

THE COLLAPSING OF THE COVENANTS:  
NARROW IS THE WAY THAT LEADS TO DESTRUCTION

On March 9, 1790, Benjamin Franklin wrote a letter to Ezra Stiles, President of Yale College, responding to Dr. Stiles' question concerning Franklin's opinion of Jesus of Nazareth. In his answer Franklin offers the following statement of his faith:

Here is my creed. I believe in one God, the creator of the universe. That he governs it by his providence. That he ought to be worshipped. That the most acceptable service we render to him is doing good to his other children. That the soul of man is immortal, and will be treated with justice in another life respecting its conduct in this. These I take to be the fundamental points in all sound religion, and I regard them as you do in whatever sect I meet with them. As to Jesus of Nazareth, my opinion of whom you particularly desire, I think his system of morals and his religion, as he left them to us, the best the world ever saw or is likely to see; but I apprehend it has received various corrupting changes, and I have, with most of the present dissenters in England, some doubts as to his divinity. . . .<sup>1</sup>

Radio and TV talk show host Glenn Beck assures us that Franklin's creed summarizes America's religion.<sup>2</sup> I agree with Beck but would also add that Franklin's creed summarizes a great deal of Evangelicalism's religion in our day.<sup>3</sup> Franklin's creed reveals the natural man's "gospel," namely "Be good to people (i.e., follow the Golden Rule). God rewards you based on your obedience and service to Him. Jesus was a good example who left us with a set of morals to follow." Borrowing a phrase from Thomas Boston, WWJD (i.e., "What Would

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1. Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography and Other Writings* (New York: Bantam Dell, 1982), 290-91.

2. *The Glenn Beck Show*, Fox News Channel, September 3, 2010.

3. For an excellent exposé of the current sinking state of the American Evangelical church, see, Michael Horton, *Christless Christianity: The Alternative Gospel of the American Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008).

Jesus Do”) is being palmed on the Evangelical<sup>4</sup> church for Christianity. But it is nothing more than a “rational religion” or “refined heathenism” and evidence of a “sinking state of the church.”<sup>5</sup>

That Jesus offers a system of morals isn’t unique. Gandhi, Buddha and Dr. Phil also offer a variety of moral systems to follow. Even if the system of morals Jesus gives is “the best the world ever saw or is like to see,” the essence of Christianity is not morality or ethics.

What makes Christianity distinctive from every other religion is the gospel. In his *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, Zacharias Ursinus writes, “It is only in the church that the gospel of Christ is fully taught, and rightly understood.”<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Michael S. Horton observes,

The average person thinks that the purpose of religion is to give us a list of rules and techniques or to frame a way of life that helps us to be more loving, forgiving, patient, caring, and generous. Of course, there is plenty of this in the Bible. Like Moses, Jesus summarized the whole law in just those terms: loving God and neighbor. However, as crucial as the law remains as the revelation of God’s *moral* will, it is different from the revelation of God’s *saving* will. We are called to love God and neighbor, but that is not the gospel. Christ need not have died on a cross for us to know that we should be better people...The only thing that the church can provide to the world that is truly unique is the gospel.<sup>7</sup>

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4. The label “Evangelical” has taken on a wide variety of meanings. For clarification, the capitalized form of “Evangelical” in this paper refers to the wider meaning in contrast to the lower case form of “evangelical” that refers to the historical meaning, which affirms with Historic Protestantism the 5 *Solas* of the Reformation.

5. John Brown, *Gospel Truth Accurately Stated and Illustrated by the Reverend Messrs. James Hog, Thomas Boston, Ebenezer and Ralph Erskine, and Others by the Republication of the Marrow of Modern Divinity* (Canonsburgh, PA: Andrew Munro, 1827), 106.

6. Zacharias Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, trans. G. W. Williard (n.d.; repr. of 1852 ed., Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, n.d.), 105.

7. Michael Horton, *The Gospel-Driven Life: Being Good News People in a Bad News World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), 20-21, 23.

The law is natural to man. God has written the law in man's heart in creation (Rom. 1:32; 2:14-15). Graeme Goldsworthy writes, "An ineffaceable sense of deity is engraved upon all people's minds; it is our endowment from birth. This is what distinguishes us from the animals. It would thus seem to be the implication of being made in the image of God."<sup>8</sup> Theft and murder are universal laws that every religion and culture accepts. It is universally acknowledged that taking something that belongs to another person or striking another person without his permission is wrong. Even a small child gets upset when another child takes his toy or hits him. Although man suppresses the truth in his unrighteousness, he still retains some measure of an innate sense of responsibility ("oughtness") and accountability to his Creator (Rom. 1:18ff.).

All men retain this "oughtness" because they are born wired for law keeping. All men are naturally prone to think that God's favor and all His blessings depend upon their obedience to the law. Ebenezer Erskine notes,

There is a cursed bias in the heart of man to lean to something in himself. Is not this the language of thy heart many times? O! If I had such a frame, such a melting of heart, such love, such a degree of humility and obedience, then I think God would accept of me, and love me on that account. But, Sirs, let me tell you, it is not on account of anything wrought in you, or done by you, but only on the account of the doing and dying of the Son of God.<sup>9</sup>

Therefore Franklin's creed is not surprising but is rather a clear example of a fallen sinner who is curved in on himself.<sup>10</sup>

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8. Graeme Goldsworthy, *Gospel-Centered Hermeneutics: Foundations and Principles of Evangelical Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2006), 187.

9. Brown, *Gospel Truth*, 264.

10. It is important to note that the problem is not with the law that is written on our hearts. For, "the law," Paul wrote, "is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good," (Rom. 7:12). The problem is with the radical corruption of man's heart, which is the result of the Fall (Rom. 7:14, 24).

On the contrary, whereas the law is known from nature, the gospel must be divinely revealed (Jn. 1:13; 1 Cor. 2:10-14). The gospel is not in us by nature. It is not universally acknowledged. The gospel stands outside of us (*extra nos*). Though the natural man possesses some sense of the knowledge of and his responsibility to God (Rom. 1:18-19), he is wholly devoid of any innate ability to confess that Jesus is the Son of the God (Matt. 16:17). The gospel totally surpasses natural knowledge.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, it is no surprise that Franklin makes this admission: "As to Jesus of Nazareth . . . I have . . . some doubts as to his divinity."

