

An Examination of the Nature of the Old Covenant

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An Overview of Viewpoints

God gave his law, the Ten Commandments, to his people Israel at Mt. Sinai. With these moral instructions, God also set forth a complex of additional laws regarding public justice, sacrifices, and ceremonial uncleanness. These laws were given in the form of a covenant and were ratified and established by sacrifice and the sprinkling of blood. This covenant made with Israel is commonly called either the old covenant in contrast to the new covenant in Christ, or the Mosaic covenant since Moses acted as mediator. What sort of a covenant was this covenant? Was it the precursor to the new covenant in Christ? Or was it of a very different nature than the new covenant? Evangelical theologians hold a variety of views about the nature of the old covenant and the law given in that covenant. For the most part, three major viewpoints of the nature of the old covenant are advocated today. These are Dispensationalism, Classic Reformed theology, and a modified form of Reformed theology.

Dispensationalism

Dispensational theologians believe that the nature of the old covenant can properly be described by the Pauline phrase "works of law."¹ Further, they would assert that Paul's statement that believers are "not under law but under grace"² is the equivalent of "not under the old covenant but under the new covenant." For the Dispensationalist, the law given at Mt. Sinai stands in contrast to the promise given to Abraham and the grace preached by Paul. Law was substituted for promise as the basis of the covenant at Mt. Sinai. In the same way, law has been set aside by grace in Christ. The old covenant (as Paul calls the covenant at Mt. Sinai) was a law covenant. The new covenant in Christ is grace and promise. For the Dispensationalist, the Ten Commandments are exclusively law and not at all grace. The Ten Commandments are no longer binding in the new covenant on their own authority. Only as those commandments are repeated in the New Testament do they have applicability to new covenant believers. So then, for Dispensationalism the historical order of the dispensations is promise (Abraham), then law (Moses), and now grace (Christ).

Dispensational theologians find the justification for their view of the old covenant in the teaching of the Apostle Paul. Paul writes in Romans 10:5 that "Moses describes in this way the righteousness that is by the law: 'The man who does these things will live by them.'" The statement that "the man who does these things shall live by them" is taken from Leviticus 18:5. Paul equates this statement with "the righteousness that is by the law." For the Dispensationalist, this equation is proof positive that the old covenant was a law covenant and not a promise covenant, as was made with Abraham. The old covenant was certainly not a faith covenant in which justification and inheritance are by faith. Rather, the old covenant is antithetical to such things. Paul also quotes Leviticus 18:5 in Galatians 3:12, that "the law is not based on faith; on the contrary, 'The man who does these things will live by them.'" So, from these two passages, Dispensationalists conclude that the law (old covenant) taught righteousness by the law, and thus the law (old

¹ ἐξ ἔργων νόμου - Romans 3:20, Galatians 2:16, 3:2,5,10.

² Romans 6:14-15 New International Version (NIV).

covenant) was "not based on faith."³ The old covenant was works. The new covenant is faith. The nature of the old covenant was law and works, rather than promise, grace, and faith. All that Paul says about "works of law" Dispensationalism attributes to the old covenant as its true and essential nature. None of the old covenant applies to the believer in Christ who is "not under law but under grace."

Classic Reformed Theology

The classic Reformed understanding is very different from the Dispensational analysis. In Reformed theology the old covenant is a continuation and development of God's singular saving purpose. That saving purpose was present in the old covenant and has now been realized in Jesus. This singular saving purpose is referred to as the covenant of grace. The old covenant was an administration of this covenant of grace. It was the precursor of the completed form of God's saving purpose in Christ. Rather than the Dispensational scheme of promise, law, and grace, Reformed theology asserts that law was added to promise, such that the promise remained in force. The covenant at Mt. Sinai did not replace the promise given to Abraham but rather supplemented it with the giving of the Ten Commandments. Under Moses as much as under Abraham, justification and inheritance were by faith in God's promise and so by grace. Paul's statement in Galatians 3:17-18 is seen as defining the Reformed view. "What I mean is this: The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise. For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise."⁴ The giving of the Ten Commandments did not set aside the promise given to Abraham. It did not institute a way of righteousness by observing the law. The principle of justification by faith seen in Abraham continued unabated under the Mosaic covenant. The old covenant in the Reformed understanding is a covenant of grace as to its essential nature. It is a dispensation of the covenant of grace.

The Dispensational and Reformed views are opposites as to the nature of the old covenant. For Dispensationalism, the old covenant is law and works. For the Reformed faith, the old covenant is a part of the covenant of grace. For Dispensationalism, the Ten Commandments have no place in the new covenant, for we are not under law but under grace. For the Reformed faith, the Ten Commandments are binding on all men for all time. According to the Reformed view, the publication of the Ten Commandments through Moses was not a replacement of the promise, but a supplement to the promise. The law was not given as a regime of justification by works, but as gracious instruction for the believer in godly living. That instruction is both positive and negative. Negatively, the Ten Commandments show believers their sins and so it leads them to seek justification through God's promise in Christ. Positively, the law guides believers in doing the will of God as their grateful response to God's forgiving mercy in Jesus.

In the Reformed creeds, the principle of righteousness by observing the law is attributed, not to the covenant at Mt. Sinai, but to the original covenant with Adam at the

³ Galatians 3:12

⁴ (NIV).

creation. This original covenant is variously called the covenant of creation, the covenant of life, and the covenant of works. It is understood in Reformed theology as a covenant of works in which God offered Adam continued and fulfilled life on the basis of personal, perfect, and perpetual obedience. Had Adam never sinned, he would have continued in life with God and attained to life in its fulness by his personal obedience to the will of God. But Adam did sin, and he did so as the father and covenant head of the human race. By his sin, he plunged himself and his posterity into sin, wrath, and death.

God did not leave matters as Adam ruined them by his sin. But from the time of Adam's sin, God promised salvation through a redeemer. This promise was first given to Adam and Eve in the curse pronounced on the serpent. God promised that a seed of the woman, a son, would come who would crush the head of the serpent. Evil and the evil one would be defeated. This promised son would undo the damage done by Adam's sin. Each of the explicit covenants that followed has been understood as continuations and advancements of this initial promise in which God graciously promised a redeemer. Each of the covenants recorded in the Old Testament Scriptures were administrations of this underlying promise, this covenant of grace, according to the classic Reformed view. The Abrahamic covenant, the Mosaic covenant, and the new covenant were successive dispensations of this one covenant of grace. Thus, the entire history of God's people and their relationship with God can be set forth under two covenants. First, there was the covenant of works, and then after the fall, the covenant of grace.

Modified Reformed Theology

In the classic Reformed understanding, the covenant at Mt. Sinai (which included the giving of the law) has been understood as an administration of this covenant of grace. Yet, fairly early in the post-Reformation period, an alternative view arose, which asserted that the covenant at Mt. Sinai was in some limited sense a continuation of the covenant of works. In particular, Israel's continued possession of the land of promise was based upon their keeping of the law, rather than on their dependence on the promise. A parallel was said to exist between Adam in the garden and Israel in the land. Just as Adam would have continued in life and in possession of the garden had he obeyed God, so Israel would continue in possession of the land if the nation obeyed God. There is, however, a significant difference that must not be overlooked. Adam was innocent. Israel was sinful. God required of the sinless Adam a perfect and perpetual obedience in the covenant of works. No one imagines that the Israelites had to be perfect and without any sin to keep the land. Nonetheless, this view holds that the covenant at Mt. Sinai was in some sense a continuation or republication of the first covenant, the covenant of works. At least in part, the covenant at Mt. Sinai was "like" the covenant of works at the creation. This sort of understanding was advanced in the late Puritan era in a work called the *Marrow of Modern Divinity*. A distinction was made between the individual believer under the old covenant who was justified by faith and so in terms of his relationship to God was under the covenant of grace, and the nation as a whole which stood in a covenant of works relationship with God in regard to their continued possession of the land.

The strength of this view is that it seems to reconcile the conflicting statements of Paul about the law. On the one hand, as the Dispensationalists point out, Paul identifies

the principle of righteousness by law with Leviticus 18:5. On the other hand, Paul says that the law did not annul the prior covenant and so do away with the promise. The modified Reformed view sought to resolve this tension by finding both principles, law and promise, works and faith, in the nature of the old covenant. For the individual, the promise given to Abraham remains fully operative under Moses. Justification is by faith alone. But for the nation as a whole, continued possession of the land depends on works of law. We have called this view the "modified" Reformed view since it is a modification of the classic view found in the Reformed creeds. Nothing pejorative is intended by the label "modified Reformed view."

Recently, this modified view has reemerged in Reformed theological circles. To the arguments derived from Paul's language, further arguments have been added based on the distinction between two kinds of covenants in the ancient Near East, promise and law, and the literary connections between Eden and Canaan. Thus, the entrance into Canaan is seen as a typical return to Eden. The nation as a whole recapitulates the experience of Adam under the covenant of works. At the national level (or the level of redemptive history), the covenant of Mt. Sinai was a typical republication of the covenant of works. Israel, God's son, was a type of Adam. Canaan was a type of Eden and Israel's expulsion for violating the covenant a "recapitulation" of Adam's being cast out of the garden. These parallels are undeniable. The question is whether they are of sufficient weight to reject the classic Reformed view that the covenant at Mt. Sinai was in its entirety an administration of the covenant of grace.

Of course, modified Reformed theologians agree with the classic view that individual salvation continued to be based upon the covenant of grace and that justification was by faith during the Mosaic period. But in contrast to individual salvation, the nation as a unity possessed the land only through continued obedience. It is this paradigm of two levels (grace for individuals, works for the nation) that is used to explain Paul's citation of Moses as teaching justification by works, and at the same time regard Moses as a man of faith justified by grace. Others in Reformed circles have found this model uncomfortably close to the absolute Dispensational dichotomy between law and grace. What then was the nature of the old covenant as it was established at Mt. Sinai? Was it purely an administration of grace, or was it, at least in part, an administration of works? Was it a covenant of grace or a covenant of works? On what basis had Israel been delivered from Egyptian bondage? On what basis would they be given the land of Canaan? Were they a righteous people deserving of God's blessing on account of their doing of the will of God? What was the relationship between the promise (covenant, oath) made to Abraham and the covenant made with Israel through Moses at Mt. Sinai?

The Old Covenant according to the Old Testament

The Promise to Abraham

God appeared to Abram, made gracious promises to him, and changed his name to Abraham.⁵ These promises took the form of a covenant and were established by an

⁵ Genesis 12, 15, 17.

oath. So then, what was promised Abraham is variously called promise, oath, or covenant. God promised Abraham a son. God promised to make Abraham into a great nation, and his descendants would possess the land of promise. Even more importantly, God promised Abraham that he would be a God to Abraham and his seed. Through Abraham, all peoples would be blessed. This blessing to the nations through Abraham was nothing less than the gospel of Jesus Christ. "The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: 'All nations will be blessed through you.'"⁶ All Reformed thinkers agree that this covenant with Abraham was an administration of the covenant of grace. Though not accepting the notion of an overarching covenant of grace, Dispensational theologians would readily concur that the covenant with Abraham was based on God's gracious promise.

God's promise given to Abraham (at that time still called Abram) was based only on the favor and choice of God. Abraham had not attained to righteousness by his perfect works. Just the opposite is true, for "Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness."⁷ This promise and Abraham's response of faith became the paradigm for Paul's doctrine of justification by faith. All the major schools of thought on the nature of the old covenant, Dispensationalism, Reformed theology, and modified Reformed theology, agree on and embrace Paul's doctrine of justification by faith. All agree that no one will be justified by works of law. And all seek to relate the old covenant to Paul's distinctions. It would be well, therefore, to consider Paul's doctrine before we proceed with an analysis of the old covenant within the Old Testament Scriptures. We need to keep in mind Paul's thought as we look at the old covenant as set forth in the Old Testament. Time and again we will find that Paul's expressions make sense in light of the material in the law and the prophets. But, apart from that connection, Paul's expressions are easily misconstrued.

The Promise to Abraham and Israel's Righteousness

God promised Abraham a great nation and a land. The fulfillment of the promise made to Abraham would take many generations. Abraham's children would not possess the Promised Land until the iniquity of Amorites and the Canaanites had reached its full measure. In the meantime, Abraham's children would become slaves in Egypt. When the time arrived for the promise to Abraham to be fulfilled, God called Moses to lead the people out of bondage in Egypt and into the possession of the land of Canaan. The book of Exodus attributes the deliverance of Israel from bondage in Egypt to God's remembering his covenant with Abraham. "God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob."⁸ The explicitly-stated basis for Israel's deliverance from bondage was the promise God had made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. At the exodus, it was the promise covenant with Abraham that bound God to the Israelites. God acted in keeping with his oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Though God responded to the groans of Israel because he remembered his gracious promise to Abraham, perhaps the Israelites had also proven themselves to be a particularly righteous people while they were in captivity. Surely it would have been

⁶ Galatians 3:8 (NIV).

⁷ Genesis 15:6 (NIV).

⁸ Exodus 24:3, (NIV).

appropriate for God to keep his promise to a people deserving of such favor by their good conduct. But such was not the case. God's assessment of the Israelites' character was: "I have seen these people," the LORD said to Moses, "and they are a stiff-necked people."⁹ The Israelites had not attained to such a measure of righteousness before God that their righteousness was the basis for God's hearing their groans and delivering them. It was not their moral rectitude, but God's gracious promise alone that led to their deliverance. In fact, the Israelites were so displeasing to God that he told Moses that he would destroy them and make a new nation out of Moses. It was only the pleadings of Moses that saved Israel from God's wrath.

Forty years, later at the end of their wilderness wanderings it remained true that Israel was not "righteous" and that their inheritance of the land was not because of their moral character. Moses warned them of "boasting" in their presumed righteousness.

"After the LORD your God has driven them out before you, do not say to yourself, 'The LORD has brought me here to take possession of this land because of my righteousness.' No, it is on account of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is going to drive them out before you. It is not because of your righteousness or your integrity that you are going in to take possession of their land; but on account of the wickedness of these nations, the LORD your God will drive them out before you, to accomplish what he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Understand, then, that it is not because of your righteousness that the LORD your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stiff-necked people."¹⁰

Centuries later, Stephen would make the same charge against his people Israel using the same word as the LXX used in Deuteronomy 9:6. "You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit!"¹¹

Israel's righteousness (τὰς δικαιοσύνας μου)¹² was not the basis of their possession of the land. Israel's integrity (τὴν ὁσιότητα τῆς καρδίας σου)¹³ was not the cause of their inheritance of the land. The sole basis for Israel's deliverance from bondage and their possession of the land was God's promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Neither their deliverance from Egypt nor their possession of the land was because of their righteousness. They arrived at Mt. Sinai because of God's promise, not their righteousness. They departed from Sinai and eventually arrived in the Promised Land because of God's promise, not their righteousness. Whatever was the character of the covenant that God made with Israel at Sinai, that covenant did not replace, annul, or take precedence over the promise. The essential relationship of God with Israel both before and after the covenant at Mt. Sinai was based upon his promise to Abraham. Remember Moses was speaking about the nation as a whole, and about the nation's inheritance of the

⁹ (NIV) Exodus 32:9.

