

Good Word Schedule
“Christ and His Law”
April, May, June 2014

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Theme: “Law in Christ’s Day,”

Leading Question: “Should believers respond to civil law in the same way that they respond to religious law?”

Introduction to the Issue: This week’s lesson gives us the opportunity to look at “law” in a general sense. What is our obligation to “obey” any law? Though there is some overlap, to be sure, one could oversimplify the issue under two headings:

- A) **Obedience based on the power of the authority.** One should obey a law because of the authority and the power of the lawgiver, whether or not one sees the law as being good. A hierarchy of laws is less important because the breaking of any law shows disrespect for the authority.
- B) **Obedience based on the goodness of the authority.** One obeys a law because it is good, because a good authority only commands that which is seen to be good. A hierarchy of laws becomes a crucial factor in determining which laws to obey, thus highlighting the responsibility of the ones called to obey.

A goodness-based obedience moves in the direction of an ideal that sees all laws as having a “moral” component. Rendering to God is “morally” significant as is rendering to Caesar (cf. Mark 12:7). A power-based view of law easily links with objective views of the atonement that envision a price being paid for human transgression; a goodness-based obedience links more easily to subjective views of atonement that do not require a price to be paid, but shed light on the character of the lawgiver.

A goodness-based obedience thus leads to a consistent trajectory, one which envisions external law being replaced by internal motivation. Thus the law is written on the heart and external commands have vanished. This is the promise of Jeremiah’s new covenant in Jer. 31:33-34:

33 But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34 No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more. – NRSV.

A completely internalized law can never be fully realized in a sinful world, but it was God’s original plan and is his plan for the future. Jeremiah 31:33-34 points to a return to that ideal world, one described in tantalizing form by Ellen White’s comment that when Satan rebelled against the law of God, “the thought that there was a law came to the angels almost as an

awakening to something unthought of” (MB 109).

With such a perspective one can see a certain “obligation” to respect/obey all the different categories of law noted in the official study guide for this week’s lesson:

- Roman law
- Mosaic law: Civic (secular)
- Mosaic law: Ceremonial (religious)
- Rabbinic law
- Moral law

The suggestion here is that the word “moral” applies to more than just the decalogue. The intention of the official study guide is to highlight the importance of the 10 commandments, a laudable intention and one that is fully in keeping with the distinction between the decalogue and the additional Mosaic law as outlined in Deut. 4:13-14:

13 He declared to you his covenant, which he charged you to observe, that is, the ten commandments; and he wrote them on two stone tablets. 14 And the Lord charged me at that time to teach you statutes and ordinances for you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy (NRSV).

An Old Testament Professor at the University of Edinburgh (Graeme Auld), pointed out this passage to me, indicating clearly how the decalogue is a notch above all the other individual laws given to Moses. Note the four points applying to verse 13 and the two applying to verse 14:

Deuteronomy 4:13:

1. The Decalogue was spoken to all the people (the Hebrew word for “you” is plural)
2. Labeled as “ten commandments”
3. Labeled as “covenant”
4. Written on two stone tablets

Deuteronomy 4:14:

1. The other laws were spoken to Moses alone
2. The vocabulary changes: the other laws are “statutes” and “ordinances.”

The only other passage needed to make this a complete “Adventist” Bible study on law is the reference in Deuteronomy 31:24-26 describing how Moses wrote the additional legislation in a book, placing it beside the ark, not in the ark where the decalogue was kept.

Such an approach to law and laws allows for the possibility that humans have a “moral” obligation to respect the laws and customs of the people with whom they live and work. The decalogue, to be sure, reflects a higher level of law, one that applies universally, but humans must also respect the laws, customs, and mores of the people inhabiting their community. They may also contribute to the changing of laws and customs, but in an orderly and careful manner so that society is not unnecessarily wrenched by hasty change.

Such a view of “law” also enables us to integrate the presence of “natural” law into the overall picture, an integration suggested by Paul in the memory verse for this week: “For when

the Gentiles who do not have the Law do instinctively the things of the Law, these, not having the Law, are a law to themselves” (Rom. 2:14, NASB).

This hierarchical view of law which moves from fully internalized law in a perfect world to increasingly specific (external) laws adapted to human needs in a sinful worlds, allows the full integration of Jesus’ two great commands: Love to God, love to others (Matthew 22:35-40) and the supreme principle of love (Romans 13:8-10) into a kind of law pyramid consisting of the One great principle of love, the Two great commands, and the Ten commands, with all the other laws illustrating and applying the One, the Two, and the Ten. Note how Ellen White develops this commentary on law in *Patriarchs and Prophets*, thus illumining the concept of a “goodness” based law:

Ellen White’s Commentary on the Nature of Law
Adaptation and Restoration of the Ideal Law of Love

BEFORE SIN IN HEAVEN, THE ANGELS WERE VIRTUALLY UNAWARE OF LAW. “But in heaven, service is not rendered in the spirit of legality. When Satan rebelled against the law of Jehovah, the thought that there was a law came to the angels almost as an awakening to something unthought of. In their ministry the angels are not as servants, but as sons. There is perfect unity between them and their Creator. Obedience is to them no drudgery. Love for God makes their service a joy” (MB 109).

BEFORE SIN ON EARTH, THE LAW WAS WRITTEN ON HUMAN HEARTS. “Adam and Eve, at their creation, had a knowledge of the law of God; they were acquainted with its claims upon them; its precepts were written upon their hearts. When man fell by transgression, the law was not changed, but a remedial system was established to bring him back to obedience” (PP 363).

AS HUMANKIND FELL AWAY FROM GOD, THE LAW WAS ADAPTED TO NEED: “If man had kept the law of God, as given to Adam after his fall, preserved by Noah, and observed by Abraham, there would have been no necessity for the ordinance of circumcision. And if the descendants of Abraham had kept the covenant, of which circumcision was a sign, they would never have been seduced into idolatry, nor would it have been necessary for them to suffer a life of bondage in Egypt; they would have kept God’s law in mind, and there would have been no necessity for it to be proclaimed from Sinai, or engraved upon the tables of stone. And had the people practiced the principles of the Ten Commandments, there would have been no need of the additional directions given to Moses (PP 364).

THE DECALOGUE APPLIED THE PRINCIPLES OF LOVE: “The precepts of the Decalogue are adapted to all mankind and they were given for the instruction and government of all. Ten precepts, brief, comprehensive, and authoritative, cover the duty of man to God and to his fellowman; and all based upon the great fundamental principle of love. ‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy strength and with all thy mind and thy neighbor as thyself (Luke 10:27). In the ten commandments, these principles are carried out in detail and made applicable to the condition and circumstances of man” (PP 305).

ADDITIONAL LAWS ILLUMINED THE PRINCIPLES OF THE DECALOGUE: “The minds of the people, blinded and debased by slavery and heathenism, were not prepared to appreciate fully the far-reaching principles of God’s ten precepts. That the obligations of the Decalogue might be more fully understood and enforced, additional precepts were given, illustrating and applying the principles of the Ten Commandments” (PP 310).

ALL THE LAWS WERE FOR THE GOOD OF THE PEOPLE: “The object of all these regulations was stated: they proceeded from no exercise of arbitrary sovereignty; all were given for the good of Israel” (PP 311).

THE LAW IS AGAIN INTERNALIZED: “The same law that was engraved upon the tables of stone, is written by the Holy Spirit upon the tables of the heart” (PP 372).

Theme: “Christ and the Law of Moses”

Leading Question: “Where does Moses talk about Jesus?”

Introduction to the Issue: In John 5:46 Jesus states that Moses “wrote about me.” But how could that be? Perhaps only in the sense that the principles that Moses articulated were descriptions and applications of the eternal principles incarnated in Jesus. But Jesus’ reference to Moses also raises the question of the relationship between Jesus and the Old Testament. Later this quarter (lesson #4) a full lesson will explore the Sermon on the Mount. But here the Sermon can help us address the question of how Jesus related to the Old Testament and how we can bring the two together.

At the level of first impressions, a huge gulf seems to separate Jesus from the God of the Old Testament. Jesus takes the little children into his arms and lap; but the God of Sinai rattles the mountain and declares that anyone who gets too close must be stoned or shot (Exodus 19:12-13). And Jesus seems to accentuate the gulf by his 6 antitheses in Matthew 5: “You have heard, but I say....” Yet the English word “but” suggests a much sharper contrast than the word used in the Greek original. In the light of the Greek, it would perhaps be closer to the truth to say something like, “You have heard it said, *and* I say to you....”

As a preface to these comparisons Jesus also refers to the Old Testament in broad terms: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill (Matthew 5:17, NRSV). Some have concluded that “fulfill” here means something like “completed and set aside,” like graduation requirements that have been “fulfilled.” One doesn’t even need to think about them again for they have been “fulfilled.”

But from what follows in Matthew 5, it would be more accurate to say that Jesus came to “fill full of new meaning” what the law had said in the Old Testament. In short, Jesus ups the ante, taking the law from its external form to its internal application. The very first of the comparisons makes the point. The law says, “Don’t commit murder,” to which Jesus adds “and I say to you, even murderous anger is wrong!” With each comparison, Jesus deepens the meaning, moving it from the realm of external command to internal application.

One can also look at how Jesus’ related to teachings and practices that were mandated in the Old Testament. These are all points worth noting:

1. **Circumcision.** Jesus was circumcised and dedicated on the eighth day according to the law (Luke 1:21, 39). Luke actually uses “law of Moses” and “law of the Lord” back-to-back, as if they were synonymous.

2. **Jewish feasts.** References in the Gospels to Jesus’ recognition of Jewish feasts and the rites of the temple are striking:

A. Luke 2:41-43 – Jesus’ youthful visit to the temple

B. John 2:13-23 – Jesus’ cleansing of the temple

C. Matthew 26:17-20 – Jesus’ keeping of the passover before his death

The official study guide states that the festivals “were done away with long ago.” But the

evidence in the New Testament isn't that clear cut. Acts 21:17-21 tells how Paul willingly volunteered to take four Greeks into the temple so that they could fulfill a vow. That was many years after the resurrection. Clearly, as far as Paul was concerned, the temple services were still in effect.

3. **Temple tax.** According to Matthew 17:24-27, Jesus instructed Peter to pay the temple tax "lest we offend them." Obligation? More like a public relations gesture.

4. **Marriage and divorce.** According to Matthew 19:1-9, Jesus indicated the continuing validity of the Mosaic legislation on divorce (cf. Deut. 24:1-4).

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of the question of how the Old Testament relates to Jesus, involves the persistent violence that marks the Old Testament narratives. Chapter 2 from *Who's Afraid of the Old Testament God?* is an attempt to address that question in a meaningful way. It follows here as an appendix to Lesson 2.

Chapter 2, *Who's Afraid of the Old Testament God?*

By Alden Thompson

[Gonzalez, FL: Energion Publications, 2011]

**Behold it was very good and then
it all turned sour**

And God saw everything that he had made, and behold it was very good. – Genesis 1:31

The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth.... – Genesis 6:5

When I step back and try to picture the sweep of the entire Old Testament, and, in fact, of the whole Bible, I see something very similar to the scene suggested by the chapter title: a glorious idea that has somehow gone terribly wrong. I would hasten to add, however, that for all the wrongness and evil to which the Bible testifies, a generous portion of good still remains. And what is more, out of the wreckage of this beautiful creation God has conceived something even more beautiful and awe-inspiring: a plan of redemption, a theme that we shall look at more closely in chapter 7.

Because the Bible presents such an intricate tapestry, woven with the evil as well as the good, the horrible as well as the magnificent, a distorted view of the whole is quite possible. In fact, Christians have often shown a tendency to focus on one element or the other. Some have so greatly praised their Maker that they have neglected to take seriously the tragic consequences of sin. On the other hand, some have been so deeply scarred by sorrow and tragedy, that even the glories of a this-worldly sunset can scarcely quench the longing for a better world. The difference between these two emphases can be clearly seen in the contrasting hymn titles: "This is my Father's world" yet "I'm but a stranger here, heaven is my home."

Any alert citizen of planet earth can testify that life is composed of the bitter and the sweet, the good and the bad, but it is a rarer gift to be able to enjoy this world while longing for a better one. To claim that this world is absolutely filthy is false. Nor can any sober person say that this little corner of the universe is a beauty spot which has no rival. For the Christian, a balanced view is vital: the thorns must not be allowed to ruin the roses, nor should the roses obscure the thorns. That is a principle which is significant not only for daily living, but equally for understanding the Old Testament.

In Chapter 1, I noted briefly that one can use two rather different emphases in interpreting the Old Testament: the "high road" approach and the "low road." "High road" refers to an emphasis on the

“goodness” in the Old Testament, particularly in the lives of the men of God. The most straightforward example of this approach is found in Hebrews 11 where men of great variety and diverse experiences are all marked with the label “faith.” By contrast, “low road” refers to the approach which calls attention to the great depths to which humans had fallen, including those people that God claimed as his own.

Because the “low road” approach has been so helpful in enabling me to come to grips with the Old Testament, I tend to emphasize that way of reading the biblical accounts. The “high road” has marvelous potential for immediate inspiration, and perhaps that is why it has tended to predominate in Christian circles. But such an approach does not really prepare one for actually reading the Old Testament stories. In other words, one could become so accustomed to a “high road” diet that reading the Old Testament itself could lead to indigestion! I think that both approaches are possible and useful, yet in actual practice it is difficult to follow them both with equal enthusiasm.

Perhaps one reason why the “low road” approach has been neglected stems from the recognition that the discovery of the shadow side of the Old Testament characters has not always produced positive results. In fact, the sins of the saints have often been turned against Scripture and its God and have been used as weapons to attack the authority of the Word of God. Nevertheless, the “low road” approach is in some ways a two-edged sword which can cut either way. For example, one could turn to any nineteenth century devotional writer who is defending the Bible against its detractors. To the statement, “If your God condones things like that, then I want no part of your religion,” he can answer, “But it is precisely that point that vindicates the word of God, for here we have a realistic picture of fallen humanity accompanied by a picture of a God who stoops to help.” So what is taken as a great hindrance to faith by one man is seen as a pillar of faith by another. The psychological and sociological reasons behind those two opposite reactions to the same evidence are undoubtedly complex and cannot be explored here. But I do think it is important to recognize that there is much in the Old Testament that offends refined tastes. When we ignore those aspects, we lay the groundwork for the loss of faith. We must take them seriously and show how God can bring about his purposes even out of that kind of situation.

