

‘A Gospel Church’: A Warning

Introduction

Isn't it odd how somebody coins a phrase, and that phrase catches on and becomes common currency among believers – even to the extent that many regard it as a scriptural expression?¹ But there can be a catch, a very serious catch: what if that phrase has come from a theology that is unscriptural? If so, then it follows that many believers, through their repeated use of the phrase in question, are being unconsciously influenced by the theology behind it. It is very much like the singing of hymns: for many – without them being aware of it – hymn-book phrases carry more weight than Scripture; hymn-book phrases become ‘received wisdom’.

The phrase I have in mind is one which appears in countless articles, blogs, books and commentaries: ‘a gospel church’ – or its stable companion, ‘a Christian church’. This phrase – ‘a gospel church’ – I fully acknowledge is almost invariably used in a casual way by many who never give a second thought as to its origin and substance. Again, I am sure that many use it to speak of a church which practices and preaches the gospel, to distinguish it from churches that do not. The intention is good, but ‘a gospel church’ is a most unfortunate choice; it compounds the problem I am talking about.

The theology behind it

Although ‘a gospel church’ may seem to be an innocuous phrase, it is, in fact, loaded, and heavily loaded at that. It carries large overtones. Let me explain.

¹ To produce this article, I have lightly edited the Introduction to my forthcoming booklet with the same title. In that booklet I go on to set out the details of the two consequences which I speak of at the conclusion of this article.

The phrase comes from (or, at least, is much popularised by) a theology – covenant theology, to be precise – which, this past 450 years or more, has detrimentally coloured the way many believers read and understand Scripture.

While covenant theologians talk – as Scripture does – about the old and new covenants, alas, they mean something quite different to the Bible: they have invented a system which postulates a covenant which they call ‘the covenant of grace’, a phrase unknown in Scripture. And since the Bible has a great deal to say about covenants,² this invention grievously imposes a man-made construct on a vital scriptural principle, and thus clouds it dreadfully.

Covenant theologians allege that their invented over-arching covenant, ‘the covenant of grace’, has been revealed in two different administrations: the old covenant in the Old Testament and the new covenant in the New Testament. In essence, covenant theologians allege, these two covenants are the same, just different administrations of their one covenant of grace.³

Furthermore, those covenant theologians who hold to infant baptism (and that is the majority)⁴ try to use their system to support their practice by contending that the church is the same in both Testaments. From this assertion, they argue that what circumcision was in the Old Testament, baptism is in the New. Baptism, they say, has replaced circumcision. That being so, they go on to argue that since infants were circumcised in, as they put it, the Old Testament church (that is the Jewish church), infants ought to be baptised (sprinkled is what they

² See my *Redemption History through Covenants*.

³ This is simplistic. There is a spectrum of views covered by the umbrella of ‘covenant theology’. I will not stop to show the wrongness of this theological system, having done so, in detail, in various works; principally, *Christ Is All: No Sanctification by the Law*.

⁴ Those covenant theologians who hold to believer’s baptism have an uphill struggle to handle the implications of covenant theology.

really mean) in the New Testament church (that is, the gospel church). Hence the phrase I am objecting to – ‘a gospel church’ – is one which is based on a faulty theology, and, consequently, one which carries massive overtones, unscriptural overtones; not least, infant baptism. We are not talking about a phrase which is innocent, harmless. Far from it!⁵

Let me show that covenant theologians do indeed talk in terms of ‘the Jewish church’ (meaning Israel) and ‘a gospel church’ (meaning believers in the days of the new covenant).⁶ We

⁵ See, for instance, my *Battle for the Church: 1517-1644; Clarity Dispelling Confusion: S.W.Lynd on the Abrahamic Covenant; Conversion Ruined: The New Perspective and the Conversion of Sinners; Infant Baptism Tested; The Hinge in Romans 1 – 8: A critique of N.T.Wright’s view of Baptism and Conversion.*

