

John Saltmarsh, having studied at Magdalene College, Cambridge, became a Church of England minister at Heslerton in North Yorkshire in the late 1630s, then, for a very short time, at Brasted in Kent in 1645, but he gave up each position in turn because of his disenchantment with tithes. In the Civil Wars, he was a chaplain in the army of Thomas Fairfax, where he advocated religious toleration, liberty of conscience, and freedom of speech, but was accused of antinomianism. In June 1646, he preached at St Mary's after Oxford had been taken by the army. According to Richard Baxter, who was shocked by his influence, John Saltmarsh and William Dell were the dominant voices in the army's move to a more radical Protestantism, particularly over the doctrine of free grace. On the title-page of his *Free Grace*, Saltmarsh alludes to a spiritual crisis he had experienced some twelve years previously (about 1634), now resolved because his conscience has been relieved of the burden of the Mosaic law. With such views, he naturally attracted the attention of the Presbyterian heresy-hunters of the 1640s, Samuel Rutherford, in his *Survey of the Spiritual Antichrist* (1648), noting 'the antichristian doctrine of John Saltmarsh and Will. Dell' on the title-page. Saltmarsh, in his turn, attacked the Presbyterians (when they had power) for opposing toleration – when only a few years earlier they had pleaded for it on their own behalf. He, like Dell, denying that degrees or ordination should be the qualification for ministry, pleaded instead for 'the infinitely abounding Spirit of God'. Consequently, in his popular works, he showed himself a master-teacher, shunned show of scholarship (such as marginal notes or Latin quotations), preferring a clean page, aiming to use simple, accessible language liberally endowed with witty aphorisms to drive home his point. His arguments, however – perhaps because he was rather too spare with words – can be convoluted, and capable of being misunderstood. Near the close of 1647, even though he was dying, Saltmarsh, convinced he should confront the army, rode from Ilford to Windsor in order to admonish Fairfax about his backsliding. He kept his hat on while addressing both Fairfax and Cromwell, explaining that he could no longer honour them because they had imprisoned the saints (by which he meant the Levellers). He returned home to die, and that within days. In his time, Saltmarsh was one of the most influential of the radical preachers and writers in England.

John Saltmarsh

And I, brethren, when I came to you, did not come with excellence of speech or of wisdom declaring to you the testimony of God. For I determined not to know anything among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified

1 Corinthians 2:1-2

Right from the outset, in his opening ‘Epistle Dedicatory’, addressing the two baronets to whom he dedicated his *Free Grace*, John Saltmarsh let everyone know what to expect from his book:

The truths... I here present to you, are of free grace... There is one thing appears to us in the discovery [revelation] of this, which is love, God loving us freely, and sending out his Spirit of love into our hearts. This should be [the] only principle of power in believers now under the gospel: love began all the work of salvation in God, and love should carry on this work of salvation in men. This is a way of service which none know but those whom the Son has made free indeed.

Saltmarsh realised, of course, that, in the spiritual climate of the time, by teaching such doctrines, he was sure to meet with a hostile reaction. So much so, in a sort of prologue, ‘An Occasional Word’, he expressed the (vain) hope that discussion of the issue in hand could be conducted without name-calling and mud-slinging:

It would be [a] matter of much peace among believers if the names of ‘antinomians’ and ‘legal teacher’, and the rest, might be laid down [aside], and no mark or name to know one another by but that of ‘believers’ who hold thus and thus for distinction. Surely, carnal suspicions and jealousy do much to increase our differences.¹

Saltmarsh spelled out the problem. He knew he would be attacked from two sides at once:

Some [the Reformed], hearing the doctrine of free grace, think presently there will follow nothing but looseness and libertinism. And

¹ ‘Vain’ in that he himself used the questionable terms! As do I! Sadly, however, in debates of this kind, we have to use the accepted terminology; otherwise chaos ensues. What we must guard against, surely, is false accusation and character assassination. This *ad hominem* approach, sadly, is too common.

the other [real antinomians], hearing of holiness, of duties and obedience, think there will follow nothing but legalness and bondage, and self-righteousness. And upon these jealousies, each party over-suspecting the other's doctrine, bends [applies the mind] against one another in expressions something too uncomely for both, and there are some unwarrantable notions to be found on all sides.

By means of a series of questions (always the most potent way of teaching), rhetorical questions in this case, Saltmarsh summarised his doctrine:

Can the free grace of Jesus Christ tempt anyone to sin? Can a good tree bring forth evil fruit? And shall we call everyone 'antinomian' that speaks free grace, or [speaks] a little more freely than we do?

Saltmarsh then issued a categorical statement – one which should, once and for all, have put a stop to those who try to dismiss him as an antinomian:

If any man sin more freely because of forgiveness of sins, that man may [that is, he ought to] suspect himself to be forgiven [in the first place], for in all [the] Scriptures and all scriptural examples, [we see that] the more forgiveness, the more holiness. Mary [for instance] loved much because much was forgiven her.²

Using the illustration of the miser who wanted to be thought generous with his wine, but who had secretly heated it to make it too hot to drink, Saltmarsh gave notice of his approach: 'I with the wine of the gospel... be not overheated by the law, and conditions and qualifications, that poor souls cannot taste of it freely... Antichrist goes never rightly down, but when Christ is lifted up'. In saying this, he was going straight to the point of his book. What place for the law of Moses in the age of the new covenant, in the gospel? What place for that law in addresses to sinners? What place for the law in the lives of believers? Above all, which law is it for believers? Saltmarsh rightly (in light of John 1:17) polarised what was at the heart of the issue: Is it the law of Christ, or the law of Moses? Commenting on the Reformed way of preaching, Saltmarsh complained that though 'Jesus Christ has appeared more of late,

² Saltmarsh A2-A4. The 'A' pages are double-sided.

and his glory has been more abroad, than this kingdom ever saw before', nevertheless:

If Jesus Christ had been more in the divinity of these latter times, and in their preachings for reformation, and Moses less, we had not only had more of his grace, but more of his glory than we yet see.³

Turning 'to the reader' of his book, Saltmarsh declared:

The more Christ is known, [along with] that love of God to the sons of men which was manifest in the flesh, the more glorious liberty from the law, sin and Satan is manifested in that soul. This made Paul desire to know nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified. And the more this light of the gospel shines in the face of Jesus Christ, the more does the ignorance of flesh and blood dissolve; and the shadows of the law, as doubts, fears, terrors which are cast in, vanish before it. For the day breaks, and shadows fly away.⁴

That is to say, right from the start, Saltmarsh was making it clear to his readers that he was not dealing with an academic subject, handling it in a detached way. Far from it! The more believers are taken to the law of Moses, the more bondage they get. That is what Saltmarsh was leading up to; that is what he feared. On the positive side: the more Christ is exalted in the preaching they hear, and the more Christ is exalted within them by faith, the more gospel liberty they enjoy. Pursuing this further, Saltmarsh left nobody in any doubt as to why he wrote his book. He was deeply concerned with those believers who are afflicted with 'a spirit of bondage... made poor in spirit [in the wrong way] through the ignorance of the riches of grace, and by a legal faith... [being kept] both under grace and the law at the same time. Surely', he went on, 'such legal believers are as much subject to death and bondage in their own apprehensions of the gospel as they were before under the law'.⁵

So, how did Saltmarsh propose to set about helping such afflicted believers? Convinced that the source of their trouble lay in their lack of appreciation of the freeness of grace, and the glorious liberty there is in Christ for all who are truly united to the Saviour, there was only one aim he could have, and there was only one

³ Saltmarsh A5.

⁴ Saltmarsh A8.

⁵ Saltmarsh A7. See also Saltmarsh pp177-179.

cordial in his cabinet. He did not mince his words: ‘The only scope of this discourse and observation is to hold forth the glory of free grace’.⁶ That was the way – that *is* the way – to bring these afflicted believers into the gospel liberty they so sadly lacked. The title of Saltmarsh’s book says it all:

*Free Grace; or, The Flowing of Christ’s Blood Free To Sinners. Being an experiment of Jesus Christ upon one who has been in the bondage of a troubled conscience at times, for the space of about twelve years, till now upon a clearer discovery [revelation, understanding] of Jesus Christ and the gospel... and by way of observation concerning[?] a natural condition, and a mixed condition of law and gospel, with a further revealing of the gospel in its glory, liberty, freeness and simplicity for salvation.*⁷

Would to God we had more such ‘antinomians’ both in the pulpit and at the writing desk these days! Let me spell it out. We suffer too much from ‘academic’ presentations of truth, we have to endure too many lectures on the gospel, and all delivered with far too little passion. Saltmarsh had his faults, and he got some things wrong, but what a man! What a desire! What an aim! To exalt Christ, and so bring believers out of their bondage into gospel liberty!

Let me summarise his book before I distil its essence, and try to tabulate the points to which I wish to draw particular attention. Remember Saltmarsh’s declared aim – to give gospel relief to distressed souls; that is, to those who were in bondage because they lacked assurance. Having opened with a glance at the natural man’s bondage, he came to conversion – and the first mistake made by the advocates of the law; namely preparationism by the law. He showed how this stores up problems, not only for the sinner coming to Christ, but for the child of God after conversion. Some of these problems can be long-term. Saltmarsh then expanded on the wrong way of assurance, and its consequences. In an extended section, he applied gospel ointment to the sore of the believer’s doubt – speaking of true faith, the believer’s glorious freedom, the glories of the new-covenant ministry compared to the temporary, passing,

⁶ Saltmarsh A7.

⁷ Clearly, Saltmarsh was talking about his own experience, which I have already noted.

and now-passed, obsolete Mosaic economy, the freeness of the offer of the gospel – Christ offered to sinners as sinners – all the while exalting the freeness of grace. Lest anyone should run away with the idea that, as a result of what he was teaching, there is no place for practical godliness, he argued that even though the law of Moses is not the believer's rule, Christ, in the new covenant, rules the believer by his Spirit, and this inevitably leads to the believer's progressive sanctification.

So much for the synopsis. Now let me draw attention to several particular points, even though, it surely goes without saying, it is quite impossible to do what Saltmarsh himself did not do; namely, set out a simple cut-and-dried list. Indeed, he was prepared to move from one topic to another in the course of his book, often including elements which are equally relevant under another of my headings. The upshot is, there will be some overlap and some repetition. While I will do all I can to avoid it, I must let Saltmarsh speak for himself.

To save awkward circumlocution, let me say I shall be moving to and fro between the historical (with Saltmarsh), and the present (with us). In other words, I will not only say '*that* was the way to bring these afflicted believers into the gospel liberty they so sadly lacked', but that it *is* still the way today. As with all my writing and preaching, I want to be useful. I am not an antiquarian, nor am I an academic. My *penchant* is for usefulness.

Saltmarsh on the atonement

Before we examine Saltmarsh's view of the free offer and the way to address sinners in the gospel, we need to be clear about his concept of the atonement. What did he think about its nature and extent? In particular, how did his view of redemption affect the way he addressed sinners in the gospel? Alas, in all this, we must bear in mind that Saltmarsh held to eternal justification, and this, naturally, had a serious bearing, a sad bearing, on the issue in hand.

He set out what he described as the 'purest' way of describing the atonement; namely:

That God the Father for [the] manifestation of his mercy and love, purposed [to bring] some to glory whom he loved freely, and gave his

Son to be a [the] way to them for [salvation]⁸ and righteousness, knowing that they would fall under sin and condemnation in Adam, where he might justly have left them, as the rest, in their blood and pollution, had it not been for that free grace in himself.⁹ And therefore that Son is called the second Adam or quickening Spirit, and this mystery of salvation is free, infinitely free; the Father loving freely, and giving his Son; the Son loving freely, and giving himself freely; and the Spirit working from them both freely for the manifestation of this salvation in the souls of his elect, and through the ministry of a free gospel, even to sinners as sinners, and children of wrath in themselves.

In addition to Saltmarsh's undoubted emphasis on the particular nature of redemption, do not miss his stress on 'free'. This is the point Saltmarsh is after; he wants to extol free grace.

He then turned to 'the Reformed opinion', which he did not accept. Let me try and unravel the point he was making. The Reformed, rightly rejecting eternal justification, take the scriptural position and argue for the necessity of faith for actual justification. Saltmarsh recognised this (not that he himself believed it): 'None are actually justified, nor partakers of free salvation, but by faith'. So far, so good. Unfortunately, because of his eternal justification, as Saltmarsh went on setting out the Reformed view, he did so in a loaded (I mean, of course, 'unfair') way: 'And the gospel [is a]¹⁰ ministry of conditions or qualifications [for]¹¹ this salvation'.

I pause. That word 'condition' needs careful nuancing, and the word 'qualification' carries heavy overtones in this debate. As I say, at this point Saltmarsh failed to show necessary care. The biblical position is that sinners need no qualification whatsoever to be invited to Christ, but unless they repent and believe they will never be saved – as Saltmarsh knew full well. But what are repentance and faith, if not 'conditions'? Mistakenly holding to eternal justification, however, Saltmarsh stigmatised the Reformed view of the atonement, and their way of addressing sinners.

He then turned to the Arminian and the Amyraldian scheme, rightly not liking either. Why not? Because they say: 'Christ [must

⁸ I cannot make out the print.

⁹ I have had some difficulty in determining the best punctuation here.

¹⁰ I cannot make out the print.

¹¹ I cannot make out the print.

have] died for all, else the gospel cannot be preached [offered] to all'. In this, they are mistaken!

In short, in that Saltmarsh was convinced of the particular nature and extent of the atonement, he was right, but in that he held to eternal justification, he was adrift from Scripture.¹²

The question is: in light of particular redemption, how should we address sinners with the gospel?

Saltmarsh and the free offer of the gospel

Scripture shows us that we should offer Christ to all because God has commanded us so to do, and he has given us biblical examples of men doing it – not excluding himself in his Son. We do not need to try to justify the free offer by logic. Indeed, we ought not to try to do it.

Saltmarsh set out his view – the biblical position:

Christ died only for his [elect], and it [the benefits of his death] is [are] offered to all [in order] that his [the elect] who are among this all [among the total mass of humanity] might believe. And though he died not for all [mankind], yet none are excepted [from the offer], and yet none are accepted [by God] but they that believe, and none believe but they to whom it is given. And in this way of salvation lies more mystery, which is more suitable to a divine work. Great is the mystery of godliness. And this ground, that none are excepted [from the offer], is as clear and spiritually rational for the gospel to be preached to all, as this ground, that he died for all. Seeing upon both grounds, some only are saved, and not all, and a decree of mere grace and of faith foreseen do equally imply an impossibility of all to be saved; and therefore why is it so contended for that all are redeemed?¹³

Let me translate. According to Saltmarsh, the rationale for the free offer is not that Christ died for all mankind – which he did not – but, even though Christ died only for the elect, nevertheless no one is exempted from the invitation and command to trust Christ.

