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A table of contents for *Reformation & Revival* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_ref-rev-01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ref-rev-01.php)



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## FINAL THOUGHTS

John H. Armstrong

I was browsing through a number of dictionaries and encyclopedias for this issue of the *Reformation & Revival Journal*. One of my favorite works is the always interesting *Encyclopedia of Evangelicalism*, written by Randall Balmer, a widely-celebrated historian at Columbia University. I looked for the entry under "gospel" and found the following:

The gospel is the "good news" of salvation, as proclaimed in the New Testament. Evangelicals believe that they have appropriated that gospel by acknowledging Jesus as their savior, and they believe it is incumbent on them to spread the gospel, the "good news," to others.

I then looked for Balmer's entry on "law," but found nothing. Absolutely, totally, nothing. As I pondered this I thought to myself, "That's about the way it is in modern evangelicalism. We talk a great deal about the gospel but say little or nothing about the law."



The motive for obedience in Scripture is always faith in the promises of God. If one believes what God says, one will obey him. This is the consistent emphasis of the Bible, and no careful reading will lead you to any other conclusion. The Bible places no importance on faith *that does not trust and obey*. In some cases faith and obedience are actually used interchangeably (Acts 6:7). In other places faith is seen as the source of obedience (Romans 1:5). And those who do not obey the gospel will be condemned eternally (2 Thessalonians 1:8). I have never really figured out why this is such a big problem for Christians to see, but then again we do have two thousand years' practice messing up the essential themes of the Bible.



Professor Norman Shepherd has written:

When Paul preached the gospel he did not call for faith alone with the assumption that repentance would *automatically flow from faith*. He did not see repentance *simply as the fruit and evidence of a pre-existing faith*. He *explicitly demanded both faith and repentance* (*Backbone of the Bible*, 91, emphasis mine).

Professor Shepherd's views on these matters have become quite controversial in some circles, with several very small denominations actually labeling his views as heresy. I have read Shepherd for some years now, and though I do not agree with every word he writes on this matter, I fail to see error in conclusions like this.

Note the point Shepherd makes initially, which is emphasized by my own italics. We cannot *assume* that repentance *flows automatically from faith* because the Bible does not make this assumption. I would add, and Shepherd would, of course, agree with me, that various human professions of faith regularly demonstrate the point as well.

Second, Shepherd is certainly correct to say, "Paul did not see repentance *simply as the fruit and evidence of a pre-existing faith*." Paul never tells readers to treat repentance as "evidence." Repentance is commanded. Both faith and repentance are gospel requirements, and both must be present where the Spirit has worked in grace.

Finally, Shepherd notes that Paul also "explicitly demanded both faith and repentance." He certainly did. He never ever calls people to believe and then to presume that, then if they believe correctly, repentance will simply follow. A Christianity that treats faith and repentance any other way is sub-biblical, even if it makes perfect sense in terms of someone's favorite systematic theology.



Another modern writer whose name is regularly associated, by some critics, with error in regard to law and gospel is N. T. Wright, a New Testament scholar and the Bishop of Durham in England. In a wonderfully succinct entry in the *New Dictionary of Theology* (Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, and J. I. Packer, editors, [Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1988, 359–60], N. T. Wright concludes:

“Justification by faith” is thus shorthand for “justification by grace through faith,” and in Paul’s thought at least *has nothing to do with a suspicious attitude towards good behavior*. On the contrary: Paul expects his converts to live in the manner appropriate for members of the covenant (Romans 6, etc.), and this is in fact necessary if faith is not to appear a sham (2 Corinthians 13:5). His polemic against “works of the law” is not directed against those who attempted to *earn* covenant membership through keeping the Jewish law (such people do not seem to have existed in the 1<sup>st</sup> century) but against those who sought to *demonstrate* their membership in the covenant through obeying the Jewish law. Against these people Paul argues, (a) that the law cannot in fact be kept perfectly—it merely shows up sin; and (b) that this attempt would reduce the covenant to a single race, those who possess the Jewish law, whereas God desires a world-wide family (Romans 3:27–31; Galatians 3:15–22). This means that James 2:14–26 is not in conflict with Paul, but expresses the same truth from a different perspective. The “faith” which is insufficient is bare Jewish monotheism (James 2:19); and Abraham’s faith, through which God declared him within the covenant in Genesis 15 (James 2:23), was simply “fulfilled” in the later incident of Genesis 22 (James (2:21).

Once again I fail to see how this kind of thinking does anything but clarify the biblical doctrine of justification and the proper relationship of law and gospel.



One of the most highly respected conservative Reformed theologians of the mid-twentieth century was Professor John Murray who taught at Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia for several decades. Professor Murray was a wise and astute thinker, who most certainly did not teach what Shepherd and Wright teach but who *anticipated*, in a certain sense, the developments in Pauline biblical theology of more recent years. Shepherd cut his teeth on Murray’s teaching. I did the same, though more indirectly. In Murray’s classic little book on salvation he writes:

Union with Christ is really *the central truth of the whole doctrine of salvation* not only in its application but also in its once-for-all accomplishment in the finished work of Christ (*Redemption Accomplished and Applied*, 161). . . . We may never think of redemption in *abstraction* from the mysterious arrangements of God’s love and wisdom and grace by which Christ was united to his people and his people were united to him when he died upon the accursed tree and rose again from the dead (162–63).

I have a deep and abiding concern that a great deal of the dispensational *and* covenantal theology in the conservative world of American evangelicalism leads to making redemption an “abstraction.” Murray’s counsel sets us on the right course.



My fellow editor, P. Andrew Sandlin, has stated my own conclusion regarding law and gospel simply:

This means, when you boil it right down, that there is no *fundamental* distinction between Gospel and Law. These words have been used for so long to communicate theological definitions that I am not advocating them; however, we must understand

that the *theological* definition given to the Gospel and Law is quite often *not* the *Biblical* definition (*Backbone of the Bible*, 78-79).

There is much more to be done to develop a better and richer theology of law and gospel. A moribund conservative evangelical theology needs this renewing desperately. It behooves us to listen better and speak humbly while we seek to better discern the trajectories of the Bible with regard to these twin truths.