

Grace My Fears Relieved:

***the blessing of
the law/gospel
distinction***

by Christopher A. Hutchinson

**Grace My Fears Relieved:
*the blessing of the law/gospel distinction***

by Christopher A. Hutchinson

All rights reserved, 2006

***Publication possible: Please do not distribute or duplicate
without prior express permission of the author***

**Christopher A. Hutchinson, Senior Pastor
Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
2101 Shadow Lake Road
Blacksburg, VA 24060
c_a_hutch@juno.com**

Table of Contents

The Law/Gospel Distinction Defined

The History of Redemption

The Christian Life

Perfection Demanded and Supplied

~ ~ ~

Appendix: Early Reformed Creeds

One of the great doctrinal matters which has not often been taught clearly in our day is the matter of how the law and gospel relate together in the life of the believer. This was one of the chief questions on which the Reformation itself turned. How can a man be simultaneously justified and sinful at the same time? Can a Christian be completely assured that he has entered into eternal life? If so, what then motivates him to follow the law as an already saved sinner?

Some have answered this question with the dubious possibility of a man being a “carnal Christian,” one who has intellectually believed in Christ, but never goes on live as if he believes. On the opposite extreme, there are those who claim that a man’s justification must be completed by his obedience being added to his faith. Contrary to both of these errors, the Reformers found in Scripture a clear pattern which became known as the law/gospel distinction. In short, this doctrine teaches that in the matter of redemption, God Himself meets His own requirement of perfect righteousness through His Son, Jesus Christ, so that all a person must do in order to be saved is to cling to Christ by mere faith – faith alone. Then, in response to God’s free salvation, the saved will begin to live a life of grateful obedience.

Part of this gratitude means seeing more and more how far one continues to fall and so how much more one continues to need’s Christ’s righteousness on our behalf. Thus the law/gospel distinction is a doctrine which not only surrounds conversion, but one which must serve the growing Christian throughout his life. Any yet, in our day, there is much confusion about this very clear distinction which is found throughout

Scripture and an indisputable portion of classic Reformed thought.

Surprisingly, this confusion has arisen not only in liberal or Arminian churches, but in some of our Reformed churches as well. In some quarters, Reformed teachers have overreacted to the “easy-believism” of our day by going so far as to deny the law/gospel distinction altogether, saying that to be saved *is* to follow the law, that faith *is*, by definition, obedience. The implication for us then is that the Gospel is to “follow Jesus,” defined as joining the Church, worshiping, learning the Word of God, taking the Lord’s Supper and tithing. According to this way of thinking, to have faith *is* to obey. Left unanswered of course, is *how much* one must obey in order to know that one has faith and is undoubtedly saved.

In light of this present confusion, the purpose of this booklet is to provide a brief defense of the classic Reformed position of the law/gospel distinction and why understanding this distinction is critical in maintaining a proper view of both the Gospel and the Christian life that it brings. Conversely, we hope to show that abandoning the traditional Protestant notion of the law/gospel distinction damages a believer’s assurance of salvation, diminishes the greatness of Christ’s work on our behalf, and varnishes the pure grace of the Gospel, recovered by the Reformation and so well summarized by the “Five Solas” of the Reformation: Scripture Alone, Christ Alone, Faith Alone, Grace Alone and God’s Glory Alone.

Definitions: Before we begin our defense, some simple definitions are in order. For the purposes of this outline, by “law,” we mean the moral law of God, that which is perpetually binding on all men in all eras, generally summarized for instance in the Ten Commandments. While acknowledging the more complex understanding found in the Reformed creeds, for the sake of clarity we limit our definition in this book to these universal demands of God, unless otherwise specified.¹ By gospel, I mean of course the good news of Jesus Christ’s life, death and resurrection, by which God’s elect are justified, sanctified, and glorified through faith.² Both law and gospel are found in both Testaments under one Covenant of Grace, although the mystery of the gospel is only fully revealed in the New, being proclaimed in the Old by shadows,

¹ For more detail, see Westminster Confession of Faith XIX, and Westminster Larger Catechism questions 93 and 98.

² Cf. I Corinthians 15:1-4. It has unfortunately become necessary to highlight justification and the forgiveness of sins as central to the gospel due to the recent reiteration by some that the gospel message may be properly reduced to the creed, “Jesus is Lord,” or to the command, “Follow Jesus.”

types and prophecies in “proto-gospel” form.³

Thus, while both law and gospel may be understood to fall under the general rubric of God’s grace to the believer, the purpose of this booklet is to defend the traditional Protestant notion that they perform very different functions within that rubric of grace. This is a difference of function in individual salvation, not one of temporal administration between the Testaments. To be clear, we are not defending the distinction between the Mosaic law and the Christian gospel such as there is, but the distinction between the moral law and gospel promises, which is a reality found throughout both Testaments, and is an indisputable cornerstone of classic Protestant theology.⁴

³ For example, Galatians 3:8 says that “the Scripture... preached the gospel beforehand (*proeueggelisato*) to Abraham.”

⁴ So Louis Berkhof, “The Churches of the Reformation from the very beginning distinguished between the law and the gospel.... This distinction was not understood to be identical with that between the Old and New Testament, but was regarded as a distinction that applies to both Testaments. There is law and gospel in the Old Testament, and there is law and gospel in the New. The law comprises everything in Scripture which is a revelation of God’s will in the form of command or prohibition, while the gospel embraces everything, whether it be in the Old Testament or in the New that pertains to the work of reconciliation.” *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmanns, 1941) p. 612.

For further clarity, in referencing the functions of the law, we at times avail ourselves of Calvin's enumeration,⁵ so that the "first use" refers to the role of the law to convict the sinner by pointing to God's holy perfection and thus our need for repentance and the Cross. By "third use," we mean the role of the law to provide positive instruction to the believer in aid of his sanctification. (Calvin's "second use" – to restrain evil in society in large – is incidental to our purposes here.) Both these first and third uses of the law should be held in balance for a healthy, orthodox understanding of grace in justification and sanctification. Thus, while law and gospel must never be separated, they must remain clearly distinct in both justification and sanctification, especially the former. To confuse them in sanctification is harmful; to confuse them in justification is deadly.

So then, it is this first use of the law to convict both believer and unbeliever to the end of showing us our ongoing need for God's mercy in the Cross which we term "the law/gospel distinction" and which this booklet defends. And so the purpose of this defense is not merely to win some intramural debate, but to safeguard the Gospel that the Scriptures proclaim in which God accomplishes all things in our salvation for His glory alone.

The History of Redemption

One of the complaints sometimes made about the law/gospel distinction is that it is not a healthy hermeneutic or one supported by the Bible itself. Now, it is true that one does not need to scour every verse of Scripture to see whether it is a demand or a promise, law or gospel. But it is reasonable to acknowledge the pattern when it does clearly appear in Biblical accounts, especially in critical passages concerning the

⁵ As opposed to the Lutheran enumeration, which inverts Calvin's first and second uses. See *The Formula of Concord*, Article VI. For Calvin's enumeration, see his *Institutes*, II.7.

giving of the Mosaic Law and its fulfillment by Christ on our behalf. Likewise, since the law performs two distinct functions – to both convict and to instruct – we should not be surprised if one function is sometimes emphasized in one passage with little mention of the other. To cite an example, Psalm 119 is often hailed as a passage in which the believer rejoices and obeys the law. This much is true, and is a clear goal of the Christian life. But neither does Psalm 119 negate the law's ongoing function to convict the believer of his continuing sin and pride and see his need for Christ all the more.

