

The Law-Gospel Contrast in Lutheranism, Dispensationalism, and Pauline Theology

Lee Irons

Various hermeneutical systems adopt a Law-Gospel contrast of some sort.

Dispensationalism and Lutheranism are two well-known systems that come to mind. But while there are similarities, neither system teaches the Law-Gospel contrast in precisely the way articulated by Paul. My goal in this paper is to sketch out some preliminary answers to the following questions: How does Paul understand the Law-Gospel contrast? How does Paul's understanding differ from that of Lutheranism and Dispensationalism? Why is the Law-Gospel contrast important?

Defining the Law-Gospel contrast

By “the Law” Paul most frequently and basically means the Mosaic Law, focusing particularly on its legal requirements. But for Paul, the Mosaic Law wasn't a set of ethical ideals or timeless commands. It was a covenant, for a particular people (the Jews – Rom. 2:12) and for a particular time (from Moses until Christ – Gal. 3:19, 24).¹ This legal covenant offered the blessing of life for the obedient (Rom. 10:5; Gal. 3:12) and threatened a terrible curse for the disobedient (Gal. 3:10). “The Law” was thus a particular kind of covenant – a covenant based on works.

¹ Although the Mosaic Law was strictly binding only on the Jews, this does not mean that it had no broader significance for all humanity. As I will explain below in my critique of classical Dispensationalism, the Mosaic Law was a republication of the Adamic covenant of works in a form adapted to Israel's life in the land. As such, the failure of Israel under the Mosaic Law was a demonstration of the sinfulness of all humanity. Paul makes this broader application in Rom. 3:19 and Gal. 3:22. See also the interesting implication of a passage like Gal. 4:1-9 where Paul draws a parallel between Israel “under the Law” and the Gentiles “under the elementary principles of the world.”

By “the Gospel” Paul means the announcement that the Abrahamic promise has been fulfilled in the person and work of Christ (Gal. 3:15-22). The Gospel is the free offer of salvation and eternal life on the basis of Christ’s death and resurrection. Like the Law, the Gospel is also covenantal. But unlike the Law, the Gospel is a covenant based on God’s gracious promise. The Law requires complete obedience, and since no one can yield that obedience, it only produces wrath (Rom. 4:15). The Gospel only requires faith so that “the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed” to all of Abraham’s seed (Rom. 4:16).

It is clear that Paul does not view the Law and the Gospel as a continuum but a contrast. The Law and the Gospel are founded on antithetical principles. Paul expresses this fundamental contrast in various ways. In Romans 4, he uses an analogy from every day life. The Law is like earning a wage that one deserves. The Gospel, on the other hand, is like receiving a gift that one does not deserve:

Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but trusts him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness (Rom. 4:4-5 ESV).

In other passages, Paul describes the Law and the Gospel as two contrasting kinds of righteousness: “the righteousness that is based on the Law” (Rom. 10:4) *versus* “the righteousness based on faith” (Rom. 10:5; cp. 4:13; Phil. 3:9).

For Moses writes about *the righteousness that is based on the law*, that the person who does the commandments shall live by them. But *the righteousness based on faith* says ... “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved (Rom. 10:4-9 ESV).

The righteousness of the Law says, “The person who *does* the commandments shall live by them.” The righteousness of faith says, “The righteous shall live by *faith*” (Gal. 3:10-12). The one makes life conditional upon doing, upon performance. The other offers

righteousness and life freely as a gift received by faith. So stark is the contrast that Paul can say, “The Law is not of faith” (Gal. 3:12).

Comparison with Lutheranism

Lutheranism agrees with this Pauline contrast between doing and believing, between performance and gift, especially as it relates to justification. But if Paul were alive today, his concern with Lutheran theology would be that it defines “Law” too broadly. The habit of dropping the definite article is a clue that something is amiss. For Lutherans, “Law” is defined a-historically and denotes any passage of Scripture that contains a demand, including the exhortations to holy living throughout the New Testament. Luther said: “By the term ‘Law’ nothing else is to be understood than a word of God that is a command, that enjoins upon us what we are to do and what we are to shun, that requires from us some work of obedience.”²

Now Paul would sympathize with the Lutheran concern to avoid turning the Gospel into a new law. For this reason he would not classify the New Testament exhortations to holy living as “Gospel” per se. Although the Gospel itself certainly does include commands – the call to turn to God and exercise faith in Christ – the Gospel is not fundamentally a demand for us to do something, but an announcement that God has done something for us in Christ. Paul would say Lutheranism gets it right at this point.