⁶ This, of course, runs in tandem with ‘the Jewish sabbath’ and ‘the Christian sabbath’. In this case, ‘Jewish’ is a tautology – the sabbath has only ever been ‘Jewish’. And, speaking of a day, the sabbath has never been ‘Christian’. We may extend this. A fully-consistent covenant theologian would be happy to talk about the old covenant in terms of the members of the *Jewish* church keeping the *Jewish* sabbath, their *Jewish* priests offering *Jewish* sacrifices on *Jewish* altars in a *Jewish* temple – with its counterpart in the new covenant being the members of the *Christian* church keeping the *Christian* sabbath, their *Christian* priests offering *Christian* sacrifices on *Christian* altars in a *Christian* temple. Of course, no covenant theologian is fully consistent – they all pick and mix, selecting items according to taste. Although not holding to covenant theology, Rome gets closest to being consistent in this matter. The scriptural position is that the new covenant uses all the old-covenant shadows, but only in a spiritual sense, Christ having fulfilled the shadows: believers are the temple of the Spirit and spiritual priests within that temple; Christ himself is their sabbath; they, trusting his one finished sacrifice, offer spiritual sacrifices to God; and so on. The Fathers started the ball rolling for this adulteration of Scripture when they imposed the old covenant on the *ekklēsia*, with disastrous results. For my arguments on all this see my *Sabbath Question: An open letter to Iain Murray; Sabbath Notes & Extracts; The Essential Sabbath; Horne on the True Sabbath; The Pastor: Does He Exist?; The Priesthood of all*

could, perhaps, start with John Owen and his *The True Nature of a Gospel Church*.⁷ In addition to ‘a gospel church’, the following extract is full of other covenant-theology speak.⁸ This is what Owen stated right at the start of his book:

There is no other sort of visible church⁹ of Christ organised... but a particular church or congregation (either in the Old or New Testament), where all the members thereof do ordinarily meet together in one place to hold communion one with another in some one or more great ordinances of Christ.

I break in: how, when and where did Israel ‘meet together in one place to hold communion one with another in some one or more great ordinances of Christ’? Would some covenant theologian give me a scriptural reference for it?

Considering the descendants of Abraham who would eventually become the nation of Israel, Owen, without batting an eyelid, declared:

After the descent of a numerous progeny from Abraham’s loins, God takes them to himself in one visible body, a national but congregational church, into which he forms them four hundred and thirty years after the promise, in the wilderness [that is, at Sinai with God’s giving of the law and the establishment of the old covenant for Israel by the hand of Moses]; and although all Abraham’s natural posterity, according to the external part of the promise made to him, were taken into visible church fellowship, so that it became a national church, yet it was such a national church always, in the wilderness and in the promised land...¹⁰ They were always bound to assemble at the tabernacle or temple thrice at least

Believers: Slogan or Substance?; Christ Is All: No Sanctification by the Law.

⁷ John Owen: *The True Nature of a Gospel Church, The Works of John Owen*, Vol.16, The Banner of Truth Trust, London, 1968.

⁸ As I have noted, there is a spectrum of views under the umbrella ‘covenant theology’. Owen was idiosyncratic in his covenant theology, but he was a covenant theologian.

⁹ ‘Visible church’ is another example of covenant-theology speak. For more, see below.

¹⁰ Owen had ‘Holy Land’.

every year; hence the tabernacle was still called ‘the tabernacle of the congregation’...

With the coming of the Messiah, his finished work, ascension and outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the old covenant was fulfilled and rendered obsolete, and the new covenant was brought in. This is what Scripture teaches.¹¹ Owen, however, expressed this in terms of his covenant theology:

When Christ had divorced this people [that is, Israel the *Jewish church*], abolished their mosaical constitution... he erects *his gospel church*, calls in disciples by his ministry, forms them into a body, furnishes them with officers and ordinances, and after he had suffered, rose again, and continued here forty days...

And so Owen went on. When referring to the ministry of Haggai to the Jews after the return of Judah from Babylonian captivity, and during their rebuilding of the temple, Owen confused confusion even more when he spoke of:

...the great discouragements laid before [the Jews] by the adversaries of Judah, when they find the children of the spiritual captivity are about to build *a gospel church* unto the Lord.

Staggering! While there is no question but that Owen was a great theologian, these extracts clearly illustrate the cost of letting a theology trump Scripture: Owen ended up in nonsense-land on this issue.