Scores of texts could be cited to demonstrate this convicting function in the life of the believer, though some of these have undergone fairly radical reinterpretations by recent opponents of the classical Protestant notion, notably several classic “proof texts” in Romans and Galatians. While we will interact with some of these below, we wish to begin our argument with four passages highlighting the biblical theology of the law/gospel contrast in the history of redemption found in Scripture.

The Giving of the Law: Opponents of the law/gospel distinction often cite the “preamble” to the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20:1-2 as proof that the law is meant primarily to instruct the redeemed rather than to convict them of sin: “And God spoke all these words, saying, “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.”⁶ This much is true, and the forgiveness of sins for all who believed God’s promises was certainly symbolized in the Passover and Red Sea events which they as a people had just previously experienced. However, it is equally true that immediately after the giving of the Ten Commandments, the people saw God’s holy presence and cried out for a mediator:

Now when all the people perceived the thunderings and the lightnings and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the people were afraid and trembled; and they stood afar off, and said to Moses, “You speak to us, and we will hear; but let not God speak to us, lest we die.” And Moses said to the people, “Do not fear; for God has come to prove you, and that the fear of him may be before your eyes, that you

⁶ All Scripture texts are RSV unless otherwise noted.

may not sin.” And the people stood afar off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was (Exodus 20:18-21).

Are we to conclude that the Israelites were wrong to ask Moses to intercede for them after hearing God’s demands and perceiving His holiness? Why else did God accompany the presentation of His holy law with such a frightening display of His power (cf. Exodus 19:16ff)? Why else is this recorded as the very first reaction of Israel to the law? Moses tells them not to fear, for they are already God’s people; and yet, he tells them that God’s purpose is to test them in order that they might still fear and not sin. Another way of putting this is that believers should not fear God’s wrath with regards to their justification, but a healthy fear of God is an essential part of their ongoing testing and sanctification.

We can be certain that Israel’s instinct to call for a mediator is entirely proper because of Whom Moses typifies. Moses’ intercession is but a shadow of the intercession which the Greater Mediator, Jesus Christ, provides to His people, as is clear from Deuteronomy 18 and Hebrews 3. Indeed, later in the book, Hebrews explicitly contrasts Sinai and Calvary in a chapter exhorting us to persevere in faith and accept God’s fatherly discipline:

For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers entreat that no further messages be spoken to them. For they could not endure the order that was given, “If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned.” Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, “I tremble with fear.” But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem... and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant (Hebrews 12:18-22a, 24a).

This description of Zion is clearly a preview into our heavenly glory, but the author’s point appears to be that in one sense we have already entered into this glory (cf. Ephesians 2:6): “Therefore, let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire” (Hebrews 12:28-29).

Some have noted that the preaching of the gospel can also cause fear, citing II Corinthians 2:15-16: “For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life.” There is no question that Christ is a

stumbling stone to those who refuse to trust the foolishness of the Cross, but this does not argue that the gospel causes fear in *believers*. After all, the Ten Commandments came to an already redeemed people, cf. Exodus 20:1-2. In fact, Paul says later that the gospel “is veiled only to those who are perishing” (II Corinthians 4:3). It was the law which caused the people to tremble, not the promise of salvation as proclaimed by the gospel. The law can indeed bring delight to the sanctified heart as Psalm 119 makes abundantly clear, but its high demands can also bring a sanctifying fear, causing the believer to depend more upon God for both forgiveness and sanctifying strength.

The law reminds us how great a salvation it is that Christ has earned for us by His perfect obedience. Rightly John Newton captures Christ’s intercession for us when he wrote:

Let us love and sing and wonder,
 let us praise the Saviour’s name!
 He has hushed the law’s loud thunder,
 he has quenched Mount Sinai’s flame:
 he has washed us with his blood,
 he has brought us nigh to God.

The Sermon on the Mount: Since Jesus is the Promised One of Deuteronomy 18, and thus the “Second Moses,” it follows that the recounting of His ministry in the Gospels would reflect this office. Matthew, in particular, appears to take up this theme, recording both Jesus’ infancy exile in Egypt (2:13-15) and His commission to His disciples upon a mountain (28:16-20) in striking similarity to Moses’ and God’s commissioning of Joshua in Deuteronomy 31 and Joshua 1. It is not surprising then that right after Jesus begins creating the New Israel by calling the first of the twelve disciples (4:18-22), Matthew records that Jesus ascends a mountain to give His law as the New Moses, beginning with the Beatitudes.

And then Jesus continues, “Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them,” and “For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you can never enter the kingdom of heaven” (5:17, 20). And just in case his hearers are tempted to think by this that they can enter the kingdom through their own righteousness, Jesus goes on to interpret the law of Moses, and specifically the sixth and seventh commandments:

You have heard that it was said to the men of old, ‘You shall not kill;

and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.’ But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says ‘You fool!’ shall be liable to hell fire (Matthew 5:21-22).

You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ But I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart. If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away; it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into hell (Matthew 5:27-29).

Besides correcting the various oral traditions which had developed and supplanted the actual law of God, Jesus is also showing them the danger of so externalizing and “dumbing down” the law that men may be made to think that they might keep it to God’s perfect standards. Jesus is clear: anyone who calls someone a fool or looks on a woman lustfully has already sinned enough to deserve nothing short of hell.

How then is the believing heart to respond to such teaching? In two ways, all at once: 1) to endeavor to live up to such a standard of internal holiness; and 2) to cast oneself upon the mercy of God in Christ, Who Alone has met such a standard. There is the balanced view of the law, one which sees it as simultaneously instructive and convicting. In case we miss the point, Jesus concludes his interpretation of the law with the stunning statement, “You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”⁷ This we can take to be both exhortation and promise; for even as we strive for perfection, we know that we shall never reach such this side of heaven. And

⁷ Matthew 5:48. The word *telios* can of course be translated as “complete” or even “mature.” We must agree with the vast majority of translations in translating *telios* in this verse as “perfect,” due to its description of God Himself. For even if Jesus is telling us to be mature or complete as God is such, we must ask, how mature or complete is God the Father? And the answer is: perfectly so, and that is His standard for all who would live with Him in heaven.

yet the promise is that all who are justified through faith are already made perfect in God's sight, and will be made inherently perfect in glory.

Paul's First Recorded Sermon: Although Paul doubtless preached the Gospel many times before his first missionary journey, the first message by Paul which Luke records in Acts is his sermon to the Jews and God-fearers in the synagogue of Pisidian Antioch. As such, we can surmise that it serves as an accurate representation of all his introductory sermons in the many synagogues he visited. Not surprisingly, Paul begins with the story of Israel, briefly tracing the history of redemption from Egypt to King David. He then outlines the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, saying that "we bring you the good news (*euangelizometha*)," that which God promised to the fathers." After describing how Christ's resurrection authenticates the gospel, Paul then defines this good news:

Let it be known to you therefore, brethren, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him every one that believes is freed (*dikaioutai*) from everything from which you could not be freed (*ouk... dikaiothernai*) by the law of Moses (Acts 13:38-39).

