

Countering 10 Arguments Against the Law-Gospel Paradigm

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Rich Lusk is a leading proponent of the so-called “Federal Vision” popular in certain Reformed circles. In the course of defending the Federal Vision’s reformulated covenant theology, Mr. Lusk sets forth 10 arguments against “the Law-Gospel paradigm.”¹ I’d like to thank Mr. Lusk for providing a set of clear arguments to interact with. I’m also glad that he bases his arguments on Scriptural reasoning rather than appealing to Reformed traditions, an approach that I intend to imitate. I’ll quote each of Lusk’s arguments in full and offer a concise response.

Argument # 1: The Torah didn’t present a different way of salvation

Lusk writes: “First, the Mosaic covenant did not annul the earlier gracious covenant made with Abraham (Galatians 3:21). The Torah didn’t present a different way of salvation, nor did it tempt Israel to turn from faith in the promises to a principle of works righteousness. Only if abstracted from the broader covenantal narrative in which God placed it can the law become a program of merited favor.”

The Law-Gospel paradigm, as I have defined it elsewhere, doesn’t imply different ways of salvation. Contra classical Dispensationalism, I affirm the unity of the covenant of grace from Genesis 3:15 on as the underlying substratum in every epoch of redemptive history, including the Mosaic. There has always been only one way of salvation from Genesis 3:15 on – namely, by faith alone in Christ alone.

¹ Rich Lusk’s critique of the Law-Gospel paradigm may be found in two places. On the Internet: www.homes.org/theologia/content/rich_lusk/why_the_lawgospel_paradigm_is_flawed.htm. In print: In his “A Response to ‘The Biblical Plan of Salvation,’” pp. 127-30 in *The Auburn Avenue Theology, Pros and Cons: Debating the Federal Vision*, edited by E. Calvin Beisner (Fort Lauderdale, FL: Knox Theological Seminary, 2004).

But this is not inconsistent with seeing a works principle in the Mosaic economy, as Paul teaches. Although not as a way of salvation, the works principle in the Mosaic economy was a divine pedagogical strategy in which God was setting forth the standard of his exacting holiness in order to confine all mankind under sin (Gal. 3:19-23). It existed as a temporary overlay, without for a moment extinguishing the underlying covenant of grace. And it was designed with a Christological purpose in view: to be “a custodian [or disciplinarian] until Christ” (v. 24), “until the Seed should come” (v. 19). In other words, God did not give the Mosaic Law in order to tempt the Israelites to seek to be justified by works, but precisely the opposite – in order to shut them up to Christ (v. 22).

That the Law can be falsely distorted into a program of merit “if abstracted from the broader covenantal narrative” is true. In other words, if abstracted from the Christological purpose of the Law described in Galatians 3, the Law could be misconstrued as promoting a Pelagian program of salvation by self-effort. This is because the Law itself does require obedience as the basis for obtaining life. Paul twice quotes Leviticus 18:5 to support his thesis: “The one who does these things shall live by doing them” (quoted in Rom. 10:5; Gal. 3:10). Paul says that the Law itself preaches “the righteousness of works” (Rom. 10:5), and requires actual obedience in order to be righteous before God (Rom. 2:13). The Law of which Paul is speaking is not “the Law as distorted by legalists,” but the Law itself – the Law that came 430 years after the Abrahamic promise (Gal. 3:17), the very Law that God gave Israel by angels through the hand of Moses (Gal. 3:19).

But this understanding of the Law does not lead to legalism, because it is just this understanding which sounds the death-knell to all Pelagian attempts at self-justification. For the Law, when properly understood in all its inflexible rigor and holiness, leaves no

room for the half-baked, imperfect obedience of Pelagianism. The proper deduction that God wanted Israel to make when confronted with the claims of his Law, was this:

“Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the Law; rather, through the Law we become conscious of sin” (Rom. 3:20).