¹⁰ Deuteronomy 9:4-6 (NIV). See also Deuteronomy 31:27-29, 32:5-6.

¹¹ Acts 7:51 (NIV). Both the Septuagint in Deuteronomy 9:6 and Stephen use the term σκληροτράχηλος (stiff-necked).

¹² Septuagint Deuteronomy 9:4.

¹³ Septuagint Deuteronomy 9:4.

land. At this level, the level of redemptive history, God's relationship to Israel was not based upon their righteousness or integrity, but only upon God's promise. Israel was delivered from Egypt because of God's promise. Israel came to possess the land because of God's promise. Nothing that occurred at Mt. Sinai with the giving of the law changed this principle of inheritance by promise.

The Exodus, Redemption, and Sacrifice

God brought Israel out of bondage in Egypt to fulfill his promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The language used to describe the Exodus will later become the language of new covenant salvation. The terminology used for Israel's deliverance from Egyptian bondage would later be used of Christ's deliverance of his people from the bondage of sin and death. God told Moses to explain God's purpose with these words. "Therefore, say to the Israelites: 'I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment.'"¹⁴ This terminology of "redemption" occurs repeatedly in the books of Moses (Ex 6:6; 15:13; Dt 7:8; 9:26; 13:6; 15:15; 21:8; 24:18). We find the same language used in the New Testament. Paul, for example, writes of Jesus that he "gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good."¹⁵ Christ redeemed us that we might be eager to do what is good. So also, at the Exodus, God redeemed Israel and then instructed them on what was good. He gave them his law. In both covenants redemption led to instruction in doing good. God redeemed Israel from bondage in Egypt and then gave his law (torah = teaching, instruction) to his people. In Christ, God redeemed his people from bondage in sin and instructed us how to live, at times even repeating the same words that were delivered at Mt. Sinai. The giving of the law at Mt. Sinai no more abolished promise and grace, than the republishing of the law in Paul's letters abolished promise and grace. The giving of the law (instruction in what is good) did not by its nature change a covenant of grace into a covenant of works. If it did, the moral instructions of Romans 12:9ff would annul the mercies of God of verse 1. But rather, these mercies are the motivation for obedience to the moral instruction. "I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, *which is* your spiritual service of worship."¹⁶

The connection between old covenant redemption and new covenant redemption is more than a commonality of language. When God delivered his people from slavery to the Egyptians, this redemption was much more than a mere deliverance from political oppression. It was also a deliverance from the wrath of God justly visited upon the wicked. God himself would pass through Egypt to judge the gods of Egypt. The Lord would slay the firstborn of Egypt. To prevent the same fate for the firstborn of Israel, the people were instructed to slaughter a lamb, roast its meat, and splash its blood on the doorposts and lintels of their houses. "On that same night I will pass through Egypt and strike down every firstborn - both men and animals- and I will bring judgment on all the gods of Egypt. I am the LORD. The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you

¹⁴ Exodus 6:6 (NIV).

¹⁵ Titus 2:14 (NIV).

¹⁶ Romans 12:1, New American Standard Version (NAS).

are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt."¹⁷ God said that what kept him from slaying the Israelites was the blood of a sacrifice. Israel was redeemed from the wrath that fell upon the Egyptians by the shedding of the blood of a sacrifice. They were delivered from divine wrath by a sacrifice. In fact, God used the verb "to deliver" to describe the effect of his seeing the shed blood. He told the Israelites to say to future generations at the Passover celebration, "It *is* the sacrifice of the LORD'S Passover, who passed over the houses of the children of Israel in Egypt, when he smote the Egyptians, and delivered our houses."¹⁸ The Hebrew word translated as "delivered" is used repeatedly in Exodus for God delivering his people. But in this case, that from which the Israelites were delivered was the divine judgment that destroyed the firstborn of Egypt. The judgment could have fallen upon the Israelites too. They were deserving of death for God does not judge unjustly. But God provided that they should be delivered from the very wrath which consumed their oppressors, and it was that wrath that in turn delivered them from bondage in Egypt. Thus, Israel's redemption from Egypt involved a redemption from wrath and death. The giving of the law at Mt. Sinai was in the context of redemption, both from political tyranny and from the just anger of God at sinners. God redeemed his people and delivered them from his wrath and from death through sacrifice. In Christ, God redeemed his people and delivered us from his wrath and from eternal death through the sacrifice of his son. Both covenants are expressions of God's grace and mercy. In both covenants justification was by a "sacrifice of atonement" and through the "redemption" which God accomplished.

God delivered his people because of his promise. God gave the land to his people for the sake of his oath to Abraham. God redeemed his people from Egyptian bondage and from divine wrath by sacrifice. These factors alone are sufficient to establish the essential nature of the Old covenant as a covenant of promise, redemption, and grace. The law was given at Mt. Sinai in the context of promise and redemption. It did not replace the promise. And it did not provide another way of redemption than sacrifice and the shedding of blood.

The initial Passover lamb did not exhaust the redemptive character of the old covenant. The covenant at Sinai was not only preceded by sacrifice, it was inaugurated with the shedding of blood sprinkled on the people and the book.

Moses then wrote down everything the LORD had said. He got up early the next morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain and set up twelve stone pillars representing the twelve tribes of Israel. Then he sent young Israelite men, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as fellowship offerings to the LORD. Moses took half of the blood and put it in bowls, and the other half he sprinkled on the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, "We will do everything the LORD has said; we will obey." Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, "This is the blood of

¹⁷Exodus 12:12-13 (NIV).

¹⁸Exodus 12:27 (KJV).

the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words."¹⁹

This ratification was wholly unlike the ancient Near East pattern of oath-curse covenant ratification, in which the lesser king symbolically undergoes the curse by walking between the cut-up pieces of the slaughtered animals. Such an oath-curse was a part of the covenant with Abraham. But it was God who "walked" between the pieces symbolically taking the oath.²⁰ The blood shedding and sprinkling at Mt. Sinai was rather like the blood shedding and splashing of Passover. The imagery of the covenant inauguration at Sinai was wholly redemptive. The New Testament builds upon this imagery to explicate the redeeming death of Christ. Jesus himself at the last supper called the cup "my blood of the covenant"²¹ a phrase derived from the covenant inauguration at Mt. Sinai. Both Peter and writer of Hebrews speak of the sprinkling of Christ's blood alluding to the sprinkling of blood by Moses.²²

Sacrifice and the sprinkling of blood were not limited to the inauguration of the old covenant. Within the old covenant, provision was made for a complex of redemptive sacrifices, daily, annual, and occasional. Every day, animals were sacrificed. The annual feasts all involved such sacrifices. And a complex structure of sacrifices was established for the sins of individuals, leaders and the nation as a whole. Israel was constantly making sacrifice for atonement. So also, Israel, by this very action of sacrifice, was confessing her sinfulness and her need for the forgiving mercy of God. This was summed up on the Day of Atonement, in which the high priest was to confess his sin and the sin of his people. In light of this extensive pattern of sacrifice, atonement, and sprinkling of blood, it is hard to conceive how the old covenant could be a republication of the covenant of works. Daily, Israel was to offer sacrifice for sins. Daily, by this action, the Israelites confessed themselves to be sinners in need of the mercy of God. Not only the statement of Moses, but also the sacrificial worship, was an affirmation that "you are a stiff necked people." Israel could never approach God without sacrifice. Their whole relationship to God was through sacrifice. Thus, the performance of the law's requirements was a continual acting out of the twin truths that men are sinners and that forgiveness is only through a sacrifice of atonement. The Law bore witness to the righteousness of God that is a gift through sacrifice. The sacrifices appointed by the law did not teach justification by works of law, but they taught justification by faith in God who accepts sacrifice to cover over the sins of his people.

The Name of God

At the center of the old covenant was God's self-revelation. God at Sinai revealed himself as more than he had revealed himself to Adam in the garden before the fall. In the Garden, God showed himself as the Creator of all who gave good gifts to his creatures. But at the Exodus, God revealed himself as the merciful God who redeems his sinful people from bondage, wrath, and death. This self-revelation took the form of God proclaiming his name in which he not only called himself LORD (Yahweh), but

¹⁹ Exodus 24:4-8, (NIV).

²⁰ Genesis 15.

²¹ Matthew 26:28, Mark 14:24.

²² Hebrews 12:24, 1 Peter 1:2.

explicated the meaning of that name. "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation."²³

In the Garden God, threatened Adam with the curse of death for one infraction of the divine command. At Sinai, God revealed himself as "compassionate and gracious... forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin." The old covenant was made with redeemed sinners. It was based on sacrifice and atonement. It was ratified with the shedding of blood. It provided for continuing forgiveness through sacrifice for individuals, for leaders and for the whole nation. The old covenant was the revelation of the God who is "the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin." What else would you call such a covenant but a covenant of love, grace and mercy?

The Covenant and the Mercy

This language is exactly how the Old Testament Scriptures repeatedly describe the old covenant. The old covenant's self-designation is "covenant of love" (New International Version) or "covenant and mercy" (King James Version). "Know therefore that the LORD thy God, he *is* God, the faithful God, which keepeth covenant and mercy with them that love him and keep his commandments to a thousand generations."²⁴ The phrase, "covenant and mercy" is also used in Deuteronomy 7:12, 1 Kings 8:23, 2 Chronicles 6:14, Daniel 9:4, Nehemiah 1:5 and 9:32. The phrase in Hebrew is *וְהַבְרִיתָ וְהַחֲסֵד*. Both nouns have the definite article prefixed. Therefore, they could be rendered in English as "the covenant and the mercy." The Hebrew word *חֶסֶד* means love, kindness, mercy, or goodness. In standard English translations this word is rendered as "love," "loving kindness," "mercy," or "unfailing love." It is rendered by the Septuagint as *διαθήκην καὶ ἔλεος*. The word *ἔλεος* is the standard Greek word for mercy or favor. In other words, from the days of Moses through the period of the kings, into the captivity in Babylon, and at the restoration to the land, the old covenant was understood as "the covenant and the mercy." So then, the old covenant according to the old covenant was a covenant of mercy, of love, or of loving kindness.

In three of the texts where the old covenant is called "the covenant and the mercy," the texts also say that God keeps his covenant and mercy with "those who love him and keep his commandments" (Deut 7:9; Neh 1:5; Dan 9:4). In two other occurrences, the texts say that God keeps his covenant and mercy with "thy servants that walk before thee with all their heart" (1 Kgs 8:23; 2 Chr 6:14). Throughout Deuteronomy, Moses exhorts the people to love the Lord and keep his commandments. Again and again the Israelites are told to love the Lord their God. Again and again the covenant is said to be made with such as love God and keep his covenant. Should we understand this language as an expression of works righteousness, of works of law, or of seeking to establish one's own righteousness by law? For the Dispensational theologian, such language is a clear statement of the works character of the old covenant. For the

²³ Exodus 34:6-7 (NIV).

²⁴ Deuteronomy 7:9 (KJV).

modified Reformed viewpoint, such statements and exhortations could be understood as a republication of the covenant of works.

Without a doubt, Israel was to love God. Why? Because Yahweh had chosen them. He had sworn an oath to their forefathers Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He had redeemed them from slavery in Egypt and delivered them from his wrath through the sacrifice of the Passover lamb. He had forgiven them time and again. From the days of the exodus, God had been to Israel "gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in mercy, forgiving sin and iniquity." They were to love God because God had first loved them and redeemed them. Love for Yahweh was not a work done to earn a wage (Paul's notion of works of law), but a response of gratitude to a loving and merciful Savior. How is that different now in the new covenant? "We love because he first loved us"²⁵ is equally true in old and new covenants. God did not say to enslaved sinners "Love me and keep my commandments and I will redeem and deliver you." God redeemed and delivered Israel and then said "Love me." In the old covenant as much as in the new covenant, love for God is the result of God's prior redeeming love for us.

Love is not works of law, a trying to establish one's own righteousness by law, or a boasting before God. Love is our response to God's unmerited and undeserved mercy to us. Love and faith are inexorably joined. The apostle says in Galatians 5:6 that "faith works itself by love" (πίστις δι' ἀγάπης ἐνεργουμένη). The participle (ἐνεργουμένη) is middle in voice. It describes the outworking of faith, namely, love. Or, as the New International Version puts it, "faith expresses itself through love." Without faith, we cannot please God. So the root of love for God is always faith that receives the mercy of God. We love because he first loved us. When we think about it, love for God is necessarily rooted in faith. In order to love God, we must first believe that he has loved us, redeemed us, and delivered us. If we think such things happened because God owed them to us for our obedience, then there is no reason to love God. God merely gave us our due. We got what we earned. God loved Israel and redeemed his nation from bondage and wrath. Believing this fact, they were to respond by loving Yahweh. In the Old Testament as well as in the New, the expression of faith is always love.

It is impossible, therefore, to identify the requirement to love God with Paul's notion of works of law. Works of law are the antithesis of faith. But love is the outworking of faith. Therefore, the statements that God keeps his covenant and mercy with those who love him cannot be formulations of the notion of justification by works. Such language is rather a description of true believers who are known as believers by the outworking of their faith, which is love.

Further, if we love God from a true faith, we will delight to do his will. And so the outworking of love is obedience. As Jesus said, "if you love me, you will obey what I command."²⁶ Since it is true in the new covenant, that if we love Jesus, we will keep his commandments, how can it be false in the old covenant, that if love we Yahweh, we will keep his commandments? Faith expresses itself in love, and love leads us to obedience. Therefore it must be just as true in the new covenant that God keeps his new covenant

²⁵ 1 John 4:19.

²⁶ John 14:15 (NIV).

and mercy in Jesus with those who love him and keep his commandments. Not surprisingly we find just such formulas throughout the New Testament.

First, the New Testament describes believers in Jesus as those who love God. Paul writes in Romans 8:28, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."²⁷ If all things work together for good, then God is keeping his covenant and mercy. So then, in Paul's theology, God keeps his covenant and mercy with those who "love God." Or in the negative Paul can say, "If anyone does not love the Lord - a curse be on him. Come, O Lord!"²⁸ Again, God (in this instance God the Son) keeps his covenant and mercy with those who love him, and a curse is on those who do not love him. In the old covenant Israel ended up under the curse, because the nation did not love God. So now, in the new covenant, a curse is on those who, though professing to believe, do not love the Lord Jesus.

Second, the New Testament repeatedly teaches that those who do not obey will be cast out. It is those who do the will of the Father who will be saved. This terrible consequence results because "faith without works is dead." A dead faith is no faith at all. Consider these statements.

Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.²⁹

Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.³⁰

The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.³¹

Faith expresses itself by love and, if we love God, we will obey his instructions. Those who do not obey God, but instead live in open rebellion, neither love God nor trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. In the old covenant as well as the new, justification (forgiveness of sins) is by faith alone. In the old covenant as well as the new, faith expresses itself by love, and love leads to obedience. In the old covenant as well as the new, it can be said, "Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do."³² Love

²⁷ (NIV).

²⁸ 1 Corinthians 16:22 (NIV).

²⁹ Matthew 7:21 (NIV).

³⁰ 1 Corinthians 6:9-11 (NIV).

³¹ Galatians 5:19-20 (NIV).

³² James 2:8(NIV).

and the consequent obedience are the evidences of a true and saving faith. And in neither covenant, did God cast out those who sincerely but imperfectly loved and obeyed him. In the old covenant, sacrifices were appointed for all sorts of sins and transgressions. And in the new covenant, Jesus taught us to pray, "Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors." Or, as the apostle expressed it: "If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."³³

Loving God and keeping his commandments is not the antithesis of justifying faith. They are rather the outworking and evidence of such faith. The opposite of justifying faith is to trust in yourself that you are righteous. Against such self-trust Moses wrote, "After the LORD your God has driven them out before you, do not say to yourself, 'The LORD has brought me here to take possession of this land because of my righteousness.'" Love for God cannot exist in a heart filled with unbelief and self-boasting. Love for God rather arises in a heart that has believed that God has first loved us, redeemed us, and delivered us. God does not keep his covenant and mercy with those who disbelieve, but with those who believe. The sure sign of true faith is love. And if we love God, we will also strive to keep his commandments. Had Israel loved God, Israel would have kept his commandments. But Israel did not love God and did not keep his commandments. Why? Because Israel was unbelieving.

Israel's Unbelief

Israel's unbelief was the fault in the old covenant. The people of God did not believe. Israel from the beginning was stiff-necked and unbelieving. Because they did not believe God, they did not regard him as their life. Because they did not trust him, they repeatedly failed to obey him. The root of the failure to keep the covenant was not disobedience but unbelief. By their unbelieving rebellion, they brought upon themselves the curses that the covenant had threatened. In the end, the people were taken into captivity again. They had been redeemed from slavery in Egypt, but through unbelief the Israelites ended up in captivity to the Assyrians and the Babylonians. Some even returned to Egypt. Thus, on the whole, the ministry of Moses became a ministry which condemned. It was not intended for that end. But the unbelief of Israel brought it to such a sad state.

At first, the Israelites believed God.³⁴ But this faith proved to be a transient and unstable faith. It was not a saving faith that persevered, but a temporary faith that soon turned into unbelief. Thus, God would say to Moses, "How long will these people treat me with contempt? How long will they refuse to believe in me, in spite of all the miraculous signs I have performed among them?"³⁵ The Israelites refused to believe in Yahweh, their God, a compassionate and gracious God. Good news was proclaimed to them about God, about his promise, and about his provision for them. But they did not believe. Because they did not believe, they did not obey. At the end of the wilderness wanderings, Moses repeated this charge of unbelief. "For I know how rebellious and stiff-necked you are. If you have been rebellious against the LORD while I am still alive and

³³ 1 John 1:8 (NIV).

³⁴ Exodus 4:29-31, 14:31.

³⁵ Numbers 4:11(NIV).

with you, how much more will you rebel after I die!"³⁶ The psalmist repeated this charge many centuries later. "They did not believe in God or trust in his deliverance" and "in spite of all this, they kept on sinning; in spite of his wonders, they did not believe."³⁷ In Psalm 106, we are told that, at first, "they believed his promises and sang his praise." These promises were the word of deliverance that Moses brought to Israel in Egypt. But later, the Israelites' faith turned into unbelief. "Then they despised the pleasant land; they did not believe his promise."³⁸ Israel did not believe God. Israel did not believe his promise. Israel's failure was a failure to believe God's gracious promise. The writer of Hebrews says of the wilderness generation, "So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief."³⁹ Because they were unbelieving they died in the desert.

In other words, their hearts were uncircumcised (Lev 26:42; Jer 9:26; Acts 7:51). This is another way of saying they were "stiff-necked." We can see this meaning in Deuteronomy 10:16 where "stiff-necked" and "circumcised in heart" are opposites. "Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer."⁴⁰ Israel was unbelieving and disobedient. They did not love God. Their hearts were uncircumcised.

Old Covenant as Typical and Historical

The old covenant was a gracious covenant based on God's redeeming mercy and his prior promise to Abraham. But the redemptions, sacrifices and atonements of the old covenant were only historical (out of Egypt) and typical (by animal sacrifices that could not take away sin). Thus the old covenant was, by its very nature, historical and typical. It would become obsolete and pass away. What was needed was a covenant that was final and real. What was required was a covenant that would deliver God's people from sin and death finally and fully. A covenant in which God circumcised the heart and on that heart wrote his law.

The old covenant had been an external covenant in which the law was written on tablets of stone. Its sacrifices could not take away sin, but only foreshadow that sacrificial lamb whom John the Baptist announced, "Behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Since the hearts of the Israelites were unbelieving on the whole, and since the covenant at Sinai provided only an historical and typical redemption, the end result was that Israel suffered the curses of the covenant. The whole nation, northern and southern kingdoms, ended up in captivity. Moses' ministry was a ministry of condemnation, not by intention, but by effect.⁴¹ The law condemned because it was written only on stone. As typical and historical the old covenant could not take away sin. Moses himself recognized this reality.⁴²

³⁶ Deuteronomy 31:27 (NIV).

³⁷ Psalm 78:22, 32 (NIV).

³⁸ Psalm 106:12, 24 (NIV).

³⁹ Hebrews 3:19 (NIV).

⁴⁰ Deuteronomy 10:16 (NIV).

⁴¹ 2 Corinthians 3:7-9.

⁴² Deuteronomy 30:1-2, 6; 31:27, 29.

Only a remnant of a remnant (some of the tribe of Judah) returned from captivity in Babylon. Outwardly, it appeared that they had learned their lesson. The blatant idolatry of the earlier era was not repeated in the restored nation. But that does not mean the restored Israel had become a nation of faith; just the opposite, for they remained stiff-necked and unbelieving. Jesus charged, "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithes of mint and anise and cummin, and have omitted the weightier *matters* of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith: these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone."⁴³ The Israelites, according to Jesus, were lost sheep. Though they boasted in Moses, they neglected what was really important in the law of Moses, namely "judgment, mercy, and faith." These weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy and faith, were the very things that the Old Testament shows to be the essential nature of the law. The law was "the covenant and the mercy." The religious leaders in Jesus' day omitted "mercy." The law summoned Israel to faith in Yahweh. But it was "faith" that Israel lacked. Ironically, in the gospel narratives, the only people said to have great faith were a Roman centurion and a Canaanite woman.⁴⁴ The law was to produce discernment (judgment), but the Pharisees misunderstood the Sabbath as evidenced by their reaction to Jesus' fulfillment of Sabbath by healing the sick. Thus they condemned the just (Jesus) and excused themselves.

Now if the really devout Israelites, the Pharisees and the scribes, omitted the weightier matters of the law, then without a doubt, the Pharisaical interpretation of the law was incorrect. And this interpretation was wrong, not merely on peripheral matters, but on what was essential. For Jesus the law taught judgment (discernment), mercy, and faith. If instead, the law had become a matter of boasting before God and despising others, as both Jesus and Paul charged, then contemporary Judaism had distorted and twisted the law into something it was not intended to be. Contemporary Israel did not believe Moses for he wrote of Jesus and they did not believe Jesus. This is the charge that Jesus leveled against them. "If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me."⁴⁵ Throughout the Gospels, Jesus indicates that Israel in his day was like Israel in Moses' day. They did not believe God or his word through Moses.

However, some who lived under the old covenant were men and women of faith. They had not omitted the weightier matters. As such, they relied not on their own righteousness, but on the mercy of God. Paul mentions David in this regard. The writer of the Hebrews lists a host of those who lived by faith. Those who lived by faith kept the old covenant stipulations in their positive and intended sense. For them, the requirements of the moral law were a word of life from Yahweh. For them, the ceremonial laws pointed to the amazing love and mercy of God. They were those who by faith kept the commandments and did the law. They were true believers. Like Moses, they longed to see the days of Jesus, and, by faith, they did see those days. These believers during the age of the old covenant were the spiritual opposites of the scribes and Pharisees.

⁴³ Matthew 23:23 (KJV).

⁴⁴ It is the contrast between the faith of those two Gentiles, and the lack of faith in Israel, that indicates that the correct sense of πιστις in Matthew 23:23 is faith, and not faithfulness.

⁴⁵ John 5:46 (NIV).

The Old Covenant According to Paul

Paul on Justification

When we turn to the Apostle Paul, we find that his comments about the law are bound up with his teaching about justification by faith. Paul's doctrine of justification is based on Genesis 15:6, a text that is part of the law (meaning the books of Moses). Paul himself refers to Genesis as law.⁴⁶ He refers to the episode with Hagar and Sarah as "the law says." So for Paul, the doctrine of justification by faith is to be found within the law as a collection of literature.

Paul repeatedly cites the statement of Genesis 15:6 that "Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him for righteousness." It is for Paul the paradigm and the proof of his doctrine, that we are justified only by faith in Jesus Christ and never by what Paul calls "works of law." Paul writes, "knowing that a man is not justified out of works of law but through faith in Jesus Christ, we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order that we may be justified out of faith in Christ and not out of works of law, for out of works of law no flesh shall be justified."⁴⁷

For Paul, works of law and faith are opposites and irreconcilable. Paul expresses the notion of justification out of works of law in a variety of other ways. To be justified out of works of law is the equivalent of "righteousness through law," "to be justified by law," to receive "the inheritance out of law," and to have "out of law the righteousness."⁴⁸ In Romans Paul says that Israel of his day "pursued a law of righteousness" and was "seeking to establish their own righteousness."⁴⁹ He describes himself, while a Pharisee, as "according to righteousness by law being blameless" and "having my own righteousness out of law."⁵⁰ In Paul's thought there is a close connection between law, works, and seeking one's own righteousness.

In contrast to the seeking of one's own righteousness by law through works, Paul teaches that believers are justified by faith in Christ. Justification by faith is founded on the promise of God given to Abraham, that in him all nations would be blessed. "The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: 'All nations will be blessed through you.'"⁵¹ Paul says that the law did not annul this promise. "What I mean is this: The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the

⁴⁶ Paul uses the term law (νόμος) with a variety of different meanings and nuances. He uses the term law to mean the written documents, that is, the books of Moses (Romans 3:21b). He uses law for the old covenant as whole, that is, the entire covenant administration (Romans 3:31, Galatians 3:17). He uses law to refer to the moral commandments, e.g., the Ten Commandments (Romans 13:8-10). He uses law to refer to the ceremonial commandments about food, cleansing and sacrifice (Galatians 5:3). And he uses law to refer to the old covenant as misinterpreted as way of justification by works (Romans 3:21a, 6:10). Furthermore, Paul sometimes writes about the law as anticipating its fulfillment in Christ (Romans 2:13), and sometimes about the law in itself, apart from the efficacy that flows from Christ (2 Corinthians 3:8-9).

⁴⁷ Galatians 2:16 (author).

⁴⁸ Galatians 2:21, 3:11, 21 (author).

⁴⁹ Romans 9:31, 10:3 (author).

⁵⁰ Phillipians 3:6, 9 (author).

⁵¹ Galatians 3:8 (NIV).

promise."⁵² The basis for this gracious justification of sinners is the "righteousness of God." This "righteousness of God" is without cost and is a gift of grace.

But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus."⁵³

Just as law, works, and one's own righteousness are connected in Paul's thought, so too are faith, grace, and the righteousness of God. Justification can either be sought through one's works of law, based on one's own righteousness which is out of law, or it can be sought by faith in Jesus Christ through the grace of God and based on the righteousness of God as a gift.

This contrast between faith and works is crucial for understanding Paul. To seek justification by works of law is to seek to establish one's own righteousness. It is to reject the promise of God and the gift of God. In contrast, justification by faith is by the righteousness of God. This righteousness of God is without cost to believers, but was costly indeed to the Savior. Believers "are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood."⁵⁴ Both terms, "redemption" and "sacrifice of atonement," are taken from the Law of Moses. Both necessarily imply that those justified are debtors and sinners under divine wrath. The word "redemption" pictures men as debtors and Christ as paying the debt. The term in the Old Testament Scriptures is especially connected to the payment of debt to release a slave from his bondage. The word atonement pictures men as under God's wrath and delivered from that wrath by a sacrifice that satisfies God's justice and so turns away his just anger.

So then, to be justified by faith in Christ is to receive the righteousness of God according to his promise, as a gift, through the sacrifice of Christ. Paul writes that "I may be found in him, not having my own righteousness out of law, but through faith in Christ, that is the righteousness out of God which rests on faith."⁵⁵ Justification by faith is based on the "righteousness of God" or the "righteousness out of God."⁵⁶ Abraham beforehand received this righteousness of God by faith. David under the Mosaic covenant wrote of this righteousness of God. Paul says that the Law and the Prophets testified of this righteousness of God. "But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been

⁵² Galatians 3:17 (NIV).

⁵³ Romans 3:21 (NIV).

⁵⁴ Romans 3:24-25 (NIV)

⁵⁵ Phillipians 3:9 (author).

⁵⁶ The use of τὴν ἐκ θεοῦ δικαιοσύνην in Phillipians 3:9 shows that the more common expression, δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ, should be taken as a genitive of origin. The righteousness of God is not God's attribute of righteousness, but the righteousness of which God is the source or author. As such it can said to be a gift (Romans 5:17 τῆς δωρεᾶς τῆς δικαιοσύνης). God's attribute of righteousness by its very nature cannot be gift and cannot be described as τὴν ἐκ θεοῦ δικαιοσύνην.

made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify."⁵⁷ Though Israel in Paul's day revered the Law and the Prophets, Paul charges that Israel was ignorant of the righteousness of God and did not submit to it. The Law and the Prophets testified of the righteousness of God that is by faith. But Israel was ignorant of that righteousness. Instead they sought their own righteousness. "For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God."⁵⁸

Here is the conundrum in Paul's thought. Israel in his days had the law, studied the law, boasted in the law, yet was ignorant of the righteousness of God to which the Law and the Prophets testified. Why was Israel ignorant of the righteousness of God? How was it that they devoted themselves to the law, yet were ignorant of that about which the Law bore witness? In answering this question we find the key to the Apostle's thought about the nature of the old covenant.

Law Does Not Annul Promise

In the Apostle Paul's writings, there is much that fits and confirms our analysis of the old covenant as a covenant of grace founded upon the promise of God and exhibiting the mercy of God to undeserving sinners. In Galatians, he wrote that law did not abrogate the covenant of promise made with Abraham four hundred and thirty years earlier. He expressly rejected the notion that inheritance was through law rather than by promise.