He then concludes the sermon with a warning. It is hard to make this any more plain. Paul says the gospel brings something which the law of Moses could not. In terms of freedom, or justification, Paul says that the gospel and the law of Moses stand in contrast, not in continuity. Now, since the purpose of the law of Moses was to point to Christ (see Romans 10:4), law and gospel certainly stand in continuity in terms of purpose; they are parts of the same, continuous revelation of God's plan. This is why Paul can preach his message from the Old Testament, which we are told in countless other texts includes the gospel (e.g. Galatians 3:8; Hebrews 4:2). But when it comes to function and efficacy, Paul states plainly that belief in Christ brings what the law of Moses could not – the forgiveness of sins. Or, as we have seen above from Exodus 20, the law of Moses could only "bring" the forgiveness of sins insofar as it points to its end, Christ (Romans 10:4). The law/gospel distinction that Paul plainly makes in this sermon is not merely a temporal distinction, but a functional distinction, one critical to understanding the full forgiveness and righteousness that the gospel brings to those who cast themselves upon Christ.

The Jerusalem Council: We now turn to the first great Ecumenical council, the one initiated by the church in Antioch in order that they might know what should be required of Gentile converts. The decision of the Jerusalem Council, that Gentile believers need not be circumcised nor follow the ceremonial law, is of course critical to the history of redemption and follows clearly the revelation given by God to Peter

in Acts 10. Furthermore, it is clear that the Council's decision was understood to be both universal and authoritative, applying not only to Antioch but to all churches everywhere (Acts 16:4). Now let us read again Peter's speech to the assembled elders and apostles:

Brethren, you know that in the early days God made choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. And God who knows the heart bore witness to them, giving them the Holy Spirit just he did to us; and he made no distinction between us and them, but cleansed their hearts by faith. Now therefore why do you make trial of God by putting a yoke upon the neck of the disciples *which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear*? But we believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will (Acts 15:7-11; emphasis added).

Peter says plainly that the ceremonial law was a yoke which the Jews could not bear. It is important to note that this was a debate about the ceremonial rather than the moral law. But those who claim that God would never give His people something they could not accomplish are clearly contradicted by Acts 15. Peter's point is simple: 1) God gave the ceremonial law; and 2) it could not be borne. The unmistakable conclusion is that part of the reason God gave the ceremonial law was to frustrate His own people in some regard. Why would He do that? That is what the classical Protestant doctrine of the law/gospel distinction answers so well.

The ceremonial law underscored God's awesome and fearful holiness so that anyone who approached Him without a mediator and the forgiveness of sins was sure to be destroyed. The ceremonial law, in part, revealed to God's people their continual need for God's mercy. To be sure, gospel promises can be found in the ceremonial law, but as an entire code, Peter says that it could not be borne. A superior ceremony is needed, the ceremony of Christ's once-for-all sacrificial death. Jesus came both to fulfill and to abrogate this ceremonial law so that now, the means of grace are plain and all that is required to approach God through them is simple faith. The beauty and complexity of the ceremonial law shows us the greatness of the access which Christ provides us in the gospel. We praise God that Christ has fulfilled in Himself that which we could not bear.

The Christian life

The main point we wish to drive home in this booklet is that the law/gospel distinction is not just a matter of theology, but a matter for the Christian life. There

are crucial pastoral implications in the way one approaches the question of law and gospel, and maintaining the distinction between the two provides a helpful paradigm not only in the matter of justification, but in our sanctification as well. The doctrines surrounding sanctification are certainly some of the more difficult for Christians to define accurately, much less practice wholeheartedly. This is not too surprising given where it falls in the Christian life – between justification and glorification, somewhat analogous to the “already/not yet” status of the Kingdom of God that we also enjoy. We are already perfect (justified), but not yet perfect (glorified). We are already a new creation, but still carry around in us our crucified, old natures. One reading of Romans 7 should comfort us that we are not the first to be vexed by the confusing, though ultimately victorious, nature of Christian sanctification.⁸

But it is precisely this mixed state that we find ourselves in that causes us to find in the law/gospel distinction a useful paradigm to understand and progress in sanctification. It provides us with both prod and balm, instruction and rest. In short, it gives to us a repeating cycle which serves us well our whole lives long until the final rest of glorification. It is a cycle which brings us upward in sanctifying progress, even as the very opposite often appears to be the case as we discover deeper and more hidden sins. We now consider four of these cycles which the law/gospel distinction brings out.

Fear and Relief: In glory, when we shall possess an inherent perfection and sin no more, there shall be no more fear in our hearts in the face of God’s law. In the meantime, we must not only delight in God’s demands, but have honest hearts, saying along with the disciple, “I believe; help my unbelief!” (Mark 9:23). When we hear God’s law, the sanctified and honest heart both rejoices and fears.

Again and again throughout the Bible we see saints come into the presence of God and immediately be overwhelmed by their own unworthiness. How do they know they are unworthy? Because they know God’s holy law and that they fail to live up to it. Perhaps the most famous instance of this is in Isaiah 6 when the prophet is caught up into God’s presence where the angels, though having no sin themselves, nevertheless cover up their faces and their feet before God as they cry out, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory.” As the temple shook and filled with smoke, Isaiah then famously calls out, “Woe is me! For I am

⁸ We acknowledge that some exegetes believe Paul is referring to his pre-conversion state in Romans 7, but we find such unlikely for several reasons, namely, 1) its placement within the argument of Romans; 2) its concluding assertion found in 8:1; and 3) its agreement with other Christian experience in both Scripture and church history.

lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!"

The aftermath of this is well known: an angel flies to Isaiah and touches his mouth with a burning coal, saying, "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin forgiven." And then, when God calls out for a messenger, Isaiah is emboldened enough to say, "Here am I! Send me." And so we see encapsulated in this one story a proper fear of God's wrath immediately followed by relief and service in the wake of God's forgiveness. We see much the same dynamic as Peter reacts to Jesus in Luke 5:8, "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord." And yet Jesus did not depart from Peter in the least but forgave him and called him into service. Likewise, when John saw the resurrected Christ in all His glory, he fell at his feet as though dead, and yet Jesus told him not to fear, commissioning him to write all that he saw (Revelation 1:17).

Here we find both fear and relief. It recalls what John Newton captures so well in the account of his own conversion,

Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear,
The hour I first believed!

