

**A
Treatise
on the Law
and the Gospel**

A Treatise on the Law and the Gospel

by
John Colquhoun

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Publisher's Introduction

John Colquhoun (ka-hoon) was a minister in the Church of Scotland and a prolific writer. He was born in the parish of Luss (Dunbartonshire) in 1748 and was led to conversion as a teenager by the answer to the Shorter Catechism's question, "What is effectual calling?" He immersed himself in the writings of Thomas Boston, then studied at the University of Glasgow. He was ordained as minister of St. John's in South Leith in 1781, where he served for 46 years. He died in 1827.

Colquhoun was a Reformed experiential preacher. His sermons and writings reflect those of the Marrow brethren, whose theology was more like that of the Secession churches than like that of Colquhoun's fellow evangelicals in the Church of Scotland. Though Colquhoun was not allowed to recommend Fisher's *Marrow of Modern Divinity* as a Church of Scotland minister, because the General Assembly had condemned it, he felt free to recommend Thomas Boston's notes.

Colquhoun's writings are theologically astute and intensely practical. He wrote on the core doctrines of the gospel, particularly on experiential soteriology. He wrote *A Treatise of Spiritual Comfort* in 1813, then, three years later, *A Treatise on the Law and the Gospel* (hereafter referred to as *Law and Gospel*). He also wrote books on the covenant of grace (1818), the covenant of works (1821), saving faith (1824), the promises of the gospel (1825), and evangelical repentance (1825). Then, too, he wrote a catechism for young communicants (1821) and a

volume of sermons that was published posthumously (1836) with a brief memoir.

To whet your appetite for *Law and Gospel*, I provide a summary of it below, and then provide some practical applications drawn from Colquhoun that you can glean from it.

Chapter One: The Moral Law

The opening chapter of *Law and Gospel* provides a three-part theological overview of the moral law. The first section shows that the law was “inscribed on the heart of man in his creation.” Colquhoun says that that law is sometimes called *the law of creation* because it is the will of the sovereign Creator revealed to man as His creature and made in His image, owing “all possible subjection and obedience to God as his benign Creator” (p. 6).

Sometimes this is called *the law of nature* because it was founded in the holy and righteous nature of God, its author, and was woven into the nature of man who is justly subject to that law. Sometimes it is called *the moral law* because it reveals the will of God as man’s moral governor. God uses this moral law, summarized by the Ten Commandments, as the standard and rule of man’s moral qualities and actions. Both God and man are bound to this law by their very nature and relationship, a relationship between “God the Creator, Proprietor, Preserver, Benefactor, and Governor of man; and man the creature, the property, and the subject of God” (p. 7).

In the second section, Colquhoun explains how the law was given to Adam under the form of the covenant of works. That covenant includes a precept, promise, and penalty, Colquhoun says: “a precept requiring perfect, personal, and perpetual obedience as the condition of eternal life; a gracious promise of the continuance of spiritual and temporal life and, in due time, of eternal life; and a penal sanction, an

express threatening of death: spiritual, temporal, and eternal" (pp. 11–25).

In the final section, Colquhoun teaches how the law functions in the Mediator's hands as a rule of life to believers. After establishing that the law in Christ's hands is not a new perceptive law but the old law issued to believers under a new form, Colquhoun explains that this law must be given to believers in and through the Mediator. Otherwise, the law could only terrify and destroy. Colquhoun writes, "It was requisite that a Mediator should interpose both between the offended Lawgiver and the sinner, and also between the violated law and the sinner, who, by satisfying the justice of the one and by not answering the demands of the other, might obtain free access for the guilty criminal to both" (p. 29).

God did not give the law through Christ to His people for their justification, for that is complete in Christ alone, but for their sanctification, that the law may "direct and oblige them to walk worthy of their union with Christ, of their justification in Him, of their legal title to and begun possession of life eternal, and of God Himself as their God in Him" (p. 32). In words reminiscent of Luther, who described the law as a stick that God first uses to beat a sinner to Christ, then is used by the believer, saved at the cross, as a cane to help him walk the Christian life, Colquhoun writes, "The precept of the law as a covenant is 'Do and live,' but the command of the law as a rule is 'live and do.' The law of works says, 'Do or you shall be condemned to die,' but the law in the hand of Christ says, 'You are delivered from condemnation; therefore do'" (p. 32).