What I mean is this: The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise. For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise.⁵⁹

Paul is clear that the law does not "set aside" (New International Version), "annul" (New King James Version, New Revised Standard Version), or "invalidate" (New American Standard Version) the covenant made with Abraham. The law did not replace the promise in the old covenant. The law was not given to be a different means to inheritance than faith in the promise. The law did not "do away with" (New International Version), "make of no effect" (New King James Version) or "nullify" (New Revised Standard Version, New American Standard Version) the promise. The promise remained operative after the law was given at Mt. Sinai, according to Paul. This continuation of promise fits what we saw in the books of Moses. In Deuteronomy forty years after the initial giving of law, Moses was still insisting that inheritance was not based on Israel's righteousness, but on the oath given Abraham.

It is not because of your righteousness or your integrity that you are going in to take possession of their land; but on account of the wickedness of these nations, the LORD your God will drive them out before you, to accomplish what he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Romans 3:21, (NIV).

⁵⁸ Romans 10:3 (KJV).

⁵⁹ (NIV) Galatians 3:17-18.

⁶⁰ Deuteronomy 9:5 (NIV).

In this passage, we have language remarkably like what Paul would later use. Israel is told by Moses that they are not to think that they inherited the land because of their righteousness. Moses said, "it is not because of your righteousness that the LORD your God is giving you this good land to possess." Rather, their entry into the land was to accomplish what God swore to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God's promise, not Israel's righteousness, was the basis of inheritance. Paul makes the same point. "For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise."⁶¹ Both Moses and Paul agree that inheritance was by promise and not by one's own righteousness. Moses adds a further the reason why the Israelites ought not to boast in their righteousness. The Israelites, rather than being righteous, are instead stiff-necked. "Understand, then, that it is not because of your righteousness that the LORD your God is giving you this good land to possess, for you are a stiff-necked people."⁶²

Moses said, in effect, "all have sinned." His actual words were, "for you are a stiff-necked people." But such a statement has the same meaning as Paul's assertion that all have sinned. Paul was not saying anything new. He was affirming what Moses had said. Paul wrote that through the law was the knowledge of sin. Moses in the Law said "it is not because of your righteousness... for you are a stiff necked people." Moses in the law rejects the notion that inheritance is by one's own righteousness because Israel is not righteous but stiff-necked. So then, for both Paul and Moses inheritance is by promise and not by one's own righteousness. For both Paul and Moses, Israel is not righteous, but sinful. Paul, of course, adds the thought that the Gentiles also are sinful. If the Israelites in Paul's day were seeking to establish their own righteousness, it was only because they had rejected the teaching of Moses. For according to Moses, inheritance was not by Israel's righteousness, but by God's promise. Paul said the same thing. Israel in Paul's day did not take to heart the admonition of Deuteronomy 9:4-6. According to Paul, they sought to establish their own righteousness.⁶³ They came to believe that they were righteous. In so doing, they rejected the testimony of the law that "you are a stiff necked people."

So then, it is the teaching of both Moses and Paul that inheritance is not by one's own righteousness, but only by God's promise. It is the teaching of both Moses and Paul that men are in fact not righteous before God, but, instead, stiff-necked sinners. Thus we must say that God added the law to the promise, rather than substituting the law for the promise. If in theological categories, we regard the covenant with Abraham as a covenant of grace, then the covenant at Mt. Sinai continues under that covenant of grace. God was not obligated by Abraham's perfection to give him a son and the land. God's covenant with Abraham was wholly a matter of God's free promise, his undeserved grace, that is, his gift. In the same way, God was not bound in his justice to reward Israel for the nation's righteousness with deliverance out of Egypt and the inheritance of the land of promise. The people were and remained a "stiff-necked" people. If they received the blessings promised to Abraham, it was due only to God's grace, favor and mercy.

⁶¹ Galatians 3:18 (NIV).

⁶² Deuteronomy 9:6 (NIV).

⁶³ Romans 10:3 - τὴν ἰδίαν [δικαιοσύνην] ζητοῦντες στήσαι.

Moses Writes of the Righteousness by Law

But we also find in Paul expressions that seem to be antithetical to the view we have espoused. Statements like "the law is not of faith" and "we are not under law but under grace"⁶⁴ seem to conflict with our analysis above of the old covenant as a covenant of mercy. At the level of language (but not of idea), Paul says conflicting and even contradictory things about the law. Perhaps this is why Peter found Paul's writings hard to understand.⁶⁵

Twice, Paul cites Moses as expressing the principle of righteousness or inheritance by law. Both in Romans and in Galatians, he quotes Leviticus 18:5 as expressing the notion that righteousness is by law rather than by faith.

Moses describes in this way the righteousness that is by the law: "The man who does these things will live by them."⁶⁶

The law is not based on faith; on the contrary, "The man who does these things will live by them."⁶⁷

One can hardly imagine a stronger statement than "the law is not based on faith." But if the law is not based on faith, and instead teaches a righteousness by works of law, how can Paul say that the law did not nullify the Abrahamic covenant and so do away with the promise? Paul within the span of a few sentences appears to contradict himself. How can righteousness be by faith and at the same time be by law? Paul denies that the law annulled the promise. But Paul finds the antithesis of promise, namely, a "righteousness that is by law" in the writings of Moses.

The modified Reformed view is an attempt to resolve this tension by asserting that there is within the old covenant two distinct principles of inheritance. For the individual believer, the Abrahamic promise remains in force, and justification is by faith. For the nation, the principle of works of law had been introduced as regards Israel's possession of the land. Only by keeping the law would Israel be righteous before God and so continue in possession of the land. Such a view seeks to resolve the problem of how the principles both of faith and works can be operative under the old covenant at the same time. Individuals were justified by faith through the promise. The nation as a unity kept the land through works of law. The promise was not annulled for the individual believer. Yet the law taught a righteousness and inheritance by works of law for the nation. It is easy to see why this view has appeal. It appears to allow the interpreter to take both Galatians 3:17-18 and Galatians 3:12/Romans 10:5 at face value. The old covenant is both grace and law, faith and works.

⁶⁴ Galatians 3:12, Romans 6:14.

⁶⁵ Verbal contradictions are a common feature of human language. They are the result of the inherent limitations of language in which words have more than one meaning. Thus one can say that the President is running and the President never runs. These are verbal contradictions. But if the first statement, the President is running, described his seeking reelection, and the second described his dislike of exercise, there would be no contradiction of idea. Failure to notice verbal contradictions leads to serious misinterpretations of literature.

⁶⁶ Romans 10:5 (NIV).

⁶⁷ Galatians 3:12 (NIV).

There are two problems with this seemingly neat solution. First, it runs afoul of the very statement it is supposed to protect. Paul says in Galatians 3:18: "For if the inheritance depends on the law, then it no longer depends on a promise; but God in his grace gave it to Abraham through a promise." For Paul, inheritance by law and inheritance by promise are mutually exclusive. It cannot be both/and, but must be either/or. So then, if at some point Israel's continued inheritance of the land depended on their own righteousness by law, it could not at the same time depend on the promise. If it no longer depended on the promise because it now depended on the righteousness that is by the law, then law has annulled and set aside the promise. But Paul expressly rejected this idea in the prior verse. "The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise." Promise was and remains the only basis of inheritance. If the law was a typical republication of the covenant of works, then inheritance would have been by law. But Paul explicitly rejected the notion that inheritance is by law. The law cannot, therefore, be a typical republication of the covenant of works.

The second problem with the modified Reformed view is that the verse that supposedly teaches inheritance by works of law for the nation (Leviticus 18:5) in fact does not address the issue of national inheritance at all. Leviticus 18:5 is not addressed to the nation as a unity. It is addressed to individuals. It is not about the nation's future bliss in the land, but about the individual. Moses did not write "the nation who does these things," but, "the man who does these things." Likewise, Paul cites this verse, not in regard to the nation as a whole, but in regard to individual justification before God. In other words, Paul did not find a principle of national inheritance by law in Leviticus 18:8, but a principle of individual justification by law. So then the notion of a typical republication of the covenant of works as regards the nation does not resolve the interpretive dilemma in Paul's writings. Even if there were a principle of inheritance by law in the old covenant for the nation, neither Moses in Leviticus 18:5 nor Paul in citing Moses were writing about the nation as a unity. Moses wrote "the man who does these things," and Paul quoted him in regard to individual justification before God.

The issue that needs to be resolved is how Paul found the principle of justification by works in the writing of Moses and at the same time insisted that the law did not annul the promise so as to make inheritance by law. It is in resolving this interpretive difficulty in Paul's thought that we will also resolve the apparent tension between the Old Testament Scriptures assessment of the old covenant as mercy, and Paul's apparent assessment of it as "works."

Both Dispensationalist theologians and modified Reformed theologians regard Paul's citations⁶⁸ of Leviticus 18:5 as evidence that Paul found in the Law the principle of justification and inheritance by works of law. These theologians regard the words "The man who does these things will live by them" as necessarily and exclusively expressing the principle of works of law. Thus Paul's citations of Leviticus 18:5 proves that the Law of Moses is based on the principle of works rather than the principle of faith. However, If we accept that Leviticus 18:5 was intended by Moses to teach the principle of works, then two insurmountable problems are created. First, Moses contradicted himself, for Moses

⁶⁸ Citation necessarily implies an interpretation of what is cited.

explicitly rejected this principle as regards Israel (Deuteronomy 9:4-6). Second, Paul contradicted himself, for Paul wrote that the law is no opposed to the promise (Galatians 3:17, 21). If the law teaches righteousness by works of law, then it does proclaim a way of righteousness antithetical to promise.

But there is another approach much neglected these days. This approach is the classic Reformed view, which holds that Pharisaical Judaism had perverted the old covenant into a law of works and a boasting before God. Thus, the statement "the man who does these things shall live by them" meant one thing as originally written by Moses to ancient Israel in the wilderness, and latter meant something very different in the Pharisaical Judaism of Paul's day. Originally, "the man who does these things shall live by them" meant that the believing Israelite, who regarded Yahweh as his life, would find the blessings of life in grateful obedience to his Redeemer's instructions and commands. But in contemporary Pharisaical Judaism, the statement had come to mean that devout Pharisees were righteous before God by their works, and were not like those Gentile sinners, or tax collectors, or prostitutes. The Pharisees kept the law and more, tithing even their garden herbs, and fasting twice a week.

Is it plausible that Paul intentionally cited Moses, not in the sense his words were originally intended, but in the perverted sense that those words later attained? In fact, the very context of Paul's citation of Moses demands that the reader consider such a possibility. In the passage where Paul cited Leviticus 18:5, he also cited Deuteronomy 30:14 that "the word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart." In the writings of Moses, both passages refer to the law. Yet Paul applies Deuteronomy 30:14 to the word of faith Paul preached.

Moses describes in this way the righteousness that is by the law: "The man who does these things will live by them." [Lev 18:5] But the righteousness that is by faith says: "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" [Deut 30:12] (that is, to bring Christ down) "or 'Who will descend into the deep?'" [Deut 30:13?] (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart," [Deut 30:14] that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.⁶⁹

Here is the statement quoted by Paul in its context in Moses' writing.

Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, "Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, "Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it. See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in his ways, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase,

⁶⁹ Romans 10:5-10 (NIV).

and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.⁷⁰

The word that "is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart" refers to the law that Moses had given to Israel. Moses commanded Israel to keep Yahweh's "commands, decrees and laws." This is the word that is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart. Yet Paul cites this verse and says it is the gospel he is preaching. "The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,' that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: That if you confess with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved." Now perhaps, Paul is just picking up some familiar phrases from Moses and using them in a different sense. Perhaps he is not citing Moses as authority but merely borrowing language. These are every bit as much the words of Moses as is "the man who does these things shall live by them." The one statement from Moses is set in contrast to the other. For Paul, the first citation expressed the principle of justification by works and the second citation justification by faith. But if in fact, Moses taught justification by works (as Paul's citation of Leviticus 18:5 seems to imply), then he taught it also in Deuteronomy 30:11-16. The phrase "these things" in Leviticus 18:5 undoubtedly refers to the same "commands, laws and decrees" as does "the word" in Deuteronomy 30:14.

How can Paul take a text about the law and say that it is the word of faith he is preaching? Paul appears to find both "works" and "faith" in Moses. Leviticus 18:5 and Deuteronomy 30:14 are both encouragements to do the law. They are very similar. Yet Paul uses one to express the notion of righteousness by works of law and the other to express the gospel of justification by faith. How can this be? This difficulty is sufficient reason to consider that Paul might not simply be asserting that Moses taught unequivocally that righteousness was by law when he said, "the man who does these things will live by them." Perhaps he was using this text in a special way, just as he would do a few sentences later with Deuteronomy 30:14.

David and the Righteousness by Faith

Paul writes of Israel that: "Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness."⁷¹ Paul in this passage tells us two things about Israel in his day which cannot be said of believers under the old covenant as seen in David. First, Israel in Paul's day "did not know the righteousness that comes from God." David most certainly did know this righteousness of God. Paul says of David, "David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works: 'Blessed are they whose transgressions are forgiven, whose sins are covered. Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will never count against him.'"⁷² David knew the righteousness of God and wrote about it. Yet David not only lived under the old covenant law, he wrote passionately about the goodness of that law. Who can read Psalm 19 or

⁷⁰Deuteronomy 30:11-16 (NIV).

⁷¹Romans 10:3 (NIV).

⁷²Romans 4:6-8 (NIV).

Psalm 119 and think that David had a disparaging view of the law? The law of the Lord is perfect. The commandments of God are more to be desired than gold. David became wise because he meditated on the law. Yet fall of this advocacy of the goodness, blessedness, and perfection of the law did not keep David from knowing the righteousness of God that is by faith. And he not only knew about it as an abstract truth, but he submitted himself to it. He was a true believer with a broken and contrite heart before God.

In contrast to David, Israel in Paul's day was ignorant (ἀγνοοῦντες) of the righteousness of God and did not submit (ὑποτάγησαν) to it. The verb, ὑποτάσσω, means to place oneself under another's authority. Paul uses it of believers submitting to Christ, of believers submitting to one another, and of believing wives submitting to their husbands. Israel had not submitted to the righteousness of God. So how does one submit to the righteousness of God? The answer from Paul is obvious. One believes God and his promise. David did so; contemporary Israel did not. Nor did they receive in faith the Scriptures. Paul says that the law and the prophets bore witness to the righteousness of faith. "But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify."⁷³ As Paul says in 2 Corinthians, a veil was over their eyes whenever the law was read. But no such veil beclouded David. The testimony of the law (books of Moses) was sufficiently clear that David understood, believed, submitted to and sang about the righteousness of God that is by faith. But Israel in Paul's day did not. The fault, therefore, cannot lie in the law but in the hearts of the Israelites.