Argument # 2: The preface to the Ten Commandments

“Second,” says Lusk, “the preface to the Ten Commandments indicates the law was given as a gift to redeemed Israel, not as a platform from which they could strive to attain God’s favor. They were already saved; now God simply tells them how to live as his faithful people. The fundamental requirement of the Mosaic covenant was not any different than the basic requirements of the Abrahamic or Christic covenants: the obedience of faith. The shape of the covenantal demand may have changed in the specifics (e.g., new laws for dwelling in the Promised Land), but the basic posture of faith-filled obedience remained constant.”

It is true that the Law was given as a gift to redeemed Israel, an already-saved people. The preface to the Decalogue makes this point clear: “I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (Exodus 20:2). God then tells them how to live as his redeemed people. The preface to the Decalogue makes clear that God did not give the Law in order that Israel might seek justification by works. It sets the typological covenant of works with national Israel within the larger context of God’s gracious purposes. The Law did not annul the Abrahamic covenant previously ratified by God (Gal. 3:17). It was “added” (overlaid) until the Seed should come (Gal. 3:19). As God’s redeemed people, they were being brought into the land of Canaan where a perfectly holy God would dwell in their midst. To be thus constituted as a holy people in God’s holy realm was a great gift that Israel did not earn. But the Law teaches that only the righteous may dwell in God’s holy presence. If they are to retain the land, Israel must be obedient. This conditional element stands in contrast with the Abrahamic promise by which God

guaranteed the inheritance to Abraham's seed on the basis of an irrevocable oath. This is why Paul contrasts the two covenants: "If those who live by the [Mosaic] Law are heirs, faith has no value and the [Abrahamic] promise is worthless" (Rom. 4:14; cp. Gal. 3:10-18; 4:24).

Argument # 3: The Law did not require perfect obedience

"Third, the law did not require perfect obedience. It was designed for sinners, not unfallen creatures. Thus, the basic requirement of the law was covenant loyalty and trust, not sinless perfection. This is why numerous sinful but redeemed people are regarded as law keepers in Scripture."

That the Law did not require perfect obedience is true in one sense, but not in another. If you're considering the Mosaic Law in terms of its temporal blessings and curses in the land, it's true. Numerous sinful but redeemed OT saints were regarded as Law keepers because they repented of their sin, offered the required sacrifices, and were generally faithful to God. The temporal curses did not immediately fall the moment an Israelite had a sinful thought. The covenant curses were usually reserved for major sins like idolatry. And the ultimate covenant curse of exile from the land was delayed for many generations, coming only when the nation as a whole had persisted in its covenant-breaking in spite of repeated calls to repentance. In this sense, the Law did not require perfect obedience.

But if you're considering the spiritual verities to which the Mosaic Law pointed, it did. What spiritual verities do I have in mind? I'm referring to the Leviticus 18:5 principle, in which life is conditioned on obedience to the Law. Both Jesus and Paul interpreted Leviticus 18:5 as teaching that God requires perfect obedience in order to inherit eternal life (see Matt. 19:16-17; Luke 10:25-28; Rom. 10:5; Gal. 3:12). In its original context, of

course, Lev. 18:5 merely offered long life in the land of Canaan to those who substantially kept the Law. But Jesus and Paul understood that this pointed to a deeper spiritual truth in the kingdom of God: perfect righteousness is required to enter heaven.²

Argument # 4: The sacrificial system

“Fourth, the sacrificial system clearly offered a remedy for sin. If the whole system was a covenant of works (even in the narrowly typological sense that Kline proposes), no provision for sin would have been possible.”

Actually, the sacrificial system proves that the Law *was* a covenant of works. Think about it. What did the Law demand as the punishment for sin? An accursed death. What did the sacrificial system provide? A substitute who died an accursed death in the sinner’s place. The sacrificial system graphically showed that repentance alone was not enough. The Law will not let the sinner go just because he is sorry and promises to do better next time. The Law, which is simply the concrete expression of God’s own justice and holiness, requires satisfaction. The Law received that satisfaction in a provisional manner by means of the blood of bulls and goats. It received payment in full by means of the blood of the Son of God, thus demonstrating the perfect justice of God (Rom. 3:25-26, 31). Lusk’s statement must be turned on its head: if the Law wasn’t a covenant of works, the extensive sacrificial system attached to the Law wouldn’t have been necessary.

