

THE SEARCH FOR AN EVANGELICAL CONSENSUS ON PAUL AND THE LAW

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From the perspective of evangelical Protestantism historically defined, one would have thought that in our day the doctrine of justification by faith alone would remain one of the central tenets of the faith, a doctrinal element foundational to the one gospel of Jesus Christ faithfully proclaimed in every age and every culture. Presumably a Protestant of the reputedly evangelical variety would have regarded this doctrine as a theological nonnegotiable. Regrettably, such is not the case in contemporary Protestantism. The doctrine that once distinguished Protestantism from Roman Catholicism has begun to fade into the background. The sharp line of demarcation between Scriptural fidelity and apostasy—respecting that which historic Protestantism considered to be the doctrine upon which the Church stood or fell—has virtually been obliterated. The document “Evangelicals and Catholics Together” has signaled an ominous future for American Christianity. Of this, however, we can be certain: Biblical Christianity—present and future—will not be party to what, in any fair and balanced analysis, amounts to a betrayal of the gospel of salvation by grace through faith alone. Evangelical Protestants continue to pray for Rome’s repudiation of those teachings that are contrary to the teachings of Scripture. They also hope that Protestants who have strayed from Reformation teaching will yet reclaim these vital truths.¹

My concern in this paper is not, in the first place, with this unsettling development among Protestants and Catholics but with the doctrinal error found today within the Reformed camp in particular. This is to show that the threat of theological deviancy is not isolated to any one peculiar corner on the ecclesiastical map. The problem is all about us. Perhaps it is merely indicative of the age in which we live, an age characterized by individualism and by that unrelenting drive toward relativism, the gradual undermining of truth and authority. The great creeds and confessions of Protestant orthodoxy no longer carry the weight and respect they once did. More often than not they are viewed as relics of the past, as historic curiosities. Unchecked,

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¹ Compare C. F. H. Henry, “Trouble at the Peak: Emerging Leadership Challenges Plague Evangelicalism,” *World* (August 12/19, 1995) 25; “Breaking Ranks: Evangelicals and Catholics Divided: Is ECT to Blame?,” *World* (August 26/September 2, 1995) 25; “Justification: A Doctrine in Crisis,” *JETS* 38 (1995) 57–65. See also R. C. Sproul, *Faith Alone: The Evangelical Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995); N. L. Geisler and R. E. MacKenzie, *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals: Agreements and Differences* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995) 491–502.

the contemporary disregard for historic Christian dogma will only lead to the further erosion of evangelical witness in our generation.

Although the contemporary theological landscape is rocky, the prospects for evangelical consensus on Paul and the law remain encouraging (at least with respect to the essentials of the Christian faith). This study is the culmination of two earlier unpublished papers of mine.² Some of the material in them appears in what follows. Curiously, Craig Blomberg comments (prior to the publication of Frank Thielman's study):

The work on Paul and the Law which encourages me the most, however, is T. R. Schreiner's quite recent monograph [*The Law and Its Fulfillment*]. Here I think we come closest to preserving the valid insights of both Luther and Calvin, preserving the unity of Torah and the salvation-historical shift of the ages which permeates Paul's thought, while nevertheless incorporating the equally valid insights of the new perspective on Paul.³

The works of Thomas Schreiner and Thielman are strikingly similar, although the latter, in my judgment, is a slight advance upon the former.

Paul's understanding of God's purpose in placing ancient, theocratic Israel under the law of Moses has a direct bearing upon the doctrine of justification by faith. (One has only to read Paul's letters to the Romans and the Galatians to confirm this basic but often overlooked ingredient.) What precisely is the nature of the Mosaic law, and what is the relationship between the old and new covenants? These theological questions bring into view a wide range of hermeneutical issues, more than I can adequately address in this paper. My own theological persuasion is that of Reformed, amillennial covenant theology. Typology is but one somewhat obscure feature of that system of doctrine set forth in the Westminster standards. This confessional formulation, written at the close of the Reformation era, I enthusiastically adopt—with some minor revision—as the teaching of Scripture.

The key to the current doctrinal dispute concerning the nature of the Mosaic law and the relationship between the covenants is the Biblical teaching concerning God's covenant with Adam at creation, what Reformed theologians commonly call the covenant of works. The opposition between the law and the gospel, whether in the writings of Paul or Protestant orthodoxy, pertains to the two antithetical principles of inheritance, one of works and one of faith. The Judaizers (and later the Roman Church) turned Biblical religion into a religion of works-salvation. The ideas of works-righteousness and works-salvation are entirely distinct from each other. Reformed orthodoxy teaches that the principle of works—"This do and you shall live" (Lev 18:5)—is contrary to the principle of faith. Reformed interpreters have differed, however, in their understanding of the nature and operation of this works-

² M. W. Karlberg, "Israel under a Covenant of Works: An Evaluation of Thomas R. Schreiner's *The Law and Its Fulfillment*"; "Israel under Probation: An Evaluation of Frank Thielman's *Paul and the Law*."

³ C. L. Blomberg, "Critical Issues in New Testament Studies for Evangelicals Today," *A Pathway into the Holy Scripture* (ed. P. E. Satterthwaite and D. F. Wright; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994) 58–59.

principle within the Mosaic administration of the single covenant of grace spanning the entire period of redemptive history from the fall to the consummation. Whatever the differences between the OT and NT, there is nevertheless an underlying unity in God's saving purposes for Israel and the Church. God has not abandoned his promises to the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The ingathering of the Gentile nations in the latter days will, by electing grace, provoke many Jews to saving faith. In such manner all (elect) Israel will be saved. The true Israel of God includes both believing Jews and Gentiles. Election is not based in any way upon national privilege or human merit but solely upon God's sovereign good pleasure and foreordination. Parenthetically, Reformed Biblical Christianity offers no credence to the two-covenants theory favored by modern-day ecumenists. According to the Scriptures, OT religion is one in substance with that of the NT. There is no other name under heaven whereby one must be saved from the wrath and condemnation that is coming.⁴

The apostle Paul identifies the Mosaic law as "letter" in contrast to the new covenant, which is "Spirit" (2 Cor 3:6; Rom 7:6; cf. Jer 31:31–34; Ezek 36:24–27; 37:14). The former is an administration of death and condemnation, not life and righteousness. Does this Pauline comparison imply that the Holy Spirit as the agent of regeneration is active only in the new, eschatological age? Or does it merely bring into view differing degrees of enablement so that under the new covenant the Spirit of Christ manifests a fuller outpouring of redemptive grace?⁵ Is Paul's negative reading of the Mosaic dispensation to be explained along the lines suggested by Patrick Fairbairn and John Murray—namely, in terms of Jewish misinterpretation of the law of God? Or is the period from Moses to Christ to be properly viewed as a parenthesis in redemptive history, a period of discontinuity, a period in which the temporal blessings were administered to theocratic Israel on grounds of legal obedience? These are important questions confronting us in our study of Paul and the law.