The law initially metes out the rewards and punishments of judgment, but in the hands of Christ, it offers the rewards and paternal chastisements of grace. To keep believers from disobedience and sin, the Lord warns as their Father that "al-

though He will not cast them into hell for their sins, yet He will permit hell, as it were, to enter their consciences” in the form of afflictions, the greatest being the withdrawing of His favorable and sensible presence in the soul. Colquhoun concludes that to distinguish clearly between “the law as a covenant and the law as a rule of life is, as Luther said, ‘the key which opens the hidden treasure of the gospel’” (p. 40).

Chapter Two: Covenant and the Law

In this chapter, Colquhoun explains how the Ten Commandments were published from Sinai in the form of a covenant, then how the Sinaic transaction contained aspects of both the covenant of grace and the covenant of works.

The covenant of grace was promulgated from Mount Sinai. That is evident from the following:

- The Ten Commandments are rooted in the gracious prologue “I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage” (Ex. 20:2);
- The people with whom the Lord covenanted at Sinai were “the people of God” upon whom He was to have mercy;
- God commanded that the two tables of the covenant on which He had written the Ten Commandments were to be placed in the ark of the covenant and covered by the mercy seat;
- After Moses read the book of the covenant, he sprinkled the people with the blood of sacrifices and said, “Behold, the blood of the covenant which the LORD hath made with you concerning all these words” (Ex. 24:8);
- The ceremonial law, which referred exclusively to the

covenant of grace, was an important part of the transaction at Sinai; and

- Circumcision and the Passover, the two sacraments of the covenant of grace made with the patriarchs, were added to the transaction at Sinai (John 7:22–23; Deut. 16:1–8; pp. 47–55).

The Ten Commandments were also displayed to the Israelites at Sinai in the form of a covenant of works, Colquhoun says. God did not do this to renew that broken covenant with His people. Rather, in subjection to the covenant of grace, He displayed the covenant of works before His people so that they would see “how impossible it was for them as condemned sinners to perform that perfect obedience” which the law by its very nature requires.

The covenant of works at Sinai is evident in the following:

- The thunderings and lightnings, the noise of the trumpet, the smoking mountain, the thick darkness, and the awful voice of the living God are all symbols of divine justice and wrath;
- Paul’s reference to the Ten Commandments given to Moses on Sinai as “the ministration of death, written and engraven in stones” (2 Cor. 3:7) implies a covenant of works, for only this type of covenant includes the penalty of death;
- Christ’s command to the rich young ruler to keep the Ten Commandments if he would earn eternal life (Matt. 19:17–19) implies a covenant of works;
- The New Testament presentation of law and grace in contrast to each other (e.g., “The law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ,” John 1:17) implies a covenant of works, for if the law only

included the covenant of grace, grace would not be contrasted with grace.

The Israelites at Sinai could not have been placed under the covenants of works and grace at the same time. As Colquhoun explains, “The believers were internally and really under the covenant of grace and only externally under that terrible display of the covenant of works as it was subservient to that of grace, whereas the unbelievers were externally, and by profession only, under that dispensation of the covenant of grace, but were internally and really under the covenant of works” (pp. 63–64).

Furthermore, Colquhoun teaches that a national covenant between God and the Israelites was added to the covenant of grace. That is evident because the moral law was given in the context of ceremonial and judicial laws that related to the blessed entrance of Israel into Canaan. This national covenant with Israel, which is embedded in the moral law, is a secondary and subservient dimension to the primary emphasis of Scripture, however, which is that the moral law underscores the covenant of grace.

Chapters Three and Four: Properties and Principles of the Moral Law

In chapter 3, Colquhoun offers a traditional Reformed understanding of the properties of the moral law, saying that the moral law is universal, perfect, spiritual, holy, just, good, and perpetual (pp. 76–84). In chapter 4, he offers several principles for rightly understanding the Ten Commandments. Some of these principles, such as the following, are standard Reformed fare:

- That which is forbidden requires the opposite duty, and a required duty forbids the opposite sin.

- A required duty implies that every duty of the same kind is required; a forbidden sin means that every sin of the same kind is prohibited.
- No sin may be committed to prevent a greater sin.
- Obedience should aim for God's great goals: His own glory and our holiness.
- Love is the beginning, summary, and end of all the commandments.

