

An Appeal to the Reformed

I have a problem, a problem which only the Reformed can solve. I appeal to them to help me.

During years of engaging with the works of covenant theologians over the law, I have tried time and again to get them to think about Scripture unfettered by one or another of the Reformed Confessions.¹ But I always come up against the same brick wall. Whenever I read a work on the law – or some topic connected to the law – by a covenant theologian, I always meet the same three adjectives – moral, ceremonial and judicial, or their equivalents. It seems as though covenant theologians cannot think about, read or write the word ‘law’ without calling upon these three adjectives. Do they have a box of them to hand? It reminds me of somebody curling up on the settee on a Friday night, switching on the TV, and, from time to time, while their eyes are still glued to the screen, a skilful hand instinctively dips into a box of chocolates to select a favourite – Turkish Delight, Caramel, or Brazil Nut. When the programme gets exciting, threatening or whatever, pop another chocolate in the mouth and chew the faster.

But it isn’t funny!

No, it is not!

Serious issues are involved; very serious. By imposing these three adjectives on Scripture, covenant theologians bolster their theological system, and so utterly fail to see the glorious biblical doctrine of the covenants. How ironical – the biggest mistake that covenant theologians make is their complete misunderstanding of the biblical doctrine of the covenants! And the consequences of this are far-reaching – far beyond the ivory tower of the

¹ Do they read Scripture without the Confession in mind? I’ve given up trying to get them *discuss* Scripture unfettered. See my ‘Flogging a Dead Horse’.

minister's study. Because of it, the man, woman and young person in the pew – and in many cases, at the font – are loaded with immense problems and hurts. Unbelievers can be led through years of torture as they are prepared for Christ, prepared by repeated doses of the law to produce what many Reformed think of as ‘a thorough law work’. Infants can – countless numbers do – grow up thinking that because a parent was ‘in the covenant’ and had them sprinkled as babies, they, too, are ‘in the covenant’, or somesuch jargon. Because of law-teaching, believers can spend many anxious years in lack of assurance, smarting under heavy lashes with the (to use John Calvin's word) whip of the law, being told again and again that the height of spirituality is to know and feel that you are ‘the wretched man of Romans 7:14-25’. These consequences, and others like them, are the heavy pastoral fall-out of covenant theology. I don't engage with the Reformed over the law as some sort of a chess match, a battle of wits over texts. Think of it as the emergency ward of a hospital. Life and death issues – spiritual life and death issues – are at stake.

And, as I say, at the heart of this debate is this matter of the so-called threefold division of the law into moral, ceremonial and judicial. This invention is the lynchpin of covenant theology.

Now, as I have argued time and time again,² this so-called threefold division of the law is unscriptural. Probably dreamed up by Thomas Aquinas, set in concrete by John Calvin, it was adopted wholesale by the Puritans, and so dominated both the Westminster Confession of Faith and the 1689 Baptist Confession, and has exercised a widespread influence over evangelicals ever since, including men like C.H.Spurgeon and D.Martyn Lloyd-Jones.³ For all that, I, along with many others, still assert that it is unscriptural.

² See above all, my *Christ is All: No Sanctification by the Law*.

³ Both men were contradictory over the law. See my *Spurgeon on the New Covenant*; ‘Lloyd-Jones for Law Men’ in my *New-Covenant Articles Volume Four*.

Now... here's my problem. This is where we reach the nub of it. It is always hard to prove a negative. It can be done, but proof of a negative is never – to my mind – quite as convincing as proof of the positive. In any case, the burden of proof in this case lies with the Reformed. They assert that the law is divided into three; I, as just one among many, say it is not. The ball is in their court – they make the assertion; they should prove it.

Let me illustrate my point. All illustrations fail, but at least let me try.

First from the field of Mathematics. Pythagorean Triples exist. Take the integers 3,4,5. We know that $3^2 + 4^2 = 5^2$. The same goes for 5,12,13 and 7,24,25, and so on. But nobody has ever found three integers for the power three and above; that is, nobody has found three integers to satisfy $a^3 + b^3 = c^3$, and so on. Until recently, however, it had to be admitted that just because nobody – so far – had come up with such a set of integers, it did not mean that somebody, tomorrow, might not find a set. A million, million failures does not prove that it is impossible. Proving – proving, I repeat – the negative can be very difficult.⁴ How much easier for those who say three such integers exist! Just produce them!

Take the legal system. Margaret Fleming was reported missing in 2016. She had not been seen by any independent witness since 1999. Her two carers had continued to claim her benefits over those years. In 2019, the carers were convicted of Margaret's murder. But the prosecution had a very difficult task: no body was found, no body could be produced. The defence could argue that though Margaret might have been missing for those years, she might walk in tomorrow. 'Beyond reasonable doubt' is essential for a conviction. Who could be certain that Margaret was dead? If she was dead, where was the body, where was the D.N.A proof, where was the link to the carers? Make no mistake: if the prosecution could have produced the body, it would have

⁴ For those with a strong constitution, that very difficult proof in this case, may be found in Andrew John Wiles: 'Modular elliptic curves and Fermat's Last Theorem', *Annals of Mathematics*, 141,1995.

done so – like a shot! If forensics could have linked the carers to the corpse, the prosecution would have produced the evidence in court. Produce the body! Give us the proof!

The upshot? I can argue 'til the cows come home that Scripture never uses the threefold division, that Scripture never justifies such a division. But this still leaves the ball firmly in the Reformed court. Even so, it's a doddle for them! Just produce the proof, the evidence! They've had hundreds of years to come up with it.

Let me be clear. No quotation from Aquinas, Calvin, a score of Puritans, any Confession, Spurgeon, Lloyd-Jones or Uncle Tom Cobby is proof. Proof and justification must come from Scripture, and Scripture only.

So I appeal to the Reformed. You can put this issue beyond doubt once and for all. Produce the proof – that's all you have to do. Otherwise, admit the truth of what you are doing – which everybody knows you are doing – that you are breaking your own Confessions and making the inventions of men – and not Scripture – the authority for what you teach. Or... drop your use of the threefold division of the law.

By the way, Scripture does speak of a division in the matter – not the Reformed threefold division, of course, but a twofold division between law and grace. I restrict my extracts to where the contrast is explicit. Many more passages speak in similar terms, of course:

The *law* was given through Moses; *grace* and truth came through Jesus Christ (John 1:17).

For by works of the *law* no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the *law* comes knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the *law*, although the *law* and the prophets bear witness to it – the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his *grace* as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (Rom. 3:20-24).

The *law* came in to increase the trespass, but where sin increased, *grace* abounded all the more (Rom. 5:20).

Sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under *law* but under *grace* (Rom. 6:14).

I do not nullify the *grace* of God, for if righteousness were through the *law*, then Christ died for no purpose (Gal. 2:21).

You are severed from Christ, you who would be justified by the *law*; you have fallen away from *grace* (Gal. 5:4).

Now let's have a discussion on that basis, without any smokescreen of a so-called threefold division of the law!