

One Bible, One Gospel

©2012 - Rev. Reggie Kimbro

In recent decades many among the Lord's people have begun to reinvestigate the details of the gospel. This happy renewal follows a century plagued by inattention and error. To be sure, many errors still vigorously challenge the church's fidelity to the gospel, but a remnant it seems has awakened. Foremost within this resurgent interest lies a willingness to re-embrace the doctrines of the Reformation. The un-challenged caricatures of Calvinism that previously prevailed are being re-examined and there is a definite shift, especially among younger believers, towards the Calvinistic side of the Calvinistic/Arminian divide. While not universal, the fear of ostracism for being found Calvinistic has diminished. This is not yet true, however, for another element of Reformation theology—that of the old 'Federal' or 'Covenant Theology.' Yet ultimately these two facets of doctrine should be embraced together because they most clearly summarize the fundamental details of the one Gospel in our one Bible.

Covenant Theology has a simple but profound point of anchor. It finds all of God's gracious dealings with His people in Christ the Second Adam (Romans 5, 1 Cor. 15). Salvation can be summarized as simply as this: God's work in bringing believers out of condemnation (with all of its consequences) which they suffer in union with the First Adam, into justification (with all of its consequences) which they graciously receive in union with the Second Adam. This is as true of the first person saved in earth's history as it will be of the last. While there are changes of outward administration governing the worship of saved people from age to age, the inward spiritual realities present a clear unity to what is called the 'Covenant of Grace.' Though some would see at least three different administrations between Eden and Sinai, a remarkable continuity remains between the sacrifices outside the Garden and those of Israel's Tabernacle and Temple. Significant *outward* change came when the great Antitype appeared and fulfilled His *genuine* sacrificial work. After the Second Adam arrived the pictures of the Anticipated One were done away and the completed work of the Crucified One was proclaimed. Light increased from age to age, but greater light was not different light.

Whatever title one chooses for the original arrangement between God and Adam, the 'Covenant of Works' resulted in man's failure and the curse coming upon all creation because its head fell short of perfect obedience (Romans 5:12, 8:22). It is important to realize that the Covenant of Works did not disappear after the Fall. Its

righteous demands remained. This marks man as sinful. 'Sin is the transgression of the law' (1 John 3:4). Scripture clearly teaches that fallen man cannot merit his own righteousness by attempts to fulfill the Law (Romans 3:20; Galatians 2:16). He is already a law-breaker. A murderer cannot agree never to murder again and thereby cease from being a murderer. So it is with every transgression. To this one must add the vitally important corollary truths of the spirituality and unity of the Law. It reaches to the heart and to fail in one point is to be guilty of all (Matthew 5:20-48; James 2:10-11). Understanding what God requires of man thus becomes an overwhelming experience. Fallen but religious man always lowers the Law to a standard he feels capable of keeping. Thus legalists make the law smaller than it really is instead of larger. This is why Christ's exposition of the Law was such a shock to those mired in legalism (Matthew 7:28). The Covenant of Works demands perfect love to God and to my neighbor not merely in outward actions, but in every thought and in every inclination of the will. Truly every son of Adam must say, "O wretched man that I am" (Romans 7:24).

Here the Gospel enters. The Covenant of Grace answers man's need under the broken Covenant of Works. Or put another way, the Gospel meets sinners' need under the Law. It is not too much to say that one cannot understand the Gospel before he understands the Law. The fact that all men (not just OT Israel) are subjects of God's law and under its condemnation supplies the great theme of Paul's opening argument in Romans 1-3. This demands that we observe the historic distinction between the Moral Law (summarized in the 10 Commandments and present in the Covenant of Works) and those aspects of Civil and Ceremonial laws that were established for national Israel. In this way Christ merited the righteousness that is imputed to believers. He voluntarily entered the Covenant of Works on behalf of those given to Him of the Father. It behooved Him to fulfill all righteousness and actually *merit* heaven for His believing people. Contrary to the easy error over which well meaning Christians often stumble—*faith* is not the merit that brings us to heaven. It is the vehicle through which we appropriate the righteousness of Christ which brings us to heaven. While strides are being made in promoting the doctrine of imputed righteousness again, ground still needs to be recovered in defining the righteousness of Christ that is imputed. It is not His righteousness as the Eternal Son that we receive. It is righteousness with reference to the law that we receive. That which was ordained to life but sinners find to be unto death (Romans 7:10) Christ has fulfilled on behalf of His people. 'For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the *obedience* of one shall many be made righteous' (Romans 5:19). It was in a true human nature that Christ rendered perfect obedience unto the Father. 'Since by man came death, by *man*

came also the resurrection of the dead' (1 Corinthians 15:21). These texts illuminate the soul assuring truth that God has not lowered or altered His standard in order to accept believers. He has honored His law and met its demands in the Person of a representative. The work of the Incarnate Christ meets the demands of the Law from both perspectives. Historically these complementary truths are called the Passive and Active Obedience of Christ. 'Passive' refers to His suffering the penalty of the broken law. 'Active' refers to His earning the reward of the same law when fulfilled. This supplies the very heart of Covenant Theology. The fact that so many Evangelicals abandoned Covenant Theology in the last century lies behind the inattention and error that ensued with reference to Justification.

That this vicarious work applies to believers from both testaments clearly appears in Scripture. NT believers are of the seed of Abraham (Romans 4:16; Gal. 3:29) even though they are Gentiles. The Promise of Israel's Messiah is the foundation of the NT Church (Acts 2:39). NT Gentile believers are brought from their alienated position to come within the one true covenanted people (Ephesians 2:11-13). NT believers are called the 'Israel of God' (Gal. 6:16). The list of OT heroes of the faith concludes with the reminder that they as well as NT believers will come to completion together (Hebrews 11:40). The gates and foundations of the heavenly Jerusalem reflect the names of the twelve Tribes and of the twelve Apostles (Rev. 21:12-14). The unity of the Gospel could not be clearer. There is but one Gospel in our one Bible. One Body of redeemed men is formed—those united to Christ—and if united Christ, then united to one another in His one Body and as His one Bride. What a marvel to be received in and as One in whom the Father was 'well pleased!'