

LAW AND GOSPEL IN REFORMED PERSPECTIVE

DONALD G. BLOESCH

MEANING OF REFORMED

THE term “Reformed” has become almost as ambiguous as “evangelical,” but I am using it in a very specific sense. First it means anchored in the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. To be Reformed means to claim the legacy of Calvin, Zwingli, Knox, Bucer, and Bullinger. But Reformed people also acknowledge their indebtedness to Luther and Melancthon, both of whom spearheaded the Lutheran Reformation. It should be kept in mind that Calvin signed one of the editions of the Augsburg Confession. In the old Evangelical Synod of North America, the church of my childhood, the guiding standards of faith were the Augsburg Confession, Luther’s Small Catechism, and the Heidelberg Catechism. These remained confessional standards in the Evangelical and Reformed church, which came into existence in 1934 (now part of the United Church of Christ).

A second meaning of Reformed is the willingness always to be reformed in light of the Word of God. Our creeds and theologies remain under the witness of holy Scripture and therefore may be corrected and amended on the basis of new insight gleaned from the Word of God. New creeds can be written as new heresies arise to challenge the faith once delivered to the saints. Both Calvin and Luther placed the Word of God above the testimonies of sacred tradition.

Other theologians who have shaped the Reformed tradition and have influenced me personally in various ways are P. T. Forsyth, Charles Hodge, Karl Barth, Jacques Ellul, G. C. Berkouwer, Hendrikus Berkhof, and Reinhold Niebuhr. My principal mentors in this study are Barth, Calvin, and to a lesser extent Niebuhr.

CONTRASTING POSITIONS

In Roman Catholicism the gospel is often pictured as a new law, one that fulfills the Mosaic law of Hebraic tradition. Christ is envisaged as the eternal or final law of God. The teachings of Christ as well

as the ministry and acts of Christ constitute the gospel as the fulfilled law of God.

In Luther an antithesis is frequently drawn between the law and the gospel. The law is the hammer of God's judgment, which brings about conviction of sin. The gospel is the balm of God's mercy that assures us of divine forgiveness. Luther like Calvin also affirmed a political use of the law—to restrain our rapacity and thereby preserve us from injury in the order of creation. While Luther's emphasis was on the spiritual use—to drive us to an awareness of our helplessness and need for God, it is debatable whether he held that the law always accuses. For the person with a stricken conscience, he says, "sin assuredly rules by the law, for no one loves the law by nature; and that is a great sin. Grace, however, makes the law dear to us, and then sin is no more there, and the law is no longer against us, but with us."¹

For Calvin the principal use of the law is the ethical one—the law as a guide in the Christian life. He acknowledged that the law is also a tutor that leads one to Christ, but he was equally emphatic that the law is also a divinely-given standard that keeps us in conformity with the will of God as revealed in Christ. Calvin affirmed the basic continuity between law and gospel, though he did perceive the continuing tension between the letter of the law and the evangelical proclamation. According to him the law is always *with* the gospel rather than simply before the gospel. The right order is law-gospel-law. The law prepares us for faith in Christ, and the gospel then sends us back to the law enabling us to obey it in the spirit of love. Reinhold Niebuhr perceptively observes that, unlike Luther, Calvin does not "believe that grace abrogates the law, for he does not think of sanctification as an ecstatic experience of love which transcends all law. He thinks of it rather as a rigorous obedience to law."²

In contradistinction to the mainstream of Reformation tradition, Karl Barth gives priority to the gospel in the determination of the content of the law. If we are to understand the demand of the law rightly, we must first have been confronted by the promise of the gospel. Barth basically sees one use for the law—a spiritual-ethical use: the law directs us to the gospel and to service in the world in light of the gospel. Or to put it another way, the law leads us to faith in Christ and to obedience to Christ. The law thereby becomes a sign and witness of the gospel. The law is not the gospel, and the gospel is not the law, but the two are inseparable in constituting the one Word of God.

¹Luther, *Preface to the Epistle to the Romans*, trans. C. M. Jacobs. In *Works of Martin Luther II* (Phil.: A. J. Holman Co., 1932) 457.

²Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man II* (NY: Charles Scribners, 1951) 202.