² Calvin interprets Lev. 18:5 with reference to both temporal and eternal life: God “promises both blessings in the present life and everlasting blessedness to those who obediently keep his commandments. He threatens the transgressors no less with present calamities than with the punishment of eternal death. For that promise (‘He who does these things shall live in them’) and its corresponding threat (‘The soul that sins shall itself die’) without doubt have reference to either never-ending future immortality or death. Wherever God’s benevolence or wrath is mentioned, under the former is contained eternal life, under the latter eternal perdition.” *Institutes* II.viii.4.

Argument # 5: The Law as a pre-Christian revelation of the gospel

“Fifth, the law was a pre-Christian revelation of the gospel. Paul regarded the law as a witness to the gospel (Romans 3:21) and a shadow of the good things to come in Christ (Hebrews 10:1). John regarded the law as a type of the grace and truth that came in Christ Jesus, and (conversely) regarded Jesus as the Law incarnate, the Torah made flesh (John 1:18). For John, the transition from Moses to Christ was a movement from grace to grace (John 1:17), just as for Paul it was a movement from glory to glory (2 Corinthians 3).”

Lusk appeals to four proof-texts to support the idea that the Law was a pre-Christian revelation of the gospel. As we go through them one-by-one, we’ll see that they only prove that the Old Testament as Scripture contains a pre-Christian revelation of the gospel. Furthermore, we’ll observe in three of the four verses, there is actually a marked contrast between the Law and the Gospel.

Romans 3:21

But now a righteousness from God, apart from the Law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify.

The two occurrences of “the Law” here have distinct references. This important passage teaches that while God’s justifying activity in the new age takes place apart from the Mosaic Law as a covenant, nevertheless the Old Testament as Scripture (“the Law and the Prophets”) anticipated and predicted this new work of God. Sounds like a Law-Gospel contrast.³

³ For more on Rom. 3:21 see Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 223.

Hebrews 10:1

The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming – not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship.

Whereas Paul most frequently and most basically uses “the Law” to refer to the Mosaic Law as a covenant (stipulations and sanctions), the author of Hebrews uses the same term to refer to the Mosaic economy as a whole, including the tabernacle, the sacrifices, and the Levitical priesthood. In this broad sense “the Law” (or, Mosaic economy) certainly does contain a pre-Christian revelation of the Gospel. But this does not mean that the Law in the narrower sense is the same as the Gospel.

John 1:16-17

On Lusk’s view, John 1:16 could be paraphrased as follows: “From the fullness of his grace we have all received New Testament grace upon Old Testament grace.”

Reflecting this interpretation the TNIV has, “Out of his fullness we have all received grace in place of grace already given.” But the words “already given” are not present in Greek, which literally has “grace upon grace.” Although the TNIV’s interpretation is possible, there is much to commend the NIV: “From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another.” This reading is supported by the consideration that the one from whose fullness the disciples received “one blessing after another” is the Word who “made his dwelling among us,” i.e., the incarnate Word. Regardless of one’s understanding of verse 16, verse 17 goes on to place this affirmation in redemptive historical context: “The Law through Moses was given; grace-and-truth through Jesus Christ was realized”

(my literal translation). The implication is that grace-and-truth was not realized in the Law of Moses, but only through Jesus Christ. Sounds like a Law-Gospel contrast.

