

# The Law and the Gospel

by

Fred Malone

Romans 6:14

If I could do one thing to improve the effectiveness of pastoral preaching and pastoral care in the church, it would be to call all pastors to understand the doctrine of the Law and the Gospel in Scripture. When I first went to serve as Ernie Reisinger's associate in 1977, he required me to study Romans 6:14 on the Law and the Gospel and placed a book in my hand to help: *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom* by Samuel Bolton. Ernie's book on The Law and the Gospel contains much of what we talked about in those days.

There is much controversy and ignorance over this doctrine today. Errors in this doctrine have spawned dispensationalism, theonomy, the New Perspective on Paul, hyper-covenantalism, legalism, antinomianism, shallow evangelism, shallower sanctification, worship errors and unbiblical mysticism. Yet our Reformed and Baptist forefathers generally did not succumb to such errors before 1900. Why not? I believe it was because they understood the biblical doctrine of the Law and the Gospel. You can see it in their confessions of faith and their writings.<sup>[1]</sup> I pray that today's pastors, especially Baptist pastors, will restudy this doctrine and reform their lives and ministries by these truths.

Charles Bridges, author of *The Christian Ministry*, said:

The mark of a minister "approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed," is, that he "rightly divides the word of truth." . . . This revelation is divided into two parts — the Law and the Gospel — essentially distinct from each other; though so intimately connected, that an accurate knowledge of neither can be obtained without the other.

<sup>[2]</sup>

If understanding the doctrine of the Law and the Gospel is this important, then it serves every seminary to teach it correctly and every pastor to master it. In this short article, we will look at the doctrine by examining Romans 6:14 both *exegetically* and *pastorally*.

## EXEGETICALLY

*For sin shall not be master over you, for you are not under law, but under grace (Romans 6:14).*

The context of this verse is Paul's discussion of sanctification. Paul taught that all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Romans 1-3). He also taught that repentant sinners are once-for-all justified by faith alone in Christ alone (Romans 4-5). Such a once-for-all justification might entice some to take advantage of God's grace and to continue in sin that grace might abound (6:1). But Paul rejected such thinking about sanctification as impossible for the justified man (Romans 6-8). Why? Because "sin shall not be master [have dominion, rule, tyranny] over you, for [because] you are not under law but under grace" (6:14).

This is not an imperative statement, a command to obey. It is an indicative, a declaration of fact. You might call it a promise of Paul to the Roman Christians. This statement explains why it is impossible for the justified man to live under the dominion of sin as do the unconverted. He is under grace. To be under grace is to be freed from slavery to sin, which is the natural state of all men under law. God will not allow the tyranny of sin in the New Covenant of Jesus Christ (Jeremiah 32:40). "Let us sin that grace might abound" cannot be the working principle of the once-for-all justified by faith alone (Romans 5:1-2). Something about being under grace prevents this. All else is false faith, still under law.

### Under Law

If Paul were speaking only to Jewish Christians, under law might have a primary reference to the Sinai Covenant, as in Hebrews. However, the Roman Christians were primarily Gentiles. To be under law in this passage cannot mean that they were formerly under the Mosaic law or covenant. Yet, Paul says that these Gentiles were formerly under law and, therefore, condemned under sin's dominion.

Paul explains that all men are "under law" to God in Adam as the head of the human race and, therefore, condemned for Adam's one transgression (Romans 5:12-19):

*Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned . .*

*. So then as through one transgression there resulted condemnation to all men . . . (Romans 5:12, 18)*

Adam was placed under law as a working principle in his covenant relationship to God. If he obeyed God's Laws perfectly, he would be blessed; if he disobeyed them, he would be cursed. This law-covenant with Adam is often called the Covenant of Works (Life, Eden, etc.; Hosea 6:7). God also declared him the covenant head and representative of the whole human race. [3] Therefore, all men are condemned in Adam's sin against God's law-demand of perfect obedience. In Adam's sin against God's Laws, while under law to God, he and all his descendants were under law with him and fell under God's condemnation for failing to keep "the Law" perfectly. All men are born under sin because they are born condemned under law in the Covenant of Works, both Jew and Gentile (Romans 3:19-20).

