinomians' Tried and Vindicated: Tobias Crisp, William Dell, John Eaton, and John Saltmarsh*.

progressive sanctification. As Christ still commands all his disciples:

You call me teacher and Lord, and you say well, for so I am... I... your Lord and teacher... have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you... If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them (John 13:13-17). A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another (John 13:34). Believe... in me... believe me (John 14:1,11). If you love me, keep my commandments (John 14:15). He who has my commandments and keeps them, it is he who loves me (John 14:21). He who does not love me does not keep my words; and the word which you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me (John 14:24). Abide in me (John 15:4). This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you (John 15:12). You are my friends if you do whatever I command you (John 15:14). These things I command you, that you love one another (John 15:17).

And Christ continues to rule his people by Scripture. As Isaac Watts put it:

*Praise to the goodness of the Lord,  
Who rules his people by his word.*

In conclusion, while I reject the mystical view, 'Christ is the covenant' does indeed convey a glorious truth, one which needs trumpeting abroad: Christ is the sum and substance of the new covenant. 'Christ is all' (Col. 3:11).