

Law and Promise Reading of the Scriptures, Part III

Colleagues,

Today's post is the final segment of a three-part monograph by Dr. Harry J. Duffey—engineering prof turned theologian in his senior years—titled: “Introduction to Law & Promise Reading of the Scriptures.” Information about the author and this essay came along with the original posting of Part One, now archived on the Crossings website <www.crossings.org> at this address <https://crossings.org/thursday/2011/thur060911.shtml> Harry Duffey's e-address is <HJDuffey at aol dot com >

The three segments of the full text are as follows:

Part 1.

- Introduction.
- The Question.
- Beginnings.

Part 2

- Recovery of Law and Gospel.
- Law.
- Gospel.

Part 3

- Biblicism.
- Authority.
- Conclusion.
- Endnotes.

Peace and Joy!
Ed Schroeder

“Introduction to Law & Promise Reading of the Scriptures” Part Three:

Biblicism

Some may answer the Bertram question posed in the opening section by saying: The Bible reveals the will of God. It informs us readers of things, very important things, that we would not know apart from this revelation: what God wants us to believe (faith life) and how God wants us to behave (moral life), to worship, etc. Salvation is following the will of God by believing what God wants us to believe and behaving as God instructs us to behave. Unbelievers ignore what God reveals for us to believe. Immoral people ignore God’s mandates for how we are to behave. And where does Jesus fit in? The Gospel of Jesus is the most important thing revealed by God. And, of course, it is at the top of the list of what you ought to believe. When you believe it, you are righteous; when you don’t, you aren’t. And the same applies to God’s moral revelation. When you behave as God tells you to behave, you are moral. When you don’t, you are immoral.

A proper label for this kind of hermeneutics/soteriology (interpretation of the Scriptures/doctrine of Salvation) is “legalist Biblicism.” It is not the Gospel, not the Gospel’s way to read the Bible. If Law and Gospel are not clearly distinguished in reading the Scriptures, then the statement, “salvation is fundamentally linked to doing the right thing, and sin linked to doing the wrong thing,” leads to the “Biblicist” way for interpreting the Bible.

Here, salvation and sin both branch from law. If you keep the law, you’re good, if you break the law, you’re bad— the common understanding in secular law. But sadly, that is what many Christians think and say about God’s law. In Biblicism, Law and Gospel become entwined in a way that God never intended.

Christians on either side of a moral issue use the same Bible. Both sides—the pro and the con—often concur that salvation is fundamentally linked to doing the right thing, and sin linked to doing the wrong thing. The pros find ways of reading Bible passages that prove “it’s okay,” and the cons do likewise to prove that “it’s not okay.” But in both instances “doing the right thing” is the measure of what’s faithful and what’s not. Biblicists single out the law and through the law they seek forgiveness of sin and justification. Their reading glasses focus on law, but God’s method of salvation is always a grace method.

For example, Mark 10:17-31, if not read through the Law-Gospel lens, can be interpreted as Jesus telling the Rich Man, “Your salvation depends on your doing the right thing” – straight Biblicism from Jesus, the foundation and fulfillment of the Gospel. Even the disciples, as is clear from their response, were buying the Biblicist demands for the Rich Man’s salvation (and maybe their own). Mark 10:17 begins:

As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. “Good teacher, he asked, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” “Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone. . . .”

The first four sentences of the story set the stage. The man falls on his knees and calls Jesus “good” – action and word that seem to indicate that the man is going to plead for mercy – a request for a Gospel response from Jesus. But instead, the man asked, “What must I do?” He continues to push Jesus for a “law response,” and a “law response” is indeed what he gets. The result is always the same after hearing the demands of the law. It causes the man to despair, to leave without hope of meeting the law’s demand for justification. After the first four

sentences, the Rich Man finds that hearing the law-words of Jesus is not good news. The story continues, but the man has left the stage. The Gospel never commands; it only invites.

Authority

The Old Testament and the New Testament gain their authority for individual Christians as God's word in the Gospel and as God's word of Law.

The New Testament books are the only authentic source we have for what can be known about God's revelation in human history that occurred in Christ. Why? It is only the eye- and ear-witnesses, the apostles, who could testify authentically to what was said and done (Luke 1:2; 1 John 1:1). We today have no access to that oral testimony, but only to the written testimony they have given to us. The New Testament is the only norm for the church's entire proclamation, since the apostles themselves—once they had received the Holy Spirit promised to them by Christ—became the means for God's revelation, and because all subsequent church life and work is measured by this revelation.

