

Law and Gospel

In

Covenantal Perspective

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When we hear the expression, “law and gospel,” we immediately think of the doctrine of justification and the importance that making a proper distinction between law and gospel has for confessional Lutheran orthodoxy. This distinction has been important for confessional Reformed orthodoxy as well. Covenant theology became a distinctive mark of the Reformed faith and the distinction between law and gospel corresponds broadly to the distinction between covenant of works and covenant of grace. My objective in this lecture, as one who subscribes to the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, and the Canons of Dort is to look again at law and gospel and to do so from a covenantal perspective.

The relation between God and human beings made in his Image has always been covenantal in character. Covenants define a divinely established relationship of union and communion between God and his people in the bonds of mutual love and faithfulness. Biblical history begins with the creation of Adam and Eve in covenant with God and with the fall into sin that destroyed this covenant relationship. But God will not allow his purpose in creating the human race in his own image to be frustrated. Therefore he undertakes his work of redemption in order to re-establish the covenant bond that has been broken. That is why biblical history unfolds in terms of a series of historical covenants—the Noahic, the Abrahamic, the Mosaic, and the Davidic—leading up to and culminating in the new covenant. Ultimately God will have the human race he intended to have from the beginning, a loving and faithful covenant people as his own treasured possession, and “the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.”¹

The Bible concerns itself principally with the Mosaic covenant and the new covenant, and these covenants correspond to our Old and New Testaments. But to understand these covenants we must begin where the Bible begins, with the Adamic covenant.

Law and Gospel in the Adamic Covenant

Reformed theology as it developed from the late sixteenth century onward commonly spoke of a covenant of works made with Adam and his posterity. God created Adam righteous, without sin, and promised to him and his posterity confirmation in righteousness and eternal life “upon condition of perfect and personal obedience.”² That is to say, Adam would earn or achieve whatever eschatological blessing and privilege was held out to him on the ground of perfect law keeping. In this covenant justification is by works, that is, by the meritorious performance of good works. As it turned out, Adam did not obey the Lord perfectly and therefore forfeited the promised blessing. Instead, by his sin and disobedience he merited condemnation and death for himself and for the whole human race he represented.

1 Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the New International Version (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984).

2 The Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 7, section 2. Citations of the Westminster Confession are from The Westminster Standards (Suwanee, GA: Great Commission Publications, 2001). Chapter 19, section 1 describes the condition as “personal, entire, exact, and perpetual obedience.”

Because of sin human beings cannot hope to be justified and saved by fulfilling a covenant of works themselves. In order to bring salvation to lost mankind God sent his Son as the second and last Adam, also under a covenant of works. This covenant of works is often called the covenant of redemption and in this covenant of redemption Christ meets the condition of perfect and personal obedience in the place of his people. In the covenant of grace that now takes the place of the pre-fall covenant of works they are Justified and saved on the ground of Christ's perfect obedience imputed to them and received by faith alone. Faith is the only condition operative in the covenant of grace and it is not a meritorious condition but an instrumental condition. It is called an instrumental condition in order to avoid saying that it is a meritorious condition, although believing is still something the sinner must do in response to a command from our Lord. R. C. Sproul summarizes this commonly received view with these words: "Man's relationship to God in creation was based on works. What Adam failed to achieve, Christ, the second Adam, succeeded in achieving. Ultimately the only way one can be justified is by works."³

I would like to offer a different way of looking at the Adamic covenant. The Bible teaches that God created Adam and all of mankind in his own image for covenant fellowship. The relation established in this covenant is not analogous to the relation of an employer to an employee, but is analogous to the relation of a father to a son or a husband to a wife. It is a relationship of union and communion in the bonds of mutual love and faithfulness. This is the way the covenant relationship is described throughout the Bible and the covenant relationship established as a result of the program of redemption is similar to the original relationship. It is not a structurally different kind of relationship with the first one based on works and the last one based on grace. The program of redemption does not destroy creation but recreates, restores, and renews what was there from the beginning.

The command not to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is not a task to be performed in order to earn the right to eternal life. In this command the Lord does not actually ask Adam to do anything, but *not* to do something. Obedience to this command is a pure act of faith. There was no reason not to eat of the tree except for the word of the Lord. The issue in the probation was whether Adam would live by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. In other words, the issue was whether he would live by faith or perish in unbelief.

Consider the fact that Adam was created holy and righteous, without sin. He was the original just man. He would live and live forever not by the merit of his works but by faith. He would exhibit the principle stated in Habakkuk 2:4 and reiterated by Paul in Romans 1:17, "The righteous will live by faith." Whatever blessing was in store for him was not a reward to be earned by performance but a gift to be received by faith.

