

Thoughts on Isaiah 33:22

I recently published an article on this passage in James 4:

Do not speak evil against one another, brothers [or brothers and sisters]. The one who speaks against a brother or judges his brother, speaks evil against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, he who is able to save and to destroy. But who are you to judge your neighbour? (Jas. 4:11-12).

Here is the verse which I want to concentrate on in this article:

The Lord is our Judge; the Lord is our Lawgiver; the Lord is our King; he will save us (Isa. 33:22).

The similarity between the two is unmissable. Indeed, I take the Isaiah passage to be nothing less than a prophecy of the new covenant, played out in the passage from James.

Let me say why. Isaiah had already spoken in terms which resonate with his words in Isaiah 33:22 when he had declared:

It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be lifted up above the hills; and all the nations shall flow to it, and many peoples shall come, and say: 'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths'. For out of Zion shall go forth the law [or teaching], and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples... O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord (Isa. 2:2-5).

And when he had insisted:

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

And so on. There are scores and scores of Isaiah passages which are quoted in the New Testament. See for instance, Isaiah 7:14;

8:14,17-18; 9:1,6; 11:10; 22:22; 28:16; 40:6; 42:1,4,6; 45:23; 52:7,11; 53:1-12; 54:1; 55:3; 59:20; 61:1; 65:1 and so on. Oh yes, the new covenant is certainly prophesied in Isaiah. We have a classic example of it to demonstrate the point. Isaiah prophesied:

All your children shall be taught by the Lord, and great shall be the peace of your children (Isa. 54:13).

Which, as Jesus explained, was a new-covenant prophecy:

No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day. It is written in the prophets: 'And they will all be taught by God'. Everyone who has heard and learned from the Father comes to me (John 6:44-45).

Of course, the prophet's words had relevance first to the Israel and Judah of his day. He was, in this respect, a preacher as well as a prophet; he was a preacher to his own people in his own time. But he was also a prophet for Israel, one who addressed the restoration after the captivity. Above all, however – and I mean, above all, speaking of the full import of the prophet's words – in keeping with Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36 (to mention but two chapters in two prophets), Isaiah was looking forward to the coming of Christ, his establishment of the new covenant, with his ultimate return in glory as Judge. Isaiah, in company with all the prophets, spoke of gospel days (1 Pet. 1:10-12).¹ Christ, himself – and, therefore, his covenant, the new covenant – is in all the Scriptures. Addressing the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, Christ put that beyond doubt:

Beginning with Moses and all the prophets, [Christ] interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself (Luke 24:27).

Peter, as we have seen (1 Pet. 1:10-12), certainly got the message. Furthermore, as he had declared to the Jews:

All the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and those who came after him, also proclaimed these days (Acts 3:24).

¹ See my *Christ is All* pp299-321,543-555.

And as he had told Cornelius and those gathered with him:

To [Christ] all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name (Acts 10:43).

And so Isaiah 33:22:

The Lord is our Judge; the Lord is our Lawgiver; the Lord is our King; he will save us.

The issue I want to address is this: What we are to understand by ‘the law’ and ‘the Lawgiver’ in the days of the new covenant? This is a matter of the utmost significance. But can there be any doubt about it? Starting with the latter, ‘the Lawgiver’ must be God, and the ‘the law’ must be his law, ‘the law of God’. So far, so good. But it is at this point that we must take full account of the biblical contrast between the two covenants – the old, Mosaic covenant, and the superior, better, new covenant established by Christ. The old covenant had its law, the old, Mosaic law; the new covenant has its law, the new law. A covenant and its law are intimately bound together – so much so, it is impossible to separate them. Take the old covenant:

And Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD... Then he took the book of the covenant and read it in the hearing of the people... ‘Come up to me on the mountain and wait there, that I may give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction’ (Ex. 24:4,7,12).

And the LORD said to Moses: ‘Write these words, for in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel’... And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the ten commandments (Ex. 34:27-28).

You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deut. 6:8-9; see also Deut. 11:18-20).

Take this book of the law and put it by the side of the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, that it may be there for a witness against you (Deut. 31:26).²

Hence the stone tablets, the book of the law, and the household and personal writing of the words of the law, were integral to the old covenant. Much the same can be said of the new covenant and its law, with the proviso that the new covenant and its law are superior to, better than,³ the old:

Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbour and each his brother, saying: 'Know the Lord', for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more (Jer. 31:31-34).

And I will give them one heart, and a new spirit I will put within them. I will remove the heart of stone from their flesh and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my rules and obey them. And they shall be my people, and I will be their God (Ezek. 11:19-20).

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).