Nor should we expect this cycle of fear and relief to occur only once in our lives, but rather as an ongoing rhythm of sanctification. The author of Hebrews exhorts us to "offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire" (Hebrews 11:28-29). Peter likewise reminds us, "And if you invoke as Father him who judges each one impartially according to his deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout your time of exile" (I Peter 1:17). Believers fear God as part of our worship and our sanctification, but pointedly not in regards to justification. And therein we find relief amidst our healthy fear; for despite our ever present failings, God justifies those who cling to Christ. "But God shows His love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

How then does the law enter into this cycle of ongoing fear and relief? We do not see God immediately as some of the saints of old did, but His holiness is represented to us in the law, and by it we learn to fear God. And the more the law shows us our sin, the more we learn to fear. And yet, as we learn to fear more, so the gospel tells us to throw ourselves upon Christ all the more that we might find relief from our fears. It is exactly this kind of dynamic that we find in Romans 7, as Paul

discusses the ongoing use of the law in the life of the believer. Consider these excerpts from Paul's famous discourse:

If it had not been for the law, I should not have known sin. I should not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, "You shall not covet." But sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, wrought in me all kinds of covetousness.... So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good.... We know that the law is spiritual, but I am carnal, sold under sin. I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. Now then, if I do what I do not want, I agree that the law is good. So then it is no longer I who do it, but sin which dwells within me. For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. I can will what is right, but I cannot do it (Romans 7:7-8, 12, 14-18).

After more of this anguished confession of his ongoing struggle with obeying the law, Paul then writes:

Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! So then, I of myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin. There is therefore now no condemnation of those who are in Christ Jesus (Romans 7:24-8:1).

Just as Paul had already written that those who are justified by faith have peace with God through Jesus Christ (5:1), so he now reminds the believer that this peace continues despite our ongoing struggle with sin and the fear of God's discipline which this struggle rightly brings. The law causes us to see our sin and to fear God, that we might also find our relief in Him alone.

Repentance and Faith: Closely related to this cycle of fear and relief are the twin duties of repentance and faith. Jesus' first recorded words in Mark highlight the importance of this pairing: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). In the farewell speech to the Ephesian elders, Paul echoes these words of Jesus as a summary of his own preaching: "I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance to God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:20-21).

While much could be said about the relationship between faith and repentance,

our point here is simple: both are clearly needed, not just at conversion, but as a lifelong pattern for the Christian life. Now, why do Jesus and Paul mention both repentance and faith? It cannot be that faith combines with repentance in some sort of meritorious combination, or else works would add to our salvation. Rather, it is because they are part and parcel of the same act of faith: the one is a movement away from self, and the other a movement towards Christ. Having repented of our sin and cast away self-dependence, we now cast our dependence on One Who is able to save us. Likewise, it is impossible to place one's trust in Christ if one does not at the same time turn from self-worship. Repentance and faith are inseparable.

But while repentance and faith are inseparable, it is apparently important to Jesus and Paul that they be distinguished from one another. Why is this? Here again, we find the classical Protestant law/gospel distinction helpful. Of what must we repent? Our own sin. Where do we learn that we are sinful? From the law of God. We repent because the law shows us our need. Now as we repent, where do we find hope? In the gospel. The opposite makes little sense: that we find hope in the law's demands or repent towards the gospel's promises. If we must repent from what the gospel promises, then to what shall we turn? If we place our trust in the law's demands, rather than in its end, Christ (Romans 10:4), how does that differ from self-dependence? At some point, the need for continued repentance must have an ending place, or else assurance becomes impossible. And the ending place is Christ alone, and not our efforts to repent properly.

But conflating law and gospel together damages this assurance won for us by Christ. If one says that the gospel is "keeping covenant" with God by obeying Jesus, then formalism is more inclined to develop. If one's emphasis is on avoiding the "big sins" of "covenant breaking" rather than deep, daily repentance of all of one's sin, it is true that one might avoid the scandal of excommunication. But it is also true that one is unlikely to grow much in faith, wisdom or humility. The law/gospel distinction is not meant to define the church, those who are in and out of the covenant, but is rather a dynamic which provides a powerful impetus for spiritual growth within the covenant community. The law/gospel distinction does not so much instruct us how we might remain "married to Christ," but how to grow in love within that marriage. Every sin against our Perfect Bridegroom is grievous to Him; and that knowledge spurs us on to greater humility, gratitude and love.

The law/gospel distinction encourages an ever deepening repentance and faith. Contrariwise, the conflation of law and gospel appears to "dumb down" the moral law's requirements to the level of merely not-getting-divorced. That may keep one in the outward covenant, but it is unlikely to inspire deep spiritual growth. Nor is it

likely to lead to the conversion of any nominal believers within the church.

Humility and Exaltation: In the book of Romans, Paul makes humility the very first application of the doctrine of justification by faith alone:

“Then what is to become of our boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On the principle of works? No, but on the principle of faith. For we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law” (Romans 3:27-28).⁹

And so as Paul begins the practical section of Romans, he writes, “I bid every one of you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith which God has assigned him” (Romans 12:3). Likewise, Paul writes in Ephesians 2:8-9 that the reason God saves us by grace alone is “lest any man should boast.” In almost exact parallel with Romans, he also begins the practical half of that epistle with the need for humility: “lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness,” (Ephesians 4:1b-2a).

The same emphasis is found throughout the Scripture. Three times in three different settings, Jesus issues this promise, “Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”¹⁰ Solomon, James and Peter repeat much the same idea: “God opposes the proud and gives grace to the humble,” and so therefore, “Humble yourselves before the Lord and He will exalt you.”¹¹ The point is clear: humility is a central and essential outworking of salvation by faith alone. Humility is essential because it alone is able to ascribe all of the glory of our redemption to God alone (Romans 11:36; I Corinthians 1:28-31). Humility understands that in God’s economy, the way up is down, and that crown is always preceded by cross.

⁹ The context of this verse (and the very next application of this doctrine) is the unity of Jew and Gentile together in one Church, cf. 3:29ff. That said, this unity follows as an application of the doctrine of justification by faith alone and the resulting humility. The order is important: first faith (reconciliation with God), then humility, and only then unity (reconciliation within the church). This order is also clearly seen in Romans 12:1-8 and Ephesians 2:1-22 and 4:1-6.

¹⁰ Matthew 23:12; Luke 14:11; 18:14. The verses vary slightly with one another.

¹¹ Proverbs 3:34; James 4:6, 10; I Peter 5:5-6. As above, there are slight variations.

And so now we ask, which understanding of law and gospel best supports and encourages growth in Christian humility? One which says that law and gospel are practically synonymous, so that our obedience is assessed as part of our final justification? Or one which says that our obedience is only and always a fruit of self-abasing faith in the One Who obeyed the law in our stead?

The point is simple: the law/gospel distinction helps keep the believer humble in a way that is much less likely if the distinction is abandoned. If we are not continually reminded of our inability to keep the law, then we are more likely to grow in pride and self-satisfaction as the Lord progressively sanctifies us. But that immediately raises a question. How is progressive sanctification to be measured? Surely, one such measure is the objective obedience to the commandments, so that more and more our outward lives conform to the holiness “without which no one shall see the Lord” (Hebrews 12:14). But another important measure is the ability to soberly judge ourselves to discover where we continue to lack faith and, therefore, obedience. And it is precisely the law/gospel distinction which provides the framework for such a sober evaluation and thus spur an even truer growth in grace – which is, simply put, greater humility. As Thomas Watson wrote, “Better is that sin which humbles me than that duty which makes me proud.”