¹² For my views on the points being dealt with in this section, see my *Offer; Particular; Septimus; Eternal*.

¹³ Saltmarsh pp197-203. It seems to me that, by (rightly) arguing the necessity of faith, Saltmarsh was contradicting his rejection of 'the Reformed position'.

Scripture makes it clear that all without exception are invited to Christ, and are commanded to come to him. It is also true that only the elect will believe, and that all the elect will believe, through the sovereign operation and gift of the Spirit of God. Men may deride and dismiss this as illogical – indeed, they do – but they badly miss the point. Logicality is not the great shibboleth. We must be scriptural. As Saltmarsh recognised, we are dealing with a ‘great mystery’. Let me spell it out: all men are dead in sin by nature; from the mass of fallen humanity, God has elected those upon whom he will have mercy; Christ died particularly to redeem the elect; and the elect, and only the elect, are effectually called by the Spirit. Nevertheless, as the Bible makes equally clear, the offer of the gospel is universal, to each and every sinner as a sinner. In other words, the ground of the free offer does not lie in the extent of the atonement. Indeed, the extent of the atonement has no bearing on the freeness of the offer. Logical this may not be, but scriptural it is.¹⁴

Moving on, Saltmarsh could not have been more explicit:

Christ in the gospel calls out of heaven to sinners by that very name [that is, he calls sinners as sinners], and tells them he has salvation for them if they will believe in him. Nor does he stand upon what sins, less or more, greater or smaller; so as none can say they are not called on, and proffered salvation, be they never so sinful.¹⁵

First class! Let’s have more of this kind of ‘antinomian’ preaching. If we did, we might see more conversions than we do!

Expanding on the heading ‘Jesus Christ offered to sinners as sinners’, Saltmarsh insisted that ‘the apostle has a precious doctrine, and it is this’:

‘This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptation, that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief’ (1 Tim. 1:15). As if [the apostle] should say: ‘Do any of your hearts tell you [that] you are sinners? Let not that be any ground at all to keep you from Christ. Let not any despair because of that. I myself [Paul] was thus and thus, a blasphemer, a persecutor; indeed, as if that were not enough, I was the chief of sinners, or the sinner in chief, the grand

¹⁴ See my *Offer; Particular; Septimus; Eternal*.

¹⁵ Saltmarsh p141.

and supreme sinner, as if there could not well have been a greater. And I (says he) obtained mercy'. So as here the Spirit has laid out answers to the objecting or doubting soul. If the soul should object: 'If I were not such a sinner as I am, I could believe', the Spirit answers: 'Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners' – as if he should say, 'to save even just such as you are'. If the soul should object further: 'But there is not such a sinner as I am', [then] the Spirit answers: 'Yes, but here is one greater than you. Here is the chief of all sinners, the prince of sinners obtaining mercy. [After all, Paul himself declared] "of which I am chief"'. So as none can be such a sinner to whom Christ, and the blood of Christ, may not be tendered and offered; and that upon these grounds.

From such an excellent opening, Saltmarsh then went on to set out the grounds of the free offer; that is, on what basis can we freely offer Christ to sinners as sinners? He set out his answers under seven heads:

1. From the order of God's decree, he loved us, and gave Christ for us when we were sinners. 'God commends his love towards us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us' (Rom. 5:8). 'God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son' (John 3:16).¹⁶
2. The offering the gospel and Jesus Christ to a sinner as a sinner is but the bringing out of this glorious [eternal] love of God in time and dispensation; it is but the offering that love which God loved them with from everlasting. Neither is it any more to offer Christ to a sinner, than to manifest God in his first love, when he gave Christ for sinners in his own decree.
3. It exalts grace more, and shows [it] as a gift indeed. What can be more of grace than that Jesus Christ should receive a sinner, one who has no money or price, no works or righteousness to bring for him?
4. It is the right lifting up [of] Jesus Christ as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness – not for the healed to look upon, but the stung and wounded.¹⁷

¹⁶ Saltmarsh should have been more careful in quoting passages written to believers, and applying them to unbelievers. While his overall sentiment was right, he should have been more guarded in the way he expressed himself.

¹⁷ We can go further: the free offer fulfils the typical meaning of the lifting up of the brass serpent in the wilderness, and nothing but the free offer does so. Presenting the gospel only to the sensible (hyper-Calvinists avowedly never invite any) certainly does not! The pole was not lifted up

5. It leaves men without all excuse, and brings the greater condemnation, for when Christ is brought home to the very soul, and the blood offered at everyone's door for receiving, then there can be no objecting: 'Lord, had I been thus and thus fit and prepared'¹⁸ then I should have received you, but I was a foul sinner at that very time, so and so guilty'. 'Oh', will the Lord answer, 'I come [came?] therefore to pardon you, and to wash you in my blood, because you were so foul'. And that [your sinful state, your unprepared condition] is no excuse.
6. It is most agreeable to the gospel way of dispensation, and Christ's own preaching: 'The whole need not a physician, but they that are sick. I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance'.
7. All that ever received Christ in the gospel, received him in a sinful condition. The many believing Jews in the sin of crucifying Christ;¹⁹ all the churches of Corinth, Ephesus and Colosse: 'Such were some of you, but you are washed', *etc.* [1 Cor. 6:11]. 'And now you were sometimes darkness, but are now light in the Lord' (Eph. 5[:8]). 'You who were dead in trespasses and sins; and were enemies in your minds by wicked works, yet now has he quickened'.²⁰

Such was Saltmarsh's view of the justification of the free offer. He went on: 'So as to offer Jesus Christ to sinners as sinners is but':

1. To offer him in time, as God gave him before all time. God gave him to us because we were sinners, and now he is but offered as he was given.²¹

only in front of the elect or sensible; many saw the serpent but did not really look, and so perished. Even so, they were invited to look.

¹⁸ We shall come across several hints of Saltmarsh's dislike of preparationism, but I will leave it until I deal with the matter in the next section.

¹⁹ That is, Luke 24:47. See John Bunyan's *Jerusalem Sinner Saved*.

²⁰ Saltmarsh had Col.1, but he appears to be citing a combination of Eph. 2:1,5; Col. 1:21-22; 2:13.

²¹ Saltmarsh must not be misunderstood here. Christ was given to the elect, and given for the elect, in eternity, but he is offered to all men in time. Saltmarsh was saying that in eternity Christ was given to sinners because they were sinners, and in time he is offered to sinners as sinners. Quite rightly, Saltmarsh was not allowing God's decree to hinder the free offer. At the biting-point of the free offer, whether or not the sinners are elect, whether or not Christ has died in particular for them, has no bearing on the offering of Christ to them. While it is absolutely decisive in whether or not they trust Christ, it has nothing to say about offering Christ to them. Here we come across the continual battle between being logical and being

2. There is more of grace in it to offer him to a sinner as a sinner, that 'where sin has abounded, grace may abound much more' [Rom. 5:20].
3. There is a clearer lifting up of Christ as Moses [did the serpent] for the wounded to look on as well as the whole.
4. Men are without excuse because when he is held out to sinners as sinners, all are in a condition for him; sin and a Saviour are most suitable [for each other].
5. It is as Christ himself did, who both calls sinners, and converses with sinners; with Mary Magdalen... and with the publicans, and with the woman of Samaria, who lived in uncleanness when the pure Messiah preached himself to her.
6. It is as all that ever received him, both [*sic*] in Jerusalem, Corinth, Ephesus, *etc.*, who had they not been foul, had never been washed; had they not been darkness, had never been light in the Lord.

Saltmarsh moved on to a thorny contention between him and the Puritans: 'But you will tell me of conditions in the gospel, of faith and repentance, *etc.*, and certain legal preparations, before Christ should be offered and brought to the soul'. Let me take a moment to underscore the vital nature of this objection. Note the word 'before'. As I have shown, far too many preachers take the Puritan path mapped out here. Saltmarsh is about to show the wrongness of that route. Hyper-Calvinists demand repentance before issuing the gospel invitation – even if they give the invitation then! In my experience, they never designedly do! More widely, too many Reformed preachers argue for preparationism, claiming that it is useless, wrong, to offer Christ to sinners without first preparing them by a thorough law work. Saltmarsh here sets to work to annihilate this unbiblical position: In order 'that you may not be puzzled as many are', you should know that:

In the gospel way or dispensation, faith and repentance are²² to be preached, but Jesus Christ with it. 'Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ'.

scriptural. The Arminian and the Amyraldian say that Christ was given for all and is offered to all. The hyper-Calvinist says that Christ was given for the elect and this is declared or presented to all, but offered to none. The Bible says that Christ was given for the elect and is offered to all. The biblical doctrine leaves itself open to being called illogical – but, even so, it is right. The other three are all logical – but wrong.

²² Saltmarsh had 'is'. I cannot tell whether or not it was the grammar of the day, or the printer's mistake. Or did Saltmarsh deliberately use 'is'

And you are not to consider [divorce] repentance from believing, nor believing from repentance, nor either from Jesus Christ, nor Jesus Christ without them; and yet neither of them bringing in Christ to the soul, but Christ bringing in them, and working them more and more in the soul, and that upon these grounds...

I pause. The above statement is excellent. Saltmarsh got it spot on! In our day, there is much confusion over this issue, and there is too great a risk of turning faith and repentance into a saving work, on account of which God justifies the sinner. As always with Saltmarsh, he is driving the soul to Christ, and I cannot overstate how right he is in his main argument, and how helpful that argument is: Christ and repentance and faith must never be divorced from each other. What is more, in the ultimate, the only bringer of salvation to the soul is Christ himself, by his Spirit, not faith and repentance. Even so, great care is needed at this point. Saltmarsh in his statement, heavily coloured by his view of eternal justification, went too far. While it is certain that faith is not the cause of justification, it most definitely is the means.

Bearing this in mind, let Saltmarsh continue:

1. Christ is not ours by any act of our own but God's, God's imputing and accounting. To make Christ ours is an almighty work, and not the work of anything created [any creature]. So as Christ is ours without faith [in God's decree], by a power more glorious and infinite, but we cannot here [in time] know him to be ours but by believing, nor [actually] partake of him as ours but by believing.²³

Saltmarsh then moved to the consequences of making faith the ground or cause of salvation:

2. If faith should give [be the cause of] our interest in Christ, then as our faith increases, our interest should increase, and we should be more and more justified and forgiven, which none allow, calling these and other acts of faith, faith of assurance, and acts of manifestation;²⁴ and if

because he viewed faith and repentance as one indivisible entity? It looks probable to me. If so, I am of the same mind.

²³ Saltmarsh, I am sure, was thinking in terms of eternal justification, but what he said, as it stands – with my clarifying interpolations – is right.

²⁴ Saltmarsh's eternal justification is clearly evident at this point.

faith is thus in its other degrees of work, why not in its first? It is 'the evidence of things unseen' (Heb. 11:1).²⁵

3. If Christ should be ours by faith, then when faith ceases, shall we cease to be justified? Shall faith begin our interest here, and not be able to continue hereafter?

He immediately made a thrilling point by asking a question in short compass:

4. Can the sinner be too foul for a Saviour, and too wounded for a physician to heal, and too filthy for a fountain opened to wash?

He went on:

5. He [who] offers Christ, offers all the conditions in him, both of faith and repentance, for 'Christ is exalted to give repentance' [Acts 5:31], *etc.*, and faith is called 'the faith of the Son of God' (Gal. 2:20).²⁶

6. It is no more to offer Jesus Christ than any grace of Christ's or gift of Christ's to a sinner. For a sinner is as unprepared and unfit for the one as the other, equally in sin and pollution to both.

7. This spiritual work is a new creation, and so works of preparation are not so proper in that. 'We are (says the apostle) his workmanship created in Christ Jesus' (Eph. 2:10).

In conclusion: 'And now, why shall any servant of Christ refuse to give out that blood of his master's which runs so freely to sinners? And [why should] any sinner refuse to receive it, because their vessels are not clean enough for it, when it is such a blood as makes the vessels clean for itself?'²⁷ In other words, let the freeness of God's grace in giving his Son to die for sinners, the freeness of Christ's willingness to shed his blood for them, move every preacher to be equally free in offering Christ and his precious blood to sinners. Coming at it from the other direction, let God's freeness in Christ move every sinner to come to Christ, being heartily persuaded that the blood of Christ can cleanse him from all sin. Let

²⁵ See my *Eternal* for an examination of this (mis)use of Heb. 11:1 by those who hold to eternal justification.

²⁶ See my *Eternal* for an examination of Gal. 2:20. The 'of' should, in my opinion, be translated 'in'. The apostle is not speaking of Christ's faith or faithfulness. Rather, he is speaking of the sinner's faith, his faith *in* Christ.

²⁷ Saltmarsh pp184-190.

nothing – nothing at all – hinder any sinner from coming to the Saviour. There is no excuse – either for preacher or sinner.

In this long, and somewhat convoluted, section, Saltmarsh has striven hard for the freeness of grace and the exaltation of Christ in the free offer of the gospel to sinners. Leaving aside his eternal justification – but even here, I am sure, his motive was to exalt free grace – his statement on the free offer is worthy of the highest praise. In the gospel, Christ is to be offered to sinners as sinners; and sinners as sinners must come to Christ in repentance and faith; if they do, they will be saved; if they refuse, they show the greatest contempt possible for the freeness of God's grace in Christ. In all this we see that the gospel offer exalts the free grace of God in Christ. How right this is! And if this is 'antinomianism', let's have more of it! We need it. Sinners need it.

As I noted, we have already met several hints at preparationism – one of the very serious and damaging consequences of the Reformed view of the law. It is now time to examine how Saltmarsh dealt with it. He certainly did not like it! And quite right too!