Abraham believed God, and it was counted for righteousness. Paul stresses this truth of Genesis 15:6 repeatedly. It could not, therefore, be the case that Israel believed God and it was not counted as righteousness. Then God would be unfaithful. But rather it was Israel that was unbelieving. Israel did not believe God. Paul says this explicitly. When Paul asks why Israel has not obtained the righteousness of God, he answers his own question this way. "Why not? Because they pursued it not by faith but as if it were by works."⁷⁴ The writer of Hebrews makes the same point. The wilderness generation did not enter the rest because they did not believe the word of God: "but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith."⁷⁵ David did receive the word of God by faith. David pursued righteousness by faith. But Israel in Paul's day pursued it by works. In place of faith, the Israelites put works.

Notice here that "works" stands in complete antithesis to "faith." The statement is even more emphatic than the New International Version renders it. Paul wrote ὅτι οὐκ ἐκ πίστεως ἀλλ' ὡς ἐξ ἔργων. Translated simply it is "for not out of faith but as out of works." For Paul such works are incompatible with faith. Before the law was given at Sinai, Abraham was righteous by faith. After Sinai, David was righteous by faith. Neither pursued righteousness by works. Yet both Abraham and David sought to obey the commandments of God as they knew them. David, of course, knew them in the form of the Ten Commandments. David delighted in these commandments. He meditated on them. He strove to keep them. But none of this godly obedience was "works" in Paul's sense of the term. David never faults the law. He only faults himself. "My sin is ever

⁷³ Romans 3:21 (NIV).

⁷⁴ Romans 9:32 (NIV).

⁷⁵ Hebrews 4:2 (NIV).

before me" he sings. "Against you, you only have I sinned." "I have been a sinner from birth." "When I hid my sin, your hand was heavy against me."

As a result, David took refuge exclusively in God and his mercy. "Have mercy (חַנּוּן) on me, O God, according to your unfailing love (חַסֵּד); according to your great compassion (רַחֲמִים) blot out my transgressions."⁷⁶ The same three Hebrew roots occur in God's declaration of his name in Exodus 34. "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate (רַחוּם) and gracious (חַנּוּן) God, slow to anger, abounding in love (חַסֵּד)." The only difference is that two of the terms are nouns in Psalm 51 and the corresponding adjectival form is used in Exodus 34. David believed the old covenant name of God that he was compassionate, gracious and abounding in love. He placed his entire hope for forgiveness and acceptance with God on this truth. "Have mercy... according to your unfailing love, according to your great compassion." David believed in God as merciful, compassionate and forgiving. And he knew himself to be a sinner who had no hope except in God's compassion, grace, and love. David trusted wholly and only in the mercy and compassion of God. He did not trust in his performance of the law as the basis for his justification as regards his sin and guilt.

Pharisaism and the Law

How different attitude of David is from the attitude of a Pharisee who wrote, "If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee... as for legalistic righteousness, faultless."⁷⁷ Prior to the Damascus road event, Paul put his confidence in the flesh. He trusted in his circumcision. He trusted in his ethnicity. He believed he was "faultless" in regard to "legalistic righteousness." The original language text reads κατὰ δικαιοσύνην τὴν ἐν νόμῳ γενόμενος ἄμειπτος. Rendered simply into English it is "according to righteousness by law being blameless." Paul the Pharisee (Saul) saw himself as blameless. In his pharisaical interpretation of the law, he was not a sinner like the tax collectors, the prostitutes and the Gentiles. He wrote in Galatians 2:15 "We who are Jews by birth and not 'Gentile sinners.'" Paul, while a Pharisee, did not see himself in the category of sinner, but in the category of the righteous. But this righteousness was not a righteousness of God received as a gift through faith. It was his own righteousness by his works of law. This was his religion. He was seeking ἐμὴν δικαιοσύνην τὴν ἐκ νόμου (my righteousness out of law). This is the same sort of phraseology he uses about contemporary Israel in Romans. The Israelites were "seeking to establish their own righteousness" (τὴν ἰδίαν [δικαιοσύνην] ζητοῦντες στήσαι). Paul, as a Pharisee, did not know himself as only and always a sinner before God. By his pharisaical standard of righteousness, he was blameless. Paul, as a Pharisee, did not put his trust in God as compassionate, gracious, and loving. Instead, Paul boasted in his flesh (circumcised, of the lineage of Abraham); he relied on his religious performance (a Pharisee) and regarded himself as righteous before God by his own works. By his own testimony he was "according to the righteousness that

⁷⁶ Psalm 51:1 (NIV).

⁷⁷ Philippians 3:4-6 (NIV).

is by law - blameless." Like the rich young ruler in the Gospel, Paul would have said of the commandments, "These I have kept from my youth." About such people, Jesus told the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector.

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men - robbers, evildoers, adulterers - or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.' But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."⁷⁸

The attitude of the Pharisee in this parable is very much that of Paul before his conversion. The Pharisee said "God, I thank you I am not like other men." Paul wrote "we who are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners" and "as for legalistic righteousness, faultless." Paul saw himself, not as "sinner," but as "faultless." So did the Pharisee in Jesus's parable. Both exalted themselves before God, and so were not justified before him.

Notice the close connection between the conclusion of this parable and the conclusion of Paul's discourse on justification in Romans 3. Jesus says, "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." Paul concludes, "Then what becomes of boasting? It is excluded. By what law? By that of works? No, but by the law of faith."⁷⁹ The Pharisee in the parable boasted before God: "I am not like other men." Placing such a statement inside a "prayer of thanksgiving" did not deceive God, who sees the heart. Adding the words, "I thank you, God," did not diminish the reality that the Pharisee exalted himself. According to Luke Jesus told this parable because "some were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else." Indeed, this absorption with self-righteousness destroyed the inward meaning of the act of prayer. The New International Version reads, "the Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself." But the Greek text could be understood differently. Luke wrote ὁ Φαρισαῖος σταθεὶς πρὸς ἑαυτὸν ταῦτα προσήύχeto. The New International Version renders the preposition πρὸς as "about," but it also and more commonly has the sense of "to." So Luke may have intended to say that the Pharisee prayed "to" himself. He was not really praying to God at all. With his mouth, he addressed God, but in his heart, he was only talking to himself. Indeed, this ambiguity "about" or "to" may well have been Luke's intention. At first, the phrase seems innocuous, but on reflection it becomes appalling. He was not praying to God, even when he was praying.

What Jesus said in this parable fits entirely with the attitude of Paul prior to his conversion: boasting, self-exalting, and trusting in one's own righteousness. Paul, like the Pharisee in the parable, was confident that he was righteous before God. His trust was in himself and his works, not in God and his mercy. In Paul's writings, the phrases "works

⁷⁸ Luke 18:9-14 (NIV).

⁷⁹ Romans 3:27 (NRS).

of law," "law of works," "by law," and "one's own righteousness" express this attitude of trusting in one's self and one's works as fulfilling the law and so guaranteeing acceptance with God. But such an attitude devoid of humility, faith, and repentance was not the attitude that the Law given at Mt. Sinai required. Furthermore, one who exalted himself such that God would humble him could hardly be said to be keeping the covenant and loving God with heart, mind, and soul. Indeed, such an attitude of boasting before God would instead be the breaking of the covenant and the despising of compassion and forbearance of God. To such arrogant men, it could be said, "Do you despise the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience? Do you not realize that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?"⁸⁰

So we are compelled to conclude that the attitude of "works of law" was a rejection of the old covenant and the true meaning of the law. For what the law required was a broken and contrite heart, not a boasting and self-exalting heart. The tax collector, not the Pharisee, expressed the acceptable attitude of the old covenant. "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." The original language text reads ὁ θεός, ἰλάσθητί μοι τῷ ἁμαρτωλῷ. The tax collector, far from comparing himself to others, calls himself "the sinner." There is no hint of excuse making. But even more importantly, the verb used is not the common term for mercy (ἐλέεω), but rather a verb from the same stem as the words for "atone," "atonement," and "mercy seat." The use of the particular term shows that the tax collector understood the law's requirement to offer sacrifice for atonement as picturing the truths that men are sinners under wrath, and that reconciliation with God can only be attained by sacrifice that covers over sin and turns aside the just anger of God. The Pharisee, on the other hand, had turned the locale of atonement (the temple) into a place of self-trust and boasting before God.

The tax collector in the parable expresses the attitude of humility, faith, and repentance that was found in David. Both found justification. Both belonged to the old covenant order and understood it as mercy, compassion, and kindness from God for sinners. The old covenant was not a covenant of works, but a covenant of mercy. The law did not teach self-trust, boasting, and self-exaltation. Rather it taught humility, faith, and repentance toward the merciful God who forgives sin, iniquity, and rebellion. Yet it does so without compromising his justice that sinners be punished. The law as given by God could not have been a regime of "works of law" or of "righteousness by law." It was not a "law of works", but a "law of faith." There can be no republication of the covenant of works to sinners, for it is only arrogance, boasting, and pride for sinners to think they can keep the very law which they daily break in thought, word, and deed. But since the old covenant is mercy, sinners out of gratitude to the mercy of God can endeavor to serve God by joyful obedience, just as believers do now in the new covenant.

So then it is Paul's own explication of the meaning of "works of law" that forces us to conclude that Moses did not teach such a regime in Leviticus 18:5. Rather, once Israel began to trust in their circumcision, in their ancestry, and in themselves and their works, they distorted the law into something it was not intended to be. The phrase "the man who does this things shall live by them" became an impossibility. It was a goal beyond the reach of sinners. For "cursed is everyone who does not do all that is written in

⁸⁰ Romans 2:4 (NRS).

the book of the law." For the believer, "the man who does these things shall live by them" means, that having found the mercy of God in a humble and contrite heart, one endeavors to obey God from gratitude. On such real, but imperfect, obedience, God showers his blessings in this life. But without a humble and contrite heart, the statement "the man who does these thing shall live by them" becomes boasting and self-exaltation before God.

Boasting Excluded

Paul's goal in his exposition of justification is to exclude just such boasting before God. Contemporary Judaism boasted of its works of the law. Reflecting on his life as a Pharisee, Paul said of himself, "as to that righteousness that is out of the law *I was* faultless."⁸¹ The Pharisee in Jesus' parable expressed the same attitude. "I thank you that I am not like the rest of men." Jesus told this parable because "some trusted in themselves that they were righteous and despised others." When the rich young ruler asked Jesus about eternal life, and Jesus called his attention to the commandments, the ruler replied, "All these I have kept since I was a boy."⁸² Earlier in Romans, Paul had accused his fellow Jews of hypocrisy for boasting in the law and yet not doing the law. For Paul, boasting before God characterized contemporary Judaism. It is this attitude of boasting that Paul intends to exclude by his doctrine of justification by faith. So he concludes his statement of justification by faith with: "Where therefore the boasting? It has been excluded. Through what law? Of works? No! But through a law of faith."⁸³ The Greek text is Ποῦ οὖν ἡ καύχησις; ἐξεκλείσθη. διὰ ποίου νόμου; τῶν ἔργων; οὐχί, ἀλλὰ διὰ νόμου πίστεως.

Paul begins with the question "Where therefore is the boasting?" To this question he answers, "It has been excluded." The verb, ἐξεκλείσθη, is an aorist passive. It expresses not a wish or hope, but an accomplished fact. Boasting has been excluded. Paul continues by asking the question "through what law (is boasting excluded)?" The question is phrased in an awkward way given Paul's earlier use of terminology. Paul could have written simply "how is boasting excluded?" But instead he wrote διὰ ποίου νόμου; (through what law?). Up to this point, the term "law" has been associated with works and hence with boasting. Contemporary Judaism boasted in the law and in their works of law. What excludes boasting is not law but rather faith. Yet Paul writes "by what law?"

There is a "law" that does exclude "boasting." What law is it? The New International Version seeks to soften this verbal dissonance by rendering νόμος by the English word "principle." But this only disguises for the English reader the problem felt by a reader of the original text. If works of law produce boasting, how can law exclude boasting? Certainly a law "of works" cannot exclude boasting. Paul brings up this possibility and immediately rejects it. He writes, "Through what law? Of works? No!"

⁸¹ Philippians 3:6 (author).

⁸² Luke 18:21 (NIV).

⁸³ Romans 3:27 (author).

(διὰ ποίου νόμου; τῶν ἔργων; οὐχί).⁸⁴ The form of the question necessarily implies that there is a "law of works." What has excluded boasting is "a law of faith" (διὰ νόμου πίστεως).

A contrast is set up between two different laws in Romans 3:27. First, there is the "law of works" which has not excluded boasting. The religious attitude of the Pharisees proves that works of law do not exclude boasting. Second, there is the "law of faith." This law of faith has excluded boasting. This law of faith is justification by the "righteousness of God" that is "without cost" and through "the redemption of Jesus Christ." There can be no boasting before God, if that by which we are justified is "of God" and not "of ourselves." Such righteousness was not a wage we earned, but was "without cost" to us. The cost of our justification was paid by Jesus. Our justification is based on his redemption. Justification by faith, therefore, excludes boasting before God. But Paul does not say that boasting is excluded by faith but by a "law of faith."

Thus Paul sets up a contrast between two irreconcilable principles: a law of works versus a law of faith. The former phrase, "law of works," very much fits the earlier language of the Apostle. It is a play on the phrase "works of law." To seek to be justified by "works of law" is to follow a "law of works." Up to this point in Romans, the opposite of "works of law" has been "faith."⁸⁵ Thus, the expected language in contrast to "By what law? Of works?" would be "No! But by faith." Paul regularly sets works of law in contrast to faith. But instead Paul wrote "No! But by a law of faith." The combination of law with faith (νόμος with πίστις) is awkward. The term "law" has been associated with "works" and not with "faith" in Paul's writings. So the prior language of the Apostles leads the reader to expect that faith should stand in opposition to both works and law (τῶν ἔργων and νόμος). Paul has said that by works of law no flesh shall be justified. Through law is the knowledge of sin. And apart from law has been revealed a righteousness of God. This righteousness of God that has been manifest apart from law is instead received through faith (διὰ πίστεως). The term law (νόμος) had been consistently linked with works (ἔργων) and distinguished from faith (πίστις). This prior usage of terms makes the phrase "through a law of faith" (διὰ νόμου πίστεως) seem to be an oxymoron. Νόμος and πίστις are opposites as much as πίστις and ἔργων are opposites. Faith is opposed to law as much as it is opposed to works.

Furthermore, the reader has already encountered a phrase that is the opposite of "law of works." It is "the righteousness of God through faith" (δικαιοσύνη δὲ θεοῦ διὰ πίστεως) in verse 22. For unbelieving Israel, justification was through a "law of works." It inescapably produces boasting before God. But Paul's gospel proclaimed justification apart from law. For, apart from law, a righteousness of God has been revealed. This righteousness of God is through faith in Jesus Christ. So we would expect Paul to conclude with something like this: "Where is boasting? It is excluded. Through what law? A law of works? No! (Of course not, for a law of works produces boasting.) But

⁸⁴ It is also possible that the text could be punctuated as διὰ ποίου; νόμου τῶν ἔργων; οὐχί, ἀλλὰ διὰ νόμου πίστεως, producing the translation "Through what? A law of works? No! But through a law of faith?"

