



Law and Gospel

Issue 28

Spring 1997

Contents

[Inside Cover]

A Neglected Topic for Needy Times

Tom Ascol

Law and Gospel

Ernest Reisinger

A Much-Needed Tool for Evangelism

William Hatfield

Book Reviews

- *Baptist Confessions, Covenants, and Catechisms*, edited by Timothy and Denise George; Broadman & Holman, 1996; 282 pp. \$24.99.

Tom Ascol

- *The Art of Prophecy* by William Perkins, Banner of Truth Trust, 1996, 191 pp. \$6.99.

Derek Johnson

Missions & the Sovereignty of God

News

Letters

Sidebar



The Founders Journal



Contributors:

Dr. Thomas K. Ascol is Pastor of the Grace Baptist Church in Cape Coral, Florida.

Mr. Ernest Reisinger is an author and retired pastor living in Cape Coral, Florida.

Dr. William Hatfield is Pastor of the First Baptist Church in Dierks, Arkansas.

Book Reviewer:

Derek Johnson is a pastoral intern at Grace Baptist Church in Cape Coral, Florida.

Cover Photo:

Geoffrey Thomas proclaiming the Doctrines of Grace (Reid Chapel, Samford University) during the 1996 Founders Conference. Photo by William D. Lollar.

Editor:

Thomas K. Ascol, PhD

Associate Editor:

Ernest C. Reisinger

Contributing Editors:

Bill Ascol, MDiv

Mark Dever, PhD

Timothy George, PhD

Fred A. Malone, PhD

Joe Nesom, PhD

Tom Nettles, PhD

Roger Nicole, ThD, PhD, DD

Don Whitney, DMin

Hal Wynn, BD

Graphic Design Editor:

William D. Lollar

Webmaster:

Stan Reeves, PhD

The Founders Journal is a quarterly publication which takes as its theological framework the first recognized confession of faith that Southern Baptists produced, [*The Abstract of Principles*](#).

[Subscription and Contact Info](#)



A Neglected Topic for Needy Times

Tom Ascol

Everyone laments the increasing moral decay of American society. Crime and violence have turned our homes into fortresses and given birth to security as an industry. Sexual perversion and political scandal have become such fixed parts of the American landscape that it is now the chaste young person and the honest politician who amaze us.

While preachers decry it, congressmen debate it, and taxpayers pay for it, few people have zeroed in on the real reason for our culture's moral degeneration. God is the Creator. He has made mankind for Himself. He has given to men and women a fixed moral code, a standard by which we must live. Romans 1 teaches us that where this standard is expelled, God's judgment soon replaces it. What is taking place in our culture will never be properly assessed until it is seen in the light of God's absolute, unchanging moral standard.

Without a renewed emphasis on God's law our nation will remain like a ship at sea without a rudder; like a man lost in the wilderness without a compass. Christians, above all people, must be clear on this point. In the forthcoming book, *The Law and the Gospel* (soon to be released by P & R), Associate Editor Ernest Reisinger addresses this important topic.

Few subjects compare in importance with "law and gospel." It is the hub from which all other biblical doctrines extend. To be unclear on either law or gospel is to be spiritually paralyzed. To confuse the relationship between the two is to fall into serious, crippling error. The great pastor, theologian and hymn-writer, John Newton, declared:

Clearly to understand the distinction, connection, and harmony between the law and the Gospel, and the mutual subserviency to illustrate and establish each other, is a singular privilege, and a happy means of preserving the soul from being entangled by errors on the right hand or the left (*Works*, 1:350).

The subject of "law and gospel" is vitally important to a proper understanding of God's Word. All of the Bible is either law or gospel. God, man, sin, Christ, redemption, grace, guilt, judgment, atonement, forgiveness and holiness are all revealed to us in the Scriptures in terms of law and gospel. The Christian who neglects the study of this subject, therefore, does so to his own spiritual detriment.

As important as the subject is, it has been tragically neglected by modern Bible-believing Christians. The present generation of evangelicals simply assumes that it understands the gospel. Yet, as several recent studies have embarrassingly revealed, a majority cannot even cite the basic content of the gospel. Fortunately, this easy peace with a contentless Christianity is being increasingly challenged by respected evangelical leaders.

But a necessary component of the renaissance of God's gospel must be the rediscovery of God's law. In fact, the gospel cannot be established on any other foundation than that of law. This was readily acknowledged by earlier generations of Christians. Prior to this century sermons and studies on the Ten Commandments were common place in Bible-believing churches. Today, not only have the commandments been expelled from our schools and our courthouses, they have effectively been discarded in our churches. *Less than 1%* of all church members can even recite the Ten Commandments!

The failure to teach God's law in our churches has had devastating consequences. Not only is gross sin being flaunted in the public square but also the moral conduct of our church children has degenerated to alarming proportions. Josh McDowell has recently published the results of his study of young people who are actively involved in evangelical churches. He discovered that within the previous three months:

- 66% had lied to their parents
- 36% had cheated on an exam
- 55% had engage in sexual activity
- 20% had tried to hurt someone physically

Most of these teenagers profess to believe the gospel for salvation. Yet, most are not obeying God's law. Something is gravely wrong.

The relationship between law and gospel desperately needs to be rediscovered in our day. The law was given to teach sinners their sin. When a sinner sees the law in all of its strictness and spirituality he thereby comes to understand the spiritual bankruptcy and grave danger of his condition. The law, able to condemn but unable to save, sends the convicted sinner looking for salvation in the only place it can be found. It sends him to Jesus Christ who, in His perfect law-fulfilling life and perfect law-fulfilling death gave Himself to redeem helpless sinners. In this way the law is useful in evangelism. Spurgeon said,

The divine Spirit wounds before he heals, he kills before he makes alive. We usually draw a distinction between law-work and gospel-work; but law-work is the work of the Spirit of God, and is so far a true gospel-work that it is a frequent preliminary to the joy and peace of the gospel. The law is the needle, which draws after it the silken thread of blessing, and you cannot get the thread into the stuff without the needle: men do not receive the liberty wherewith Christ makes them free till, first of all, they have felt bondage within their own spirit driving them to cry for liberty to the great Emancipator, the Lord Jesus Christ. This sense or spirit of bondage works for our salvation by leading us to cry for mercy (*Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit*, 30:15-16).

But what about the believer? Does the law have any place in the Christian's life? Absolutely. When Christ receives repentant, believing men and women He forgives them, grants them His righteousness and gives them His Spirit. He writes His law on their new hearts and empowers them to follow Him in obedient discipleship. As the One who perfectly kept the law Himself, He then leads His disciples to obey His commandments. Thus, the commandments continue to be important for Christian living--not because they provide any power to pursue holiness, but because they define that which has always constituted holiness.

It is no disrespect to the gospel or to God's grace to recognize the proper place of law in the believer's life. Nor does emphasizing the law's necessary role in Christian living constitute legalism. Martin Luther, the great champion of free grace against Roman Catholic legalism, had to fight against such misunderstanding with some of his closest followers. In his 1539 tract, *Against the Antinomians*, he wrote,

It is most suprising to me that anyone can claim that I reject the law or the Ten Commandments, since there is available, in more than one edition, my exposition of the Ten Commandments, which

furthermore are daily preached and practiced in our churches....Furthermore, the commandments are sung in two versions, as well as painted, printed, carved, and recited by the children morning, noon, and night. I know of no manner in which we do not use them unless it be that we unfortunately do not practice and paint them with our deeds and our life as we should. I myself, as old and as learned as I am, recite the commandments daily word for word like a child.

What a contrast Luther's attitude is to the spirit of the present age which insists that relativism is the only truth and tolerance is the only virtue! Absolutes are seen as archaic and right and wrong are forgotten categories. The Church, rather than effectively standing against this spirit, has been infected by it. We have lost our doctrinal and ethical moorings. We have forsaken our foundations. Until they are recovered, God's people will lack the spiritual ability and moral authority to resist the onslaught of cultural decadence.

When expounding the great themes related to law and gospel perils abound on both the right hand and the left. It is not easy to avoid the Scylla of legalism and the Charybdis of antinomianism. The spiritual carnage which is scattered across church history bears sad testimony to this fact. It is foolish, however, to think that the errors can be avoided by neglecting the subject altogether. Rather, a right understanding of what the Bible teaches on the subject is what is desperately needed. Ernie Reisinger's new book addresses this need in a wonderful way. What it says is in harmony with the great creeds, confessions and catechisms which grew out of the Protestant Reformation.

