

among traditional Lutherans, with some suggesting that Luther himself (and significant portions of the Lutheran tradition following him) was quite open to, and even affirming of, a 'third use' of the law.<sup>15</sup> Thus, while the Lutheran theologian Edward A. Engelbrecht continues to affirm the 'law and gospel dialectic', he argues that Luther, Melancthon and the Formula of Concord are all fundamentally in agreement in affirming a 'third use' of the law for Christians.<sup>16</sup>

### Law and gospel: friend or foe?

A lot hinges on how one understands continuity and discontinuity across the canon. I will allow John Frame to set the stage for exploring this seminal question. Frame has authored an especially helpful essay, 'Law and Gospel'.<sup>17</sup> While faith receives what Christ has done, Frame notes that faith is also commanded by God, and thus 'is like other divine commands'.<sup>18</sup> Frame notes, 'So it is impossible to say that command, or law, is excluded from the message of the gospel.'<sup>19</sup> Frame is self-consciously and intentionally distancing himself from a thoroughgoing law-gospel contrast. Thus, he writes, having just turned to Isaiah 52:7, 'So the gospel includes law in an important sense: God's kingdom authority, his demand to repent. Even in the view of those most committed to the law/gospel distinction, the gospel includes a command to *believe*.'<sup>20</sup>

Frame suggests that the gospel really comes *first* in God's dealings with man. He continues, 'That is the pattern of the Decalogue, as we

so changed our heart . . . and made the Law so lovely to it that the heart so delights and rejoices in nothing more than the Law. It would not willingly see one tittle of it fall away." Thus even the law depends on the gospel for its efficacy. The distinction between law and gospel, works and faith, and the covenant of works and covenant of grace does not, at least in Reformed theology, imply an absolute antithesis except at the point of how one is accepted by God. To distinguish the respective nature and role of command and promise is not to denigrate, much less repudiate, either. . . . Yet God's gift of new obedience can in no way serve as a second instrument of justification, nor can faith be defined as obedience (faith formed by love) in the act of justifying sinners. Certainly not at every point, but *where justification is concerned*, faith and works are absolutely antithetical (Rom 3:20–28; 4:4–5, 13–17; 10:1–13; 11:6; Gal 2:16–21; 3:2–14, 21–4:31; Eph 2:8–9; 2 Tim 1:9) (2007: 217–218; emphasis original).

<sup>15</sup> See Engelbrecht 2011 and S. R. Murray 2002. The entire July–October 2005 issue of *Concordia Theological Quarterly* was devoted to the question of the use of the law in Lutheran theology.

<sup>16</sup> Engelbrecht 2011: 252–253.

<sup>17</sup> Frame 2002.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 3.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

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have seen: God proclaims that he has redeemed his people (gospel), then asks them to behave as his covenant people (law). Since both gospel and law are aspects of God's covenants, that pattern pervades Scripture.<sup>21</sup>

Frame also raises a concern central to the argument of this monograph: certain understandings of salvation, and of justification in particular, can, if one is not careful, lead to an unbiblical passivity. Thus it would appear that some, with a commendable passion to guard the objective nature of justification (i.e. Christ has done, outside us, what is necessary for our justification), are unable to speak meaningfully about the subjective change wrought in the believer. Thus, as Frame notes:

This understanding [which is zealous to guard the objective nature of justification] focuses on justification: God regards us as objectively righteous for Christ's sake, apart from anything in us. But it tends to neglect regeneration and sanctification: that God does work real subjective changes in the justified.<sup>22</sup>

In a lengthy review of Meredith Kline's *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview*, Frame makes a number of helpful criticisms. While there is much in Kline that I would affirm, it is helpful to contrast what both Frame and Kline say about the obedience of persons – particularly under the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants. Kline was a careful expositor of Scripture, so he clearly saw that all sorts of 'conditions' were given to God's people, conditions stipulating the necessity of works, obedience and faithfulness. Thus when we turn to the Abrahamic covenant, Kline must reckon with the repeated 'conditions' that must be met in order for Abraham and his seed to receive continued covenantal blessings. To clarify: obedience is somehow necessary for God to pour out his covenantal blessings on Abraham and his seed (see esp. Gen. 18:19; 22:15–18; 26:4–5).

Kline writes that

a conditionality of human responsibility necessarily entered into the stipulated terms of the covenant of promise. This conditionality did not negate the guarantee of kingdom fulfilment nor did

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 3–4.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 4.