⁸⁵ 1:17, 3:22, 25, 26.

boasting is excluded by a righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ that is manifest apart from law."

This is Paul's meaning. But he chooses to convey it by the oxymoronic "law of faith." Justification is by "the righteousness of God through faith" and this is a "law of faith." The two phrases refer to the same reality. Thus Paul can say that boasting is excluded by a "law of faith." Therefore, the Law and the Prophets bore witness to "a righteousness of God by faith," they bore witness to a "law of faith." The phrase, "law of faith" is another way of describing the righteousness of God that is by faith. It is another way of describing the gospel of free justification for sinners.

By phrases such as "works of law," "apart from law," and "law of works", Paul has left the impression that the law of Moses is a "law of works", and it requires from us "works of law" in order to be justified before God. And since "works of law" produce boasting, and a "law of works" does not exclude boasting, it would appear that the law itself leads to boasting. The Jews certainly boasted in the law.

Paul rejects works of law and a law of works. Justification is by faith, not by works of law. Justification is by a righteousness that is apart from law. The implication could be taken from this line of reasoning that Paul rejected the law per se. From the perspective of contemporary Judaism, where the law was a law of works, and righteousness was by works of that law, Paul's rejection of "works of law" was also a rejection of the law. This accusation was hurled by the Jews at Paul. "This is the man who teaches all men everywhere against our people and our law and this place."⁸⁶ It was surely echoed by the Judaizers who insisted on the circumcision of Gentile believers. So Paul himself brings up the accusation. "Therefore, do we nullify law through faith?"⁸⁷

If the law is a "law of works," as the Jews presumed, then to establish justification by faith was surely to annul the law. If the law given at Mt. Sinai was, as to its intended nature, a "law of works," justification by faith sets aside the law and its method of justification by works. But Paul denies this assertion unequivocally. "May it never be!" In fact, Paul believes that the righteousness of God by faith establishes the law. He writes *ἀλλὰ νόμον ἱσθάνομεν*. The verb *ἵστημι* means "to stand" literally, and, when used metaphorically, "to establish, to put into effect." If by the message of justification by faith we "establish" law, then the law given at Mt Sinai cannot have been founded on the opposite principle of "works." It could not have been a "law of works" as contemporary Israel presumed it was.

On reflection, we realize that Paul has prepared us for this conclusion that law is consistent with faith. He has already told his readers that the law and the prophets bore witness to the righteousness of God that is by faith. Further, the law forbade boasting. Moses told Israel, "do not say in your hearts it is by my righteousness." Paul has earlier stated that the purpose of the law was to shut every mouth. That is to say, the law was to exclude boasting. The law excluded boasting because through the law was the knowledge of sin. The law showed men that they were sinners and so it shut their mouths from boasting before God. But the law also excluded boasting because it bore witness to the

⁸⁶ Acts 21:28.

⁸⁷ Romans 3:30 (author).

righteousness of faith. If the law given at Mt. Sinai was a "law of works," it would not have excluded boasting, and it would not have led to justification by faith. Therefore, the law given at Sinai could not have been intended by God as a law of works. Rather, as we have already shown, it proclaimed the promise, set forth the mercy of God, showed that atonement was by sacrifice, and summoned Israel to cleave to Yahweh as their life. In other words, the law was, as to its proper nature, a law of faith.

When Paul established that justification was by faith through the atonement and redemption of Jesus Christ, that it therefore excluded boasting, he established the law in its proper meaning and purpose. In other words, as to its nature the covenant established at Mt. Sinai was not a "law of works," but instead was a "law of faith" because it taught faith and urged faith. Therefore, to do the law in its proper nature was to rely only on God and his promise, to love Yahweh who first loved us, to cling to him, and to reject the boast that it was because of "your righteousness." It was to agree with Moses that "you are a stiff necked people." Such a confession is the knowledge of sin. Therefore, we can conclude that the law was as to its intended nature a "law of faith." Because that was its nature, when Paul excluded the corruption of the law as a "law of works," the effect was to "establish the law" in its proper nature and function. The gospel of justification by faith was a law of faith and the Law of Moses taught justification by faith. Therefore the Law of Moses was a law of faith. Paul used the awkward phrase "law of faith" to make this very point that "faith" does not annul the law, but establishes the law in its proper nature.

Those Who Do the Law Will Be Justified

When we grasp that the Law of Moses was law of faith, the awkwardness of another passage in Romans is removed. Paul wrote that it is not those who hear the law, but those who do it, who will be justified. "For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who obey the law (οἱ ποιηταὶ νόμου) who will be declared righteous."⁸⁸ This verse is commonly understood to be a hypothetical statement. No one actually succeeds in obeying the law (except Jesus). But if anyone should do the law, such a person would be justified. The presumption of this interpretation is that the law is a "law of works." However, Paul does not use the subjunctive mood. He uses the indicative. There is no introductory "if." Rather, Paul has in mind a contrast between those who hear, but do not do the law, over against those who hear and do it. This is very much the same as Jesus' parable in the Sermon on the Mount about the wise and foolish house builders. "Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice (ποιεῖ αὐτούς) is like a wise man who built his house on the rock."⁸⁹ These two verses sound very different in the English ear as rendered by the New International Version. But the same verb is used. How differently Romans 2:13 would sound if we used the English phraseology of Matthew 7:24. "For it is not those who hear the law who are righteous in God's sight, but it is those who put into practice the law who will be declared righteous." The wise builder "puts into practice" the words of Jesus. This is not "works of law," but faith producing action. So too, in Romans 2:13, the one who will be justified is he who puts the law into practice. David certainly put the law into practice!

⁸⁸ Romans 2:13 (NIV).

⁸⁹ Matthew 7:24 (NIV).

But this was not "works of law," but faith producing action. Putting the law into practice seems to be a positive matter. Are we reading too much into this language? No, because earlier in this passage Paul had written:

God "will give to each person according to what he has done." To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger. There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile; but glory, honor and peace for everyone who does good: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.⁹⁰

Phrases like "persistence in doing good" and "everyone who does good" do not fit with Paul's notion of "works of law" as boasting and trusting in the flesh. These phrases could be applied to believers, either in the old covenant or in the new. There are those who by faith are persistent in doing good, and who put into practice the law in its proper sense. Again, there is no suggestion in the grammar that these expressions are hypothetical statements. That this is the correct interpretation is confirmed by Paul's definition of a Jew in this same passage.

Circumcision has value if you observe the law, but if you break the law, you have become as though you had not been circumcised. If those who are not circumcised keep the law's requirements, will they not be regarded as though they were circumcised? The one who is not circumcised physically and yet obeys the law will condemn you who, even though you have the written code and circumcision, are a lawbreaker. A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God.⁹¹

Those who are circumcised in heart by the Spirit do practice the law and are persistent in doing good. Such an interpretation fits what was said in the Old Testament Scriptures. Moses prophesied, "The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live."⁹² Similarly, God said through Ezekiel, "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws."⁹³ In light of such passages, of Paul's definition of the true Jew as one circumcised in heart, and the consistent use of the indicative, that in Romans 2, Paul is referring to true believers who by faith put into practice the law, persevere in doing good, and so by their works are shown to be God's redeemed people. Such elect ones trusted the promise of God, cleaved to God, relied on his favor and mercy, loved God, and so kept his commandments as a pattern of life (not perfectly, but really and substantially). And

⁹⁰ Romans 2:6-10 (NIV).

⁹¹ Romans 2:25-29 (NIV).

⁹² Deuteronomy 30:6 (NIV).

⁹³ Ezekiel 36:26-27 (NIV).

some who were doers of the law were not Jews, and were not circumcised. We need look no further than Moses' family to see an example in Jethro, Moses' father in law.

Thus for Paul the law can have either a very negative sense or a very positive sense. If one does the law as to its intended nature, as a law of faith, then one seeks justification by faith and perseveres in doing good. Similarly, new covenant believers seek justification by faith and persevere in doing good. Or one can regard the law as a law of works, and boast in one's works before God. But to do so is to refuse to be taught by the law whose twofold message is that men are sinners (through the law is the knowledge of sin), and that forgiveness is only by the mercy of God through the appointed sacrifice, that is, through the righteousness of God that is by faith.

In other words, the old covenant law can be either a law kept by faith with humility, contrition, and gratitude or it can be a law of works, boasting and self-exaltation. The first proceeds from the Spirit of God. The second arises from the flesh. The first finds in the law, the promise. The second turns the promise into law. The law given at Mount Sinai, the old covenant, could be either a law of faith (its intended nature), or a law of works (if one trusted in one's own righteousness and boasted before God). As a law of works, the law is denuded of the promise that preceded it, and is, thereby, converted into a regime of boasting. As such, "the law is not of faith, but the man who does them shall live by them." When Paul reflects on the attitude of trusting in one's own works of law for acceptance with God, the law is not of faith.⁹⁴ But when Paul considers the righteousness of God through the redemption of Christ Jesus, then the law is not annulled, but established. It is now a "law of faith" because the believer, resting on the mercy of God and receiving the gift of righteousness in gratitude, gladly obeys his Savior-God. According to Jesus the weightier matters of the law are mercy and faith. For David the law was most certainly "of faith." For the believer in Jesus the law is of faith. It is received by faith, and kept by faith. For when we believe the promise, the mercy, and the compassion of God, the law is wonderful. It restores the soul for it shows us how to live in way that pleases our heavenly Father. It is a delight. It makes us wise. It is more to be desired than gold. The statement, "the man who does these things shall live by them," becomes a promise to be believed in which God graciously bestows his blessing on our imperfect obedience. Paul expressed it to the children of the covenant. "Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 'Honor your father and mother'- which is the first commandment with a promise- 'that it may go well with you and that you may enjoy long life on the earth.'"⁹⁵

Paul says to believing children that, if they obey the law which says to honor their parents, they will live long by such obedience. In other words, "the man who does these thing shall live by them." Yet he does not call this "works" but "promise." It is to be received by faith, and kept by faith. So then, Paul calls a commandment also a promise. For Paul, when writing to believers, the fifth command was a law of faith and not a law

⁹⁴ If we take Paul's statement that the law is not of faith as describing the essential nature of the law, then Paul flatly contradicts Jesus who taught that the weightier matters of the law included faith. Both the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 23:23, and the analysis of Paul's thought lead to the conclusion that "the law is not of faith" describes the law as misunderstood by contemporary Judaism, not the law as intended by God.

⁹⁵ Ephesians 6:1-3 (NIV).

of works. It was a promise to be received and obeyed in faith, and not a confidence in the flesh and a boasting before God.

So then, when we believe in God as merciful, kind, and forgiving, when we approach him with humility and faith, that is to say, when we believe in the Lord Jesus as God's mercy to us, then the law is established in its true nature as a rule of life for believers who continually trust in the promise of God. In other words, the law was an administration of the covenant of grace prior to coming of Christ. It was a schoolmaster to lead us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. It so served for David, who ahead of time believed and was justified by faith, and it does so for Paul. But for Saul and all those who are confident in themselves that they are righteous, the law is a law of works that only condemns for "cursed is everyone who does not do all that is written."

Sarah and Hagar

Moses did not teach justification by works but by faith. But when Israel presumed on their own righteousness and boasted before God, the meaning of the law was utterly distorted. In such a setting, Paul could rightly say, "Moses writes concerning the righteousness that comes from the law, that 'the person who does these things will live by them.'"⁹⁶ Notice the use of present tense (γράφει). It is not "Moses wrote" (what was true back then) but rather "Moses writes" (what is now true because Israel does not submit to the righteousness of God). Apparently, Leviticus 18:5 was a favorite of the Pharisees. Paul's technique is to hurl it back at them. In Christian circles, the Judaizers who advocated the circumcision of the gentiles, represented the same mindset. About this Paul writes at some length.

Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. His son by the slave woman was born in the ordinary way; but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a promise. These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother. For it is written: "Be glad, O barren woman, who bears no children; break forth and cry aloud, you who have no labor pains; because more are the children of the desolate woman than of her who has a husband." Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. At that time the son born in the ordinary way persecuted the son born by the power of the Spirit. It is the same now. But what does the Scripture say? "Get rid of the slave woman and her son, for the slave woman's son will never share in the inheritance with the free woman's son." Therefore, brothers, we are not children of the slave woman, but of the free woman. It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let

⁹⁶ Romans 10:5 (NRS).

yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. Mark my words! I, Paul, tell you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no value to you at all. Again I declare to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obligated to obey the whole law. You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from grace. But by faith we eagerly await through the Spirit the righteousness for which we hope.⁹⁷

The Judaizers wanted the Galatians to be circumcised and so become Jews in the same sense that they were Jews. Paul desired to dissuade them of this course of action by pointing out the dire consequences of submitting to circumcision. According to Paul, to be circumcised was (1) "to be burdened again by a yoke of slavery;" (2) for "Christ to be of no value to you at all;" (3) to be "obligated to obey the whole law;" and (4) to "have been alienated from Christ, to have fallen from grace." Why did Paul see circumcision in such a negative way? Paul himself was circumcised on the eighth day. He had Timothy circumcised for the sake of the gospel ministry. What would be so wrong with being circumcised? Indeed, in Paul's own theology, circumcision was for Abraham "a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith while he was still uncircumcised."⁹⁸ The Galatians had believed while in uncircumcision just like Abraham. Why would their receiving of circumcision not be a seal of righteousness by faith, when for Abraham it was such? How could the circumcision of Timothy be for the sake of the gospel, and the circumcision of the Galatians be the repudiation of the gospel?

It cannot be that the giving of the law at Mt. Sinai converted circumcision from a seal of righteousness by faith into an obligation of works righteousness. If that were the case, then the circumcision of Timothy would also have been a repudiation of the gospel. So too would have been the circumcision of David. But it was not. The meaning of circumcision was not changed by the giving of the law. As indicated earlier, Moses repudiated the notion that the Israelites received the land because of their righteousness. Moses insisted on the promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as the basis for their inheritance. We have already shown that the law in a variety of ways bore witness to the righteousness that is by faith. It taught the sinfulness of man and the necessity of atonement. It proclaimed the mercy and compassion of God. Furthermore, circumcision in the flesh pointed to true circumcision of the heart. This circumcision of the heart is the very circumcision that was accomplished by Christ in his death. "In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead."⁹⁹ Circumcision was a sign of grace, not of works. The sign was accomplished in reality at the cross.

Nor could it be a matter of the timing of circumcision. For both Timothy and the Galatians were first believers, and only later were they circumcised (or to be circumcised for the Galatians). In this order they were like Abraham, who first believed, and then

⁹⁷ Galatians 4:21-5:5 (NIV).