Saltmarsh and preparationism

Calvin taught preparationism by the law, and sowed the seeds which would produce a fearful harvest in the centuries that followed. In his own words:

First, by exhibiting the righteousness of God – in other words, the righteousness which alone is acceptable to God – [the law] admonishes every one of his own unrighteousness... convicts, and finally condemns him. This is necessary, in order that man... may be brought... to know and confess his weakness and impurity... So soon... as he begins to compare [his own powers] with the requirements of the law, he has something to tame his presumption. How high soever his opinion of his own powers may be, he immediately feels that they pant under the heavy load, then totter and stumble, and finally fall and give way. He, then, who is schooled by the law, lays aside the arrogance which formerly blinded him... After he is forced to weigh his conduct in the balance of the law, renouncing all dependence on [his] fancied righteousness, he sees that he is at an infinite distance from holiness... In the law we behold, first, our impotence; then, in consequence of it,

our iniquity; and, finally, the curse as the consequence of both... To this effect is the apostle's declaration, that 'by the law is the knowledge of sin' (Rom. 3:20). By these words, he only points out the first office of the law as experienced by sinners not yet regenerated.²⁸

That, of course, comes from the 1559 edition of the *Institutes*. By the 1640s (Saltmarsh's time), a massive amount of preparation water had flowed under the bridge, the trickle having become a torrent, with devastating effects. The Puritans, by their divisions and sub-divisions of the stages of preparationism, having been responsible for the swirling flood, had been trying to cope with its grievous consequences for decades, and it still had a long way to go. Jonathan Edwards would suffer from it a century later. Indeed, if nobody else is, Gospel Standard Strict Baptists are still weltering under it to this very day. Despite the warnings of history – let alone the teaching of Scripture – contemporary Reformed teachers still hanker after preparationism by the law. This is no academic issue. It was nothing of the sort for Saltmarsh, nor is it for me with my books on the subject. Nor is it for those doubting souls who are (perhaps) irretrievably damaged by the preaching of the law, and not Christ, and thus being driven to poring over their wretched works instead of looking to Christ, and immediately resting upon him and his promise. If, in a coming day, preparationism gets a hold, souls will have to meet the same grave costs as before.

Now for Saltmarsh. He was clear as to the way God converts a sinner. Steering the biblical course – having no truck with free-will and creature merit, and yet showing that God changes the sinner's will and does not force it with violence – he declared: although it includes 'threatenings', 'the gospel is formed up of exhortations and persuasions'. Listing several, he went on:

Now this gospel, thus fashioned, is on purpose for the better dispensing of it to the souls of his [God's] people [the elect], that his divine and spiritual things might be more naturally conveyed, in a notional and natural way, [just] as the key is made to fit the wards of the lock. And this is the end [purpose] rather of this gospel fashion, than any supposed free will in man – as some imagine. For the gospel is offered,

²⁸ Calvin, John: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, A New Translation by Henry Beveridge, James Clarke & Co., Limited, London, 1957, Vol.1 pp304-305.

not upon [the] freedom of [the] will in any, but that those who are made to receive it should be wrought on in a way as near to their own condition and nature and reason as can be, for none are converted against their will, but their will is spiritually changed, and so they are made willing in the day of his power [Ps. 110:3]. God does not break up the hearts of his people, but opens them, and stands and knocks. Lydia's heart was opened [Acts 16:14]; and he stands at the door and knocks (Rev. 3:20). This is the gospel way of his entrance. He does not strive nor cry, nor does anyone hear his voice in the streets [Matt. 12:19]. He does not force in himself, nor anything of his into the soul, but brings in spiritual things so naturally as they [the sinners within whom he is working] cannot, indeed, will not, resist.²⁹

Saltmarsh spoke of the greatness of the promises of the gospel in Christ, especially their freeness, and how this serves to break down all resistance in the sinner, remove all excuse, and so bring him to the Saviour: 'The promises that God makes thus in Christ are free, and being made in Christ are more free; for Christ is all that to God that we should be unto him. And we are in Christ so as Christ takes away all discouragements and excuses in any that dare not believe them to be theirs. And, therefore, the Spirit and the bride say: "Come, and whosoever will let him come and take of the waters of life freely" (Rev. 22:17)'.³⁰

Having expatiated on the old covenant, the Mosaic economy, Saltmarsh came to the new covenant. He opened with what I consider to be *the* great biblical phrase in all this debate, 'but now':

But now under the new covenant,³¹ God appears in Christ, and reconciliation is finished, peace is made by the blood of his cross, and now the ministry of the new covenant is not a priesthood of any more offering Christ to God in sacrifice, but of offering and tendering the tidings of a fully reconciled God in Christ to man, and of a sacrifice already accepted for sin. So as now there are no priests, but ministers or stewards or ambassadors for dealing out and dispensing the love of God to man, and for publishing the glad tidings of peace. So as all worship now and spiritual obedience is to run in the way of this

²⁹ Saltmarsh pp163-164.

³⁰ Saltmarsh pp164-165.

³¹ Saltmarsh had 'Testament'. It is better to read this as 'covenant'. The same applies from time to time in what follows, but without this note. I have left 'Testament' where this is obviously right.

dispensation, not for procuring love or peace from God, nor for pacifying [him], but for love procured, and peace purchased, by Jesus Christ.³²

First class!

Again:

I observe that the calling and conversion which souls have in a legally gospel way, not from a pure and clear apprehension of Jesus Christ revealed in the gospel, covenant or promise, though there may be truth in such a calling, and Christ received, yet the manner being not in the way of pure gospel dispensation, the soul may be exceedingly puzzled and perplexed; so though Christ may be truly there, yet being not in a gospel form, but a legal, the soul may mistake and lose the knowledge of Christ... When the Lord sends the light of Jesus Christ into a soul that has formerly been in darkness, and in the shadow of death, then it begins to see its corruption and lusts... then the soul presently is pricked upon the discovery of that, and there is remorse and perplexity in the soul. [Take the Jews in Acts 2]: after Peter had laid open their sin of shedding the blood of Christ, [they] were pricked to the heart for it... And if there be not a clear understanding of Jesus Christ and the gospel, the soul thus wounded will groan under many legal convictions... Many preachers... keep such souls with their wounds open. And if they pour in anything, it is rather... something of the law than [than?]³³ the gospel. So as they [the sinners] are not only long in healing and getting peace through Jesus Christ, but they carry a fear with them still, and are, as it were, lame in their consciences a long time after... The passions which [the] gospel way works in the soul are such as bring enlargements, and [f?]lowings and pourings out of the Spirit, but the passions which the law works bring in straitening, a contraction, or gathering up, or narrowness into the spirit;³⁴ and therefore it is called bondage and fear.³⁵

Saltmarsh has made some huge statements here, statements which he proceeded to work out in detail. The gospel, Christ, is the great

³² Saltmarsh pp166-168.

³³ If it should be 'then', Saltmarsh was here disagreeing with the idea of preparationism by the law; namely, that the law must be preached before the gospel.

³⁴ Saltmarsh had 'Spirit'. He might have meant the law restricts the Spirit's working, or the sinner's apprehension of it. I prefer 'spirit' – the man's own spirit.

³⁵ Saltmarsh pp33-39.

convictor of sinners – not the law; legal preachers keep sinners in bondage with wounds; Christ by his Spirit, however, gives liberty; and so on. And this brings us to preparationism.

Saltmarsh came to grips with the issue. Beginning with the Reformed call for preparationism by the law, he made it clear that he had no time for it: ‘The opening of Jesus Christ in the gospel is the best and surest way to deal with sinners’. He had observed, he said, that when sinners are coming to Christ, some of them ‘are [more] ready to put away gospel promises than [to] receive them, and imagine themselves rather in fitness for judgement than mercy or grace’. In other words, some souls are already (on their own) going down the preparation route – and this effectively keeps them from Christ! And many of the doubts which afflict believers, Saltmarsh traced back to preparationism.

Such anxious souls are, of course, listening to their preachers. What a responsibility such preachers carry! Saltmarsh spoke of the Puritan (Reformed) way of dealing with these afflicted souls – namely, by the law – and showed the dreadful consequences they were storing up for such believers. So closely did Saltmarsh link the hurt preparationism causes both unbelievers and believers, he moved from preparationism by the law in the legal preaching of the gospel to sinners, to the effect of that style of preaching on anxious believers. In so doing, he failed adequately enough to distinguish the two – the reason being, as I have said, that he thought the two are intimately connected. Be that as it may, let Saltmarsh continue:

And then if preachers run to the law in dealing with such souls for their thorough humiliation as they say or pretend, and not to the gospel and faith in Jesus Christ, they bring fire, and not water, to quench them, and so kindle them the more, and setting the everlasting burnings of the law before their souls, put them in a spiritual flame and vexation.

In other words, contrary to the Reformed, the law inflames sinners! Not only so! Saltmarsh showed that this legal preaching went directly against biblical examples. He cited Nathan dealing with David, ‘though under the old covenant’. When David confessed his sin, Nathan told him: ‘The Lord has put away your sin’ (2 Sam.

12:13).³⁶ Saltmarsh cited John's way of dealing with such a case; namely: 'We have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous' (1 John 2:1). This is the biblical way to deal with anxious souls.³⁷

Saltmarsh then tackled Reformed preaching, analysing what lies behind it:

I know the divinity of some former ages [the Roman Church] to these present times [the Reformed], made up all their recipes for distempered [unsettled] souls of so much law and so much gospel, and usually put a grain or dram of gospel to a pound of law; not being then clear enough in judgement to unminge things which Antichrist had confounded and put together – as to the two Testaments, and two covenants, and not rightly discerning Christ's manner or way of preaching, and the apostles' [preaching], both in their holding forth law and gospel. Now we know that the apostle said: 'Did you receive the Spirit by the preaching of the law, or the preaching of faith?' (Gal. 3:2). And therefore, they that would make the law the ministry of life, and of the Spirit, are not of such a spiritual discerning as the Lord has now revealed, and such put a soul on a legal method of conversion, or coming to Christ.

What is the 'legal method of conversion'? Saltmarsh spelled it out:

First, they [sinners] must be kept so long under the law for humiliation, and contrition, and confession, and then brought to the gospel – as many [Puritan, Reformed] books and teachers do – when... [in fact] the law is not of any power to infuse such gracious passions [feelings] into the soul as the gospel calls for. [True, Christ told us:] 'Blessed are they that mourn, and they that are poor' [Matt. 5:3-4], but this is not the mourning spirit under the law, nor the poor spirit under the curse of the law of sin, but... gospel mournings, and gospel poverty... If they [the passions produced] are only such as the law brings forth, and presses the soul into, they are no better than the contritions of Esau and Judas.

³⁶ How did Nathan preach David into a state of conviction for his sin? Did he hammer the 6th and 7th commandments? He did not! He told him a parable which could have come straight from the Gospels – the sheer unfairness of snatching a poor man's cherished lamb, his only lamb, his little ewe lamb, when he himself had an abundance. It was the rich man's lack of pity that Nathan drove into David's heart (2 Sam. 12:1-10). And this, by a prophet to a king under the old covenant! How much less, then, should new-covenant preachers take Gentiles to the law for conviction!

³⁷ For Crisp's important sermon on this text, see above, p62.

In contrast, if the gospel method were to be adopted, the results would be altogether different:

But if they [the passions produced] are such as the law or Spirit of Jesus Christ, or the law of life, works in the soul, then they are of a more spiritual and precious nature; but this is from the gospel and the preaching of faith.

Saltmarsh then turned to scriptural examples: ‘What law did Peter preach to Cornelius, or Philip to the eunuch, or Ananias to Paul, or Paul to the jailor and his household, but only Jesus Christ?’ He generalised the point:

Nor can you find the law – I mean the law in its form or covenant – preached, but to those who were under the law, and pretended to stand by the law, and to set up a righteousness by the law, as the Pharisees and Jews, *etc.*

How right this is! As I have shown, there is no biblical example of anyone preaching the law to unbelieving Gentiles. Not one! To Jews, yes, but not to Gentiles. And, even then, the law was never preached to Jews to make them fit for Christ. Saltmarsh was careful to add:

Though in all this, I esteem no less of the law than any other, as it was a law for the people of God under Moses, and had³⁸ something of the image of God in it, but now we are under a better law, a more excellent law, and a more spiritual commandment... the more pure, transcending and excellent law of the commandments of the gospel, or the more perfect rule of righteousness of God in the righteousness of Christ, so as the New Testament is both law and gospel... ‘Do we therefore make void the law by the preaching of faith? Indeed, we establish the law, Christ being the end of the law for righteousness’ [Rom. 3:31; 10:4].³⁹

Saltmarsh went on to speak of the long-term damage caused to ‘a soul that is not informed by a pure gospel light, nor apprehends clearly the way of faith, of Christ, and the promises, and the glory of the new covenant’. He is, said Saltmarsh, for ‘ever unsettled, unstable, full of fears, doubtings, distractions, questionings. And the more such a soul is reasoned with concerning their [*sic*]

³⁸ Saltmarsh had ‘hath’, but he was talking in the past tense.

³⁹ Saltmarsh pp39-43.

condition, the more they question the truth of every spiritual working in them’.

Where does this come from?

And this comes from the power of the law still upon the consciences, which is more powerful to convince and accuse them, than the gospel is to excuse or acquit them, having more of the ministry of condemnation before them, or in their eye, than of the ministry of life and Jesus Christ. And Satan takes advantage of their legal condition... and so much as there is of legal apprehensions, so much there is to hinder the bringing in of the kingdom of God into the soul... There is nothing but the taking in of the law, and accusings or condemnations of it, which can trouble the peace and quiet of any soul... all trouble arising from the obligation of [to, required by] the law, which demands a satisfaction of the soul for the breach of it, and such a satisfaction as the soul knows it cannot give, and thereby remains unquiet like a debtor that has nothing to pay... It is no marvel that such souls should be troubled for sin, and unpacified... [since] the law in tables or letters of stone must needs work strongly upon the spirits of such as are but weakly and faintly enlightened, and are not furnished with gospel enough to answer the indictments, the convictions, the terrors, the curses which the law brings. Therefore all the power of Christ and the gospel is to be applied to raise up such souls from under the power of those stones and burdens which the law could roll upon them. Such [souls] are to have more gospel than ordinary applied,⁴⁰ because they have so much law naturally within them. Such are to know, they are not now under the law, but under grace, and the law has no more dominion over them, and they are dead unto that husband [Rom. 7:4-6], and they are now upon a new foundation, Jesus Christ himself being the chief cornerstone [Eph. 2:20]. And we should say to such: ‘Let not your hearts be troubled. You believe in God, believe also in Jesus Christ’ [John 14:1].⁴¹

Saltmarsh conceded ‘that in a soul, though legally enlightened, or receiving Christ, yet there are certain gospel workings, whereby it

⁴⁰ I do not understand Saltmarsh here. I could understand the comment if made by a Reformed preacher: a little more law here; a little more gospel there. Nonsense! All gospel! Full weight gospel, all the time, every time!