Even a believer must remain vigilant in recognizing that the gospel does not come naturally to him and that it is not easy to overcome the legal disposition of his heart. Ralph Erskine writes,

It is not easy to get the law killed; something of a legal disposition remains even in the believer while he is in this world: many a stroke does self and self-righteousness get, but still it revives again. If he were wholly dead to the law, he would be wholly dead to sin; but so far as the law lives, so far sin lives. They that think they know the Gospel well enough bewray their ignorance; no man can be too evangelical[;] it will take all his life-time to get a legal temper destroyed.<sup>12</sup>

Lamentably, Franklin's creed reveals an underlying and destructive problem that plagues the Evangelical church today: a failure to properly distinguish between law and gospel.<sup>13</sup>

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11. Theodore Beza, *The Christian Faith*, trans. James Clark (East Sussex, England: Focus Christian Ministries Trust, 1992), 40.

12. Ralph Erskine, "Law-Death, Gospel-Life: Or, The Death of Legal Righteousness, The Life of Gospel Holiness," in *The Works of Ralph Erskine* (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1991), 2:27.

13. For an excellent critique of the current gospel crisis within American Evangelicalism, see Michael Horton, *The Gospel-Driven Life: Being Good News People in a Bad News World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009).

Concerning the importance of distinguishing the law and gospel, Theodore Beza writes, “We must pay great attention to these things. For, with good reason, we can say that ignorance of this distinction between Law and Gospel is one of the principal sources of the abuses which corrupted and still corrupt Christianity.”<sup>14</sup>

The Bible consists of either law or gospel. Zacharias Ursinus writes, “The doctrine of the church consists of two parts: the Law, and the Gospel; in which we have comprehended the sum and substance of the sacred Scriptures.”<sup>15</sup>

Likewise, Beza wrote, “We divide the Word into two principal parts or kinds: the one is called the ‘Law’, the other the ‘Gospel’. For, all the rest can be gathered under the one or the other of these two headings.”<sup>16</sup>

It is important to note that we are not to understand “law” as referring to the Old Testament and “gospel” as referring to the New Testament. Such a misunderstanding fosters a tendency toward discontinuity between the Old and New Testaments. Michael S. Horton underscores the importance of keeping this distinction in mind:

Historically, exegetes have...understood “law” and “gospel” on two levels: (1) the principle of law (personal fulfillment of its stipulations) distinct from the principle of promise/gospel; and (2) the old covenant (promise) in relation to the new covenant (fulfillment). So one could say that the gospel is revealed in the “law,” taken as the Old Testament’s Pentateuch, while nevertheless affirming that law (commands) and promises are distinguished even to the point of stark opposition when it comes to the question of our justification before God.<sup>17</sup>

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14. Beza, *The Christian Faith*, 41.

15. Ursinus, *Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism*, 2.

16. Beza, *The Christian Faith*, 40.

17. Michael Horton, *God of Promise* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2006), 75.

The "law" refers to whatever God commands to be done and forbids to be avoided (Lev. 19:18; Matt. 22:37-40; 1 Thess. 4:3; 1 Jn. 5:21). God, in His law, promises life on the condition of perfect obedience (Lev. 18:5; Rom. 10:5; Gal. 3:12). Beza writes ". . . He (God-J.F.) sets out for us the obedience and perfect righteousness which we owe to His majesty and our neighbours. This on contrasting terms: either perpetual life, if we perfectly keep the Law without omitting a single point, or eternal death, if we do not completely fulfill the contents of each commandment . . . ."18

On the other hand, the gospel is a free promise of life and salvation through Christ. The gospel announces the free forgiveness of sins on account of and for the sake of Christ alone (Lk. 2:10-12). The gospel promises life on the basis of Christ's perfect obedience and satisfaction. Again, Beza writes,

By it God testifies to us that it is His purpose to save us freely by His only Son (Rom. 3:20-22), provided that, by faith, we embrace Him as our only wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption (1 Cor. 1:30). By it, I say, the Lord testifies to us all these things, and even does it in such a manner that at the same time he renews our persons in a powerful way so that we may embrace the benefits which are offered to us (1 Cor. 2:4).<sup>19</sup>

Summing up the distinction between the principle of law and the principle of promise, John Colquhoun writes, "In a word, the law says, 'Do this and you shall live'; but the gospel...says, 'Believe this, and you shall be saved.' The law is God in a command; but the gospel is God in Christ, God in a promise."<sup>20</sup>

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18. Beza, *The Christian Faith*, 40.

19. *Ibid.*, 40-41.

20. John Colquhoun, *A Treatise on the Law and the Gospel* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1999), 149.

Historically, Reformed theologians have been more or less united in their affirmation of this law-gospel contrast, particularly in regard to its implications regarding justification. However, there are exceptions to this consensus.

In a published lecture titled *The Covenant of Grace*, John Murray states the following concerning the Mosaic Covenant:

At the outset we must remember that the idea of conditional fulfillment is not something peculiar to the Mosaic covenant. We have been faced quite poignantly with this very question in connection with the Abrahamic covenant. And since this feature is there patent, it does not of itself provide us with any reason for construing the Mosaic covenant in terms different from those of the Abrahamic.<sup>21</sup>

Concluding his view of the Mosaic Covenant, Murray argues,

What needs to be emphasized now is that the Mosaic covenant in respect of the condition of obedience is not in a different category from the Abrahamic. It is too frequently assumed that the conditions prescribed in connection with the Mosaic covenant place the Mosaic dispensation in a totally different category as respects grace, on the one hand, and demand or obligation, on the other. In reality there is nothing that is principally different in the necessity of keeping the covenant and of obedience to God's voice, which proceeds from the Mosaic Covenant, from that which is involved in the keeping required in the Abrahamic. In both cases the keynotes are obeying God's voice and keeping the covenant (cf. Gn. xviii. 17-19; Ex. xix. 5, 6).<sup>22</sup>

Influenced by the views of Murray, Andrew McGowan writes, "I am convinced that Murray was right!"<sup>23</sup> Following in Murray's footsteps, McGowan holds that Genesis 2 does not teach a covenant of works and that the Mosaic Covenant is not a republication of the covenant of works.<sup>24</sup> However, McGowan,

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21. John Murray, *The Covenant of Grace* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1988), 20.

22. *Ibid.*, 22.

23. Andrew McGowan, "Scottish Covenant Theology: Thomas Boston and John Murray," in *The Covenant: God's Voluntary Condescension*, ed. Joseph A. Pipa, Jr., C.N. Willborn (Taylors, SC: Presbyterian Press, 2005), 70.