The “high road” approach has often led to the aggravation of one more point of tension in the interpretation of the Old Testament, namely, that between those who see the religious experience of the Old Testament as evolving naturally, and those who see it as stemming from divine revelation. Much of the modern scholarly study of the Old Testament is based on the assumption that every aspect of man’s experience is evolving, following principles of natural development. In such circles, then, it has become quite standard procedure to describe Old Testament people as developing from the primitive towards the sophisticated, from superstitious beliefs to a mature, intelligent faith. In accordance with such a scheme, those parts of the Old Testament judged to be primitive are said to be most ancient, whereas the more “developed” parts of scripture are said to be of later origin. Thus the stories of Genesis 2 and 3, for example, are said to be early and primitive because God is depicted very much like a man: he walks in the garden, forms man of the dust of the earth, he operates on Adam and builds Eve. By contrast, Genesis 1 is said to be the very latest (and greatest) theology in the Old Testament, written towards the end of the Old Testament period, because God is depicted as transcendent, quite removed from the mundane affairs of life; he creates by his word and does not get his “hands” dirty with the dust of man’s creation.

A PARTIAL REVELATION OF GOD

Such an approach to the Old Testament has often been so completely foreign to conservative Christians that we have failed to take it as a serious effort to explain some difficult aspects of the Old Testament. Conservative Christians have often tended simply to quote the New Testament view of the Old Testament and to use the “high road” approach for purposes of affirming faith in God and in his word without seriously attempting to explain the Old Testament. The specter of an evolutionary approach to the Old Testament has often made it impossible for conservative Christians even to listen to scholarly

discussions about the Old Testament, to say nothing of actually participating in the dialogue.

At the risk of sounding terribly conservative to some of my scholarly friends and dangerously liberal to some of my conservative friends, I would like to propose, as a first step towards understanding the Old Testament, that we simply accept the scheme of “history” which the Old Testament itself suggests. I don’t think that is asking too much, regardless of whether one assumes a scholarly or a devotional approach to the Old Testament, or whether one happens to be liberal or conservative.

Now if we do let the Old Testament speak for itself, a rather surprising picture emerges; surprising, at least, for one who has been accustomed to taking an exclusively “high road” approach to the Old Testament. Perhaps a brief summary can serve as an outline of the discussion which follows:

1. God creates a perfect world and calls it good (Genesis 1).
2. Man exercises his free will to turn against God. (Genesis 2-3).
3. After the “fall,” God’s beautiful world is marred by repeated outbreaks of sin and tragedy:
 - A. Cain murders his brother (Gen. 4:1-16)
 - B. Cain’s line develops into a hateful and hated race (Gen. 4:17-24)
 - C. Noah’s generation rebels, leading to the Flood (Gen. 6-8)
 - D. Noah’s son Ham mocks his father (Gen. 9:20-28)
 - E. The Tower of Babel shows humanity as still being rebellious (Gen. 11).
 - F. Abraham’s own family worships other gods (Josh. 24:2)
4. With Abraham, God begins a fresh attempt to reveal himself to mankind, to people who now know very little of God’s plan (Genesis 12).

This prologue to the Old Testament is extremely important for understanding what follows, for it sets the stage for all the degenerate and “primitive” acts which follow. Beginning with Abraham, God seeks to reestablish his way in human hearts, hearts which have fallen far from the natural purity and knowledge of the first human pair.

Now right at this point I would like to note a more serious problem that arises out of the “high road” emphasis, namely, the assumption that virtually the full content of the “gospel” was both known and essentially preserved from the time of creation through the line of the “sons of God” (the patriarchal line). Whatever the reasons for that view, it causes real problems when one observes the behavior and ethical standards held at various points throughout the Old Testament period. Christians have always claimed that what one believes about God has a direct impact on the way one lives. In other words, good theology leads to a noble life. If that principle holds true, as I think it must if Christian theology is to make any sense at all, then how could it be that the Old Testament saints had in their possession virtually the complete “gospel” while their behavior falls far short of such a theology? All the evidence from Genesis suggests that Abraham did not consider it wrong to take a second wife. His loss of faith was wrong, something that he himself came to realize according to the Genesis story. But the principle of polygamy is never discussed. In the Jacob story it is even more evident that polygamy is an accepted way of life. By reading between the lines in the light of later Christian standards we can certainly surmise the tragedies caused by polygamy, but Genesis does not moralize about it. To cite further examples, Exodus does not moralize about slavery, nor does the Old Testament grant an “enlightened” status to women.

This tension between theology and ethics evaporates if we read the Old Testament in its original setting and do not insist on finding full-blown New Testament standards everywhere in the Old Testament. In fact, the New Testament itself contrasts the many and various ways of the Old Testament with the way of Jesus Christ (Heb. 1:1-2) and speaks of the shadow pointing to the reality (Heb. 10:1).

Perhaps we could even borrow another famous New Testament phrase: “seeing through a glass darkly” (1 Cor. 13:12). A type is never as clear as the reality, nor is the shadow as clear as the subject itself. Why then should we insist that the Old Testament be as clear as the New in its picture of God? For all practical purposes, the New Testament contradicts the claim of a complete Old Testament revelation while confirming that the Old Testament believer had quite adequate evidence on which to base faith (cf. John 5:46-47).

The point of all this is to emphasize that if one is going to understand the Old Testament, one must let the Old Testament speak for itself, something which conservative Christians have had considerable difficulty in doing.

Returning then to our survey of the Old Testament story, I would like to suggest, in keeping with the evidence from Genesis, that Abraham’s actual knowledge about God was most likely quite limited. He was a great man of faith who acted on the evidence which he had. And though his knowledge of God was limited, and though he was occasionally unfaithful to that knowledge, he rightly stands as one of the great heroes of faith. The story in Genesis 22 of his willingness to offer up Isaac, the son of promise, stands out as one of the great testimonies to his relationship with his God. Yet right here within this great story of Abraham’s faith lies a problem for us if we take the “high road” approach. Biblical narratives detailing the later history of God’s people clearly establish that human sacrifice was forbidden. If Abraham already knew that such “killing” was wrong, then why should we commend his faith for his willingness to do what he believed to be wrong? Such an approach puts Abraham and us in an inconsistent position. What would hinder God from coming to me now and asking me to “sacrifice” my child? And how would I know that it was the voice of God if he had clearly indicated to me by other means that such sacrifice was wrong? Would he expect me to disobey him in order to obey him? Not at all.

The explanation lies in the recognition that Abraham was most likely surrounded by a culture which assumed that the sacrifice of the heir was the highest possible gift that one could offer to the gods. It was only that cultural background which made that particular test possible. But interestingly enough, if we interpret the story rather freely, we find in it the very heart of the gospel story, for, in effect, God comes to Abraham and tells him: “Abraham, I appreciate your willingness, but you really cannot offer your son. Only I can offer my son. I will provide the sacrifice – there it is behind you.” Is that not what God says at the cross? “No merely human sacrifice can ever be adequate – I will provide the gift that brings peace.” Did Abraham see the full story? Through a glass darkly, yes, but probably not in detail. I think that is the message of Genesis 22.

A great number of perplexities that crop up in connection with the patriarchs simply vanish when we recognize that these men had entered a world that had been greatly distorted by sin so much so that the truths which God had originally entrusted to the human family had disappeared or had become greatly distorted by contact with pagan culture. It does not take a great deal of imagination to see how an original promise of a Messiah who must die for our sins could have become distorted into the practice of human sacrifice. No proof can be cited for such a development, of course, but such a possibility would certainly be in keeping with the known human tendency to transform the gift of God into a matter of our own works and pride.

THE PEOPLE OF GOD: RISE AND FALL

If we follow the Old Testament story further, we note that the period of drastic loss of the knowledge of God highlighted in Genesis 3-11 is not the only one of decline and degeneracy. The descendants of Jacob migrated to Egypt where they became enslaved for hundreds of years. The biblical account makes it clear that when the time came for God to deliver “his” people, their spiritual condition was low indeed. While the knowledge of God had not been completely lost, the book of Exodus does

suggest that most of the people had virtually lost sight of the God who had revealed himself to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. No wonder Moses' position as leader of these people was often quite tenuous; they were always on the verge of deserting this "new" God for the old ones of Egypt. And when this rough lot of ex-slaves finally arrived at Sinai, the laws which God gave through Moses provide clear evidence that these people, cowering in mixed fear and awe about the mountain, were so deeply involved with cruel customs that instant abolition of such customs was out of the question. The best that could be done in some instances was a slight "humanizing" of some of the more barbaric aspects. And I use the term "humanizing" intentionally, for I think the laws of the Pentateuch must be seen, in the first instance, as revealing the kind of people God was dealing with, and then only in the second instance, as, revealing the character of the God who had chosen these people. The thunder and smoke, the heavy hand, and the strange customs seen at Sinai, are often cited by God's detractors as evidence against him. Because of the "high road" approach, many Christians also find these aspects troublesome even though they choose for other reasons to remain within the community of faith.

Later Old Testament writers make it clear that when human beings forget God, they also forget their fellow creatures, sinking to cruelty and abuse. So when God seeks to awaken a knowledge of himself in the hearts of people thus degraded and alienated from him, he does not seek simply to make them more "religious," but also to make them more human. Judged by the cultures around ancient Israel, the laws given to Israel show remarkable signs of "humanization." God took this people, in spite of the many barbaric and cruel customs which they had adopted and began to draw them to him. He wished to show them a better way. But if human beings are to be treated as real human beings who possess the power of choice, then the "better way" must come gradually. Otherwise, they will exercise their freedom of choice and turn away from that which they do not understand. I shall return to this point later, for it is a crucial one, but now I simply want to make clear the "rise and fall" of God's people as the Old Testament itself describes it. Up to the time of the Exodus, it is mostly "fall," and that is why the "low road" approach can be so helpful.

Before taking up the question as to why God allowed man to fall so low, I should perhaps draw attention briefly to some other "low" points in the progression of the Old Testament narrative. Have you read the book of Judges lately? Maybe you haven't been brave enough. In chapter 6 we will discuss in some detail one of the frightful stories at the end of the book of Judges, but the whole of that period is one of apostasy, rebellion, and degeneration with very few glimmers of light. If unstable characters such as Samson and Jephthah were the best that God could find for his judges, you can imagine the condition of the rest of the people. At the beginning of the settlement period, even that fine young man Joshua, one who generally occupies a position of honor on the "high road," sometimes acts in a shocking manner, at least when judged by our standards of right and wrong. Take the story in Joshua 10 as an example. When five Canaanite kings had been captured, Joshua commanded his men of war: "Put your feet on the necks of these kings." With a few words about the Lord's continuing presence and assistance, he then killed the kings and hung the corpses on five trees until sundown (Josh. 10:22-27). What would a modern Christian church do with a military leader who treated his enemies in such a way? Reflection on such questions simply emphasizes how far these great men of ages past were from holding the kinds of standards that we would consider right. Yet these were God's men and God chose to use them. What does that tell us about God? Either that God is very cruel – or that he is very patient. I much prefer the latter alternative, for that is the kind of God I find revealed in Jesus Christ. With that deep Christian bias which I readily admit, I choose the alternative which best fits the larger picture.

Glimpses of two other periods in the history of Israel should be sufficient to give at least the flavor of the Old Testament story. The key names are Hezekiah and Josiah during the period of the monarchy, and Ezra and Nehemiah from the post-exilic period. During the approximately four hundred years of Israel's monarchy, her religious experience was wildly erratic. Some great and good names do stand out, including those of Hezekiah and Josiah, both of whom initiated great religious reforms.

Hezekiah's reform and Passover preceded Josiah's by about eighty years and are described at some length in 2 Chronicles 29-31. Why does the Chronicler give this story so much space? Perhaps because in Hezekiah's day, the Passover was quite a novel idea, so novel, in fact, that the priests could not consecrate themselves in time. Levites had to be drafted to help administer the sacrifices (2 Chron. 29:34). The Passover itself had to be delayed for a month so that everything could be done as the law required. The people were so taken with this "new" thing that everyone agreed to extend the feast for another seven days (2 Chron. 30:23).

Now one might think that such a glorious Passover would establish the pattern for generations to come, but how does the biblical record describe conditions when Josiah came to power a few decades later? The Chronicler's detailing of Josiah's own development is most illuminating and deserves a closer look.

As told in 2 Chronicles 34, Josiah's religious experience grew as follows: he was only a lad of eight when he began to reign (v. 1), but he apparently did not begin to "seek the God of David" until he was sixteen (v. 3). What had he been doing for religion before this? Use your imagination. The Bible doesn't say. After *beginning* to seek the God of David at the age of sixteen, he finally decided to do something concrete to establish the faith; he began to break down the idols and destroy the pagan altars, but that didn't actually take place until he was twenty (vv. 3-7). One would think that by now he must have been a devout worshiper of the true God and would have had most aspects of the faith firmly under control. Not quite, for it was only when he was twenty-four years of age that he decided to restore the temple, the official place of worship (v. 8). While the temple renewal was underway, Hilkiah the priest found the book of the law (v. 14). The Bible itself does not clearly identify the book that was found, but many scholars think it was the book of Deuteronomy or at least part of it. In any event, Hilkiah brought the book to the king's secretary who in turn rushed it to the king. Whatever the precise contents may have been, the king was greatly surprised and shocked (v. 19). Can you imagine both the priest and the king being ignorant of the book of the law – and that so soon after Hezekiah's great reform? And if the king and priest were ignorant, what was the condition of the average citizen?

I can well remember my reaction when the events of 2 Chronicles 34 finally made an impression on my mind. My "high road" picture of faithful kings, priests, and prophets, who held high the "banner of truth," needed to be remodeled to fit the picture that the Old Testament itself gives. What a struggle it was for God to reveal himself to those people, people who so easily and so quickly fell so far.

Our last snapshot picture from the Old Testament comes after Israel had been dragged into Babylonian captivity, the just reward for her sins as the biblical account so dearly states. Nebuchadnezzar's final capture and destruction of Jerusalem is usually dated at 586; the first feeble group of returning exiles apparently headed back for Judah in 536, but morale was a problem. After a half-hearted attempt to rebuild the city and the temple, local opposition discouraged the people and they simply let the temple remain in ruins. Finally, around 520, under the inspiration provided by the prophets Zechariah and Haggai, a drive was begun which resulted in the completion of the temple.

We have no biblical narrative which describes what took place during the next few decades. All we know from the biblical account is that when Ezra arrived in Jerusalem in 458/57, the state of religion was appalling. He and Nehemiah worked together to restore the city walls and the faith of the people. But a most sobering insight is provided by the last chapter of Nehemiah. Ezra had now passed from the scene and Nehemiah has had to return to the court of the Persian king, though the biblical account does not explain why. Upon his return to Jerusalem some twelve years later, which would probably be no earlier than 425, Nehemiah was appalled by the conditions he found. Some of the very reforms that he and Ezra had established earlier had been reversed entirely. Read the story yourself in Nehemiah 13 and you will discover further evidence of the "low road" on which Israel so often traveled! In Nehemiah's absence, the people had given over part of the temple to one of Israel's avowed enemies, Tobiah the Ammonite; the priests and Levites had simply been left to fend for themselves; the Sabbath had been

disregarded; and the Israelites were still marrying foreign wives, contrary to God's law. That last point was precisely one that Ezra and Nehemiah had "reformed" earlier.