² From Luther’s “Sermon on the Distinction between the Law and the Gospel,” quoted by C. F. W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction Between the Law and the Gospel* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1986), 18-19. Cp. *The Formula of Concord*, Article V. A similar a-covenantal definition of the Law is frequently found among Reformed theologians. For example, Berkhof writes: “The law comprises everything in Scripture which is a revelation of God’s will in the form of a command or prohibition.” Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 612.

But Paul would not agree that everything else must therefore be classified as “Law.” The New Testament exhortations to holy living exist within an evangelical framework that differs markedly from the Mosaic Law with its blessings and curses. Rather than labeling these calls to holy living “Law,” Paul views them as exhortations to live in a manner consistent with the Gospel. They are imperatives that flow out of the grand indicatives of the Gospel. To paraphrase one New Testament passage of this sort: “You have died with Christ and have been raised with him; therefore, set your mind on things which are above, and put to death your members which are on the earth” (see Col. 3:1-5). This Christocentric, grace-based exhortation is miles apart from the Mosaic Law with its threats and curses.

The Lutheran definition of “Law” not only mixes things that ought to be distinguished, in practice it often blunts the force of the New Testament imperatives. Typically Lutherans use the Law, including the New Testament imperatives, to remind themselves how far they fall short of God’s standard and to be driven again to Christ for assurance of pardon. As valid as this practice may be, it should not be the only use that we make of the extensive New Testament teachings and exhortations to holy living. For these imperatives also have an important positive role to play with regard to sanctification.

Of course, it’s true that no one can perfectly obey any New Testament imperative. To take an example, no one, this side of glory, will ever be able to fully implement the exhortation to have the same attitude of humility that Christ displayed when he took a slave’s form and became obedient to the point of death (Phil. 2:3-8). Certainly Christ’s example quickly shows us how far we fall short. But I don’t think Paul would be satisfied with this typically Lutheran response. The directness of Paul’s imperatives in this context,

issued to a particular congregation facing specific problems, suggests that Paul actually intended the Philippian Christians to follow Christ's example. Paul expressly exhorted them to "have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus ..." (Phil. 2:5 ESV). Of course, Paul recognized that no one can do this perfectly. But surely he believed it was possible, by the Spirit's power, to make genuine progress in following Christ's example.

The Reformed tradition, at least as commonly interpreted today, with its "third use of the Law," is better than the Lutheran tradition in this regard, but only marginally so. The biblical imperatives are not viewed merely as goads to drive us to Christ but as a positive means of grace for sanctification, and rightly so. However, the imperatives take on a dead, Mosaic flavor. The NT imperatives lose their lively evangelical thrust when they are subsumed under the rubric of the ten commandments. This is seen most clearly in the Reformed catechisms, which use the Decalogue as ten "hooks" upon which to hang the various OT commands and NT imperatives. The NT imperatives are detached from the Christocentric indicative and become little more than elaborations of the ten commandments. The Mosaic Law becomes a vortex that sucks in all of the NT exhortations, uprooting them from the soil of Christ and the Spirit, and attempting to graft them onto Moses.

In the Westminster Larger Catechism, for example, the powerful Christocentric exhortations to love one another even as Christ has loved us, to have this mind among ourselves which is ours in Christ Jesus, and so on, are either "deduced" from the ten commandments by Puritan ingenuity or simply buried in the prooftexts as if to provide a perfunctory NT parallel. Meanwhile, the Mosaic threats attached to the second and third

commandments, and the promise of long life attached to the fifth commandment – all of which are essential elements of the Mosaic covenant of works – receive detailed treatment under separate questions and answers. For example, rather than seeing the promise of long life in the land as a promise unique to Israel, the Westminster Larger Catechism applies it to all believers across redemptive history:

The reason annexed to the fifth commandment, in these words, That thy days may be long upon the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee, is an express promise of long life and prosperity, as far as it shall serve for God's glory and their own good, to all such as keep this commandment (WLC #133).³

Both the Lutheran tradition and “the third use of the Law” as commonly understood in the Reformed tradition are guilty of abstracting “the Law” in an a-covenantal manner as a timeless code. The unintended result of this approach is a failure to live up to the robust Pauline doctrine of sanctification in union with Christ. Paul was neither an anemic Lutheran nor a nomistic Calvinist. He was a Christ-intoxicated teacher of grace. And although Paul was often accused of preaching grace as a license for sin, he was actually very concerned to promote holy living. But he believed that holy living is not promoted by placing believers under the Law but by leading them to Christ in whose death they have died and in whose resurrection they have been raised to walk in the new life of the Spirit.

Comparison with Dispensationalism

When we examine the Law-Gospel contrast advocated by classical Dispensationalism, a different problem emerges.⁴ Unlike the Lutheran and Reformed

³ For a similarly problematic exposition of the threats attached to the second and the third commandments, see WLC #110 and #114.

⁴ Craig Blaising and Darel Bock have identified three broad forms of Dispensational thought. “Classical Dispensationalism” denotes the original brand advocated in the 19th century by John Nelson Darby, popularized by the

traditions, classical Dispensationalism generally reserves the term “Law” for the specific, historical covenant that God made with Israel at Sinai. Where classical Dispensationalism goes wrong is that it seems to imply that there are two ways of salvation – one for Israel (via the Law) and one for the church (via the Gospel). Although revised and progressive Dispensationalists may not wish to admit it, the original architects of their system implied that before Christ came people were saved by their faithfulness to the Law, and that the Gospel brought a new way of salvation for the Gentiles.⁵

But the NT plainly teaches that the Gospel was announced prophetically in the Old Testament Scriptures in the form of “the promise,” long before the Messiah came and fulfilled the promise (Rom. 1:2; 3:21; 4:13; Gal. 3:16-18). By means of the promise, Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness (Gen. 15:6). As a result Paul can appeal to Abraham, an Old Testament believer, as the model of salvation by faith alone apart from the Law (Gal. 3:6-9; Rom. 4:1-25). Thus, in contrast with

Scofield Reference Bible, and systematized by the founder of Dallas Theological Seminary, Lewis Sperry Chafer. “Revised Dispensationalism” refers to Dispensational thought circa 1950-1980, and takes its name from the 1967 revision of the *Scofield Reference Bible*. Well-known advocates of this form of Dispensationalism include John Walvoord and Charles Ryrie. “Progressive Dispensationalism” is a more recent development that began in the 1980’s and gained momentum in the 1990’s. Blaising and Bock, *Progressive Dispensationalism: An Up-To-Date Handbook of Contemporary Dispensational Thought* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1993), 22.

⁵ In the original *Scofield Reference Bible*, Scofield wrote: “The point of testing [in the dispensation of grace] is no longer legal obedience as the condition of salvation, but acceptance or rejection of Christ” (p. 1115 n. 2). Revised and progressive Dispensationalists disavow Scofield’s statement and clearly affirm that there is only one ground of salvation in every dispensation (the work of Christ) and only one way of salvation (faith). See, e.g., Charles Ryrie, *Dispensationalism Today* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1965), 110-31. However, revised and progressive Dispensationalists still maintain that “the content of faith changes in the various dispensations” (Ryrie, 123). Thus, while contemporary Dispensationalism cannot justly be accused of teaching multiple ways of salvation, its “changing content of faith” formulation falls short of the Pauline teaching that Old and New Testament believers are saved by the same faith (Rom. 4:1-25; Gal. 3:6-9).

Dispensationalism, Paul teaches that there is only one way of salvation from the fall onward. All OT saints were justified by faith alone by trusting in the Messiah to come.