Not surprisingly, natural law is suspect in Barthian circles, where natural awareness of moral law is deemed insufficient to provide us with valid knowledge of God's will and purpose for human life. This is because of human sin, which distorts our perceptions of moral order in the universe and subverts the moral sense that is a gift of creation. Jacques Ellul, however, who more or less follows Barthian theology, makes a place for the fact of natural law as opposed to a theology of natural law.³ Despite human limitation and sin, all societies construct moral norms simply to preserve a semblance of justice and order. These moral norms attest the reality of a universal moral order, but they do not give a reliable account of this moral order. They nevertheless play a secondary role in preserving social order, and societies are judged by God on how they live up to their own standards.

DISTINCTIVE REFORMED EMPHASES

Reformed theology affirms a polarity but not an antithesis between law and gospel. It is commonly said that the second face of the gospel is the law, and the second face of the law is the gospel. The gospel is the form of the law, and the law is the form of the gospel (Barth). A believer is not released from the imperatives of the law but is now obliged and empowered to obey these imperatives. In Reformed thought the person of faith stands "under grace but also under judgment, under the promise but also under the demand, under the gospel but also under the law."⁴ There is not a separation but a correlation between law and gospel. The antithesis is between the law of God as God intended and the human misunderstanding of the law, which is manifested in legalism and rigorism.

In Reformed theology the law is a means to salvation—but only when united with the gospel. Psalm 19:7–8 is often cited: "The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. . . . The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes" (NIV). The law saves by directing us to the gospel, by relaying the message of the gospel to us. The law by itself does not save but only condemns. It is when Christ speaks to us through the law, it is when we perceive the law through the lens of the gospel, that we are convicted of sin and assured by the promise of the gospel.

Reformed theology takes strong exception to grounding ethics simply in the spirit of love. With the Reformed fathers "ethics was grounded not upon love but upon obeying the commandments as *God's* commandments. The Law keeps its place beside the Gospel as another, a second,

³See Jacques Ellul, *The Theological Foundation of Law*, trans. Marguerite Wieser (NY: Seabury, 1969).

⁴Karl Barth, *The Göttingen Dogmatics: Instruction in the Christian Religion I*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 195.

reality, equally true and commanding and necessary because the one God stands behind both, because the one Holy Spirit imparts both to men."⁵

Calvin was insistent that the gospel too is a sword that slays. The gospel brings judgment as well as grace because it introduces us to the majesty and holiness of God as well as to his infinite mercy. Indeed, God's mercy can only be understood and appreciated in light of his severity toward human sin.

In the mainstream of Reformed tradition there is one covenant—a covenant of grace, but it has two dimensions or stages, one of preparation, the other of fulfillment. The covenant that God makes with His people in the Old Testament is a preparation for the covenant He consummates in Christ. The Christian church is the new covenant form of the people of God. In Reformed history allusion was sometimes made to a covenant of works; this is best understood as the legalistic misunderstanding of the covenant of God's grace. The covenant that God made with both Abraham and Moses is based on His unconditional and unmerited love, but this covenant is not fulfilled until its beneficiaries, the people of God, walk according to the way of holiness.

Reformed theology is reluctant to suggest that the gospel abrogates the law. Romans 10:4 has often been a subject of controversy in the history of Christian thought: "Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes" (NRSV). The word for end is *telos*, which generally signifies purpose or completion rather than termination. Yet in its immediate and wider context it can be seen as both termination and completion,⁶ because Christ does bring an end to the law as an independent way to salvation. Christ is both the negation and fulfillment of the Mosaic law. Christ overthrows the law of sin and death in order to clear the way for the law of spirit and life (Rom 8:2).

The law is overturned by the gospel, and yet a new imperative standing in continuity with the original divine imperative proceeds from the gospel. Reinhold Niebuhr recognizes that "a higher than the traditional law is implied in the gospel."⁷ Barth calls this the "law of grace" and the "law of freedom." It signifies the paradoxical unity of obligation and permission.

LOVE AND LAW

Reformed theology readily acknowledges an abiding tension between love as law and love as grace. Love is both an obligation and

⁵Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*, trans. Douglas Horton (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1978) 264.

⁶See James R. Edwards, *Romans* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1992) 247–50.

⁷Reinhold Niebuhr, *op. cit.* 106.

a gift that transcends the sense of duty. When we are liberated by the grace that comes to us through both law and gospel, we are only too happy to obey the imperatives of the law. As the Psalmist exclaims, "I shall run the course made known in your commandments, for you set free my heart" (119:32 REB).