⁹⁸ Romans 4:11 (NIV).

⁹⁹ Colossians 2:11-12 (NIV).

received circumcision. Why would circumcision not be a sign of the righteousness that is by faith? Nor could it be the truth that what was before signified in circumcision was now conveyed by baptism in the name of Jesus. Paul does not argue that to be circumcised is to repudiate baptism. If that were the point, then Timothy's circumcision would also be a repudiation of his baptism. But just like the Galatians, he first believed, was baptized and only later was circumcised.

The answer to Paul's apparently differing attitudes toward circumcision is not in the nature of the old covenant or in the nature of circumcision. Rather it is in the intention of those urging circumcision and also in the intention of those submitting to it. Paul perceives that the Galatians "want to be under the law," and "are trying to be justified by law." In other words, the Galatians want to become Jews, just like the Judaizers and the present inhabitants of Jerusalem. For Paul, justification by law and justification by faith in Christ are mutually exclusive. If someone seeks justification by law (as contemporary Israel did), such a person can find no benefit in Christ. Just as pharisaical Judaism was alienated from Christ, so too would the Galatians be, if they submitted to circumcision as understood in contemporary Judaism. For Paul himself, circumcision had been a trusting in the flesh and a seeking to be justified by law (Phil. 3:3ff). Thus, in the circumstance of the Galatians, circumcision would not be a seal of the righteousness that is by faith, but rather an immersion of oneself in the enslaving regime of works righteousness. It would be trying to be like Paul was when he was Saul. It would be to try to finish by the flesh (Gal 3:3) and so to embrace the very religion that Paul counts as rubbish that he might gain Christ (Phil 3:8).

In the New International Version rendering of Galatians 5:4, Paul accuses the Galatians of "trying to be justified by law." This rendering is a bit of periphrastic license on the part of the New International Version. Paul does not use the subjunctive mood or a helping verb like the English "trying" implies. Rather he wrote, "οἵτινες ἐν νόμῳ δικαιοῦσθε." The New International Version has taken the present tense as implying an intention not yet realized. But the text could also be rendered as a simple present. The King James Version reads, "whosoever of you are justified by the law." Pharisees believed themselves to be righteous. Paul as a Pharisee said that regarding the righteousness that is by law, he was blameless. So too, the Galatians were being enticed to regard themselves as justified by law when they submitted to circumcision.

With such an attitude, circumcision could not be for them a seal of righteousness by faith, but rather a boasting in the flesh and in one's works of law. The circumcision demanded of them was the circumcision of pharisaical Judaism, not the circumcision of Abraham. To submit to such a circumcision as was urged upon the Galatians was to renounce the promise, rather than to embrace the promise. To make this clear, Paul uses the allegory of two women, Sarah and Hagar. These two women represent two covenants and two cities. Their sons, Isaac and Ishmael, represent two distinct peoples. Hagar was a maid servant, and Abraham had a son by her according to the flesh. But God rejected this effort of the flesh to fulfill his promise to Abraham. Instead God gave Abraham a son, Isaac, through the dead womb of Sarah. God instructed Abraham to send away Ishmael, because the promise was given to Isaac.

In this allegory, Hagar is identified as present day Jerusalem (τῇ νῦν Ἱερουσαλήμ). This city and her children are in bondage. In contrast, Sarah is identified

with the Jerusalem that is above. This Jerusalem above is the mother of believers, whether Jew or Gentile. Her children are children of promise and are free. As a matter of history and paternity, present day Jerusalem was descended from Sarah, not Hagar. But present day Jerusalem was religiously from Hagar because the literal descendents of Sarah did not believe the promise, did not submit to the righteousness of God by faith, and stumbled over the cornerstone, Jesus. They trusted in the flesh. In contrast, those who believed the gospel which Paul preached were the children of promise, the descendants of Isaac, even if they were gentiles by birth. "If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."¹⁰⁰ The Galatians would be foolish to give up the freedom and inheritance of the free woman to become slaves with the servant woman.

Paul identifies Hagar and Sarah, not only with two cities, but also with two covenants. "One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar." The other covenant is by implication the promise to Abraham. At this point, a Dispensationalist might well say that here is a clear statement that the covenant at Mt. Sinai was a covenant based on works of law. When Israel accepted the covenant, they gave up the promise and enslaved themselves to the law. They ceased to be children of Sarah and became children of Hagar, so to speak. But notice that Paul is not talking about the past but about the present. It is present day Jerusalem that is Hagar. The Jerusalem of David and Solomon's days was founded on the promise. God kept his promise to the seed of Abraham. They inherited the whole land under faithful David. Yahweh was their God, and his house was built in Jerusalem. In that house he dwelt. But present day Jerusalem was not "of faith" like David was "of faith." The Jews in Paul's day did not submit to the righteousness of God like David did. They did not count themselves as sinners before God, and they did not rely only on the mercy of God as David did. (Psalm 51)

For present day Jerusalem, the covenant at Mt. Sinai was a basis for boasting in their superiority over the gentiles. Their unbelief had converted the law into the antithesis of the promise. They had become Hagar and Ishmael. They had ceased to be Sarah and Isaac. Israel entered the land because of God's promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. But now their literal descendants had become "religiously" like Hagar and Ishmael. Once more we see that Paul speaks of the old covenant, not in terms of its own nature, but in terms of its corruption in contemporary Judaism. For without a doubt, the covenant at Mt. Sinai was made with the seed of Isaac, and that seed was expressly told that the basis of their inheritance of the land was the oath given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. At the exodus, the law did not annul the promise. At the exodus, the people were delivered from bondage into freedom. But in present day Jerusalem, boasting in the flesh and in the law had replaced faith in the promise. Paul writes to his contemporaries, "if you call yourself a Jew; if you rely on the law and brag about your relationship to God."¹⁰¹ His rhetorical question indicates that the his countryman were relying on the law. Present day Jerusalem had become Hagar and her children were enslaved (both outwardly by the Romans and inwardly by sin). But the Jerusalem that is above is free (for Christ rules at the Father's side, and in him we are forgiven and given the Spirit) and she is our mother.

¹⁰⁰ Galatians 3:29 (NIV).

¹⁰¹ Romans 2:17 (NIV).

To submit to circumcision was for the Galatians to become like present day Jerusalem, relying on the flesh and boasting of one's works before God. So we see in this passage that Paul speaks both of circumcision and of the covenant at Mt. Sinai in terms of their corrupted meaning that characterized Pharisaical Judaism, that is, present day Jerusalem. Circumcision was, in the intention of God, a seal of righteousness by faith. So too, the covenant at Mt. Sinai did not annul the promise. Moses rejected justification by works of law. The old covenant was a "covenant and mercy. This was true of David or Isaiah or Daniel. They all had Sarah as mother. All of them received circumcision and all were justified by faith. For them as well as for Abraham, circumcision was not "trying to be justified by law" but was a "seal of the righteousness that is by faith."

In contrast, circumcision was not being urged on the gentile Galatians as a seal of righteousness by faith. Rather, it was being asserted that they had to submit to circumcision to be saved. They had to become Jews. The circumcision demanded of them was the circumcision of pharisaical Judaism, a boasting in the flesh and in one's works of law. But from Paul's perspective, the Jews who boasted in the law were not true Jews. They were not circumcised in the heart. And so in Galatians 4 and 5, Paul says that contemporary Jews are not descendants of Isaac but of Ishmael. Their mother is not Sarah but Hagar. Like in the episode with Hagar, it is by human means (the flesh) and not by the promise. God made the covenant at Mt. Sinai with the seed of Isaac. Yet Paul says that "One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children." The unbelief of contemporary Judaism had converted circumcision into bondage and law into boasting. The Galatians were to have nothing to do with this.

Paul says that, for the Galatians to be circumcised, is to obligate themselves to do the whole law (ὅλον τὸν νόμον ποιῆσαι). Such submission to circumcision as was urged upon the Galatians was a grave mistake. It was nothing less than to be alienated from Christ. To submit to circumcision in such a context of meaning was to obligate oneself to keep the whole law as a means of justification before God. It meant the renunciation of the promise. But to do so was to utterly break the true meaning of the law and prove oneself a sinner. Yet this does not mean that Paul rejected the law and renounced its instruction. What the law really taught was justification by faith. The law bore witness to the righteousness of God and brought to men the knowledge of sins, so that they would seek God's gift of righteousness in Christ.

Those who by faith were justified, were also freed from the enslaving power of sin and the flesh. By the Spirit they were enabled to bear fruit for God. For the fruit of the Spirit is love... And such love was the true fulfillment of all the law. Faith works itself by love and love is the essence of the law's demand. "For in Jesus Christ neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision; but faith which worketh by love... For all the law is fulfilled (ὁ γὰρ πᾶς νόμος ἐν ἐνὶ λόγῳ πεπλήρωται) in one word, even in this; Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself."¹⁰² Only the believer can fulfill (πληρῶ) the law. In self-boasting there can be no fulfillment of the law. Love comes from a heart of faith that receives and relies on the mercy of God, as has already been

¹⁰² Galatians 5:6,14 (KJV).

shown. When one seeks to be justified by the law, one obligates himself to the whole law. But all fall short. All sin. So, just as certainly, when one seeks justification by the law, one brings himself under a curse, for cursed is everyone who does not do all that is written in the law.¹⁰³ Moreover, in seeking to be justified by works of law, one boasts before God, misses the mercy of God, and so finds himself all the more enslaved to sin. He makes himself ignorant of that very righteousness of God that alone can fill his heart with love for God, and so lead to the fulfillment of the law. For the believer the law is a law of faith, rooted in the promise, and, as James says, the law a royal law of freedom.¹⁰⁴ But for the religious unbeliever, the law is a law of works that only enslaves.

The key to Paul's thought on this matter is Romans 3:27. "Then where is the boast? It is excluded. Through what law? Of works? No! But through a law of faith." The old covenant, the ten words spoken by God at Mt. Sinai, can be for us either a law of works or a law of faith. God gave them as a law of faith. Unbelieving Israel has distorted them into a law of works, a boasting before God and men. Where there is boasting in oneself, there can be no saving faith. Where there is saving faith, there is no boasting in oneself and in one's works of law. Similarly, the sign of the covenant, circumcision, can be a seal of the righteousness by faith or a seeking to be justified by law. The law can be bondage or the law can be freedom.

The Word of Faith Moses Preached

This understanding of the old covenant as either a law of faith or a law of works will allow us to elucidate several difficult passages in Paul. First of all, this explains how Paul can find both works of law and justification by faith in Moses. So with this understanding of the law in mind, we return to Romans and the passage where Paul finds both principles of faith and of works in Moses. We have already shown that "the man who does these things shall live by them" meant one thing as given by Moses, and another as corrupted by the unbelief of Israel. The original meaning is applied by Paul to believers in the new covenant. But how is it that Paul can find the gospel in the statement about the law that "the word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart"?

The context of Paul's citation of Leviticus 18:5 in Romans 10:5 is structured by a contrast between the Gentiles and Israel. Paul writes: "What then shall we say? That the Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, have obtained it, a righteousness that is by faith; but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it."¹⁰⁵ The meaning as expressed by the New International Version is simple and straightforward. But the original is more demanding. Τί οὖν ἐροῦμεν; ὅτι ἔθνη τὰ μὴ διώκοντα δικαιοσύνην κατέλαβεν δικαιοσύνην, δικαιοσύνην δὲ τὴν ἐκ πίστεως,³¹ Ἰσραὴλ δὲ διώκων νόμον δικαιοσύνης εἰς νόμον οὐκ ἔφθασεν. The New International Version renders the last phrase of the sentence "but Israel, who pursued a law of righteousness, has not attained it." The obvious antecedent of "it" is "righteousness." Israel pursued a law of

¹⁰³ Galatians 3:10. What the Law required was, not merely an outward performance of the sacrifices, but a contrite and broken heart (Psalm 51). When a person sought to be justified by his works of law, he excluded the possibility of a contrite and broken heart. Thus he failed to continue in all that the Law required, and so was under a curse.

¹⁰⁴ James 2:8, 12.

¹⁰⁵ Romans 9:30-31 (NIV).

righteousness but has not attained righteousness. A cursory look at the original shows that an entire phrase is not represented in the New International Version. It is the prepositional phrase εἰς νόμον that has been left out of the New International Version. Let us tentatively render it "unto law." What Paul wrote was "Israel pursuing a law of righteousness unto law has not attained." Paul often uses the preposition εἰς with a noun to express purpose; εἰς plus the noun means "for the purpose of." We find this construction twice in the immediate context. In 10:3 Paul says "Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes."¹⁰⁶ The phrase translated as "so that there may be righteousness" is simply εἰς δικαιοσύνην (unto righteousness). In verse 10 Paul says, "For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved."¹⁰⁷ The phrases "and are justified" and "and are saved" are the same construction of εἰς (unto) with the nouns δικαιοσύνην (righteousness) and σωτηρίαν (salvation). The New International Version has not mistranslated either 10:4 or 10:11. A wooden translation of these three verses demonstrates the parallel structures which are obvious in Greek.

9:31 "Israel pursuing a law of righteousness unto law has not attained."

10:4 "For Christ is end of law unto righteousness to all who believe."

10:10 "For by heart one believes unto righteousness, by mouth one confesses unto salvation."

In 10:4 and 10:10, εἰς with noun expresses purpose. Christ is the end of law for the purpose of righteousness. By the heart, one believes for the purpose of righteousness. With the mouth, one confesses for the purpose of salvation. So too in 9:31, εἰς with a noun expresses purpose. Hence the meaning is that Israel pursuing a law of righteousness for the purpose of law has not attained to righteousness. Why? Paul says, ὅτι οὐκ ἐκ πίστεως ἀλλ' ὡς ἐξ ἔργων. Israel pursued righteousness not "out of faith," but "as out of works." They misinterpreted the law. They misconstrued it to be a "law of righteousness" as to its purpose. But it was really a law of faith. The law was not given for men to boast before God that they were righteous. It was given to show men their sin, the necessity of sacrifice, and the merciful character of God who forgives sin, iniquity and rebellion. So, although the law bore witness to the righteousness of God, the Israelites through unbelief were ignorant of that righteousness and did not submit to it. They misinterpreted the law's purpose and so missed the law's goal, the righteousness of God obtained by faith. But now, Paul says, Christ is the end (completion) of the law for the purpose of righteousness to all who believe. For believers in Jesus the law's purpose is attained. Believers, rejecting self-righteousness and trusting God for the gift of righteousness, bring the law to its completion. The law bore witness to the righteousness of God, and it bore witness to the sinfulness of mankind. So when Jew and Gentile come to faith in Christ, the law's purpose is realized. It has as a schoolmaster to lead us to Christ. Furthermore, believers in Christ have the love of God poured out in our heart. Believers, from a heart of gratitude and love for God, can now begin to fulfill the law as moral duty. Thus love, engendered in the heart of the believer, leads to the fulfillment of the law as God's rule for live. Thus

¹⁰⁶ Romans 10:4 (NIV).