24. *Ibid.*, 68-71.

thinks Murray's "Adamic Administration" view only went part way in dealing with the "incipient problem" in Federal theology and suggests that a "further step" must be taken.<sup>25</sup>

Therefore, McGowan introduces the concepts of "Messianic Administration" and "Headship Theology" in an attempt to turn aside from what he argues is an "over-emphasis" on the concept of covenant in order to refocus attention on Adam and Christ as the two heads of administration.<sup>26</sup> McGowan then explains his purpose for this "refocus" when he writes, "This then leaves us free to see the covenant of grace as an overarching theme, rather than as a counterpoint to a covenant of works."<sup>27</sup>

Norman Shepherd, in his book *The Call of Grace*, firmly rejects any notion of the Mosaic Covenant as being in any sense a republication of the covenant of works or embodying a works/merit principle. Rather, the Mosaic Covenant is solely an administration of the covenant of grace.<sup>28</sup> Shepherd writes,

Scripture shows that the Mosaic covenant is not a covenant of works embodying a works/merit principle at its core. It is not a republication of an original covenant of works...Rather, the Mosaic covenant is an administration of covenant grace. At its core, the Mosaic covenant does not simply drive us to Christ, but further unfolds the gracious covenant relationship that the Lord established with Abraham and his children.<sup>29</sup>

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25. Ibid., 71.

26. Ibid., 71.

27. Ibid., 71.

28. Norman Shepherd, *The Call of Grace: How the Covenant Illuminates Salvation and Evangelism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2000), 25-27.

29. Ibid., 26-27.



Throughout his book, Shepherd makes confusing statements concerning the nature of and relationship between the Mosaic and Abrahamic covenants. For example, he writes,

The Mosaic covenant is not, however, opposed to the Abrahamic covenant. Nor does it run concurrently with the Abrahamic covenant while offering a totally different way of relating covenantally to the Lord. Paul is saying in Galatians 3 that the Mosaic covenant is a further unfolding of the Abrahamic covenant. The Mosaic covenant is a revelation of salvation by grace through faith.<sup>30</sup>

He summarizes his position thus:

The new covenant and the Mosaic covenant are not opposed to each other as two different ways of salvation, one offering salvation by faith and the other by works. The Lord God never taught his people to save themselves by their good works on the basis of merit. The Abrahamic, Mosaic and new covenants are all revelations of salvation by grace through faith. Like the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants, the New Covenant has two parts: promise and obligation.<sup>31</sup>

Concerning the purpose for why the Mosaic Covenant was given, Shepherd writes,

These laws were obviously not given as a means whereby Israel might earn the right to be delivered from Egypt. Nor were they a means whereby Israel might earn the right to take possession of the Promised Land...The inheritance of the Promised Land did not depend on law understood as a works/merit principle. The Mosaic covenant was never intended to function that way.<sup>32</sup>

Shepherd's conflation of the Abrahamic, Mosaic and New covenants, leads him to make ambiguous statements regarding the nature of saving faith.

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30. Ibid., 28-29.

31. Ibid., 57.

32. Ibid., 29-30.

For example, he writes, "A living, active, and abiding faith is the way in which the believer enters into eternal life."<sup>33</sup> Moreover, Shepherd continues,

Note that Paul can take an example from life under the Mosaic covenant and apply it to those who live under the new covenant. This shows that the principles operative under both covenants are the same. There is promise and there is obligation. The land promised to the wilderness generation was the Promised Land. It was an unearned and unmerited gift of grace. Yet the first generation did not inherit the land because of their unbelief and disobedience. This is the point made in Hebrews 3:18-19. Similarly, for us, eternal life is an undeserved gift of grace; we enter into it by way of a living, active and obedient faith.<sup>34</sup>

The problem Murray, McGowan, and Shepherd share is that they collapse the definition of "covenant" in Scripture into one main overarching idea, namely grace. For example, Murray writes, "The covenant is a sovereign dispensation of God's grace."<sup>35</sup> He notes that

...the idea of stipulations and conditions devised by mutual consultation and agreed upon as the terms of engagement need not to be present even in human covenants. There is, of course, the bond of commitment to one another, but so profound and all-embracing is this commitment that the notion of contractual stipulations recedes into the background or disappears entirely. To say the least, the case is such in these instances of human relationship that no evidence can be derived from them to support the idea of mutual contract or compact.<sup>36</sup>

Since grace is the overarching theme, concludes Murray, "... the gracious, promissory character of covenant cannot be over-accented."<sup>37</sup>

Is Murray correct in narrowly defining the "covenant" as a sovereign dispensation of God's grace? Do the Scriptures not provide any reason for

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33. Ibid., 50.

34. Ibid., 51.

35. Murray, *The Covenant of Grace*, 19.

36. Ibid., 10-11.

37. Ibid., 8.

understanding the Mosaic covenant in terms different from those of the Abrahamic covenant? Is it correct that in reality there is nothing principally different in the necessity of keeping the covenant and of obedience to God's voice (which proceeds from the Mosaic Covenant) from that which is involved in the keeping required in the Abrahamic? Should we be left free to see the Scriptures as setting forth a covenant of grace as an overarching theme as a counterpoint to a covenant of works? Do we enter into life by way of a living, active, obedient faith?

The answer to all of these questions is a resounding "No!" Unlike McGowan, I am convinced that Murray, as well as McGowan and Shepherd, is wrong. The gracious, promissory character of "covenant" can be over-accented if it jostles out law. Instead of allowing for a broader definition of "covenant" by the Scriptures, Murray, McGowan, and Shepherd insist on a narrower definition, which asserts that all of God's dealings with men are solely gracious. This narrow definition collapses the covenants into one overarching theme of grace and ends up confusing the law and gospel.

A monocovenantal scheme blurs the stark distinctions between the Abrahamic (Davidic) and Mosaic covenants. In fact, it not only blurs but also effectively eliminates an explicit law-gospel distinction in the Scriptures. Though unintended,<sup>38</sup> the collapsing of the covenants into one unified definition has destructive consequences for the gospel and the Christian life.

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38. The assertion is not being made that Murray, McGowan or Shepherd are "Judaizers." However, their commitment to a monocovenantal scheme eliminates a clear-cut distinction between the Abrahamic/Davidic ("promise") and Sinaitic ("law") covenants and therefore results in the same destructive "Judaizing" effect on the gospel. This confusing of law and gospel inevitably alters the nature and integrity of the gospel.

First,<sup>39</sup> collapsing the covenants into one overarching theme of grace distorts the gospel and turns it into *another*<sup>40</sup> gospel (Gal. 1:6). John Colquhoun writes, "To mingle, then, the law with the gospel, or teach men to join the works of the law to the perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ as the ground of a sinner's title to justification in the sight of God, is, according to our apostle, to preach another gospel."<sup>41</sup>

For example, Shepherd states that the promises and obligations of the New Covenant are related in the same way as in the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants.<sup>42</sup> Such a collapsing of the covenants into one overarching theme of grace is a confusion of utterly distinct covenants and results in a mingling of the principle of law and the principle of promise.

The prophet Jeremiah could not have stated the distinction between the new covenant and the Mosaic covenant more definitively when he prophesied,

Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD (31:31-32).

