

A Theology By Any Other Name...

I am merely musing aloud, you understand, not setting out detailed arguments. They, of course, may be found in my works. Nevertheless, even though what follows consists only of thoughts, I have a purpose – a good, a significant purpose, I believe – in getting my musings down on paper (and out on audio). What I want to do is to stimulate thought and start a conversation.¹

Some advocates of new-covenant theology have long since had misgivings about the label ‘New Covenant Theology’. For my part, at the very least I have a linguistic difficulty with it; new-covenant theology is not a new version of the old covenant-theology which started in the late 16th century. No! Hence my (no doubt, some would say) pedantic use of the hyphen: ‘New-Covenant Theology’. Ah well...

Some of us would prefer no label at all, for while labels can be a convenient shortcut, the baggage they usually bring with them can greatly outweigh their benefit. Especially does this apply in theology, where nuances can have a very important role to play. But, it’s no use griping over spilt milk; we are, alas, stuck with labels. (No pun intended). And if we advocates of new-covenant theology don’t choose one for ourselves, our opponents will readily step into the breach and ‘kindly’ do it for us – and almost certainly come up with ‘Antinomian Theology’, or somesuch pejorative term.

It is along these lines that I am thinking aloud. But thinking is allowed is it not?

How about the tag ‘Fulfilment Theology’? ‘Fulfilment’ is a massive New Testament word. It is used far, far more times than the phrase ‘new covenant’. It occurs scores and scores of times. And this surely strikes a chord with new-covenant theologians;

¹ While this article is not strictly on the subject in hand, it contains relevant material.

we want to be scriptural, do we not? As for frequency of use, when searching for it my *Christ Is All: No Sanctification by the Law*, I admit I was taken aback at the number of times I myself had used the word in that work.

And it is not just its frequency. ‘Fulfil’ is pregnant with meaning in the New Testament. It is a rich word, very rich indeed.

Christ set the tone right at the start: ‘Do not think that I came to destroy the law or the prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfil. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled’ (Matt. 5:17-18). As Paul said in Galatians 5:14, the Spirit is the ‘fulfilment’ of the law, its goal, end or aim – which is, to bring about righteousness. The law, though holy, righteous and good (Rom. 7:12), being weak, could not bring about the righteousness that God required. It is the Spirit who has been given to believers in order to effect, to ‘fulfil’, the law in them, and so establish that righteousness which the law demanded but was unable to produce. Paul was not talking about ‘law-works’, law-observance, but conformity to Christ (Rom. 8:29), renewal of mind so that the believer can live to God’s pleasure (Rom. 12:1-2). This is why Paul, when spelling out the details of the believer’s obedience (Rom. 12:1 – 15:13), declares that ‘the righteous requirement’ of the law is love of neighbour – which ‘fulfils’ the law (Rom. 13:8). And that touches only the tip of the iceberg. Yes, ‘fulfilled’ is a massive New Testament word.

Take Matthew’s very frequent use of *plēroō* (fulfil) – 16 times. This makes it probable – I would say, certain – that he was thinking in terms of the eschatological. Let me explain. In Matthew 5:17-18, Christ was not abandoning the law, but was bringing out what the law had pointed to. He ‘fulfilled’ it – the very word he used! Christ was showing continuity with the old covenant, yes, *but also discontinuity*, in the sense of shadow giving way to reality as the new age came in. Moses anticipated Christ, foreshadowed him, but Christ was unique, and so was his teaching. It was new: ‘No man ever spoke like this man!’ (John 7:46). He alone has the words of eternal life (John 6:68).

There is a further point. Christ said he had not come ‘to destroy the law or *the prophets*. I did not come to destroy but to fulfil’. Notice: as with the law, so with the prophets. Just as the prophets (speaking of Christ’s first coming) have been fulfilled by Christ, and, therefore, their day is over, so with the law. Consequently, in the same way as we read and use the prophets where Christ has now fulfilled them, so must we read and use the entire law, since he has fulfilled it all. This has an all-important bearing on our understanding of the Old Testament prophecies of ‘the law’ in the new covenant. Yes, ‘fulfilment’ is the key.