The Laws that all men are guilty of breaking under law are more than the particular law of not eating of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They are the moral Laws of God, the two great commandments, summarized in the Ten Commandments, the reflection of God's image in man. Even Gentiles, who do not have the Mosaic revelation, do "by nature" the things of "THE Law," their conscience bearing witness, because they have the "work of THE Law written in their hearts" as did Adam, though now defiled (Romans 2:14-16).

What Law was originally in Adam's heart while under law and is still written in all men's hearts? In Romans 2:14-16, this Law is defined in context as "the law of nature," the summary of the Ten Commandments, which the Jews later received and broke (2:21, 22; 7:7; stealing, adultery, idolatry, coveting). Thus, all men are condemned under law for not perfectly obeying the Law of God.

In fact, "the power of sin is the Law" (1 Corinthians 15:56). The Law itself can only reveal God's holy nature, the original moral image of God in man, and define sin and righteousness. It ultimately stirs up sin by our inability to keep it perfectly and cannot justify us (Romans 7:8-10). The more we try to keep it for righteousness before God, the more we sin in failure. All men are under sin's dominion because they are under law to God. Therefore, sin is our master while we are under law.

## Under Grace

However, our passage also teaches that all true Christians, once-for-all justified, have been transferred from under law in Adam to under grace in Christ's headship and salvation. This is often called the Covenant of Grace. Though Adam's covenant was a law-based covenant, Christ's covenant is a grace-based covenant. It was announced in Genesis 3:15, prophesied through the Old Testament "covenants of promise" and fulfilled in Jesus Christ's New Covenant of grace.

To be in Christ is to be under grace by faith alone and no longer under law for salvation through perfect obedience in Adam's failed covenant. Everyone is either in Adam under law or in Christ under grace, but not in both at the same time, nor in neither. This is why we must preach the Gospel of grace to all men.

To be under grace means that sin cannot have dominion over us because grace in Christ frees us from the condemnation of perfect Law-obedience in Adam. This is through our Lord's perfect Law-keeping life and atoning death for law-breakers. You really cannot understand the cross without understanding the Law. Under grace means that God grants us justification by faith alone in Jesus Christ through His perfect atonement for sin and the imputation of His perfect righteousness as a gift. It also means that the new birth writes God's Law upon our hearts so that we delight in it again (Jeremiah 31:31-34, 32:40; Romans 7:22). This "grace in which we stand" throughout the Christian's walk impels and empowers the forgiven sinner to love God and keep His commandments without fear of condemnation. Under grace, the believer no longer finds obedience to God's Law a condemning burden, but a joyful privilege of the saved under grace (Romans 3:24, 5:2, 5:15, 5:21, 6:14-15).

The Christian lives under grace according to God's Law so that sin no longer has dominion over him. Although the Christian still commits sins against God's commandments while under grace, the power of sin, which is the condemnation of the law, is broken. Sanctification, then, is the daily exercise of saving faith in Christ, redeemed by His blood and covered with His righteousness, by which justifying faith we seek to keep the Law of God under grace. That is why Jesus said: "if you love Me, you will keep My commandments." Faith working through love to God is the evidence of being

under grace. And such faith always works.

## **PASTORALLY**

### **Evangelism**

Having lost the importance of the Law of God to reveal sin to the sinner, today's evangelism has become more and more shallow. Yet "through the Law comes the knowledge of sin" (Romans 3:19-20). Sin in many presentations is not presented in terms of violating the Ten Commandments and being condemned before God. Therefore, repentance from lawbreaking is either left out of the presentations or repentance is left out altogether. As a result, many who supposedly respond to the gospel call have never repented of their law-breakings and committed themselves to live a holy, obedient life. Our Baptist church rolls are full of them. True evangelism must preach the Gospel of deliverance from sin's reign under law. But if the Law is not used to define sin, how shall sinners know how sinful they are and what kind of holy life they are committing to?