Our spiritual forebears of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries clearly saw the importance of this subject for healthy Christian life. John Calvin concluded his ninety-third lecture on the Minor Prophets with the following prayer. May its burden be kindled in the hearts of modern pastors, and may its request be answered in our churches:

*Grant, Almighty God,
that as thou hast made known to us thy Law,
and hast also added thy Gospel,
in which thou callest us to thy service,
and also invitest us with all kindness to partake of thy grace,--
O grant, that we may not be deaf,
either to thy command or to the promises of thy mercy,
but render ourselves in both instances submissive to thee,
and so learn to devote all our faculties to thee,
that we may in truth avow that a rule of a holy and religious life
has been delivered to us in thy law,
and that we may also firmly adhere to thy promises,
lest through any of the allurements of the world,
or through the flatteries and crafts of Satan,
thou shouldest suffer our minds to be drawn away from that love
which thou hast once manifested to us in thine only-begotten Son,
and in which thou daily confirmest us
by the teaching of the Gospel,
until we at length shall come to the full enjoyment
of this love in that celestial inheritance,
which has been purchased for us by the blood of thy only Son.
Amen.*



The **Founders
Journal**
Contents Issue 28

The **Founders
Journal**
Main Page

Law and Gospel

Ernest Reisinger

Importance

Why is the subject of "law and gospel" important? Let me state six reasons:

1. Because there is no point of divine truth upon which ministers and Christians make greater mistakes than upon the proper relationship which exists between the law and the gospel.
2. Because there can be no true evangelical holiness, either in heart or life, except it proceed from faith working by love; and no true faith, either of the law or the gospel, unless the leading distinction between the one and the other are spiritually discerned. The law and the gospel are set before us in the Bible as one undivided system of truth, yet an unchangeable line of distinction is drawn between them. There is also an inseparable connection and relationship. Unfortunately, some see the difference between them but not the relationship; however, the man who knows the relative position of the law and the gospel has the keys of the situation in understanding the Bible and its doctrine.
3. Because a proper understanding between the law and the gospel is the mark of a minister who rightly divides the word of truth. Charles Bridges summed up this mark of a true minister: "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 implies a full and direct application of the gospel to the mass of his unconverted hearers, combines with a body of spiritual instruction to the several classes of Christians. His system will be marked by Scriptural symmetry and comprehensiveness. It will embrace the whole revelation of God, in its doctrinal instructions, experimental privileges and practical results. This revelation is divided into two parts--the Law and the Gospel--essentially distinct from each other; though so intimately connected, that no accurate knowledge of either can be obtained without the other...." (*The Christian Ministry*, [London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1967], p. 222).

The law, like Christ, has always been crucified between two thieves--Antinomianism on the one side and Legalism on the other side. The antinomian sees no relationship between the law and the gospel except that of being free. The legalist fails to understand that vital distinction between the two.

Some preach the law instead of the gospel. Some modify them and preach neither the law nor the gospel. Some think the law is the gospel, and some think the gospel is the law; those who hold these views are not clear on either.

But others ask, Has not the law been fully abrogated by the coming of Christ into the world? Would you bring us under that heavy yoke of bondage which none has ever been able to bear? Does not the New Testament expressly declare that we are not under the law but under grace? That Christ was made under the law to free His people therefrom? Is not an attempt to over-awe men's conscience by the authority of the Decalogue a legalistic imposition, altogether at variance with that Christian liberty which the Savior has brought in by His obedience unto death? We answer: so far from the law being abolished by the coming of Christ into this world, He Himself emphatically stated "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the

Prophets [or the enforcers thereof]. I did not come to destroy, but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law, till all is fulfilled" (Matt. 5:17, 18). True, the Christian is not under the law as a covenant of works nor as a ministration of condemnation, but he is under it as *a rule of life and an objective standard of righteousness for all people for all times*. This makes it important.

4. Because the power of a holy life needs to be accompanied by instruction in the pattern of it. In what does sanctified behavior consist? It consists in pleasing God. What is it that pleases God? The doing of His will. Where is His will to be discerned? In His holy law. The law, then, is the Christian's rule of life, and the believer finds that he delights in the law of God after the inward man (Rom. 7:22). The Christian is not lawless but "under the law to Christ", a phrase from Paul which would be more accurately rendered "in the law of Christ" (1 Cor. 9:21). Sin is lawlessness, and salvation is the bringing of the lawless one into his true relation to God, within the blessedness of His holy law. The law of Moses is not other than the law of Christ; it is an objective standard just as Christ is our pattern.
5. Because the Ten Commandments were uniquely honored by God, founded in love, and are obeyed out of affection for the One who provided redemption. A. W. Pink, writing about the uniqueness of the Ten Commandments, said, "Their uniqueness appears first in that this revelation of God at Sinai--which was to serve for all coming ages as the grand expression of his holiness and the summation of man's duty--was attended with such awe-inspiring phenomena that the very manner of their publication plainly showed that God Himself assigned to the Decalogue peculiar importance. The Ten Commandments were uttered by God in an audible voice, with the fearful adjuncts of clouds and darkness, thunders and lightnings and the sound of a trumpet, and they were the only parts of Divine Revelation so spoken--none of the ceremonial or civil precepts were thus distinguished. Those Ten Words, and they alone, were written by the finger of God upon tables of stone, and they alone were deposited in the holy ark for safe keeping. Thus, in the unique honor conferred upon the Decalogue itself we may perceive its paramount importance in the Divine government." (*The Ten Commandments*, ([Swengel Pennsylvania: Reiner Publications 1961], p.5).
6. Because there is a need for a fixed, objective, moral standard. The moral law carries permanent validity since it is an objective standard uniquely sanctioned by God and goes straight to the root of our moral problems. It lays its finger on the church's deepest need in evangelism as well as in the Christian life: sanctification. The Ten Commandments are desperately needed not only in the church but also in society. We live in a lawless age at the end of the twentieth century; lawlessness reigns in the home, in the church, in the school, and in the land. The Scriptures tell us that "righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people." The Ten Commandments are the only true standard of righteousness.

Moral Measure

Tragically, Christians have contributed to our society's moral decline by removing the Ten Commandments from their instruction. The law restrains sin. Without the moral law this world would be a field of blood, as is evidenced in place where there is no regard for God's commands. The puritan, Samuel Bolton, in *The True Bounds of Christian Freedom* ([London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1964], p. 79), said:

Blessed be God that there is this fear upon the spirits of wicked men; otherwise we could not well live in the world. One man would be a devil to another. Every man would be a Cain to his brother, an Amon to his sister, an Absalom to his father, a Saul to himself, a Judas to his master; for what one does, all men would do, were it not for a restraint upon their spirits.

Not only the wicked, but also followers of God need an objective, fixed, yes, an absolute standard of right and wrong. A devotional life cannot exist without regard to morality. We cannot separate devotion from duty. After all, what constitutes a devout person? Someone who is seeking to do the will of God, someone who is instructed in sanctified behavior. And in what does sanctified behavior consist? In doing the will of God. And where do we find the will of God in respect to morality? In the only true standard summarizing the moral law--the Ten Commandments.

This subject, law and gospel, is in the highest degree, important and edifying, both to saints and to sinners. To know it experimentally, is to "be wise unto salvation;" and to live habitually under the influence of it, is to be at once holy and happy. To have spiritual and distinct views of it, is the way to be kept from verging toward self-righteousness, on the one hand, and licentiousness, on the other; and to be enabled to assert, the absolute freeness of sovereign grace, and at the same time, the sacred interests of true holiness. Without an experimental knowledge, and an unfeigned faith, of the law and the gospel, a man can neither venerate the authority of the one, nor esteem the grace of the other.

The law and the gospel, are the principal parts of Divine Revelation; or rather, they are the center, the sum, and the substance, of the whole. Every passage of sacred Scripture, is either law or gospel; or is capable of being referred, either to the one or to the other. Even the Histories of the Old and New Testaments, so far as the agency of man is introduced, are but narratives of facts, done in conformity, or in opposition, to the moral law, and done in the belief, or disbelief, of the gospel. The ordinances of the ceremonial law, given to the ancient Israelites, were, for the most part, grafted on the Second and Fourth Commandments of the moral law; and in their typical reference, were an obscure revelation of the gospel. The precepts of the judicial law, are all reducible to commandments of the moral law, and especially, to those of the second table. All threatenings, whether in the Old or in the New Testament, are threatenings either of the law, or of the gospel; and in every promise, is a promise either of the one, or of the other. Every prophecy of Scripture, is a declaration of things obscure, or future, connected either with the law or the gospel, or with both. And there is not, in the sacred Volume, one admonition, or reproof, or exhortation, but what refers, either to the law or the gospel, or to both. If then, a man cannot distinguish aright, between the law and the gospel; he cannot rightly understand, so much as a single article of Divine truth. If he does not have spiritual and just apprehensions of the holy law, he cannot have spiritual and transforming discoveries of the glorious gospel; and, on the other hand, if his views of the gospel, be erroneous or wrong, his notions of the law, cannot be right.

Besides, if the speculative knowledge, of the law and the gospel, be superficial and indistinct, they will often be in danger of mingling the one with the other and they will, in a greater degree than can be conceived, retard their progress in holiness, as well as in peace and comfort. But on the contrary, if they can distinguish well, between the law and the gospel, they will thereby, under the illuminating influences of the Holy Spirit, be able, to discern the glory of the whole scheme of redemption; to reconcile all passages of Scripture which appear contrary to each other; to try doctrines whether they are of God; to calm their own consciences in seasons of mental trouble; and to advance resolutely in evangelical holiness and spiritual consolation.

It is important to consider the difference between the law and the gospel as well as the agreement between them. The establishment of the law by the gospel, or the subservience of the gospel to the authority and honor of the law must be addressed. The believer's privilege of being dead to the law as a covenant of works, with a necessary consequence of it is very important. To emphasize this importance of the law (Ten Commandments) I will call three credible witnesses.