Some of Colquhoun's principles are quite innovative, however, such as:

- That which is forbidden is forbidden always; that which is required is to be done only when the Lord affords opportunity.
- We are obliged to persuade others around us to be, do, or forebear whatever the law commands us to be, do, or forebear.
- The commandments of the second table of the law must yield to those of the first when they cannot both be observed (pp. 85–98).

Chapters Five and Six: The Uses of Gospel and Law

In chapter 5, Colquhoun introduces the concept of the gospel as good news, or glad tidings of salvation “to lost sinners of mankind” through the Savior, Christ the Lord (Luke 2:10–11). The gospel includes all the promises of grace as well as God's gracious offers and invitations of His Son to sinners (pp. 102–110). Colquhoun concludes this chapter by stressing that if a reader wants to know if he is truly experiencing the grace of the gospel, he should ask himself such questions as:

1. Do I know spiritually, and believe cordially, the doctrines of this glorious gospel?

2. Do I heartily comply with the invitations and accept the offers of the gospel?
3. Do I frequently endeavor to embrace and trust the promises of it, and do I place the confidence of my heart in the Lord Jesus for all the salvation which is offered and promised in it?
4. Do I so love the gospel that I delight in reading, hearing, and meditating on it?
5. Do I find that under the transforming and consoling influence of the gospel that I, in some measure, delight in the law of God after the inward man and run in the way of all His commandments? (pp. 116–117).

In chapter 6, Colquhoun says that the primary purposes of the gospel are to reveal:

- How the believer is reconciled with God in Christ,
- The covenant of grace and how that gives sinners a right, or warrant to trust in Christ for complete salvation, and
- The grace of Christ to elect sinners by the Spirit, using the gospel as a means to effect a supernatural change of their nature and state. This is the instrument by which the Holy Spirit plants saving faith in the soul and continues to apply Christ to believers for their sanctification and comfort so they may glorify God before men and angels (pp. 118–124).

The moral law is subservient to the gospel. It reveals to sinners the holy nature and will of God, informs them of their duty to God and neighbor, restrains sin and promotes virtue, convinces sinners of their sinfulness and misery and utter inability to recover themselves from this tragic state, and especially shows sinners their dire need of Christ and of His

righteousness. It drives them to Him and serves believers as a rule of life (pp. 124–31).

A faithful preacher cannot preach the gospel faithfully unless he preaches the law in subservience to the gospel, Colquhoun concludes. He must press the demands of the law upon the consciences of his hearers, particularly on secure sinners and self-righteous formalists. He must “tear away every pillow of carnal security on which they repose themselves” (p. 136) and show “how great is the misery, and how intolerable will the punishment be, especially of those under the gospel who obstinately continue in their unbelief and impenitence” (p. 138).

Colquhoun goes on to say, “Suppose that sinners reject the gracious offer (of Christ) a thousand times; they are a thousand times greater sinners than they were when He began to be offered to them — and according to the greatness of their sin will their punishment be” (p. 139).

Chapter Seven: The Difference Between Law and Gospel

Those who do not know the difference between law and gospel are prone to mix bondage with freedom of spirit, fear with hope, and sorrow with joy, Colquhoun says. They are prone to misunderstand both justification and sanctification, thus diminishing Christ in the soul and promoting self-righteousness. Some souls will be discouraged from coming to Christ for salvation but will instead look in vain for something to bring with them to recommend themselves to Christ (pp. 141–45).

The major differences between the law and the gospel are these:

- The law proceeds from the very nature of God; the gospel, from His love, grace, and mercy, or His good will to men.

- The law is known partly by the light of nature, but the gospel is known only by divine revelation.
- The law regards us as creatures who are capable of yielding perfect obedience; the gospel regards us as sinners who have no strength to perform perfect obedience.
- The law shows us what we ought to be but not how to become holy, whereas the gospel show us that we may be made holy through communion with Christ and by the sanctification of His Spirit.
- The law says, “Do and you shall live”; the gospel says, “Live, for all is already done, believe and you shall be saved.”
- The law promises eternal life for man's perfect obedience; the gospel promises eternal life for Christ's perfect obedience.
- The law condemns but cannot justify a sinner; the gospel justifies but cannot condemn a sinner who believes in Jesus Christ for salvation.
- The law, by the Spirit, convicts of sin and of unrighteousness; the gospel presents the perfect righteousness of Christ to justify a sinner before God.
- The law shows the sinner that his debt is infinitely great and he can make no payment toward that debt; the gospel tells the sinner that, by Christ's obedience as his divine Surety, his debt is paid to the last penny.
- The law irritates the depravity of the sinner and hardens his heart; the gospel melts the sinful heart and subdues depravity.
- The law, when obeyed, prompts boasting; the gospel discourages all boasting because of the law of faith (Rom. 3:27) (pp. 146–54).