The New Testament functions as norm, as a yardstick, in that all proposals for what should be proclaimed, enacted, practiced as "Christian" is measured by this test: is it congruent with Christ's original Gospel? As the one and only source and norm for what the church does, the written apostolic witness needs no supplementary additions from other witnesses. The Scriptures are sufficient, they are complete for what the Gospel is. They need no additions from tradition in order to be made more complete. There are no missing parts to the Gospel that must be supplied from other sources.

To Gentile audiences (people who had never heard of God's work in the Old Testament), the apostles did not make the validity of

their witness to Christ depend on any previous acceptance of the Old Testament. This fact is significant also today for Christian mission to the nations of the world. You do not become a Christian via a two-stage process – first acknowledging the Old Testament and its authority and then coming to Christ and following him. Faith in Christ is trusting Christ's promise.

People throughout the world are promise-trusters of one sort or another. Every "other Gospel" in the world – sacred or secular – offers a promise of some sort, and then calls people to trust that promise. Christian mission at its most basic level is inviting people to let go of the promises they have been trusting and "switch" to trusting Christ's promise.

Faith in Christ does not call for disciples to visit Moses first before coming to Christ. Yet from the very beginning Christians did not turn away from the Scriptures of the Old Testament. The New Testament records over 250 explicit quotations of the Old Testament and many hundreds of indirect references [en 6] to it. The Christian church received the Old Testament as a normative word of God, the God of the Old Testament is also the Father of Jesus Christ, and thereby – when we are linked to Christ – the Old Testament God becomes our father, too.

In its promises, the Old Testament is testimony to Christ, foreshadowed in Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12. Yet the authority of the Old Testament in the Christian church can be understood only as a derivative from the authority of the New Testament. What the Old Testament says must be understood through the prism of what the New Testament says.

It is a misleading opinion to say that after all of Jesus' twelve disciples died, the Church itself became the guarantor for the New Testament canon – for which books genuinely belong in the New Testament. The early church always saw itself

standing under the authority of the original apostles. First, it was the authority of their oral testimony when the apostles were personally active in the church's life, and then after their death it was the authority of their written testimony. The later church did not create the canon, they received it from the hands of the apostles.

Conclusion

The Scriptures are clear in their proclamation concerning the righteousness of God in Jesus Christ. Since that is the central item which God wants to convey to people, it does come across loud and clear. If we come to Scripture asking the kinds of questions for which the gracious righteousness of God is the answer, then there is no problem in our getting a clear answer. If we come with any other question, then the Scriptures are indeed darkly veiled.

Now one might come to the conclusion that following these principles would lead to a very short-lived study of the Bible. Once a person had learned what the Gospel was, he would have finished. He would know it all, and that would be that.

But that is not the case with the actual Christian. This Christian, though he is God's saint, is still plagued by "saintly" sins. Now that the Christian knows Christ, the Christian needs to learn how to let both the Law and the Promise move into the Christian's life – the Law to expose those areas where sin is still thriving, the Promise to have Christ take over those areas and have them function as sectors of redeemed creation and not of the condemned old creation. Christians must be told – and that, as indicated in John 20:31, is the Scriptures' own objective – how faith comes into being, how the Holy Spirit is given, how regeneration takes place, how good works can be done. The purpose is not that they will have the

right answer for the great final examination, but rather that they can have that answering happening in their own lives now.

The only reason there is a Christian church engaged in interpreting the Scriptures at all is that Christ is not buried but “is arisen” – “that we might have life in his name.”

Endnotes

1. Martin Luther (1483-1546) German theologian, recognized as the lead figure in the European Reformation and noted for the doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ alone.
2. Robert W. Bertram (1921-2003) Major voice for Law/Gospel Lutheranism in America in the 20th century and author of “The Hermeneutical Significance of Apology IV.”
3. Jerome (ca. 342-420) Biblical scholar of the early church, noted for the Latin translation of the Bible (i.e., the “Vulgate”).
4. Philipp Melanchthon (1497-1560) German theologian, lifelong friend and ally of Martin Luther, Professor of Greek and student of Luther at Wittenberg University, he systematized Luther’s early works and was the author of the Augsburg Confession and Apology.
5. Suleiman (1494-1566) Sultan of the Ottoman Empire, 1520 to 1566.
6. Ronald F. Youngblood, “Old Testament Quotations in the New Testament,” chapter 10 of “The NIV: The Making of a Contemporary Translation.”