

Edmund Burke, Thomas Paine and New-Covenant Theology

What? Whatever did Edmund Burke and Thomas Paine know about new-covenant theology? – that is, if you are talking about the 18th century men who wrote against each other on political and society matters, especially revolution, the American and French Revolutions, in particular. Yes, that’s who I mean – the very same Burke and Paine.

Well, what did they know about new-covenant theology? Nothing! I never claimed they did! Look at the title again.

Edmund Burke (1729-1797) was born in Dublin of a Protestant father and a Catholic mother, was brought up and remained an Anglican who supported Catholic emancipation. He was a staunch upholder of the established Anglican religion. For Burke, the State Church has a vital role to play in maintaining a stable political system. But as for the theology of the new covenant? I wouldn’t look to Burke for much light there, I am afraid!

So what about Tom Paine? Tom Paine (1737-1809) was born in Thetford, Norfolk, of a Quaker father and Anglican mother. He was at best a Deist – that is, one who believed that God exists but is virtually absent from his creation – had no time for the Bible, the atonement, the supernatural, and so on. Knowledge of the new covenant? Zilch!

So why this article? Well, as I say, these two men engaged in an extended battle over the question of revolution, pursuing their disagreements by means of a series of pamphlets and books. While, in this article, I have no interest whatever in the ins and outs of their political disagreement, what does interest me – and it interests me very much, indeed – is the basis on which they argued.

They were agreed that they must go back to the start and argue from there. For Burke, that meant going back to the

Establishment as it was then constituted – the Glorious English Revolution of 1688, constitutional Monarchy, and the established State Church as settled in 1660. Paine stoutly disagreed. In 1792, in his ‘Rights of Man’, he wrote:

The error of those who reason by precedents drawn from antiquity respecting the rights of man is that they do not go far enough into antiquity. They stop in some of the intermediate stages of a hundred or a thousand years, and produce what was then done as a rule for the present day. This is no authority at all.

So here is the fundamental point of departure for the two men. One stopped at the established position, the *status quo*; the other wanted to go back to the beginning.

As I say, I have not the slightest interest in the political wrangle in question. But what does interest me is the question as to where we should begin when we are engaged in debate. What should be the basis on which we argue? In particular, in this matter of new-covenant theology, where should we begin? What should be the basis on which we argue?

I assert that the basis on which we should argue, the place where we should begin, is Scripture. The Reformed, however, whatever they say by way of ‘subsidiary standards’, really want to begin with, and stay with, the 17th century Reformed Confessions or their systematic theologies based on one or other of those Confessions. In this connection – *and only in this connection* – I agree with Tom Paine. To paraphrase him:

The error of those who reason from the Confessions drawn up by puritan theologians or their followers in the 17th century respecting the theology of the covenants, the law, and so on, is that they do not go far enough back. They stop at this intermediate stage of the 17th century, and produce what was then set up as a Confession as the rule for the present day. This is no authority at all. They must start with Scripture.

That’s all I wanted to say. Brief it may be, but I think it very important. Where do you stand on this vital question?