Chapter Eight: Harmony Between Law and Gospel

In this chapter, Colquhoun teaches how law and gospel are harmonious. First, the commanding and condemning power of the law harmonizes with the gospel, for both law and gospel seek to lead the sinner to Christ. The law does so indirectly; the gospel, directly. As Colquhoun explains, while the law is our schoolmaster that teaches us our absolute need of Christ, the gospel presents Christ as the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes (p. 165).

The gospel is the law immersed in the blood of Jesus Christ. The good news of the gospel is that for lawbreakers, Christ took upon Himself their nature, and bore the law's curse and paid the law's penalty for them as their Mediator and Substitute. Christ not only satisfied the moral and punitive claims of the law, however; on the basis of His finished work on the cross, He transforms lawbreakers into lawkeepers. And thus the good news of the gospel is that Jesus Christ has been made unto us justification (having satisfied the claims of the law) and sanctification, guaranteeing our restoration as image-bearers of God and as keepers of His law.

Second, the law and gospel harmonize in being a rule of life for believers. What the law requires as duty is offered as a privilege by the promise of the gospel. "The commands of the law reprove believers for going wrong, and the promises of the gospel, so far as they are embraced, secure their walking in the right way," Colquhoun says. "The former show them the extreme folly of backsliding; the latter are the means of healing their backslidings and restoring their souls."

The law requires true holiness of heart and of life, and the gospel promises and conveys this holiness. Thus, as Colquhoun says, "The gospel dwells richly in none but in such as have the law of Christ put into their minds and written on their hearts.

The law cannot be inscribed on the heart without the gospel, nor the gospel without the law” (pp. 167–68).

Finally, the law and the gospel have the same friends and enemies. It is impossible to be a friend of the gospel and an enemy of the law, for both the law and the gospel are transcripts of the moral perfections of God, and those perfections are loved by true believers. Law and gospel, therefore, are not to be seen in opposition to each other (pp. 170–73).

Chapter Nine through Twelve: The Believer’s Response to the Law

In chapter 9, Colquhoun stresses how the gospel establishes the law. As Paul says, “Do we then make void the law through faith? God forbid: yea, we establish the law” (Rom. 3:31). Believers, by the doctrine of faith, establish the law especially as a rule of life, Colquhoun says. This helps prevent licentiousness, promotes holiness, condemns legalism, and exposes sin in its heinousness (pp. 186–92).

In chapter 10, Colquhoun shows (in a detailed manner reminiscent of Ralph Erskine) how the believer becomes dead to the law as a covenant of works. Dying to this covenant of works includes being delivered from anxiety about being justified by works, he says. Justification by faith alone sets believers free from the commanding, condemning, and irritating power of the covenant of works. Redeemed sinners are divorced from the law, their first master, enabling them to be married “to him who is raised from the dead.” The goal of this remarriage, as the apostle says, is that believers “should bring forth fruit unto God” by living unto Him (Rom. 7:4). Living unto God is a holy, humble, and heavenly life, Colquhoun says. It involves living in close communion with the Triune God and the inestimable blessings of salvation.

In chapter 11, Colquhoun focuses on why believers must

yield obedience to the law as a rule of life. This obligation is grounded in God's nature as the sovereign and supremely excellent Jehovah: in being our Creator and Provider and we being His dependent creatures; in being our redeeming, covenantal God; in His holy, revealed will, which commands obedience; and in the great blessings that come to us when we pursue holiness.

Obedience to God is honorable, delightful, and pleasant. Believers, therefore, should make spiritual and moral vows of gratitude to God, voluntarily covenanting and dedicating themselves and all that they are, have, and do to the Lord.