Let me turn to another writer who said the same sort of thing as Owen, but did so in a far more accessible manner – Matthew Henry. Although he used ‘a Christian church’, Henry, was, of course, speaking of ‘a gospel church’. Like Owen, grievously confusing the establishment of the nation of Israel with the foundation of the church, Henry claimed that the Jewish church began at Mount Sinai. Commenting on Acts 2, he spoke of:

¹¹ See my aforesaid works for the full justification of my claim.

...the giving of the law upon Mount Sinai, whence the incorporating of *the Jewish church* was to be dated.

Commenting on Acts 7, he declared:

They [that is the Jews] are ready to look upon him [that is, Stephen] as an apostate from *the Jewish church*, and an enemy to them... But let us see what this is to Stephen's case. They had charged him as a blasphemer of God, and an apostate from *the [Jewish] church*; therefore he shows that he is a son of Abraham, and values himself upon his being able to say: 'Our father Abraham', and that he is a faithful worshipper of the God of Abraham, whom therefore he here calls the God of glory. He also shows that he owns divine revelation, and that particularly by which *the Jewish church* was founded and incorporated... but also that they [that is, the Jews he was addressing] might consider that what they were now doing against *the Christian church* in its infancy was as impious and unjust, and would be in the issue as fruitless and ineffectual, as that was which the Egyptians did against *the Jewish church* in its infancy.¹²

And commenting on Acts 15:

Many of the Jews who embraced the faith of Christ, yet continued very zealous for the law... They knew [the law] was from God and its authority was sacred, valued it for its antiquity, had been bred up in the observance of it, and it is probable had been often devoutly affected in their attendance on these observances; they therefore kept them up after they were by baptism admitted into *the Christian church*... In a few years the mistake would be effectually rectified by the destruction of the temple and the total dissolution of *the Jewish church*, by which the observance of the Mosaic ritual would become utterly impracticable.¹³

¹² Henry was referring to Israel in Egypt.

¹³ What Henry could not see – or what his system would not let him see – was that it did not take the Romans in AD70 to render the old covenant and its law obsolete. Christ did that! And Romans, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Hebrews, and so on, declared it – long before AD70! See my *Christ Is All: No Sanctification by the Law*.

In this way, covenant theologians, on the basis of their philosophical covenant-system, fly in the face of the fact that Israel was a nation, not the church. What is more, they disregard the fact that the overwhelming majority of the people of Israel were unregenerate; if not, they use that fact to bolster their view which inevitably follows in the wake of infant baptism, and talk of churches comprising the regenerate and unregenerate. Whichever it is, they end in an unscriptural cul-de-sac. The scriptural position could not be more explicit: only the regenerate can be part of the *ekklēsia*;¹⁴ regeneration is the absolute minimum qualification for membership.¹⁵ As for Israel, while there was a spiritual remnant in the nation (see, for example, Romans 9 – 11),¹⁶ in no sense was every Israelite regenerate. In any case, no nation has even been a church. Israel in the old covenant was not. The church was not founded until Christ brought in the new covenant.

But there is it. Covenant theologians speak of Israel as a church: ‘the Jewish church’. And this, as I have said, carries a huge price tag, infant baptism being not the least of it: infant baptism has brought immense – not to say, eternal – damage to many. And infant baptism is a direct consequence of covenant theology with its view that Israel and believers form one continuous body, being merely two manifestations of one ‘church’ belonging to different administrations.¹⁷

I leave the question there, but, in my booklet with the same title as this article, I take all this a little further in two respects. *First*, I show how the concept of ‘a gospel church’ plays into

¹⁴ The *ekklēsia* – ‘the called-out ones’.

¹⁵ It also requires a credible testimony and baptism (dipping) as a believer.

¹⁶ See my *Romans 11: A Suggested Exegesis*.

¹⁷ All this is somewhat simplistic. John Calvin, for instance, though he pre-dated the invention of covenant theology, held to the continuity of the church, infant baptism and mixed (regenerate and unregenerate) churches. Infant baptism, of course, started with the Fathers, Augustine being the main culprit for establishing its cataract of disastrous consequences.

infant baptism. Having done that, *secondly* I say a little more about the question of mixed churches, churches made up of the regenerate and unregenerate.