I. MOSES AND CHRIST REVISITED (LAW VERSUS GOSPEL)

Even a casual reader of the Bible will be struck by the differing emphases found in the OT on the one hand and the NT on the other. Although the message of God's saving grace is apparent throughout the OT, nevertheless during the Mosaic epoch of redemptive revelation the accent falls undeniably upon judgment and curse for covenant transgression. The drama of redemption portrayed in ancient Israelite history has been enacted in order to demonstrate humankind's need for God's mercy and forgiveness. Israel's plight

⁴ See further D. E. Holwerda, *Jesus and Israel: One Covenant or Two?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

⁵ W. VanGemeren explains the essence of the new covenant in terms of "God's deeper commitment to the new community." He believes that "the postexilic community already enjoyed some realization of these promises [prophesied by Jeremiah]" ("A Response," *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church: The Search for Definition* [ed. C. A. Blaising and D. L. Bock; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992] 338).

is everyone's plight. This theme of the universality of sin is developed at great length in Paul's letter to the Romans.

So striking is the contrast between the two covenants—the covenant made at Sinai and the new covenant in Christ's blood—that Paul, as we have already observed, describes the former as a ministration of death and condemnation and the latter as a ministration of Spirit and life. In a very crucial sense the law of Moses is deemed to be contrary to the law of Christ. Most interpreters concede that Paul, as well as other NT authors, employs the term “law” (*nomos*) in different senses. It is necessary, accordingly, that our Biblical and systematic theologies take full account of this datum. That there is little hope for consensus among contemporary Biblical interpreters of diverse theological persuasion regarding the larger issues on Paul and the law should neither surprise nor discourage us. Our immediate concern is with evangelical scholarship. Disappointingly, the stunning impact of E. P. Sanders' rereading of the Bible (through the spectacles of Palestinian Judaism) seems to have left an indelible mark. Quoting again from Blomberg:

Although seventeen years have elapsed since Sanders' groundbreaking work, there is no end in sight of studies on Paul and the law. The amount of confusion that still exists on the topic and the foundational nature of the theological issues at stake surely justify continuing attention, not least on the part of Evangelicals. More so than in many areas of biblical research, the field seems to be dominated by major protagonists repeatedly reworking much of the same material, and each proposing credible but one-sided theses. What is needed is a synthesis of the work done that avoids numerous false dichotomies.⁶

This strategy proposed by Blomberg will not work. What is needed is not a synthesis but a thoroughgoing critique of the various proposals, especially the Biblico-theological and dogmatic presuppositions at work in each of the interpretations. Only then will headway be made through this present morass.

To be sure, as Richard Gaffin observes, the question of Paul on the law has become “the ‘storm centre’ of scholarly controversy.”⁷ Unfortunately Gaffin's adherence to the neo-orthodox interpretation of the covenants has led him away from historic Reformed teaching, which he regards to be misguided with respect to Paul and the law. (Others who follow this now-dominant school of thought within Reformed circles include such names as Willem VanGemeren and Sinclair Ferguson.) Obsession with the Protestant law/gospel antithesis, contends Gaffin, has prevented Reformed theology from rightly interpreting Paul. It has prevented Paul from speaking on his own terms. Gaffin speaks of the “distorted conception of Paul [that] results, in part, from failing to recognise [Paul's] positive use and application of the law.”⁸ In terms of classic formulation Gaffin denies the “second use of the law” in the appli-

⁶ Blomberg, “Critical” 57.

⁷ R. B. Gaffin, Jr., “Justification in Luke-Acts,” *Right with God: Justification in the Bible and the World* (ed. D. A. Carson; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992) 122. T. George describes justification by faith as “the theological lodestar in Paul's body of divinity” (*Galatians* [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994] 181 n. 154).

⁸ Gaffin, “Justification” 122; see further “Pentecost: Before and After,” *Kerux* 10/2 (September 1995) 3–24.

cation of redemption, affirming only the vivifying or normative (i.e. "third") use of the law in the life of believers in every age of redemptive history. Like many modern interpreters, Gaffin maintains that the law principle enunciated in Lev 18:5 in its original OT context is identical with the faith principle.⁹ It is not surprising, then, to hear it said that the Biblical expressions "justification by faith" and "justification by works" are interchangeable. Based on the alleged synonymy of faith and works, no difference is found between Paul and James in their formulations on justification.

This popular nuancing of the debate leads me to wonder whether Gaffin (and modern scholarship in general) agrees with J. Christiaan Beker's contention that the apostle Paul is first and foremost a hermeneutic theologian rather than a systematic theologian.¹⁰ The shift in contemporary theology away from traditional dogmatics to semantics and lexicography does not bode well for Biblical studies at the present time. It may well be that evangelicals, by and large, are in need of reassessing the role of creedal orthodoxy in the interpretive enterprise.¹¹

The Reformed tradition has always stressed the normative or regulative use of the law in the life of the Christian, but never at the expense of the pedagogical or elenctic. So important was the latter that evangelical theology at the time of the Protestant Reformation emphasized over and over again the opposition of law to gospel. Both Lutheranism and Calvinism held tenaciously to this theological distinction. Nowadays we are told (in the words of Ferguson): "A more serious challenge is posed by the question whether the order of Grace and Law is not more true to Scripture than Law (or Works) and Grace."¹² Ferguson further speaks of "the apparent stringency and legality of the Covenant of Works." He portrays the Reformed (i.e. federal) conception of redemptive history as merely "the logical extension of a

⁹ This position is ably refuted by M. C. Kauk, *Paul's Use of the Old Testament in Romans 10:6-8* (dissertation, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1994). R. L. Saucy argues unsuccessfully that under the new covenant the Holy Spirit brings an increase of sanctifying grace that was not present under the old: "Surely some added measure of enabling grace is included in the new covenant that was absent under the old economy" (*The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism: The Interface Between Dispensational and Non-Dispensational Theology* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993] 17). In a footnote he adds: "If the concept of a law-demand without complete enablement for fulfillment constitutes a form of the covenant of works, then it is difficult to deny some aspect of this covenant from under the Mosaic economy" (p. 17 n. 11). Later he speaks of the "conditional Sinaitic covenant" in contrast to the "unconditional new covenant of grace" (p. 226 n. 11).