In chapter 12, Colquhoun addresses the nature, necessity, and desert of good works. "Good works are such actions or deeds as are commanded in the law of God as a rule of life," he writes. Such works must be performed in obedience to God's holy will as expressed in His law. They must be motivated by evangelical principles and obedience and based on sound doctrine, especially the glorious doctrine of justification by faith in Christ alone. They must be done out of evangelical graces such as faith, hope, and love, which flow out of the heart. And they must have evangelical goals, which are to glorify God in Christ, to conform heart and life to our great Redeemer, and to prepare for the full enjoyment of God in glory as our infinite portion.

Such good works are necessary as just acknowledgments of God's sovereign authority over believers, as acts of obedience to His righteous commands, as inevitable fruits of God's election of believers, and as the great design of the gospel and of all God's providential leadings of His people. They are also essential expressions of gratitude to God for His great salvation. They are the ordained way that leads to heaven, as confirming and assuring evidences of the faith of the saints, as sources of comfort that help maintain the Spirit's peace and

joy in believers, as adornments of the doctrine of God our Savior that promote God's glory before a watching world, as requisites to close the mouths of unbelievers and to prevent offense, and as sources of edification and comfort for fellow believers.

The good works of believers cannot procure the smallest favor at the hand of God, much less eternal life, Colquhoun teaches. They have no merit in themselves. This teaches us several important lessons:

- That we are dependent for all the good works we do as believers upon Christ alone.
- That no unregenerate person outside of Jesus Christ can ever perform even the slightest good work.
- That millions today in the visible church are deceiving themselves for eternity when they base their salvation in any measure on their own works.
- That our good works, instead of contributing to our salvation, are evidences of our salvation.
- That believers receive rewards of grace, not rewards of debt, for good works, and even then, these rewards are all for Christ's sake.

Colquhoun's *Law and Gospel* helps us understand the precise relationship between law and gospel. He excels in showing how important the law is as a believer's rule of life without doing injury to the freeness and fullness of the gospel. By implication, he enables us to draw four practical conclusions:

1. *The law shows us how to live.* Colquhoun shows how both the Old and New Testament teem with expositions of the law that are directed at believers to help them in the ongoing pursuit of sanctification. The Psalms repeatedly affirm that the believer relishes the law of God in the inner man and honors it in his

outward life (see especially Psalm 119). One of the psalmist's greatest concerns is to understand the good and perfect will of God, then to run in the way of His commandments.

Likewise, the Sermon on the Mount and portions of Paul's epistles in the New Testament are prime examples of the law being used as a rule of life. The directions contained in these portions of Scripture are intended primarily for those who are already redeemed, to encourage them to combine a theology of grace with an ethics of gratitude. In this ethics of gratitude, the believer finds his life in Christ and follows in the footsteps of his Savior, who was Himself the Servant of the Lord and Law-Fulfiller, daily walking in all of His Father's commandments throughout His earthly sojourn.

2. The law combats faulty understanding. The law as a rule of life combats both antinomianism and legalism. Antinomianism, meaning anti-law, teaches that Christians have no obligation toward the moral law because Jesus has fulfilled it and freed them from it. Paul strongly rejected this heresy in Romans 3:8, as did Luther in his battles against Johann Agricola, and New England Puritans in their opposition to Anne Hutchinson.

Likewise, Colquhoun teaches that antinomians misunderstand the nature of justification by faith, which, though granted apart from works of the law, does not preclude the necessity of sanctification. One of sanctification's most important elements is grateful obedience to the law. As Colquhoun writes, "When the law as a covenant presses a man forward, or shuts him up to the faith of the gospel; the gospel urges and draws him back to the law as a rule."

Antinomians charge that those who maintain the necessity of the law as a rule of life for the believer fall prey to legalism. It is possible, of course, as Colquhoun warns us, that abuse of the law can result in legalism. When an elaborate code of con-

duct is developed for believers to follow, little freedom is left for believers to make personal decisions based on the principles of Scripture. In such a context, man-made laws smother the divine gospel, and legalistic sanctification swallows up gracious justification. The Christian is then reduced to bondage like that of the medieval monks of Roman Catholicism.