2 Corinthians 3

Paul does not say that the transition from Moses to Christ was a movement from glory to glory, as if the glory just kept getting brighter. Rather, Paul says the glory of the Old Covenant was fading away, and ultimately came to an end, whereas the glory of the New Covenant is permanent. The fact that both were glorious does not mean they are the same. Surely the glory of the Old Covenant is due to the fact that it reflected the glory of God's moral perfection and holiness. Nevertheless, the Old Covenant was not permanent. The fading of the glory of Moses' face was a picture of the impermanent nature of the Old Covenant itself. Why was it impermanent? Because it was "the letter that kills," that is, a covenant of works that no one could keep and by which Israel was ultimately thrust out of God's holy presence in the land. It was "a ministry of death" and "of condemnation." The New Covenant, however, "remains in glory" (v. 11), because it is "a ministry of [imputed] righteousness" (v. 9). Sounds like a ... well, you know.

Argument # 6: Other summaries of the Law

"Sixth, other summaries of the law show it was not a legalistic, meritorious system. For example, the 'Micah Mandate' (6:8), one of several post-Sinai encapsulations of the Decalogue, hardly breathes a legalistic air. In Matthew 23:23, Jesus regards faith as one of the weightier matters of the law. But if the law was of faith, it was not a meritorious works righteousness system."

I don't accept Lusk's view that a passage must "breathe a legalistic air" for it to set forth the works principle. In the *pactum salutis* between the Father and the Son, Jesus

delighted to keep God's Law without betraying a legalistic attitude (Heb. 10:5-7). And yet the obedience he rendered was meritorious within the context of that covenant.

But doesn't Matthew 23:23 imply that the Law was of faith? Lusk's interpretation cannot be correct, because it is in direct conflict with the teaching of Paul that "the Law is *not* of faith" (Gal. 3:12). There is no conflict between Jesus and Paul because Lusk's interpretation is based on a flawed translation of Matt. 23:23. Although the traditional rendering (e.g., KJV, RSV) supports the idea that "faith" is one of the weightier matters of the Law, more recent versions, like the NASB, NIV, and ESV translate the word as "faithfulness." This is in fact the same point as the Micah Mandate in context (see Micah 6:6-8). Notice how the parallels line up rather nicely: "to act justly" (= justice), "to love mercy" (= mercy), "to walk humbly with your God" (= faithfulness).

Argument # 7: Both the Law and the Gospel enhance the fear of God

"Seventh, the giving of the law was an occasion of fear and trembling on the part of the people (Exodus 19:16). But in itself, this does not suggest the law was a covenant of works program. After all, the gospel does not negate the fear of God. In fact, it enhances it (cf. Acts 9:6; Philippians 2:12; Hebrews 12:18ff; Revelation 1:17)."

It is true that the gospel promotes the fear of God. A person who claims to be a Christian but who has no fear of God does not have a credible profession of faith. But there is a big difference between the kind of fear that is kindled by the flames of Mount Sinai and the evangelical (that is, gospel-motivated) fear nourished by the covenant of grace. The former arises from a consciousness of sin apart from an apprehension of God's mercy in Christ. It is a fear of punishment, and causes the sinner to shrink back from God, just as

Israel did at Sinai (Heb. 12:18-21). This kind of fear has no place in the covenant of grace:
“Perfect love drives out *fear*, because *fear* has to do with punishment” (1 John 4:18).

Argument # 8: Both the Law and the Gospel contain warnings against apostasy

“Eighth, the warnings against apostasy in the law (e.g., Deuteronomy 28:15ff) are not inconsistent with its fundamentally gracious character. The same kinds of warnings are found scattered throughout the New Testament revelation, which is unquestionably gracious (e.g., John 15:1ff; Romans 11:20ff). Grace, conditions, and the possibility of genuine apostasy are not incompatible in God’s covenant economy.”

I agree that both the Old and the New Covenants have conditions and warnings. But that doesn’t make them the same covenant. I’ll begin with the conditions, and then look at the warnings, and show how they function differently under their respective covenants.

The conditions. In a covenant of works, the condition is perfect obedience, or, in the case of Israel’s national covenant, substantial (though not perfect) obedience. In any case, obedience – or doing what the Law requires, i.e., works – is the condition of receiving the blessings offered. In the covenant of grace, on the other hand, the sole condition is faith in Christ, apart from works (Rom. 3:28). “To the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is credited as righteousness” (Rom. 4:5).