⁴¹ Saltmarsh pp43-46. As before, Saltmarsh moves from the unbeliever to the believer without adequately distinguishing between them. As I have noted, Saltmarsh was too sparing with words. A few more would not have come amiss here!

will appear that Jesus Christ is there'. Having spelled out four such signs, Saltmarsh nevertheless felt bound to record that 'the souls of such know not the word or Spirit in their souls many times'. Why not? 'The voice of Christ is not heard for the voice of Moses, nor the voice of grace for the voice of the law'. How right he was! Even so, he concluded: 'I will not quench the smoking flax' [Matt. 12:20].⁴²

Indeed, he was very concerned to make sure his readers really understood and appreciated the simplicity and immediacy of the gospel. He had no time for the wire-drawn experience demanded by legal preparationists. Granting that he got some things askew, nevertheless, he certainly drove home his main concern:

The simplicity of the gospel salvation, easy and plain: Jesus Christ, and forgiveness of sins in his name, and redemption through his blood, is the first and only thing held forth in the gospel to sinners... Jesus Christ crucified is the best story for sinners, and Jesus Christ exalted for saints... Salvation is not made any puzzling work in the gospel; it is plainly, easily and simply revealed. Jesus Christ was crucified for sinners. This is salvation, and we need go no further. The work of salvation is past and finished. Sins are blotted out. Sinners are justified by him that rose for justification. And now if you ask me what must you do to be saved, I answer: 'Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved' [Acts 16:31]. All that is to be done in the work of salvation is to believe there is such work, and that Christ died for you among all those other sinners he died for.

I must break in at this point. Saltmarsh went badly astray here, and in two respects. *First*, there is far more to saving faith than believing Christ died for sinners. That is Sandemanianism. Saving faith goes far deeper than head knowledge. It reaches the heart. And, *secondly*, saving faith does not involve believing that Christ died for me personally. If that were true, a sinner would have to be convinced he was elect before he came to faith – an impossibility, in that God never tells a sinner he is elect before he trusts Christ. The fact is, saving faith is trusting Christ, and nothing to do with believing that I am elect or that Christ died for me.

To let Saltmarsh go on:

⁴² Saltmarsh pp46-49.

To believe now is the only work of the gospel. ‘This is the work that [God requires namely, that] you believe on him whom he sent’ (John 6:29). ‘This is his commandment, that you believe on his Son Jesus Christ’ (1 John 3:23); that is, that you be persuaded of such a thing, that Christ was crucified for you and for your sins;⁴³ and we are called on to believe because they only that can believe are justified. ‘By him all that believe are justified’ (Acts 13:39).

So as salvation is not a business of our working and doing. It was done by Christ, with the Father. Sin, Satan and hell were all triumphed over by Christ himself openly for us, and all our work is no work *for* salvation,⁴⁴ but *in* salvation [that is, because we are saved]. In all the salvation we have by Christ, we receive all, not doing anything that we might receive more, but doing because we receive so much, and because we are saved. Therefore we work, not that we may be saved, and yet we are to work as much as if we were to be saved by what we do, because we should do as much for what is done already for us, and to our hands, as if we were to receive it for what we did ourselves.

This is short work: Believe and be saved. And yet this is the only gospel work and way... [John 3:14-15; 6:40,54; Acts 16:31] (Rom. 10:6-9). So as here is but looking upon Jesus Christ, and salvation is in your soul, and believing with your heart, and you are saved. You were saved by Christ before [in God’s decree and in Christ’s work], but now in yourself.⁴⁵

Saltmarsh concluded: ‘There are yet these grounds why salvation is so soon done’; that is, why sinners are so quickly saved:

1. Because it was done before by Christ, but not believed on before by you till now.
2. Because it is the gospel way or dispensation to assure and pass over salvation in Christ to any that will believe it.
3. There needs no more on our sides to work or warrant salvation to us, but to be persuaded that ‘Jesus Christ died for us’.⁴⁶ Because Christ has suffered, and God is satisfied. Now, suffering and satisfaction is that great work of salvation.
4. Because they, and they only, are justified who can believe. ‘Righteousness is revealed from faith to faith’; and ‘all that believe are justified’ (Rom. 1:17; Acts 13:39).

⁴³ See my comment immediately above.

⁴⁴ Saltmarsh had ‘of salvation’.

⁴⁵ In this last, Saltmarsh actually (but rightly) contradicted his stance on eternal justification.

⁴⁶ See previous notes. As it stands, this is Sandemanianism.

5. That it may be by grace, and not of works. ‘Being justified freely by his grace’ (Rom. 3:24).⁴⁷

As can be clearly seen, we could have done with a few more words to make Saltmarsh’s meaning clearer. But their import is plain enough: we must preach Christ to sinners; they need no legal preparation to fit them either for the invitation or for actually coming to Christ; sinners must be made to look to Christ, and not to themselves; none of this needs to be drawn out.

Saltmarsh’s remarks are leading us to the crux; namely, his view of sanctification, and the part the law plays in that sanctification. It is time we looked at that in some detail.

Saltmarsh on the believer and the law

Saltmarsh was convinced that a right understanding and proper appreciation of the freeness of grace in Christ is essential, not only for the unbeliever coming to Christ, but for the saint:

They that are under grace revealed are no more under the law. While we are out of covenant with God [before we come to faith], we are... under the curse for any breach of law or disobedience. But when we are once under grace revealed, we are ever under grace, and no more under the law.

What does this entail? Once he is in Christ:

The law can only tell a believer he sins, but not tax him for any. We are not under the law, but under grace [Rom. 6:14-15]. ‘Who shall lay anything to the charge God’s elect? Who shall condemn? It is Christ that died’ (Rom. 8:33)... Christ came into the world that he might do what we could not do [as] to the fulfilling of the law, and suffer what we could not suffer for the breach of the law... Christ now standing as a person between God and the children of men [better, the elect] takes in the fullness of righteousness and sin from both natures – righteousness from God, and sin from men – whereby all the sins of his people are fully done away with by the infinite glory of that righteousness, both from himself and from us.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Saltmarsh pp190-194, emphasis mine.

⁴⁸ Saltmarsh pp128,132.

In other words, the law's condemning power has gone for the believer. Christ has taken it for him. What are the consequences?

A person justified... is as pure in the sight of God as the righteousness of Christ can make him (though not so in his own eyes, that there may be work for faith),⁴⁹ because God sees his [people] only in Christ, not in themselves; and if they were not in such perfect righteousness, they could not be loved by him, because his eyes are purer than to behold iniquity, or to love a sinner as a sinner.⁵⁰

So much for justification. But what about sanctification? What about the law, the believer and his sanctification? Does the believer never sin? Sadly, of course, he does. So what about sin in a believer? What are the consequences when a believer sins – and who does not?

Sin separates [a believer], not from his God, but from communion with his God. No sins can make God, who loves for ever and unchangeably, love us less; and yet a believer will grieve for his sin, because it grieves the Spirit of his God. And though he knows [that] sin cannot now separate [him] from God, yet because it once separated [him and God], he hates it, and because it separates still, though not from God, yet from communion with God, grieving the Holy Spirit of God.⁵¹

In other words, when a believer sins, although he loses his communion with God, he never sins himself out of the love of God. Does this mean that a believer's sin does not matter? The suggestion is both ridiculous and offensive. As Saltmarsh stated, the believer grieves for and hates his sin because it grieves God.

Yes, but what about the law's part in the believer's sanctification? What place for the law in this regard now, under the new covenant? Calvin, as we know, followed by and extended by the Puritans, and still maintained by the Reformed today, all argue and continue to argue for sanctification by the law. What about Saltmarsh? Saltmarsh turned to 'a believer's glorious freedom', declaring:

⁴⁹ That is, the believer cannot see in his actual life that he is perfect. It is only by faith that he can realise that he is so in the sight of God.

⁵⁰ God, of course, loves the world (John 3:16). The word 'love' needs nuancing.

⁵¹ Saltmarsh pp129-130.

The Spirit of Christ sets a believer as free from hell, the law and bondage here on earth, as if he were in heaven; nor wants [needs] he anything to make him so, but to make him believe that he is so.⁵² For Satan, sin, sinful flesh and the law, are all so near and about him in this life, that he cannot so walk by sight or in the clear apprehension of it. But ‘the just do live by faith’ [Hab. 2:4; Rom. 1:17], and ‘faith is the evidence of things not seen’ [Heb. 11:1]. All the sins of believers [are] done away [with] on the cross. There is no sin to be committed [for] which Christ did not pay down the price of his blood upon the cross, ‘making peace through the blood of his cross’, and yet a believer will sin as tenderly as if all his sins were to pay for yet, knowing that he is not redeemed *to* sin, but *from* sin; not that he may sin, but that sinning he may not suffer for sin; Christ is risen for our justification [Rom. 4:25].⁵³

I pause. Clearly, this is potent medicine, and capable of dangerous misuse in the wrong hands. But the question is: *Is it biblical?* I have no hesitation in saying that Saltmarsh was right. What is more, the man who could say such things ought never to have been called an antinomian. Listen to him again: ‘A believer will grieve for his sin, because it grieves the Spirit of his God... A believer will sin as tenderly as if all his sins were to pay for yet, knowing that he is not redeemed *to* sin, but *from* sin; not that he may sin, but that sinning he may not suffer for sin’.⁵⁴ Is that antinomianism? I think Saltmarsh’s meaning is perfectly clear to any fair-minded reader. Above all, of course, was he not declaring what we need to hear far more of today: namely, the glorious freedom and assurance Christ has wrought and accomplished for his people? Do we hear enough these days of the liberty belonging to the saints in Christ? Did not Saltmarsh reach the heart, warm it, and lift it up? More, as he himself declared, is this not the way to produce holiness? For this, he should never be censured. Rather, he should be imitated!

As he stated:

If these things thus stated were more fully and spiritually opened, there would be more gospel teaching and obeying. For man’s obedience

⁵² As before, he needs faith to appreciate what he is in God’s sight.

⁵³ Saltmarsh pp140-141, emphasis mine.

⁵⁴ 70 years later, Matthew Henry, commenting on Matt. 1:21: ‘Christ came to save his people, not in their sins, but from their sins; to purchase for them, not a liberty to sin, but a liberty from sins’.

towards God is not so notionally, or orderly carried, or so purely as the gospel calls for, but they [the preachers and, therefore, the hearers] run in a legal strain, and would work God down into his old and former way of revealing himself as under the law... and... they deal with God as they did under the old covenant, not considering the glorious love revealed in Christ crucified, and how all gospel ordinances are only ways and means for God to reveal this love and grace by the Spirit of adoption, not in any ways and means of ours for getting some love from God, which Christ himself has not gotten for us.⁵⁵

This is the New Testament – the new covenant – way of sanctification. While it does appeal to the law by way of paradigm (never as binding commandment),⁵⁶ the New Testament overwhelmingly appeals to the grace of God in Christ as the motive, the means, the spur to our sanctification. In short, the gospel not only leads sinners to Christ for conversion, it leads saints to Christ for sanctification by his Spirit.

But the question remains: What place of the law now in the sanctification of the believer? In approaching his answer, Saltmarsh turned to another topic – the union of a believer with Christ – the importance of which cannot be overstated. Sadly, how little is this doctrine preached and understood today.

Saltmarsh on the union of a believer with Christ

On this vital – but grossly neglected – topic, Saltmarsh was magnificent:

A believer has a twofold condition (yet as a believer but one); in Christ, [and] in himself. Yet he ought ever to consider himself in Christ by faith, not in himself. In Christ, he has perfectly obeyed the whole law, perfectly suffered and satisfied for all his sins to [that is, he has satisfied] the justice of God, and in Christ is perfectly just and righteous. And therefore it is said that ‘our life is hid with Christ in God’ [Col.3:3], and ‘we are raised up with Christ, and made to sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus’ [Eph. 2:6], even already. But in [the believer] himself, there is but a body of lust, corruption and sin, and there is a law revealing sin, accusing and condemning. So if a believer lives only by sense, reason and

⁵⁵ Saltmarsh pp168-169.

⁵⁶ See my *Christ, Sanctification in Galatians*.

experience of himself, and as he lives to men, he lives both under the power and feeling of sin and the law. But if he lives by faith in Christ, believing in the life, righteousness, obedience, satisfaction and glory of him, he lives out of [beyond, free of] the power of all condemnation and unrighteousness. And thus a believer is blessed only in a righteousness without, not within [in himself], and all his assurance, confidence [and] comforts are to flow into him through a channel of faith, not of works, believing himself happy for what another, even Christ, has done for him, not what he has done or can do for himself.

Saltmarsh explained:

All the ground of a believer's righteousness and salvation, and exemption from the law, sin and curse, is from the nature, office and transaction or work of Christ, and God's accounting or imputing [of it to the believer]. Christ stood clothed in our nature, between God and man, and in that with all the sins of believers [better, the elect] upon him, 'God having laid on him the iniquities [*sic*] of us all' [Isa. 53:6]. In his office, he obeyed, suffered, satisfied and offered up himself, and now sits as a mediator to perpetuate or make his sacrifice, obedience, suffering and righteousness everlasting, and thus bringing in everlasting righteousness. And God... accounts, reckons or imputes all that is done in our nature [by Christ], as done by us, 'calling things that are not, as if they were' [Rom. 4:17], and in his [Christ's] person as in our person. And thus he is 'made sin for us who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in him [2 Cor. 5:21]'.⁵⁷

What are the practical, day-to-day consequences of this union between Christ and believers? How does it affect them? A believer must keep his union with Christ in mind at all times; he must learn to talk to himself, constantly reminding himself: 'I am in Christ. God sees me only in Christ; he sees me perfectly righteous in Christ'.

Saltmarsh had not finished with this important point, not by a long way. Indeed, he now moved on to make a series of powerful statements – statements running in direct contradiction of the attitude engendered by Reformed teaching, both in his time and ours. What am I talking about? The Reformed think that the believer is in his most spiritual state when he talks in the vein of Romans 7:14-24. I have already referred to this, when looking at

⁵⁷ Saltmarsh pp141-143.

John Eaton. Saltmarsh would have none of it. True, even as believers we *are* sinners in ourselves. Nevertheless, the great truth is not what we are in ourselves but what we are in Christ, and *that* is what we should be concentrating on. Indeed, it is how God views us – in Christ. All this has far-reaching consequences for our peace, assurance and sanctification.

Saltmarsh:

We must come before God, as having put on Christ first, not as sinners and unrighteous. A believer, in all his dealings with God, either by prayer, or other way of drawing near, is to state, and consider himself, thus in Christ in the first place, and to put on the relation of sonship and righteousness, and to look at or consider sins no otherwise [in no other way] than as debts paid and cancelled by the blood of Christ.

And what follows from this?