Paul writes in Romans 4:4, "Now to the one who works his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due."⁴ If Adam had turned a deaf ear to Satan and obeyed the Lord's command he would not have received what was his due, but a gift. He would have received that gift by faith. The Lord God did not and never does deal with his image bearers in terms of a principle of works and merit but ever and always in terms of a principle of faith and grace.

³ R. C. Sproul, *Getting the Gospel Right: The Tie That Binds Evangelicals Together* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books), p. 160.

⁴ *English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

Faith for Adam was what true faith always is, a living and active faith. It is a matter of living by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. Faith for Adam was therefore also a matter of discharging the cultural mandate. This is the obedience of faith. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil stood as a perpetual reminder to Adam that he was to carry out all of his cultural activity in obedience to the Lord God, under the guidance of his word, and out of love for and faithfulness to his Creator. Along the path of faith and obedience the Lord was leading him into confirmed righteousness and eternal life.

The method of justification for Adam before the fall is exactly what it is for Paul after the fall: “The righteous will live by faith” (Romans 1:17). Of course there is this major difference, that justification now takes place on the background of sin and condemnation. Therefore justification includes the forgiveness of sin, and faith is faith in the blood of Jesus; but the basic structure is the same. The power of Jesus’ death and resurrection recreates us in the image of God in righteousness and holiness. In Christ our sins are forgiven and we become righteous men who live now and forever by faith. Through Christ rather than through Adam we attain to confirmation in righteousness and the eternal life that was held out before him in promise as his eschatological destiny. “For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God’s abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:17).

If Adam had believed God and acted accordingly his destiny would have been comparable to what we read concerning Enoch in Genesis 5:21–24. These verses tell us that Enoch did not experience death as we know it. “Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him away.” Hebrews 11:5 explains further, “By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death; he could not be found, because God had taken him away. For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God.” Enoch was a righteous man who lived by faith. He pleased God, and without faith it is impossible to please God (verse 6). That held true for Adam as well. Without faith it was impossible for Adam to please God.

Law and Gospel in the Mosaic Covenant

We read about Adam in the book of Genesis and Moses wrote Genesis as an introduction to the covenant established at Mt. Sinai. In Genesis Moses explains where sin came from, what its consequences are, and how God plans to remedy this disaster. God lays the groundwork for the Mosaic covenant in the covenants with Noah and with Abraham. In the Noahic covenant God promises to maintain the created world as the platform for the unfolding of his redemptive plan. The obligations of this covenant reiterate the cultural mandate given to Adam before the fall. In the Abrahamic covenant God promises that he will be Abraham’s God and the God of his descendants. He promises that Abraham’s posterity will increase in number and will have a place to live in this world. God promises that eventually all the nations of the world will be blessed through Abraham. The obligations of the covenant as signified and sealed in circumcision require that Abraham and his children walk with the Lord by faith as faithful covenant keepers. “For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him” (Genesis 18:19).

In the Adamic, Noahic, and Abrahamic covenants law and gospel are not set over against one another as mutually exclusive principles of inheritance. They do not embody antithetical principles of faith and works, or grace and merit. What we have instead are gracious covenants with two sides: promise and obligation. All that is promised is the pure gift of grace, the undeserved and unmerited favor of God. Promises are received not by the merit of works, not as an obligation that is due to perfect performance. What is promised is a gift of grace and it is received by a living, active, and obedient faith.

At Mt. Sinai God formed his people into a nation and established his covenant with them through Moses. The Mosaic covenant will regulate the life of God's people from Mt. Sinai to the advent of Christ and the establishment of the new covenant.

God established the Mosaic covenant in fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham. Abraham will be a blessing to the nations of the world and Israel is the first of the nations to be disciplined to our Lord. Like the pre-redemptive Adamic covenant and the two preparatory covenants that precede it, the Mosaic covenant establishes and defines a relationship of union and communion between the Lord and his people in the bonds of mutual love and faithfulness. This covenant also has two sides: promise and obligation. Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy describe the promises and obligations of this covenant in detail.

The outstanding feature of the Mosaic covenant is the law that God gave his people in order to regulate their lives. We should not think of this law as a set of rules that have to be kept perfectly in order to merit the reward of eternal life. The Law of Moses is not a republication of a covenant of works made with Adam because there was no covenant of works to republish.