Thus it has appeared to many saints that they are regressing in sanctification, when in fact they are progressing in humility as the Holy Spirit reveals more of their sin to them through their exposure to the law’s high demands.¹² Jesus Himself makes a growing awareness of our own sin crucial to both piety and ethics when He states, “he who is forgiven little, loves little” (Luke 7:47b). When we are most offended by our own sin, then we are made humble before God and gentle towards others, especially our enemies.

Jesus also says plainly that it is not the well, but the sick who are in need of a doctor, and that He did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance (Luke 5:31-32). Who upon hearing this should conclude that they are the well who are not in need of a doctor? The law/gospel distinction reminds believers that we are sick and in continual need of the Cross, and that repentance is not a one time event but our Christian vocation. Only then, as we continue to humble ourselves before God on account of His law, are we able to see all the more that He has already exalted us by

¹² On this point, see Paul’s explanation of the law’s use followed immediately after by his self-description as “the chief of sinners” in I Timothy 1:8-17.

the gospel. As the awareness of our sin grows, so the awareness of the greatness of God's grace to us.

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:4-7).

So we find ourselves humbled by the law while simultaneously exalted in the gospel. But our present exaltation remains hidden until it is revealed on the Last Day (cf. Colossians 3:3-4).

This leads to one likely reason that the law/gospel distinction is so poorly understood in some Reformed churches in our day. In some Reformed circles, what is most paramount are not the doctrines of grace so much as having a so-called "Reformed world and life view," which generally means actively engaging in the culture wars by attempting to bring all of society under the Lordship of Christ. Our concern about this is that the sort of theology and ministry which focuses on kingdom-building to the point that law and gospel become conflated is a kind of theology which can be very discouraging to those whose lives have been filled with trial, failure and sin. But a clear law/gospel distinction at this point helps to provide us a consistent message of joy and hope to broken people. For even as they are humbled by their worldly circumstance or sin, they who believe are yet exalted in Christ, seated with Him in the heavenlies. Though they are lowly, they can boast in their exalted position (James 1:9). Though they are sick, they are anointed with the gospel of God's favor (James 5:14, cf. Isaiah 61:1-3). Though they are brought low by their own sin and rebellion, they are yet forgiven and restored to high office (John 21; I Peter 2:9).

When broken people look to the law, they find instruction but little comfort. They have not built the kingdom as they ought and cannot see how they are an asset in any way. And so they need the comfort of the gospel which teaches them that God's acceptance of us comes by faith, and not by what we have produced (Romans 4:5). It teaches us that it is precisely the meek who shall inherit the earth (Matthew 5:5) and that the Christian life is largely characterized by sharing in the sufferings of Christ rather than the outwardly manifest glory of kingdom-building (II Corinthians 1:5; Philippians 3:10; I Peter 4:13). And so Paul gladly confesses that in contrast to the outward strength and glory of the Corinthian church, the apostolic band are fools for Christ's sake, weak, in disrepute, ill-clad, homeless, "the refuse of the world, and the

offscouring of all things” (I Corinthians 4:8-13). Paul can freely confess such humiliating things, because his confidence was in the exaltation that comes from the gospel alone.

And so even as we hear criticisms that the law/gospel distinction has produced an anemic Church, let us remember that God’s economy is to choose what is foolish and weak in the world in order to shame the wise and strong; that it is Christ Jesus alone Who is our wisdom, righteousness, sanctification and redemption; and that it is written, “Let him who boasts, boast of the Lord” (I Corinthians 1:27, 29-31). We should rather have a weak piety which boasts in the Lord alone, than a “strong” piety which attempts to conflate our obedience together with our faith in Christ. Our paltry obedience to the law can do nothing but humble; but faith in Christ can do nothing but exalt on account of the gospel of His resurrection and rule.

Work and Rest: We must all work out our own salvation with fear and trembling, for God is at work in us both to will and to work for His good pleasure (Philippians 2:12b-13). Paul worked harder than any of the other apostles, though it was not he, but the grace of God which was with him (I Corinthians 15:10). There is no question that the Christian life involves work, and hard work at that. Work itself is good, ordained by God in the Garden before the fall, becoming a curse to man only on account of sin (Genesis 1:26-30; 3:17-19). It follows therefore that as part of our redemption, we are reinstated as God’s viceroys upon earth, cultivating and building the City of God. “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:10).

Furthermore, countless texts make clear that a believer’s life will be filled with good works which will receive God’s approbation on the Last Day. But the believer also knows that the source of these good works is always the Holy Spirit within him, so that God alone receives all the glory. As Jonathan Edwards puts it,

In efficacious grace, we are not merely passive, nor yet does God do some and we do the rest. But God does all and we do all. God produces all, and we act all. For that is what He produces: our own acts. God is the only proper author and fountain; we only are the proper actors. We are, in this respect, wholly passive and wholly active.¹³

¹³ Jonathan Edwards, “Concerning Efficacious Grace,” *Works*, ed. Edward Hickman (London: William Ball, 1837), vol. II, p. 557.

And so in the same way that God gives a man justifying faith which causes him to repent and believe, He likewise provides sanctifying faith which produces all manner of good works. Faith always leads to work, even as we refuse to boast in anything save God's work. "For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be glory for ever. Amen" (Romans 11:36).

So, how do we know what works we should do, what an active faith should look like? Clearly, and without debate, from the law of God. And so we struggle to conform our life thereto, both outwardly and inwardly in accordance with Jesus' instructions in the Sermon on the Mount. But, like Paul in Romans 7, we find that we constantly fail in thought, word and deed, not only in what we have done but in what we have failed to do. "For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself'" (Galatians 5:14). Which of us have loved our neighbors as well as we could? And so we find that even as the law instructs and guides us, it gives us no rest. We must work, but we must also rest, as the law itself so magnificently reminds us by the Sabbath Commandment in memorial to the pattern ordained by God in the Garden (Exodus 20:8-11; Genesis 2:1-3.) And so while the law itself provides us no rest, it does point us to the place we may find rest: the gospel of Jesus Christ, Who is the end of the law (Romans 10:4). In this way, law and gospel perform complementary but distinct functions. The one prescribes how we must work out our salvation, while the other provides the rest of salvation for us who never work as we ought.

This is why the Scriptures also speak about salvation as Sabbath, as rest. "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.... Cease striving, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations. I will be exalted in the earth" (Psalm 46:1, 10-11a; NAS). "In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength" (Isaiah 30:15a). And yet, like everything else in our sanctification, this rest remains incomplete until we enter heaven:

"So then, there remains a sabbath rest for the people of God; for whoever enters God's rest also ceases from his labors as God did from His. Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, that no one fall by the same sort of disobedience" (Hebrews 4:9-11).