Of course, in the new covenant, the law and the prophets continue to play an important role in the law of Christ. The law of Christ embraces all Scripture (2 Tim. 3:16-17), including the law (all of it, not just the so-called moral law) and the prophets, but as nuanced by Christ and the apostles. The law and the prophets are ‘fulfilled’, but, being living Scripture, they still speak today.

Moreover, I am convinced that the concept of ‘fulfilment’ is vital in the matter of justification. No doubt it is vital in other areas, too, but let me explain what I mean about ‘fulfilment’ and the cardinal doctrine of justification. We know that when the sinner believes he is united to Christ (Rom. 6:1 – 7:6). The blood of Christ washes him from all sin, from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). He is pardoned. But there is more. Righteousness is imputed to him (Rom. 4:11,22-24; Gal. 3:6; Jas. 2:23). And righteousness is more than pardon. This is where ‘fulfilment’ comes into play. To understand apostolic use of ‘righteousness’, we must remember that the apostles had been brought up under the old covenant yet now saw the new covenant as fulfilling the old. What was righteousness in the old covenant? It was obedience to God’s commandments, his law (Deut. 6:25; Rom. 10:5). Although Israel failed to keep the law, God did not abandon his demand. ‘Do and live’, he had said (Lev. 18:5; Ezek. 20:11,13; Matt. 19:17; Luke 10:25-28; Rom. 10:5; Gal. 3:12), and that is how it had to be. Perfect obedience would merit life (Rom. 7:10). Alas, no sinner could do the work. But Christ came into the world to save sinners (1 Tim. 1:15),

being born under the law (Gal. 4:4), expressly to do his Father's will (Heb. 10:1-18). And this surely included his honouring of the law, his obedience to the law, his fulfilment of the law – both in his life and death. Christ's death and resurrection (Rom 4:25; 5:18-19) secured the justification of the elect, and upon their believing, sinners are perfected forever (Rom. 8:1-4; Heb. 10:10,14), being washed in the blood of Christ, and imputed with his righteousness, he having been imputed with their unrighteousness (2 Cor. 5:21).² While not all advocates of new-covenant theology would go along with this,³ for my part I see the label 'Fulfilment Theology' playing very strongly into this imputation of Christ's righteousness.

Again, 'Fulfilment Theology' reminds us that God's purpose is always fulfilled, that God's way and timing is perfect – even to the very day (Ex. 12:41; 2 Sam. 22:32; Ps. 18:30; Mark 1:15; Gal. 4:4). It also tells us that the progress of God's plan, as seen through his eyes, is always serene. The history of redemption does not consist of God trying one covenant after another, each

² I admit there is no text which states that Christ's righteousness is imputed to the sinner. But neither is there a text which states that the sinner's unrighteousness is imputed to Christ. Even so, 'the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all' (Isa. 53:6) gets pretty close. And sin is imputed to the sinner (Rom. 4:8; 5:13), but not to the believer (Rom. 4:8). As for the exchange between the sinner and Christ – namely, the imputation or transfer of the sinner's unrighteousness to Christ, and Christ's righteousness to the sinner – the law (and before) pictured it admirably (Gen. 22:13; Lev. 1:4; 16:21-22). Christ fulfilled this in reality (Matt. 8:17; Heb. 9:28; 1 Pet. 2:23-25). In other words, Christ bore his people's sin or unrighteousness; they bear his righteousness. See Gal. 2:20; 1 Pet. 3:18. Linking this with Rom. 3:26; 5:10, I am convinced it is right to speak in terms of the great exchange: Christ was imputed with the sin of the elect; the believer is imputed with the righteousness of Christ. And as for no explicit text for it, there is no text which states that justification is on the basis of grace through faith alone. But what evangelical would question that this is the teaching of Scripture?