Reinhold Niebuhr, coopting a phrase from Nicolas Berdyaev, refers to the ethics of the gospel as "the morality beyond morality."⁸ Yet even here, Niebuhr says, law is not completely transcended. When we are freed from legal demands, we nonetheless set out on a new course of obedience—no longer to legal claims but to a holy person.

This notion of the kingdom of God transcending the claims and codes of legal morality is also evident in Karl Barth: "The Kingdom of God has its beginning on the other side of the Cross, beyond all that is called 'religion' and 'life', beyond conservatism and radicalism, physics and metaphysics; on the other side of morals and of that which is beyond morality."⁹

What I am proposing is an ethics of divine command, but this is the divine command in unity with the divine promise. Love goes beyond the prescriptions of law, but at the same time love fulfills the imperative of law (cf. Matt 5:17; Rom 13:10). Love liberates us from the burden of the law and empowers us to keep the law.

To reduce the Christian life to agape love (as Nygren does), is to disregard the claims of God's law upon the believing community. God is both love and holiness, and his law proceeds from both. Agape does not cancel the claims of *nomos*, but it places *nomos* on a new foundation. Agape is not simply sacrificial love but also holy love. Love leads us to respect the holy law of God as deserving of our fidelity and adherence. But now under grace we adhere not to make ourselves acceptable before God but to show our gratefulness for what God has already done for us in Jesus Christ.

An ethics of the divine command is at the same time an ethics of grace. When we strive to obey the law of God we are making a witness to the gospel fact that salvation comes by grace and grace alone. We are justified and also sanctified only by grace because our works are invariably mixed with motives that are less than pure. Even as Christians we sin in our morality as well as in our immorality. But we can proceed to do good works because, although inevitably falling short of God's glory, they are covered by the perfect righteousness of Christ and thus rendered pleasing in God's sight.

⁸Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christian Realism and Political Problems* (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1953) 164.

⁹Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, trans. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (NY: Oxford University Press, 1968) 159.

As Christians we are still under the command of God, but this command must now be seen as a permission as well. This paradoxical fact is attested in Matt 14:28–29. Peter asks to be commanded to come to Jesus in the water, and Jesus says “Come.” The command of our Lord fulfills the innermost yearnings of our being and sets our will free to act according to both God’s perfect will and our deepest existential need.

CALL TO DISCIPLESHIP

Reformed theology has always endeavored to tie the gift of God’s unfathomable grace with the call to discipleship under the cross. If grace is not united with discipleship it becomes cheap. Just as grace cost God the life of his own Son, so it must also cost us our lives—our reputations, our self-esteem, sometimes even our health—in the service of the gospel.

The gospel is an evangelical indicative, but an indicative that implies an imperative. This inseparability is seen in Mark 2:1–12 where Jesus heals the paralytic: “Your sins are forgiven” and “Stand up and take your mat and walk” (NRSV). Which is law and which is gospel? They both announce the good news, but a command is also involved.

As Christians we are enjoined to be rich in good works (1 Tim 6:17–19), but our motivation is not to make ourselves acceptable before God or to earn the favor of God. The Heidelberg Catechism rightly reminds us that our commitment to a life of service is to be based on gratitude for what God has already done for us in Jesus Christ. And there are other biblical motivations for following Christ: the fear of God, the love of God, and the desire to glorify God. Paul confessed that it is “the love of Christ” that “urges us on” (2 Cor 5:14 NRSV).

In delineating the rationale for the Christian life we should heed seriously the biblical dictum that being is prior to action. We must be in Christ before we can act in harmony with his will. This truth is underlined by Paul: “We have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him” (Col 1:9, 10 NRSV). Jesus makes this same point when he contends that good fruit can only come from a good tree (Luke 6:43–45). Once we are converted into salt and light by God’s grace we must sprinkle our salt and let our light shine before others so that they may see our good works and give glory to our Father in heaven (Matt 5:14, 16 NRSV).

Reformed theology emphasizes the need not only for faith but also for obedience. Faith does not simply produce obedience but encompasses obedience. Barth makes this very clear: “There has to be a rec-

ognition, an acceptance, an acknowledgment, a respecting, a bowing down. This is why there has to be knowledge and action, not just sinking and vanishing, not just stillness and passivity, not just a 'feeling of absolute dependence.'"¹⁰

To preach grace without sounding the call to holiness is to settle for a truncated gospel. The whole counsel of God embraces both the divine promise of unmerited grace and the divine mandate to live out a vocation to service and holiness. We preach the gospel to comfort the afflicted and the law to afflict the comfortable (Luther). But we also preach both law and gospel to challenge the forgiven sinner to lead a life that redounds to the glory of God.

