

Law and Grace

that of the Judaizers. God's law is how the Christian obeys God, not his means of redemption. The law is part and parcel of God's Word. Because it is a revelation of the Righteousness of God it is all moral law. Every Biblical doctrine has, at some point, been distorted and abused. The response must be a return to Scripture and orthodoxy in terms of it. This includes the law. Misconceptions and even its abuse must be addressed, but we must declare, with Paul, that "the law is good, if a man use it lawfully" (1 Tim. 1:8).

The Protestant Reformation correctly settled the issue of that day: justification is an act of God's grace received by faith alone that no man can merit. The Institutes stands clearly on that foundation, but what was never settled by the Reformation was the means of sanctification. What is the believer's response to God's grace? Theonomy is based on the belief that all provisions of God's Word, including the law, are binding on man today unless (as the book of Hebrew relates) they were perfected in the atonement and priesthood of Christ or altered by apostolic authority. The law of God, in other words, is the believer's instruction for obedience, growth in grace, and the exercise of His covenant duties in the Kingdom of God and His Christ.

Mark R. Rushdoony

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The opposite of law is not grace; it is lawlessness. The opposite of grace (God's undeserved mercy to sinners) is no grace, that is, God executing the sentence of death for sin that men deserve. The law of God is the righteousness (or justice) of God in which the righteous man is to "delight" and in which he is to "meditate day and night" (Ps. 1:2).

Law and grace have the same divine author, and grace was not manifested in the New Testament. The giving of the law was itself an act of grace by God to His people. Abraham knew his culture well enough to fear he could be killed and his wife taken from him by force. Jacob had no legal resource against fraud of Laban. Joseph knew the futility of crying "unfair" when he was made a slave, and later, the whole Hebrew tribe was likewise enslaved and at the mercy of a tyrant who claimed divine birth and who could order Hebrew babies killed at will. Such was the brutal system before the giving of the law of God. When God brought the Hebrews out of Egypt He gave them not just another set of arbitrary rules, but justice in its purest and divinely ordained state. The law was and remains the gift of grace.

Then too, grace itself must involve law. The idea of a morally lawless Christian is an oxymoron. Paul said that the thought that we can sin because grace abounds should be abhorrent (Rom. 1:6ff). Rather, the law is how we live in the state of grace, and as new creatures in

Christ, declare with Paul that the law is “holy, just, and good” (Rom. 7:12).

The alternative to dispensational antinomianism presented in *Institutes* was a conventional theology, one that saw a single message of grace and redemption throughout Scripture. The covenant between God and man is a contract, though not between equals as in our use of contractual arrangements. This covenant was between a Sovereign Creator and sinful creatures, so it was a gift by God, i.e. of grace. The covenant of grace had to be interpreted in terms of a law, just as our contracts specify the civil jurisdiction whose laws are to be used to interpret or adjudicate its provisions. The law of the covenant given by God’s grace was God’s law.

Jesus offered us His “blood of the new testament [i.e., covenant]” (Mk. 14:24). This was done at the Passover, one of the signs of the old covenant, so Jesus obviously saw a carry-over. The new covenant is renewed covenant and it’s only real distinctions are *first*, that the anticipated atonement represented by the blood of animals was to become an accomplished fact in Christ’s blood and *second*, that the covenant was expanded to Jew and Gentile alike.

The Law Is for Sanctification, Not Justification

If the authority of a father, husband, or pastor is sometimes abused, it does not negate their legitimate authority and purpose as given by

God. Likewise the law can and has been abused, but this does not detract from its purpose as directed by God. The fact that no man can keep the law perfectly is irrelevant to its applicability. It was not given to perfect men but to sinners to teach them the alternative (1 Tim. 1:9-10). Sinful self-willed can affect our prayers at times, but that certainly does not make proper prayer invalid. The law was never a means of salvation for sinless men but a revelation of the righteous standard of God. This standard is not negated by man’s sin.

The Pharisees were often singled out by Jesus because they represented the logical end of much of the Jewish misuse of the law. One way the Pharisees abused the law was that they made their own rules equal to and then greater than God’s law (two examples are in Mark 7:1-23). Their reasoning was that if they made rules as “hedges” around the law that were stricter than the law, they would never get close to breaking the law itself. Often, however, their “hedges” allowed them to “reject the commandment of God that ye may keep your own tradition.”

In the modern church, such Pharisaical rule-making has also been popular. What is deemed “Christian” or “God honoring” is too often a subjective rule which purports to be binding on others, thereby destroying Christian liberty. An obvious reason for such pietistic rule-making is gaping void left by antinomianism. For this reason, antinomianism churches are often the most flagrantly guilty of Pharisaical rule-making.

A second error of Pharisaism was a hypocritical use of law. This is a tendency of all men. When Jesus said “Judge not, that ye be not

judged” (Matt. 7:1ff.), He was referring to hypocritical judgement where a man had a greater sin (“beam in thine own eye”) than the one he criticized (“mote” in brother’s). What is often neglected in that passage is that Jesus commands the removal of our sin to “see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother’s eye.” Hypocritical judgement was a sin, not judgement itself. Repeating the requirement of Leviticus 19:15 to “judge in righteous,” Jesus commanded that we “Judge not according to appearance, but judge righteous judgement” (John 7:24). By what standard does the believer judge in righteousness? The thesis of the *Institutes* is that law of God was given as that plumb-line.

The tendency to wrongly use the law was early present in the Christian community as well. The entire book of Galatians was written to refute the error of a group of Judaizers who sought to require conversion to the old covenant Jewish religion, so as to make Christianity a sect of that religion. Their motive in doing this was to bring Christianity under the umbrella of the Jewish religion, simply because it had long enjoyed legal status and such a strategy would prevent Rome’s persecution of Christianity (Gal. 6:12-13). With the cowardly motive, they demanded circumcision of believers as the act of conversion to the Jewish tradition before acknowledging them as members of the church. Paul rightly characterized this as “justification by the works of the law,” because it added an act (circumcision) to faith in Jesus Christ as a requirement for inclusion in the church.

Theonomy is sometimes falsely labeled as the same heresy Paul condemned in Galatians, though it’s view of the law has no relation to