And by this, all bondages, fears and doubtings are removed, and his spirit is free. And now he comes in the spirit of adoption, and calls God ‘Father’. And here begins all faith, hope, confidence, love [and] liberty when as others⁵⁸ dare not believe themselves in such a condition till upon terms of humiliation, sorrow for sin, works of righteousness, they have, as they think, a reasonable measure, price or satisfaction to come with, and then begin to believe, hope and be confident, and thus in [a] way of compounding and bargaining with God, deal with him [on] all occasions. But such submit not to the righteousness of God, and the free gift of justification by grace, and give not glory to God. For they that believe upon something first in themselves, shall, as they have kindled a fire of their own kindling, and having nothing in Christ [that is, they look too little to Christ, too much to their own sanctification], lie down in the sparks of their own kindling, and have nothing in Christ, because they will not have all in him. For we must either have all in him, or nothing. And though some will have all in Christ for salvation, yet they will have something in themselves to believe their interest in this salvation, and though this is not to reject Christ for righteousness, yet it is to reject his free promise or word of assurance for this righteousness, and rather be persuaded upon sight [rather] than faith, and sense [rather] than promise, and something in ourselves [rather] than in himself.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Saltmarsh clearly had the Puritans, the Reformed, in his sights.

⁵⁹ Saltmarsh pp144-145.

Although I have annotated that extract, let me return to it and further translate it – it merits it! Please bear in mind that Saltmarsh was speaking about believers and their assurance and sanctification – he was not talking about sinners and their justification. Saltmarsh was arguing that if a believer looks for assurance by his sanctification – which is, according the Reformed, by the law – it will inevitably mean that the believer is greatly impoverished, is encouraged to doubt, and never able to shake himself free of a measure of fear and torment. Why? Since he is looking within, he can only see his sin and failure, and hence arises his doubt and fear. What he should do is look to Christ for all. He looked to Christ for his justification, didn't he? Well, then, he must look to Christ for his assurance and for his sanctification. He is 'in Christ'! This is no figment! It is a glorious reality! Let him think like it, live like it and talk like it. He must! It is the truth!

How practical is all this! And how refreshingly different to the usual Reformed way of speaking about our poor wretched state! How liberating! The question is, as always: Which way is the New Testament way? I have no doubt. What about you, reader?

But, the question still stands, what about the law for sanctification?

Saltmarsh on the believer and the law for sanctification

Saltmarsh was explicit. The believer is *not* under the law of Moses for sanctification. He is under the law of Christ. Let me stress this with as much vigour as I can. The believer is not lawless. He is not even law-less. While he is not under the law of Moses, he is under the law of Christ. Saltmarsh, quite rightly, made no apology for stating this loud and clear. It is the teaching of the new covenant! What is more, he argued (again, rightly) that it is the Reformed who need to explain their position. They are the ones out of step with biblical teaching on the new covenant:

The law is now in the Spirit and in the gospel for a believer to walk by. The gospel is a perfect law of both life and righteousness, of grace and truth, and therefore I wonder at any [the Puritans, the Reformed] that should contend for the ministry of the law or ten commandments under Moses, which is of less glory than that which is now revealed and exceeds in glory, and should strive for a law without the gospel, which

is in the gospel [the law of Christ]. Nor is the holiness and sanctification now such as is fashioned by the law or outward commandment, but by the preaching of faith, by which the Spirit is given, which renews and sanctifies a believer, and makes him the very law of commandments in himself, and his heart the very two tables of Moses. And though the law [of Moses] is a beam of Christ in substance and matter, yet we are not to live by the light of one beam now when the Sun of righteousness is risen in himself, that was a fitter light for those who lived in the region and shadow of death. And it is with the law [of Christ] now, or light of righteousness, as it was with the light in creation, when that which was scattered was gathered into one body of light. So Christ now being revealed, holiness and righteousness, as well as grace and love, are revealed in him, and gathered up in him. And what need we light up a candle for the children of the day to see by? What, is there any striving for a stream in the channel, when the fountain is open? Nor does it become the glory of Christ revealed to be beholding to any of the light upon Moses' face. 'The word is now made flesh, and dwells among us, and we behold his glory as the glory of the only begotten Son, full of truth as well as grace [John 1:14]'.⁶⁰

As Saltmarsh was saying, the age of the law of Moses has passed; it is now the age of the law of Christ, the age of the Spirit. It is, as I stressed in my *Christ is All*, the time of the 'but now'.

In a passage of the utmost importance, Saltmarsh dealt with an issue which is often greatly misunderstood. He compared, he contrasted, the two laws – the law of Moses and the law of Christ – 'legal [duties] and gospel duties':

Gospel commandments and legal commandments do not command in the same power, in the same manner, or to the same end.

Admirable! I love Saltmarsh's pithy way of encapsulating profundity. The difference between the law of Moses and the law of Christ is that 'gospel commandments and legal commandments do not command in the same power, in the same manner, or to the same end'. He went on:

⁶⁰ Saltmarsh pp146-147.

The law commands us to obey, to love, to fear, to be holy, that God may be our God, and we his people; the gospel commands us to obey and love because we are the people of such a God.⁶¹

The law commands in the power of God as a law-giver and tutor⁶² or minister; the gospel in the power of a Father.

The law commands by promises and threatenings, blessings and cursings; the gospel persuades rather than commands, and rather by promises, and exhorts rather than bids, and reasons us to duty rather than enforces, and rather draws us than drives us, and by setting forth promises and privileges and prerogatives and works done on God's part, and Christ's part, for us, and in love, rather argues us into doing and working, and loving reflections again; and Christ is chiefly propounded, both for holiness and obedience, for mortification and newness of life. So as the gospel commands us rather by pattern than precept, and by imitation than command (Heb. 12:1-3).

Important remarks are coming thick and fast. Do not miss them, reader. Let them sink in. The gospel, not the law, is the believer's rule, spur and motive for godliness. What is more, the entire ambience, range, spirit, place of the old law has gone – the new law, the law of Christ, being of a different character altogether.

Saltmarsh:

Nor [do the law and the gospel work] to the same end. The end of the law was to bondage, fear, tutorship,⁶³ revealing sin, outward obedience and conformity.⁶⁴ The end of gospel laws is to [produce in us] love, newness of spirit, praise and thanksgiving for righteousness and life received, and testimony to our righteousness received in Christ. 'Having these promises, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness both of flesh and spirit' [2 Cor. 7:1]... And thus, Christ's 'yoke is easy, and his burden light' [Matt. 11:30], and 'his commandments are not grievous' [1 John 5:3], for they are commandments that carry life and power, and quicken to that duty [which] they command, like the sun which warms us in the very shining upon us. And we work and walk and live under the gospel, as being saved already, and redeemed, and

⁶¹ What a massive point! See my *Christ*. See also Jer. 7:23; 24:7; 31:33; Ezek. 11:20; 2 Cor. 6:14 –7:1, for instance.

⁶² Better: 'child-custodian', prison keeper. See my earlier notes on this.

⁶³ See above.

⁶⁴ This is a huge point, and needs stressing today. 'Conformity' is not wanted; conversion and heart-consecration is. Too often, we rest satisfied with conformity.

bringing forth the power of this redemption and salvation, through the Spirit of adoption, freely working to the praise of that free grace, and freely obeying for such free redemption, and doing everything in love, because of the love shed abroad in our hearts; and neither taking in judgements, nor hell, or damnation; no!, nor heaven, nor glory, to force on the work or quicken the duty, but doing all from the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus, except when corruption or temptation hinders the freeness and spirituality in the duty.⁶⁵

Note Saltmarsh's heavy and sustained – but proper – emphasis on 'free'. How great is the gulf between Saltmarsh and Calvin with his whip! Which man has caught the spirit of the new covenant? Do not miss Saltmarsh's emphasis on love, placing spiritual love above all other motives for sanctification. Has he not caught the spirit of the apostle? Listen to him:

Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do. *But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection* (Col. 3:12-14).

Even so, and it is vital to note it, Saltmarsh was clear. Although the believer, through his union with Christ, has the inward grace and power of the Spirit, and is – or ought to be – motivated by love, nevertheless, he needs an outward law, as well as an inward law, to live by. Have no fear! God has given him one! But this law is not confined to the ten commandments! It is the entire word of God, principally the gospel, that is the outward rule for the believer. Not only that! It is not 'merely' the entire word of God, especially the gospel, that is the rule for the believer; it is the entire word of God, especially the gospel, *in the hands of Christ, administered by his Spirit*, that forms the believer's outward governance – hence, 'the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus', 'the law of Christ' (Rom. 8:2; Gal. 6:2). Saltmarsh spoke of 'the gospel in the holiness and grace of it':

There is doctrine of holiness in the gospel, as well as grace and love; and there are commands for obedience, as well as tidings of forgiveness: 'The grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to

⁶⁵ Saltmarsh pp147-149.

all, teaching us that, denying ungodliness', *etc.* 'We should live soberly, righteously and godly' (Tit. 2:[11-]12). And this kind of gospel is such in the revelation of it as fits both God and man. God the Father may be seen in commanding holiness, and the Spirit in forming the holiness commanded, and the Son in redeeming us to holiness, even to the will both of the Father and the Spirit. And this gospel fits [suits] man, who is made up both of flesh and spirit, and so has need of a law without, and in the letter, as well as in the heart and spirit [that is, the law is necessary both outwardly and inwardly]. 'The law is spiritual, but we are carnal' (Rom. 7[:14]). Nor can such a state of flesh and spirit be ordered by a law only within, for the word and law of the Spirit merely [on its own] is for [those in] a [completely] spiritual condition or state of glory, as angels who only live by a law spiritual, or word of revelation. But our estate here being partly carnal, must needs be ordered yet in part by the law of a carnal commandment.

Let me pause. Was Saltmarsh going back on himself and setting out Reformed doctrine here, speaking as he did of the law? Far from it! The truth is, Saltmarsh was using 'law' in more than one way in this paragraph. If only he had taken time and used more words to explain his terms! Nevertheless, as he went on to declare:

And yet this law is not such as it was before, a mere law in the letter, but it is now under the gospel a law of life, spirit and glory. It is a law in the hand of Christ, and with the promises of Christ about it to make it spiritual indeed. And this is according to the just, wise and righteous distribution which God has made to our mixed estate of flesh and spirit, by dealing out to us both the word and spirit, the letter and life. Therefore the word is called 'Scriptures given by inspiration, and is profitable for doctrine', *etc.* (2 Tim. 3:16-17). And the Spirit is called 'the anointing, and teaches all things' (1 John 2:27). 'And I will put my law in their minds' (Heb. 8:10-11). 'And the Comforter whom I will send, he shall teach you' (John 14:26; 1 Thess. 4:9; Acts 2:17).

I pause again. This statement is one of massive import. While he ought to have taken care to sort out his use of 'law', Saltmarsh was constantly hitting the nail right on the head. The believer is under both an inward law and an outward law; the inward law is the Spirit of Christ; the outward law is, not as the Reformed argue, the ten commandments, but the entire word of God, all Scripture, principally the gospel. And not only that. In the new covenant, God in Christ by his Spirit gives life and power, the will and heart to obey his law. The two laws, the law of Moses and the law of Christ,

are totally different in character, form, nature. The law of Christ is his own law in his hand. And so on.

Saltmarsh went on:

Thus, whatever doctrine of holiness is in the New Testament, we are to receive it, because it is now the doctrine of him who is the Lord, Jesus Christ, the Lord as well as Jesus Christ,⁶⁶ and one who commands as well as saves. Nor is there any covenant of works in such kind of obedience. Life is given us to make us obey, but not for obeying [that is, God gives grace to help us to obey, not because we do obey].⁶⁷

Reader, how this man could be, and can be, pilloried as an antinomian, I simply cannot fathom. Those who hurl that sort of offensive epithet at such a man must either be blind or utterly prejudiced. I know I keep saying it, but it needs to be repeated: Would to God we had more such ‘antinomians’ in our pulpits these days! Would to God that we all – as believers – were such ‘antinomians’ in life, word and thought.

Saltmarsh moved on to ‘the new covenant further set forth to be merely a promise. The covenant that is called the new covenant that God makes with his [people] now under the gospel, is all on his own part, without anything on man’s’. Having said a few words on the old covenant, Saltmarsh expatiated on ‘the new covenant’:

This is called a *new* covenant, for it is clear against the strain of the *old*, wherein man was to have his life upon condition. Yet it were good that [if] we did not rest too much in the notion of a covenant.⁶⁸ Nor is it the way of a covenant that the gospel uses, but rather the promise or grace or salvation. For the Spirit uses the word ‘covenant’ only by way of allusion, and because the soul, being under the power of the Spirit, does itself contract a covenant with God to obey, though God gives no life in such a way of a covenant or obedience [on our part – it was all

⁶⁶ What a contemporary note! ‘Take Christ as Saviour today. Tomorrow, you can go on to a second blessing or stage and take Christ as Lord’. Rubbish, abhorrent rubbish! The Redeemer is the Lord – Jesus – Christ, and what God has joined together no man should try to separate. Dead right, Mr Saltmarsh, dead right!

⁶⁷ Saltmarsh pp150-152.

⁶⁸ In my *Christ* I drew attention to the fact that although the phrase ‘new covenant’ is not very frequent in the New Testament, the idea appears throughout.

on Christ's part]. And I observe that the usage of this word has a little corrupted some in their notion of free grace, and makes them conceive a little too legally of it.⁶⁹ And I conceive that the doctrine of it in Hebrews 8:10 *etc*; 'I will write my law' *etc*; and 'I will take away your stony heart' *etc*; and 'I will put my Spirit within you' (Jer. 31:31; Ezek. 36:26) clears it to be only [that is, nothing but] promise and grace and free love to a sinner. For if anything were to be done [by us] for life and salvation, we should darken the glory of free grace, and make it a promise neither wholly of grace, nor wholly of works. 'And if it is grace, it is no more of works, otherwise grace is no more grace' (Rom. 11:6). Nor is this promise of salvation given to sinners as sinners, barely, simply and singly; nor as qualified or conditioned; not to sinners as sinners, for God can only love in Christ;⁷⁰ nor as qualified and conditioned; for [if it were] so life [then] should be purchased *by* us rather than *for* us.⁷¹ So as we are only sinners in our own and others' judgements, but truly loved in Christ when the promise comes. And thus the Scripture calls us ungodly and sinners and children of wrath [by nature]...⁷² So here is ground enough for any to offer salvation to the veriest sinners, and for the veriest sinners to receive. 'For God in Christ reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation' (2 Cor. 5:19).⁷³

As good as this is in the main – in particular, the new covenant not being a legal covenant, and the free offer yet again clearly stated – there are two points I need to make. *First*, Saltmarsh seemed to

⁶⁹ I drew attention to this important point, also, in my *Christ*. The law of Christ is not strictly a law in the sense of the old-covenant use of the word. Did Saltmarsh also have Reformed 'covenant theology' in mind? I think it very likely.

⁷⁰ As before, the gospel offer is to sinners as sinners, and God loves the world (John 3:16). Nevertheless, Saltmarsh was making the point that God bestows all the benefits of Christ's work upon sinners as they believe, and, therefore, as they are, and as he sees them, in Christ.