Further, God did not give his law in order to demonstrate to Israelites that there was no hope in trying to save themselves by their works since they could not perform perfect obedience anyway. That is the way we often think of the Mosaic covenant as serving the purpose of grace—by condemning us in its severity and driving us to Christ to find salvation in the merit of his perfect works. We think of the Mosaic covenant as a covenant of works but functioning as an administration of the covenant of grace. In reality we have to see the first five books of the Bible as the gospels of the old covenant. They correspond to the first four books of the new covenant. They tell the story of God's miraculous and powerful work to save his people from slavery in Egypt. This corresponds to Christ's miraculous and powerful work to save us from sin and condemnation as revealed in our four gospels. The five books of Moses show God's people how to enjoy and maintain covenant fellowship with the living and true God who has chosen them to be his people, his treasured possession.

The sin of Adam left the human race with two problems: the guilt of sin and the corruption of sin. The guilt of sin rendered all of us liable to the punishment of eternal condemnation and death. The corruption of sin made it impossible for us to please God, to do his will, or to have fellowship with him.

The laws of the Mosaic covenant are designed to solve both of these problems. That is why the Mosaic covenant is a covenant of grace in line with the Noahic and Abrahamic covenants. The Mosaic covenant is not a covenant of grace masquerading as a covenant of works, and the Mosaic covenant is not a covenant of works masquerading as a covenant of grace. The

Mosaic covenant reveals the grace of God to undeserving sinners, and more than that, to sinners who deserve to perish in their unbelief and disobedience. The Mosaic covenant is a covenant of grace, pure and simple.⁵ This can be seen in the two purposes this covenant serves in the unfolding of God's cosmic redemptive purpose.

First, the Lord God deals with the guilt of sin by revealing his will to forgive sin. Nothing demonstrates the gracious character of the Mosaic covenant more than this, the fact that God actually wills to forgive sin. This is the great purpose served by the sacrificial system outlined in the Mosaic law and described for us in the Book of Hebrews. The tabernacle and temple were set up so that priests could offer sacrifices daily for their own sins and for the sins of the people. The sacrificial system reaches its acme in the ceremonies of the great Day of Atonement to secure the forgiveness of sin. Such laws were given not as so many chores that had to be performed in order to merit eternal life. Rather, their message was that without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sin (Hebrews 9:22).

Second, the Lord God deals with the power and corruption of sin by teaching his people how to live happy and productive lives. He did not assign jobs to be done, but taught his people how to avoid the death dealing wickedness of surrounding nations. That is the point of Leviticus 18:5 in the context of verses 1–4. The Israelites must not behave themselves like the Egyptians or like the Canaanites who will perish because of their sin. They must be different because they are the Lord's people, his treasured possession. Therefore he says to them, "Keep my decrees and laws, for the man who obeys them will live by them. I am the LORD." The same holds true for God's people today. We will survive and prosper as a church if we avoid religious and cultural integration with the enemies of our Lord and the powers of darkness. God's people must always live by faith in the true and living God. We must live by faith in his word.

Many of the commandments are given in a negative form to counteract the power and corruption of sin in the world. God taught his people how to live in harmony and fellowship with one another and with their God. He taught them what to do when the harmony was broken and how to restore it. He taught them how to live happy and productive lives in total dependence on the goodness of their Father in heaven who promised to send seedtime and harvest, sunshine and rain. In other words he taught them in his law how to be righteous men who would live by faith. God would be glorified as his image bearers and covenant partners reflected his righteousness in the earth.

In the Law of Moses God promised to forgive the sins of his people and he taught them how to live in holiness as his people. That is pure grace. No other nation in the world had anything like the wisdom of these laws, and no other nation had experienced the deliverance Israel had experienced when God led his people out of slavery in Egypt. Of course if Israel turns her back on the grace of God then the law will expose and condemn that unbelief and disobedience. The obligations of the covenant always come with warnings, but the central purpose of the law was not to condemn sinners. God so loved his people that he gave them his law as a loving father instructs his children in the wisdom of living. He did not give them his law to condemn them, but to save Israel through the law. The law was designed to lead Israel in the

⁵ In Ephesians 2:12 Paul includes the Mosaic covenant among "the covenants of the promise."

path of righteousness and that is grace. In the words of Proverbs 12:28, “In the way of righteousness there is life; along that path is immortality.”

If we ask how sinners are saved under the Mosaic covenant the answer is clear enough. They are saved by faith. They confess their sins and seek forgiveness from the Lord by the faithful use of the sacrificial system. The ministry of the priests assures them that their sins are forgiven, that they are justified. By that same faith they walk with the Lord in obedience to his commands. They walk in the footsteps of the faith of their father, Abraham. They are not without sin, sin that would otherwise condemn them to death; but their sin is pardoned by the shedding of blood. They sin but they do not give themselves over to a sinful lifestyle. They are both justified and sanctified by the law and that is to say they are justified and sanctified by grace through faith. These people are called the righteous in Israel and they are the polar opposite of the wicked who have contempt for the Lord and his ways. They are the righteous who live by faith.