¹⁰ J. C. Beker, "The Faithfulness of God and the Priority of Israel in Paul's Letter to the Romans," *HTR* 79 (1986) 10. In *Paul the Apostle: The Triumph of God in Life and Thought* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980) Beker declares: "Paul's hermeneutic is characterized by the deliberate use of a 'mixed language' that ultimately defies logical precision" (p. 286).

¹¹ See M. W. Karlberg, "Doctrinal Development in Scripture and Tradition: A Reformed Assessment of the Church's Theological Task," *Calvin Theological Journal* 30 (1995) 401-418.

¹² S. Ferguson, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life in the Teaching of Dr. John Owen* (dissertation, University of Aberdeen, 1979) 56.

theological scheme.”¹³ Here lies the difference between orthodox and neo-orthodox formulation.

In Rom 10:5–13 Paul sets Moses’ teaching against Christ’s. In terms of their proper offices, Moses preached the law and Christ the gospel. These are not two contrary ways of salvation. Rather, they are two contrary means to the attainment of divine blessing and reward. These contrary means were ordained by God. Under the Sinaitic arrangement obedience to the law (i.e. works) was the means of inheriting temporal reward: prosperity in the land of Canaan. Justifying faith was and is the means of inheriting the anti-typical, spiritual reward (fellowship with God through divine reconciliation). Accordingly the Mosaic law served a subordinate role in the history of redemption. This, I submit, is the only consistent and viable explanation of the legal contrast between the old and new covenants.¹⁴

More important, however, than a solution to the problem of the relationship between the OT and the NT is the doctrine of Christ’s substitutionary atonement. The Reformed tradition arose in the midst of intense polemical debate. Reformed leaders set their teachings over against those of the anabaptists, the so-called radical reformers. Preeminent in these disputes were the Biblical doctrines of justification, sovereign election, and the covenants, especially the sacrament of baptism. Early in the development of Reformed theology the federal representative headship of the first and second Adams

Torrance, under whom Ferguson studied, insists: “Law is the gift of grace, spells out the obligation of grace and leads to grace—its fulfilment in Christ. That is the inner meaning of the *Torah*. That is true not only in the life of Israel, but in Creation” (“Strengths and Weaknesses of the Westminster Theology,” *The Westminster Confession in the Church Today* [ed. A. I. Heron; Edinburgh: Saint Andrew, 1982] 49). Contrast the interpretation of Reformed covenant theology offered by C. Graafland, *Van Calvijn tot Comrie: Oorsprong en ontwikkeling van de leer van het verbond in het Gereformeerd Protestantisme* (Zoetermeer: Uitgeverij, 1992–), and D. N. J. Poole, *Stages of Religious Faith in the Classical Reformation Tradition: The Covenant Approach to the Ordo Salutis* (Lewiston: Mellen, 1996), with works found in the *Reformed Theological Seminary Archives* (Bohatec in the Netherlands). **Reformed Theological Seminary, Westminster, October 1994, 22-28**

Concept of Works in Reformed Hermeneutics (dissertation, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1994).

¹⁴ This view is set forth in the *New Geneva Study Bible* (gen. ed. R. C. Sproul; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995). The Mosaic covenant reinstates in modified fashion the covenant of works. “The old covenant calls for a heart religion, but it failed through human weakness and became obsolete after its fulfillment at Calvary (Rom. 8:3; Heb. 7:12; 8:13)” (introduction to Deuteronomy, p. 240). The legal principle enunciated in Lev 18:5 remains operative under the covenant with David. “There was a conditional element in the Davidic covenant. His physical descendants would only rule successfully in Jerusalem if they were obedient to the covenant” (note on Ps 132:12). “The Mosaic covenant offered life for obedience (Lev. 18:5; Rom. 10:5). Israel’s failure to merit life in the land testifies to the universal need for a Substitute through whom the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met on behalf of those who could not meet these terms on their own (Rom. 8:3,4)” (note on Neh 9:29). In “Kingdom Promises as Spiritual” (*Continuity and Discontinuity: Perspective on the Relationship Between the Old and New Testaments* [ed. J. S. Feinberg; Westchester: Crossway, 1988] 269) B. K. Waltke writes: “As Abraham was the father of ‘true Israel’ (his physical seed that believed in Christ), Moses was the founder of national Israel (Abraham’s natural and spiritual seed as administered under the law). God’s soteriological kingdom, originally founded on the principle of promise-faith, now became united in a kingdom with the contrary principle of law-inheritance. . . . Both the New and Old Covenants were righteous and promised life; but whereas the former was unconditional, because it depended solely on God’s sovereign grace, the latter was conditional, because it depended on fallen man to keep it (Gal 3:10–14; Rom 10:5–13).”

was emphasized. Romans 5 was (and remains) a pivotal text in the Reformed

arsenal. The basis of spiritual life and blessing in the covenant of grace is Christ's satisfaction of the legal demands of the original covenant with Adam. Succinctly stated, where Adam failed, Christ succeeded.

In distinction from Lutheran dogmatics an additional theological element had been introduced into the Reformed system of doctrine at the beginning of the latter half of the sixteenth century—namely, the doctrine of the covenant of works. From that time onward this element was regarded by the Reformed orthodox as crucial to the system of doctrine. The Westminster standards teach that in the first covenant between God and Adam (the covenant of works) the reward of confirmed life and communion with God would have been granted on condition of Adam's perfect and personal obedience to the law of God.¹⁵ According to Reformed federalism, Christ's earning of eternal life necessarily entailed legal and vicarious satisfaction of God's law. As second Adam, Christ obtained for the elect what the first Adam failed to obtain—namely, the reward of life everlasting on grounds of perfect, personal righteousness. Both the active and passive obedience of Christ were requisite in achieving the salvation of those for whom Christ died. To be sure, God was not obliged to deal with humankind on the basis of federal imputation any more than he was obliged to create the world and all that is in it. The covenant (and federal) relationship itself was a manifestation of the Father's love to Adam, son of God, made in his own image.