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the obligations enjoined contradict the pure gospel principle of grace that governed the bestowal of the eternal redemptive blessings.<sup>23</sup>

This is all well and good: one can have grace and conditionality. Indeed, as Kline writes, 'the divine promises of the covenant never existed apart from human obligations'.<sup>24</sup> This, indeed, is a central burden of my own argument. Kline continues, in treating Abraham's obedience, to argue for the 'indispensability of obedience'.<sup>25</sup> Kline works from a strong 'covenant of works' versus 'covenant of grace' distinction, so he explains this clear conditionality in an interesting way. He avers that such 'indispensability of obedience did not, however, amount to the works principle'.<sup>26</sup> According to Kline, we are saved by a 'works principle' (Jesus working on our behalf). Since the work of Abraham (or of us, eventually) must be kept separate from any 'works principle', then Christ's work must be kept separate from Abraham's (or our) work. Hence Abraham's (or our) works/obedience must be kept completely and utterly sequestered from any meaningful connection to our salvation whatsoever. Kline speaks of the real and necessary relationship between Abraham's obedience and the granting of God's covenantal blessings. He writes:

Here the significance of Abraham's works cannot be limited to their role in validation of his own faith. His faithful performance of his covenantal duty is here clearly declared to sustain a causal relationship to the blessing of Isaac and Israel. It had a meritorious character that procured a reward enjoyed by others.<sup>27</sup>

What is Kline saying that differs from the thesis of this book? Namely this: Kline sees that Genesis is full of 'conditions' related to the ultimate fulfilment of the Abrahamic covenant. Abraham's obedience is the 'condition' for God's continuing to grant the covenantal blessings and promises outlined in the Abrahamic covenant (and, for our purposes, we can simply affirm that Gen. 12, 15, 17 and 22 are all components of the God-Abraham relationship).<sup>28</sup> Kline posits a

<sup>23</sup> Kline 2006: 309; quoted in Frame 2011: 177-178.

<sup>24</sup> Kline 2006: 309.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 319.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 324-325.

<sup>28</sup> For a helpful summary of these various components of the Abrahamic Covenant, see Alexander 1994.



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thoroughgoing distinction between (1) earthly/temporal covenantal blessings – having to do with Israel's inheritance of the land of Canaan, and (2) spiritual/heavenly blessings of Abraham's personal salvation and Abraham's descendants in Christ. As Kline writes, 'Though not the ground of the inheritance of heaven, Abraham's obedience was the ground for Israel's inheritance of Canaan. Salvation would not come because of Abraham's obedience, but because of Abraham's obedience salvation would come of the Abrahamites, the Jews (John 4:22).'<sup>29</sup>

I both agree and disagree with Kline. He is right to affirm the essential conditionality of the Abrahamic covenant. But he imports unnecessary and unbiblical categories when he posits a strict temporal/earthly versus heavenly/eternal dichotomy, and then says that there are conditions (hence the necessity of obedience) related to the temporal/earthly realm (the realm where a 'works principle' is in play), but there are no conditions (hence not a necessity of obedience) related to the heavenly/spiritual realm (the realm where a 'grace principle' is in play). Does it not make more sense biblically simply to say, God saves people by grace, and within a gracious covenantal relationship expects his people to obey him, and indeed efficaciously moves his covenant people to obey him (cf. Phil. 2:12–13)? And here I am in more agreement with Frame than with Kline. Frame writes of the new covenant believer:

Today we receive salvation by faith alone, apart from works. But that faith must be a living, working faith, if it is true faith (Jam. 2:14–26). As with Abraham, God rewards our trust, even in the midst of persecution and difficulty (Mk. 10:29–30). Those rewards are the beginning of the rewards we finally inherit at the consummation of God's kingdom.<sup>30</sup>

Frame writes similarly in summarizing his perspective on the Mosaic covenant, again by way of criticizing Kline:

Since God has redeemed them [the Israelites] by his grace and chosen them by his love, they ought to obey his commandments. . . . But there is nothing substantively different from the pattern of the new covenant. That covenant too is established by God's grace.

<sup>29</sup> Kline 2006: 325.

<sup>30</sup> Frame 2011: 181.

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But believers, through baptism and public profession (Rom. 10:9–10), promise to follow Christ as Lord.<sup>31</sup>

That is, Frame argues, as I am arguing, that across the canon God saves a people by his grace. Then, *once persons are in covenant relationship with the Lord*, he then gives his people commands, statutes, laws, and so on. And he expects his people to obey what he communicates to them.