The Law was given to a people who were already redeemed (Exodus 20:2). But once redeemed, God set them apart from the nations and entered into a special covenant with them in which national Israel would be a re-enactment of Adam's probation and fall on the grand stage of history. Like Adam, Israel violated the covenant and forfeited God's blessing (Hosea 6:7). This is known as "the republication thesis," a thesis common among older Reformed theologians who took their inspiration from the Apostle Paul. They viewed the Mosaic Covenant as a republication of the Adamic covenant of works at the national level. These older Reformed theologians saw significant differences between the Adamic covenant of works and its Mosaic republication. If Adam had obeyed the covenant of works, he would have obtained eternal life. By contrast, if the Israelites obeyed the Mosaic Law, they would merely enjoy long life in the land (Deut. 4:40). The Mosaic covenant of works was not a literal re-institution of the Adamic covenant of works, as if God were offering eternal life to sinners by their own works, since the blessings and curses of the Mosaic Covenant only applied to the typological level in the land. In this way, the error of classical Dispensationalism is avoided and the truth that there is only one way of salvation from the fall onward is protected.

Perhaps you're wondering, "If God wasn't trying to tempt the Israelites to seek salvation by works, why did God re-enact the works principle with Israel at the typological level?" In Paul's theology, long life in the land of Canaan was a type of eternal life in heaven. God gave the Law to teach us that God requires perfect righteousness in order to dwell in his inheritance. By making Israel's obedience to the Mosaic Covenant the

condition of tenure in the land, and by ultimately spewing Israel out of the land for breaking that covenant, God was graphically showing that after the fall “there is no one who is righteous, not even one” (Rom. 3:10 NIV). Israel’s failure to attain righteousness by Law-keeping is the failure of all humanity under the Law. If Israel couldn’t produce the righteousness necessary for heaven, no one can. This seems to be Paul’s point when he writes: “Now we know that whatever the Law says, it says to those who are under the Law [that is, to Israel], so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the Law” (Romans 3:19-20a NIV).

But God’s purpose in giving the Law wasn’t exclusively negative. The Law was given to confine everyone under sin, so that we might be shut up to Christ (Gal. 3:19-24). By entering into a covenant of works with national Israel, God was setting the historical context for the incarnation. Since Christ became man and performed his obedience unto death within the context of the Mosaic covenant of works, his obedience is clearly seen as the righteousness that wins heaven on behalf of sinners who couldn’t win it for themselves.

Why it’s important

We’ve examined the Pauline Law-Gospel contrast and compared it to the look-alike Law-Gospel schemes of Lutheranism and Dispensationalism. We’ve seen that these pretenders fall short of the Pauline teaching at critical points. At this point, I want to wrap things up by explaining why the Law-Gospel contrast is so important. It’s important because of the crucial role it plays in Paul’s teaching on justification and sanctification.

With regard to justification, the Law-Gospel contrast plays a central role. Paul argues that because of the reign of sin, no one can be righteous before God by observing the Law. That would be a good summary of Paul's argument in Romans 1:18–3:20. "But now," Paul says, "the righteousness of God has been manifested *apart from the Law* ... the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ" (Rom. 3:21-22 ESV). As the context shows, "the righteousness of God" is the righteousness that has been accomplished by Christ and is now available as a gift to all who believe. We are "justified (that is, counted as righteous) by his grace as a gift" (Rom. 3:24 ESV), on account of Christ's righteousness imputed to us and received as a gift. Apart from doing what the Law requires, we possess "the righteousness that brings life" (Rom. 5:18 NIV). We are now qualified to enter heaven.

The implication is that when applied to justification, the Law-Gospel contrast is a works-faith contrast and is the key to understanding the notion of justification by faith alone. Paul states: "We hold that one is justified by faith apart from the works of the Law" (Rom. 3:28 ESV). Although much ink has been spilled over the meaning of the phrase "the works of the Law," a good case can be made for the view that it simply means "doing what the Law requires."⁶ And so Paul is saying that a person doesn't attain the status of being righteous in God's sight by producing the good behavior prescribed in the Law – an unthinkable thought according to the Law! Rather, Paul says, a righteousness from God apart from the Law has been revealed in the Gospel. The Gospel announces the amazing fact that a person can be righteous in God's sight, and thus worthy of entering heaven by simply trusting in Jesus. Righteousness is a gift, received by faith, not an achievement of

⁶ Douglas Moo, "Excursus: Paul, 'Works of the Law,' and First-Century Judaism," in *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 211-17. http://www.covopc.org/Papers/Moo_New_Perspective.html.

moral effort. In this way the Law-Gospel contrast provides the necessary framework for Paul's doctrine of justification by faith alone. Or, to use Paul's language, it provides the necessary framework for the doctrine of justification "apart from works." To say that a person is justified by faith apart from doing the good and moral things required by the Law, is to say that a person is justified by *faith alone*.