The Testimony of Three Witnesses

Consider the attitudes expressed by three of God's choice spokesmen regarding His law:

1. *David, a man after God's own heart--the sweet singer of Israel.* "Make me to go in thy path of thy commandments; for therein do I delight" (Ps. 119:35). "Indignation has taken hold of me Because of the wicked, who forsake Your law." (Ps. 119:53). "Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day" (Ps. 119:97). "I hate the double-minded, But I love Your law" (Ps. 119:113). "It is time for You to act, O LORD, For they have regarded Your law as void" (Ps. 119:126).
2. *Our Lord's chief apostle--Paul.* "Do we then make void the law through faith? Certainly not! On the contrary, we establish the law" (Rom. 3:31). "Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good" (Rom. 7:12). "For I delight in the law of God according to the inward man" (Rom. 7:22). "Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith" (Gal. 3:24).
3. *Our Lord Himself.* "Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled" (Mt. 5:17, 18,).

We often hear the expression, "Be like Jesus." What was He like? He was perfect. How do we know? We must have a perfect standard by which to judge and that perfect standard is the perfect law of God (Ps. 19:7).

The Testimony of the Whole Bible

The importance of this subject is seen in that the whole Bible is either law or gospel--or law *and* gospel related. For example:

- The history of the Old and New Testaments, as far as man is concerned, is nothing more than narratives of lives lived in conformity or opposition to the moral law, or lived in belief or unbelief of the gospel.
- All the threatenings of the Old and New Testaments are threatenings either of the law or of the gospel. "He who believes in Him is not condemned; but he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God" (John 3:18). "...when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on those who do not know God, and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. These shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power" (2 Thess. 1:7-9).
- Every prophecy of Scripture is a declaration of things obscure and future and is connected with either law or gospel.
- Every promise is a promise related to either the law or the gospel, or both.
- Every good admonition, reproof, or exhortation is with reference to the law or the gospel, or both.

Thus the law and the gospel are the center, the sum, and the substance of the whole Bible. How important then is it properly to relate and distinguish the two? The closer we get to a clear view of the difference between the law and the gospel, and the connection between them as they serve to establish each other, the more we will understand the Holy Scriptures and thus the will and mind of God, and the more useful we will be in His service.

Two Kinds of Knowledge

Another indication of the importance of the law is that it reveals the two kinds of knowledge that are necessary for salvation:

1. *The law reveals the character of God.* God's law comes from His nature. The nature of God determines what is right, and the will of God imposes that standard upon all His creatures as a moral obligation. Since his will flows from His nature, and the law is perfect (Ps. 19:7), the law reflects the perfection of his nature.

Man is not answerable to an abstract law, but to God. Behind the law is the Lawgiver. Therefore, to find fault with the law is to find fault with the Lawgiver. The law is not the arbitrary edicts of a capricious despot, but the wise, holy loving precepts of one who is jealous for His glory and for the good of His people.

Christ was perfect. How do we know? He kept the law perfectly--He was the law personified. Christ perfectly manifests the Father : "For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily" (Col. 2:9).

2. *The law reveals the condition of man.* To walk up to someone and say, "All have sinned" does not bring conviction unless that person knows what sin is. "Sin is the transgression of the law" (1 John 3:4). "By the law is the knowledge of sin" (Rom. 3:20). The knowledge of sin as violation of God's law brings conviction.

The Law and Evangelism

Similarly, the importance of the law is seen in a subject that is dear to the heart of every true preacher and every true Christian--evangelism.

In days gone by, children learned the commandments before they learned John 3:16, because only then did John 3:16 make any sense. Likewise, John Elliot's first translation work among the Indians was not of John 3:16 but of the Ten Commandments, and his first sermon was on the commandments. Did John Elliot think the Indians would be saved by the Ten Commandments? Of course not, but the commandments would show them why they needed to be saved--they were law-breakers, and they needed a law-keeper to be their substitute.

John Paton, a great Presbyterian missionary to the New Hebrides, first taught the commandments. Why? People will never be properly interested in a relationship with the Redeemer until they see the terrible breach in their relationship to the Creator. The commandments are the moral mandate of the Creator to creatures. The sharp needle of the law makes way for the scarlet thread of the gospel. The law is indispensable in biblical, God-centered evangelism.

Run and work the law commands
But gives me neither feet nor hands.
A sweeter sound the gospel brings;
It bids me fly and gives me wings.

Summary

1. The whole Bible is law and gospel, and the two are so vitally related to each other that an accurate

knowledge of either cannot be obtained without the other.

2. The law reveals the character of God and the condition of man. These two kinds of knowledge are absolutely necessary for salvation. (See, for example, the first chapter in Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.)
3. The law is essential to true biblical evangelism because by the law is the knowledge of sin. It was the law that was effective in Paul's conversion: "I would not have known sin except through the law" (Rom. 7:7).
4. The law is the only biblical rule and direction for obedience--that is, a sanctified life. In what does sanctified behavior consist? Doing the will of God. What is the will of God in respect to morality? The moral law summarized in the Ten Commandments.
5. The law is one of three truths of the Bible that stand or fall together: (1) the law of God, (2) the cross of Christ, (3) the righteous judgment of almighty God.

First, if there is no law there is no sin because sin is the transgression of the law (The Ten Commandments).

Second, if there is no cross there is no hope for poor sinners--no forgiveness of sin.

Third, if there is no righteous judgment of almighty God who cares about sin or a Savior. These three truths stand or fall together.

The following statement by J. Gresham Machen, the principal founder of Westminster Theological Seminary will emphasize the importance of the place of the law.

A new and more powerful proclamation of that law is perhaps the most pressing need of the hour; men would have little difficulty with the gospel if they had only learned the lesson of the law. So it always is: a low view of law always brings legalism in religion; a high view of law makes a man a seeker after grace/ Pray God that the high view may again prevail. (*What is Faith?*, [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust], pp. 141-142).

Preacher, preach the moral law; and parents, teach your children the Ten Commandments.



A Much-Needed Tool for Evangelism

William Hatfield

Most believers want that old time-religion, that first-century faith that shook the Roman Empire to its very foundations. It's good enough for us! We want to be like that vibrant early church. We want to see our world turned upside down with the Gospel of Christ.

Sadly, although we long for that old-time religion, we seriously deviate from that old-time evangelism. For decades we have omitted an element of it that the Lord Jesus Christ, His apostles, and one of our most esteemed Baptist forefathers deemed important enough to include. This is especially ironic, considering that much of the evangelical church emphasizes praying for worldwide revival.

I am writing to call us back to this powerful implement in soul-winning: the Ten Commandments, which I will refer to as the Law of God, the Decalogue, and the Commandments. Unlike most of modern Christendom, the premier evangelists of all time used the Law in their efforts to reach the lost. This article will, by the grace of God, demonstrate that fact and present a methodology of doing it in today's setting.[\[1\]](#)

What the Law Cannot Do

To avoid misunderstanding, I must first underscore that the Commandments cannot save from sin. Obeying them will not make one right in the sight of Holy God, for they were designed for no such purpose. Gal. 3:11 declares that the Commandments do not acquit one of the charge of sin: "But that no man is justified by the law in the sight of God, it is evident."

If that were not enough, Rom. 3:20 likewise thunders this truth in crystal-clear language: "Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight."

Anyone who counts on his obedience to the Decalogue to get him to heaven is as doomed as one who defends himself against an enraged grizzly bear with a B-B gun. To trust the Law to make one acceptable to the Lord is an utterly false hope.

What the Law Can Do

Even so, Holy Scripture asserts that God's Law has three uses. This article is concerned only with the pedagogical (theological) use--its utilization in evangelism.[\[2\]](#) Rom. 3:20 ends by describing this use: "for by the Law is the knowledge of sin."

Although it cannot save him, it can show him that he needs to be saved. It teaches man that he is a hopelessly lost and undone sinner. It performs this wondrous task by teaching him what sin is--the breaking of it (1 John 3:4, which defines sin, literally, as "lawlessness")--and making him realize that his life falls short of what God demands--perfection.[\[3\]](#)

It may come as a great surprise to many Christians, but few lost people know what sin is. They do not have a clue. Western civilization is fast approaching the paganism of the first century, and, except in rural areas, Christian influence upon those outside the church is a thing of the past. Far more pervasive and powerful is the influence of pop culture. Many movies trivialize theft by portraying robbers in a very sympathetic light, even as heroes. The police on TV cop shows are as sexually immoral as the cocaine dealers they pursue. Magazines like *Time* and *Newsweek*, rock and country-western music,

TV sitcoms, and even government agencies condition people to view promiscuity and homosexuality as morally neutral or even good.

Consequently, the concept of sin is an empty bucket to most unbelievers--it contains very little meaning. The images it conjures up in their minds, if any, encompass only the most heinous crimes: murder (with an exception for abortion, of course), rape, and child molesting.

Neither do non-Christians have any inkling how terribly evil sin is in the sight of Holy God. They do not consider such matters as coveting or children disobeying parents to be what they are: abominable sins, high-handed treason against the Almighty. Consequently, man needs an objective standard to teach him not only what sin is, but also how bad it is.