### Insights from Richard Gaffin

Richard Gaffin writes, ‘faith and good works, thus distinguished, are always synecdochic. To speak of the one invariably has the other in view; they are unintelligible apart from each other. They always exist without confusion, yet inseparably.’<sup>32</sup> Gaffin’s following words are provocative. He contends that the ‘law–gospel’ antithesis is real, but is simply a part of reality after the fall, and that one of the things the gospel does is to undo this antithesis:

From this perspective, the antithesis between law and gospel is not an end itself. It is not a theological ultimate. Rather, that antithesis enters not by virtue of creation but as the consequence of sin, and the gospel functions for its overcoming. The gospel is to the end of removing an absolute law–gospel antithesis in the life of the believer. How so? Briefly, apart from the gospel and outside of Christ the law is my enemy and condemns me. Why? Because *God* is my enemy and condemns me. But with the gospel and in Christ, united to him by faith, the law is no longer my enemy but my friend. Why? Because now *God* is no longer my enemy but my friend, and the law, *his* will, the law in its moral core, as reflective of his character and of concerns eternally inherent in his own person and so of what pleases him, is now my friendly guide for life in fellowship with God.<sup>33</sup>

Gaffin links faith, union with Christ and continued obedience: ‘The faith by which sinners are justified, as it unites them to Christ and so secures for them all the benefits of salvation there are in him, that

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 186.

<sup>32</sup> Gaffin 2006: 103.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 103; emphases original.

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faith perseveres to the end and in persevering is never alone.<sup>34</sup> Gaffin, in the same work, also writes, 'a faith that rests in God the Savior is a faith that is restless to do his will'.<sup>35</sup> Some of these fundamental insights from Gaffin will be worked out in more detail in chapter 5, which focuses on union with Christ.

### Geerhardus Vos on law and grace

Some might say that Geerhardus Vos is the grandfather of the contemporary renaissance of biblical theology among evangelicals. His shadow looms large over the world of contemporary evangelical biblical scholarship. Vos nicely summarizes the overarching thesis of this present book:

It is plain, then, that law-keeping did not figure at that juncture [the Mosaic covenant] as the meritorious ground of life-inheritance. The latter [life-inheritance] is based on grace alone, no less emphatically than Paul himself places salvation on that ground. But, while this is so, it might still be objected that law-observance, if not the ground for receiving, is yet made the ground for retention of the privileges inherited. Here it cannot, of course, be denied that a real connection exists. But the Judaizers went wrong in inferring that the connection must be *meritorious*, that, if Israel keeps the cherished gifts of Jehovah through obedience of His law, this must be so, because in strict justice they had earned them. The connection is of a totally different kind. It belongs not to the legal sphere of merit, but to the symbolico-typical sphere of *appropriateness of expression*.<sup>36</sup>

A little later in the same section of *Biblical Theology* Vos writes, 'law-observance is not the meritorious ground of blessedness'.<sup>37</sup> For a number of reasons this is a fascinating quote. Vos is one of the key proponents of traditional, Reformed, biblical theology. At the same time, Vos – with John Murray, John Frame, and others – denies that a 'works-principle' lies at the heart of the Mosaic covenant. Was Vos flirting with the 'new perspective', before it was even invented? That is, according to Vos, did the Mosaic administration teach that we get

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 105.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 78.

<sup>36</sup> Vos 1954: 127; quoted in Frame 2008: 207; emphases original.

<sup>37</sup> Vos 1954: 128.