And so we find this balance in Scripture that may be put this way: to be justified, we can do nothing but find our rest in Christ; and yet this justification leads us to continue to strive in sanctification until that rest is finally consummated in glory. In the meantime, even as we strive in sanctification – and often fail – we still find our

refuge and rest in Christ alone. And so the Sabbath is seen as a sign of my salvation, teaching me to “cease from my evil works all the days of my life, allow the Lord to work in me through his Spirit, and thus begin in this life the eternal Sabbath.”¹⁴

Jesus told his disciples, “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me” (Matthew 16:24). We must work if we believe in Christ, and work in a way that is so difficult and selfless that Jesus compares it to the same form of painful death He underwent. Which of us can work to that standard and claim that we have fulfilled Christ’s demand? That is why Jesus also presents Himself as our Sabbath when He says, “Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls” (Matthew 11:29-30). And so we take upon ourselves the yoke of Christ which is simultaneously all-demanding, and all-relieving; both cross and Sabbath. Jesus requires us to follow after Him, but first and foremost, this means finding our rest in Him. “What must we be doing, to do the works of God?” asked the Jews of Christ. Jesus answered them, “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent.” (John 6:28-29).

It is this assurance and rest for our souls in the midst of our continued sin and failure which the law/gospel distinction protects in a way that would be lost with its abandonment. When we soberly evaluate our works and sanctification and find them lacking our souls easily lose their peace. If we are inclined to conflate justifying faith with obedience then our assurance is easily unwound. But when we understand the clear distinction between law and gospel in this matter, then we are able to find assurance, for our peace with God comes not through the law with its demands, but in the gospel of promise. “Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1).

Why does God allow us to struggle so with our sanctification? Why does He endure the old man within us constantly fighting against His love? The early Puritan, Richard Sibbes answers,

¹⁴ Heidelberg Catechism, Q. 103.

The reason for this mixture is that we carry about us a double principle, grace and nature. The end of it is especially to preserve us from those two dangerous rocks which our natures are too prone to dash upon, security and pride, and to force us to pitch our rest on justification, not sanctification.¹⁵

Ultimately, the rest of assurance can come only from justification, and not sanctification. That is why Paul echoes the language of Romans 5:1 three chapters later after the recounting of his continued struggle to obey the law: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1).

This balanced view of work and rest is why Westminster is careful to define saving faith as a living faith which bears the fruit of good works, while making it absolutely clear that the center piece of faith is not these resulting works, but rather our resting in the finished work of Christ for our salvation:

By this faith, a Christian believeth to be true whatsoever is revealed in the Word, for the authority of God Himself speaking therein; and acteth differently upon that which each particular passage thereof containeth; yielding obedience to the commands, trembling at the threatenings, and embracing the promises of God for this life, and that which is to come. *But the principal acts of saving faith are accepting, receiving, and resting upon Christ alone for justification, sanctification, and eternal life, by virtue of the covenant of grace* (WCF XIV.2, emphasis mine).

¹⁵ Richard Sibbes, *The Bruised Reed* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1998), p. 19.

As this paragraph makes plain, properly defined, salvation does not just include justification, but sanctification and glorification as well. And therefore, *saving* faith must be living and active, or as James makes plain, it is a dead faith, and thus no true faith at all (James 2:1-26).¹⁶ But this paragraph also makes plain that the *principal* acts of this saving faith are not acts of work, but acts of rest. Therefore, to make primary that which Westminster calls secondary is in fact to be out of accord with the Confession.

In other words, anyone who emphasizes acting differently, yielding obedience, or trembling at the threatenings more than accepting, receiving and resting upon Christ alone is living and/or teaching contrary to the gospel, at least according to the Westminster Confession of Faith. And thus those who define faith chiefly in terms of our own faithfulness or loyalty to Christ are likewise undermining the main thrust of the gospel as the Confession defines it.

Jesus is our Lord and we are His bond servants, bound to do His will. But they only are Christ's servants who first came to him weak and naked with nothing to offer but their need of Him. Jesus is our Master because He is first our Rest, our Sabbath. The law instructs us how we must labor as Christ's own. But in the midst of our weak, half-done, and often self-serving work we may yet find rest and forgiveness for our souls. That rest cannot be found in our own work, but only in the work of Christ

¹⁶ The distinction between *saving* faith as a whole and *justifying* faith is made more plain by Westminster Larger Catechism questions 72 and 77. They are the same faith certainly, but these questions indicate a difference of focus in the matter of justification and sanctification. Put simply, faith in justification is passive, resting in Christ's work; faith in sanctification is active, working by the Holy Spirit.

on our behalf. That is the gospel.

Perfection Demanded & Supplied

By this point, we hope the reader is firmly convinced of the need to maintain a strong law/gospel distinction in the matter of salvation, not only for sound doctrine but true growth in grace as well. We have attempted to show how the law/gospel distinction is helpful, even critical, for the maintaining of a consistent humility in both theology and piety. It does so by continually reminding us of the greatness of our own sin and weakness, and thus also the greatness of God's provision for us through Christ our Lord.

Some say that we should try to keep a balance of law and gospel in our lives. But we should not try to do that if what is meant by balance is some sort of see-saw where the one brings the other down – as if it were possible to have too much of God's law or too much of God's gospel so that either one needed the moderation of the other. We should never try to dilute the holiness of God's demands in the Law by a larger dose of gospel, or bring down the wonders of the gospel by a heavier weight upon law. Rather, both law and gospel are soaring absolutes that pinnacle together in Christ. The higher we hold one up, the higher the other will be. A man who has a high view of God's law will have a high view of God's grace. For a great sinner needs a great salvation. Likewise, a man who understands the magnitude of God's grace to him in Christ will understand the magnitude of the gratitude he owes God by his obedience. For he who has been forgiven much loves much.

And so not only will we say that we should have a high view of the law, but the very highest view possible – that God demands nothing less than moral perfection. But then in the next breath we say that God Himself provides that Perfection in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ. What God demands in redemption, God Himself supplies.

And so at once we find that Christian faith is both inconceivably easy and inconceivably hard. It is easy because all we must do is believe. It is hard because all we must do is believe – and that changes everything. God demands of us perfection because He loves us. The grace of the law/gospel distinction is that it explains clearly how God demands perfection and how God fulfils those demands Himself, both without and within us. Without us, God the Son perfectly fulfils His Father's demands through His life, death and resurrection. Within us, God the Spirit increasingly subdues and enables us to freely and cheerfully meet the Father's demands ourselves (WCF XIX.7). And when we fail – as we do daily – the

law/gospel distinction steadfastly reminds us that we are already accounted perfect in Christ; and that the Day is unstoppably coming when our own obedience will be fully perfected in glory.

And so we should properly ask, am I as the Prodigal Son of Luke 15, realizing my own wretchedness apart from God? Or am I still foolish enough to think that I am the elder brother, having never left my Father's house and having never disobeyed His command? What the law/gospel distinction reminds us of so well is that we are all the Prodigal – in heart, if not deed. Not all of us have rebelled as conspicuously as the Prodigal of the parable, but every one of us is a Prodigal of the heart, rebels by birth – perhaps most especially those internal Prodigals who have never left their father's house. For those who see themselves as the elder brother are those who see themselves as healthy and in no need of a physician. And Jesus did not come for the healthy.