Nehemiah's response to this multiple threat was vigorous and passionate. In his own words: "I contended with them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair; and I made them take an oath in the name of God" (Neh. 13:25). Tough lines, but perhaps not too surprising considering the circumstances.

Descriptions of the history of Israel often suggest that the Babylonian captivity cured Israel once and for all of the worship of pagan deities and turned her to the religion of law, an emphasis that is altogether too clear by New Testament times. But even that religion of law was not easy to come by. The evidence from the Old Testament suggests that virtually throughout her history, even after the exile, God's people were mostly traveling the "low road." One could hardly accuse Israel of worshiping God wrongly when she was not even worshiping Him at all! But that must have been the case more often than we have been inclined to admit.

After tracing the above scenario, we must now ask the question as to why God would allow such frightful degeneration. Why would he create a world and then let it slide away from him? Why would he choose a people and then not keep them close to him? Those questions have often been asked and they are the right ones to ask. The problem of evil and sin is an ominous cloud over our world. When God's children either cannot recognize or cannot understand his activity among men, they turn away from him. I do not presume to know the full answer, but I would like to suggest a way of interpreting God's activity that has helped me to see the Old Testament and the New Testament as part of a consistent revelation of a good God.

A COSMIC STRUGGLE BETWEEN GOOD AND EVIL

The claim of both the Old Testament and of the New is that God is all-powerful, all-knowing, and the source of everything good. How could such a God be the architect of this world with its sin and tragedy? The Bible does not really attempt to answer that question in a philosophical manner, but there are some hints in Scripture that point in the direction of a possible explanation of the course that this world has taken. When these hints are drawn together, a picture of a great cosmic drama begins to emerge. John Milton's *Paradise Lost* is perhaps the best known popularization of this drama, but the elements are present in Scripture, and Milton himself draws heavily on scriptural imagery. As the writings of C.S. Lewis attest, the motif is still popular in our modern era.

The drama centers on the great struggle between good and evil, between God and the Enemy of the good. The Old Testament treatment of this drama will be discussed more specifically in the next chapter, but the hints appear very early in the biblical narrative. The serpent of Genesis 3, although more crafty than any of God's other creatures, is somehow also God's opponent, raising questions about God's manner of dealing with man. He claims that God arbitrarily has withheld something good from man. Traditional Christianity has attributed personal qualities to this serpent and has depicted him as the Great Opponent of God, usually under the name of Satan or simply the Devil.

The suggestion of a great cosmic struggle between this Adversary and God is further amplified in the book of Job. The Adversary accuses God of favoritism, implying that God virtually has bribed Job to serve him; remove the hedge and Job's allegiance would simply evaporate. In short, the book of Job sets a drama in which the Adversary attacks the very heart of God's ways with man. If God is to prove his case, he must throw his man Job to the lions, so to speak. Job suffers, argues, talks back to a silent God, but never abandons his faith in God's justice. Thus, through Job's endurance, God's character stands vindicated.

Two additional Old Testament passages, Isaiah 14: 12-15, the famous "Lucifer" passage, and Ezekiel 28:11-19, both suggest further elements in the traditional Christian interpretation of the cosmic

struggle. In particular, the aspect of selfish pride is prominent in both of these passages. It requires only a small step to arrive at the two great points of tension in this cosmic drama: the selfishness and pride of the Adversary over against God's self-sacrificing love, a contrast that has been much developed in the Christian understanding of the mission of Jesus.

The New Testament intensifies the focus on this cosmic drama. When the "seventy" returned from their successful mission, Luke records that Jesus exclaimed: "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven" (Luke 10:18). In addition, both Matthew and Luke record the personal confrontation between Jesus and the Adversary (Matthew 4; Luke 4). Both accounts hint at a cosmic significance when the devil offers the world to Jesus if he will fall down and worship him.

Much additional New Testament evidence could be cited, but for purposes of defining the cosmic struggle, the final book of the New Testament is one of the more important New Testament points of reference. Revelation 12-14, and 20, in particular, throw the struggle into bold relief; the dragon and Michael are at war (Rev. 12:7). The dragon is defeated and cast to earth where he pursues those who are faithful to God's commands (Rev. 12:17). The dragon carries on his warfare through the beast of Revelation 13. The beast and his allies attack virtually every part of God's realm. As the struggle climaxes, its religious character becomes more evident, for another beast follows in the authority of the first, demanding that all should *worship* the image of the beast or be killed (Rev. 13:15). Thus the human family is inevitably drawn into the struggle. Those who refuse the demands of the beast are described as saints who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus (Rev. 14:12).

Throughout the book of Revelation the theme of judgment is prominent, a judgment which is ultimately for God and his holy ones and against the dragon and his demons. Revelation 14:6 declares that the hour of judgment has come and in the chapter which describes the final demise of the devil and his angels, Revelation 20, judgment is committed to the saints (Rev. 20:4). The language of confrontation simply dominates the book.

Now it is perhaps noteworthy that where this cosmic struggle is given any kind of content, the enemy accuses God of being arbitrary: in Genesis 3, God is accused of arbitrarily withholding something good from man. In Job, God is accused of arbitrarily favoring Job. Yet interestingly enough, these same passages suggest that God actually grants remarkable freedom: in Genesis, the power of choice and the right to rebel; in Job, the right of the Adversary to viciously attack Job, Job's family, and Job's possessions. In short, the biblical writers seem to present the evidence for a freedom-loving God who has no fears of granting freedom also to his creatures and even to the Adversary himself. But in the context of the great cosmic struggle, when the Adversary accuses God of being arbitrary, the only possible way of putting the accusation to rest is for God to do precisely what he did in Job's case: he must throw Job to the lions. Refusal to let Satan attack Job would simply have left the accusation all the more believable, and the reputation of God's government all the more in doubt. But now let us apply the above suggestions to the interpretation of biblical history as a whole. If the course of history can be seen to be taking place within a great cosmic struggle in which God is accused of governing in an arbitrary manner, then we have a hint as to how we might understand his willingness to create a good world – but then watch it fall into serious decay. Who would be the mastermind of that decay? The Adversary.

The suggestion that the Adversary is in some sense the master of this world as well as the mastermind behind its pain and agony, appears in the book of Job. At least when the sons of God gathered together, the Adversary reported that he had come from the earth. This may also be the origin of the references in the gospels to "the ruler of this world" (John 12:31). The devil's willingness to "concede" rulership to Jesus (for a price!) as noted in the temptation accounts also implies a certain demonic lordship over creation. Placing this demonic control in a framework similar to that provided by the book of Job, we can imagine that a good world has been thrown to the lions. Thus, the entire creation must endure a Job-like experience at the hands of the Adversary.

If God's ultimate authority is to be established, then the full impact of demonic rule must be

allowed to develop. The “benefits” and “blessings” of demonic rule must be allowed to develop for all to see, if God’s lordship is to be finally regained. So just as God had to remain silent during Job’s agony, just as he allowed Satan to destroy Job’s innocent children, just as God allowed circumstances to deteriorate to the point where Job’s wife could say: “Curse God and die,” so it is with the world which God has created. Demonic forces must be granted the right to rule. Man must be granted the right to rebel without the threat of immediate and sudden punishment. And so we have the tragic sequence of Genesis 3-11, a somber reminder of the devastation caused by rebellion, but at the same time, a testimony to a God who loves freedom so much that he even grants us the privilege of ruining our lives and the lives of others.

Yet God has not abdicated completely his responsibilities and control. Just as he set limits on Satan’s attack on Job, so he has put some limits on the spread of evil. And just as God finally broke his silence with Job, so he also came in a special way to Abraham to renew the knowledge of God and to lead Abraham into a new relationship as an example of what a divine-human relationship could mean. But if God is the kind of God who loves freedom, then he cannot force us to grow towards him. Growth can come only as we choose to respond to the divine invitation. That is why the Old Testament stories provide such a mysterious blending of good and evil. In some of the narratives the distinction between good and evil is clear enough: human beings simply failed, revolting against what they knew to be right. But in other cases, divine wisdom apparently saw that man was not yet ready for the next step upward. Reforms cannot be hasty, otherwise all can be lost, For freedom’s sake, God had been willing to let the demons have a fair crack at his creation; now God must defeat the demons, the false deities who had inundated the earth.

If we apply this suggested interpretative framework to Abraham’s situation, we can see that if God had moved too quickly in his attempt to win the heart of Abraham, Abraham would have had plenty of other “gods” to choose from. He was by no means bound to serve the God who had called him from Ur of the Chaldees. There must have been many things that God desperately wanted to tell Abraham, but he didn’t dare. Abraham was not yet ready to move from milk to meat!

Thus when the larger picture of a cosmic struggle forms the background of the Old Testament, I find it much easier to understand the activities of God. It now seems strange to me that the Old Testament God has the reputation of having a short fuse. A God of incredible patience is a much more accurate description. Judged by New Testament standards, life in the Old Testament was often at a very low ebb. Yet God was there – working, inviting, winning.

We must not assume, however, that the upward path was a continuous one once God had come to Abraham. The graph actually looks much more like a roller-coaster ride! Freedom means we may grow or fall, depending on whether we respond to the divine invitation or turn from it. When one of God’s children chooses to turn away, the memory of the divine presence can very easily fade completely. Very little time is required to obliterate even important traditions from the human experience. I have known families who have become alienated from the Christian community and have turned away, taking their children with them into isolation. Given a few years of such isolation, the children have no memory of that which had at one time been so important to their parents. So it is with the rebellions and apostasies in the Old Testament. The example cited earlier of the loss of the knowledge of God between Hezekiah and Josiah is almost the rule rather than the exception, more typical than remarkable, though still very much a tragedy.

To summarize the argument of this chapter, we can say that God did create a good world. In this world he placed free creatures. They chose to rebel and align themselves with the Adversary. His attacks on God set the stage for demonic rule, a rule which a freedom-loving God chose to allow as necessary evidence in the cosmic struggle between good and evil. The Old Testament gives ample evidence of the impact of the demonic rule. At the same time, however, it testifies to God’s patient interest in his own people, a people through whom he hoped to demonstrate to the world that there is a God in heaven who

is the source of everything good. God had much that he wanted to show and tell his people. As soon as they were ready, he passed on the good news. The tragedy was that they were so seldom ready. Yet God was still willing to watch and wait. That is the glory of the Old Testament and the glory of our God.

Theme: “Christ and Religious Tradition”

Leading Question: “How do we know which traditions to keep and which ones we can safely ignore?”

Introduction to the issue. When addressing the questions of what laws and traditions we should retain and which we should lay aside, Jesus’ teaching and example gives a glimmer of insight, but not much more. In Matthew 15:8-9, he notes that the worship of God’s people was marred by the fact that they worshiped in vain, “teaching as doctrines the precepts of man” (RSV).

Among Protestants, the word “tradition” is usually viewed with suspicion, if not outright alarm. It has often represented the contrast between the Protestant attempt to remain faithful to Scripture over against the Roman Catholic claim that “tradition” is also valid. But the term actually can be quite neutral, simply referring to that which has been “passed down.”

The Gospels reveal that Jesus was often quite ambivalent on the question of whether “tradition” should be valued and preserved. In Matthew 15:1-6, it is clear that Jesus was not supportive of the tradition involving ritual washing before meals. And when accused of allowing his disciples to ignore the tradition, Jesus pointedly told the Jewish leaders that he had indeed made Scripture of none effect by their tradition. His example involve that matter of dedicating property for sacred purpose, thus making it inaccessible for the purpose of supporting ones (aging) parents. This custom of declaring property to be under the protection of “Corban” enabled wealthy Jews to avoid the application of the 5th command in ways that would be helpful to their parents. In this case, tradition was clearly leading the people astray.

But in at least two other instances recorded in the Gospels, Jesus seems to have supported Jewish tradition:

1. **Seat of Moses.** In Matthew 23:1-7, Jesus refers to the fact that the leaders sit in the “Seat of Moses.” Surprisingly, he tells the people to do as they say, but not as they do.

2. **Tithing and moral issues.** In Matthew 23:23 Jesus criticizes the Jewish leaders for “tithing mint anise and cummin” while neglecting the weightier matters, “justice, mercy, and faithfulness.”

If one is tempted to think that exceeding the righteousness of the leaders (cf. Matthew 5:19-20) involves following a better and more comprehensive check list, perusal of the six antitheses in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5) uncovers a massive argument against such a check-list religion. That chapter will be the focus of our attention in lesson #4.

Theme: “Christ and the Law in the Sermon on the Mount”

Leading question: Does the Sermon on the Mount make keeping the law harder or easier?

Introduction to the Issue: Jesus’ treatment of the law in Matthew 5 (Sermon on the Mount) raises acute questions, not only about the relationship between Jesus and the God of the Old Testament, but also between law in the New Testament and law in the Old. Here are Jesus’ introductory comments that lead into the six antitheses:

Matthew 5:17: Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. 18 For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. 19 Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. 20 For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

These are the salient points:

1. However one interprets “fulfill,” it stands in contrast with abolish. In short, Jesus affirms the law.
2. Fulfilling the law includes “doing” the commandments.
3. Fulfilling the law means exceeding the righteousness of the Jewish leaders.

From the content of the comparisons that follow, it is clear that Jesus is internalizing laws that previously could have been treated as external commands. The first comparison prohibits murderous anger, for example, not just murder. And one of my New Testament colleagues has noted that the Greek conjunction linking the two halves of the “antitheses” is much closer to “and” than to “but,” suggesting that Jesus is enhancing, not replacing the external command.

The focal point of the six comparisons becomes clearer if one can see the word “fulfill” in the sense of “filling full” – of richer meaning, for example – not in the sense of “fulfilling” requirements” and then putting them out of mind. To illustrate the point from academia, “fulfill” typically refers to something like graduation requirements. Once these have been checked off the list, one can ignore them thereafter. Clearly Jesus intends to enrich our understanding of law, not just abolish the law and put it out of mind.

Summarizing the six comparisons that Jesus fills full of richer meaning reveals how different these comparisons actually are. Two, murder and adultery, are based on the ten commandments and are very troubling for the idealist who seeks to obey God’s law. Staying

clear of murder and adultery is one thing, but how does one eliminate anger and lustful thinking? The other four comparisons are based on the additional Mosaic legislation: Divorce (cf. Deut. 24:1-4), oaths (cf. Lev. 19:12; Deut. 23:21-23), *lex talionis* [law of revenge] (cf. Exod. 21:23-25), and love for a neighbor (cf. Lev. 19:18).