in by grace and stay in by works? Vos's answer to the question 'Did Israel retain via works or obedience what they had initially received by grace' is 'yes' (properly understood). Vos suggests that Israel did not obtain 'retention of the privileges inherited' because of meritorious works. Nonetheless, there is a '*real connection*' (Vos's words) between 'retention of the privileges inherited' by grace and 'law-observance'. So, what is the nature of the relationship between retaining of privileges and law-observance? For Vos, 'law-observance' does not belong to the 'legal sphere' (which would include or entail the notion of 'merit'), but to the 'symbolico-typical sphere of *appropriateness of expression*'.<sup>38</sup> This is a fascinating move by Vos. Yes, 'law-observance' is essential, but not in a 'meritorious' sense. Rather, 'law-observance' exhibits an 'appropriateness of expression'. I take this to mean that 'law-observance' is not necessary in the sense that we merit something before God, but of course it is necessary and appropriate for those whom God has rescued by grace to obey him, including obedience that consists of 'law-observance'. And thus we return to a central theme of this book: God is rescuing and transforming a people who will love, glorify and serve him from the heart. Works, obedience and faithfulness are 'necessary' in that such realities are simply *constitutive of a redeemed life*. And such a life flows from a heart radically transformed by the grace of God. It is not, in Vos's terms, 'law-observance' in the meritorious sense, but it is certainly 'law-observance' (works, obedience, faithfulness) 'appropriate' to the life of a redeemed person. And if (1) one does not make the error of playing grace against human agency, and (2) one can avoid equating 'necessity' with the notion of autonomous works, obedience and faithfulness that merit God's favour, then it is possible to speak meaningfully of the necessity of works, obedience and faithfulness in the Christian life, without in any way compromising *sola fide* and the radical nature of divine grace.

Thus Vos continues to speak of the law 'not as the burden and yoke which it later came to be in the religious experience of the Jews, but as one of the greatest blessings and distinctions that Jehovah had conferred on his people'.<sup>39</sup> So, with Vos, we should not 'identify the Old Testament with law, negatively considered, and the New Testament with gospel'.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, Vos's perspective, at least at this point, is the perspective of this book. Thus there was indeed 'real gospel under

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 127; emphasis original.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 128.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

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the Theocracy'.<sup>41</sup> Vos is worth quoting at length when he writes about the presence of grace and even of 'gospel' in the Mosaic administration:

The people of God of those days did not live and die under an unworkable, unredemptive system of religion, that could not give real access to and spiritual contact with God. Nor was this gospel-element contained exclusively in the revelation that preceded, accompanied, and followed the law; it is found *in the law itself*. That which we call 'the legal system' is shot through with strands of gospel and grace and faith. Especially the ritual law is rich in them. Every sacrifice and every lustration proclaimed the principle of grace. Had it been otherwise, then the idea of positive, vital continuity would have to be abandoned. There would be conflict and opposition instead. Such is the Gnostic position, but it is not the view either of the Old Testament itself, or of Paul, or of the Church theology.<sup>42</sup>

Vos affirms, as do I, that works and grace are not necessarily in conflict. I do not see how it is possible to make sense of the biblical material any other way. God is a God who saves by grace, expects his people to obey him, and moves his people to obey him. This obedience can be 'necessary' without compromising in the least an affirmation of the radical grace of God.

### The law is not of faith – but is there grace within the law?

We now turn to portions of Scripture where the law is spoken of in extremely negative terms; indeed, where it is apparently spoken of as *against* faith, or *not of* faith. One of the most important passages in this regard is Galatians 3:12.

#### *Galatians 3:10–12*

The *locus classicus* for the relationship of promise (to Abraham), law (given to Moses) and the gospel, is Galatians 3:12, where Paul states

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. 129; emphasis original. However, it is fascinating that Vos apparently retreats from this position, and emphasizes still the 'legal character' of the Mosaic administration. And because of this legal character of the Mosaic administration, it differs 'from the form it [God's revelation] exhibits at the present time' (ibid.).



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that 'the law is not of faith'. In both Galatians 3:12 and Romans 10:5 Paul makes use of Leviticus 18:5. It is important to come to terms with what is being communicated in this nexus of passages. Let us start with Leviticus 18:5.

Placing Leviticus 18:5 in context, we note that 18:4 reads, 'You shall follow my rules and keep my statutes and walk in them. I am the LORD your God.' Then 18:5 reads, 'You shall therefore keep my statutes and my rules; if a person does them, he shall live by them: I am the LORD.' There is of course debate on how to make sense of the reference to Leviticus 18:5 in Galatians.<sup>43</sup> There are at least three key questions involved in making sense of the use of Leviticus 18:5: (1) What was the original purpose of Leviticus 18:5? (2) How was Paul using Leviticus 18:5 in Romans 10:5? And (3) how was Paul using Leviticus 18:5 in Galatians 3:12? In the Old Testament context itself, it seems unlikely that the Lord is setting forth a 'works covenant' or 'works' option by which one could merit salvation, justify oneself, and so on. More likely, the Lord is instructing his people that (1) he is the covenant God, (2) he expects his people to obey his word, and (3) there are blessings that follow upon obeying God.