Protestant orthodoxy teaches that justification is by faith alone. Faith is the sole instrument that appropriates Christ's righteousness. Good works are

¹⁵ G. Vos states: "The tree [of the knowledge of good and evil] was associated with the higher, the unchangeable, the eternal life to be secured by obedience throughout his probation" (*Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948] 28). Orthodox Reformed scholasticism introduced the notion of disproportionality into their formulation of the covenant of works. Positing an infinite disproportion between the meager obedience required of Adam under the probationary covenant and the reward of confirmed life and communion with God, the federalists maintained that the reward—eternal life (in distinction from that life with God that the creature already enjoyed by virtue of creation)—was more than Adam could justly earn on the basis of his own works. Gaffin further reasons that since the creature of the dust is, in his view, incapable of meriting anything at all from the hand of God, the federalists were wrong to set law against promise (grace). Obedience as the legal grounds of blessing in the original covenant with Adam is thereby denied. For further analysis see M. W. Karlberg, "The Original State of Adam: Tensions in Reformed Theology," *EvQ* 59 (1987) 291–309.

evidential of genuine, saving faith. In truth, justifying faith cannot stand apart from good works. But it is faith alone—faith apart from all other saving graces—that receives the perfect righteousness of Christ, the meritorious ground of our salvation. In an attempt to reformulate the classic Reformed doctrine of justification by faith and the covenants Norman Shepherd and Gaffin have maintained that good works are not merely evidential of justifying faith. Nonmeritorious works, they contend, bear an analogous role to faith in the procurement of divine justification. Accordingly faith is not the “alone” instrument of justification. In the Shepherd-Gaffin position faith does not justify apart from good works, which is to say that believers are justified by faith and (nonmeritorious) works. In an essay soon to be published Gaffin argues that initial justification is contingent upon final justification (or judgment according to works).¹⁶ These two are one. According to Gaffin’s interpretation of “single justification by faith,” the “already” of justification is not made complete until the *eschaton*. The Protestant Reformers, Gaffin argues, have failed to do justice to the eschatological—the already/not-yet—structure of Biblical revelation. He states that “the integral tie between that future acquittal and present justification needs to be made clear: as a single justification by faith, the one is the consummation of the other.” This statement of the doctrine is both unclear and misleading. How can the “already” (the fixed, once-for-all) aspect of justification await future completion? The implication by Gaffin is that faith must persevere in order for genuine faith to justify. But such a formulation is flatly contradictory. In the same paper Gaffin contends that the life of the justified is not “storm-free.” There is a real possibility of apostasy even among the elect. The warnings in Scripture against covenant-breaking suggest to Gaffin that even the elect are capable of apostatizing from the faith and falling from grace.¹⁷ Parenthetically, this position sees an analogous situation with respect to national Israel under the old economy. The distinction between individual election unto salvation and ancient Israel’s national election is lost.¹⁸

To the contrary, Reformed theology insists that the elect in all ages cannot lose their justification. God will preserve his work of grace, enabling the saints to persevere in all faith and obedience. He will guard them against ultimate harm, so that on the day of judgment they stand victorious in their Savior. According to historic Protestant theology, the evidential working of

¹⁶ R. B. Gaffin, Jr., “The Vitality of Reformed Dogmatics” (unpublished paper). Intimations of Gaffin’s reformulation are found in his earlier essay, “The Holy Spirit and Eschatology,” *N Woord op sy tyd: ’N Teologiese Feesbundel aangebied aan Professor Johan Heyns Ter Herdenking van sy Sestigste Vergaarsday* (ed. C. J. Wethmar and C. J. A. Vos; Pretoria; NG Kerkboekhandel, 1988) 43–52. Contemporary dogmatics, Gaffin insists, must complete what was left unfinished by the Protestant Reformers: “An important and fruitful challenge for the teaching ministry of the church is to clarify further the nature of justification within the already/not-yet structure of New Testament eschatology, at the same time ensuring that commensurate attention is given to the eschatological nature of sanctification and the present work of the Holy Spirit” (p. 49). The unfortunate legacy of the Reformation, contends Gaffin, was the “tendency, at least in practice, to separate or even polarize justification and sanctification” (p. 48).

¹⁷ Compare N. Shepherd, “Perseverance: The Gift (I),” *Outlook* 42 (February 1992) 10–11; “The Need to Persevere (II),” *Outlook* 42 (March 1992) 20–21.

faith through love in no way adds to definitive, once-for-all justification. The believer is constituted righteous through faith on the grounds of Christ's meritorious obedience. Good works are demonstrative of justifying faith. For the believer, judgment according to works issues in the acquittal of the righteous through faith (on the sole basis of Christ's righteousness) and in the approbation/vindication of the saints for their good works: works done in righteousness.¹⁹

The root of the Shepherd-Gaffin error is denial of the traditional Reformed doctrine of the covenant of works. Shepherd and Gaffin contend that the reward of communion with God (including life eternal) under the first covenant between God and Adam would have been purely a matter of gratuitous promise (or divine beneficence), not Adam's meritorious accomplishment of a divinely appointed task (what Paul in Rom 5:18 identifies as the "one act of righteousness"). There is, they insist, no earning of reward on the part of the creature, whether in the covenant of works or the covenant of grace. In this neo-orthodox formulation there is no antithesis between law and grace, law and gospel. Just as blessing is conditioned upon obedience in the first covenant, in the same way (according to this position) blessing is conditioned upon obedience in the covenant of grace. Having jettisoned the law/gospel contrast, these revisionists assure us that the works done by the righteous (those who are in a right relationship with God) are nonmeritorious, whether under the first covenant of creation or the subsequent covenant of redemption.²⁰

¹⁸ Responding to modern-day dispensationalism's openness and receptivity to the teachings of Reformed covenant theology, J. H. Walton unpersuasively sets forth "a new proposal regarding covenant" (*Covenant: God's Purpose, God's Plan* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994] 24). "In the Mosaic phase the key point of election is that Israel is chosen to be the *people of God*. I have defined and interpreted this phrase in a revelatory sense. With the new covenant, the new elect body is identified as all who respond in faith to the salvation offered through Christ. This is a soteriological definition" (p. 123). According to Walton, the Church does not replace Israel: "Rather a new group is taking shape and, though it uses the same label to indicate a special relationship with God that Israel had, the relationship is on quite a different basis. Therefore this is not one people replacing another, it is one definition of people of God replacing another" (p. 125). Equally unsatisfactory is W. E. Glenny's argument that "the church represents a pattern and thus is a fulfillment of the promises made to Israel. . . . Peter uses Israel's historical situation as the people of God as a pattern of his recipients' relationship with God; he is not saying that the church is a new Israel replacing the nation" ("The Israelite Imagery of 1 Peter 2," *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church* 183). Glenny reiterates: "Peter's argument does not suggest or necessitate that his recipients replace Israel in God's program. Peter's point is that their relationship with Christ represents a continuation of the pattern God established in his election of Israel to be his people. So if God's election of Israel in the Old Testament was somehow annulled and therefore not an eternal election, it would destroy the argument of 2:4–10 as well as that of the whole epistle (cf. 1:1, 2, 5)" (p. 185).