And we know from Hebrews what the prophets were referring to when they spoke of a superior, better, new covenant:

² See also Ex. 19:3-8; 1 Chron. 16:15-17; Ps. 105:8-10; Isa. 24:5; Hos. 8:1; Mal. 2:8-9; Gal. 3:17-18.

³ 'Better' is the key word in Hebrews.

[The] former commandment is set aside because of its weakness and uselessness (for the law made nothing perfect); but on the other hand, a better hope is introduced, through which we draw near to God... This makes Jesus the guarantor of a better covenant (Heb. 7:18-22).

Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises. For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second. For he finds fault with them when he says: ‘Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt. For they did not continue in my covenant, and so I showed no concern for them, declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall not teach, each one his neighbour and each one his brother, saying: “Know the Lord”, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more’. In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away (Heb. 8:6-13).

When Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time until his enemies should be made a footstool for his feet. For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified. And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying: ‘This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds’, then he adds: ‘I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more’. Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin (Heb. 10:12-18).

As with covenant, so with law: better covenant, better law.

The question is, what is ‘the law of God’ in all this? Israel and Judah, listening to Isaiah in the days of the old covenant, would naturally think of the law of Moses. Quite right! The law of God for Israel was the law of Moses.

But in the days of the new covenant? New covenant, new law. Better covenant, better law. Let me draw attention to the relevant words: in the days of the new covenant, God's people will have his law, but that law will be written on their hearts by the Spirit who will give them a love for it, and who will move and enable them to obey it with care and determination.⁴

So the question is, what is 'the law of God' in the new covenant? In other words, what is the law of God for the believer? We know it cannot be the law of Moses. The believer has died to that law (Rom. 7:4-6). He is not under it (Rom. 6:14).⁵ Consequently, the believer's Lawgiver cannot be Moses; the believer's law cannot be the law of Moses.

So, whose law can it be? Well, when I read passages such as these, I have no doubt as to the answer:

The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers – it is to him you shall listen – just as you desired of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said: 'Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die'. And the Lord said to me: 'They are right in what they have spoken. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him. And whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name, I myself will require it of him' (Deut. 18:15-19; see Matt. 21:11; Luke 7:16; 24:19).

Peter, addressing the Jews, quoted Moses:

The Lord God will raise up for you a prophet like me from your brothers. You shall listen to him in whatever he tells you. And it shall be that every soul who does not listen to that prophet shall be destroyed from the people.

After which, he went on:

And all the prophets who have spoken, from Samuel and those who came after him, also proclaimed these days. You are the

⁴ Not perfectly, alas, hence the need for progressive sanctification.

⁵ I have set out my arguments in many works. See, in particular, my *Christ*.

sons of the prophets and of the covenant that God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham: ‘And in your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed’. God, having raised up his servant, sent him to you first, to bless you by turning every one of you from your wickedness (Acts 3:22-26).

I am left with only one conclusion. Although the actual phrase appears only once in Scripture (Gal. 6:2; but see 1 Cor. 9:20-21), we must be talking about Christ as the believer’s Lawgiver, and his law, ‘the law of Christ’, the believer’s law.

Now as we have seen from the extracts from Jeremiah and Ezekiel, in the new covenant Christ writes his law on his people’s hearts. That is, he gives his people a love of the Lawgiver – Christ – and a love for his law. More, he gives his people the Spirit to move and enable them to obey that law, and to do so with care and diligence, as well as delight.⁶

So far, so good. But the question is: Where are we to find that law? *It cannot be confined to the internal.* As Isaiah says:

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

Israel and Judah, of course, in the days of the old covenant, would go to the law of Moses – written on the tables and in the book of the law. And this, as Isaiah clearly implies, was verifiable. The prophets could – and frequently did – denounce Israel for breaking the law, the written law of God.

But what about the new covenant? According to the above passages in Isaiah, believers have a law, the law of their Lawgiver, Christ; they have to obey that law, and their obedience is verifiable. If the law of Christ, as some argue, is entirely inward and subjective, then there can be no possibility of any verification of obedience, with no possibility of discipline for failure. Hence, at a stroke, a massive amount of post-Pentecost Scripture has been rendered virtually otiose.⁷ Which is patent nonsense! The law of Christ, therefore, must be written

⁶ Take Ps. 1:2; 119:14,16,35, and so on. David was a prophet, speaking of the believer in the days of the new covenant.