The Abrahamic covenant operates like a Royal Grant.<sup>43</sup> Michael S. Horton writes, "Scholars of ancient Near Eastern texts see in Genesis 15 a classic example

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39. This first point is the foundational point from which all the subsequent points in this paper flow. Therefore, more space will be devoted to this argument.

40. The word, *different*, in Galatians 1:6 comes from the Greek word, ἕτερος, which means "that which is completely different in kind from something else." Paul says the Galatians were in the process of deserting Christ and embracing a "*heteros* gospel," (i.e., a false, heretical gospel).

41. Colquhoun, *A Treatise on the Law and the Gospel*, 142.

42. Shepherd, *The Call of Grace*, 50.

43. *Ibid.*, 41.

of a royal grant as opposed to a suzerainty treaty. Royal grants were an outright gift by a king to a subject..."<sup>44</sup> The Abrahamic covenant is a unilateral, one-sided divine promise. In the Abrahamic covenant, God unilaterally assumes the obligations and sanctions of the covenant (Gen. 15:17-18).<sup>45</sup> Concerning the nature of the Abrahamic covenant, Geerhardus Vos observes, "The keynote is not what Abraham has to do for God, but what God will do for Abraham."<sup>46</sup>

In fact, Ancient Near Eastern scholars have discovered no parallels to the Abrahamic covenant.<sup>47</sup> This uniqueness testifies to its utter distinctness from the suzerainty treaty language of the Mosaic Covenant. Michael S. Horton writes,

...there are no ancient Near Eastern equivalents of the self-maledictory oath (i.e., calling down curses upon oneself) as a royal grant. It is as if, from the divine side, the covenant made with Abraham is a suzerainty treaty in which God swears unilaterally to personally perform all of the conditions and suffer all of the curses for its violation, but from the human side, the same covenant is a royal grant, an inheritance bestowed freely and in utter graciousness on the basis of the Great King's performance.

God's unilateral swearing in the Abrahamic covenant is precisely why it is superior to and distinct from the Mosaic covenant. Michael S. Horton, noting a key distinction between the Mosaic and Abrahamic covenants, writes, "The missing piece here is 'for the sake of your fathers.'"<sup>48</sup> Every time God withheld judgment in Israel's history of rebellion or brought deliverance it was for the

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44. Ibid., 41.

45. It is worthy of noting that while God is working Abraham is sleeping (Gen. 15:12). In Matthew 26:40, it is also interesting to observe that while Jesus is working in the garden of Gethsemane the disciples are sleeping. In both cases, the accent clearly falls on God's promises and works rather than man's.

46. Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2004), 80.

47. Horton, *God of Promise*, 41.

48. Ibid., 55.

sake of His commitment to the Abrahamic or Davidic Covenants not the Mosaic Covenant (cf. Deut. 4:30-31; Pss. 89; 132:10-11).<sup>49</sup>

In contrast to the Abrahamic covenant, the Mosaic covenant bears the marks of and operates like a suzerainty treaty.<sup>50</sup> Observes Horton, “The elements of the treaty form were clearly present: the historical prologue (liberation from Egypt), the stipulations (ten words or commandments), sanctions with the usual blessings and curses formula, with the warning that the Israelites were “but God’s tenants” (Le. 25:23 NIV) and were subject to the eviction if they violated the covenant.”<sup>51</sup>

The keynote in the Mosaic covenant is not what God will do for the people of Israel but what the people of Israel swear to do for God (cf. Ex. 19:8; 24:3-8). In Exodus 24, Moses leads the people of Israel in reconfirming the covenant. He reads the Law to the people, and they respond, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient” (Ex. 24:7). In response to their sworn oath, Moses takes the blood and throws it on the people, saying, “Behold the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words” (Ex. 24:8). Clearly, the emphasis falls on the people’s swearing instead of the Lord’s. The people of Israel assume the obligations and sanctions prescribed in the covenant. Yahweh, however, does not obligate Himself to do anything but instead simply commands.

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49. Ibid., 55.

50. Ibid., 39.

51. Ibid., 31.

In contrast, in the Abrahamic Covenant and New Covenant, the LORD assumes the obligations and sanctions. In the Abrahamic covenant, God pronounces a self-maledictory oath by which He calls down the curses upon Himself. In the New Covenant, instead of the blood being thrown on the people, Jesus, who is both Lord and Servant<sup>52</sup> of the covenant, sheds His own blood (Lk. 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25; Heb. 9:12-14). The one who makes the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them and causes Moses to say, "I tremble with fear," (Heb. 12:19, 21), condescends and becomes for sinners the mediator of a new covenant (Heb. 12:24). The one who set limits for the people all around and warns them to not even come near the edge of the mountain lest they should die (Ex. 19:12-13; Heb. 12:20) now invites sinners to draw near with confidence to "the throne of grace" to receive "mercy and find grace to help in time of need" (Heb. 4:16).

Clearly, the Mosaic covenant operates on a completely antithetical basis from the Abrahamic and New covenants. The Mosaic covenant operates on a "Do this and live" principle. It is a covenant of personal obligation in which the oath-taker is obligated to fulfill the conditions of the covenant or else suffer the penalties, signified by the throwing of blood on the people by Moses.

Due to his narrow understanding of "covenant," Shepherd fails to see these obvious distinctions. Consequently, he writes,

Israel was delivered from slavery in Egypt because God heard the cries of his people and remembered his covenant of promise with Abraham. It was after the deliverance that the Lord established his covenant at Mount Sinai and gave his people the Ten Commandments and other laws. These laws were obviously not given as a means whereby Israel might earn the

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52. see Michael S. Horton, *Lord and Servant: A Covenant Christology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005).

right to be delivered from Egypt. Nor were they a means whereby Israel might earn the right to take possession of the Promised Land...The inheritance of the Promised Land did not depend on law understood as a works/merit principle.<sup>53</sup>

When Shepherd states that the Mosaic covenant does not embody a works/merit principle (“Do this and live”) at its core, he is failing to distinguish between the law’s strictness in relation to individual salvation and in relation to the national covenant with Israel.<sup>54</sup>

It is crucial to distinguish between the typological and conditional aspects of the old covenant (principle of law) and the reality to which they point (principle of promise).<sup>55</sup> Concerning the works/merit principle inherent in the Mosaic covenant, Michael S. Horton writes,

The Decalogue...although it begins with the indicative announcement of God’s liberation- thus showing its continuity with the Abrahamic promise- is basically a law covenant. Purely a suzerainty treaty, it does not obligate God to do anything but instead simply commands, with sanctions for obedience and disobedience. If the Israelites, about to enter Canaan, obey God’s will thus revealed, they will “live long in the land the Lord [their] God is giving [them]” (Exod. 20:12...). They are not promised that they will inherit the heavenly rest, but only the earthly copy of that rest, and this is how the New Testament understands the relation of the earthly and heavenly Jerusalem. So it does not contradict the Abrahamic promise in the slightest. No one in the Old Testament obtained the inheritance by works, but only by promise. Yet Israel’s national status in God’s land depended on fulfillment of the treaty’s terms.<sup>56</sup>

While Shepherd is correct in stating that Old Testament saints were justified by grace through faith, he is wrong in his assertion that Israel’s national status in God’s land was not to be maintained and vindicated by strict adherence

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53. Shepherd, *The Call of Grace*, 29-30.