⁷¹ Saltmarsh is emphasising that everything we have in the gospel is in Christ, not in ourselves.

⁷² Saltmarsh then betrayed his hyper-Calvinism; in particular, his view of eternal justification: 'And thus the Scripture calls us ungodly and sinners and children of wrath. Not that we are so, but seem so; or not so in God's account, but the world's'. He was quite wrong. Before we are converted, we are as much objects of God's wrath as the reprobate.

⁷³ Saltmarsh pp152-154, emphasis his.

confine his remarks to salvation or justification. I am convinced he was including more – and that is why the Reformed so disliked him and his work – but he did not state it here. The fact remains, what he said about the new covenant and salvation or justification applies equally to the believer and sanctification. That is the first point. *Secondly*, as I have already noted, Saltmarsh held to eternal justification. In this, though he wanted yet again to exalt Christ and free grace, he went beyond Scripture. Before they are united to Christ by faith in conversion, the elect really are the children of wrath even as much as the rest (Eph. 2:1-3). It is not merely that they seem so!⁷⁴

But to come back to the main point: Beyond all question, the great issue in this debate is whether or not the law is the spur, the motive and the measure of the believer's sanctification. Calvin had no doubt. Nor have his followers today. The law of Moses is king in this regard. They could not be more wrong! The law of Moses? No! Christ! Christ *is* all! Christ is his law! And Christ is the believer's law!

Saltmarsh, in yet another purple passage:

Christ and every part of Christ [is] to be studied, and believed in. There is not anything of Jesus Christ, but that it should be a matter for a believer's faith to be exercised in, from his divine nature to his incarnation, and so to his exaltation; that they 'may be able to comprehend with all saints the height, and depth, and breadth of the love of God' [Eph. 3:18]. For God was infinitely influencing⁷⁵ into every passage of [Christ's] birth, his growing up, his infancy, his circumcision, his baptism, his preaching, his praying, his temptations, his fasting, his obedience to the whole law, his sufferings, his reproaches, his poverty, his humiliation, his bloody sweating, his judgement and judges, his condemnation, his crucifying, his piercing, his nailing, his drinking vinegar and gall, his strong crying and tears, his crown of thorns, his blood flowing out from his feet, hands and side, his giving up the ghost, his death, burial, resurrection, ascension, exaltation and sitting on the right hand of God, his priesthood, mediation, intercession, dominion. There is infinite virtue in all these,

⁷⁴ See my *Eternal*.

⁷⁵ I am not quite sure what Saltmarsh meant. Was it: God was working in every part of Christ's life, working in love, empowering Christ, inserting virtue into every aspect of Christ's life and work?

and the gospel is made up of these. In these are those unsearchable riches of grace, love and redemption. These are to be the subjects of every believer's meditation, and he is to seek into the spiritual extent of these, and deepness of these. Out of these he is to draw strength, power, love, holiness, spirituality, regeneration, mortification, new obedience, faith, repentance, humiliation, meekness, temperance, *etc.* Christ, and everything of [about and in] Christ, is to be matter for him, and meditation for him. These are those ministerial and instrumental means of grace and life to sinners; not an historical or tragical use of these, but a believing use, a relying, resting, comforting, spiritualising use. These were all but parcels of the work of redemption, but parts of the whole; and to all these, there is an infinite depth of sin and temptations opposed. And therefore the more we are improving ourselves in [that is, the more we draw on] these things of Christ, the more spiritual and infinitely provided shall we be against the other. It is not enough to look on Jesus Christ in his single person glorified and exalted, but to study every part and parcel and passage of Jesus Christ, and thus 'to know nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified' [1 Cor. 2:2].⁷⁶

Amen to that! I wish I had written it! I hope to preach it! Above all, I want to live it out! Christ, Christ alone, is both the believer's driver and standard for godliness. The more the believer sets his mind and heart on Christ (Col. 3:1-2), the more like him he will become. Who dares to say that Saltmarsh was not here setting out the gospel of Christ, and doing so in a biblical way? And doing it in such a way as we preachers need to imitate today? How we should pray: 'Oh God, give us such antinomians as this, and make us such antinomians as this; give us such a spirit!'

The sad fact is, however, in some believers, 'the Spirit of adoption works not freely'. Saltmarsh, showing his credentials as a master-physician of souls, analysing this, and setting out several reasons for it, certainly caught the Reformed in his net. Believers get into all sorts of spiritual trouble when they attempt sanctification by wrong methods. And what are those wrong methods?

When they [the believers in question] do things merely as commanded from the power of an outward commandment or precept in the word,

⁷⁶ Saltmarsh pp194-196.

[then] that brings forth but a legal, or at best but a mixed, obedience, and service something of finer hypocrisy.

When they do [things]... more properly the service of the old covenant, and part of their bondage; for wanting the power and fullness of the Spirit of adoption to work them to obedience freely and from within, they [are] under the power of outward principles to put them on from without...

When they take any outward thing to move them, rather than apply to Christ for strength, life and spirit; for the more any motion or obedience is caused from things without [external things], the more forced and unnatural is all such obedience, and the less from a spiritual power within.

When they measure their forgiveness by their sin and sanctification, and can believe no more than they have peace for, and that peace upon [that is, arising from, out of] something of their own performed, and not from believing on him who has performed all.

Saltmarsh had the antidote:

‘God has not given us the spirit of fear, but of power, of love, and of a sound mind’ (2 Tim.1:8), or of a mind not corrupted with any of these.⁷⁷

I intend to return to this important set of statements very shortly, and develop them further. For now, I simply note that Saltmarsh was spelling out ‘opinions which make men legal’, and I draw but one statement from it: ‘The legal, formal, poor ignorant Protestant runs in a course of obedience and serving God, yet it is not in God’s way of righteousness’.⁷⁸ In saying this, Saltmarsh showed that he had observed the Reformed way of sanctification, and was able to distil it. I fear that Reformed and evangelical preachers, who are of Calvin’s persuasion on the law, bear a heavy responsibility for driving – whipping – believers into this bondage, and for keeping them there. We need men of Saltmarsh’s stamp to preach the gospel freely so that such souls may be released from their bondage, and begin to enjoy the liberty they have in Christ, and thus produce good works from a heart full of the sense of the love of God in Christ. In saying this, I am clearly implying a sad deficiency in much professing Christianity, brought about by legal preaching of

⁷⁷ Saltmarsh pp179-181.

⁷⁸ Saltmarsh pp181-183.

the gospel, which leaves believers impoverished. In this regard, I speak for myself.

Nevertheless, at this point, how eagerly Saltmarsh's critics would pounce! Would? They did! They do! They will! Here he is, dismissing the law, speaking ill of God's law! Not at all, Saltmarsh replied. Getting his defence in first, he declared:

Though in all this, I esteem no less of the law than any other, as it was a law for the people of God [Israel] under Moses, and has something of the image of God in it. But now we are under a better law, a more excellent law, and a more spiritual commandment even [than?] that law which was but a few single beams of righteousness, even ten, but [it was] a decalogue of righteousness.⁷⁹ Yet now in the gospel, the righteousness of God is brought forth in more glorious and spiritual commandments; and for ten, there are scores.

The result?

And with this righteousness of God, the righteousness of Christ is brought forth, which makes the condition of God's people a blessed condition, so as they stand righteous now in all their obedience to the righteousness of God, which is the more pure, transcending and excellent law of the commandments of the gospel, or the more perfect rule of the righteousness of God in the righteousness of Christ.

The conclusion?

So as the New Testament is both the law and gospel, or the righteousness of God and Christ more excellently manifested. 'Do we therefore make void the law by the preaching of faith?' [We do not!] Indeed, 'we establish the law', 'Christ being the end of the law for righteousness' [Rom. 3:31; 10:4].⁸⁰

Reader, I do not think I could choose a passage from Saltmarsh to better illustrate my reasons for re-publishing him and his fellow-antinomians. We have suffered – yes, suffered, and suffered grievously, and for far too long – from a sustained diet of legal preaching, and we desperately need a dose of the sort of teaching these men delivered from the pulpit and with their pen. We need to

⁷⁹ Saltmarsh seems to have adopted the Reformed way of restricting the law to the ten commandments, following Aquinas. The Jews, of course, were under the law – the entirety of the law!

⁸⁰ Saltmarsh pp39-43.

hear of the fullness and freeness of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We need to hear of our glorious liberty in Christ. We need to hear of sanctification from a heart full of gratitude – not fear. And so on, and on. I say this for the good of both sinners and saints; above all, for the glory of God.

But let me return to that ‘sad fact’ I spoke of a few moments ago; namely, as Saltmarsh recognised, in some believers, ‘the Spirit of adoption works not freely’; in other words, there are believers who lack assurance. Saltmarsh was eager to help such afflicted saints – remember the title of his book – and he did so in a masterly fashion. It is time to look at what Saltmarsh had to say about the believer and assurance.

Saltmarsh and assurance

As he had made clear in the title of his book, Saltmarsh was greatly concerned to help true believers who, nevertheless, had doubts about their state. Having considered this spiritual problem, he listed three main causes of it. Not only that, having specified the causes, he did what he could to deal with each case, and so resolve the doubts under which true believers might struggle. In all this, he showed not only his compassion, but his skill, in handling diseases of the soul.

Doubt 1. That you are not therefore beloved of God or in Christ because you fell back again into your sin

Saltmarsh knew that doubting souls could think that when they sin they would remove themselves from the love of God. Saltmarsh did not hold back. He explained at once that this doubt stems from a tremendous misunderstanding; namely, that it is possible for a believer to sin himself out of God’s love. Immediately he set out to ‘prove that no sin can make one less beloved of God or less in Christ’.⁸¹

This, it goes without saying, is spiritual dynamite, dangerous stuff to handle. But that’s not the point. Was Saltmarsh right – from

⁸¹ Saltmarsh p79.

Scripture, I mean? *That* is the issue! I have no hesitation in saying that he was. He made three points to substantiate his claim.

First, he rightly argued that God's mercies are sure, his love everlasting, his covenant an everlasting covenant. Quoting, nothing 'shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord' (Rom. 8:39), he went on: 'So then, to whom he is once merciful, [God] is ever merciful; whom he once loves, he ever loves; whom he once takes into covenant, he is ever theirs. "I am the Lord; I change not"'

Secondly, God loves his people, yes, and – more important – he loves them, not in themselves, but in his Son in whom he is well pleased, with whom he is always well pleased, who is always beloved of him, who is ever 'the same yesterday and today, and for ever' (Heb. 13:8). *This union and identification with Christ must not be watered down.* Saltmarsh continued:

Whom he loves in his Son, he accounts as his Son; 'he is made unto us righteousness, sanctification and redemption' [1 Cor. 1:30]. So as we being not beloved for our own sakes, but for his Son's, nothing in us can make God love us less because he loves us not for ourselves, but in and through his Son in whom he is well pleased.

In short, since God without ceasing loves his elect as he sees them in his Son, united to his Son, and not in themselves, and since Christ and his work are perfect and unchangeable and unchanging, the believer has no cause to fear that he shall sin himself out of God's love.

Thirdly:

If God should love us less or more, as we are less or more sinful, then he should be as man... And if believers stood upon these terms with God, then how are the Scriptures true: 'He rose again for our justification. Who shall lay anything to the charge of God's elect? Who shall condemn? There is no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus. The foundation of God stands sure. He ever lives to make intercession for them' [Rom. 4:25; 8:33-34; Rom. 8:1; 2 Tim 2:19; Heb. 7:25]. So as God is ever the same that loves, and his love is as himself, ever the same; and Christ in whom we are beloved, ever the same.⁸²

⁸² Saltmarsh pp78-80.

In other words, since God and his love are unchangeable and unchanging, the believer need have no fear that he can ever sin himself out of God's love. Dangerous it may sound, but it is nothing less than gospel truth. Do not forget Saltmarsh's emphasis on the necessity of sanctification: his instrument had more than one string! But this note – the glory of our free justification in Christ – is a note which needs to be sounded far more than it is.

If I may add my own comment, let me repeat what I said, when looking at Crisp:

'The one who comes to me I will by no means cast out' (John 6:37). This truth is commonly applied to unbelievers, assuring them that if they come to Christ, he will never drive them away (NIV). Glorious truth indeed! But we can go further, much further; indeed, we should go much further: 'The one who comes to me' – the believer – 'I will by no means cast out'. The Greek has the double negative – *ou-mē* – and is thereby much strengthened – 'not at all, never, never under any circumstances' – cast out, reject or drive away. Moreover, the context puts it beyond doubt: 'All that the Father gives me [the elect] will come to me, and the one who comes to me [the believer] I will by no means [under any circumstances] cast out'. Thus declared the Lord Jesus.

In other words, Saltmarsh was right.

Doubt 2. Because you feel not yourself sanctified, you think you are not justified

This, of course, was getting to the heart of the doctrine for which he and his friends were being accused of antinomianism. He did not duck the issue. While he thought that arguing assurance on the basis of sanctification could tend to legalism, Saltmarsh also knew that sanctification is essential. So he had a tightrope to walk. But walk it he did. And he kept his balance.

'I shall allow you', he said, 'your sanctification so far as the Scriptures do, as a lower motive, and more carnally mixed and uncertain way of persuasion and assurance of justification'. That is to say, he was sticking to his guns about the basis of assurance. He did not agree with those who look for assurance mainly on the basis of sanctification (the typical Reformed view today). He himself was sure that the main way of assurance is by the witness of the Spirit,

and the believer looking out of himself to Christ – who gives him the witness of the Spirit.

And he had more to say. Saltmarsh depicted the ‘two sides’ or parties in the debate, each ‘sadly mistaking one another’; that is, the Reformed and the real antinomians. One side would allege that the other was making justification to depend, in part at least, on sanctification. They, in their turn, would allege that the other ‘would cast out all sanctification’; in other words, rank antinomianism. ‘Now such opinions are in neither of them; justly in them, I mean’. ‘But’, he went on, ‘there are some expressions on both parts, which make one side pass for legal teachers, and the other for antinomians – the one giving too much in their sermons and books to faith and works, in an unwarrantable jealousy [concern] lest holiness should be slighted’. Some on the other side, however, give ‘less [weight in their sermons and books to faith and works] than is fit, lest free grace should lose her due’. He gave his own opinion: ‘And both [sides, therefore, do it] in an unwarrantable jealousy [concern]’. That is to say, for the best of motives – but misguided motives – each side tries to protect scriptural principles – one the necessity of good works, the other the freeness of grace. As a consequence, both parties tamper with the biblical doctrine of assurance.