Thankfully, the Lord has provided just such a criterion: His holy Law. As the unbeliever compares his life to its demands, he finds that, try as he may, he can never measure up to its strict requirements. If he strives ever more to obey it, he only falls farther short. It is a slave driver who cannot be pleased, for it allows no room for error. The sinner is like a high jumper who runs for the bar and leaps with all his might, only to realize that the bar is five hundred feet above the ground. No matter how hard he tries, he cannot even come close.

It then begins to dawn on the non-Christian that the taskmaster he serves makes a demand that, even at his best, he cannot meet: moral perfection. He begins to despair of ever saving himself. He agonizes, "Is there any hope for me?" The Law has done its job. It has plowed the soil of his heart. It has exposed the evil that he long overlooked, and he is now ready as never before to hear of the love and sacrifice of the Lord Jesus on behalf of sinners. Gal. 3:24 explains: "Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith."

The mercy of Christ and the freeness of grace appear wonderfully precious when set against the backdrop of the Law. The Law cannot save the sinner, but it can drive him to despair of attempting to save himself and can direct him to turn to the only one who can. It can be his teacher to bring him to Christ, that he might be justified by faith.[\[4\]](#)

Christ Used the Law Evangelistically

Let us now examine how the premier evangelists of all time used the Law to reach the lost. We will begin by considering how the Son of God employed it in His encounter with the man known as the rich young ruler in Matt. 19:16-22. For years I puzzled over Christ's approach in dealing with this individual. Why, when asked a question that would thrill the heart of any Christian--"What good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?"--did He quote from the Decalogue, rather than exhorting him to trust in Him?

The answer is simple. The Lord Jesus was using the Law to show the ruler that he fell short of God's standard of righteousness. In verse 17 our Savior called the man to recognize the unique goodness of God (His holiness). In the next two verses He applied the Law to him in a general manner by walking him through its Second Table (the commandments concerning one's conduct toward his fellow man). When the ruler responded that he had obeyed all these, the Lord narrowed His focus and applied the Law more specifically in verse 21. He preceded His demand for radical discipleship ("come and follow me") by commands to sell all his possessions and to donate the proceeds to the poor.

Christ was not teaching salvation by self-denial, but, rather, was making the ruler aware that he had by no means kept the Commandments. Indeed, he had flagrantly violated the First--his real god was his possessions--and the Tenth--he was quite covetous and materialistic. The sinner was then face to face with his own failure to live up to the Law's demands. In this manner Christ used the Law to show him that he was guilty in the eyes of Holy God.[\[5\]](#)

Now let us turn our attention to Christ's dealing with the Samaritan woman in the fourth chapter of the Gospel of John. Rather than merely asking her, "You know you're a sinner, don't you?," our Savior wisely made her face a Law of God that she had broken repeatedly. In verses 16-18 He instructed her to call her husband, then reminded her that she had had five

husbands and was living in adultery with a sixth. In so doing He was making her realize that she had violated the Seventh Commandment and therefore stood condemned before the Lord. When she, unlike the rich young ruler who turned away, showed more interest in the person of Christ, He revealed to her that He was indeed the Messiah (verse 26), the Redeemer of Jew and Samaritan alike. Her subsequent actions indicate that she came into a saving relationship with Him by faith.

The Son of God brilliantly used the Law as a search light to show the lost their sin. This by itself is reason enough for us to do likewise. But He was not the only one in the pages of the New Testament to employ it in this manner.

The Apostles Used the Law Evangelistically

Peter's sermon on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:14-40) contains another prime example of the Law employed in soul-winning. This time the audience was a huge one: Jews from all over the Roman Empire. The Apostle charged them with murdering none other than the promised Messiah. In verse 23 he declared, "Him [Jesus of Nazareth]...ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain."

In verse 36 he hit them again with the same accusation: "God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ." In this terrible act of violence they had transgressed the Sixth Commandment. They stood guilty in the eyes of the Lord, with nowhere to turn. This was a sledgehammer blow that shattered the imagined righteousness of those who knew the Law well. The Decalogue was a vital portion of a message that the Holy Spirit used to call about three thousand souls into the kingdom of God.

Next, notice Paul's soul-winning message in Acts 17:22-31. This time the hearers were people who apparently knew nothing of the true God or His Law: pagan Greek philosophers. The Apostle spent the bulk of his message enlightening them about the nature of their Maker. He declared that God created all that is (verse 24), then verbally slapped their faces with their failure to keep their Creator's Law. Paul made his audience face their violation of God's prohibition against the worship of idols. In verses 25 ("[God] neither is worshipped with men's hands, as though he needed anything") and 29 ("We ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and man's device") he did little more than state and explain a Commandment that is basic to the nature of true religion. The Second Commandment says, "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth."

Even though these people probably knew nothing of the God of Israel or His Commandments, for them to break it was sin nevertheless. Their ignorance did not excuse them, and the Almighty demanded that they repent of their wickedness (verse 30). Gloriously, several did just that! [\[6\]](#)

Spurgeon Used the Law Evangelistically

Finally, let us consider the words of a great man who diligently followed the examples of his greater predecessors. Charles H. Spurgeon, one of our most esteemed Baptist forefathers, asserted:

We usually draw a distinction between law-work and gospel-work; but law-work is the work of the Spirit of God, and is so far a true gospel-work that it is a frequent preliminary to the joy and peace of the gospel. The law is the needle, which draws after it the silken thread of blessing, and you cannot get the thread into the stuff without the needle: men do not receive the liberty wherewith Christ makes them free till, first of all, they have felt bondage within their own spirit driving them to cry for liberty to the great Emancipator.[\[7\]](#)

Spurgeon regarded the Decalogue to be highly effective in evangelism. Modern Baptists and indeed all Christians would do well to heed his admonition.

The Son of God and His apostles used the Decalogue in their efforts to reach the lost. So did one of the greatest soul-winners since their day. If it was good enough for them, it certainly should be for us! I do not believe that we can improve on their methodology.

We Should Use the Law Evangelistically

How do we use the Law in evangelism? Here is a method that I have developed through study of the Scripture and refined through many witnessing encounters. My goal is to make the sinner face the guilt he has incurred before Holy God by using the Law to show him a few specific sins he has committed. I try to do this as humbly, tactfully, and graciously as I can. My desire is that the heavy weight of his sins will become so real to him that, when I then present Christ as his only hope of salvation, he will gladly flee into His loving arms.

Because few non-Christians have any idea that God is holy, that is where I begin:

God is holy (Hab. 1:13, Rev. 15:4). That means He is pure. Sinless. He never does anything wrong. We say, "Nobody's perfect," but that's not true of God. He is perfect! And one day everyone will stand before Him to give account of everything he did on earth.

Then I move to man's sin:

We need to know what this holy God expects of us, and He tells us in the Ten Commandments. Some of these are 'Honor thy father and thy mother,' 'Thou shalt not bear false witness,' and 'Thou shalt not covet.' If you have ever disobeyed your parents, lied, or lusted after something that was not yours, even just one time, you have broken God's Law. Breaking it is what the Bible calls sin (1 John 3:4).

I then ask my friend if he has broken any of them (no one has yet told me that he has kept them all). I am praying that he will begin to see that there is a huge gulf between his righteousness and that of the Lord.

I try to tailor my approach to the individual. The above paragraphs outline witnessing to a child using the commandments he is most likely to break: the Fifth, Ninth, and Tenth. If I am sharing the Gospel with a prison inmate who was convicted of robbery, I emphasize the Eighth--"If you have ever taken something that was not yours...", if with someone who thinks he is morally good, the Ninth and Tenth coupled with James 2:10, "For whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all," and if with a promiscuous person, the Seventh.

I then warn him that he, as well as all people, has offended this holy God and is condemned in His sight. The Almighty is angry with him because of his sins. Even if he somehow could stop sinning, that would not erase the guilt of his past transgressions. Unless something is done to remove them, God will one day judge and sentence him to eternal punishment (Rev. 20:11-15). I stress that God would be perfectly fair to send us to hell, because we are guilty--we have real, actual, genuine guilt. We cannot honestly claim to be innocent.

At this point I try to get him to admit again his own sinfulness. I am praying that he, like the man Christian in *Pilgrim's Progress*, will begin to see the huge load of sins he carries as it is: something that will press him into hell unless removed. Then I share the love and mercy of the Lord Jesus and exhort him to repent of his sins and to trust in Him alone. What I hope to see is the godly sorrow for sins that culminates in heart repentance and faith.[\[8\]](#)

A Tangible Benefit of Using the Law Evangelistically

What practical effect does using the Decalogue as a witnessing tool have? A concern of mine as a pastor is the large

number of supposed converts who show no lasting fruit of salvation. Although they can remember "the day and the hour," their lives are not the slightest bit different from what they were before they professed faith. Their normal way of life has no place for God, His Bible, or His people, and they seem perfectly at home in sin.

Wishing not to increase the ranks of these poor deceived souls, but, rather, to see genuine converts, I have found using the Law in witnessing to be of significant benefit. My experience has been that, although this approach does not eliminate false professions, it greatly reduces them. A much higher percentage of those claiming to be saved under this methodology remain faithful to the Lord over the long haul.