54. Horton, *God of Promise*, 32.

55. *Ibid.*, 57.

56. *Ibid.*, 100-101.



to the Law. Once again, he is confusing and collapsing the principle of law (national covenant) with the principle of promise (individual salvation). The typological/conditional aspect of the Mosaic covenant was designed to prefigure Jesus' arrival in the world. Meredith Kline writes,

A variety of purposes can be discovered to explain the insertion of the old covenant order and its tupal kingdom into the course of redemptive history. Of central importance was the creation of the proper historical setting for the advent of the Son of God and his earthly mission (cf. Rom. 9:5). In accordance with the terms of his covenant of works with the Father he was to come as the second Adam in order to undergo a representative probation and by his obedient and triumphant accomplishment thereof to establish the legal ground for God's covenanted bestowal of the eternal kingdom of salvation on his people. It was therefore expedient, if not necessary, that Christ appear within a covenant order which, like the covenant with the first Adam, was governed by the works principle (cf. Gal. 4:4). The tupal kingdom of the old covenant was precisely that.<sup>57</sup>

Thus, only Jesus, the greater Son of Abraham and David, is able to merit by his covenant faithfulness the eternal blessings that the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants anticipated typologically.<sup>58</sup> Therefore, with respect to individual salvation, Paul is correct in asserting that both Abraham and David were justified by grace through faith on the basis of Christ's merits alone (Rom. 4:1-8).

It is evident from Galatians that Paul understood the Mosaic covenant as embodying a works/merit principle of law. For example, in Galatians 3:10 Paul states that those who seek to obtain God's blessing by their personal obedience (principle of law) are under a curse (Gal. 3:10) because man, due to his radical corruption, is unable to perfectly obey every last requirement in the Law.

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57. Meredith G. Kline, *Kingdom Prologue: Genesis Foundations for a Covenantal Worldview* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2006), 352.

58. Horton, *God of Promise*, 57.

Moreover, Paul states, that the Law is not of faith, which is a way to say that the Law is of works. Thus, Paul writes, "The one who does them shall live by them," (i.e., "Do this and live," Gal. 3:12). Jesus affirms the principle of "Do this and live" in Luke 10:25-28. When the lawyer stood up to test Jesus and asks Him on the basis of law, "Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus asks him, "What is written in the Law? How do you read it?" The lawyer answers by quoting Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. Jesus commends his answer and says, "You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live." Concerning Paul's use of Leviticus 18:5 in Galatians 3:12, Bryan Estelle warns that

...Paul uses Leviticus 18:5 in Galatians 3 in a manner similarly juxtaposed to his quote from Habakkuk to demonstrate the same principle: a fundamental antithesis of works and grace. In short, in the apostle's understanding of the nature of the Mosaic Covenant, there was a works principle operative in the administration of the covenant of grace. This was intentionally present for specific reasons, and unless the categories are rightly understood in their own and their canonical context, this will entail systemic toxicity in one's theological system.<sup>59</sup>

The collapsing of the covenants into one overarching theme of grace is evidence of such "systemic toxicity."

Continuing his argument, in Galatians 3:17, Paul argues that the Mosaic covenant cannot annul the Abrahamic covenant. It does not annul it because it is merely a further unfolding of the Abrahamic covenant, as Shepherd argues.<sup>60</sup> Rather, the later covenant (which is inferior) doesn't annul the earlier covenant (which is superior) precisely because the Abrahamic covenant is the basis for individual salvation and the Mosaic covenant is the basis for remaining in the

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59. Bryan D. Estelle, "Leviticus 18:5 and Deuteronomy 30:1-14 in Biblical Theological Development: Entitlement to Heaven Foreclosed and Proffered," in *The Law Is Not Of Faith: Essays on Works and Grace in the Mosaic Covenant*, ed. Bryan D. Estelle, J.V. Fesko and David VanDrunen (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, 2009), 132-133.

60. Shepherd, *The Call of Grace*, 29.

earthly land.<sup>61</sup> God never instituted the Mosaic covenant in order to take away transgressions but rather to reveal them (Gal. 3:19). Ever since the Fall, salvation has always been based on the principle of promise rather than the principle of law (Gal. 3:18).

In Galatians 3:19-20, Paul reveals how the two-fold mediation involved in the giving of the Law at Mt. Sinai witnesses to its conditional nature and thus its inferiority to the Abrahamic covenant.<sup>62</sup> As previously noted, in the Mosaic covenant, the people of Israel were obligated to obey and in return God would grant life (an entitlement to heaven).<sup>63</sup> But the Abrahamic covenant operated on a totally antithetical principle. God spoke the promise directly to Abraham without any intervening mediation. Paul's point is that the absence of mediation in the Abrahamic Covenant witnessed to its unconditional nature. "God is one," which is to say Yahweh is the only party involved in the making of the covenant. Abraham played no part in making the covenant and no obligations were imposed upon him. He was merely a recipient of its blessings. Timothy George, quoting G. E. Mendenhall, notes this stark contrast between the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants: "It is not enough seen that no obligations are imposed upon Abraham. . . . The covenant of Moses, on the other hand, is almost the exact

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61. Horton, *God of Promise*, 101.

62. Ronald Y.K. Fung, *The Epistle to the Galatians* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 161-162.

63. Estelle, "Leviticus 18:5 and Deuteronomy 30:1-14 in Biblical Theological Development: Entitlement to Heaven Foreclosed and Proffered," 118.

opposite. It imposes specific obligations on the tribes or clans without binding Yahweh to specific obligations.”<sup>64</sup>

In the Abrahamic covenant, God is the one who promises to perform all of the conditions and to suffer all of the penalties of the covenant. The Great King walks alone through the severed halves of the animals (Gen. 15:17) whereas in the Mosaic covenant Moses takes the blood and throws it on the people (Ex. 24:8). It is the swearing of nothing on Yahweh’s part that makes the Mosaic covenant inferior to the Abrahamic covenant.<sup>65</sup>

By affirming the distinctions between the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants, Michael S. Horton concludes,

In this way, we are preserved from two problems that result from a confusion of the land promise (law) and the everlasting Sabbath (gospel). The first problem (older dispensationalism) is to think of the Old Testament believer as one who sought to be justified by works, and the second (covenantal nomism) is to regard the conditions for preservation in the earthly land as conditions for enjoyment of everlasting life, either for the Israelites or for new covenant believers.<sup>66</sup>

God’s unilateral, one-sided promise announced in the Abrahamic (and Davidic) covenant is good news. To confuse the antithetical distinctions between these two covenants is to alter the nature of the gospel, which is a free promise of life and salvation through Christ. No law was ever given by God that could give

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64. Timothy George, *An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture: Galatians*, vol. 30 of *The New American Commentary*, ed. E. Ray Clendenen (Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994), 249.