If he had to come down on one side or the other, Saltmarsh had no doubt which it would be. He would prefer not to have to do it, but, if forced, he would come down on the latter and not the former. ‘I had rather cry down men to exalt Christ, than Christ to exalt men, though I would [prefer to] do neither, but let both have their place and order’. He had raised this, he explained, ‘to keep from dashing against the Scriptures either way’.⁸³

⁸³ Saltmarsh pp81-82. Writing in 1692, just after the republication of Crisp’s *Works*, Benjamin Keach: ‘Brethren, ’tis a hard case that any who maintain the old doctrine of justification, should be branded with the name of antinomians. As for my part, if Dr Crisp is not misrepresented by his opponents, I am not of his opinion in several respects’ – Keach did not believe in eternal justification – ‘but I had rather err on their side, who strive to exalt wholly the free grace of God, than on theirs, who seek to darken and magnify the power of the creature’ (Keach, Benjamin: *The Marrow of True Justification*, quoted by Walker, Austin: ‘Much for the

This is a vital passage in Saltmarsh's book. Though he did not agree with the Reformed view that sanctification is the best way of assurance, he did not dismiss it. He was, in my view, scripturally balanced at this point. And whatever other label might be justly fastened to him, 'antinomian' should not. Clearly he was no enemy of sanctification.

Now for the doubt itself – 'because I feel not sanctified, I fear I am not justified'. Saltmarsh drove straight for the jugular: 'If you suppose that God takes in any part of your faith, repentance, or new obedience, or sanctification as a ground upon which he justifies or forgives you, you are clear against the word [of God]: "For if it is of works, it is no more of grace, otherwise work is no more work"'. Superb! The basis or ground of justification is grace, not our works. Nevertheless, too often, doubting souls can begin to think that sanctification is not only the evidence of justification, but its ground or cause. And such a thought is patently unscriptural.

But if the doubting soul had not made that mistake, confusing the *basis* of justification with its *evidence*, 'it must then be only the evidence of your being justified that you seek for in your sanctification'. Very well! Saltmarsh agreed that, according to Scripture, sanctification does contribute to the assurance of justification. But he urged care: 'It must be done in the Scripture's own cautions and way'. He spelled out what he had in mind: 'Christ is revealed to be our sanctification'. He listed a string of scriptures:

'You are Christ's. You are sanctified... you are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus... We are God's workmanship created in Christ Jesus unto good works... Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith. That new man which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness... Be found in him, not having my own righteousness... That we present every man perfect in Christ Jesus. But Christ is all and in all. Your life is hid with Christ in God'. See Hebrews 13:20-21. [1 Cor. 3:23; 6:11; Eph. 2:10; 3:17; 4:24; Phil. 3:9; Col. 1:28; 3:11; Col. 3:3].⁸⁴

'All these scriptures', said Saltmarsh:

Work of Religion', being a paper given at the Westminster Conference 2004: *The Faith that Saves* p104.

⁸⁴ Some of these refer to positional sanctification, of course.

Set forth Christ, the sanctification and the fullness of him, the all in all. Christ has believed perfectly, he has repented perfectly, he has sorrowed for sin perfectly, he has obeyed perfectly, he has mortified sin perfectly, and all is ours, and we are Christ's and Christ is God's.⁸⁵

In other words, not only for justification (over which, with the Reformed, there is no quarrel), but even when looking for and at our sanctification, we must keep our eye on Christ, and Christ alone. Our own godliness, in this life, will always be defective, but since we are in Christ, in the eyes of God, as believers we are for ever beyond condemnation.

Furthermore, Saltmarsh argued, 'we must believe more truth of our own graces than we can see or feel... We should walk by faith and not by sight'. We are believers, we walk by faith, and when the crunch comes, we must trust God in his word above and against our feelings. Saltmarsh went on: 'We are to believe our repentance true in him who has repented for us; our mortifying sin true in him, through whom we are more than conquerors, our new obedience true in him, who has obeyed for us, and is the end of the law to everyone that believes, our change of the whole man true in him who is righteousness and true holiness'.⁸⁶

Now there is much that is excellent in this – and that which must not be forgotten but rather stressed! – but... and there is a but! Saltmarsh was in danger of leaving his readers with the wrong impression. We do have to repent for ourselves. God does not do our repenting for us.⁸⁷ I am not aware that Scripture teaches that

⁸⁵ Saltmarsh pp82-84.

⁸⁶ Saltmarsh pp84-85.

⁸⁷ Although God gives faith to the elect sinner, working in him, it is the sinner who believes (Eph. 2:8-10; Phil. 2:12-13). The Holy Spirit does not believe for the sinner; God does not do the believing. Gill had it right when he said: 'It is the convinced sinner, and not God or Christ, or the Spirit, who repents and believes'. 'Faith... as a principle, is purely God's work; [but] as it is an act, or as it is exercised under the influence of divine grace, it is man's act'. 'Faith, as it is our act, is our own; hence we read of *his* faith, and *my* faith, and *your* faith, in Scripture' (Gill, John: *The Cause of God and Truth*, W.H.Collingridge, London, 1855, p112; *Gill's Commentary*, Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, 1980, Vol.5 p654; *Sermons and Tracts*, Old Paths Gospel Press, Choteau, 1997, Vol.4 p185, emphasis his).

Christ repented for us. And while Christ is our holiness, even so we do have to live a life of godliness. And so on. Saltmarsh was right in saying that we as believers can depend too much on our feelings, but he was playing with fire when he left his readers to deduce that everything is outside of us, and none of our responsibility. It seems as though the desire to exalt Christ, and to help doubting saints, got the better of him here.

And when he declared: ‘This is the scriptural assurance for a child of God, or believer, to see everything in himself as nothing, and in himself everything in Christ. “Faith is the ground of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen” (Heb. 11:1)’, although he was essentially right, once again he needed to show more care. Faith is not the ‘basis’ or ‘ground’ as he baldly stated. The word ‘evidence’, *hupostasis*, is more nuanced than that. It can speak of putting a ground or foundation under something, but faith itself is not the actual ground or basis of assurance. Rather, faith is the confidence, the assurance that the hoped-for things afford.⁸⁸

And Saltmarsh was surely too sweeping – but I sympathise with him a great deal – when he said:

All other assurances are rotten conclusions from the word, and such things as true legal preachers have invented, not understanding the mystery of the kingdom of Christ. The Scriptures bid you see nothing in yourself, or all as nothing. These teachers bid you see something in yourself. So as to leave Christ out of sanctification is the foundation of all doubts, fears and distractions. And he that looks on his repentance, on his love, on his humility, on his obedience, and not in the tincture of the blood of Christ, must needs believe weakly and uncomfortably.⁸⁹

In saying this, Saltmarsh, of course, was not dismissing practical godliness. He did not balk the question: ‘Why do the apostles press sanctification... in all their letters?’ As they do, let it be said loud and clear. What was his reply? This:

Sanctification is the beginning of the forming of Christ here in this life in one part of him; which is holiness, which shall be perfected in the life to come: we shall be fashioned like unto his glorious body.

⁸⁸ See Thayer. As above, see my *Eternal* for my comments on the (mis)use of Heb. 11:1 by the advocates of eternal justification.

⁸⁹ Saltmarsh pp85-86.

Sanctification is the witness to the righteousness of Christ, which, being a glory out of sight to the soul and to the world, is made clearer by faith and holiness to both.⁹⁰ So as in sanctification, both soul and body, flesh and spirit join to glorify the riches of Christ. ‘You are bought with a price; glorify God in your bodies, and in your spirits’ [1 Cor. 6:20]. And: ‘Walk as children of light and of the day’ [Eph. 5:8]. So as the wisdom of the Spirit is seen much in the word, in pressing sanctification, and praising sanctification, both to set forth the nature of the Spirit in believers, and to quicken flesh and blood against an empty formal profession.⁹¹

Nevertheless, while Saltmarsh did not dismiss practical godliness as some sort of evidence, he still came down firmly on the believer taking his eye off himself, and focussing firmly on Christ *in* all things and *for* all things. Otherwise, as Saltmarsh so rightly discerned, the believer will always be prone to doubts about his assurance – this being inevitable, since his sanctification can never be complete in this life.

Doubt 3. Whether you do believe or not

This doubt, Saltmarsh called the Great Doubt: doubting souls can question whether or not their faith is true faith, a real saving faith. In answering this doubt, Saltmarsh rightly went back to preparationism. This, he saw, carries a heavy responsibility for much of the distress caused to such souls.

He opened: ‘It is one thing to believe, and another to know we believe’. He plunged at once into duty faith, speaking of ‘Christ’s command to believe... Now, Christ’s commands are to be obeyed, not disputed. Good servants do not reason their duty out first with themselves, but fall to doing as they are commanded’.

Having cleared that fundamental, but vital, point, he came to grips with preparationism. Remember, preparationism means the

⁹⁰ If Saltmarsh was saying that progressive sanctification, along with faith, is a witness to the soul of its possession of Christ’s righteousness – in other words, progressive sanctification is a part of the believer’s assurance – then he was contradicting his own assertion that all assurances other than reliance upon Christ were rotten. From what follows, however, he may well have been saying that our sanctification testifies to the world of Christ’s righteousness. If so, he was spot on.

⁹¹ Saltmarsh pp90-91.

preaching of the law to sinners to make them ‘fit’ to trust Christ. Saltmarsh:

I find not any in the whole course of Christ’s preaching or the disciples’ [preaching], when they preached to them to believe [that is, when they commanded sinners to believe, that any of those who were so commanded] asking the qualification, whether they believed or not, or whether their faith were true faith or not. I find one saying: ‘Lord, I believe, help my unbelief’; but not: ‘Lord, whether do I believe or not?’ And: ‘The Lord increase my faith’; but not: ‘Lord, whether this is true faith I have or not?’ It would be a strange question in any that were bidden to a feast to ask the master of the feast whether his dainties were real or a delusion.⁹² Would not such a question disparage him for a sorcerer? So in things of the Spirit, to be over-jealous of the truth of them, as many poor tempted souls are, does not become the faithfulness of Jesus Christ [that is, to doubt is to impugn Christ’s faithfulness]. The way to be sure of the truth of the good things is to taste and see how good the Lord is. Spiritual things are best felt and tasted with [by] feeding upon them. Eat, O friends, drink, yes, drink abundantly, O beloved.

I pause to underscore the excellent point Saltmarsh is making. As I have shown, preparationists make sinners wait at the gate, wait for certain qualifications to be met, wait until they are ‘fit’, properly prepared and qualified to believe. Not so, retorted Saltmarsh. As the Scriptures show, this was never the way with the biblical preachers. No! Come to Christ at once. The only way, the ‘best’ way (to use Saltmarsh’s term) is to taste and see. As the hymn writers, Nahum Tate and Nicholas Brady, said: ‘O make but trial of his love/ Experience will decide’. God’s command to sinners is to believe. That is their duty. Therefore, sinner, believe!

Moving on, Saltmarsh confessed that he had no competence to really satisfy souls who doubted the trueness of their faith. There was only one who can do that: ‘For any to doubt whether they do believe or not, I find to be a question only fit and proportional [proper] for Christ himself to satisfy’.

Even so, Saltmarsh then set out the biblical doctrine of faith, showing what true saving faith is. He rightly talked of ‘being

⁹² Remember, Saltmarsh was fully convinced that, according to Scripture, God in Christ gives both repentance and faith (Acts 5:29; Eph. 2:8).

persuaded more or less of Christ's love' in 'the heart'. He also explained that, even though he could and would set out the biblical 'effects and properties of this faith and belief', nevertheless 'none can simply persuade a soul that it does believe, but he on whom it does believe'; that is, Jesus Christ himself. He gave the illustration of a husband bestowing rings and bracelets upon his wife: his gifts 'may concur and help in the manifestation' of his love, but it is the husband's 'voice' that 'can more principally, and with clearer satisfaction, persuade the spouse of [his] goodwill'.

Saltmarsh rolled his sleeves up: 'We ought to believe till we are persuaded that we believe, because the more we do believe, the more we shall be persuaded to believe'. Quoting Ephesians 1:13, though admitting 'there is more to be said' upon it, he gave an illustration: 'The way to be warm is not only to ask for a fire, or whether there is a fire or not, or to hold out the hands towards it... but to stand close to that [what?] fire there is, and to gather heat'. In other words, unbeliever, stop debating about faith, and get on and believe! To change the figure: don't sit looking at a plate, endlessly questioning the nutritional value of the food upon it. Eat and see!

Driving deeper, and, as always driving his readers to Christ: 'We ought, I suppose, no more to question our faith... than we ought to question Christ the foundation of our faith'. Referring to scriptural warnings against unbelief (Heb. 3:12,19; 4:2) – in particular, through preparationism – Saltmarsh came to the biting point:

It is Satan's greatest policy to put a soul upon such qualifications. For by this he sets on the soul for evidence [that is, he starts the soul seeking for evidence] from things which he knows can afford but a questionable assurance; [namely, seeking]... persuasion [of our justification] most [principally] upon marks and signs out of our own sanctification, or works, which cannot hold good without faith itself, to bring down Christ upon them. For he puts us clean back if we observe.

What did Saltmarsh mean? He explained. It was a catch-22 situation. To try to authenticate our faith by our works is a circular argument: 'We are proving our faith by our works, when as [whereas] no works can be proved godly but by our faith, for without faith it is impossible to please God'. A vicious circle, indeed!

Saltmarsh illustrated his argument by observing that a coin may be made of silver, but, unless it has the right ‘image and superscription’, it is no coin, and of no use as coin. The same with works. To take evidence from our works, to use our works as evidence that we truly believe, means that we have to see Christ in those works – and we can only do that by believing! In short: ‘While Satan puzzles us in questioning our faith or believing, he keeps us off from believing, knowing that this is the condemnation: “He that believes not is condemned already” [John 3:18]’.⁹³

As always, Saltmarsh traced this particular doubt back to preparationism:

I cannot but wonder at any [preachers] that keep souls, in acts of preparation and qualification, from the act of believing, as if we could believe too suddenly; and many a one loses some degrees of faith while they are seeking it thus in the evidence of their works. For while faith is kept off from Christ, and the soul suspended, faith decays, and becomes weaker and weaker; when as if it were still exercised upon Christ in the promises, it would sooner bring a clearer and more undeceivable evidence with it, than can any other way be ministered unto it.

In other words, sinners, relying on the promises, should go straight to Christ for everything needed for salvation. And believers, too, should go straight to Christ. Keep going to Christ! Keep him in view! Trusting Christ and his promise is the only way of salvation, and it is the best way of assurance. As we trust Christ, the Holy Spirit increasingly bears witness with our spirit that all is well. ‘Having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise’ (Eph. 1:13). Of course that verse applies to conversion, but the principle stands. As we trust Christ and his promises, so the Spirit confirms us more and more. The more we look at ourselves, the weaker our assurance becomes.