Not only are the conditions different (works vs. faith), but the conditions themselves function very differently in relation to the blessings. In a covenant of works, the condition (works) is the legal ground for obtaining the blessings offered in the covenant.

In the covenant of grace, the condition (faith) is merely a means by which the blessings are received. Although faith is necessary, it is not the ground on which God bestows the blessings of the covenant of grace upon us. The legal ground for the bestowal of the blessings is the perfect obedience and merit of Christ – not our faith, which is nothing in itself. The condition of the covenant of grace functions merely as the means or instrument by which the blessings earned by Christ are received and appropriated. Faith is not a work but an empty hand whereby we receive all that Christ has earned for us as a gift. To be sure, believers must also demonstrate the genuineness of their faith by producing good works as the fruit of faith. But good works are the result of salvation, not its condition. We were created in Christ Jesus “unto good works” (Eph. 2:10).

As with the conditions, the warnings function rather differently in the Old and the New Covenant. The warning of the Old Covenant is quite clear: “Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all the things written in the book of the Law to do them” (Gal. 3:10, quoting Deut. 27:26). It is a call to do all the works commanded in the Law in order to avoid the curses. The New Covenant warnings, by contrast, are a call to continue in faith in Christ and to bring forth the fruits which are the evidence of faith, because we have already been freed from the curse and received the blessings Christ has obtained for us (Gal. 3:13-14). Those who profess faith in Christ and yet do not produce good fruit, demonstrate that they were never really trusting in Christ to begin with.

In both this and the preceding argument Lusk tries to demonstrate the alleged unity of the Law and the Gospel based on something they have in common. But these commonalities turn out to be superficial upon closer examination. “Obedience,” “fear of God,” and “conditions” under a covenant of works have a very different meaning than

“obedience,” “fear of God,” and “conditions” under the covenant of grace. There’s a big difference between obeying in order to be blessed, and obeying because we are blessed. If we do not understand this vital distinction we will be driven to frustration, despair, and defeat. But the gospel announces good news: we are saved not by what we do, but by what Christ has done, plus nothing. Only when we believe that astounding truth are we in a position to start living in a way that is truly pleasing to God.

Argument # 9: There is a typological continuum from Moses to Jesus

“Ninth, the New Testament places the law of Moses and the gospel of Christ in a typological continuum. So far from contrasting Jesus and Moses in an absolute fashion, New Testament writers clearly portray Jesus as a new and greater Moses. In Jesus, the person and work of Moses are recapitulated and escalated. Jesus is the prophet like Moses that God promised to send his people (Acts 3:22ff). His cross accomplishes a greater exodus (cf. Luke 9:31), rescuing the covenant people from the greater Pharaoh of sin and death ... Both Moses and Jesus are delivered from Egypt (cf. Exodus 1-2 and Matthew 1-2) ... both were transfigured on a mountain (cf. Exodus 34:29-35 and Matthew 17:1-9), both gave expositions of the law for a new situation facing Israel (cf. Deuteronomy as a whole and Matthew 5-7) ... both interceded for a disobedient Israel (cf. Exodus 34 and Luke 23:34) ... both led Passover celebrations ... and on and on we could go. If the New Testament writers truly wanted to juxtapose the ministry of Moses with the ministry of Christ, they chose a very odd strategy for doing so! Indeed, they have presented Moses as the typological forerunner to Jesus, not his theological adversary.”