65. In Galatians 4, Paul unmistakably contrasts two distinct covenants (v. 24) in which promise and obligation operate on two mutually exclusive principles.

66. *Ibid.*, 101. Providing a definition of covenantal nomism, Michael Horton writes, “Covenantal nomism, holds...that righteousness is a matter of being part of God’s covenant people, which is initially a matter of grace- “getting in” to God’s covenant is a matter of God’s “electing” or choosing- but then becomes a matter of obedience- “staying in” God’s covenant requires obeying the stipulations that come with it, which make Torah, God’s law,” “Paul and Covenantal Nomism,” *Modern Reformation*, vol. 12, Sept./Oct., 2003, 32-33.

life (Gal. 3:21). Rather, God gave the Law in order to reveal and increase sin (Gal. 3:19) and thereby imprison man (Gal. 3:22a) so that he may seek the promise by faith in Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:22b). The underlying error of the Judaizers consisted in their seeking life in an inferior, temporary, subservient, covenant. Confusing mutually exclusive covenants, according to Paul, alters the nature of the gospel and is no secondary matter but rather a primary error resulting in damning eternal consequences (Gal. 1:8-9).

Second, collapsing the definition of covenant into one main overarching idea of grace undermines the doctrine of justification. John Colquhoun writes,

If he does not know the difference between the law and the gospel he will be apt, especially in the affair of justification, to confound the one with the other. The consequence will be that in his painful experience, bondage will be mixed with liberty of spirit, fear with hope, sorrow with joy, and death with life. If he cannot so distinguish the gospel from the law as to expect all his salvation from the grace of the gospel, and nothing of it from the works of the law; he will easily be induced to connect his own works with the righteousness of Jesus Christ in the affair of his justification.<sup>67</sup>

Murray's contention<sup>68</sup> that the Scriptures do not provide any reason for construing the Mosaic covenant in terms different from that of the Abrahamic covenant, simply flies in the face of the Bible's teaching, particularly Galatians, as has been shown.<sup>69</sup>

As just noted, the blurring of the distinctions between the covenants echoes the root problem Paul addresses in his letter to the Galatians. The

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67. Colquhoun, *A Treatise on the Law and the Gospel*, 141.

68. Murray, *The Covenant of Grace*, 20.

69. Shockingly, T. David Gordon points out that even though Murray was a New Testament scholar and professor of systematic theology, he never wrote even a paragraph about Galatians! This certainly speaks volumes. see T. David Gordon, "Abraham and Sinai Contrasted in Galatians 3:6-14," in *The Law Is Not Of Faith: Essays on Works and Grace in the Mosaic Covenant*, ed. Bryan D. Estelle, J.V. Fesko and David VanDrunen (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing Company, 2009), 253.

Judaizers were blending the Abrahamic covenant (“promise”) and Mosaic covenant (“law”). They insisted that the Galatian believers must be circumcised, follow dietary laws, and observe holy days prescribed in the Mosaic covenant in order to be justified (Gal. 2:11-14; 4:10; 5:2-6).

Paul discerns that the blending of these two covenants undermines the doctrine of justification (Gal. 2:16; 5:4). Therefore, throughout Galatians, he sets forth a clear, sharp distinction between the Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants in order to keep both within their proper office and function in regard to justification. Martin Luther writes,

The Law has its proper function and use; but this is not the one that our opponents attribute to it, namely, that of justifying. It does not belong to the Law to be used for justification; therefore we teach that it must be separated from this as far as heaven is from earth. With Paul we say that ‘the Law is good, if anyone uses it lawfully’ (1 Tim. 1:8), that is, if anyone uses the Law as Law. If I define the Law with a proper definition and keep it in its own function and use, it is a very good thing. But, if I transfer it to another use and attribute to it what should not be attributed to it, I distort not only the Law but all theology.<sup>70</sup>

Unlike Luther’s clear distinction, Shepherd’s ambiguous statements distort justification. A “living, active and obedient faith” radically parts company with the doctrine of *Sola Fide*, which wholly distinguishes between faith and obedience.<sup>71</sup> *Sola Fide* emphasizes the *instrumental cause* of justification. Faith is the gift (instrument) by which the sinner is linked to Christ and receives the grace of justification. Faith is not a work (i.e., obedience; cf. Rom. 4:-5; Eph. 2:8-9; Philip. 1:29). Obedience is a fruit of faith (1 Thess. 1:3). Faith is not obedience or

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70. Martin Luther, *Lectures on Galatians, 1535, Chapters 1-4*, vol. 26 of *Luther's Works*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, trans. Jaroslav Pelikan, (St. Louis: MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1963), 306-307.

71. See Sproul, R.C. *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995.

faithfulness. To suggest otherwise is to confuse justification with sanctification.<sup>72</sup>

A “living, active and obedient faith” suggests that faith is a condition for justification. It implies a meritorious quality in the sinner for the sake of which justification is granted by virtue of his “active faith” (obedience).

It is more accurate to speak of faith as the *instrument* rather than *condition* of justification. Faith is a self-emptying grace. Faith directs the believer to look outside of himself and rest upon Christ’s works, who alone merited salvation for us. Article 22 in the Belgic Confession teaches that true saving faith embraces Christ with all His merits and makes Him its own, and no longer looks for anything apart from Christ. Justification is “by faith” precisely because faith renounces all presumption of righteousness and receives and rests on Christ alone. Robert Traill wrote,

That faith in Jesus Christ doth justify (although by the way it is to be noted, that it is never written in the word, that faith justifieth actively, but always passively: that a man is justified by faith, and that God justifieth men by, and through faith; yet admitting the phrase) only as a mere instrument receiving that imputed righteousness of Christ, for which we are justified; and that this faith, in the office of justification, is neither condition nor qualification, nor our gospel-righteousness, but in its very act a renouncing of all such pretences.<sup>73</sup>

The conflation of law and gospel is no trifling matter. It is the foundation upon which the doctrine of justification rests. Without a clear distinction between law and gospel the doctrine of justification is utterly lost. In fact, Paul repeatedly

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72. This confusion of justification and sanctification also lies at the heart of the so-called “Lordship” debate. See Michael Horton, “Don’t Judge a Book by its Cover,” in *Christ The Lord: The Reformation and Lordship Salvation*, ed. Michael Horton (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Company, 1992), 36.