When we move to the New Testament usage of this key passage, different issues arise. For example, how is Paul using this passage for his own purposes? Since my goal here is limited, I cannot offer anything near an exhaustive treatment. Certainly, whatever Paul means in Galatians 3:12, he cannot mean that faith was completely absent from the Old Testament era, including the Mosaic administration. In Hebrews 11 both Abraham and Moses are held up as exemplars of faith (cf. Heb. 11:8–31).<sup>44</sup> Paul cannot be comparing two legitimate paths to justification: that is, an Old Testament path via works, and a New Testament path via faith.<sup>45</sup> It is clear that Leviticus 18:5 is not laying out a recommended path of justification.<sup>46</sup> Rather, it speaks clearly about the life of faith when one is in covenant with God. To complicate Galatians 3:12 slightly, Paul quotes Habakkuk

<sup>43</sup> See Sprinkle: 2008.

<sup>44</sup> I know some might flinch at using Hebrews to help understand Paul. I am simply trying to operate within the *analogia fidei*, or the *analogia Scripturae*: Scripture must be interpreted by Scripture (see Blocher 1987).

<sup>45</sup> When I speak of 'legitimate' or 'suggested' paths to justification, I am proposing that God never intended humans to be justified by works.

<sup>46</sup> It is another question whether a works path to justification is implicit in Lev. 18:5. That is, it is conceivable (if unlikely) that Lev. 18:5 implies that if someone chose (however foolishly!) to seek justification by works, and was able to obey all of God's commands completely, that person could in fact be justified that way. No one is able to do such a thing; thus the only option is justification by faith.

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2:4, which also speaks straightforwardly about the life of faith when one is in covenant with God. Thus, in their own contexts, both Leviticus 18:5 and Habakkuk 2:4 speak simply of the life of faith – a faith that works and obeys – when one is in covenant with God. That is, God graciously brings people into covenant relationship with him, and once they are in such a relationship, he gives commands and statutes – all of which must be obeyed.

But in Galatians 3:12 Paul is working in a different context with different purposes. We can see from Galatians 3:10 that he is concerned to refute those who ‘rely on works of the law’. Such persons are under a curse because they believe one should approach God via works. But since Deuteronomy 27:26 teaches, ‘Cursed be anyone who does not confirm the words of this law by doing them,’ anyone who tries to approach God in such a works-centred way is indeed under a curse, for it is impossible to come to him that way. Indeed, as Paul continues in 3:11, ‘*no one* is justified before God by the law’. And then Paul turns to Habakkuk 2:4 and Leviticus 18:5, passages that both clearly speak of the life of faith.

Paul and the entire canon teach that in the new covenant God’s people obey his will from the heart, because he has put his Spirit in them, has united them to Christ (by faith alone), and through his Spirit causes them to walk in his ways and keep his statutes.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>47</sup> To make sense of Paul’s statement that ‘the law is not of faith’ almost requires one to sketch a biblical theology of the law more generally. My brief sketch would run something as follows (here I am relying on the insights of Blocher 2001: 121–123). Professor Blocher was kind enough to provide a translation and summary of this portion of his work. In one sense God’s law is simply his moral expectations. His law is neither legalistic nor onerous, and its purpose is not primarily a foil to drive us to the gospel. God creates man, places him in the garden and communicates his will. This is fundamentally an act of God’s goodness and righteousness. But after the entrance of sin into the world, law can function in different ways. As Blocher notes in his personal communication to me, after the entrance of sin into the world, the law ‘denounces evil as evil’. But ‘this new function is no new meaning; it is a logical corollary: as it defines righteousness, it defines (and so denounces) unrighteousness’. Considered in our relationship to God, then, ‘law’ is simply God’s will lovingly revealed to us both for his glory and our good. When does the issue of ‘legalism’ enter the scene? As Blocher sees it, ‘Legalism begins when sinners, who are found under the regime of law, imagine they can, *by doing works prescribed by the law, obtain life, acceptance with God*’ (emphasis original). To the extent that one seeks acceptance before God by one’s law-keeping, one certainly is under the curse of the law: for no one (except Jesus, the obedient Son) obeys the Father perfectly. But this is not because the law is designed to frustrate persons or be a curse. The law itself is holy, righteous and good (Rom. 7:7, 12). It even (when properly approached!) revives the soul (Ps. 19:7). Once someone is in covenant relationship with God, his will (a part of which is expressed in his law) ought to be obeyed – *mutatis mutandis* in terms of the historical-redemptive shift as one moves from old to new covenant, from the era of promise and shadows to the era of fulfilment and