The sad story of the Old Testament, however, is the story of how God’s people refused to be a righteous people and how they refused to live by faith. Instead, they turned away from the Lord in unbelief and disobedience. They became an ungodly people who would perish in their unbelief. Moses says in Deuteronomy 9:23, 24, “And when the LORD sent you out from Kadesh Barnea, he said, ‘Go up and take possession of the land I have given you.’ But you rebelled against the command of the LORD your God. You did not trust him or obey him. You have been rebellious against the LORD ever since I have known you.” Here we see a pattern of unbelief and disobedience that is repeated throughout Israel’s history.

For this reason the Lord sends prophets to his people to call them to repentance and to an obedient faith in their covenant Lord. This is the way the Lord would lead his people into possession of all that he has promised them as a gift of sovereign grace. But Israel persists in her unbelief and disobedience, even to the point of crucifying the ultimate prophet, Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

The law and the prophets of the old covenant teach justification and salvation by faith, by a true and living faith. The repentance and obedience that are necessarily and invariably tied to faith are no more meritorious than is faith itself. The whole idea of salvation grounded in the merit of perfect obedience is as foreign to the Old Testament as it is to the New. The Apostle Paul found his doctrine of justification by faith in the law and the prophets as he testifies in Romans 3:21. “But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.” That is why he can summarize the gospel he brings with words from Habakkuk 2:4, “the righteous will live by his faith.”

Paul sees his own doctrine of justification by faith as continuous with what we find in the Sinaitic covenant, in the words of Moses and the prophets. But at the same time there is a vast difference between the gospel of the old covenant and what he is preaching now as a minister of the new covenant.

Law and Gospel in the New Covenant

Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 3:7–11 that the old covenant, the Mosaic covenant, “came with glory.” The old covenant was a glorious covenant and we must not suppress this truth. It is not difficult for us to see how and why it was glorious. The old covenant revealed God’s will to forgive the sins of his people. The old covenant also taught God’s people how to love the Lord God with heart, soul, mind, and strength. It taught them how to love one another, how to live together in peace and harmony, and how to prosper in the world God created for them. Of course the old covenant was glorious! It could not be otherwise.

But the point Paul now makes is that what was glorious has no glory in comparison with the surpassing glory of the new covenant. Why is this so? What makes the difference? The radical difference is the presence in world history of the person and work of our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus of Nazareth is Lord—that is the gospel Paul now proclaims and to which he calls both Jew and Gentile.

The old covenant was glorious, but it was not without fault. Hebrews 8:7 says, “For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another.” What was wrong was the fact that the blood of bulls and goats could not really atone for sin (Hebrews 10:3). Not only that, the Mosaic law could teach people how to live holy and righteous lives but it did not have the power to make that teaching effective. Hebrews 8:8 says that God found fault with the people. They were dead in their trespasses and sins, and the law did not have the power to bring them to life. As Paul says in Galatians 3:21, the law could not impart life to its adherents.

Now Jesus comes as Savior and he accomplishes what the law could not do. Hebrews 8:7–13 testifies to a new covenant that has been established in which God forgives the wickedness of his people and writes his law on their hearts. These are the gifts of justification and sanctification that are ours in union with Jesus Christ. Paul writes, “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit” (Romans 8:1–4).

This is the promise side of the new covenant—justification, sanctification, and eternal life through union with Jesus Christ. And this new covenant, like all the covenants that preceded it in redemptive history, has an obligation side as well. The obligation side of the covenant is no different from what it has always been, namely, faith, repentance, and obedience.

First, the Lord leads us into possession of eternal life by faith. This is nothing new. God’s people have always been saved by faith, as we have already observed. What is new is that saving faith is now specifically faith in Jesus Christ and faith in his shed blood (Romans 3:25, 26). Faith

means believing that Jesus is who he claims to be, the Lord God in human flesh, and “accepting, receiving, and resting upon him alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life.”⁶

Second, the Lord leads us into possession of all that he has promised by repentance. Again, this is nothing new. The prophets of the old covenant continually called a rebellious and disobedient nation to repentance so that Israel might be saved. John the Baptist, the last of the old covenant prophets, was a preacher of repentance; and our Lord began his public ministry with the same message, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near” (Matthew 4:17). Jesus commissioned his disciples to preach repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Luke 24:47). Repentance is not simply a mental act. It is not simply sorrow for sin, but a turning away from sin (Acts 26:20). Repentance and faith are indissolubly tied together. You cannot turn to Christ in faith for the forgiveness of sin without turning away from the sin that is so offensive to God.