73. “A Vindication of the Protestant Doctrine Concerning Justification and of its Preachers and Professors, from the Unjust Charge of Antinomianism,” *The Works of Robert Traill* (1810; repr. Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), 1:277.

emphasizes throughout Galatians that in the matter of justification one must forget the law (2:16; 3:7-14, 18; 5:4). Martin Luther declares,

When you deal with righteousness, life, and eternal salvation, the Law must be put completely out of sight as if it had never existed nor ever would exist, but were absolutely nothing. For in treating of justification one cannot put the Law out of sight far enough, nor can one center one's attention too much on the promise. Therefore I have said that in our hearts the Law and the promise must be kept very far apart.<sup>74</sup>

The doctrine of justification is the chief article of the Christian faith. By it the church and believer stand or fall. It has priority and authority over the church, apostles, and angels (Gal. 1:8-9; 2:11). Therefore, it must be defended at all costs. For when the law and gospel are not clearly distinguished, a man will be inclined to confound the one with the other in the matter of justification. In so doing, he will, as Colquhoun notes, be easily persuaded to join his own works with the righteousness of Jesus Christ in the matter of his justification.

Third, collapsing the definition of covenant into one main overarching idea of grace inevitably invalidates the death of Christ (Gal. 2:21; 5:2). The Abrahamic and Mosaic covenants are mutually incompatible with one another in regard to individual salvation. Salvation by promise and salvation by law, like oil and water, cannot mix together.

The Judaizers attempted to supplement the saving work of Christ by their own obedience to the law. Supplementing Christ's work calls into question the sufficiency of His saving work for man's justification. Paul refutes such a notion and sets forth the utter sufficiency of Christ alone for one's justification (Gal. 2:21).

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74. Edwald M. Plass, *What Luther Says: A Practical In-Home Anthology for the Active Christian* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1959), 740.



The collapsing of the covenants shifts the ground of justification from Christ to a damning combination of Christ and self. Salvation by promise rests on Christ alone. Salvation by law rests on self alone. There is no *via media* between Christ and self.<sup>75</sup> There is no sense in which the believer contributes anything to his own righteousness in the matter of justification, as Paul writes in Philippians 3:9, “not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith.” Christ will do and be everything or nothing. He is either totally sufficient or He isn’t. Both ways cannot be mixed without rendering needless the satisfactory death of Christ.

Ironically, collapsing the covenants into one overarching theme of grace thwarts God’s grace! Still worse, carried to its logical conclusion, a mono-covenantal scheme inevitably strips away the sufficiency of Christ’s death on the cross. Only a distinct contrast between the Abrahamic (promise) and Mosaic (law) covenants upholds the sufficiency of Christ’s satisfaction on the cross. It is critical to note that Paul’s insistence on the sufficiency of Christ’s atonement for justification occurs in the context of a clear law / gospel distinction.

Justification is by grace through faith in the sole, sufficient, redeeming work of Christ’s death alone. The only meritorious ground of justification is the imputed righteousness of Christ. However, this is evident only in context where

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<sup>75</sup> *via media* means “middle way.” For an excellent treatment of how there is no sense in which the believer contributes to his own righteousness for justification and how this truth became corrupted and gave rise to moralism see Allison, C. Fitzsimons, *The Rise of Moralism: The Proclamation of the Gospel from Hooker to Baxter*. Vancouver, British Columbia: Regent College Publishing, 2003.

the Abrahamic (promise) and Mosaic (law) covenants are clearly distinguished.

Hence, Martin Luther writes,

Either Christ must abide, and the Law perish; or the Law must abide, and Christ perish. It is impossible for Christ and the Law to agree and to share the reign over a conscience. Where the righteousness of the Law reigns, there the righteousness of grace cannot reign; and, on the other hand, where the righteousness of grace reigns, there the righteousness of the Law cannot reign...the doctrine of grace simply cannot stand with the doctrine of the Law. One of them must be rejected and abolished, and the other must be confirmed or substantiated.<sup>76</sup>

Fourth, collapsing the definition of covenant into one main overarching idea of grace leads to a wasteland of confusion and lack of assurance for believers. This last point is the natural consequence, which flows out of the prior three. Once the gospel is altered, justification is undermined, the ground of justification is shifted from Christ to self and Christ's death is rendered insufficient, there is no basis for assurance.

So for example, when Murray asks how one is to construe the conditions of the Abrahamic covenant he writes,

The continued enjoyment of this grace and of the relation established is contingent upon the fulfillment of certain conditions. For apart from the fulfillment of these conditions the grace bestowed implies a subject and reception on the part of that subject. The relation implies mutuality...By breaking the covenant what is broken is not the condition of bestowal but the condition of consummated fruition.<sup>77</sup>

First, like Shepherd, Murray fails to distinguish between the typological and individual aspects of the Abrahamic covenant. The unfolding story of Abraham clearly portrays his continued failures throughout his life, yet Abraham died a justified believer.<sup>78</sup> Nothing, not even Abraham's ongoing sin,

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76. Luther, *Lectures on Galatians*, 54.

77. Murray, *The Covenant of Grace*, 19.

was able to hinder God's promises.<sup>79</sup> Discussing the conditional aspects of the Abrahamic covenant, Michael S. Horton (citing Meredith Kline) explains,

"God was pleased," writes Kline, "to constitute Abraham's exemplary works as the meritorious ground for granting to Israel after the flesh the distinctive role of being formed as the typological kingdom, the matrix from which Christ should come." This does not mean, of course, that his obedience was the ground of his justification before God (which would contradict Genesis 15:6 and its New Testament interpretation), but that it was itself typological of Christ, who would merit by his obedience the reward of everlasting life that this old covenant economy foreshadowed.<sup>80</sup>

Israel's national deliverance from Egypt in the Exodus and their coming into the Promised Land was a matter of grace based on the promise of the Abrahamic covenant. However, once in the Promised Land, Israel as a nation would enjoy long life in the land by virtue of their obedience to the Law or else face exile as a result of their disobedience.<sup>81</sup>

Second, because of his failure to distinguish between the typological and individual aspects of the Abrahamic covenant, Murray offers what seems to be a form of covenantal nomism, when he writes statements such as, "What is broken is not the condition of bestowal but the condition of consummated fruition." In other words, if "getting in" is a matter of grace, "staying in" becomes a matter of obedience.