The law offers us a comprehensive ethic but not an exhaustive application. Scripture provides us with broad principles and illustrations, not the particulars that can be applied to every circumstance. Daily the Christian must bring the law's broad teaching to his particular situation, carefully weighing all matters according to the "law and testimony" (Isaiah 8:20), praying all the while for a growing measure of Christian prudence.

Legalism and thankful obedience to God's law are totally different, Colquhoun says. They differ as much from each other as compulsory, begrudging slavery differs from willing, joyous service. Sadly, too many people confuse law with legalism. They do not realize that Christ did not reject the law when He rejected legalism. Legalism is indeed a tyrant, but law is our helpful and necessary friend. Legalism is a futile attempt to attain merit with God. Legalism is the error of the Pharisees; it cultivates outward conformity to the law without regard for the inward attitude of the heart.

The law as a rule of life steers a middle course between antinomianism and legalism. Neither antinomianism nor legalism are true to the law or the gospel. Antinomianism stresses freedom from the law's condemnation at the expense of the believer's pursuit of holiness. It accents justification at the expense of sanctification. As Colquhoun points out, antinomianism fails to see that abrogation of the law's condemning power does not abrogate the law's commanding power.

By contrast, legalism so stresses the believer's pursuit of

holiness that obedience to the law becomes something other than the fruit of faith. Obedience becomes a constitutive element of justification. The commanding power of the law for sanctification suffocates the condemning power of the law for justification.

Legalism denies in practice, if not in theory, the Reformed concept of justification. It stresses sanctification at the expense of justification. The Reformed concept of the law as a rule of life helps the believer safeguard, both in doctrine and in practice, a healthy balance between justification and sanctification. Justification leads to and finds its proper fruit in sanctification. Salvation is by grace alone and cannot help but produce works of grateful obedience.

3. *The law shows us how to love.* As 1 John 5:3 says, “For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous.”

God's law is evidence of His tender love for His children (Psalm 147:19–20). It is not a cruel taskmaster for those who are in Christ. Rather, in giving His law to His own, God is like a farmer who builds fences to protect His cattle and horses from wandering into roads and highways.

This became clear to me when I witnessed a horse belonging to a farmer break through a fence and wander across a highway. The horse was struck by a car. Not only the horse, but also the 17-year-old driver were killed immediately. The farmer and his family wept all night. As broken fences can cause irreparable damage, so can broken commandments. But God's law, obeyed out of Spirit-worked love, will promote joy and rejoicing, Colquhoun says. Let us thank God for His law, which fences us in so we may enjoy His Word.

In Scripture, law and love are friends rather than enemies. Indeed, the essence of the law is love. As Scripture teaches:

“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and... thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets” (Matt. 22:37–40; cf. Rom. 13:8–10). As a loving subject obeys his king, a loving son obeys his father, and a loving wife submits to her husband, so a loving believer yearns to obey the law of God.

4. *The law promotes true freedom.* Today there is widespread abuse of the idea of Christian liberty, which is only an excuse for freedom to serve the flesh. But true Christian freedom is both defined and protected by the law of God. When God’s law limits our freedom, it is only for our greater good, and when God’s law imposes no such limits, the Christian enjoys freedom of conscience from the doctrines and commandments of men. In matters of daily life, true Christian freedom consists of willing, thankful, and joyful obedience to God and Christ. As Calvin wrote, true Christians “observe the law, not as if constrained by the necessity of the law, but that freed from the law’s yoke they willingly obey God’s will” (*Institutes* 3.19.4).

God’s Word binds us to Him as believers. He alone is Lord of our consciences. We are truly free in keeping His commandments, for freedom flows out of grateful service. We were created to love and serve God above all and our neighbor as ourselves in accord with God’s will and Word. Only when we realize this purpose do we find true freedom. True freedom is a free servitude and a serving freedom. True freedom is obedience. Only those who serve God are free. Such liberty is used to promptly and readily obey God.

This, then, is the only way to live and to die.