¹⁹ See further M. W. Karlberg, "Justification in Redemptive History," *WTJ* 43 (1981) 213–246. R. C. Sproul ("Justification by Faith Alone: The Forensic Nature of Justification," *Justification by Faith Alone: Affirming the Doctrine by which the Church and the Individual Stands or Falls* [ed. D. Kistler; Morgan: Soli Deo Gloria, 1995] 23–52) arrives at a formulation similar to mine. To accommodate the total Biblical witness concerning the believer's state of justification, Sproul speaks of "the complex of justification," comprising justification in the "narrow sense" and the "wider sense" (p. 44).

This anti-Reformational understanding of law and gospel leads one like Gaffin to a very different conception of Christ's active obedience. Although he applies the concept of merit to the righteousness of Christ imputed to all who have been justified through faith, he denies that the parallel drawn by Paul between the first and second Adams must necessarily include the positive side—the prospect of meritorious accomplishment on the part of Adam. In Gaffin's view the merit of Christ's righteousness is merely set over against Adam's demerit which has accrued as a result of the fall. And whereas Adam was never in a position to earn anything from God, Gaffin contends, what Adam did merit through his breaking of the covenant was eternal death for all humanity. According to this view, Christ's reconciling work, which brings about the believer's union with Christ through the Spirit, places the believer in the same position as Adam (before the fall), obligating him/her to perpetual (though nonmeritorious) obedience to the law of God. Such teaching undermines the doctrine of Christ's substitutionary satisfaction of the law of God.²¹

Fortunately all has not been lost in the contemporary polemical cross fires. The classic Protestant law/gospel distinction still plays a formative role in evangelical theology.²² Additionally, important elements of Reformed federalism—notably the feature of continuity throughout the period of the covenant of grace (both the Mosaic and new dispensations)—have gradually been assimilated into the system of evangelical doctrine. The recent rapprochement between covenant theology and modern dispensationalism is in part illustrative. But nagging differences still remain between these longstanding disputants, and new points of contention have arisen within the respective camps.

²⁰ The impact of this doctrinal error is clearly evident in the recent Protestant/Roman-Catholic discussions. In *Protestants and Catholics: Do They Now Agree?* (Eugene: Harvest House, 1995) J. Ankerberg and J. Weldon conclude their critique by noting: "A final illustration should reveal the seriousness of this issue. Yet another story of conversion to Rome is found in the person of Scott Hahn, author of *Rome, Sweet Home*" (p. 207). The teaching of Shepherd helped cement Hahn in his theological convictions regarding the role of faith and works in justification. (Compare Hahn's own account in S. Hahn and K. Hahn, *Rome, Sweet Home: Our Journey to Catholicism* [San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993] 31, 129–130.) For further reading on this matter see K. Riddlebarger, "No Place Like Rome? Why Are Evangelicals Joining the Catholic Church," *Roman Catholicism: Evangelical Protestants Analyze What Divides and Unites Us* (ed. J. Armstrong; Chicago: Moody, 1994) 221–243; A. Sandlin, "Deviations from Historic Solafideism in the Reformed Community," *Chalcedon Report* (February 1995) 18–27.

²¹ Contrast D. B. McWilliams' analysis, "The Covenant Theology of the 'Westminster Confession of Faith' and Recent Criticism," *WTJ* 53 (1991) 109–124, with that of M. W. Karlberg, "Covenant Theology and the Westminster Tradition," *WTJ* 54 (1992) 135–152, and R. S. Ward, "Recent Criticisms of the Westminster Confession of Faith," *Proceedings of the International Conference of Reformed Churches* (Alberta: Inheritance, 1993) 184–202.

²² See the important study by S. Westerholm, *Israel's Law and the Church's Faith: Paul and His Recent Interpreters* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), as well as the thoughtful reviews by A. J. Bandstra ("Paul and the Law: Some Recent Developments and an Extraordinary Book," *Calvin Theological Journal* 25 [1990] 249–261) and M. Silva (*WTJ* 51 [1989] 174–177). Cf. my review of *The Law, the Gospel, and the Modern Christian: Five Views* (ed. W. G. Strickland; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993) in *JETS* 37 (1994) 447–450.

II. THE DRAMA OF REDEMPTION UNFOLDED

There is no question that the popularity of the so-called misinterpretation view of the Mosaic law has helped bring about a degree of consolidation within evangelical thinking. That is not to say that any like consensus of opinion has been reached on the complex question regarding the nature and purpose of the Mosaic law in the progressive unfolding of redemptive history. But with all the significant changes that have taken place thus far in dispensationalism in particular, attention has focused once again on the Reformation theme of law and gospel. Current preoccupation with the history of salvation among evangelicals—the category of *historia salutis* in distinction from *ordo salutis*—has occasioned a fresh look at traditional Protestant formulation on Paul and the law. In this setting the work of Schreiner and Thielman should command our full attention.²³

It is gratifying to read that after extended theological and exegetical study Schreiner remains convinced that “the Reformers understood Paul better than those who are espousing new approaches.”²⁴ The central message is this, explains Schreiner: “No one can be justified by the works of the law, for no one keeps perfectly the law’s demands.”²⁵ This is the (unfulfilled) legal requirement of the covenant between God and humankind, the duty of the creature to the Creator. It is one aspect of the natural (i.e. covenantal) bond between the Father and the son. It distinguishes the first relationship established in creation from subsequent reconciliation between the Redeemer and the redeemed, those formerly estranged from God. Happily, Schreiner is not a blind disciple of Daniel Fuller. He takes exception to Fuller’s understanding of the Pauline expression “the works of the law.” Schreiner rightly insists that a contrast, not a continuum, between the law and the gospel is contemplated by the apostle. This insight of Schreiner, however, needs to be applied even more consistently than he presently allows.