¹⁰⁷ Romans 10:10 (NIV).

in Christ, the goals of the law, which are faith and love, are attained. The Law of Moses as to human salvation is a law of faith, and as to human behavior, a law of love.

These goals of the law, faith and love, were the original meaning of the law before it was perverted into a "law of righteousness as the purpose of law". It is for this reason that Paul can equate the statement about the law that it is near you, in your heart and in your mouth with the word of faith he was preaching. Moses preached a word of faith to Israel. Paul preached a word of faith to Jew and Gentile. The Law summoned men to faith in Yahweh as savior, and to a new life of love toward God and neighbor. In the same way, Paul's gospel summoned men to faith in Yahweh incarnate, and to love for God and neighbor. Israel was not given an impossible task such as go up to heaven to bring down the law. It was near to them such that they could cleave to Yahweh as their life, and love him. So also, believers do not need to go up to heaven to bring down Christ, who is the completion and fulfillment of the law. Rather, Christ is proclaimed to all, that all might believe.

What, then, was this word of faith that Moses preached? As we have repeatedly shown, it was a rejection of the righteousness by works of law. But positively it was an assertion of the gospel beforehand. First, it was such an assertion of the gospel because in the law the promise to Abraham was reasserted and reaffirmed. Second, it was an assertion of the gospel for through the types and symbols of the ceremonial law, the promise of Christ's future redemption was shown forth. Third, in these types and symbols, and by direct assertion, the mercy and compassion of God was proclaimed. These parallels between the Law of Moses and the Gospel are general considerations. Within the passage quoted by Paul, a more immediate reason can be seen for the law being considered a word of faith.

In the beginning of Deuteronomy 30 Moses predicted that Israel will be scattered among the nations and then will return to the land. The blessing and the curses of the law will have been experienced. Then God will circumcise their hearts. "The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live."¹⁰⁸ Living after Christ's resurrection, we know that indeed God did circumcise the hearts of his elect ones. He accomplished this through the death and resurrection of Christ. He applies this to the elect individually by the regeneration of the Spirit. So here in Deuteronomy 30 the gospel is proclaimed ahead of time. God will circumcise the hearts of his people. This is a word of faith about the mercy of God who will deliver his people from the bondage of sin and unbelief. He will do inwardly and truly what was signified and sealed outward in circumcision. And he did this by his son, Jesus Christ our Lord. "In him you were also circumcised, in the putting off of the sinful nature, not with a circumcision done by the hands of men but with the circumcision done by Christ, having been buried with him in baptism and raised with him through your faith in the power of God, who raised him from the dead."¹⁰⁹

The effect of this circumcision, now accomplished in Christ, is "that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live." Love for God is the

¹⁰⁸ Deuteronomy 30:6 (NIV).

¹⁰⁹ Colossians 2:11-12 (NIV).

outworking of a saving faith which receives the mercy and gift of God. If Israel is to truly love God, it can only be because God has first loved them, and they, by faith, have received that love. If God has circumcised the hearts of his people, and they as a result love him, then they must be true believers, for love is the outworking of faith. They must have submitted to the righteousness of God. They must have been justified by the promise and through faith. So again, it is evident that the word of Moses to Israel was the gospel ahead of time. It was a word of faith.

Moses says that God will put the curses of the law on the enemies of believing Israel. "The LORD your God will put all these curses on your enemies who hate and persecute you. Consider what happened to unbelieving Israel which persecuted believers in Christ, believers whom Paul called "the Israel of God."¹¹⁰ But about believing Israel, Moses said, "You will again obey the LORD and follow all his commands I am giving you today."¹¹¹ Unfortunately the New International Version significantly misconstrues this verse. The Hebrew is better translated "and thou shalt turn back and hear the voice of Yahweh." The LXX has καὶ σὺ ἐπιστραφήσῃ καὶ εἰσακούσῃ τῆς φωνῆς κυρίου τοῦ θεοῦ σου. Yahweh is speaking. His words are to be believed. Again we encounter the notion of a word of faith. The LXX uses not "obey" but "listen to, heed". According to Deuteronomy 3,0 Israel will listen to the voice of God. At Mount Sinai, the Israelites were afraid to listen to God's voice. They asked God to not speak to them. But in the future, believing Israel would listen to the voice of Yahweh. "For in these last days God has spoken to us by his Son." God has himself taken flesh, lived among his people, and spoken to them a word of faith and life. This was the message Paul was proclaiming as an apostle. Both in the Old and New Testaments, ἐπιστρέφω is used to describe men turning from unbelief to the Lord. To turn and hear the voice of the Lord your God describes faith. Israel will have true faith. The Israelites will turn and hear the Lord, and having heard his word, they will gladly do his commandments. For when we turn and hear the word of the Lord Jesus, does not faith express itself through love, and is not love the fulfillment of the law?

God will bless his people in response to their hearing his word, keeping his commandments, and turning with their whole heart to him (vv. 9-10). Again, in verse 10, the LXX uses εἰσακούω and ἐπιστρέφω. Can one conceive of turning with his whole heart to God and at the same time disbelieving his promise and ignoring his mercy? To turn "to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul" is a description of saving faith. Such saving faith is never alone, but always expresses itself by love, and so leads to the fulfillment of the commandments.

Verses 11 through 14 are the verses cited by Paul about not going up to heaven or into the abyss because the word is near you, in your heart and in your mouth. Paul can apply this to the gospel he preached for the word through Moses promised that very gospel in which, by the death of Jesus, we are truly circumcised. Through this gospel, we turn to the Lord, are justified by faith in him, love him for he first loved us, and gladly strive to do what he commands.

¹¹⁰ Deuteronomy 30:7 (NIV).

¹¹¹ Deuteronomy 30:8 (NIV).

In verse 15 Moses says that he sets before Israel life, death, blessing and curses. "See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction."¹¹² So too the gospel Paul preached was a savor of life unto some and of death unto others. Next Moses commands the Israelites to love Yahweh (vs. 16). We have already shown that the root of love is faith and that the call to love God necessarily involves believing in him and his promise to us. Again, Moses is proclaiming a word of faith. But on the contrary (vs 17-18), if Israel turns away to other gods (which means they have not put their trust fully in Yahweh to save, protect and deliver them), then they will be destroyed. Again Moses sets before Israel life and death and exhorts them to choose life (19). He says "Now choose life..." But what does it mean to choose life? How does one choose life? Moses answers, saying "that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob."¹¹³

Notice that the very last words of Deuteronomy 30 are the promise God swore to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The law did not annul the promise. Israel was to choose life by loving Yahweh. This necessarily implies faith. So does the next clause "listen to his voice." But in this last verse, faith is not merely implied, but clearly described. Israel is to "hold fast to him." The Hebrew verb used is the same as in Genesis 2:14 where it says that a man will cleave to his wife. Moses, repeatedly in Deuteronomy, exhorts the people to "hold fast to" Yahweh.¹¹⁴ The LXX translates the Hebrew verb with a variety of Greek verbs. In our text the verb "ἔχω" is used which means "to have" or "to hold." We hold fast to Yahweh by believing his promise, by trusting his word to us, and by depending and relying on him. What else is faith but holding fast to Yahweh and his promise to us? Again, Moses' word is a word of faith, that is, a summons to believe and trust Yahweh.

Israel was called to hold fast to Yahweh. Why? What would be the ground of such faith? On what message would it rest? "For the Lord is your life." Yahweh was life for his people. Here is the gospel in a sentence. Yahweh is life for Israel. How is Yahweh life? In the old covenant, this was not yet fully manifest. But in the new covenant, it has been made manifest. The Gospel tells us that Yahweh the Son took our flesh, bore our sins, carried our sickness, and died for us. On the third day he arose from the dead. Jesus is the resurrection and the life. We who believe have been raised up with him through faith. Yahweh, that is Jesus, is our life. Life is not that which we earn like a wage for our works of law. Life is Jesus crucified and risen for us. To him we need to hold fast. To him we need to cleave and cling. Deuteronomy 30 ends with a reaffirmation of the promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. The law did not annul the promise. Indeed, it reaffirmed the promise, and summoned Israel to faith in Yahweh and his promise.

Paul could cite the words of Moses' that the word is near you in your heart and in your mouth and identify it with "the word of faith that we are preaching" because that law was always a word of faith. It was the gospel announced beforehand in the words "Yahweh is your life." The fulfillment of Moses' words, that Yahweh is your life, is Jesus incarnate, crucified, and risen. Yahweh is our life for he took our flesh, died our death,

¹¹² Deuteronomy 30:15 (NIV).

¹¹³ Deuteronomy 30:20 (NIV).

¹¹⁴ Deuteronomy 4:4, 10:20, 11:22, 13:5.

atoned for our sins, and now has risen from the dead. We have been joined to him in his death and so have been truly circumcised. We, though dead in sin, have been raised to life with him. All our sins have been forgiven. God has adopted us as his beloved children.

Conclusion

The law given at Mt. Sinai did not annul the promise. It was not a word of works, but a word of faith. The Law's fulfillment is in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Rightly, did the Holy Spirit repeatedly inspire believers to call the law given at Mt. Sinai "the covenant and the mercy." The law only became a law of works, a curse, and a condemnation when Israel ceased to believe the promise of God, the word of faith, the good news that Yahweh is your life. The old covenant was not in itself, on its own terms, by its own definition a law of works. It did not teach justification and inheritance by works of law. It was not a republication of the covenant of works. It was a covenant of mercy, compassion, forgiveness, promise, and life for sinners.

But the old covenant was not the fulness of the promise. It did not proclaim the finished mercy of God. It only foreshadowed, typified, and foretold the mercy of God. Therefore, in itself, it could not produce what it promised and required. At Mount Sinai, the law was only written on stone, and not on human hearts. Circumcision was a sign in the flesh, and not a reality of the heart. Whatever efficacy it had, it had in anticipation of the reality yet to come. It was necessary, therefore, that it both be fulfilled and pass away so that the reality might come. Thus, Jesus said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them."¹¹⁵

Jesus fulfilled the law by being the reality it foreshadowed and typified. Jesus fulfilled the law by accomplishing what it predicted (the Lord your God will circumcise your hearts). Jesus fulfilled the law by his perfect life of love to God and neighbor. And Jesus fulfills the law by transforming us by his love into those who more and more come to love God and our neighbor. But we can have no part in this as long as we boast in our presumed righteousness. Only when we know ourselves to be sinners (which the law shows us), renounce ourselves and our boasting in ourselves, and turn to the Lord Jesus, putting our trust fully and only in him, can we enter into this fulness of life. Only then is Yahweh our life.

So then, when Paul wrote "we are not under law but under grace," he did not mean that we not under the old covenant in its proper sense. He meant that we are not under the old covenant as a law of works. We were not under the old covenant as distorted into a law of works such that we come under the curse of the law. Rather, we are under the new covenant in which the proper meaning of the old covenant reaches its fulfillment. Abraham, Moses, Joshua, and David experienced the grace of Christ ahead of time. They knew the reality of that grace, of which the old covenant was only the shadow and the symbol. They, too, were under grace, and not law. Or, to put it differently, old covenant believers were under the law as a law of faith and so were under grace. They were not under the law as a law of works, the outcome of which is only curse. Of course,

¹¹⁵ Matthew 5:17 (NIV).

new covenant believers are no longer under the old covenant shadows and types. In Paul's language, believers are no longer under the schoolmaster. The old covenant has passed away, not by being annulled, but by being fulfilled.

So then, both in terms of the witness of the Old Testament, and witness of Paul, the old covenant was as to its proper nature a covenant of mercy, compassion, and grace. The Law's purpose was the redemption of sinners and their adoption as sons. The old covenant was not a republication of the covenant of works in which inheritance and life were conditioned on perfect, personal, and perpetual obedience. The Law was, rather, a publication of the mercy of God to sinners. The Law was not an alternative to justification by faith, but it bore witness to the righteousness of God, and served as a schoolmaster to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that the faith has come we are no longer under the schoolmaster. The old covenant's ceremonies and sacrifices have been replaced by the reality of Jesus crucified and risen. The old covenant signs have been superseded by the signs of the crucified and risen Jesus. But the Law as regards our moral duty, the Ten Commandments, has not passed away. Rather, the commandments are being fulfilled in us, who by the grace of Jesus, are enabled more and more to love God and our neighbor. The law as moral duty has not been annulled, but rather fulfilled. It is fulfilled in Christ and through faith in him. "Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law."¹¹⁶

The Ten Commandments were not given in isolation, but in the context of prior promise to Abraham, and in the context of the sacrificial law that foreshadowed and symbolized the true redemption, atonement, and reconciliation that is Jesus Christ. Within the books of Moses, the gospel was proclaimed in an anticipatory way. Yahweh was life. Israel was to hold fast to him. The Ten Commandments, abstracted from this twofold context, and considered in themselves, are law. As isolated statements of moral duty, they can only command, but cannot give life.¹¹⁷ But God did not give the Ten Commandments in the abstract, but in the context of redemption, promise, and mercy. If we take the Ten Commandments out of their proper context, we may wrongly think that God judges us to be righteous by our obedience to those commandments. When we do so, we wrongly convert the law into a law of works. We make it into a boasting before God. This is common today among nominally religious people. It is expressed in the statement "I've tried to do what is right." Such an attitude can never lead to justification because God justifies, not those who presume they are righteous, but those who confess they are sinners, and put their trust only in the redemption of Jesus Christ.

But just as the law of Moses can be distorted into a law of works, so can anything that God tells us to do. Pharisaical Judaism distorted circumcision, a sign of righteousness by faith, into a boasting in the flesh. So too, in much popular Christianity, the sacraments of baptism and the holy supper have been distorted into "works of law." For there are many people, Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant, who trust in their performance of these sacraments, rather than in the Jesus which these sacraments proclaim. "I go to church. I tithe. I attend mass. I go to confession. I have correct doctrine." Any of these statements can be "works of law" if they are asserted as the basis

¹¹⁶ Romans 3:31 (KJV).

¹¹⁷ Galatians 3:17-22.

of acceptance with God. We are not justified (forgiven and reconciled) by attending church, being baptized, having correct doctrinal notions, or attending the Lord's supper. These are all things we ought to do. God wants us to do them. But we are not to put our trust in what we do, nor even in our intellectual attainment of correct doctrinal understanding. Rather we are to put our trust, faith, and confidence in the person of the Savior, as he is offered to us in the gospel. We are to receive and rest upon Jesus.

The gospel is a covenant of mercy for sinners who will believe in the Savior. It is a law of faith showing forth human sin and divine forgiveness. The Law of Moses was that same covenant of mercy administered by promises, symbols, types and foreshadowings. It was the same law of faith proclaiming forgiveness to repentant and believing sinners. The symbols, types and foreshadowings of the old covenant have passed away. The reality has fully arrived in the death and resurrection of Jesus.