Here are some brief notes on each of these four comparisons that should trigger further study and lively discussion:

1. **Divorce.** Both Matthew 5:23 and 19:9 include the exception clause, “except for fornication.” Luke 16:18 offers no exception: it is simply wrong to put away your spouse and marry another. Liberal Jewish spokespersons had interpreted law of divorce (Deut. 24:1-4) very loosely, allowing males to divorce a spouse for the most trivial of reasons. In Luke, Jesus closes all loopholes. What did Jesus really say? You have a choice.

2. **Oaths.** Jesus went a step further than the Old Testament which affirmed the use of some oaths, albeit rather cautiously. Jesus argued for no oaths at all.

3. **Lex Talionis.** The so-called *lex talionis*, the law of revenge, seems to point in the opposite direction from Jesus’ call for turning the other cheek. But the contrast is not that sharp, for most biblical scholars agree that the purpose of *lex talionis* was to limit revenge, not encourage it. Thus it could be seen as a half-way house to the full pacifism of Jesus.

4. **Loving your neighbor.** The last comparison is the most radical one. In Matthew 5 Jesus quotes the Old Testament as saying, “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” The command to love one’s neighbor is a direct quote from Leviticus 19:18, but it applies only to one’s Jewish neighbor, not to everyone. And it is simply one command in a long series of laws, not the pinnacle of a hierarchy of laws as it is in the New Testament. In Matthew 22:35-40, it is Jesus’ second great command; but in Romans 13:9 and Galatians 5:14 it stands alone as *the* command. Finally, in Matthew 7:12, all qualifications are dropped. God’s people are called to treat everyone the way we would want to be treated.

The Old Testament falls far short of that ideal. Deuteronomy 23:3-6 in the legal code prohibits Israel from having anything to do with Moab and Ammon, two of Israel’s tribal enemies. In the psalms and prophetic books, the hatred is open to public viewing. There is no command to hate one’s enemies, but examples of hatred abound, with Psalm 139:21-22 being the most vivid:

21 Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord?
And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?
22 I hate them with perfect hatred;
I count them my enemies.

Jesus is much more radical. He calls us to fulfill the law by loving our enemies.

Theme: “Christ and the Sabbath”

Leading Question: “What did Jesus do to transform the human understanding of the Sabbath?”

Introduction to the Issue. In our modern world the idea of sacred time has nearly vanished. “Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy,” said the Lord from Mt. Sinai. But very few people “remember” anymore. Because our series for this quarter is “Christ and His Law,” Sabbath is included. So how can we discuss all that needs to be discussed in one lesson? These are the issues that could shape our discussion:

1. Sabbath as command, gift or test?
2. Sabbath as a day of liberation or Sabbath as a day of restriction?
3. Sabbath as a day for all people or as a day for Jews?
4. Jesus as Sabbath reformer.

Focusing on the last item may be most helpful, especially since discussing Sabbath in the context of “law” has potentially harsh overtones. Have you ever heard anyone say, “It’s the law” in a friendly tone of voice?

We have a choice of beginning this discussion with a good Old Testament text or a good New Testament one. The New Testament one is well known. In fact it is the official “memory verse” in the regular lesson guide: “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath” (Mark 2:27-28, NRSV).

But if the New Testament declares that the Sabbath was made for humankind, the Old Testament declares that it was also made for animals: “Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest, so that your ox and your donkey may have relief, and your homeborn slave and the resident alien may be refreshed (Exod. 23:12, NRSV). In the Deuteronomic version of the decalogue, the fourth command includes a statement of purpose for the sabbath: “so that your manservant and maidservant may rest as you do” (Deut. 5:14). Former British prime minister, Harold MacMillan, is reputed to have called this passage “the first and greatest worker protection act in history” – Chris Wright, “Deuteronomic Depression,” *Themelios* 19:2 (Jan. 1994), 3.

Right here two radical ideas can be inserted into the discussion. The first one is based on the fact that Jesus’ every day language was Aramaic. And in Aramaic, the phrase “son of man” is the normal term for “human being.” That could mean that humans are Lord of the Sabbath! A New Testament colleague pointed that possibility out to me once, but I have never seen it confirmed in print. So perhaps we should deal with it rather cautiously. But whether the “lord” of the Sabbath is the Messiah or the people whom the Messiah created, it is clear that the Sabbath was intended to be a blessing to human beings. That was the point Jesus was making in Mark 2.

The second bombshell comes when we compare the Old Testament method for enforcing the keeping of the Sabbath – stoning a man who picked up sticks on the Sabbath – and Jesus’ approach to the Sabbath. In one of his most famous Sabbath healing miracles, Jesus told the man

who had been crippled for 38 years: “Stand up, take your mat (= sticks!) and walk” (John 5:8). So how could Jesus move away from the heavy hand in the Old Testament? And why? Is it possible that when the law is internalized, the heavy hand disappears? In the additional Mosaic legislation, the death penalty is linked with the breaking of each of the commandments except the last one – you shall not covet. The ten commandments themselves contain no penalties, thus giving them a more positive role to play, one that slips easily into the new covenant when the law is written on the heart. In such a model there are no threats or penalties, just blessings (cf. Jer. 31:31-34).

Now let’s look at some specific aspects of Sabbath keeping in the light of both Testaments:

1. The Sabbath is intended for all human beings not just for Jews. In Exodus 20 the Sabbath is linked with creation, suggesting that it was intended for all humanity, not just for the Jews. Furthermore, Exodus 23:12 declares that the Sabbath was intended to refresh both animals and foreigners. “On the seventh day you shall rest,” the Scriptures declare, “so that your ox and your donkey may have relief, and your homeborn slave and the resident alien may be refreshed” (NRSV). And in the decalogue of Deuteronomy 5 where the Sabbath celebrates, not creation, but Israel’s redemption from Egypt, a blessing is still granted to the broader group. It was given “so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you” (Deut. 5:14, NRSV).

2. The Sabbath is a day for corporate worship. While there is little in Scripture that tells just how one should worship on the Sabbath, Luke 4:16 indicates that Jesus saw the Sabbath as a time for worshipping with the community of believers. On the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue “as was his custom.”

3. The Sabbath is a time for enjoyment. Not only does Mark 2 point to the Sabbath as a day for blessing humanity, the idea of the Sabbath as a day of delight is already present in Isaiah 58, though the text presents a tantalizing paradox. The prophet tells us to turn from our own interests on the day *and* to call the Sabbath a delight. There’s plenty to ponder in that paradox.

4. The Sabbath is a day for healing. Five of Jesus’ most spectacular healing miracles give us a vivid picture of a God who goes out of his way to heal wounded people on Sabbath. Note that none of these were “emergency” miracles. In one instance Scripture notes that the woman was afflicted for 18 years; in another that the man was afflicted for 38 years.

Mark 3:1-6, man with the withered hand

Luke 13:10-17, woman with the bent back (18 years)

Luke 14:1-6, man with dropsy

John 5:1-9, man at pool of Bethesda (38 years)

John 9:1-14, man born blind

5. The Sabbath will be a part of the new creation. Isaiah 66:22 assures us that we will come together from Sabbath to Sabbath. Could that be a call for more careful attention to the Sabbath in our secular world today?

There follows a 1992 column of mine that calls us to transform the “No” of the Sabbath into a “yes,” an important corrective for those who may have experienced the Sabbath as more of a burden than a joy.

God's Liberating "No!"
By Alden Thompson
Signs of the Times, August, 1992

“Six days you shall do your work, but on the seventh day you shall rest, so that your ox and your donkey may have relief, and your homeborn slave and the resident alien may be refreshed” (Exodus 23:12, NRSV).

If English is your mother tongue, then “no” was one of your first words, along with “ma-ma,” “da-da,” and “see.” The adults in your life taught it to you firmly and with conviction.

Theirs was a noble purpose, of course. “No!” saved you from the dangers of the world and spared the world the havoc your grubby little hands were eager to cause. But you didn’t like the word. Keeping a wary eye on the No-sayer, you watched for that slight break in resolve that would leave your liberty intact.

When you learned to say it yourself, however, you liked it a lot. “No!” became *the* word in your vocabulary. With a jaunty toss of your little head, you said No! to everything.

Except for very obedient souls, that love-hate relationship with No continues into adult life. We like to say Yes to friends. But against the system, against the big boys, we love to say No whenever it is safe to do so. I still remember (with some chagrin) the twinge of wicked delight that crept into my soul when I could write a No to Harvard. Harvard hadn’t done anything wrong. I simply had decided to attend the University of Edinburgh instead. Yet for a brief moment, I was the little man saying No to the big system. It was fun.

But it’s not the best of fun. I’m with Paul in Romans 7, wanting to say a gracious Yes, but hearing myself blurt out a perverse No. Or vice versa.

Gratitude overwhelmed Paul when he realized his inner battle didn’t prevent him from finding peace in Jesus (see Romans 8:1-2). That’s good news for us, too. But we still long to realize that new covenant promise when our every Yes and No naturally reflect the mind of God (see Jeremiah 31:31-34).

Can it happen now?

Yes. Jesus shows the way. Let’s consider how, in the light of that most troublesome divine No, the No of the Sabbath command.

I say troublesome because the Sabbath command is likely to be just that, whether it’s new or old. If it’s new, hearing it could cost you your job. If it’s old, you’ll remember the irritation when it stood between you and fun. Let’s face it, turning from our own pleasure on the Sabbath yet calling the day a delight (see Isaiah 58:13) doesn’t come easily.

In the Old Testament, God’s hand was firm, even deadly. Sin against any one of the ten commandments, except for the prohibition against coveting, incurred the death penalty. By divine command, a man caught picking up sticks on the Sabbath was stoned (see Numbers 14:32-36). That was a language Israel could understand.

The Sabbath command itself is blunt enough: “Don’t work” (Exodus 20:10). That’s clear. But does it have to be painful?

No. Jesus taught that the Sabbath was a day for people, for meeting human needs. His Sabbath miracles of healing made that point clear. The Pharisees criticized His disciples for plucking grain on Sabbath. But that was sin against their law, not His. “The Sabbath was made

for humankind,” said Jesus, “not humankind for the Sabbath” (Mark 2:27, NRSV).

We hear the gracious No of the Sabbath in Exodus 23:12. By saying No to work, God gave rest to Israel, to slaves, to animals. It was a liberating No.

It still is. My wife discovered that liberation when she was a young girl picking strawberries and beans in the fields of Oregon: Six days of grueling work, one glorious day of freedom.

That No became special to me when I was a student on a Christian campus, one that celebrated the Sabbath rest. Joy! The Lord had forbidden me to study my college coursework on Sabbath. His No had set me free.

I still relish that Sabbath freedom. I covet it for you in our hectic world. Yet our celebration must be tempered by the sobering reminders of that great Sabbath chapter, Isaiah 58, the reminders that some are not yet free. There God calls us to “loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free” (Is. 58:6, NRSV). He asks us to share our bread with the hungry, to care for the homeless poor and the naked (vs. 7). That’s His Sabbath agenda and ours. Until He returns, His liberating No sets us free to make it happen.

Theme: “Christ’s Death and the Law”**Leading Question: “Does the death of Christ nullify the law?”**

Introduction to the Issue: When one links Christ’s death with the law, the clear implication is that the law is an instrument of condemnation, not a gracious guide. Though Scripture presents it as both, these two perspectives can easily quarrel with each other.

The two different perspectives on law also shed important light on differing perspectives on the cross. The “good news” view of law (cf. Deut. 4:5-8; Psalm 119) emphasizes contextualization, thus relativizing the absolute claims of law. Thus the cross of Christ teaches us about the servant God who came to reveal the Father to us. From such a perspective, family, more than the courtroom, is the most helpful setting for salvation discussions. John 14-17 and the story of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11-32) play leading roles in illustrating this view. Note that when the Prodigal Son returns home, the Father throws the robe of grace around the boy’s shoulders. The story illustrates grace without the payment of penalty.

When one sees law as an instrument of condemnation, however, then the courtroom becomes a focal point in salvation discussions. The memory verse for this week (Romans 7:4) refers to those “who have died to the law through the body of Christ,” a view of law that reverberates through much of Paul’s writings, especially in Romans and Galatians (cf. Rom. 7:1-7; 8:1-8). Galatians 3:10-14 speaks of the “curse of the law,” a far cry from the jubilant celebration of law in Psalm 119 and Deuteronomy 4:5-8.

An internet narrative that came my way recently vividly illustrates how important the cross of Christ can be from this courtroom perspective. It was entitled, “I Love My Attorney.”

After living what I felt was a “decent” life, my time on earth came to the end. The first thing I remember is sitting on a bench in the waiting room of what I thought to be a court house. The doors opened and I was instructed to come in and have a seat by the defense table.

As I looked around I saw the “prosecutor.” He was a villainous looking gent who snarled as he stared at me. He definitely was the most evil person I have ever seen. I sat down and looked to my left and saw My Attorney, a kind and gentle looking man whose appearance seemed so familiar to me, I felt I knew Him. The corner door opened and there appeared the Judge in full flowing robes. He commanded an awesome presence as He moved across the room. I couldn’t take my eyes off of Him. As He took His seat behind the bench, He said, “Let us begin.”

The prosecutor rose and said, “My name is Satan and I am here to show you why this man belongs in hell.” He proceeded to tell of lies that I had told, things that I had stolen, and times when I had cheated others. Satan told of other horrible perversions that were once in my life. The more he spoke, the further down in my seat I sank. I was so embarrassed that I couldn’t look at anyone, not even my own Attorney as the Devil told of sins that even I had completely forgotten about.

As upset as I was at Satan for telling all these things about me, I was equally upset at My Attorney who sat there silently, not offering any form of defense at all. I know I had been guilty of those things, but I had done some good in my life – couldn't that at least equal out part of the harm I'd done? Satan finished with a fury and said, "This man belongs in hell. He is guilty of all that I have charged and there is not a person who can prove otherwise."

When it was His turn, My Attorney first asked if He might approach the bench. The Judge allowed this over the strong objection of Satan, and beckoned Him to come forward. As He got up and started walking, I was able to see Him in His full splendor and majesty. I realized why He seemed so familiar; this was Jesus representing me, my Lord and my Savior.