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78. Even after Abraham's justification, out of unbelief towards God's promise, he slept with Hagar (Gen. 16). In Genesis 20:2, we find Abraham once again willing to sell his wife to Abimelech king of Gerar out of self-preservation. In Genesis 25:6, the story reminds us that Abraham had concubines, perhaps referring to Hagar and Keturah. Paul, then, was correct in setting forth Abraham as an example that God justifies the ungodly. Abraham testifies loud and clear of *simul iustus et peccator!*

79. Horton, *God of Promise*, 57. What is said of Abraham also holds true for David, cf. Psalm 89.

80. *Ibid.*, 45.

81. *Ibid.*, 50. The Mosaic Covenant didn't work in reverse, Horton, *God of Promise*, 99.

The “getting in,” and “staying in” scheme is exactly what Paul opposes in Galatians when he asks, “Are you so foolish? Having begun by the Spirit, are you now being perfected by the flesh?” If the “condition of consummated fruition” (“staying in”) is correct no believer will ever know for sure if they have ever obeyed enough to be saved or to remain saved. The standard is not sincere obedience but perfect obedience (Gal. 3:10, 12; cf. Matt. 5:48). John Calvin writes,

Now if we ask in what way the conscience can be made quiet before God, we shall find the only way to be that unmerited righteousness be conferred upon us as a gift of God...we profit nothing in discussing righteousness unless we establish a righteousness so steadfast that it can support our soul in the judgment of God...For no one can ever confidently trust in it [one’s obedience-J.F.] because no one will ever come to be really convinced in his own mind that he has satisfied the law, as surely no one ever fully satisfies it through works.<sup>82</sup>

Covenantal nomism disturbs souls. In Galatians 1:7b, Paul writes, “...there are some who trouble you...” The word, “trouble,” (ταράσσω) is a strong word, which means, “stir up, disturb, unsettle, throw into confusion...of mental confusion caused by false teaching.”<sup>83</sup> In Acts 15:24, the Jerusalem Council used this exact word in their letter to the churches to describe the effect of the Judaizers, “we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds.” In John 12:27, John used this word to describe the deeply disturbed soul of Jesus on the night before His crucifixion, “Now is my soul troubled...” By using this word, Paul graphically describing the havoc that results from a distorted gospel.

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82. Calvin: *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 20 of *The Library of Christian Classics* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960), 765.

83. Walter Bauer, *Griechisch-Deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schriften des Neuen Testaments und der übrigen urchristlichen Literatur*. 2nd ed. Rev. and trans. by F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker from Walter Bauer’s 4th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 805.

The blending of the law and gospel by collapsing the covenants into one overarching theme of grace does more harm than anyone can imagine. Martin writes, "It seems to be a trivial matter to teach the Law and affirm works, but this does more damage than human reason can imagine. Not only does it mar and obscure the knowledge of grace, but it also removes Christ and all His blessings, and it completely overthrows the Gospel."<sup>84</sup>

The outcome of a distorted gospel is troubled souls (or worse damned souls, Gal. 1:8-9). The confusion of law and gospel lessens Christians' confidence in God's goodwill and destroys assurance of their right standing with God because they never know exactly where they stand with God. A disquieted soul is plagued by uncertain news. But a quieted soul is comforted by good news! The glory and joy of the gospel is that the believer can be confident of where he stands with God not because of his covenant faithfulness but rather Christ's (cf. Rom. 5:1). John Colquhoun asserts,

If an exercised and disquieted Christian does not distinctly know the difference between the law and the gospel, he cannot attain to solid tranquility or established comfort of soul. He will always be in danger of building his hope and comfort partly- if not wholly- upon his own graces and performances, instead of grounding them wholly on the surety-righteousness of Jesus Christ; and so he shall be perpetually disquieted by anxious and desponding fear. For since the law knows nothing of pardon of sin, the transgressions which he is daily committing will be greater grounds of fear to him than his graces and performances can be of hope. The spirit of a depressed Christian cannot be raised to solid consolation but by being able so to distinguish between the law and gospel as to rely only, and with settled confidence of the second Adam, presented to him in the gospel, for all his title to the justification of life.<sup>85</sup>

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84. Luther, *Lectures on Galatians, 1535, Chapters 1-4*, vol. 26 of *Luther's Works*, 54-55.

85. Colquhoun, *A Treatise on the Law and the Gospel*, 143.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Thomas Boston fought against the neonomians who argued that the gospel was a “new law.” The neonomian’s remodeled gospel insisted that the legal conditions of faith and repentance had to be met before salvation could be offered to sinners. Recognizing this error as a confusion of law and gospel, Boston taught that grace precedes faith and repentance.

As he lamented the widespread legalism that had infiltrated the Church of Scotland, the following words by Thomas Boston are appropriately suitable to our day as well:

A rational religion is like to be the plague of the day...Legalism is one of the dangerous engines the gates of hell are directing this day against the church built upon a Rock: this is an attempt against the grace of Christ, bringing in a scheme of religion that that has no relation to Jesus Christ and his Spirit, and putting virtue or a virtuous life in the room of Christ’s righteousness, for acceptance with God, and the exerting of our natural powers in the room of the influences of his Spirit, by which means the corruption of nature, and the necessity of regeneration, are buried in deep silence, and living by faith, attending the Spirit’s influence, and communion with God, are branded as enthusiasm: Thus a refined heathenism is palmed on us for Christianity...In a sinking state of the church, the law and gospel are confounded, and the law justles out the gospel, the dark shades of morality take place of gospel light; which plague is this day begun in the church, and well far advanced.<sup>86</sup>

Ben Franklin’s “creed” is alive and well in the Evangelical church today. In the words of Thomas Boston, “The spring of gospel-doctrine, which some time ran clear, is now disturbed; truth is fallen in our streets.”<sup>87</sup> Carried to its logical conclusion, the collapsing of the covenants into a unified theme of grace inevitably results in a rational religion or refined heathenism. It jostles out the gospel and dark shades of morality take the place of gospel light.

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86. Brown, *Gospel Truth*, 106.

87. *Ibid.*, 105.

The collapsing of the covenants is not evidence of an advancing state of the church but rather evidence of a sinking state of the church. Our call is not to go further than Murray and chart a new course but rather to guard and proclaim the proven course, which has been entrusted to us (1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:14; Col. 1:28). Nothing good comes from collapsing the covenants. For in this case, narrow is the way that leads to destruction and broad is the way that leads to life. May we heed the challenge of Boston's exhortation:

Be of a gospel-spirit, having high thoughts of the free grace of God, and deep impressions of the nothingness of man, and all he can do...Learn and hold fast gospel-principles in your heads, and keep up a gospel-frame in your hearts, and have a gospel-practice in your walk. Learn the art of living by faith, believing the promise, and on the credit of the promise, going out in duty; let love constrain you to obedience...<sup>88</sup>

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88. Ibid., 106.

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