Conclusion

It is my prayer and fervent hope that Southern Baptists, with our passion for soul-winning, will set the pace for the evangelical community in reviving the use of this powerful instrument. Anyone who seeks to obey Christ's imperative to witness should give it serious consideration. May we once again employ this wonderful, God-ordained method of doing evangelism. Employing the Ten Commandments to lead men to Christ will help us to accomplish the Great Commission in a way that is guaranteed to honor the Lord.



¹ Although the civil and religious portions of the Mosaic Law passed away with the death and resurrection of Christ, the Ten Commandments are still in force. Because of the widespread idea that even they have been abrogated, I shall support this contention from Scripture.

Every Commandment is repeated or clearly alluded to with approval in the New Testament Epistles. Following is a list of some of their occurrences in these letters:

The First (Ex. 20:3) in 1 Cor. 8:6,
The Second (Ex. 20:4) in 1 Cor. 10:7 and 1 John 5:21,
The Third (Ex. 20:7) in 1 Tim. 1:20,
The Fourth (Ex. 20:8-11) in Mark 2:27-28,
The Fifth (Ex. 20:12) in Eph. 6:2-3,
The Sixth (Ex. 20:13) in Rom. 13:9, James 2:11 and 1 John 3:15,
The Seventh (Ex. 20:14) in Rom. 13:9, Col. 3:5, Eph. 5:3, and James 2:11,
The Eighth (Ex. 20:15) in Rom. 13:9 and Eph. 4:28,
The Ninth (Ex. 20:16) in Rom.13:9, Eph. 4:25, and Col. 3:9, and
The Tenth (Ex. 20:17) in Gal. 5:26.

Each of these verses was penned long after Christ rose from the dead. If the Commandments were no longer in force, if God did not care whether people obeyed them, then for Paul, James, and John favorably to quote or to allude to them

seems strange indeed. Further, if God had done away with them, then it is not wrong in His eyes for men to worship other gods, to bow down to idols, to take His name in vain, etc. On the other hand, if He is opposed to such behavior, then the Commandments that prohibit it still stand.

Another reason the Commandments are still in force is that the New Testament defines love for one's fellow man in terms of the Second Table of the Decalogue. Romans 13:8-10 explains that a man who loves his neighbor will obey Commandments Five through Ten toward him--if you love your neighbor, you will not murder him, commit adultery with his wife, and so on.

The Fourth Commandment is not reiterated in the Epistles, because the Jewish Sabbath laws were abrogated at the death and resurrection of Christ (Gal. 4:9-10, Col. 2:16-17). The early church began to worship on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7), for on that day Christ rose from the dead. Thus, in this sense the Lord's Day (Sunday) has replaced the Jewish Sabbath (Saturday).

² The other two uses are the civil and the normative (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2.7.6-12 in 1:304-309]). My purpose here is not to defend their validity, but merely to explain them.

The civil use of the Law applies to unbelievers. Although it cannot save them, it can at least restrain some of their grosser wickedness. Though they do not love the Lawgiver, they do have some fear of His wrath and, therefore, do not give themselves over to the worst of their depravity. 1 Tim. 1:8-10 asserts:

But we know that the law is good, if a man use it lawfully; Knowing this, that the law is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and for sinners, for unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, for whoremongers, for them that defile themselves with mankind, for menstealers, for liars, for perjured persons, and if there be any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine.

If basketball star Magic Johnson, for example, had simply obeyed the Seventh Commandment, he would not have made himself the slightest bit better in the eyes of Holy God. But neither would he be HIV positive. Even though the Law cannot save, anyone who obeys it will have a better quality of life. He who fears its warnings will enjoy this life more, even if he never comes to faith in Christ.

The lives of many of America's youth are silent testimonies to the fact that the Law has a restraining effect upon sin. The last three decades have witnessed huge increases in the number of teenagers who become pregnant outside marriage, abort their babies, carry guns to school, are killed by guns, contract AIDS, and take their own lives. Relatively few of these tragedies occurred as recently as the early 60s.

Why the big change? Among the reasons is that the Ten Commandments were removed from the public schools. When I was a boy, the Decalogue was posted in classrooms, and students recited them. Children were taught that certain actions and attitudes were wrong in the eyes of God. Although it seems doubtful that more than a minority of those children became Christians, few committed the gross sins so common in today's high and even junior high schools. This is the civil use of the Law.

The normative use of the law applies to Christians. When Christ saves someone, the Holy Spirit writes the Decalogue on his heart. Heb. 10:15-16 reveals: "Whereof the Holy Ghost also is a witness to us: for after that he had said before, This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, saith the Lord, I will put my laws into their hearts, and in their minds will I write them." Note that the Holy Spirit said these things to believers. The Christian simply does not want to do many things that lost people enjoy, because the Commandments are a part of his innermost being. He delights in obeying them, not because he is a legalist, but because he loves his Lord.

³ W. T. Conner, *Christian Doctrine* (Nashville: Broadman, 1937), 136.

⁴ A fascinating account of the Law doing its work as schoolmaster appears in the testimony of David Brainerd. God mightily used the Commandments in the conversion of this soul, who, by the plan of providence, became one of the most dedicated missionaries of all time. See Jonathan Edwards, *The Life and Diary of David Brainerd* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1949) 64.

⁵ I am assuming that, had the man faced his sin and despaired of his own righteousness, Christ would then have told him to trust in Him alone. It is especially instructive to realize that the Lord Jesus, who is love incarnate, did not try to pick fruit that was not ripe. He did not chase the ruler down the road and try to talk him into making a quick profession. How many of us pastors and evangelists use His restraint?

⁶ I have identified six evangelistic sermons in the Book of Acts. Peter preached two to Jewish audiences (2:14-40 and 3:12-26) and one to Gentiles (10:34-43). In contrast, Paul delivered one to Jewish hearers (13:16-41) and two to Gentiles (17:22-31 and 26:2-23, although the latter--his testimony before King Agrippa--may not be a full-fledged sermon). All six sermons contain the same four basic themes, although they do not have the same amount on each point. Paul spent much more time on the nature of God in his message to pagan philosophers (17:22-31) than he did when addressing Jews (13:16-41).

A composite of these messages' themes is as follows:

God: That He is holy, He created everything, He owns us, and He holds everyone responsible for what he does.

Sin: That it is breaking the Decalogue, and everyone breaks it.

Christ: Who He is--the sinless God-man--and what He did--die on behalf of sinners and rise from the dead.

Repentance and faith--a faith that produces obedience to God.

J. I. Packer identified these four as the essence of the Gospel in *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975), 57-73. Sadly, most modern evangelistic sermons, tracts, and methodologies omit some of these crucial truths. If the Apostles included them, so should we.

⁷ Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1973) 30:15-16.

⁸ A similar example of walking someone through the Law appears in chapter 12 of *Hell's Best Kept Secret* by Ray Comfort (Whitaker House). This chapter is reproduced in the pamphlet "The Law Was Our Schoolmaster" by the same author (Living Waters Pub., P. O. Box 1172, Bellflower, CA 90706). I developed my method independently of Mr. Comfort.



¹ Although the civil and religious portions of the Mosaic Law passed away with the death and resurrection of Christ, the Ten Commandments are still in force. Because of the widespread idea that even they have been abrogated, I shall support this contention from Scripture.

Every Commandment is repeated or clearly alluded to with approval in the New Testament Epistles. Following is a list of some of their occurrences in these letters:

The First (Ex. 20:3) in 1 Cor. 8:6,
The Second (Ex. 20:4) in 1 Cor. 10:7 and 1 John 5:21,
The Third (Ex. 20:7) in 1 Tim. 1:20,
The Fourth (Ex. 20:8-11) in Mark 2:27-28,
The Fifth (Ex. 20:12) in Eph. 6:2-3,
The Sixth (Ex. 20:13) in Rom. 13:9, James 2:11 and 1 John 3:15,
The Seventh (Ex. 20:14) in Rom. 13:9, Col. 3:5, Eph. 5:3, and James 2:11,
The Eighth (Ex. 20:15) in Rom. 13:9 and Eph. 4:28,
The Ninth (Ex. 20:16) in Rom. 13:9, Eph. 4:25, and Col. 3:9, and
The Tenth (Ex. 20:17) in Gal. 5:26.

Each of these verses was penned long after Christ rose from the dead. If the Commandments were no longer in force, if God did not care whether people obeyed them, then for Paul, James, and John favorably to quote or to allude to them seems strange indeed. Further, if God had done away with them, then it is not wrong in His eyes for men to worship other gods, to bow down to idols, to take His name in vain, etc. On the other hand, if He is opposed to such behavior, then the Commandments that prohibit it still stand.

Another reason the Commandments are still in force is that the New Testament defines love for one's fellow man in terms of the Second Table of the Decalogue. Romans 13:8-10 explains that a man who loves his neighbor will obey Commandments Five through Ten toward him--if you love your neighbor, you will not murder him, commit adultery with his wife, and so on.

The Fourth Commandment is not reiterated in the Epistles, because the Jewish Sabbath laws were abrogated at the death and resurrection of Christ (Gal. 4:9-10, Col. 2:16-17). The early church began to worship on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7), for on that day Christ rose from the dead. Thus, in this sense the Lord's Day (Sunday) has replaced the Jewish Sabbath (Saturday).

² The other two uses are the civil and the normative (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2.7.6-12 in 1:304-309]). My purpose here is not to defend their validity, but merely to explain them.