⁷ It would inform the believer, but not rule him as law.

externally. And that can only be Scripture. See, for instance, Matthew 5 – 7, John 12:48 – 16:33, fleshed out by the apostles in the post-Pentecost Scriptures in accordance with Christ’s promise (John 15:16-17;16:12-15). In other words, believers read Christ’s law written in Scripture. Inwardly, they have the Spirit who gives them a love for that law, and who moves and empowers them to obey it, the inward law always being calibrated by the outward. Moreover, as I have shown elsewhere,⁸ the law of Christ is more penetrating than the law of Moses (see, for instance Matt. 5:21-48).

And this is what Isaiah 8:20 is concerned with. Believers are always searching Scripture (Acts 17:11) to find the law of Christ – to know it and obey it.

John Gill, linking Isaiah 8:20 with John 5:39: ‘You search the Scriptures’ or ‘Search the Scriptures’,⁹ commented on the Isaiah verse:

It is a direction of Christ’s to his disciples to attend to the writings of Moses and the prophets, to search the Scriptures, as in John 5:39 and particularly what is before said in this prophecy concerning himself...

The written word... the Scriptures, and the evangelical doctrine in them, and the testimony they give concerning Christ... according to the word of God, and testimony of Jesus.

He further commented on Isaiah 33:22:

[God] has enacted wholesome laws for his church, writes them on [his people’s] hearts, and puts his Spirit within them, to enable them to keep them. The Lord is our King, King of saints, King of Zion, made so by his Father.

And this is what C.H.Spurgeon saw in Isaiah 33:22:

And what is to be the end of it all? Our text ascribes glory to a triune God. The church is, after all her attacks, and all her salvations, to ascribe glory to the Three-in-One Jehovah. Read the verse, dear friends, ‘For the Lord is our Judge. The Lord is our Lawgiver. The Lord is our King’ – Three, yet One. O Lord,

⁸ See my *Christ*; ‘The Penetrating Law of Christ’.

⁹ Whether the mood is imperative or indicative is debateable, but the upshot is not.

be you exalted! Our Father who is in heaven, you sit on the throne and you are Judge! Jesus, son of Mary, and Son of God, you, by your holy life, have set us such an example that you are our Lawgiver! And you, indwelling Spirit, you are with us, and therefore the shout of a King is in the midst of our camps.¹⁰

Yes, Christ is his people's Lawgiver and King. But Christ's law is more than the example of Christ's life. There is more to the law of the new covenant than that! As Spurgeon well knew! Preaching on Isaiah 8:20, he declared:

Permit me to urge upon you the bringing of certain things 'to the law and to the testimony'... I would have you bring the ideas engendered in you by your early training, to the test of the book of God... Remember, also, to bring the preachers of the gospel to this standard... It is God's word that breaks the fetters and sets the prisoner free; it is God's word instrumentally that saves souls; and therefore let us bring everything to the touchstone. 'To the law and to the testimony; if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them'...

And now I charge you that are now present to read your Bibles, for one thing. Read your Bibles to know what the Bible says about you; and some of you when you turn the leaves over, will find the Bible says: 'You are in the gall of bitterness and in the bonds of iniquity'. If that startles you, turn over another page, and read this verse: 'Come unto me, all you that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest'; and when you have read that, turn to another and read: 'Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through Jesus Christ our Lord'. I pray you, put not away your Bibles till their dust condemns you; but take them out, bend your knees, seek for the Spirit of divine teaching, and turn these pages with diligent search, and see if you can find there the salvation of your souls, through our Lord Jesus Christ. May the blessing of God rest upon you in so doing, through Jesus Christ. Amen.¹¹

To sum up, let me remind you of the verse we have been looking at:

¹⁰ Spurgeon sermon 489.

¹¹ Spurgeon sermon 172. In this sermon, Spurgeon kept on urging the people to 'read their Bible'.

The Lord is our Judge; the Lord is our Lawgiver; the Lord is our King; he will save us (Isa. 33:22).

Coupled with the other passages which have appeared in this article, we can see that the believer is under law, the law of Christ. He has the Spirit who gives him a new heart to love Christ and his law. But this inward work is calibrated by the written word, which is, therefore, the law of Christ to him. Thus, by the Spirit, the believer is careful to obey Christ's law – all that God has commanded in his word, as seen through Christ and the apostles.

I close by making two applications, expressing them negatively.

First, I do not see how anybody can maintain that the believer is not under the rule, the governance, of the law of Christ, and that this law is written in Scripture.

Secondly, I do not see how anybody can dismiss new-covenant theology – for that is what I have been setting out – as antinomianism. How can new-covenant theologians be antinomian when they assert that believers are under the law of Christ, and that that law is spelled out in all Scripture as nuanced by Christ and his apostles? What is more, how can they be antinomian when they assert, as does Scripture, that the law of Christ is more penetrating than the law of Moses?