Insofar as we believe that we have obeyed the moral law of God to His standards we are trusting in ourselves and have understood neither the greatness of God's demands nor the greatness of His mercy. We have not understood that God commands of us fallen men the impossible precisely so that He alone might do it on our behalf. As Luther put it so simply and so well, "the promises of God give what the law prescribes so that all things may be God's alone, both the commandments and the fulfilling of the commandments. He alone commands, he alone fulfills."¹⁷

And in such a way does God preserve for Himself all the glory of redemption, as the Reformers proclaimed so clearly – *Soli Deo Gloria*. In fact, as we recall the grand slogans of the Reformation, those simple axioms heralded by our fathers, we find that the law/gospel distinction champions them in a way that its abandonment simply cannot. So for instance, the law/gospel distinction tells us plainly that since we cannot attain to the perfect righteousness required of all who would enter heaven,

¹⁷ Martin Luther, *The Freedom of a Christian*, in *Martin Luther: Selections from His Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (New York: Doubleday, 1961), 58.

we must rely on Christ alone Who is perfect in our behalf – *Solus Christus*. Likewise, the law/gospel distinction insists that relying on Christ for such a prize means precisely that we offer Him nothing in return but the believing and self-abasing heart of faith – *Sola Fide*. Furthermore, because the law/gospel distinction reminds us of our utter dependence on God alone, we become wary of our own notions and traditions and hence all the more eager to learn the ways of our redemption from His Word alone – *Sola Scriptura*. Finally, the law/gospel distinction is keen to insist that all of redemption is accomplished by God alone – God the Father predestinating, God the Son purchasing, and God the Spirit applying it to us personally. So all of our salvation, even that which happens within us by the Holy Spirit is of God’s grace alone – *Sola Gracia*.

Perhaps no one has explained the beauty and importance of our dependence upon God for everything in our salvation better than Jonathan Edwards in his classic sermon, *God Glorified in Man’s Dependence*:

Though God be pleased to lift man out of that dismal abyss of sin and woe into which he was fallen, and exceedingly to exalt him in excellency and honour, and to a high pitch of glory and blessedness, yet the creature hath nothing in any respect to glory of; all the glory evidently belongs to God, all is in a mere, and most absolute, and divine dependence on the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.... Thus God appears in the work of redemption as all in all.¹⁸

If we agree with all this, then we shall likewise agree with Edwards that we must be on guard against any reformulation or nuancing of Reformed soteriology which downplays or endangers this truth:

Now whatever scheme is inconsistent with our *entire* dependence on God for all, and of having all of him, through him, and in him, it is repugnant to the design and tenor of the gospel, and robs it of that which God accounts its lustre and glory.

¹⁸ This and the two following quotes from Edwards, *God Glorified, Works* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1986 [1834]) vol. 2, p. 7. All emphases original.

A system which takes any focus off of Christ's work in order to place some upon our own may not condemn us, but it does rob us of the gospel's true lustre and glory. Finally, Edwards continues that it is God's concern to preserve all glory for Himself that makes faith alone the only proper instrument of redemption:

Hence we may learn a reason why faith is that by which we come to have an interest in this redemption; for there is included in the nature of faith, a sensible acknowledgment of *absolute dependence* on God in this affair.... Faith abases men, and exalts God; it gives all the glory of redemption to him alone. It is necessary in order to saving faith, that man should be emptied of himself, be sensible that he is "wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked." Humility is a great ingredient of true faith: he that truly receives redemption, receives it as a little child.

And we must receive it as children because a little child has nothing to offer his father except simple trust. This is the gospel of our Lord.

For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things.
To Him be the glory forever. Amen.

Appendix: Law and Gospel in Early Reformed Creeds

The Scots Confession (1560): Perhaps the least adamant of early Reformed confessions in advocating a clear law/gospel distinction, the Scots Confession nonetheless makes perfectly clear that it interprets verses such as Romans 2:13 (“the doers of the law will be justified”) as that which is possible in principle, while yet morally impossible for fallen men. Therefore, our only hope must be in One who fulfils it for us, as demonstrated below (emphasis added):

Chapter XV: The Perfection of the Law and The Imperfection of Man

We confess and acknowledge that the law of God is most just, equal, holy, and perfect, *commanding those things which, when perfectly done, can give life and bring man to eternal felicity*; but our nature is so corrupt, weak, and imperfect, that we are never able perfectly to fulfill the works of the law. Even after we are reborn, if we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth of God is not in us. It is therefore essential for us to lay hold on Christ Jesus, in his righteousness and his atonement, since he is the end and consummation of the Law and since it is by him that we are set at liberty *so that the curse of the God may not fall upon us, even though we do not fulfill the Law in all points*. For as God the Father beholds us in the body of his Son Christ Jesus, he accepts our imperfect obedience as if it were perfect, and covers our works, which are defiled with many stains, with the righteousness of his Son. We do not mean that we are so set at liberty that we owe no obedience to the Law – for we have already acknowledged its place – but *we affirm that no man on earth, with the sole exception of the Christ Jesus, has given, gives, or shall give in action that obedience to the Law which the Law requires*.

The point is clear enough: not only can we not fulfill the law’s demands perfectly, but that perfect obedience is precisely what the law requires, and so the law’s demands point us to our need for Christ.

The Heidelberg Catechism (1563): Just three questions into the Heidelberg Catechism we find this question: “*Q. 3. How do I come to know my misery? A. From the Law of God.*” From this question on, it cannot be denied that the Heidelberg is organized around a strong law/gospel distinction. The selected questions below prove this, especially if we keep in mind that this catechism was designed to teach not only converts, but covenant children as well (all emphases added):

Q. 5. Can you keep [*the Two Greatest Laws*] perfectly?

A. No, for by nature I am prone to hate God and my neighbor.

Q. 9. Is God unjust in requiring of man in his Law *what he cannot do*?

A. No, for God so created man that he could do it. But man, upon the instigation of the devil, by deliberate disobedience, has cheated himself and all his descendants out of these gifts.

Q. 10. Will God let man get by with such disobedience and defection?

A. Certainly not, for the wrath of God is revealed from heaven, both against our inborn sinfulness and our actual sins, and he will punish them according to his righteous judgment in time and in eternity, *as he has declared: "Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the book of the Law, and do them."*

Q. 60. How are you righteous before God?

A. Only by true faith in Jesus Christ. In spite of the fact that my conscience accuses me that I have grievously sinned against all the commandments of God, *and have not kept any one of them*, and that I am still ever prone to all that is evil, nevertheless, God, without any merit of my own, out of pure grace, grants me the benefits of the perfect expiation of Christ, imputing to me his righteousness and holiness as if I had never committed a single sin or had ever been sinful, *having fulfilled myself all the obedience which Christ has carried out for me*, if only I accept such favor with a trusting heart.

Q. 62. But why cannot our good works be our righteousness before God, *or at least part of it*?

A. Because the righteousness which can stand before the judgment of God must be *absolutely perfect* and wholly in conformity with the divine Law. But even our best works in this life are all imperfect and defiled with sin.

Q. 64. But does not this teaching make people careless and sinful?

A. No, for it is impossible for those who are ingrafted into Christ by true faith not to bring forth the fruit of gratitude.