²³ Gaffin, following the lead of G. C. Berkouwer and H. Ridderbos, attempts to overturn traditional Reformed interpretation of the Mosaic covenant. In “Pentecost” he substitutes the indicative/imperative construct for the traditional law/gospel antithesis. From the standpoint of the history of redemption (*historia salutis*) Gaffin argues that the law of Moses—summed up in the Decalogue or more succinctly in the imperative “Do this and live” (Lev 18:5)—sets forth God’s naked command, the fulfillment of which awaits the new-covenant era when spiritual union with the risen and exalted Christ is effectuated. In the eschatological age, Christ becomes “life-giving Spirit” (1 Cor 15:45). Under law the present imperative stands apart from the future indicative. G. Zimmermann argues conversely: “Erst wenn, mit anderen Worten, die Zehn Gebote nicht als objektiver Imperativ, sondern als subjektiver Indikativ, nicht als äussere Hindernis und äussere Begrenzung, sondern als innerer Motor und innerer Impuls verstanden werden, können sie ausgeführt und vergegenwärtigt werden” (“Gottesbund und Gesetz in der Westminster Confession,” ZKG 106 [1995] 191). Gaffin’s interpretation is marred by glaring contradiction and misapplication of the indicative/imperative construct.

²⁴ T. R. Schreiner, *The Law and Its Fulfillment: A Pauline Theology of Law* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993) 11. Consult D. L. Puckett, *John Calvin’s Exegesis of the Old Testament* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1995); Westerholm, *Israel’s Law*.

²⁵ Schreiner, *Law* 15.

On the one hand, writes Schreiner, "Paul contrasts faith and works fundamentally, not just as two periods of salvation history."²⁶ The Mosaic covenant is to be regarded as an "interim covenant" spanning the epoch wherein "the law functioned apart from the Spirit."²⁷ Schreiner adds: "The statement that Christ is 'the end of the law' in Romans 10:4 seems to harmonize with the idea that the Mosaic covenant was not intended to be in force forever."²⁸ Unfortunately Schreiner does not free himself from the dispensational error of denying the essential role of the Holy Spirit in regenerating, sanctifying and justifying OT believers. Some lingering dispensational distinctives militate against proper understanding of the essential (or substantive) continuity between the OT and the NT.

A pivotal element in Schreiner's argument is his contention that corporate Israel stands condemned under the law of Moses because she has not kept the law perfectly. To say this, however, Schreiner must acknowledge that ancient Israel was in some sense under a covenant of works. But this he is unwilling to do. He favors Moisés Silva's exegesis of Gal 3:12. This proposal is nothing other than a variation on the misinterpretation view of the law, the view that Schreiner himself aims to refute in his work.²⁹ The Schreiner-Silva reading still obscures the covenantal contrast drawn by Paul between the principle of faith and the principle of works, between the Abrahamic promise and the Mosaic law. In the words of Timothy George: "It is either law or promise, works or faith, grace or merit."³⁰ That contrast must refer to the covenants themselves. Schreiner readily admits that Paul entertains the proper use of the law, not its misuse. The law was designed to work death and condemnation for those under its dominion. Summarily, Schreiner's failure is twofold: (1) his refusal to grant the operation of the principle of works within the restricted symbolico-typological sphere of the Mosaic economy, and (2) his failure to discern the fundamental disparity between the views of Fuller and Murray on Paul and the law (whatever other similarities there are).³¹

²⁶ Ibid. 101. See also T. R. Schreiner, "Works of the Law," *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (ed. G. F. Hawthorne and R. P. Martin; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993) 975-979.

²⁷ Schreiner, *Law* 124.

²⁸ Ibid. 134.

²⁹ M. Silva has in recent years moved away somewhat from his earlier formulation. In "The New Testament Use of the Old Testament: Text Form and Authority" (*Scripture and Truth* [ed. D. A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992] 147-165) Silva adopted Ridderbos' interpretation of Paul on the law, wherein "Paul's hostile tone when speaking of the law should be understood in light of the synagogue's handling of the law. . . . Consider Galatians 3:11-12, where Paul apparently opposes Habakkuk 2:4 to Leviticus 18:5, as though the Old Testament taught two mutually exclusive approaches to salvation. One of the many attempts to solve the problem is to suggest that Leviticus 18:5 was something like the Judaizers' motto, so that Paul's use of that passage would have been understood by his readers as a reference to the Judaizing point of view. Even if we disagree with this particular interpretation of Galatians 3, is there a principial reason to set aside such an approach?" (p. 159). Silva now adopts J. Murray's interpretation of Lev 18:5, arguing that the law functions as a "bare principle." However inadequate exegetically, at least this reading preserves the crucial theological distinction between the law and the gospel.

³⁰ George, *Galatians* 252.

Thielman's contextual analysis of Paul on the law and his thematic presentation reflect the author's own systematic proclivity—that is, his contextual approach to Paul, though helpful, does not stand as a corrective to alternative approaches. (And this is the reason why Thielman's work and Schreiner's complement one another so well.) What is distinctive in Thielman's analysis is his employment of the concept of paradox to describe Paul's teaching on the law. What appears to be old and ready to pass away at the dawning of the new, eschatological age of the Spirit, Thielman argues, may not actually be so. Although the Mosaic covenant had indeed been abolished upon the establishment of the covenant in Christ Jesus, "certain commandments within the law are still valid."³² And although the new covenant signals the breakdown of the ethnic barrier between Jew and Gentile, nevertheless the restored people, the Church, resembles Israel of old. "It stands in continuity with ancient Israel and can be described in terms formerly applied to Israel, but it is itself a new entity."³³ The most puzzling feature of the relationship between the OT and the NT, Thielman admits, is the discontinuity. The solution, he suggests, is to be found in the NT reinterpretation of the Mosaic law. "The law of Moses still contains for believers the word of God, but it is interpreted in light of the eschatologically significant events that brought the new people of God into existence."³⁴ What has changed is "the outward boundary markers . . . [not] the general pattern of God's dealings with his people."³⁵ Thielman further observes that the letter/Spirit contrast is neither a contrast between two ways of interpreting the OT and NT, nor between Jewish misuse and proper use of the law, nor between two ways of ethical service. It is a contrast between two distinctive eras, "the first dominated by the law and its condemnation and the second dominated by the Spirit and righteousness."³⁶ In my judgment the same criticisms leveled against Schreiner's interpretation above are equally applicable to Thielman's. Thielman and Schreiner go so far in their argument but no farther. It is like baking a cake and leaving out the leaven. It falls flat.