The civil use of the Law applies to unbelievers. Although it cannot save them, it can at least restrain some of their grosser wickedness. Though they do not love the Lawgiver, they do have some fear of His wrath and, therefore, do not give themselves over to the worst of their depravity. 1 Tim. 1:8-10 asserts:

But we know that the law is good, if a man use it lawfully; Knowing this, that the law is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and for sinners, for unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, for whoremongers, for them that defile themselves with mankind, for menstealers, for liars, for perjured persons, and if there be any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine.

If basketball star Magic Johnson, for example, had simply obeyed the Seventh Commandment, he would not have made himself the slightest bit better in the eyes of Holy God. But neither would he be HIV positive. Even though the Law cannot save, anyone who obeys it will have a better quality of life. He who fears its warnings will enjoy this life more, even if he never comes to faith in Christ.

The lives of many of America's youth are silent testimonies to the fact that the Law has a restraining effect upon sin. The last three decades have witnessed huge increases in the number of teenagers who become pregnant outside marriage, abort their babies, carry guns to school, are killed by guns, contract AIDS, and take their own lives. Relatively few of these tragedies occurred as recently as the early 60s.

Why the big change? Among the reasons is that the Ten Commandments were removed from the public schools. When I was a boy, the Decalogue was posted in classrooms, and students recited them. Children were taught that certain actions and attitudes were wrong in the eyes of God. Although it seems doubtful that more than a minority of those children became Christians, few committed the gross sins so common in today's high and even junior high schools. This is the civil use of the Law.

The normative use of the law applies to Christians. When Christ saves someone, the Holy Spirit writes the Decalogue on his heart. Heb. 10:15-16 reveals: "Whereof the Holy Ghost also is a witness to us: for after that he had said before, This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, saith the Lord, I will put my laws into their hearts, and in their minds will I write them." Note that the Holy Spirit said these things to believers. The Christian simply does not want to do many things that lost people enjoy, because the Commandments are a part of his innermost being. He delights in obeying them, not because he is a legalist, but because he loves his Lord.

³ W. T. Conner, *Christian Doctrine* (Nashville: Broadman, 1937), 136.

⁴ A fascinating account of the Law doing its work as schoolmaster appears in the testimony of David Brainerd. God mightily used the Commandments in the conversion of this soul, who, by the plan of providence, became one of the most dedicated missionaries of all time. See Jonathan Edwards, *The Life and Diary of David Brainerd* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1949) 64.

⁵ I am assuming that, had the man faced his sin and despaired of his own righteousness, Christ would then have told him to trust in Him alone. It is especially instructive to realize that the Lord Jesus, who is love incarnate, did not try to pick fruit that was not ripe. He did not chase the ruler down the road and try to talk him into making a quick profession. How many of us pastors and evangelists use His restraint?

⁶ I have identified six evangelistic sermons in the Book of Acts. Peter preached two to Jewish audiences (2:14-40 and 3:12-26) and one to Gentiles (10:34-43). In contrast, Paul delivered one to Jewish hearers (13:16-41) and two to Gentiles (17:22-31 and 26:2-23, although the latter--his testimony before King Agrippa--may not be a full-fledged sermon). All six sermons contain the same four basic themes, although they do not have the same amount on each point. Paul spent much more time on the nature of God in his message to pagan philosophers (17:22-31) than he did when addressing Jews (13:16-41).

A composite of these messages' themes is as follows:

God: That He is holy, He created everything, He owns us, and He holds everyone responsible for

what he does.

Sin: That it is breaking the Decalogue, and everyone breaks it.

Christ: Who He is--the sinless God-man--and what He did--die on behalf of sinners and rise from the dead.

Repentance and faith--a faith that produces obedience to God.

J. I. Packer identified these four as the essence of the Gospel in *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1975), 57-73. Sadly, most modern evangelistic sermons, tracts, and methodologies omit some of these crucial truths. If the Apostles included them, so should we.

⁷ Charles H. Spurgeon, *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1973) 30:15-16.

⁸ A similar example of walking someone through the Law appears in chapter 12 of *Hell's Best Kept Secret* by Ray Comfort (Whitaker House). This chapter is reproduced in the pamphlet "The Law Was Our Schoolmaster" by the same author (Living Waters Pub., P. O. Box 1172, Bellflower, CA 90706). I developed my method independently of Mr. Comfort.



Book Reviews

Baptist Confessions, Covenants, and Catechisms, edited by Timothy and Denise George; Broadman & Holman, 1996; 282 pp. \$24.99.

Reviewed by [Tom Ascol](#)

This volume is published as a part of Broadman & Holman's Library of Baptist Classics series. Timothy and Denise George, who serve as the General Editors for the series, are the most literarily prolific couple in Southern Baptist history. The Library of Baptist Classics has brought back into print some wonderful material which has long been out of print. The series not only has historical value for Baptists, it also is theologically important.

The doctrinal significance of this present work is hard to overestimate. It brings together for the first time a collection of Baptist confessions, covenants and catechisms. Among the confessions are included full texts of the *First London* (1644), the *Philadelphia* (1742), the *Orthodox Creed* (1679), the *New Hampshire* (1833), the *Baptist Faith and Message* (1963) and the Report of the Presidential Theological Study Committee (1994).

Fifteen personal and church covenants and one covenant produced by a convention of churches are printed in this volume, including the one found in J. Newton Brown's *The Baptist Church Manual* (1853). A poetic covenant of nineteenth century missionary Peter Philanthropos Roots is the most unusual of the collection and concludes with this final verse:

New rules we do not mean to make,
The Bible rules we only take,
And show by this our Scriptural creed,
In Bible truth we are agreed.

Only three Baptist catechisms are included, but they are three which show clearly the important place which this didactic method held among our Baptist forefathers. Henry Jesse's *A Catechism for Babes, or, Little Ones*, (1652) includes a summary of the chief points and the Ten Commandments in verse. Benjamin Keach's *Catechism* (1693), edited and widely used by Charles Spurgeon in the last century, and John Broadus' *A Catechism of Bible Teaching* (1692), originally published by the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board, are also printed in full.

This collection is an excellent resource to demonstrate the great importance which, historically, Baptists have placed on orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Proper faith and practice have always been central concerns to the people called Baptists, and those who would suggest otherwise are contradicted by the historical record. How important has precisely defined doctrine been to Baptists? One need only to read the confessions and catechisms in this book to receive a clear answer. Even many of the covenants, which focus more on practical living than on accurate belief, make strong doctrinal affirmations (including "particular election" "effectual calling" and "particular redemption").

The Introduction to this volume, written by the Timothy of the Georges, is of extreme value on its own. It comprises the finest brief summary of Baptist confessional history which I have ever seen. Of particular interest is his astute clarification of the confessional (and therefore, doctrinal) heritage of the Southern Baptists Convention, which he summarizes in the following words:

The *Philadelphia Confession of Faith* was transplanted to the Charleston Baptist Association in

South Carolina. It soon became the most widely accepted, definitive confession among Baptists in America both North and South. Each of the 293 "delegates," as they were then called, who gathered in Augusta to organize the Southern Baptist Convention in 1845, belonged to congregations and associations which had adopted the *Philadelphia/Charleston Confession of Faith* as their own (11).

This volume ought to be in the library of every Baptist pastor and church leader. It would make a great supplementary text for seminary and college classes on Baptist history. All who appreciate the theological and spiritual heritage of Baptists owe a debt of gratitude to the Georges and to Broadman & Holman for putting this book together.

The Art of Prophesying by William Perkins, Banner of Truth Trust, 1996, 191 pp. \$6.99.

Reviewed by [Derek Johnson](#)

William Perkins' book, *The Art of Prophesying*, is the epitome of the old saying, "Don't judge a book by its cover." At first, one might be repelled by the title. But upon closer examination, it becomes clear that Perkins' concern is with the art of forth-telling the whole counsel of God.

The 1996 Banner of Truth edition of this book is actually a combination of two works by the author. The first section consists of *The Art of Prophesying*, first published in Latin in 1592 and in English in 1606. The second section is *The Calling of the Ministry*, originally published in 1605. The combination of the two books into one makes the Banner edition a valuable tool for aspiring young preachers as well as seasoned pastors.

The first part is especially appealing because of its relevancy for the contemporary scene. Although written over 400 years ago, the message rings true in our modern era. The opening admonitions and insights give the impression that Perkins is living in the 20th century and is experiencing the typical obstacles that plague the ministry today. The fact that a book written so long ago can speak so vividly to the modern church demonstrates the value of following scriptural models of preaching and teaching in order to effectively minister God's Word. Time does not change the way that people are won to Christ. And "new methods" of doing the work of the ministry are, in some respects, the very snares which pastors should avoid.

This message is exactly what Perkins conveys. In the brief opening chapter, he explains what he means by prophesying. He then spends the next four chapters focusing on the contents, interpretation, and exposition of the Scripture, which he describes as perfect, pure and eternal.

Perkins gives two chapters to the use and variety of application which he defines as, "the skill by which the doctrine which has been properly drawn from Scripture is handled in ways which are appropriate to the circumstances of the place and time and to the people in the congregation" (p. 54).