³ See my 'Into the Lions' Den: Christ's Active Obedience Re-Visited'; 'Observations on a Colloquy'; 'Points to Ponder on Christ's Active Obedience'.

one ending in a sense of failure. Not at all! Nor are we left to cope with some kind of hybrid of the old and new covenants. No! The old, having fulfilled its purpose, has gone; the new has come. Christ has accomplished it all; he is all (Col. 3:11).

All this would be superbly covered by the label 'Fulfilment Theology'.

So why do I not fall in with it?

The label 'Fulfilment Theology' fails to capture the essential point that we are talking about something that originated with God's decree in eternity, is progressing at his appointed pace and time through history, until in God's purpose all things will be consummated in eternal glory. This is a very powerful principle; it is, perhaps, the most fundamental principle of the lot.⁴ We, living in the days of the new covenant, are at this particular stage in God's determined course for the revelation of Christ in all his glory in the salvation of his elect. The days of the old covenant have gone – Christ having fulfilled it and rendered it obsolete (Heb. 8:13), inaugurating the new – but this in itself is only an intermediate stage. Christ will return and usher in the eternal glory (1 Cor. 15:24-28). I suggest that 'Fulfilment Theology' does not sufficiently capture this vital principle. Indeed, it could give the impression that we have reached the end of the road, when we have not! There is more to come (Rom. 8:18-25); work in progress, as it were. Things are not yet 'fulfilled'. We still await the eternal.

So what about 'Progressive-Covenant Theology'; or, to use a term already coined, 'Progressive Covenantalism'? While this is not the zippiest tag in the world – a six-syllable word following one with three syllables is a bit of a mouthful – this certainly has some advantages over 'Fulfilment Theology'. Its stress on the 'progressive' nature of the history of redemption revealed by means of covenants is invaluable. And it certainly implies there is more to come. But, there are for me, at least two serious drawbacks with adopting this label.

⁴ See my *Redemption*; series of sermons 'Watershed of the Ages'.

‘Progressive Covenantalism’ is admirably set out in an article by Stephen Wellum and Brent Parker, in which they include the work of Peter Gentry.⁵ Now, while there is much that is excellent in their article, much that chimes in with my musings here, I have some serious doubts. Yes, they are clear on the imputation of Christ’s active obedience; indeed, they draw particular attention to it. Unfortunately, however, they also want to speak of a pre-fall covenant with all creation. I am not convinced. Moreover, I fear this might leave the door open to the notion of a covenant of works with Adam (and hence all mankind). If so, I would disagree.⁶ Furthermore, in my opinion, they leave too much wriggle room for a Jewish kingdom in a millennium after the return of Christ. This introduces a confusion over the land promise: Is this shadow not fulfilled in Christ now, in the new covenant (Col. 2:17), when all the other shadows – sabbath, priest, sacrifice, temple (tabernacle), altar, feast, and so on – are? Once again, Christ is all (Col. 3:11). This confusion over the land promise, I am sure, will lead to difficulties in the future. Further, the idea of a Jewish kingdom raises the spectre of sacrifices being offered yet again, which, if it did rear its head, I would find abhorrent.⁷ I do not accuse the originators of the label ‘Progressive Covenantalism’ of holding these things, but I fear that the troubles I have mentioned might well arise under that label. Consequently I am unwilling to adopt it.

In which case, it seems I am stuck with – if that is the right way of putting it – ‘New-Covenant Theology’, especially when it includes the hyphen.

As I say, I have just been thinking aloud, and thinking is allowed is it not? May I further remind you that I want to open a conversation? What do you think?

⁵ Under B&H Academic Blog, see Stephen Wellum and Brent Parker: ‘What Is Progressive Covenantalism?’ (bhacademicblog.com/what-is-progressive-covenantalism/).

⁶ See my ‘The Covenant That Never Was’.

⁷ See my *Ezekiel; Romans 11*.