Q. 113. What is required in the tenth commandment?

A. That there should *never enter our heart even the least inclination or thought contrary to any commandment of God*, but that we should

always hate sin with our whole heart and find satisfaction and joy in all righteousness.

Q. 114. But can those who are converted to God keep these commandments perfectly?

A. No, for even the holiest of them make only a small beginning in obedience in this life. Nevertheless, they begin with serious purpose to conform not only to some, but to all the commandments of God.

Q. 115. Why, then, does God have the ten commandments preached so strictly since no one can keep them in this life?

A. First, *that all our life long we may become increasingly aware of our sinfulness, and therefore more eagerly seek forgiveness of sins and righteousness in Christ.* Second, that we may constantly and diligently pray to God for the grace of the Holy Spirit, so that more and more we may be renewed in the image of God, until we attain the goal of full perfection after this life.

The purpose of Heidelberg's system is clear: God's holiness requires perfect obedience, the very thing we cannot do in the least. Our only hope is faith alone in Christ alone, which then results in the good works stemming from gratitude. At the same time, the law, as summarized in the Ten Commandments, increases the Christian's knowledge of his need for Christ's perfect obedience in his stead.

The Second Helvetic Confession (1566): This Swiss confession contains the same system, advocating a strong third use of the law, while yet safeguarding its first use including the stark statement, "The Gospel is indeed opposed to the law." This confession goes to great length to explain that the gospel is found in some form throughout the Old Testament, so that the distinction between law and gospel is not so much one of epoch, but of function. Again, let us consider pertinent excerpts (all emphases added):

Chapter XII: Of the Law of God

We teach that the will of God is explained for us in the law of God, what he wills or does not will us to do, what is good and just, or what is evil and unjust. Therefore, we confess that *the law is good and holy....*

We teach that this law was not given to men that they might be

justified by keeping it, but that rather from what it teaches we may know weakness, sin and condemnation, and, *despairing of our strength, might be converted to Christ in faith*. For the apostle openly declares, “The law brings wrath,” and “Through the law comes knowledge of sin” (Romans 4:15; 3:20), and, “If a law had been given which could justify or make alive, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. But the Scripture (that is, the law) has concluded all under sin, that the promise which was of the faith of Jesus might be given to those who believe.... Therefore, the law was our schoolmaster unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith” (Gal. 3:21ff).

For no flesh could or can satisfy the law of God and fulfil it, because of the weakness in our flesh which adheres and remains in us until our last breath. For the apostle says again, “God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin” (Rom. 8:3). *Therefore, Christ is the perfecting of the law and our fulfilment of it (Rom. 10:4), who, in order to take away the curse of the law, was made a curse for us (Gal. 3:13). Thus he imparts to us through faith his fulfilment of the law, and his righteousness and obedience are imputed to us.*

Chapter XIII: Of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, of the Promises, and of the Spirit and Letter

The Gospel is, indeed, opposed to the law. For the law works wrath and announces a curse, whereas the Gospel preaches grace and blessing. John says: “For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17). Yet notwithstanding it is most certain that those who were before the law and under the law, were not altogether destitute of the Gospel. For they had extraordinary evangelical promises....

And although our fathers had the Gospel in this way in the writings of the prophets by which they attained salvation in Christ through faith, *yet the Gospel is properly called glad and joyous news, in which, first by John the Baptist, then Christ the Lord himself, and afterwards by the apostles and their successors, is preached to us in the world that God has now performed what he promised from the beginning of the world, and has sent, nay more, has given us his only Son and in him reconciliation with the Father, the remission of sins, all*

fulness and everlasting life. Therefore, the history delineated by the four Evangelists and explaining how these things were done or fulfilled by Christ, what things Christ taught and did, and that those who believe in him have all fulness, is rightly called the Gospel....

Some disagree with how these early Swiss Reformed confessors exegete their supporting Scripture texts, but the simple point is that they did so. And they did so in such way as to make clear that a strong law/gospel distinction was an essential part of their theological system.

The Westminster Confession of Faith (1648): Finally, we come to the Confession which was the product of English Puritan thought over eighty years after these three earlier Reformed creeds. Arguably, Westminster gives the third use of the law a more robust place in its system, and yet it does so without diminishing the fundamental law/gospel distinction which we have already seen as essential to early Reformed thought. Here is part of Westminster's balanced teaching on the function of the law (emphases added):

Chapter XIX: Of the Law of God

1. God gave to Adam a law, as a covenant of works, by which He bound him *and all his posterity, to personal, entire, exact, and perpetual obedience*, promising life upon the fulfilling, and threatened death upon the breach of it, and endued him with power and ability to keep it.

2. *This law, after his fall, continued to be a perfect rule of righteousness; and, as such, was delivered by God upon Mount Sinai, in ten commandments*, and written in two tables: the first four commandments containing our duty towards God; and the other six, our duty to man.

6. Although true believers be not under the law, as a covenant of works, to be thereby justified, or condemned; yet is it of great use to them, as well as to others; in that, as a rule of life informing them of the will of God, and their duty, it directs and binds them to walk accordingly; *discovering also the sinful pollutions of their nature, hearts, and lives; so as, examining themselves thereby, they may come to further conviction of, humiliation for, and hatred against sin, together with a clearer sight of the need they have of Christ, and the*

perfection of His obedience. It is likewise of use to the regenerate, to restrain their corruptions, in that it forbids sin; and the threatenings of it serve to shew what even their sins deserve and what afflictions, in this life, they may expect for them, although freed from the curse thereof threatened in the law. The promises of it, in like manner, shew them God's approbation of obedience, and what blessings they may expect upon the performance thereof: although not as due to them by the law as a covenant of works. So as, a man's doing good, and refraining from evil, because the law encourageth to the one, and deterreth from the other, is no evidence of his being under the law, and not under grace.

7. *Neither are the forementioned uses of the law contrary to the grace of the Gospel, but do sweetly comply with it;* the Spirit of Christ subduing and enabling the will of man to do that freely, and cheerfully, which the will of God, revealed in the law, requireth to be done.

Here, we see the Ten Commandments explicitly equated to the original moral law which God gave to Adam in what Westminster terms, "the covenant of works." It follows then that all men are bound to obey it perfectly or be subject to death. Therefore, we note in the third cited paragraph the prominent place that the law's convicting role plays in the life of the believer, showing him more clearly his ongoing need for Christ. This stands side by side with the positive instruction it gives for us then to live as followers of Christ. And while the last paragraph states plainly that the uses of the law "sweetly comply" with the Gospel, we note that as the law *complies* with the Gospel, it is thus necessarily *not equivalent* to the Gospel.

And so in this brief survey of these Reformed Creeds, a strong distinction between law and gospel is clearly put forth, and so any honest assessment must conclude that the law/gospel distinction is *the* Reformed position. It can be fairly argued, I think, that the Reformed tradition has not always been consistent regarding the law/gospel distinction. But no tradition is ever consistent with itself all the time. But those times when the law/gospel distinction has rung most clearly from our pulpits are when we have most seen the church blessed with humility, fruitfulness and revival.