The basic question is this: What does the law require? Does the law demand something less than full and perfect obedience? At one point in his ar-

³¹ Appreciation is acknowledged for the personal correspondence with Schreiner in the summer of 1994. Concerning the teaching of Fuller consult further the timely essay by M. G. Kline, "Covenant Theology Under Attack," *New Horizons* 15/2 (February 1994) 3–5; "Of Works and Grace," *Presbyterion* 9 (1983) 85–92. This entire issue of *Presbyterion* is devoted to the subject of justification and includes a response by Fuller.

³² F. Thielman, *Paul and the Law: A Contextual Approach* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994) 237.

³³ *Ibid.* 89.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 103.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 106. The influence of J. D. G. Dunn's interpretation is apparent here.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 268 n. 38. Elsewhere Thielman writes: "The change of covenants was necessary because no individual could keep the stipulations of the old covenant, a fact which Israel had demonstrated at the national level. The change was also necessary because after the covenant was broken, Israel used the Law to erect barriers between itself and the Gentile world" ("Law," *Dictionary of Paul* 541–542).

gumentation Thielman speaks of “the provisional and ultimately inadequate righteousness that was available on the basis of the Mosaic law [which] has been replaced by ‘the righteousness that comes from God by faith.’”³⁷ This idea of provisional righteousness based on observance of the law of Moses is in need of further explication or even reformulation. The Scriptures clearly teach that under the Mosaic law the bondservant was obligated to keep the law in its entirety. What was appropriate in former times under Moses is now no longer appropriate. Since the coming of Christ, reversion to the law of Moses and its demand for works-righteousness as grounds for temporal blessing in the land of Canaan would obscure, if not undermine, the surpassing glory of Christ’s atoning work—specifically, his procurement of our eternal salvation—which theocratic Israel experienced only in type and shadow. (Of course the elect within Israel were true heirs of eternal life through faith in the Messiah who was yet to come.) Reverting to the old law would once again place God’s people under a yoke of bondage. But Christ freed his covenant people from the servitude of the old law-administration. A change in status—from childhood to sonship—has taken place in history for the people of God. In the unfolding of redemptive history it was God’s design that the Mosaic law should work death and condemnation in Israel (symbolized by her exile in Babylon).³⁸ The law served a pedagogical, tutelary purpose in the history of redemption. Nothing hypothetical or improper here. The goal of the law was not to produce false confidence in the flesh nor to elicit some kind of provisional, less-than-perfect righteousness in the lives of the godly saints but rather to consign all (Jew and Gentile) under sin and death, to point sinners to Christ for eternal salvation, and thus to magnify the grace of God. That was the lesson to be drawn from Israel’s history, a history illustrative of divine blessing for obedience and curse for disobedience. The way of wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord and the keeping of his commandments. The reward for covenant fidelity awaits the consummate return of Christ (see e.g. Prov 12:28; 13:23).

Both Thielman and Schreiner perpetuate the error of traditional Protestant interpretation when they suggest that God offered Israel salvation hypothetically on grounds of works-righteousness. According to Thielman, Rom 2:5–16 and the book of Deuteronomy as a whole posit hypothetical salvation by works:

Paul argues only for the possibility that keeping the law could lead to eternal life, glory, honor and peace (vv. 7,10), not that any one actually achieves these ends by doing so. . . . He is saying nothing other than what Deuteronomy says when it claims that God will grant life to his people if they obey the law (Deut

³⁷ Thielman, *Paul* 155. He speaks of this righteousness of faith as an “alien righteousness” (p. 273 n. 19), a righteousness imputed to the believer. He reasons: “This righteousness implied that the ‘righteousness that comes by the law’ was provisional and proleptic” (p. 285 n. 39).

³⁸ The analogy between Israel and Adam is given rhetorical effect in Romans 7. The similar exegetical treatments of this highly-contested passage by D. Moo and myself are discussed in D. B. Garlington, “Romans 7:14–25 and the Creation Theology of Paul,” *Trinity Journal* 11 (1990) 197–235, and In-Gyu Hong, *The Law in Galatians* (JSNTSup 81; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993) 153 n. 2.

28:1–14) but then goes on to predict that Israel will instead disobey and receive the covenant's curses (28:15–68; 30:22–29). The possibility of life is extended to the people of Israel if they should keep the law, but, Deuteronomy affirms, they will disobey the law and choose death rather than life (30:15–20).³⁹

Over against this reading it is my contention that Israel's retention of the land was contingent upon her own compliance with the law of Moses. The grounds for the temporal reward was legal obedience.⁴⁰ To paraphrase Scripture: "Do this and you, ancient Israel, will live and prosper in the land I have given you. Otherwise, I, the Lord your God, will bring a curse on the land." In the period from Moses to Christ theocratic Israel was placed on

Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos (ed. R. B. Gaffin, Jr.; Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980) 254–255). Moo takes exception to G. N. Davies' suggestion (*Faith and Obedience in Romans: A Study in Romans 1–4* [JSNTSup 39; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1990]) that Rom 2:6 ff. is dealing with pre-Christian Jews and Gentiles (D. Moo, "Romans 2: Saved Apart from the Gospel?", *Through No Fault of Their Own? The Fate of Those Who Have Never Heard* [ed. W. V. Crockett and J. G. Sigountos; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991] 137–145).