Every preacher knows the importance of tailoring the message to his audience. Perkins' treatment of "Categories of Hearers" provides great help in doing this. He identifies seven of them and offers insights on preaching to each: (1) Unbelievers who are both ignorant and unteachable, (2) those who are teachable, but ignorant, (3) those with knowledge but no humility, (4) those previously humbled, (5) believers, (6) backsliders, and (7) the audience with both believers and unbelievers (the most common situation in a typical congregation).

Perkins ends this section of the book with tips on the use of memory, the actual preaching of the Word, and the use of public prayer. In these last chapters, he brings together the culmination of all that he has said in relation to preparing and handling the Word of God aright and then gives practical insight into the delivering of the message prepared. In summary, he states that preaching involves (p. 79):

1. Reading the text clearly from the canonical Scriptures.
2. Explaining the meaning of it, once it has been read, in the light of the Scriptures themselves.
3. Gathering a few profitable points of doctrine from the natural sense of the passage.
4. If the preacher is suitably gifted, applying the doctrines thus explained to the life and practice of the congregation in straightforward, plain speech.

The heart of the matter is this:

Preach one Christ,
by Christ,
to the praise of Christ.

The second section of this book addresses the call to the ministry. Perkins does this through an exposition of Isaiah's vision found in Isaiah 6, specifically verses 5-13. He outlines the text in three chapters: Ch. 1, The Vision of God (v. 5), Ch. 2, Divine Consolation (vv. 6-7), Ch. 3, Renewal and Recommissioned (vv. 8-13).

The bulk of the exposition centers on the first point. Perkins brings attention to the fear Isaiah experienced when confronted with the vision of God and remarks concerning true ministers, "The more afraid they are and the more they shrink under the contemplation of God's majesty and their own weakness, the more likely it is that they are truly called of God and appointed for worthy purposes in his church" (p. 128). He also shows how Isaiah's fear worked to cause conviction and confession of sin in his soul and to strip him of pride. Furthermore, Perkins uses the idea of godly fear to encourage potential ministers that "if we ever aim to be made instruments of God's glory in saving souls, then at the outset let us set before our eyes not the honour but the danger of our calling" (p.129).

Once the man of God is humbled, God gives divine consolation to his weakened soul. Perkins is careful to note that God many times will bring affliction to His people, especially those He has placed in leadership positions, in order to bring about a mighty work of grace in their lives or the life of His church.

Finally, God renewed and recommissioned Isaiah. Perkins points out that the divine question, "Whom shall I send? and who will go for Us?," was asked for our sakes to demonstrate "how hard it is to find an able and godly minister" (p.175). God seeks men who do not "content themselves merely with the name and title of minister. They must seek to adorn the gospel. They should not take the honour and material possessions of the ministry if they will not also accept its burdens and duties. God has no need of such" (p. 178).

Perkins ends this section with the admonition that God never calls a man to service without equipping him to perform it. He writes, "If he sends them he will defend and protect them,...If he sends them he will provide for them and reward them adequately....[I]f he sends them he will pay their wages" (p.190-91).

The combination of these two old works makes a wonderful treatise on preaching the Word of God and being sure of a divine call to the ministry. The systematic approach and experiential maturity make this a valuable resource for pastors and ministerial students. Banner of Truth has done a great service to God's people in publishing it.



The Founders
Journal
Contents Issue 28

The Founders
Journal
Main Page

Missions & the Sovereignty of God

Why commitment to the doctrines of grace makes me more effective in "World A"

[Due to the sensitive nature of his work, the author of this article must remain anonymous. He is a long-time Southern Baptist and has had a very fruitful ministry among Muslims in Asia. "World A" consists of nations and peoples in the least evangelized parts of the world.]

"How can you be a missionary and a Calvinist at the same time? If you believe in predestination, you can't possibly believe in missions as well!" This statement displays a stunning ignorance both of theology and of church history, but it is distressingly common in Southern Baptist circles to hear it. Even people with seminary training, who ought to know better, seem unaware that the founders of the modern missionary movement (including William Carey), and the founders of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board, were all committed to the sovereignty of God in salvation. Worse, they understand Reformed theology so poorly that they really think that it explicitly precludes evangelism and missions. My response, therefore, usually comes as quite a shock: I couldn't possibly be a missionary if I weren't completely convinced of the doctrines of grace!

I am the Strategy Coordinator for an unreached people group in Asia. These people are Muslim, giving them a strong natural resistance to the gospel. They live in countries that forbid open Christian missionary activities. The vast majority of them have never met a Christian, never seen a Bible, and never heard the gospel. Their governments are doing everything they can to make sure they never have a chance to hear it, and their religious heritage gives them every reason to reject it even if they should. In many areas, the penalty for leaving Islam is death. From a human perspective, there is every reason to expect my work with these people to fail. The only thing that encourages me to persevere in the face of human impossibility is my certainty that God is sovereign in all things, including salvation. This conviction illuminates the task, empowers my work, and preserves its integrity.

Illumination

First of all, understanding human depravity illuminates my task. It gives new insight into the concept of "resistant" people groups. From a human point of view, it is easier to reach some people with the gospel than others. Islam is the only major world religion to arise after the birth of Christ, and it therefore had the opportunity to develop a built-in apologetic against Christianity.

The ugly history of Muslim-Christian relations make matters even more difficult. Most of the Islamic world has not forgotten the medieval Crusades. More recently, colonial imperialism left behind the image of Christianity as the religion of the oppressor. Even in Soviet Central Asia, despite 70 years of official atheism, the local Muslim population thinks of their Russian oppressors as a "Christian" people group.

Perhaps worst of all, the identification of Christianity with Western culture has created the conviction that Christianity is an immoral, decadent religion. A Muslim religious leader who found out that I was a Christian pastor once asked me, in all sincerity, if I could have sex with anyone I wanted just like other Christians! To many Muslims of Central Asia, the view of America that is exported by Hollywood typifies the Christian life style. With that misperception it is easy to understand why they want nothing to do with "Christianity."

From a human point of view, Muslims have more reason to resist the gospel than anyone else on earth. From God's point of view, however, it really makes no difference. The problem is not history or anti-Christian polemic or modern Western decadence. The problem is that they are dead in their trespasses and sins. Sin has captivated every area of their lives, leaving them unable to please God, unable to understand the gospel, and unable to do anything at all about it. That means that a Muslim's condition is no different than that of any other unregenerate person. It takes the same miracle to bring a spiritually dead American to life as it does an Asian Muslim. Thus, while I certainly need to focus on entry strategies for the gospel (God's Word is the instrument He uses in this glorious work), and while I also need to develop cultural sensitivity in the way I present the message in order to overcome centuries of misunderstanding, it is ultimately just as impossible for me to convert a Muslim as it is for me to convert an American. In Asia no less than in America, the work cannot depend on my intelligence or my cleverness or my skill, because none of those will ever resurrect a spiritually dead person. I find enormous liberty in knowing that the task is the same everywhere, whether among "resistant" or "open" peoples. I am simply to be faithful as an instrument in God's hands. The people I am trying to reach are not primarily confused, or misled, or ignorant, or isolated, or even spiritually sick. They are dead in their sin. God must save, and God alone.

Empowerment

I am greatly encouraged, therefore, by the glorious truths of unconditional election and irresistible grace. If it is true that God must save, and God alone, my only hope as a missionary lies in the fact that God does save, and He does so in spite of every effort on the part of unregenerate man to stay unsaved. He has sovereign power. Despite all appearances of resistance in my target people group, God has a chosen people among them. They were not chosen on the basis of their openness to the gospel, or their own desire to seek after God or to respond to Him, nor indeed on the basis of any other virtue which I know full well none of them possesses. Like me, they were chosen simply because God, by His grace alone and for His glory alone, decided to save individuals who don't deserve it and who would never choose Him if left to themselves.

And those whom the Father chose unconditionally, the Son redeemed individually and infallibly through His death and resurrection. And those whom the Son redeemed, the Spirit powerfully calls into salvation. It doesn't matter how hostile the government may be. It doesn't matter how resistant the religious heritage may be. It doesn't matter how wicked and corrupt the culture may be. If the Father has chosen, and the Son has redeemed, the outward call of the proclamation of the Word will be accompanied by the irresistible inward call of the Spirit, and there will be fruit.

In this context, I see a particularly rich connection between the nature of the atonement and the task of missions. The focus of contemporary missiology is on unreached people groups. It is a biblical focus. When Jesus referred to "all nations" in Mt. 24:14 and 28:18-20, He was not referring to modern geo-political states. He was referring to ethno-linguistic groups. The task of the church in missions is to make disciples from among every people group, and the one condition Jesus gives for His return is precisely that every people group has heard the message.

The great news is that Jesus accomplished in His atoning work what He commanded in His Great Commission. Rev. 5:9 says of Jesus: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation" Because Jesus actually accomplished a complete and irrevocable redemption for those for whom He died, and because Scripture tells me that He died specifically for men and women from every people group, I know that people will be saved even from my "resistant" people group living in "closed" countries. It comes as no surprise, then, when I read in Rev. 7:9, "After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: 'Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb.'" God's purpose in the atoning work of His Son will be fulfilled. And His purpose has a

fundamental missiological element in it. Jesus died to redeem a people for Himself from every people group on earth. Therefore, missionary work among unreached people groups cannot fail.