At this point Paul is keenly aware that his rejection of the Law with respect to justification might be interpreted as a license to sin. So he articulates the moralist's fear by having an imaginary interlocutor raise the following objection: "What then? Shall we sin because we are not under the Law but under grace?" (Rom. 6:15). This would have been the perfect opportunity for Paul to introduce the Law again in order to mollify the moralist. He could have easily said that although the Law plays no role with in our justification, it is still the God-ordained means of promoting sanctification – the third use of the Law as commonly understood today.

But Paul passes up this perfect opportunity. Instead of reverting back to the Law which he had rejected in chapters 1-5, he forges ahead on the same path with the Gospel itself. He refuses to accept the moralist's assumption that the Gospel of free grace is dangerous and needs to be supplemented with the Law in order to prevent a slippery slide into antinomianism. Paul maintains that the Gospel has its own logic for combating antinomianism. He shows that the Gospel itself places ethical obligations upon those who have come under its sway. He appeals to our baptism and reminds us that we have died with Christ and are raised with him to walk in newness of life. If we have died with Christ, how can we continue to live in sin? If we have been raised with Christ, we have an obligation to live in the power of that new life. In other words, Paul demonstrates our

continuing moral obligation to obey God, not by placing us under the control of the Law again, but by exhibiting the controlling power of the Gospel:

The love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised (2 Cor. 5:14-15).

How could Paul go back to the Mosaic Law again, when he regarded it, not as a timeless code, but as a covenant of works? Since the Law is a covenant of works, when sinners place themselves under it, it is utterly useless for producing righteous behavior and obedience. All the Law can do is demand, threaten, and curse. That is what Paul argued extensively in Romans 7. To be sure, the Law itself is not to blame. The Law is holy, righteous, and good. But when God's holy Law confronts fallen Adamic humanity, not only is it unable to restrain sin, our sinful passions are actually "aroused by the Law" (Rom. 7:5 ESV).

The paradox of grace is that genuine progress in personal, moral righteousness is possible precisely because we have been delivered from the Law, through union with Christ in his death, that we might be joined to Another, to him who was raised from the dead, so that we might serve God "not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit" (Rom. 7:4, 6). Freedom from the Law is not, then, something that will lead to license for sin, but just the opposite: it is the necessary precondition for true moral progress. As long as we are in bondage to the Law, we cannot please God. Only those who have been delivered from the Law and joined to Christ, are able to serve God with a heart set free.

Therefore, just as we are justified apart from the Law, so we are sanctified apart from the Law. The one (justification) happens by faith apart from the Law, as we receive

the righteousness of Christ as a gift. The other (sanctification) also happens by faith apart from the Law, as we by faith reckon ourselves to be dead indeed unto sin and alive unto God in Christ Jesus. As we reckon these things to be true of us by faith in Christ, we then begin to walk in the Spirit and by the Spirit to put to death the misdeeds of the body. In this way, the good and right behavior that the Law required all along, but was unable to create, is fulfilled in us by the Spirit of Christ who dwells in our hearts.

God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh; in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit (Rom. 8:3-4 ESV).

Conclusion

Defining the Law-Gospel contrast is no easy task. It requires making important distinctions and avoiding common pitfalls. It is not a timeless contrast between God's grace and God's demand. Nor is it a contrast between two competing ways of salvation. But when properly defined the Law-Gospel contrast is an extremely useful paradigm for understanding Pauline theology, and has important systematic implications. In particular, it is the key to understanding Paul's teaching that we are both justified and progressively sanctified by faith in Christ apart from the Law.