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Faith itself is simply part and parcel of the life of the believer in both Old and New Testament. Paul does not say in Galatians 3:12 that faith has emerged in the first century. Rather, it would seem that he is saying that 'law' – shorthand for the attempt to find acceptance with God by law-keeping – is not of faith. There are two main 'whole-Bible' theology reasons in favour of my position. First, across the entire canon God saves first by grace and then gives commands. There is no place in Scripture where the primary way of acceptance with God is law-keeping. Secondly, this understanding fits Paul's teaching in passages such as Romans 9:30–33. In Romans 9:30–33, Paul deals with a tough question: Why did the Jews (generally) not reach 'a law that would lead to righteousness' (9:31)? Paul certainly does not argue that Israel failed because of some fundamental problem with the law (may it never be! Cf. Rom. 7:7, 10, 12). Rather, Israel failed because they did not pursue a law that would lead to righteousness *by faith*. Instead, they pursued the law that would lead to righteousness 'as if it were based on works' (9:32).

So the problem in Galatians 3:12 is not fundamentally or essentially the law itself. The problem is with the people and with their approach to the law. The law in every era of redemptive history was to be approached by faith. True righteousness is by faith. The law is 'not of faith' because faith always should come first, and our obedience to the law should always be a faith-filled, Spirit-induced obedience to the commands of God. The law was never meant to be a way of justification or acceptance before God. When someone approaches the law apart from or without faith, or approaches the law believing that one can obey all of God's commands in any sort of autonomous capacity, this person has completely misunderstood the whole structure of grace and obedience. God's commands are good and gracious and have

reality (Heb. 8:5; 10:1). God's law, transposed into a new covenant key, should indeed be obeyed. One cannot forget that in the one place in the OT where the term 'new covenant' is used (Jer. 31:31–34), a central mark of the new covenant is that God will place his law within his covenant people and will write it on their hearts (Jer. 31:33). Through the Holy Spirit, and through the power of the cross and resurrection itself, mediated to us because of the perpetual priesthood of the risen Jesus, God's people have the spiritual ability to obey him. Jesus has obeyed the Father in our place (he is indeed the obedient Son, the obedient Messiah), but his obedience for us does not negate the centrality of the obedience of God's covenant people. On the contrary, Jesus' obedience for us is the ground and foundation of our obedience. Our obedience to the Father flows from Jesus' obedience to the Father. As Blocher writes, 'Under the new regime, they [the people of God] live and are accepted by the works/obedience of Another, who substituted for them, even under punishment. *Under the regime of faith, grace, gospel, they obey the norms of God*, as the ways of life, but they are no longer under the regime of law' (emphasis original).



always been meant to be approached by the person of faith. If one chooses to approach the law apart from faith, or one believes one can obey all of God's law in an autonomous way, then one has completely missed the place of the law and has misunderstood the priority and centrality of faith in approaching God.

### Excursus: John Owen on the covenant

I include here some key insights from John Owen on the nature of the covenant, and particularly the nature of the *new* covenant. Surely John Owen is right when he writes, 'all theology . . . is founded on covenant'.<sup>48</sup> Our interest in Owen lies in the significant attention and commentary he gives to Hebrews 8:6: 'But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises.'

One of the key issues is the 'newness' of the new covenant. Owen is a helpful dialogue partner at this point because he is clearly working within the Reformed tradition, but also offers a 'minority report' of sorts within that tradition, while attempting to wrestle with the 'newness' of the new covenant. Owen rightly links the superiority of the new covenant with the superiority of its priest, Christ. This is of course exactly what the writer to the Hebrews is arguing: a better priest means a better covenant (Heb. 7 – 10). But this in itself does not necessarily mean that the new covenant is qualitatively better, although I argue that we get to this conclusion eventually (i.e. the new covenant is indeed a qualitatively better covenant).

When Owen speaks of the old covenant in Hebrews 8, he is speaking of the Mosaic covenant. And of particular interest is Owen's understanding of the role of grace in the Mosaic covenant (as well as the Adamic administration or covenant). Owen writes, 'There is infinite grace in every divine covenant.' Indeed, 'Infinite condescension it is in God, that he will enter covenant with dust and ashes, with poor worms of the earth. And herein lies the spring of all grace, from whence all the streams of it do flow.'<sup>49</sup> Gatiss summarizes Owen, 'the same reward (and penalty) was offered by the covenant of works as by the new covenant, and Adam's immortality was secured only by the most free goodwill of God'.<sup>50</sup> On the graciousness of the Adamic administration/covenant, Gatiss notes:

<sup>48</sup> Owen 1661: 44; quoted in Gatiss 2013: 154.