Preservation

In addition to all this, God's intention to preserve His saints is the foundation of my hope for the emerging church in the Muslim world. In his marvelous grace, people are coming to know Jesus. The pressures on them are enormous, however. In one country where I work, every believer who has become publicly known as such has either fled the country or been martyred. In a society where family means everything, it is the responsibility of the family either to pressure an apostate from Islam back into the fold, or if that fails, to kill him. In the face of such opposition, what enables the church to survive? Only the sovereign grace of God preserving His people. It is the sovereign faithfulness of God, not the ephemeral faithfulness of man, that keeps the persecuted church alive.

Confidence in the sovereignty of God is thus the only sure foundation for hope and encouragement in missions. God has appointed an end: the salvation of a multitude no one can number from every people group on earth. He has infallibly accomplished their redemption through the death and resurrection of Jesus. He is at work sovereignly calling them to salvation by His Holy Spirit. He has appointed the proclamation of His Word as the instrument He will use in thus calling people to Himself. And He has chosen us as the ambassadors who carry that Word to the nations.

Understanding missions in this way preserves the purity of the work. Gone is the temptation to rely on human cleverness, deceit or manipulation, since only the Spirit of God wielding the Word of God can really save anyone. Understanding missions in this way fuels missionary prayer. There is no point in praying for the salvation of the unreached unless God actually intends to do something about it. And finally, understanding missions in this way produces a foundation strong enough for a missionary to build his or her life upon, no matter how humanly impossible the work may be.

People are starving for the greatness of God.

But most of them would not give this diagnosis of their troubled lives. The majesty of God is an unknown cure. There are far more popular prescriptions on the market, but the benefit of any other remedy is brief and shallow. Preaching that does not have the aroma of God's greatness may entertain for a season, but it will not touch the hidden cry of the soul: "Show me thy glory!"

...So I am persuaded that the vision of a great God is the linchpin in the life of the church, both in pastoral care and missionary outreach. Our people need to hear God-entranced preaching. They need someone, at least once a week, to lift up his voice and magnify the supremacy of God.

*--John Piper, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1990), 9, 11.*



The Founders
Journal
Contents Issue 28

The Founders
Journal
Main Page

News

Don Whitney Joins SBFC Planning Committee

The Southern Baptist Founders Conference Planning Committee has recently added Don Whitney to their ranks. After serving as pastor of the Glenfield Baptist Church in Glen Ellyn, IL for more than fourteen years, Dr. Whitney has recently been elected to the faculty of the Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, KS as the professor of spiritual formation. He received his MDiv. from Southwestern Seminary and his DMin. from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. Dr. Whitney is best known for his best selling book, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*. He and his wife Caffy have one daughter.

New Contributing Editor

The Founders Journal is pleased to announce that Mark Dever has been added to our board of Contributing Editors. Dr. Dever is the pastor of the Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington DC. He previously served as Associate Pastor at Eden Baptist Church in Cambridge, England. He is a graduate of Gordon Conwell (MDiv.), Southern Seminary (ThM), and Cambridge University (PhD), where his major emphasis was the English Puritans. His work has appeared previously in the journal and he is no stranger to those who are familiar with the Founders Conference. He and his wife, Connie, have two children.

A Southern Baptist Explanation of Calvinism

The Southern Baptist Founders Conference Southwest has produced a 6 cassette tape set entitled, *A Southern Baptist Explanation of Calvinism*. The set consists of 5 sermons by Fred Malone, pastor of First Baptist Church in Clinton, LA, on "Total Depravity," "Unconditional Election," "Particular Redemption," "Effectual Calling," and "Perseverance of the Saints." Also included is a message by Tom Ascol entitled, "From the Reformation to the Southern Baptist Convention." These six tapes come in a vinyl album and are available for \$10.00 plus postage from Rusty Canoy at First Baptist Church of Roosevelt * Rt. 1, Box 398 * Lubbock, TX 79401 * phone (806) 842-3433.

Midwest Founders Conference

The first Southern Baptist Founders Conference Midwest is scheduled for March 5-7. It will be hosted by First Baptist Church of Harvester, Missouri. The cost for the conference is \$30.00 (\$15.00 for students). A list of conference hotels will be provided upon request. The theme of the conference is "Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God." For more information contact either Dr. Curtis McClain at 8454 Engler Ave * St. Louis, MO 63314 * phone (314) 428-4079; or Pastor Chuck Todd at 313 S. East St. * Pinckneyville, IL 62274 * phone (618) 357-9220.



The Founders
Journal
Contents Issue 23

The Founders
Journal
Main Page

Letters

Dear Sir:

I recently moved from the S.F. Bay Area to Northern CA. I left my old church feeling a great deal of frustration. My fingerprints were on everything after being a member for nearly 25 years, but as the church got into step with demographics and "ministry", I became an outsider in a church that was "my home". It was an independent Baptist church with no official associational connections. I'm now a member of an SBC [church] but don't really consider myself a genuine SB. After reading some of your articles I feel that you are fearlessly articulating my concerns about the crisis in the Christian community.

B.B. via email.

Dear Tom & others,

Many thanks for being "light" in a dark land and "water" for the thirsty. I enjoy every issue of the FJ. I found your article concerning Kirby Godsey's book very illuminating. How much more heretical can one become before they are given their walking orders? His positions on the salvific work of Christ are most alarming, not to mention, quite destructive...

Thanks again for informing Southern Baptists of their heritage regarding the Doctrines of Grace.

Best regards in Christ,
B.P., pastor, via email

Dear Dr. Ascol:

Thank you for this recent edition of the *Founders Journal*. It was enlightening and forthright. Your article on heresy is a gem. Thank you for standing for the great truths of God's Word.

Roger Nicole's article was a delight to read. One could picture him having this discussion! Hopefully, more Bible-believing Baptists will recognize the importance of the great creeds of the church and will promote them to popularity once again. It is pitiful to find out that many church members cannot even locate a copy of their church's articles of faith. It would be nice to see pastors and members alike possess a working knowledge of some of the great creeds. One would hope to see Dr. Nicole expand upon the creeds in future editions of the Journal.

Again, thank you for the wealth of information.

P.R.H., pastor
Lehigh Acres, Florida



If They Love You, Lord, Why Don't They Show It?

Confessions of a Puzzled Pastor

Ultimately the issue all preachers must confront is what they believe to be the relationship between people's conduct and God's acceptance. Are we holy for God's acceptance, or are we holy because of God's acceptance? I did not understand the importance of that question until after several years of pastoring. Despite my good intentions, an honest assessment of my congregation revealed many who seemed far from the Lord. Their spiritual emptiness was all the more discouraging because the church was almost two centuries old. Many of the families had attended for generations. Some knew their Bibles far better than I knew mine and after being in church so long almost everyone knew well how Christians should act. Most conscientiously observed a community code of conduct--they were faithful to their spouses, did not rob banks, drink to excess, or swear in polite company. Outward Christian conduct ruled.

Attitudes, however, were not so exemplary. I could not understand how people who were so knowledgeable about God could be so bitter, so guilt-ridden, so often depressed, so cold to each other, and so intolerant of the faults of newer Christians. Their words and external behaviors professed loyalty to Christ, but love, joy, peace, patience, and long-suffering were in scant supply. I used to get so angry at those people for their lack of heart response to the Word they said they loved. Then, I began to realize that the problem was not so much them as it was me, and others like me.

I was using guilt and fear to motivate people to obey God. What I had to confess, however, was that though my messages often secured changed behavior my ministry seemed to produce little spiritual maturity. For instance, I addressed couples whose marriages were coming apart because they were not honoring the Word of God in their relationships with each other. I told them that if they changed their behaviors, God would bless them, but that as long as they continued in their disobedience they could not expect his love. I saw changed behavior, but few signs of real spiritual growth. Instead, a year or two later these same people were locked into depression, were pursuing other addictive behaviors, or had grown spiritually disinterested.

Finally the Lord opened my eyes to my error. I was telling people that the way to get rid of their guilt before God and to assure his blessing was by behaving differently. But, what did this imply? If people expect behavior change to rid them of their guilt, who are they trusting to take their guilt away? Themselves!

I was forcing people to question, "What action of mine will make me right with God?" No wonder their faith did not mature. Their faith was in what they could do to fix their own situations with God. I was encouraging people to look to themselves rather than to the cross as the place for erasing guilt and finding God's favor. Without my conscious intent--and contrary to theology in my head--I was driving the wedge of human works between my hearers and God. The people who listened to me, though they may have changed some aspect of their lives to get my approval and secure God's affection, were actually farther away from understanding God than when I had begun to minister to them.

Works righteousness had jumped into my preaching without my even knowing it. I was implying (if not directly stating) that we become acceptable to God by being good enough. No wonder the people were so hard and bitter and cold. I was teaching them that if they just offered God more filthy rags, he would favor them more, or smile more, or love them more.

What a cruel God I painted for them. What a merciful God I had denied them by teaching them that God's love was dependent on their goodness. I was the one who made them intolerant of less mature believers. Because they listened to me, they gauged their holiness by their works, and then what better way was there to confirm their own righteousness than by finding greater faults in others? The people in my church had bad attitudes and had lost interest in matters of faith, and I was as culpable as they.