III. CONCLUDING REMARKS (AN APOLOGETIC APPEAL)

As we draw this study to a conclusion, a brief word about the typological significance of the land of Canaan in Biblical times is in order. To be sure, our understanding of this issue plays a decisive role in Biblical hermeneutics. No system of theology—no theological interpretation of the Bible—can avoid the subject. And of course one's position on this matter bears directly

³⁹ Thielman, *Paul* 172–173. Protestant interpreters have applied the hypothetical offer of salvation on grounds of works in a variety of ways. G. Vos, for example, maintained that God had "held up before us constantly the ideal of eternal life to be obtained by keeping the law, a lost ideal though it be. . . . When the work of the Spirit by means of the law and the gospel leads to true conversion, in this conversion the longing for this lost ideal of the covenant appears as an essential part. From the above we can also explain why the older theologians did not always clearly distinguish between the covenant of works and the Sinaitic covenant. At Sinai it was not the 'bare' law that was given, but a reflection of the covenant of works revived, as it were, in the interests of the covenant of grace continued at Sinai" ("The Doctrine of the Covenant in Reformed Theology,"

⁴⁰ W. J. Dumbrell explains: "We have noted how the possession of the land was regarded in the Old Testament as the spiritual index of Israel's political health. The ultimate blessing for Israel had been conceived of in terms of a good national life in the promised land, the enjoyment of the divine presence associated with it, and the material blessings which the land offered. . . . Covenant obedience, Israel knew, would result in the retention of the land, covenant disobedience in the temporary withdrawal of its gifts and in its final loss" (*Covenant and Creation: A Theology of the Old Testament Covenants* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984] 165). The Sinaitic covenant, like the original Edenic covenant, was "irretrievably breached" (p. 120). Unlike the unconditional covenant (traditionally called the covenant of grace) established on the merits of Christ's substitutionary obedience and for the sake of God's elect, these two covenants made blessing contingent upon obedience (p. 185). C. G. Bartholomew interacts with this work and other recent studies in "Covenant and Creation: Covenant Overload or Covenantal Deconstruction," *Calvin Theological Journal* 30 (1995) 11–33.

upon the millennial question. In this century the Biblical theology of Geerhardus Vos has shown convincingly the centrality of eschatology, the doctrine of last things, within the pages of the OT and NT. Reformed covenant theology, more generally speaking, has viewed typology as an essential ingredient in the Christological interpretation of the Scriptures. The pattern of teaching is already found in the teachings of Jesus and in the apostolic writings. It is left to subsequent Christian interpretation to extend the typological reading to all of redemptive revelation, not just those persons, events and institutions explicitly identified in the NT. The Law, the Prophets and the Writings all speak of Christ, his person and work. Both Biblical symbolism and prophetic idealism—that is, the premessianic vision of the future age entertained by the OT prophets—require us to view the land of Canaan as a temporary sign depicting the eternal kingdom, the promised land, which has already begun to manifest itself in this present, preconsummation epoch of inaugurated eschatology.⁴² (Thus e.g. the temple of God is now the post-Pentecost, Spirit-filled people of God.) The crucial questions that remain unanswered in modern-day dispensationalism are these: What is the relationship between the purported, future millennial reign of Christ in Palestine and the everlasting kingdom? What is the proper understanding of the

⁴¹ K. L. Barker expounds his theology of the covenants in “The Scope and Center of Old and New Testament Theology and Hope” (*Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church* 293–328). He summarily dismisses covenant theology’s typological interpretation of the OT and NT, agreeing with W. VanGemeren’s analysis that “Mark W. Karlberg has made an attempt at defining ‘legitimate discontinuities,’ but fails to be convincing because of his [?] prior understanding of typology” (p. 293 n. 4). In seeking a moderating position between dispensational and covenantal interpretations Barker favors a contrast of promise and fulfillment as opposed to shadow and reality. Precisely here Barker destroys any genuine typology in Scripture, leaving him at best with only a vague redemptive-historical analogy. He cannot do justice to the discontinuity between old and new covenants because he refuses to acknowledge a legal—that is, conditional—element in the Sinaitic arrangement. Approaching this subject from a position different from Barker’s, Saucy misreads my view when he has me saying that “Israel’s blessing and prosperity in the land were *always* related to the conditional Mosaic covenant” (*Case* 226 n. 11; italics mine). Though characterized by its

promise of a future kingdom, the land of Canaan was a symbol and type of the everlasting kingdom of Christ, of which earthly Canaan was a symbol and type. Saucy views Israel’s restoration as God’s gracious response to her repentance so that “the restoration promise is no longer tied to the conditional Sinaitic covenant, but it is now related to the unconditional new covenant of

⁴² In defense of the doctrine of the future millennial reign of Christ on earth, Saucy contends: “The divine plan for the restoration of all things according to the prophets, therefore, involved two stages. One stage included a kingdom characterized by an internal spiritual salvation and the glorious reign of the Messiah over all his enemies—for the first time in human history, a rule over the whole earth by man as a representative of God’s will. A certain regeneration of nature will also take place. But sin, although unable to contest the powerful rule of the Messiah, will still be present. Only after this temporary period, with the final elimination of evil from the heavens and earth and the making of all things new, will the restoration be complete” (*Case* 240–241).

original promise to Abraham regarding the land as an eternal possession? Are believing Jews to be granted special status among the one people of God in the eternal state? These questions have largely been skirted in the current debate.⁴³

I began this three-part study of Paul and the law asking the question: Is it naive optimism to hope that the Christian Church today can fully recover the evangelical doctrine of law and gospel, that which was part of the Protestant theological consensus at the time of the Reformation? To be sure, the future of evangelicalism remains uncertain. James Montgomery Boice has rightly observed: "The evangelical church is in a perilous condition, even to the point of abandoning the gospel which brought it into being."⁴⁴ In the opinion of Charles Spurgeon, "he who understands the covenant has reached

dispensationalism as an "aberration in Christian theology" (cited in Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* 15). In *Dispensationalism: Its Origin and Growth* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), Ryrie traces the development of dispensationalism from its origins in the writings of John Walcott (1796-1860) and John Nelson Darby (1800-1882) to its present-day form. Ryrie's work is a complete and expanded work, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody, 1995), attempts to revive classical dispensational teaching. From the standpoint of the history of interpretation, Waltke has rightly identified

⁴⁴ Cited on the jacket cover of Sproul, *Faith Alone*.

the very core and marrow of the Gospel.”⁴⁵ On the one hand, historic Reformed theology has something important to say in current discussions. On the other, many modern-day exponents (or, rather, detractors) of Reformed theology have much to rediscover in the orthodox Protestant heritage. As we prepare to enter the twenty-first century we stand at a critical threshold, a watershed in the history of the Church. As I see it, one of the tasks of the Evangelical Theological Society is to clarify issues relating to what is, after all, the heart of the gospel: justification by faith alone.

⁴⁵ Cited in P. E. Golding, “The Development of the Covenant: An Introductory Study in Biblical Theology,” *Reformed Theological Journal* 9 (1993) 60.