He stopped at the bench and softly said to the Judge, "Hi, Dad," and then He turned to address the court. "Satan was correct in saying that this man had sinned. I won't deny any of these allegations. And, yes, the wages of sin is death, and this man deserves to be punished. Jesus took a deep breath and turned to His Father with outstretched arms and proclaimed, "However, I died on the cross so that this person might have eternal life and he has accepted Me as his Savior. So he is Mine. My Lord continued: "His name is written in the Book of Life, and no one can snatch him from Me. Satan still does not understand. This man is not to be given justice, but rather mercy." As Jesus sat down, He quietly paused, looked at His Father and said, "There is nothing else that needs to be done. I've done it all."

The Judge lifted His mighty hand and slammed the gavel down. The following words bellowed from His lips.... "This man is free. The penalty for him has already been paid in full. Case dismissed."

I asked Jesus as He gave me my instructions where to go next, "Have you ever lost a case?" Christ lovingly smiled and said, "Everyone who has come to Me and asked Me to represent them has received the same verdict as you: "Paid in full."

Passing this on to anyone you consider a friend (as I have done here), will bless you both.

Note how the headings in the official study guide all reflect this view of law:

- Dead to the Law
- Law of Sin and Death
- Power of the Law
- The Impotent Law
- Curse of the Law

Our challenge this quarter is to find a way to allow both perspectives to thrive in the church and to complement each other. For that, we'll need lots of study, lots of prayer. I once wrote a column for *Signs of the Times* that made a point of grace – without payment of penalty. I'll reproduce it here, then comment briefly at the end.

“Heart of Stone, Heart of Flesh”
By Alden Thompson
Signs of the Times, November 1991

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.
(Ezekiel 36:26, NRSV)

Hard hearted or soft? Take your pick.

Success in our modern world seems to demand the hard, though I can't imagine many “successful” people actually relishing the label. But “soft hearted” doesn't cut it either, nor does “tender,” at least not in a world of macho males.

So let's dump the adjectives and go with Ezekiel's vivid nouns: heart of stone, heart of flesh. No contest. It's like asking, “Would you rather be dead or alive?”

A closer look at Ezekiel, however, reveals a surprise, for he offers no choice. We expect him to ask the people to choose between the heart of stone and the heart of flesh. But no. God simply takes away the heart of stone and puts a heart of flesh in its place. It's a pure, unsolicited gift.

Now that's scary. So scary, in fact, that I feel the immediate urge to “ruin” Ezekiel's message with a PS (at least parenthetically), a quick reminder of something we all know, namely, that we are called to choose and that our decision makes a difference.

Several stories in Scripture immediately come to mind. Joshua to all Israel: “Choose this day whom you will serve” (Josh. 24:15, NRSV). Elijah on Mt. Carmel: “How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him” (1 Kings 18:21 (NRSV). John the Baptist at the River Jordan: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matt. 3:2, NRSV). Peter at Pentecost: “Repent and be baptized” (Acts 2:38, NRSV). Even Ezekiel, elsewhere in his book, makes it clear that the good can choose evil and the evil can choose good. And in both instances, the choice is decisive (Ezekiel 18).

Why, then, in both chapters where Ezekiel describes the new heart (Ezekiel 11 and 36), does he present it as an outright gift, without apparent human permission or participation?

Because a gift is a powerful way to bring a discouraged soul to life. A gift doesn't have the same impact on all people at all times, however, so the Lord uses all kinds of methods: commands, invitations, promises, threats. One way or another He will win the hearts of His people and lead them to do good. But for some, His most effective way of renewing human life lies in the mysterious power of an undeserved gift. It transforms lives that pleadings, promises, and threats can't touch.

An experience in Scotland helped me understand that truth. We were driving into the city of Edinburgh, rolling along at a fair clip on Comiston Road. I was over the speed limit but wasn't worried. British police don't watch for speeders nearly as eagerly as American police do. . . .

From the opposite direction a car headed toward us with its headlights flashing. Now in Europe that could mean most anything: get out of my way, you go first, look at the sunset. The circumstances determine the meaning. But this time we were puzzled – until we actually saw the two foot patrolmen with their portable radar unit.

My heart sank. Just a few months before I had argued eloquently with a British insurance agent that my modestly checkered US driving record was really quite a good one (two tickets in the last five years, none in the last three). Now this.

The two men stepped up to my window and asked to see my driver's licence. I pulled it out, a newly-minted UK edition.

"You were driving too fast, Mr. Thompson," they said. "But not to worry. Nothing will happen. We'll just note a couple of items for the record and let you be on your way. Have a good day."

As I drove off, I discovered a brand-new conviction in my soul. In print it looks like this: "If these folks are going to be that nice, I'm going to be more careful to obey their laws." Deserving punishment, I got grace. And this careless driver became obedient.

That's just what Ezekiel had in mind for Israel. God would turn them back to obedience with the gift of a brand new heart. He'll do the same for you, too.

But now a request: Do you have a story in your life about the power of grace (like my story of the Edinburgh police)? If you do, I'd love to hear it. Your story could change lives, too.

The only response I got to the column was a letter from a former student who said that my story didn't really illustrate grace at all. The only way it could have been grace, she said, was for the policemen to go to court and pay the penalty for me.

I believe we can find both perspectives in Scripture, though not necessarily together. Maybe we could bring the two together under the heading of Jesus' one-sentence summary of God's law: "In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you, for this is the law and the prophets" (Matthew 7:12). The fact that one view is in some parts of Scripture and but not in others, suggests that not all Bible writers viewed the matter in exactly the same way. And if Bible writers with differing perspectives can live within the covers of the same Bible, maybe people could live together within the same church, even though they don't all view the law and the cross in just the same way.

If we are to live together, however, it is crucial that we do not label one view as biblical – because it happens to mesh with our own experience – while rejecting the other as heretical. That's not playing fair. I happen to know of some people have been greatly blessed by both perspectives. I have a very dear friend in Britain, for example, who is an avid fan of two quite different Adventist scholar/preachers, one that views law as good news and sees the cross as God's primary teaching instrument (Graham Maxwell) and one that views law as an instrument of condemnation and sees the cross as paying the penalty for our sin (Desmond Ford). I suspect that Maxwell and Ford would be unsettled by my friend's eagerness to blend the two. But he remains solid in his convictions, finding both views very helpful.

The "truth" that different Bible writers can present differing perspectives is brought out with startling clarity by Ellen White's commentary on "The Bible Teacher." Some would call it a post-modern perspective, i.e. one that stresses the differences in personal experience. But whatever label one uses, I am convinced that it speaks a great truth:

“The Bible Teacher”

Ellen White, *Counsels to Parents and Teachers*, 432-433

In our schools the work of teaching the Scriptures to the youth is not to be left wholly with one teacher for a long series of years. The Bible teacher may be well able to present the truth, and yet it is not the best experience for the students that their study of the word of God should be directed by one man only, term after term and year after year. Different teachers should have a part in the work, even though they may not all have so full an understanding of the Scriptures. If several in our larger schools unite in the work of teaching the Scriptures, the students may thus have the benefit of the talents of several.

Why do we need a Matthew, a Mark, a Luke, a John, a Paul, and all the writers who have borne testimony in regard to the life and ministry of the Saviour? Why could not one of the disciples have written a complete record, and thus have given us a connected account of Christ's earthly life? Why does one writer bring in points that another does not mention? Why, if these points are essential, did not all these writers mention them? It is because the minds of men differ. Not all comprehend things in exactly the same way. Certain truths appeal much more strongly to the minds of some than of others.

The same principle applies to speakers. One dwells at considerable length on points that others would pass by quickly or not mention at all. The whole truth is presented more clearly by several than by one. The Gospels differ, but the records of all blend in one harmonious whole.

So today the Lord does not impress all minds in the same way. Often through unusual experiences, [432/433] under special circumstances, He gives to some Bible students views of truth that others do not grasp. It is possible for the most learned teacher to fall far short of teaching all that should be taught.

It would greatly benefit our schools if regular meetings were held frequently in which all the teachers could unite in the study of the word of God. They should search the Scriptures as did the noble Bereans. They should subordinate all preconceived opinions, and taking the Bible as their lesson Book, comparing Scripture with Scripture, they should learn what to teach their students, and how to train them for acceptable service.

The teachers' success will depend largely upon the spirit which is brought into the work. . . . Let not the spirit of controversy come in, but let each seek earnestly for the light and knowledge that he needs. (*Counsels to Parents and Teachers*, 432-433)

Theme: “Christ the End of the Law”

Leading Question: “What does Paul mean when he says in Romans 10:4 that Christ is the end of the law?”

Introduction to the Issue: It is possible that the question raised by the title/topic of this week’s lesson, “Christ the End of the Law,” could be easily resolved simply as a matter of translation. Just change the word “end” to “goal” (NASB) or “culmination” (NIV) and the matter is solved. End of discussion. We can all go home early.

But such an approach is not likely to end the discussion. Indeed, it might turn a smoldering fire into a raging inferno, so strong are the feelings on the topic. At root in the discussion is whether or not we are optimistic or pessimistic on the question of the possibility of human obedience to law. While, in Adventism, both sides in the discussion would affirm an unchanging decalogue, one side is much more willing to see additional laws as adaptations to particular situations while the other side is more inclined to experience laws as fixed by divine decrees. In actual practice, most “moderate” spokespersons for both positions come out almost in the same place. But at the theoretical level, the divide is more vivid.

Enlivening the discussion in Adventist circles is the awareness that some “grace” communities see Paul’s “end of the law” phraseology as doing away with that part of the decalogue that affirms the Sabbath. Some former Adventists (e. g. Dale Ratzlaff) have taken the firm position that the Sabbath command now has no reference at all to time (see *Sabbath in Christ*, 345).

Within Adventism, a community that affirms law, the courtroom perspective can loom very large. Note how the heading for each day’s lesson highlights such a view.

Where Sin Abounded (Romans 5:20: Moreover the law entered, that the offence might abound. But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound.)

Law and Grace (cf. Romans 6:15: “Shall we sin because we are not under the law but under grace? By no means!”)

O Wretched Man (Romans 7:24)

The Goal of the Law (Romans 10:4) = “end” of the law

The Disciplinarian (Gal. 3:23-24)

Crucial question: Why does law feel like such a burden? Certainly the tension is heightened by certain forms of perfectionist thinking. In Adventism, two quotes from Ellen White accentuate the issue:

Living in God’s Presence without a Mediator. “Those who are living upon the earth when the intercession of Christ shall cease in the sanctuary above are to stand in the sight of a holy God without a mediator. Their robes must be spotless, their characters must be purified from sin by the blood of sprinkling. Through the grace of God and their own diligent effort they must be conquerors in the battle with evil.” – GC 425

Character of Christ Perfectly Reproduced in His People. “When the fruit is brought forth, immediately he putteth in the sickle, because the harvest is come. Christ is waiting with longing desire for the manifestation of Himself in His church. When the character of Christ shall be perfectly reproduced in His people, then He will come to claim them as His own.” – COL 69

Short answers to these troubling quotations would run something like this: In the light of John 16:25-27, one can see the prospect of standing in God’s presence without a mediator as a promise, not as a threat. And if one can view the character of Christ as being perfectly reproduced in his people as a corporate entity, not as individuals, then the problem of an impossible perfectionism vanishes.

It’s not likely, however, that we will ever totally resolve the tension between the impulse to rely on God’s grace while not tending to the business of holy living and the impulse to earn our salvation through good works. But if we can help each other in our respective weaknesses, the church can indeed become a showcase of effective grace to the universe.

Key passages in Scripture clearly reveal that a life lived in grace does not have to make the law of none effect. The juxtaposition of Galatians 5:18 to 5:19-21 makes that quite clear. In 5:18 Paul exclaims: “If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.” But then he immediately gives a laundry list of sins that are “obvious” as works of the flesh:

19 Now the works of the flesh are obvious: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, 20 idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, 21 envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these. I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Clearly Paul is no libertarian. But when one is led by the Spirit, the law is written on the heart and one is no longer aware of law as a burden. Returning to Romans 10:4, we can readily concur that Christ is “the culmination of the law for righteous” (NIV). That does not set the law aside, but fills it full of new meaning and the law is no longer a burden.

Theme: “The Law of God and the Law of Christ”

Leading Question: “If Jesus is God in the flesh, God incarnate, why should we have a lesson that distinguishes between the law of God and the law of Christ?”

Introduction to the Issue: Christianity required some 300 years before affirming in the doctrine of the Trinity the full divinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. From a practical point of view, the New Testament clearly distinguished the roles of all three. The Father is always on the throne; Jesus is God manifested in the flesh; and the Holy Spirit is the unseen presence of God throughout the universe. Given the difficulty of communicating such a doctrine with clarity, it is understandable that when Scripture depicts Jesus as praying to His Father and pleading with Him on our behalf, one can easily get the impression that the “real” God is the Father and Jesus is in some kind of secondary role. In my early years as a Christian, I was haunted by such a perspective: Jesus I knew was my friend; but a hesitant Father sat on the throne who needed convincing before he would reluctantly let me in by a side door. Curious, perhaps. But that was my view, shaped by the mental picture of Jesus pleading to the Father on my behalf.

In the light of Philippians 2, Christians have said the Jesus voluntarily emptied himself of divinity and took the form of a servant. Thus, during his earthly sojourn, Jesus was clearly subordinate to the Father. Yet he was fully God. If then Father and Son are both fully God, the title of our lesson for this week is misleading when it suggests that the law of God and the law of Christ might be separate entities.

When Jesus told the disciples, “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9, NRSV), he could have said that he was simply the embodiment of God’s law of love. But given man’s sinful condition, communicating that with clarity presents real challenges. If the God we serve is both all powerful and all good, what kind of “laws” should one expect from such a God? And how does he give “permission” for his children – without their appearing to be arrogant or insolent – to treat some laws as obsolete?

What God seems to have done is to give us a book full of examples – the Bible – in which laws adapted to particular needs come and go. He seems to expect us to study these laws inductively so that we can establish which laws no longer apply. The conference described in Acts 15 seems to point to a procedure like that, a procedure carried out in the community until they had arrived at consensus. “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us,” they said (Acts 15:28). This is not thunder from Sinai, but a thoughtful, prayer meeting of fellow believers who have come to a decision under the guidance of the Spirit. There were no external signs of the Spirit’s presence; but they sensed His presence and declared that their conclusion had been guided by Him.

A major critique of my book *Inspiration*, however, has been that the inductive method – drawing on examples to establish the truth – is the wrong one for the job. My critics say that I should be using the deductive method instead. Puzzled by that position, I finally asked one of them to define the difference between inductive and deductive. With the deductive method, he said, you always start with what you know to be true. So the question is: should we decide what

is true based on the examples? Or should we come to the examples already knowing what is true?