Third, the Lord leads us into possession of all that he has promised by way of obedience. In the words of Hebrews 5:9, “[Jesus] became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.” Just as faith and repentance are indissolubly tied together so also are repentance and obedience. True faith bears fruit in repentance and obedience, and this is the holiness without which we will not see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14). Again, this is nothing new in the new covenant. Moses and the prophets always willed for God’s people to trust and obey. There was no other way to be happy in Moses but to trust and obey.

The church of the new covenant received its evangelistic mandate in what we call the Great Commission. How do we evangelize? We do so first by making disciples out of sinners. Disciples of whom? Of Jesus Christ. We seek to lead sinners to faith in Jesus Christ as the one and only Savior. Second, we make disciples by baptizing sinners in the name of the triune God. This baptism is a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins as we see so clearly from the way Peter preached repentance on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:38, 39). And third, we make disciples by teaching them to obey everything that Jesus has commanded. In this way they learn to walk in the footsteps of the faith of father Abraham, and that is the faith that justifies and saves. Evangelism according to the Great Commission is not getting people to make a decision for Jesus, but making disciples by bringing sinners to an enduring faith in Jesus that turns away from a sinful lifestyle and that lives day by day in obedience to our Lord. According to the Great Commission teaching the penitent to obey Jesus belongs to the task of evangelism.

This is not salvation by the merit of good works because the Lord does not deal with us on the basis of works and merit and never did. He is our Father in heaven who is building a relationship of union and communion with his bride, the church, and with his adopted children in the bonds of mutual love and faithfulness. God’s children have always lived by grace through faith, both before and after the fall into sin. The disciples of Jesus are those who by faith are living in him and who are walking as he did (1 John 2:6). They are the righteous who live by faith (Romans 1:17). The righteous who live by faith are not without sin. They sin daily in thought, word, and deed, but they look to Jesus for the forgiveness of sin. “[Jesus] was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification” (Romans 4:25).

⁶ The Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 14, section 2.



Among evangelicals law and gospel are often presented as antithetical to one another. For example, John Th. Mueller tells us in his *Christian Dogmatics* that law and gospel “absolutely contradict each other.” He writes, “The Law demands perfect obedience of man in every way and condemns all who are disobedient, while the Gospel demands nothing, but freely offers to all sinners grace, life, and salvation for Christ’s sake.”⁷ The law is severe, but the gospel is sweet. From a covenantal perspective, however, law and gospel are not antithetically opposed.

In the history of redemption law and gospel are successive stages in the unfolding of God’s redemptive plan corresponding to the old (Mosaic) and new covenants. Law is the form in which the gospel of forgiveness and renewal came to Israel under the old covenant. Because God’s people did not trust and obey but rejected this gospel in unbelief and disobedience, the law condemned them. In the fullness of time the Lord God sent his Son to destroy the guilt and corruption of sin by his death and resurrection. Now he calls sinners to himself by a living, penitent, and obedient faith so that they might be saved and enter into eternal life.

But if we reject this call, this same gospel condemns us for eternity. Paul writes that the aroma of Christ is the fragrance of life to all who receive him, but it is the smell of death to all who reject him (2 Corinthians 2:15, 16). If we reject the gospel of Jesus Christ, there is no hope because there is no other sacrifice for sins (Hebrews 10:26–31). We cannot go back to the Mosaic covenant and there will be no third covenant beyond the new covenant. Jesus is the second Adam and the last Adam, the definitive revelation of the grace of God. “Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

To summarize, we can look at law and gospel from a covenantal perspective in two ways, namely, in terms of the history of redemption (*historia salutis*) and in terms of the application of redemption (*ordo salutis*). In neither of these ways are law and gospel antithetically opposed.

In the history of redemption both law and gospel make demands and condemn disobedience. Both law and gospel offer justification, sanctification, and eternal life through faith in the Lord and his promises. The difference between law and gospel, or between works and faith as we have it especially in Romans and Galatians, lies in the transition from the old covenant that is now set aside as obsolete and ineffective to the new covenant in the blood of Christ that alone is effective for our salvation.

In the application of redemption law and gospel are simply the two sides of the covenant, promise and obligation. All that God promises is a pure gift of sovereign grace, and he leads us into possession of what he has promised by way of a penitent and obedient faith. Salvation is by grace (promise) through faith (obligation). “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household” (Acts 16:31).

⁷ John Theodore Mueller, *Christian Dogmatics* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1955), p. 473.