Moses was indeed a type of Christ. But Moses performed more than one office in the economy of redemption. His proper office was to inaugurate the Old Covenant with its blessings and curses (Deut. 29:1; Heb. 9:18-20). But Moses also served the LORD in terms of the administration of the underlying covenant of grace. God raised Moses up to deliver Israel from captivity in Egypt, in fulfillment of the prior oath to Abraham (Acts 7:30-36; cp. Exodus 2:24; 3:6). When Moses interceded on behalf of Israel, he was acting not as a mediator of the Old Covenant but as a priestly figure interceding with God to remember

his promises according to the covenant of grace. The fact that he was administering the covenant of grace is made evident in his intercessory prayer, where he appeals not to the Law but to the promises that God made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Exodus 32:11-14). There is no conflict, then, because the typological connections Lusk cites have to do with Moses' secondary role as a priestly mediator of the covenant of grace.⁴

Argument # 10: “Torah” means “fatherly instruction”

“Finally ... the Old Testament word for law, ‘Torah,’ does not mean ‘legal code.’ Our understanding of the biblical category ‘law’ has been shaped far too much by Roman (particularly Stoic) modes of thought rather than Hebraic. The Torah was not a law code in any modern sense. If anything it was ‘fatherly instruction’ (cf. Proverbs 1:7). This is the essence of Torah: not a brownie point system for aspiring Pelagians, but fatherly wisdom and counsel. Fathers do not give commands to their sons so the sons can earn their blessing; rather, they give commands in a context of pre-existing love and favor ... Fatherly commands are not a covenant of works scheme or an ‘obey-me-to-earn-my-blessing’ scheme.”

Lusk argues that “fathers do not give commands to their sons so the sons can earn their blessing; rather, they give commands in a context of pre-existing love and favor.” But the two are not incompatible. The decisive proof is the Father’s relationship with the Son. The Father gave the Son commands in a context of pre-existing love and favor. But the Father also commanded the Son to do certain things in order to obtain a reward (John 17:4-

⁴ Calvin explains the two-fold office of Moses in his commentary on Romans 10:5: “Moses had this **common office** – to teach the people the true rule of religion. Since it was so ... it behoved him to be a preacher of the gospel; which office he faithfully performed, as it appears from many passages ... But as evangelic promises are only found scattered in the writings of Moses, and these also somewhat obscure, and as the precepts and rewards, allotted to the observers of the law, frequently occur, it rightly appertained to Moses as his own and **peculiar office**, to teach what is the real righteousness of works, and then to show what remuneration awaits the observance of it, and what punishment awaits those who come short of it ... And whenever the word law is thus strictly taken, Moses is by implication opposed to Christ: and then we must consider what the law contains, as separate from the gospel.” *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, translated and edited by the Rev. John Owen (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1993), pp. 386-7. Emphasis mine.

5). And because the Son obeyed, God highly exalted him and rewarded him (Phil. 2:5-11). The loving relationship between the Father and the Son was not incompatible with earning a reward.

In a similar manner, the Torah that God gave Israel was founded on a relationship of grace but was definitely an “obey-me-to-earn-my-blessing” scheme. Just think about the portions of the Pentateuch where the Torah legislation is set forth. A fair-minded reading of the Torah leaves the rather forceful impression that it was indeed a “legal code” in which Israel was to obey in order to earn God’s blessing and avoid the covenant curses (Lev. 26; Deut. 27-28). The fair-minded reader who comes to this conclusion isn’t influenced by non-Hebraic modes of thought but is simply taking note of the character of this divine revelation.

The heart of the problem

At the root of Lusk’s objections lies the assumption that any covenant of works, whether with Adam, Israel, or Christ, is legalistic. And we all know that legalism is a bad thing. As Christians, we don’t want to be within 100 miles of anything that smacks of legalism, that is, the idea that a sinner can be saved by doing good works. Lusk’s desire to avoid legalism is good, but he is wrong to assume that Adam, Israel, and Christ are models of how to be saved.

In the first and the last instance (Adam and Christ), their relationship with God was that of a sinless covenant head, whose obedience or disobedience is reckoned to those whom they represent. Salvation is not an issue for sinless covenant heads. Thus, the

Creator's covenant of works with Adam and the Father's covenant of works with Christ do not promote legalism, that is, the idea that a *sinner* can be saved by doing good works.