My problem with the deductive position is two-fold. First, God has given us parallel passages in both Testaments that often differ significantly from each other. In the Old Testament one can compare Samuel-Kings with Chronicles. In the New Testament, one can compare the four Gospels with each other. If our “deductive” authority has given us parallel passages, shouldn’t we be obligated to study those parallel passages inductively?

My second problem is a practical one: If I start with what I know to be true, I will never change anything. Yet Scripture reveals some rather dramatic changes in God’s dealing with his children. A position that declares our present understanding of truth to be eternally true would prevent us from dealing with change.

Related to my preference for the inductive method is the desire to approach my work honestly without fear of divine wrath. Is it appropriate for me, one of God’s creatures, to relate to the Master of the Universe in such a way? If I am called to love my Maker – as Scripture clearly indicates in both testaments (e. g. Deut. 6:4-5; Matthew 22:35-40) – then an important passage about the nature of that love is found in 1 John 4:18-19: “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. 19 We love because he first loved us” (NRSV). Without fear, there is no threat of punishment. From an ideal perspective, then, I should be so fully in harmony with the Creator that I will do his will intuitively. This would echo the new covenant promise in Jeremiah 31:31-34 where the law is written on the heart and no one commands anyone to obey.

All this may help us explore the one passage in Scripture that actually uses the phrase “law of Christ,” namely, Galatians 6:2. A similar phrase is found in 1 Cor. 9:21. But the straightforward phrase “law of Christ” appears only in Galatians 6:2: “Bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” This appeal to helpfulness ties in with Paul’s exuberant statement of the ideal in Galatians 5:13-14: “For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh [NRSV = self-indulgence], but through love become slaves to one another. 14 For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” In short, the “law of Christ” is indistinguishable from the law of God, a law which is “fulfilled” by the simple command to love. Romans 13:8-10 is explicit:

8 Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. 9 The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” 10 Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

I was intrigued and somewhat amused when I checked out Galatians 6:2 in several major commentaries. The massive volume on *Galatians* in the Hermeneia series was written by Hans Dieter Betz. A pastor in Germany before coming to the United States as a Professor of New Testament, Betz reflects a vintage German attitude toward law. Given their penchant for obedience, Germans typically emphasize righteousness by faith, a doctrine that teaches Christ’s obedience on our behalf. Betz describes the phrase “law of Christ” as “strange.” Then after

considerable comment he says similarly that the phrase “the law of Christ remains a puzzle” – Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 299-300.

Betz helps us understand that God and his children face a very similar challenge when it comes to communicating the truth about an internalized law. In short, it cannot be mandated, but still must be taught through explicit statements and commands, ones which his children will later internalize and/or set aside as the need arises, but doing so without showing disrespect to the law giver. That is all the more reason why we should approach the topic with great care, realizing that we need full community participation if we are to come anywhere near to getting it right in the end.

The Mediator

Closely linked with the topic of law is the issue of the “mediator,” and here Scripture presents two perspectives, reflecting the two views of law. That view which emphasizes internalized law, focuses on the picture of a mediator who introduces the Father to us. Such a view is dominant in John 14-17. The most explicit statement is this one from John 14:9: “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (NRSV). In such a view, Jesus as teacher is more important than Jesus as sacrifice.

By contrast, those who are more inclined to focus on external law, see the mediator as introducing us to the Father. John 14:6 points to such a view: “No one comes to the Father except through me” (NRSV). More typically, however, such a view is Pauline, as reflected in this line from Romans 8:34: “It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us” (NRSV).

Both views are biblical and will be found meaningful in varying degrees by different believers. Unfortunately, the more extreme spokespersons for both views are inclined to declare the other perspective as non-biblical and dangerous. Such a position, especially when spoken with vivid rhetoric, rouses fears in the heart of those who cherish the truths that they have discovered, finding them both helpful and precious. They fear that a movement could sweep through the church that would snatch away the very truths that enable them to live faithfully for Christ. Their fears are likely to trigger strong rhetoric in response, thus widening the chasm. So let me put my conclusion in italics and bold print: ***Both views of the cross are biblical, but not all believers will find both equally helpful. If we can keep both views alive within the community, each believer may draw from both as needed as they seek to walk humbly and whole-heartedly with their Lord.***

Theme: “Christ, the Law, and the Gospel”

Leading Question: “In the Old Testament, law is Gospel – good news – why is that hard for some people to believe?”

Introduction to the Issue: The contrast between the view of law in the two testaments is striking. In the Old Testament, law is a gracious gift of God; in the New Testament it is God’s instrument for condemning. When evangelicals put law and gospel together, law will always come out a loser. It’s bad news, even if, like Paul, we affirm that “the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and just and good” (Rom. 7:12, NRSV). The law condemns, the Gospel rescues us from condemnation. How did that change from good news to bad news come about?

Before suggesting possible reasons for the change, we should at least document the fact that a change has taken place. And here two passages stand out. The first is Peter’s speech at the Jerusalem conference, the one that determined that circumcision would no longer be required for membership in the body of Christ. As Peter tells about his own role in recognizing the equality of Gentiles before Christ, he slips an astonishing statement. Speaking about the God-given law requiring circumcision, he exclaims: “Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear?” (Acts 15:10, NRSV).

A second passage documenting the negative attitude toward law in the New Testament is Romans 7:

21 So I find it to be a law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies close at hand. 22 For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, 23 but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members. 24 Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?

Watching Paul move from this wretched unhappiness to the joy of Romans 8:1 is important for understanding a number of important issues in the New Testament: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” For Paul, it is the death of Jesus that has rescued him from the condemnation of the law. He has, of course, admitted that the law is “holy and just and good” (Romans 7:12). But that’s still a long ways from calling law good news! Now let’s turn to three possible reasons for the change.

First, the general term for “law” in the Old Testament is *Torah*, a very positive word. It is the one used for referring to the entire Pentateuch; it is also a general term referring to a healthy wholism. *Torah* is the word used to celebrate law in Ps. 119. In short, the longest book in the psalter is simply a celebration of the goodness of law, *Torah*. But even the more specific “statutes and ordinances” were viewed positively by Israel. Moses celebrates law as Gospel with these stirring words from Deuteronomy 4:5-8:

5 See, just as the Lord my God has charged me, I now teach you statutes and ordinances

for you to observe in the land that you are about to enter and occupy. 6 You must observe them diligently, for this will show your wisdom and discernment to the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, “Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people!” 7 For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to him? 8 And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today? (NRSV)

Israel felt honored that her God had actually shown them how to live by giving them specific laws. When starting from scratch, such a revelation would be seen as welcome news.

But a second possible reason is closely tied to Israel’s history. When Jerusalem was destroyed and Judah went into captivity in 586 BCE, God’s people finally got it into their heads that their nation was exiled because of disobedience. They had not been faithful to God’s law. As a result, they went to the other extreme, building what later rabbis called a “fence about the law.” For every biblical command, they added an additional “protective” layer of laws. If they could keep these additional laws, then they might be preserved from breaking the essential law of God. So for the command against taking the name of the Lord in vain, for example, they took the next step and forbid the use of God’s name under any circumstances. In 1927 Rabbi A. Marmorstein published a book that listed 91 rabbinic synonyms for God (*The Old Rabbinic Doctrine of God*, KTAV, 1927). Along similar lines, a more recent book (1997) by Judith Miller is entitled *God Has Ninety-Nine Names*.

In an attempt to keep the Sabbath more seriously, the rabbis enumerated 39 categories of work. When the disciples walked through the grainfield on the Sabbath, eating from the stalks, they broke four of these major categories: reaping, threshing, winnowing, and preparing a meal (William Barclay, *Matthew*, vol. 2, Daily Study Bible [Edinburgh: St. Andrew Press, 1958], 24). The result of all this effort to protect the decalogue would seem to have heightened any distaste for law that may have been lurking in human souls.

A third factor may have involved Jesus’ focus on the internal application of the law in Matthew 5. That’s where Jesus deepened the meaning of murder to include anger, for example, and adultery to include lustful thoughts. Pondering those lofty ideals could lead thoughtful people to not only to abandon all hope of perfection, but also to look askance at law itself.

Question: If the law is Gospel, why should we speak in terms of “minimum requirements” for salvation?

Note: Thoughtful and careful believers who emphasize the sacrificial death of Jesus as payment for sin, also know that obedience is important. Thus they often struggle to define “minimum” requirements for salvation. But if the law can be seen as “good news,” then the flexibility that such a term suggests can help to shift the conversation from minimums to maximums, not to increase the burden, but to explore ways of transforming the burdensome into joyousness.

Theme: “Christ, the Law, and the Covenants”

Leading Question: “On what basis have some Christians concluded that the Old Testament represents the “old” covenant and the New Testament the “new” covenant?”

Introduction to the Issue: Some Christians who resolve the old covenant/new covenant tension by simply separating the testaments, surprisingly retain a view of God that makes him directly responsible for some of the most violent aspects of the Old Testament. Here we want to explore alternative explanations.

Two biblical passages can set the stage for our comparison: Hebrews 9:15 and Jeremiah 31:31-34. The passage from Hebrews is the memory verse for this week’s lesson.

Hebrews 9:15: For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant (NIV).

Jeremiah 31:31-34: The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. 32 It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt – a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. 33 But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. 34 No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more (NRSV).

What needs to be said here is that while Hebrews quotes the Jeremiah new covenant passage (Hebrews 8:8-12), the original new covenant passage in Jeremiah applied to Old Testament people in Old Testament times. Since the author of Hebrews is pre-occupied with the sacrificial system, it is easy for him to adopt the view that what Jesus has done represents the “new” covenant since Jesus fulfilled the old sacrificial system.

But we must resist the temptation to import New Testament interpretations into the Old. Each Testament must yield its truths. Then we can bring them together. Furthermore, we can see Jesus as something more than simply someone who mechanically fulfilled the various aspects of the Jewish sacrificial system. We can see Jesus as the highest and clearest revelation of God, the clearest revelation of God’s character of love. Then we can also admit that some of the terrible things attributed to God in the Old Testament are not a direct reflection of God himself, but are a reflection of his radical adaptation to people with a tragically distorted view of divine authority.

Traditionally, the “theocracy” argument has been the primary means of explaining the violence of God in the Old Testament. In other words, the closer God came to direct rule over

Israel, the more violent he became. The problem with that interpretation is that the one place where we would agree that God came closest to humanity, namely, in Jesus, we see a non-violent revelation of God. In our Gospel records, Jesus never killed any one; he never even struck anyone. When he cleansed the temple, Jesus attacked the furniture, not the people, as Reynolds Price put it. And in Matthew's account of the cleansing we glimpse a beautiful picture of the right kind of anger, for after Jesus angrily drove out the money changers, the blind, the lame and the children came to take their place. I would love to have that kind of anger, an anger that drives away evil, but draws the children. Normally, when adults get angry, the children head to the hills. When Jesus got angry, the children came running to him.

Some time ago when I was in conversation with a former Adventist who had moved into a strong evangelical perspective on law and gospel, I pressed him with questions about the violent customs attributed to God in the Old Testament. "What about law of *cherem*," I asked, "where God commands the death of everything that lives: men, women, children, babies, and animals?" I was thinking not only of the story of Achan in Joshua 7, but also of God's command through Samuel to destroy the Amalekites as recorded in 1 Samuel 15:3. I was stunned by his answer:

"In today's world where Islamic Jihad is a very real threat, I wouldn't be surprised if once again God commands the death of men, women, children, even the babies."

My jaw dropped. Is Christian Jihad the answer to Islamic Jihad? I should hope not. It was Jesus who commanded, "Love your enemies" (Matt. 5:44). It was Jesus who cried from the cross, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34).

But an evangelical theology that too easily divides the covenants between the testaments is not afraid of a violent God. An eternally-burning hell is typically part of the package. And traditional evangelicals refuse to allow any into God's kingdom unless they explicitly accept Jesus Christ as their savior from sin. The good Buddhist, the good Muslim, the good heathen are all left outside the gates of the New Jerusalem.

Here it is well worth noting the expansive vision of Ellen White in her commentary on the Jesus' story of the sheep and goats:

Those whom Christ commends in the judgment may have known little of theology, but they have cherished His principles. Through the influence of the divine Spirit they have been a blessing to those about them. Even among the heathen are those who have cherished the spirit of kindness; before the words of life had fallen upon their ears, they have befriended the missionaries, even ministering to them at the peril of their own lives. Among the heathen are those who worship God ignorantly, those to whom the light is never brought by human instrumentality, yet they will not perish. Though ignorant of the written law of God, they have heard His voice speaking to them in nature, and have done the things that the law required. Their works are evidence that the Holy Spirit has touched their hearts, and they are recognized as the children of God. – *Desire of Ages*, 638

Law before grace and grace before law

In a lesson focusing on the covenants, it is well to note a biblical alternative to the law/gospel pairing that is so often seen as the New Testament perspective. From a motivational

perspective, the idea of grace before law offers a real alternative and some powerful insights. If one sees the role of law as an instrument of condemnation, then it can scarcely be seen as good news within a new covenant experience. But if we reverse the sequence, seeing grace coming to us when we do not deserve it, then a God-given law can also be seen as good news. Such a perspective can be glimpsed in both testaments, in the Old at the Red Sea crossing; in the New, in Romans 5.

Note the sequence of grace before law in the story of Israel's deliverance from Egypt. The record in Exodus gives no evidence that Israel "deserved" deliverance or had "earned" deliverance. God came to them by pure grace while they were still simmering with rebellion. But because he delivered them by grace, they were able to also see his grace when he gave them his law at Mt. Sinai. Grace softened their hearts; then they could hear the law as good news. Sinai scared them half to death. But they were thrilled. As Moses put it: "For what other great nation has a god so near to it as the Lord our God is whenever we call to him? And what other great nation has statutes and ordinances as just as this entire law that I am setting before you today?" (Deut. 4:7-8, NRSV).

In the New Testament, grace before law is taught in Romans 5. Note the highlighted phrases in the following quote:

Romans 5:6-11. For **while we were still weak**, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. 7 Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person – though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. 8 But God proves his love for us in that **while we still were sinners** Christ died for us. 9 Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. 10 For if **while we were enemies**, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. 11 But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation (NRSV).

While we were still weak, while we were still sinners, while we were enemies, Christ died for us. In the knowledge of that grace, we can proceed to see God's law as a gracious guide to our Christian living.

Theme: “Apostles and the Law”

Leading Question: “How can we avoid the tendency to focus only on the passages of Scripture that meet our needs?”

Introduction to the Issue: It is worth noting that when a person swings away from a strongly perfectionist position (“We can do it!”) to a strongly evangelical/substitutionary perspective (“We can’t do it; Jesus does it for us!”), a powerful impulse often draws them to Romans and Galatians, almost as if these were the only two books in the Bible.