—Joel R. Beeke

Author's Introduction

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

The law and the gospel are the principal parts of divine revelation; or rather they are the center, sum, and substance of all the other parts of it. Every passage of sacred Scripture is either law or gospel, or is capable of being referred either to the one or to the other. Even the histories of the Old and New Testaments, as far as the agency of man is introduced, are but narratives of facts done in conformity or in opposition to the moral law, and done in the belief or disbelief of the gospel. The ordinances of the ceremonial law, given to the ancient Israelites, were, for the most part, grafted on the second and fourth commandments of the moral law; and in their typical reference they were an obscure revelation of the gospel. The precepts of the judicial law are all reducible to commandments of the moral law, and especially to those of

the second table. All threatenings, whether in the Old or New Testament, are threatenings either of the law or the gospel; and every promise is a promise either of the one or the other. Every prophecy of Scripture is a declaration of things obscure or future, connected either with the law or the gospel, or with both. And there is not in the Sacred Volume one admonition, reproof, or exhortation but what refers either to the law or the gospel or both. If then a man cannot distinguish aright between the law and the gospel, he cannot rightly understand so much as a single article of divine truth. If he does not have spiritual and just apprehensions of the holy law, he cannot have spiritual and transforming discoveries of the glorious gospel; and, on the other hand, if his view of the gospel is erroneous, his notions of the law cannot be right.

Besides, if the speculative knowledge which true believers themselves have of the law and the gospel is superficial and indistinct, they will often be in danger of mingling the one with the other. And this, as Luther in his commentary on Galatians well observes, “doth more mischief than man’s reason can conceive.” If they blend the law with the gospel or, which is the same thing, works with faith, especially in the affair of justification, they will thereby obscure the glory of redeeming grace and prevent themselves from attaining “joy and peace in believing.” They will, in a greater degree than can be conceived, retard their progress in holiness as well as in peace and comfort. But on the contrary, if they can distinguish well between the law and the gospel, they will thereby, under the illuminating influences of the Holy Spirit, be able to discern the glory of the whole scheme of redemption, to reconcile all passages of Scripture which appear contrary to each other, to try whether doctrines are of God, to calm their own consciences in seasons of mental trouble, and to advance resolutely in evangelical holiness and spiritual consolation. In

order, then, to assist the humble and devout reader in studying the law and the gospel, and in learning to distinguish so between them as to attain those inexpressibly important objects, I shall, in humble dependence on the Spirit, consider:

First, the law of God in general;

Second, the law of God as promulgated to the Israelites from Mount Sinai.

Third, the properties of the moral law;

Fourth, the rules for understanding rightly the Ten Commandments;

Fifth, I shall endeavor to explain the gospel;

Sixth, I shall point out the uses of the gospel, and also of the law in its subservience to the gospel;

Seventh, it will be proper to consider the difference between the law and the gospel;

Eighth, the agreement between them;

Ninth, the establishment of the law by the gospel, or the subservience of the gospel to the authority and honor of the law;

Tenth, the believer's privilege of being dead to the law as a covenant of works, with a necessary consequence of it;

Eleventh, I shall consider the great obligations under which every believer lies to perform even perfect obedience to the law as a rule of life.

Twelfth, and last, the nature, necessity, and reward of good works.

Advertisement

The immediate design of the following treatise is to promote conviction of sin and misery in the consciences of sinners, and true holiness in the hearts and lives of saints.

There can be no evangelical holiness, either of heart or of life, unless it proceeds from faith working by love; and no true faith either of the law or of the gospel unless the leading distinctions between the one and the other are spiritually discerned. Though in the external dispensation of the covenant of grace the law and the gospel are set before us as one undivided system, yet an immutable line of distinction is drawn between them so that the works of the law cannot pass over to the gospel as a proper condition of the blessings promised in it, nor can the grace of the gospel pass over to the law as a recompense for the works of men therein prescribed. To blend or confound them has been a fatal source of error in the Christian Church, and has embarrassed many believers not a little in their exercise of faith and practice of holiness. Troubled consciences cannot ordinarily be quieted unless the doctrine of the gospel is rightly distinguished from that of the law.

Though to some readers there may appear in several passages of the following work a redundance of words and too frequent a recurrence of the leading sentiments, and even of the same modes of expression; yet the author cannot but hope that to others these will, in some degree, serve to make my meaning more obvious and determinate.

As it has been my constant endeavor to render my subject easy and intelligible to candid and devout readers even of the lowest capacity, so it is my unfeigned desire that this feeble attempt to promote the faith and holiness of believers may obtain the gracious approbation of the Divine Redeemer and, by His blessing, be made subservient to the glorious cause of evangelical truth and vital godliness.

John Colquhoun
September 11, 1815