<sup>49</sup> Owen 1991: 6:68; quoted in Gatiss 2013: 170.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. 171.

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For Owen, there is a measure of undeserved, unmerited (and unmeritable) grace within the graciously bestowed covenant with Adam. There is also disproportionality between obedience and proposed rewards which 'were, indeed, also of grace, in that the reward did infinitely exceed the merit of our obedience.'<sup>51</sup>

As Owen continues, 'the promise . . . of eternal life with God, did in strict justice exceed the worth of the obedience required, and so was a superadded effect of goodness and grace'.<sup>52</sup> Finally, Owen writes that the covenant of works 'had in it exceeding mixture of goodness and grace, both in the obedience constituted in it and the reward annexed unto it'.<sup>53</sup>

As Lee Gatiss has noted, perhaps the most crucial component of Owen's understanding of the 'newness' or 'improvement' of the new covenant lies in a certain historical-redemptive shift that takes place in the first century. This shift relates to the usage of *nenomothetētai* (be enacted) in Hebrews 8:6. Owen's key insight is that the new covenant existed in the form of promise during the Old Testament era, but was completed and established in the first century with the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. As Owen writes:

That which before lay hid in promises, in many things obscure, the principal mysteries of it being a secret hid in God himself, was now brought to light; and that covenant which had invisibly, in the way of a promise, put forth its efficacy under types and shadows, was now solemnly sealed, ratified, and confirmed, in the death and resurrection of Christ. It had before the confirmation of a promise, which is an oath; it had now the confirmation of a covenant, which is blood. That which before had no visible, outward worship, proper and peculiar unto it, is now made the only rule and instrument of worship unto the whole church, nothing being to be admitted therein but what belongs unto it, and is appointed by it. This the apostle intends by *nenomothetētai*, the 'legal establishment' of the new covenant, with all the ordinances of its worship.<sup>54</sup>

Interestingly, when one says that the covenant of grace is (1) at one point promised (in the OT era), and (2) at another point legally

<sup>51</sup> Owen 1991, 6: 69 (cf. 6: 66); quoted in Gatiss 2013: 172.

<sup>52</sup> Owen 1991, 2: 345; quoted in Gatiss 2013: 172.

<sup>53</sup> Owen 1965, 14: 184; quoted in Gatiss 2013: 174.

<sup>54</sup> Owen 1991, 6: 64; quoted in Gatiss 2013: 177.

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established (in the NT era – with the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus), the pressure to posit an atemporal ‘covenant of grace’ which is then manifested in different historical covenants (Abraham, Moses, David, New) is diminished. That is, there is quite a difference in saying there is an atemporal ‘covenant of grace’ which is manifested in different historical covenants (Abraham, Moses, David, new) than saying there is a historical ‘covenant of grace’ promised in the Old Testament era and established in the New Testament era.

Of especial interest to the argument of this monograph is how Owen understands conditions and obedience in the covenant of grace. As Gatiss summarizes:

The covenant of grace is not without conditions in the sense that God requires obedience in it yet ‘the principal promises thereof’ are not in the first place *remunerative* of our obedience in the covenant, but *efficaciously assumptive* of us into the covenant, and establishing or confirming in the covenant.<sup>55</sup>

As Gatiss concludes, ‘the covenant of grace gives us the things promised before we have obeyed, even the faith by which we receive forgiveness (which is not to be considered, therefore, a reward for faith)’.<sup>56</sup>

The chief insights of Owen for our purposes are as follows.

First, he appropriately sees grace in the Old Testament era and affirms that this grace is linked to the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. Hence Owen speaks of the promise of the new covenant existing in the Old Testament era and the established new covenant in the New Testament era. Thus one can be saved by grace in the Old Testament era; but this grace is Christ-centred and gospel-centred, in that the Old Testament saints are being saved, ultimately, by the death of Christ promised or foreshadowed even though they live in the Old Testament era, under the old covenant.