But there are a wide variety of perspectives on law in the writings of the apostles, and even wider when one includes the cross in the discussion. In an attempt to bring some balance to the discussion, our purpose here is to note some “non-Pauline” (!) elements in the writings of Paul, especially in Romans, as a means of suggesting that Paul himself was much more broadly based than some of his more passionate followers might like to believe. We’ll look at four points:

1. Law is good: Romans 7:12: In Romans 6 and 7 Paul grumbles mightily against the law. But one verse trumpets his appreciation for law. It is the memory verse for this week’s lesson: “Therefore the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good” (Romans 7:12, KJV).

2. Human beings have a built-in law: Romans 2:12-16. For all Paul’s emphasis on revealed law, Romans 2:12-16 is a notable move toward natural law:

Romans 2:12-16: All who have sinned apart from the law will also perish apart from the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. 13 For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but the doers of the law who will be justified. 14 When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. 15 They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them 16 on the day when, according to my gospel, God, through Jesus Christ, will judge the secret thoughts of all. (NRSV)

This passage, along with the parable of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25, are the most forceful passages in favor of a universal natural law that exists within the human heart apart from laws given by revelation.

3. God chooses our destiny: Romans 9:10-21. While most modern evangelicals stand in the reformed, predestinarian (Calvinist) tradition, many followers of Paul would emphasize the important of human choice. Augustine, however, would not be among them. Note this candid statement: “In trying to solve this question I made strenuous efforts on behalf of the preservation of the free choice of the human will, but the grace of God defeated me.” – from Henry Chadwick, *Augustine* (Oxford, 1986), 117, citing *Retractationes* ii.1 (addressed to Simplicianus of Milan)

In that connection, however, we glimpse Paul's rather humorous attempt to address the issue of predestination. It comes in Romans 9 where he is trying to explain the statement from Malachi 1:2: "Is not Esau Jacob's brother? says the Lord. Yet I have loved Jacob 3 but I have hated Esau." Here is the full passage from Romans 9. Note that with every attempt to address the problem he simply makes matters worse and he knows it. His last word is basically "Shut up! God knows what he's doing!"

Romans 9:10-21: 10 Nor is that all; something similar happened to Rebecca when she had conceived children by one husband, our ancestor Isaac. 11 Even before they had been born or had done anything good or bad (so that God's purpose of election might continue, 12 not by works but by his call) she was told, "The elder shall serve the younger." 13 As it is written,

"I have loved Jacob,
but I have hated Esau."

14 What then are we to say? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! 15 For he says to Moses,

"I will have mercy on whom I have mercy,
and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion."

16 So it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God who shows mercy. 17 For the scripture says to Pharaoh, "I have raised you up for the very purpose of showing my power in you, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth." 18 So then he has mercy on whomever he chooses, and he hardens the heart of whomever he chooses. 19 You will say to me then, "Why then does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" 20 But who indeed are you, a human being, to argue with God? Will what is molded say to the one who molds it, "Why have you made me like this?" 21 Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one object for special use and another for ordinary use?

In poetry the thrust of this passage is described by a staunch supporter of predestinarian theology:

From Douglas Wilson, *Easy Chairs, Hard Words: Conversations on the Liberty of God* (Oakcross Publications, 1991), p. 189: [omitted from second edition]

Eternity and time confound
The buckling minds of mortal men,
Who rail at God as though He were
A lesser god, or one of *them*.
They hate discriminating love,
And drag it into human courts
To try to crucify the cross.

“Will you try *me*? our Lord retorts.
Though pearls may fall beneath the swine
They do not therefore cease to be,
And trampling won’t deface the shine
Decreed before eternity.
So hold your peace, rebellious pot,
The Lord is God – and you are not.

4. Love is the fulfilling of the law: Romans 13:8-10. Instead of emphasizing the payment of a price to satisfy the claims of external law, a position more in keeping with substitutionary Pauline theology, Paul moves here to that view of law which sees its ultimate fulfillment in internalization:

Romans 13:8-10: Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. 9 The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” 10 Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law (NRSV).

In conclusion, we can say that the paradoxes in Paul’s epistles match the paradoxes in real life. With reference to law, that means that obedience is impossible – yet is God’s expectation for his children. And God does not expect the impossible.

Theme: “Christ’s Church and the Law”

Leading Question: “Given the differing reactions to law within the human family, how can a single church unite them all in Christ?”

Introduction to the Issue. If we are serious about uniting all God’s children in his church, then we must learn how to live together with differing perspectives on the law and the various teachings of the church that result from those perspectives.

In Scripture, the best place to see that diversity at work is in Paul’s first letter to the believers at Corinth. In this letter Paul uses several different metaphors for depicting this diversity:

Agriculture: 1 Cor. 3:5-9

Building: 1 Cor. 3:9-15

Temple: 1 Cor. 3:16-17 – **Note:** This is not a health reform passage referring to the human body; for that purpose the “temple” passage of 1 Cor. 6:19-20 is better suited. Here the “you” is plural – this is a church passage, the nuance is captured by the CEV translation: “16 All of you surely know that you are God’s temple and that his Spirit lives in you. 17 Together you are God’s holy temple, and God will destroy anyone who destroys his temple. – 1 Cor. 3:16-17, CEV

Body: 1 Cor. 12

From the writings of Ellen White, the comments on “The Bible Teacher,” cited from *Counsels to Parents and Teachers*, 432-433 in lesson six, are powerful and revealing. There she argues that having different Bible teachers for the youth is as essential as having different books of the Bible because “the minds of men differ.”

From the standpoint of our understanding of law, 1 Corinthians 3:5-9 may be most instructive, for it suggests that Paul was the one who sowed while it was Apollos who watered the seed. Spelled out in terms of church life, that would make Paul the evangelist, Apollos the pastor. Typically – though there are notable exceptions – those who give a strong substitutionary emphasis are more effective off-the-street evangelists. People who are becoming aware of their deep sinfulness are drawn to a message that addresses their despair and offers a healing balm in the sacrificial death of Christ. Apollos is more the pastor who deals with those who growing in Christ and may be more drawn to a presentation of the goodness of God.

A parenthetical comment is appropriate here, one that refers to the audio dialogue that accompanies this study guide. Dave Thomas, Dean of the Walla Walla University School of Theology, is more Pauline in his theology while I am more Johannine. Our conversations on the topic have enriched us both. Some time ago when we were comparing our differing perspectives, he shared what I consider to be a profound insight. Referring to our respective “spiritual autobiographies,” he noted that my growth in Christ seems to have begun with a deep appreciation of the goodness of God and that I am now deepening my understanding of the sinfulness of humankind. By contrast, his serious growth in Christ began with an awareness of his sinfulness before God and he is now deepening his understanding of God’s goodness.

In 1989, I preached a sermon with the title, “The Adventist Church at Corinth.” Using 1 Corinthians as my starting point, I portrayed the “three strands” of Adventist thinking, ordering them under the names of the three preachers who had stirred things up in Corinth: Peter, Paul, and Apollos. My point was that each had a part to play in the church and we should allow for all three. Taking my life in my hand, I gave names under each of the three headings. The outpouring of thanks from a wide variety of listeners startled me. I have never received so much positive affirmation of a sermon as I did following that event.

In my book, *Beyond Common Ground* (PPPA, 2009), I include a revision of that sermon – minus most of the names! I reproduce that chapter here with minor modifications.

The Adventist Church at Corinth
Based on Chapter 20 of *Beyond Common Ground* (PPPA, 2009), pp. 228-39

The Bible says: “It has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, ‘I belong to Paul,’ or ‘I belong to Apollos,’ or ‘I belong to Cephas,’ or ‘I belong to Christ.’ Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” – 1 Cor. 1:11-13

The Bible says: “What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.” – 1 Cor. 3:5-7

Whenever the church desires status in the world, worries about “looking good” before our upscale friends, plans for attractive new buildings that are properly “representative,” then the sporadic scandals, the inevitable antics of human beings who are members of the church cause us acute embarrassment. We cry out to ourselves, if not to each other, O that our church could always look nice so that nice people would want to belong!

That’s when it is particularly helpful to turn to Scripture and remind ourselves that God’s people seldom have had their act together for more than a few minutes at a time. Dip your finger into Scripture anywhere and ask the question: How were God’s people doing? Whether from Old Testament or New the answer is likely to be grim.

That could be discouraging. But in a strange back-door sort of way, discovering that all God’s people have their troubles, even the ones we thought were perfect, actually can be encouraging. I still vividly remember an occasion in the School of Theology when one of our senior colleagues whom we all admired, was not just late for a departmental appointment, he plumb forgot. He was never late. Students were not late to his classes nor did they turn in late papers. On-time was always the word. I think the rest of us were a bit startled at our almost unrestrained glee when he slipped. The proof was in! He was human just like the rest of us! It was not an angry, so-there, I-told-you-so kind of reaction. Rather, a certain sense of relief that swept over us, bonding us even closer to a colleague we had long revered.

When I leaf through the psalms, I discover a record of unrelenting trouble. And I wonder why we memorized only the nice things when we were kids: “For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways. They shall bear thee up in their hands, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone” (Ps. 91:11-12, KJV). “The angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear him, and delivereth them” (Ps. 34.7, KJV).

But just as prominent in the Psalms, if not more so, is the solemn cry: “Thou didst leave me in the lurch, Lord.” Why did we not memorize more words like these: “Have mercy upon me, O Lord, for I am in trouble: mine eye is consumed with grief, yea my soul and my belly. For my life is spent with grief, and my years with sighing; my strength faileth because of mine iniquity, and my bones are consumed” (Ps. 31:9-10, KJV). Or from another psalm: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me? Why art thou so far from helping me, and from the words of my roaring? O my God, I cry in the daytime, but thou hearest not; and in the night season, and am not silent” (Ps. 22:1, 2, KJV). That was not just Jesus’ prayer, it was the prayer of a real, live, struggling saint in the Old Testament. To be sure, the Psalmists almost always move on to faith. But they do spend a chunk of time talking about their troubles.

And isn’t that more typical of our lives? Think of the people close to you, your family and friends. Think of this past week, this past month, this past year. Do you not see more than enough pain, sorrow, uncertainty, and discouragement?

Given this seething cauldron of a world in which we find ourselves, the church is God’s gift to us, a community where we may find help, healing, and understanding. Yet is it not curious that this healing community is the source of so much strife?

Maybe it is because we see the church as the guarantor of truth. And, of course, we are easily convinced that *our* view of truth is the one the church must preserve and we act accordingly. Though we are drawn by the presence of the divine, all too often we are driven away by the presence of the human. It is easy to hurt others in the name of the truth.

But if our community is a troubled one, God has given us the story of another troubled community from which we can learn. One of the most instructive for us, I believe, is the church at Corinth.

Drawing its membership from people with a very checkered background, the Corinthian church was checkered still. Paul reminded the saints that not many of them had been wise, powerful, or of noble birth when God had called them (1 Cor. 1:26). He ticks off a list of violent offenders against God and the human race, adding, “And such were some of you.” (1 Cor. 6:11). But he goes on to say: “You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God.”

Washed and sanctified? Not completely. Judging by Paul’s correspondence, the Corinthians believers still were struggling with just about every category of sin known to humankind. Perhaps most alarming of all, they were choosing up sides behind their favorite preachers.

And yet, right at that point, Paul and the church at Corinth have something important to tell us, for the three favorite preachers at Corinth, Paul, Peter (Cephas), and Apollos, can serve as convenient types of three different perspectives in Adventism, three different ways of relating to God and world. These same three perspectives can be found in Christianity in general, but they have come to stand out rather vividly in Adventism in recent years because charismatic spokespersons for each tradition have wanted to say, “This is the way, walk ye in it.”

Paul, however, wants to argue that each of the three traditions, each of the three preachers, has a proper place in the church. You can't just choose one. You need all three. The church as the body of Christ or as the temple of God can only be complete when all three parts are there. That is the point of this chapter.

Now I must caution you that I am taking some liberties with the text of 1 Corinthians, a risky thing to do in the presence of numerous competent New Testament scholars. But since the New Testament is that part of the Bible that tells us most clearly about the priesthood of all the believers (1 Peter 2:5, 9), perhaps they will allow an Old Testament student to tread carefully upon their sacred turf.

So let us focus on some important sections of Paul's first letter to the church at Corinth.

1 Corinthians 1:10-17. Here Paul identifies the three key spokespersons: Peter, Apollos, and himself. Later in the same letter he comments briefly on Apollos, but says nothing further about Peter. So if we are to use these three names as "types" of three different perspectives, we will have to fill in the picture from elsewhere in the New Testament. Actually, if we were to identify the three perspectives by means of their favorite New Testament literature, we would put Peter with Matthew and James, Apollos with John. More about that below. But first we must look more carefully at the chapter in which Paul describes the relationship between himself and Apollos and how each serves the larger church in a particular way.

1 Corinthians 3. Earlier in this book (chapter 8), several "pictures" from 1 Corinthians 3 were noted under the heading of "Biblical Pluralism." Chapter 3 begins with a food model: milk is for babies, solid food for adults (1 Cor. 3:1, 2). Any congregation is likely to have both.

The next picture is agricultural: Paul sows, Apollos waters, but God gives the increase (1 Cor. 3:6-9). In short, the work assignments are different.

The next picture is a building that uses different materials, all of which are important for God's "temple," the church (1 Cor. 3:10-17).

In 1 Corinthians 12 yet another picture, the human body, illustrates the diversity of gifts within the church.

All these contribute to our understanding of a robust biblical pluralism. For my purposes, the truly crucial verses are 3:5-7 where Paul describes himself as the one who sows and Apollos as the one who waters. In other words, Paul is the front-line evangelist, Apollos is the pastor/nurturer. The language of 1 Cor. 3:16-17 drives home Paul's argument. "All of you are God's temple," he argues. "God will destroy anyone who destroys his temple and you" – he tells the Corinthians – "are that temple." In other words, if you drive out Paul, Peter, or Apollos from the church, and thereby weaken the church, you are in deep trouble with God. The temple of God needs all three to be strong and whole.

But now let's live dangerously and make the application to the Adventist church. I could mention a goodly number of prominent Adventists in each category. That would make for more interesting reading. But I have resisted the temptation. In very brief form, however, the following characterizations of what it means to "obey" can get us started:

Peter & Co. say that you *must* obey and *can* obey. The perfectionist element is strong here.

Paul & Co. say you must try to obey, but you never really can. Jesus pays the price for you. Grace and substitution are particularly strong here.

Apollos & Co. say the important thing is to try. Love is what matters and the heart is won by a picture of the Father's love.