To let Saltmarsh continue: ‘In the gospel, all are immediately called to believe’. He cited Hebrews 3:7,15; 4:7; Acts 16:30-31; John 6:22; Acts 8:37. ‘So as I shall draw this conclusion for many that are in the dark in this point, both preachers and people: that none can believe too hastily in Jesus Christ our righteousness... We

⁹³ Saltmarsh pp92-97.

must believe that we may know that we do believe; for the witness comes by believing, the Spirit bearing witness’.

By plying the doubter with a series of questions,⁹⁴ he made clear that faith is not always accompanied by ‘full assurance’, and that, because he does not have full assurance, no believer can conclude he has no faith at all, or that his faith is not a true, saving faith:

There are degrees of believing. One degree is to believe, another is to be assured that you believe. There are in the word, believers of several ages. Some are called little ones, weak ones, babes, children, strong men. Some are such as have been sound believers, and are made weak through sin, and temptation and ignorance of the covenant of free grace and their righteousness in Christ, and the glorious estate of a believer under grace, as a man that is not perfectly healed of some infirmity... The nature and properties of true saving faith [comprise] almost the [entire] business of the whole of the New Testament... Now the great mistake which I find in this [age], and ages before, is the singling out the properties of a true faith, and sending a believer for his assurance most thither – in himself. Which caused the believers of former ages [the time of the medieval Church] to walk in bondage, though with the spirit of adoption, and to make up their assurance much like believers under the law – from their obedience and repentance, and humiliation in themselves, Christ being much in the dark to them, and little seen then. And much the same darkness covers this age [of the Reformed Church] in which we live...⁹⁵

In other words, as before, Saltmarsh drove souls back upon Christ – not to look to themselves, their works, the law. Christ is all! At bottom, Rome and the Reformed send men to themselves for assurance. According to the new covenant, believers – yes, believers – must go to Christ.

Saltmarsh hit the nail smack on the head. Preparationism mars one of the main glories of the gospel, he declared. To what was he referring? He made his point by continuing to bombard the doubter with questions: ‘Did not the promises belong to sinners as sinners?’

⁹⁴ And thereby showing his skill as a spiritual physician. The arm around the shoulder is good, but the real cure is wrought by a firmer approach, and one that makes the doubter see the truth for himself. The word ‘comfort’ in Scripture has a far stronger meaning that it has today. We won’t go far wrong to read it as ‘backbone’.

⁹⁵ Saltmarsh pp97–101.

The doubter, in reply, admitted it was true, but immediately added a devastating rider: ‘Yes, but to repentant sinners’.

I pause. The doubter was making a fundamental error, one which is far too common.⁹⁶ How many times I have tried to expose it in previous works! Saltmarsh gave it short shrift. He referred to the churches of the New Testament and Paul: ‘What was Paul before Christ came to him? Were they sinners or qualified? And what were all that believed, before they believed?’ The doubter replied: ‘They were sinners’. ‘Came not the promise to Adam, even then when he was dead in sin [Gen. 3:15]?’ ‘Yes,’ came the answer. And so on and on. Well, then:

Were you not in their condition... that is, a sinner, according to your own apprehension?... Are you not then as free for Christ to come to as they were?... Are not the promises as free and open to you as to them?

⁹⁶ It always grates when I hear, say, a Grace or Reformed Baptist minister (no doubt the same is true in other circles), talk in terms: ‘Christ died for those who would repent or believe’, or some such. While it is not exactly false, and while it is certainly an improvement on ‘Christ died for believers’, neither are found in Scripture, and are euphemisms for the biblical doctrine that Christ died for his elect. What is more, it gives totally the wrong impression – placing the emphasis on the sinner, not Christ. Faith and repentance are gifts of God secured by the death of Christ. When addressing the ungodly, let us keep to such scriptures as these: ‘Christ died for the ungodly... Christ died for sinners’ (Rom. 5:6,8). We must read Caiaphas’ statement that Christ would die for ‘the children of God’ (John 11:50-52) in terms of Christ dying for the elect, not actual children of God. Gill was unclear on the text: ‘By which may be meant, not only the elect of God among the Jews, who were scattered amidst the nations of the world, for whom Christ died... but rather the elect of God among the Gentiles... because they were the children of God by special adoption, in divine predestination, and in the covenant of grace; and were so considered, when given to Christ, who looked upon them as in this relation, when he assumed their nature, and died in their room and stead; and not merely because they would hereafter appear to be the children of God in regeneration, and by faith in Christ Jesus, and have the witnessings of the Spirit that they were so’. This could be interpreted as *actual* (which is wrong) or *decreed* (which is right) children of God in eternity. Calvin was much better: ‘It is therefore by election that he *reckons* as the children of God, even before they are called, those who at length begin to be manifested by faith both to themselves and to others’ (emphasis mine).

You being all alike sinners, and God's will being revealed no more for one's election than another's, no more for their election than yours?⁹⁷

I must break in at this point. As I have shown in previous works, some argue that the gospel invitation is only to those who are elect. This, of course, is utterly false. One of the direst consequences of such a notion is that it effectually prevents preachers offering any invitation lest they should include one of the reprobate. Moreover, it sets sinners on a fruitless course of seeking to discover whether or not they are elect. And all the time the preachers should be offering Christ freely, and sinners should be trusting Christ, neither of them bothering their head about the election or otherwise of the hearers. Both parties should be applying the principles of Deuteronomy 29:29, leaving the secret things to God – in this case whether or not an unbeliever is elect – and concentrating on the revealed things – in this case, that the preacher should offer Christ freely and invite and command all sinners as sinners to repent and believe, and the sinner should obey that command, and trust Christ at once. The fact is, no unbeliever can know he is elect until he believes. Nor can any preacher. I have fully explored this elsewhere.

To let Saltmarsh continue:

Are any promises made to any in Christ, or out of Christ, [as God sees them, the sinners,] only in themselves? Is not Christ the only qualified person for all promises? And so through Christ derived upon all this, we being said to be complete in him? Does not all fullness dwell in him, and all receive of his fullness? Are not all the promises in him Yea and Amen?

As always, the dictum with Saltmarsh is: go to Christ; all the promises are in him; do not look to anything in yourself; go to Christ for all.

Saltmarsh concluded his remarks to those who suffer from this 'Great Doubt':

1. Election and condemnation being secret things, [they] belong to the Lord, and were not revealed in the word to the end to hinder any from believing, for that were against God's goodness and mercy revealed. And they that make much of them, serve not the Lord's ends, but

⁹⁷ Saltmarsh pp102-103.

Satan's, for such an end is against the sweet simplicity of the gospel of Christ.

2. The only ground for any to believe is the word of promise, not anything more or less in themselves. 'This is his commandment, that you believe on the Son of God' [1 John 3:23].

3. The promises of Christ are held forth to sinners as sinners, not as repenting sinners, or humble sinners, as any condition in us upon which we should challenge Christ.⁹⁸ For then it is [that is, it would be] no more grace, but of works. Now [the Scripture declares that] we are freely justified by his grace.

4. Whatever promise there is, which has any condition in it, it is ours in him; that is, in Christ, who was the only conditioned and qualified person for all the promises, all being in him Yea and Amen; and all being complete in him who is the fullness.⁹⁹

Excellent! The offer of the gospel is to sinners as sinners; election is no basis for the offer nor for duty faith; while God's electing decree is, of course, at the root of the cause of the salvation of a sinner, whether or not any particular sinner is elect, or whether or not Christ has died for him, has no bearing on the free offer and duty faith; the gospel offer is to be issued promiscuously – that is, indiscriminately to all. Moreover, as for the condition in the offer – namely that the sinner must repent and believe – even here the sinner must go to Christ; he gives faith and repentance (Acts 5:29; Eph. 2:8). In short: Christ is all!

If this is antinomianism, reader, let's have more of it! And quick!

Saltmarsh had more to say on the biblical nature of assurance, 'the way of assurance for believers', declaring:

The surest knowledge that anyone has that they have received the promise is the closing of the heart with Christ, the real receiving and believing, the relying and going out of the heart upon Christ. 'The just shall live by faith' (Rom. 1:17). 'We walk by faith, and not by sight' [2 Cor. 5:7]. This was the assurance that the father of the faithful [Abraham] had, who staggered not at the promise, but gave glory to God.

⁹⁸ I am somewhat at a loss to interpret 'challenge' (Saltmarsh had the Middle English spelling). My best guess is 'rival', or, perhaps, 'impugn'.

⁹⁹ Saltmarsh pp103-105.

But Saltmarsh realised that we need more:

Yet this assurance is such, as the soul cannot be content with only; there is something in man beside faith to be satisfied. Reason will have [that is, we demand] more light to see by. And therefore the working of the spirit¹⁰⁰ in new obedience, and love, and repentance and self-denial, are such glimmerings as the soul may be refreshed by, though not strengthened by; and comforted by, though not supported by; works, though they cannot assure by themselves, yet raised up in faith, may with it cheer up the soul. If we believe more of these works than we see or feel, and so strengthen them by faith, they may be like [the] tokens and change of raiment by which Jacob was persuaded that Joseph was [yet] alive; by these we may be better persuaded that we live, and live in Christ. Therefore the soul, being a reasonable and discursive [that is, a reasoning] spirit, is much satisfied in such a way, when the Spirit of God helps it to reason, and draw conclusions, as thus:

The word says 'whoever believes, shall not perish' [John 3:16]. 'But I believe', says the soul, 'and therefore, according to that word, shall not perish'.

The word says 'to believe is to receive or put confidence in or trust', as John 1:12. 'But I receive Jesus Christ for mine. I trust in him for salvation. Therefore I believe'.

The word says 'repentance, love, self denial, obedience to the will of God, are all the fruits of the Spirit' [Gal. 5:22-23]. 'But they are in me. I can [and do] repent and love, and deny myself, and obey'.

The word says that 'we are complete in Christ' [Col. 2:10]. 'But when I repent or love or obey, I believe I am in Christ, and therefore my love, and repentance, and obedience is such as I may believe, though, not in themselves, yet in him, to be good and spiritual'.

And thus a believer may believe for assurance, and yet reason for assurance. And some other questions a believer may put to his own spirit, and draw it out into more conclusions for believing: 'Am I Christ's or my own? If I am Christ's, do I walk in Christ? And obey Christ? Do I delight in Christ, and those [who] are Christ's? Or do I live to myself, to my lust? To my profit or credit? To others, or the world?'¹⁰¹

In all this, Saltmarsh reveals his balance. For assurance, the believer trusts Christ, and thus he is assured; this assurance is

¹⁰⁰ I cannot tell whether Saltmarsh used 'spirit' or 'Spirit'. I think 'spirit' is right.

¹⁰¹ Saltmarsh pp155-157.

strengthened, however, by seeing marks of sanctification. How this man could be dismissed as an antinomian, as an enemy of godliness, beats me. Eternity will tell us how many have been – and yet might be – helped by such a teacher and his teaching. Let those who will have nothing to do with him, and his ilk, wonder how many will be helped by their own teaching!

Saltmarsh exposed ‘the fears of weak believers’, applying to distressed souls the gospel remedy for each particular fear he listed.¹⁰² Of these remedies, this is but a selection:

We are commanded to believe forgiveness of sins in Jesus Christ thoroughly, and not in part. Through his name, ‘whoever believes in him, shall receive remission of sins’ (Acts 10:43)... We are to consider that one sin cannot be forgiven but [as a consequence] all is forgiven. Jesus Christ has done away with all sins. ‘For this man after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God’ (Heb. 10:12)... We are to believe God in the plainness and simplicity he speaks in, in gospel promises, and words of grace even to our souls, as if he spoke out to us by name from heaven. ‘He that believes not God has made him a liar, because he believes not the record that God gave of his Son’ (1 John 5:10)... We must know God is not as man that he should be angry and pleased as we carry ourselves.¹⁰³ ‘I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and iniquities will I remember no more’ (Heb. 8:12). ‘I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people’ (Heb. 8:10)... We must remember that our sins are no more ours, but Christ’s, and his righteousness is ours. God reckons and accounts us [that is, Christ and us] as one now. So though we sin, yet every sin was accounted for in him, and ‘now there is no condemnation to them that are in Jesus Christ’ (Rom. 8:1).

Ah, but what about trials, afflictions and sufferings? Do they not arise as a result of sin? When God afflicts a believer, is he not showing his displeasure against the believer’s sin, afflicting him for his sin as a punishment? Saltmarsh had his answer ready:

And [as] for afflictions, though they came in with sin, and for sin, and are the wages of sin, yet to the righteous, and believers, they are no judgements for sin. For everything of justice against sin was spent

¹⁰² Saltmarsh pp171-174.

¹⁰³ That is, God does not have moods, and give up on us because we are such poor believers.

upon Christ, so as to us they are only trials. ‘Count it all joy when you fall into various temptations’ (Jas. 1:2). They are chastenings of love to prevent sin. ‘As many as I love I rebuke and chasten’ (Rev. 3:19). They are, in a word, a [particular] way or dispensation of love and grace.

In short:

We are to consider that though the Scriptures do often set forth the righteousness of God against sin, and his justice against sin, yet that unrighteousness, being satisfied by Jesus Christ, it has no power against those that are in Christ, no more than the pursuer had to do with the murderer in the city of refuge. ‘For sin shall not have dominion over you’ (Rom. 6:14). ‘You are not under the law, but under grace’ [Rom. 6:14-15].¹⁰⁴

This, of course, is spiritual dynamite. But is it the truth of God declared in Scripture? I, myself, have no doubt whatsoever.

Last words on Saltmarsh

I am not conceited enough to think that this small study of Saltmarsh’s book will bring him in from the cold. But I hope, reader, you have enjoyed this taster, and found it heart-warming enough to make you want to explore the major subject of the believer and the law in greater depth than perhaps you have until now. More than that, I hope it will lead us all (I certainly include myself) into a greater sense of the liberty we have in Christ, into a greater assurance of his love and grace towards us, and into a fuller experience – in this life, here and now – of that inexpressible joy which should follow as a result of trust in Christ and his finished work. Let us hear more of Saltmarsh’s favourite word – ‘free’, free in Christ. We are saved because of God’s free grace, and in that salvation we have been redeemed from bondage to sin, death and the law – and thus set free! Let us live upon this gospel. Let us live upon Christ. And let us hear more of the apostolic proclamation: ‘For freedom Christ has made us free; stand fast therefore, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage’ (Gal. 5:1, footnote).

¹⁰⁴ Saltmarsh pp175-177.