Understanding that the Gospel calls sinners to turn from lawlessness to redemption and law-keeping would revitalize evangelistic presentations and preaching with a clear call to break from sin and to follow Christ as Lord. The errors of "the carnal Christian" and rampant mysticism without the guidance of God's Law would be resolved at the entrance into salvation. Then the call to be Christ's disciple would be more than an insurance policy for heaven. We would see sinners denying themselves, taking up their cross daily and following Jesus, which is a description of a disciple (Matthew 16:24). Is this not what we want to see in evangelism? Then we must preach the Law and the Gospel.

### **Sanctification**

Teachers of the Christian life often neglect the Law of God altogether. Emphasis upon "surrendering all . . . rededicating one's life to Christ . . . following Him wherever He leads . . . loving God with all your heart . . ." etc., have no meaning apart from the Law: "If you love Me, you will keep My commandments . . . Herein is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome" (John 14:15; 1 John 5:3). A church has not followed the Great Commission until we have made disciples, baptized them and taught "them to do all that I commanded you" (Matthew 28:18-20). The church that is not teaching faithful obedience

to God's Law is disobeying the Great Commission. Neither can the church practice church discipline fairly and consistently unless we understand that "through the Law comes the knowledge of sin . . . sin is lawlessness" (Romans 3:20; 1 John 3:4).

### **Preaching**

If the doctrine of the Law and the Gospel is at the center of God's revelation to man for salvation and sanctification, then pastors must be careful to preach the Law and the Gospel in a proper way.

To the unconverted, we must be sure that we explain that they are under law and have no hope of self-righteousness or works-salvation before God. We must also show them their transgressions of the Law so they will know that they are sinners condemned under law and must repent of their law-breakings before God. We must show them how Christ fulfilled the Law for them and died to atone for their law-breakings so they can know forgiveness is just and free as a gift. And we must show them at the entrance of salvation that they are committing themselves to love Jesus Christ and keep His commandments.

To the converted, pastors must make sure that they teach the Law of God to explain what holiness is. And when they teach a commandment to the saints, they must make sure that they teach the Gospel, that the saints are under grace in Christ as they seek to obey, so they will not fall into pride, arrogance or self-righteousness; or despair that their obedience is not good enough for God to accept them. We must make clear when we teach obedience that "having been justified (once-for-all) by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:1). Only those living by faith under grace will have the comfort and strength that "sin will not be master over you, for you are not under law but under grace" (Romans 6:14). Too many times I have heard pastors calling the saints to holy living, faithful obedience to God's commands, without giving them the comfort of the Gospel on their way.

### **CONCLUSION**

Understanding the Law and the gospel properly is the key to Christ-centered living and preaching. We present Him as one who fulfilled the Law for sinners under law, who vicariously took their law-breakings and their deserved judgment upon Himself, then died a righteous sacrifice to God upon the cross for the unrighteous. "He who knew no sin, became sin on our

behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Corinthians 5:21). Now, we call all who are condemned under law to repent and accept by faith reconciliation under grace and eternal life.

And we call the saved by grace to live joyfully under grace by faith and carve out an obedient, holy, Law-keeping life out of love for their dear Savior and Lord, who said: “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments” (John 14:15).

This is the remedy for shallow evangelism, shallow sanctification, unconverted church members, rampant unguided mysticism and lacking church discipline. The Law and the Gospel are different, yet they are inseparable friends. The Law supports the preaching of the Gospel, revealing the meaning and glory of the cross. And the Gospel, which saves from the condemnation of the Law, sends the redeemed back to the Law as a rule of life under grace.

## FOOTNOTES:

[1] See Chapter 19 – “Of the Law of God” in the Second London Baptist Confession (1689). This chapter is also included in the Philadelphia and Charleston Baptist confessions to which many of our Southern Baptist forefathers held.

[2] Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), 222.

[3] James P. Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology* (1887; reprint, Pompano Beach, Florida: Christian Gospel Foundation, 1979), 234-239.