National Israel was indeed the object of salvation, but that salvation was unto a national vocation to be a corporate re-enactment of Adam's probation in the garden. This national vocation was not given to Israel in order that Israel might be saved. The lesson to be derived from Israel's experience under the Law is not legalism but just the opposite – the realization that sinners are utterly incapable of averting God's wrath and gaining his blessing by doing the Law.

So neither Adam, nor Christ, nor national Israel – in terms of their probationary roles under their respective works-based covenants – is a model of legalism or salvation by works.

If you're looking for models of salvation, look at the many sinners of the Bible who put their trust in the Messiah to come. If you insist on looking at Adam as an example, look at Adam and Eve after the fall, expelled from the garden, ashamed of their nakedness and yet holding fast to the promise of the Seed who would win for them the right to eat of the tree of life. If you insist on looking at Israel as an example, don't look at national Israel's probationary task in the land of Canaan, but at godly Israelites like David who sinned grievously against the Lord but repented and knew the blessedness of not having their sins imputed against them.

And if you insist on looking at Jesus as a model of salvation, you're looking in the wrong place! Jesus was never a model of salvation in any sense. He is our Savior, who endured the curse of the Law and fulfilled its requirements in our place. He did not show us how to save ourselves, but as our Substitute he accomplished for us what we could

never accomplish for ourselves. Jesus was not a Christian. He did not need to trust in a sin-bearing Substitute or receive imputed righteousness by faith alone.⁵

Ironically, it is the denial of the Law-Gospel paradigm that is in danger of fostering legalism. For when the distinction between these two categories is denied, the meaning of “Gospel” changes. The Gospel is no longer the good news of the satisfaction, by a Substitute, of the justice of God, resulting in an imputed righteousness on account of which God judges us worthy of entering heaven. Instead, the Gospel subtly begins to morph into the not-so good news that sinners are made heaven-worthy by their own covenant faithfulness. Of course, this is usually explained within the context of so-called “grace,” which is viewed as God’s gracious acceptance of our imperfect faithfulness.

The way to avoid legalism is to believe that, as the Law teaches, only the perfectly righteous may be admitted into heaven. This counterintuitive premise accomplishes two things in a single blow: it crushes legalism and clarifies the meaning of grace. First, it crushes legalism because legalism cannot get off the ground unless the standard has first been lowered. But if the Law requires perfect righteousness, clearly the half-baked, imperfect obedience promoted by legalism will not do.

Second, it clarifies the meaning of grace. Grace is that God provides and accepts the imputed righteousness of Christ, in place of our own inherent righteousness demanded by the Law, as the righteousness by which the unrighteous can attain heaven. Now that’s

⁵ Machen startlingly but helpfully put it this way: “Christian faith is trust reposed in [Jesus] for the removal of sin; He could not repose trust ... in Himself; therefore He was certainly not a Christian Without doubt Jesus had a religion; the fact is of the utmost importance. But it is equally important to observe that that religion which Jesus had was not Christianity. Christianity is a way of getting rid of sin, and Jesus was without sin.” *Christianity and Liberalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), pp. 91-92.

grace! The true Gospel, then, presupposes the Law as its antithetical counterpart.

Otherwise grace is no longer grace.

My problem with Mr. Lusk's Law-Gospel continuum is that it is not good news. It leaves me with a semi-Pelagian program whereby God graciously enables me to obey in order to get into heaven. But as nice as that may sound to some, it's predicated on too low a view of what God requires and too high a view of human ability. I'm not a basically good person who needs some help in the right direction. I'm a sinner whose best efforts always fall short. God is not an indulgent judge who'll wink at my flaws and give me an "A" for effort. If there's anything we should take away from the message of the Law it is that God is holy (Lev. 19:2). My imperfect obedience would never pass muster in the sight of this holy God. In contrast with Mr. Lusk's illusory offer of salvation by imperfection, what I need is a solid Savior who actually grants me the right to enter heaven on the basis of his perfection. Jesus, I am resting, resting in the joy of what thou art!