THE ULTIMATE CRITERION

The ultimate criterion for Christian faith is the gospel-law or the law-gospel. I affirm the chronological priority of the law of God on the plane of history (cf. John 1:17) but the ontological priority of the gospel (cf. John 1:3–5, 9). God's grace precedes God's commandment and also empowers us to fulfill what is commanded. Augustine put this very tersely: "Give what you command, and command what you will."

The gospel-law is the divine commandment in its unity with the divine promise. It is not a universal principle nor a narrative but an event. It is a word of personal address that comes to us through the witness of Scripture and church tradition.

I uphold a divine command ethic over the justice-love ethic¹¹ now being promulgated in mainline churches. The latter confounds the rational search for justice with the concrete will of the almighty God. It denies the disjunction between human justice and agape—the sacrificial, paradoxical love of the cross. It also ignores the infinite qualitative distinction between human virtue and divine holiness.

There is no law of creation proceeding to the gospel of redemption (as Braaten, Tillich, Pannenberg claim), but there is a law of creation illumined by the gospel of redemption. The universal moral law does not furnish a point of contact with the gospel of free grace, but this gospel opens our eyes to the reality of a moral order imbedded in the cosmos.

I affirm one covenant of grace that unites both Old and New Testaments, prophetic and apostolic history. The grace of God revealed in Christ is a new form of the old covenant made with Abraham and then with Moses. Some Reformed theologians of the past have even recognized a covenant of grace before history, an "eternal pact between the

¹⁰*Göttingen Dogmatics*, 180.

¹¹See *Presbyterians and Human Sexuality 1991* (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church [U.S.A.], 1991).

Father and the Son whereby the Father commissioned the Son to be the Savior and gave him a people."¹²

I acknowledge that there are dangers in the gospel-law order as well as in the law-gospel order. The law must not be reduced simply to a dimension of the gospel. Nor does the law by itself prepare the way for the reception of the gospel. Even Karl Barth, who is convinced of the inseparability of law and gospel, nevertheless insists that there is an infinite distance between them.¹³ The law is a tutor that leads us to the gospel but only because grace infuses the law and illumines it. The law is not an independent propaedeutic to the gospel; yet as the righteous hand of God it leads us to the gospel but only in the power of the grace that comes from the gospel.

Again, I wish to affirm the priority of grace over works, the divine promise over the divine command, the truth of the gospel over the prescriptions of the law. The Decalogue itself begins with the announcement of grace: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery; you shall have no other gods before me" (Exod 20:2-3 NRSV). The command follows the declaration of God's mercy.

The commandments in the Bible, particularly the Decalogue and the Sermon on the Mount, should be regarded as road signs that set us on the straight and narrow way. But we should remember that it is only Christ who gives us the power and vision to walk according to the road signs. It is only in the light of Christ that we are enabled to appreciate the full meaning of the road signs, particularly as they bear on our lives in the here and now.

The implications of the gospel-law order are many. Apologetics is not to precede dogmatics but is to be fully incorporated in the dogmatic task. Faith does not stand alone but produces a life of obedience. Repentance is not prior to faith as its logical ground but flows out from faith. In our preaching we do not first try to drive people into a consciousness of sin through the use of the law, but we call people to repentance on the basis of both law and gospel. In pastoral care self-knowledge does not come before God-knowledge, but we know ourselves only in the light of God's incomparable mercy revealed in the cross of Christ. The meaning of the cross precedes and undergirds the examination of the self. The assurance of pardon comes before as well as after the confession of sins.

I think the most comprehensive order, the one that does most justice to the entire biblical witness, is gospel-law-gospel. We are awak-

¹²See M. Eugene Osterhaven, "Covenant" in *Encyclopedia of the Reformed Faith*, Donald K. McKim, ed. (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), [pp. 84-87] 85.

¹³Karl Barth, *Community, State and Church* (NY: Doubleday, 1960) 81.

ened to the seriousness of the law and the gravity of our sins when we hear the gospel of free grace through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. The gospel then directs us to the law as a guide for the Christian life. But in reminding us of our sin the law sends us back to the gospel for the grace and consolation it provides. The divine promise precedes the commandment, but the commandment in turn precedes the fulfillment of the promise.