Secondly, contra other Reformed thinkers who would see the Mosaic covenant as fundamentally a covenant of grace (or a manifestation of the covenant of grace), Owen sees the Mosaic covenant (or old covenant) as ‘declaring’ the covenant of works. Owen is not using ‘republication’ language (where the Mosaic covenant is a ‘republication’ – a reprinting – of the covenant of works), but, because

<sup>55</sup> Owen 1991, 6: 69; quoted in Gatiss 2013: 181; emphasis original.

<sup>56</sup> Gatiss 2013: 181.



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he is trying to be faithful to the 'better covenant' language of New Testament passages like Heb. 8 – 9, he distinguishes between the old covenant and the new.

Thirdly, for Owen, the covenant of grace 'flowers' into the new covenant, while the old (Mosaic) covenant is a different covenant. The covenant of works as a covenant is technically a covenant that ended with Adam's failure to keep it.

Owen is a giant in the world of theology, and I differ from him with some trepidation. However, part of the work of biblical theology, particularly if one is committed to the Reformation principle of *semper reformanda* (always to be reformed), is to challenge, when necessary, certain received theological formulations. With Owen we can affirm that the 'better covenant' language of the New Testament (esp. Heb. 8 – 9) inclines us to make sense of what exactly is 'better' and 'new' about the new covenant. And since Owen desires to root the forgiveness of sins and the salvation of sinners in the person and work of Christ, it seems biblical and therefore wise to draw out the links between forgiveness during the Old Testament era and the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus. Hence Owen's idea that there was a promise of the new covenant in the Old Testament era that is established in the New Testament era seems to move in the right direction.

However, it seems unnecessary to posit a covenant of works that is then 'declared' again (but not necessarily 'republished') in the Mosaic covenant. Indeed, it may be the case that Owen's Reformed peers – who tended to see the Mosaic covenant as a covenant of grace – were on to something. Some of the tension here is the tendency to link works with a works-covenant of some sorts. If it is the case that 'works' are what flow from the heart of the person who trusts in the God of holy Scripture, it quickly becomes unnecessary to make recourse to a 'covenant of works' when we see mention of works (e.g. in the Mosaic covenant). However, if in every covenantal relationship with the Lord – from Adam to the new covenant – the sovereign, covenant Lord calls his people to obey him, then the theological pressure to link 'works' with a 'covenant of works' lessens. When God calls a people to himself, he calls them to obey him. And he saves first by grace and then calls his people to obey, or in the case of his relationship with Adam, creates Adam and supplies all his need; Adam did not at that point need to be saved. Thus we need not be skittish when we see God's commands.

This by no means settles the issue, and we cannot skirt difficult questions. There does appear to be a newness to the new covenant that

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exists at the level of quality and not just quantity. But to affirm that the new covenant is qualitatively better than the old does not necessarily require a strong law–gospel contrast. We can argue that (1) God always saves by grace, (2) he requires obedience of all those who relate to him (whether in the OT or NT eras), (3) the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus is the fount of all forgiveness (and the fount of all mortification, sanctification, faithfulness, works and obedience), (4) the new covenant is quantitatively better than the old (all covenant members have circumcised hearts and are regenerate), and (5) the new covenant is qualitatively superior with a better priest, better promises, a better sacrifice and a more substantial pouring out of the Holy Spirit.

### Conclusion

One of the goals of biblical theology is to understand the Bible's big picture in the light of its particulars, and the particulars in the light of the big picture – in short, to understand the overarching story line and meaning of the Bible without running roughshod over its specific teachings and stories. One of the key issues in this regard is the nature of biblical covenants, and in particular the continuity and discontinuity between the old and new covenant. In this chapter I have attempted to flesh out some of the key issues concerning the newness of the new covenant and the complementary relationship of law and gospel. There is development as one moves from old to new covenant: the new is both quantitatively and qualitatively better than the old.

I have suggested that salvation is by grace across the entire canon, and that likewise there is the expectation of works, obedience and faithfulness across the entire canon. I have argued, in agreement with Henri Blocher, that while there is a fundamental continuity between old covenant and new, there is an 'advance' of sorts as one moves from old to new. I have also argued that one should not overreach in contrasting law and gospel, and, leaning on John Frame and Richard Gaffin, I have suggested that there is a grace within the law, and that the gospel does not free one from the obligation to obey our covenant Lord. The excursus on John Owen briefly explored some of his brilliant insights on the nature of the new covenant.

At the heart of biblical teaching is atonement. And in the New Testament the death of Christ for us is at the heart of the matter. Any understanding of works, obedience and faithfulness in the new covenant must link them to the atoning work of Christ, to which we now turn.