We can flesh the picture out a bit more:

Peter is optimistic, practical, and tends to think in concrete terms rather than abstract. He likes Proverbs in the Old Testament, Matthew and James in the new. Peter tells us to make a list of what needs to be done. Then do it. Peter can claim to be a perfectionist because he has reduced the claims of perfection to a list of things to do and a list of things not to do. Action, not motive, is what counts.

Paul is much more pessimistic, at least about human nature, and much more introspective and sensitive to that simmering cauldron of emotions that shapes our lives. The crucial letters here are Romans and Galatians. Life is more complex for Paul. He tries his best and still cries out: "Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" – "Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Rom. 7:24-25). Paul can't do it; he is absolutely dependent on the Lord Jesus Christ. God is the great judge of all; before that Great Judge, Jesus stands in Paul's place, the substitute.

Apollos is optimistic, inquisitive, philosophically oriented, and is especially attracted to the Gospel of John. For Apollos, God is gentle and understanding, more a father than a judge. And Jesus is not so much the sacrifice which satisfies the demands of holiness up there, as God's message of love to us down here. "He who has seen me has seen the Father," said Jesus (John 14:9). That nurtures Apollos' heart and soul.

Another way of characterizing the three positions would be to say that **Peter** is theocentric – human reason is not so important as obedience to a divine command. **Paul** is not only theocentric, he is Christocentric. Obedience to a divine command is still terribly important, but it happens in Christ Jesus. Human wisdom, human effort is suspect. God is everything and He gives it all to us in Christ Jesus. **Apollos** is more anthropocentric. For him it is important to understand the *truth* about God. Human beings are not so much wretched worms waiting to be saved as they are jewels just waiting to be polished.

But now let's cast all this into a teaching model. The goal in each instance is to effect obedience and reunion with God. How would Peter, Paul and Apollos go about the task of teaching?

Let's imagine each of them as the piano teacher for a ten-year old boy. The task: Play a Mozart Concerto:

Peter: Peter as a teacher is happy if the student has no memory lapses and gets the notes right. "Perfect!" he exclaims. But he can only speak of perfection because the standard is a limited one. He does not expect a ten-year old to reflect all the fine nuances of great music. The danger is that the student may never even attempt to reach the higher standard.

Paul: Paul as a teacher is a very sensitive musician. "This is great music," he says. "But you can't possibly master it. Here, I'll play it for you." The substitute takes over. Great music is produced by a master and the student is captivated. But the danger is that the student may never seriously attempt to bridge the gulf between his own abilities and those of the master.

Apollos: Apollos as teacher is especially concerned that the student's efforts be rewarded. "Good job!" he says, when the student tries hard – regardless of how rough the music might sound. The student feels encouraged. But the danger is that he will mistake effort for mastery.

Note the weaknesses of each: With Peter, the student can view as mastery something that

actually is less than mastery. With Paul, the student can allow another to attain mastery instead of attempting it himself. With Apollos, the student may be content to allow effort and good intentions to replace mastery.

A master teacher will incorporate the best of all three elements. I well remember sitting in on a music lesson when one of my daughters was just beginning with a new cello teacher. I was absolutely intrigued as I watched this master teacher blend the best from all three worlds: You can do it! (Peter). There is an awesome standard beyond your reach! (Paul). You did your best, that's good! (Apollos).

Most Adventists can and do profit from all three perspectives. But our failure to be careful Bible students, distinguishing between the three emphases, makes us very vulnerable if a particular spokesperson for one of the three strands becomes too forthright or too narrow in public statements. One of the best examples is Desmond Ford, who was heavily involved in the Adventist campmeeting circuit, blessing Adventists right and left with his preaching, until his Adventist Forum presentation at Pacific Union College (Oct. 27, 1979). At that fateful meeting he declared that there was “no biblical way of proving the investigative judgment.” Immediately the church was polarized. Careless statements on all sides made matters worse. And some were entirely too eager to paste the label of “new theology” on anything that sounded new, different, or even remotely similar to something Ford might have said. That made teaching or writing very difficult in the church and we are not yet out of the woods on that score.

The differences in people and differences in our relationship with God at different times in our life will often determine which one of the emphases is most helpful at a particular point in our experience. Three key aspects from Adventist life and lore can help to illustrate the differences:

Sin: For Peter, sin consists of deeds; a list of things to do and not to do. Paul sees sin more as a twisted nature, a distortion at the very heart of man. Apollos simply sees sin as flawed intention, a lack of love.

Mediator: How does each of the three relate to that troublesome statement from the pen of Ellen White that we “are to stand in the sight of a holy God without a mediator” (*The Great Controversy*, 425)? Both Peter and Paul would see the absence of a mediator as a threat. For Peter, however, the threat can be overcome by perfect obedience. Paul would not know how to interpret such a statement, for he sees Christ as the essential mediator between God and man. Apollos (John) sees the absence of a mediator as a promise, not a threat, a promise of a time when we will know God so well that we will come into his presence without fear.

For me, John's view of the mediator came as a precious insight while I was a ministerial student at Andrews University. I was asking why I needed a mediator if the Father loved me. So I embarked on a study of the biblical concept of mediation and discovered John 14-17. In particular, John 16:26-27 records Jesus' statement: “On that day you will ask in my name. I do *not* [emphasis mine] say to you that I will ask the Father on your behalf; for the Father himself loves you, because you have loved me and have believed that I came from God.”

The reason for the fundamental difference between Paul and John is that the setting in which each views the mediator is quite different. For John, the Mediator represents the Father to humankind. For Paul, the Mediator is humankind's representative before the Father. John's view makes more sense in the setting of a family; Paul's view makes more sense in the setting of a courtroom. Both concepts are thoroughly biblical, though some will be drawn to one picture

more than the other.

Pride: Each of the three traditions is quite capable of reflecting the essence of sin, namely, a wrongful and exclusive pride. The followers of Peter are tempted to claim, “We are the historic Adventists, the only true Adventists.” The followers of Paul are tempted to claim, “We are the only ones who preach the true Gospel.” And the followers of Apollos are tempted to claim, “We are the only ones who really understand the truth about God.” In short, each of the three positions is equally vulnerable to the sinful exaltation of self.

My own insights in this matter have come by a long and circuitous route, and my thinking has been sharpened by the controversy in the church. When Ford declared that there was “no biblical way of proving the investigative judgment,” I was upset with him. The investigative judgment, as I understood it, had become an important part of my theology. So I decided to search out the roots of my understanding of the doctrine. To my amazement, I discovered that my view was based on the later writings of Ellen White, and was not found at all in her earlier works. Ultimately, my research led to the publication of the 6-part Sinai-Golgotha series in the *Adventist Review* in 1981-82. In short, I traced how Ellen White’s perspective on God shifted from an emphasis on the power of God and external motivation, to an emphasis on the goodness of God, and internal motivation.

In that connection, in the initial version of the study which I presented at the West Coast Religion Teachers Conference at PUC in the Spring of 1980, I gave the distinct impression that Ellen White was moving away from one perspective of the Atonement, a price paid heavenward, toward the other perspective, a message sent earthward. I would now have to say that she was adding the second perspective (Apollos, John), while refining the first (Paul). But right at the end of that presentation, my teaching colleague, Jon Dybdahl, raised a question that set me to thinking.

“What do I say to a student,” he asked, “who says that he has a hard time worshipping a God who insists that human beings stand before the whole universe as a witness to God’s goodness? The student told me that he finds it much easier to worship a God who simply gives us salvation as a gift. What do I say to such a student?”

I sensed that I had come close to something very important to Jon. I asked him if we could talk. We did – for two hours, two precious hours. As we shared, Jon described how the message of Christ’s death on his behalf had transformed his life when he was in mission service in Thailand. I described how I had been blessed at the Seminary by John’s message of the incarnate Mediator.

Just prior to my conversations with Dybdahl I had finished reading a book by Robert Brinsmead (*Judged by the Gospel*, 1980) in which he had imposed Paul’s courtroom setting on the Gospel of John. So I blurted out, “It’s just not fair to do to John what Brinsmead does to John.” To which Dybdahl responded, “And it’s just not fair to do to Romans what Maxwell does to Romans.” At that point, something like scales fell from both of our eyes, and we realized that I was drawn more to John and he was drawn more to Paul. The perspectives are different, but both are thoroughly biblical. We agreed that we should let John be John, and Paul be Paul. Now we still carry on lively discussions, but don’t have to read each other out of the church. It is a great joy and a relief.

Such an approach requires a more careful reading of both John and Paul, rather than a homogenizing of both. We all have to resist the temptation to claim support for our position from

passages that may not share our perspective at all.

Is it not possible that such differences can explain why there were three favorite preachers in Corinth instead of just one? The differences are real. And Paul tells us they are legitimate.

Paul emphasizes the great gulf between God and humanity. That message reaches the hearts of those who have been oppressed by too much of Peter. It reaches those who are just awakening to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, those who sense the great chasm between themselves and God. They don't need a gentle God so much as they need a high and powerful One who stands for all that is holy and good – but who sent Jesus Christ to pay the price for human sin. In Christ such a one can find peace and joy.

But some Adventists, including many who have grown up with good and gentle parents, are very much attracted to Apollos. For them God is gentle and kind. Yes, Paul sows the seed, Apollos waters, but they are particularly blessed by Apollos.

I will not attempt to critique all three positions, but given my own natural home in the Apollos perspective, perhaps I could note what I perceive to be a significant weakness in this position that I call home. To be blunt, our anger often comes up short. God smiles a lot. He even ends up smiling when he shouts. But in the world in which we live, Christians must retain the ability to be angry and get angry. When innocent women are gunned down by an man who hates women – is that not a time for great anger, for being ashamed of this race of beings called human? Apollos has a hard time getting angry enough at sin.

What of the Future?

Can the church learn to live with the differences between Peter, Paul, and Apollos? I hope so. I sense an increasing mood among us to come together, to pray, to share, to help each other in our difficulties and sorrows, to try harder to understand each other. And the variety in Scripture is God's way of meeting that very need. To sense the differences between Peter, Paul, and Apollos should not tear down the temple of God, but build it up. And our failure to take Scripture seriously places the church at risk. The study of His word is the source of our strength, the measure of our unity. And it is Scripture that also sets the limits for our diversity.

To close this chapter, I will cite a passage from the pen of Ellen White. Generally she is quoted in support of each of the three traditions. And because she wrote so much over such a wide period of time, she can be used to support any of the three perspectives, and even to pit one against the other. But in *Counsels to Parents and Teachers*, she declares that we need different teachers and the different books in the Bible “because the minds of men differ.” (See lesson #6 in this series for full quote.)

My students and my correspondents have had experiences with the Lord that have enriched me greatly. This world is such a complex place that I am convinced we have only begun to fight when it comes to understanding each other and the needs of those around us. One of the most exciting challenges before us is to learn from Scripture how we can better meet the needs of God's children. He wants his church to be the place where wounded, hurting people can come together, to find understanding, hope, and courage, and to remind each other that a better world lies ahead. Until that better world comes, may God grant each of us grace to help build the temple of God so that we may all worship within.

Theme: “Christ’s Kingdom and the Law”

Leading Question: “In God’s new kingdom, how will the law of God be different than that law of God that we now know?”

Introduction to the Issue: In this sinful world, attitudes toward God’s law vary enormously. Some obey without raising any questions; some obey while raising all kinds of questions; and some simply rebel. What will happen to all that in a new world?

Remarkably, in the audio conversation that accompanies this study guide, my two conversation partners (Joe Galusha, Professor of Biology, WWU and Dave Thomas, Dean of the School of Theology, WWU) and I all agreed that in God’s new kingdom the new covenant promise of Jeremiah 31:31-34 will be fully operative. The key lines are:

“No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more” (vs. 34)

In other words, all rebels have vanished. The transformed rebels who are there – and there will be many – rebel no longer. God’s law is written on the heart and response to the law is fully intuitive.

Where my conversation partners and I were not so clear is the status of law until we arrive in the kingdom. I am prepared to argue with vigor that the new covenant promise can be operative in this world so that our response to God’s law here on earth can move in the direction of being fully intuitive. At least the process will have a very serious beginning. But once the Lord returns to take his people home, we all agreed that we will be in perfect harmony with reference to that law.

The question of why we differed so markedly on our views of how law operates in our sinful world now is one worth pursuing in our Sabbath School classes.

To celebrate the “hope” which motivates all of us, I would like to conclude this series of lessons with two of my favorite new earth quotes. One is from Isaiah 11, the description of God’s vegetarian kingdom. The other is from Ellen White’s book, *The Great Controversy*, indeed what I quote here are the concluding paragraphs of that book. I know of no finer description of the victory of love over selfishness in the great conflict between good and evil.

The question has been: Will the universe follow the law of selfishness or the law of self-sacrificing love? The answer will then be clear. Here is her answer and ours, preceded by the glorious picture of God’s vegetarian kingdom in Isaiah. It is a world in which no one eats anyone else. All live together in peace.

Isaiah 11:6-9

6 The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,

the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
7 The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
8 The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
9 They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.

“The Controversy Ended”

Ellen White, *The Great Controversy*, 677-78

There the redeemed shall know, even as also they are known. The loves and sympathies which God Himself has planted in the soul shall there find truest and sweetest exercise. The pure communion with holy beings, the harmonious social life with the blessed angels and with the faithful ones of all ages who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb, the sacred ties that bind together “the whole family in heaven and earth” (Ephesians 3:15) – these help to constitute the happiness of the redeemed.

There, immortal minds will contemplate with never-failing delight the wonders of creative power, the mysteries of redeeming love. There will be no cruel, deceiving foe to tempt to forgetfulness of God. Every faculty will be developed, every capacity increased. The acquirement of knowledge will not weary the mind or exhaust the energies. There the grandest enterprises may be carried forward, the loftiest aspirations reached, the highest ambitions realized; and still there will arise new heights to surmount, new wonders to admire, new truths to comprehend, fresh objects to call forth the powers of mind and soul and body.

All the treasures of the universe will be open to the study of God's redeemed. Unfettered by mortality, they wing their tireless flight to worlds afar – worlds that thrilled with sorrow at the spectacle of human woe and rang with songs of gladness at the tidings of a ransomed soul. With unutterable delight the children of earth enter into the joy and the wisdom of unfallen beings. They share the treasures of knowledge and understanding gained through ages upon ages in contemplation of God's handiwork. With undimmed vision they gaze upon the glory of creation – suns and stars and systems, all in their appointed order circling the throne [677/678] of Deity. Upon all things, from the least to the greatest, the Creator's name is written, and in all are the riches of His power displayed.

And the years of eternity, as they roll, will bring richer and still more glorious revelations of God and of Christ. As knowledge is progressive, so will love, reverence, and happiness increase. The more men learn of God, the greater will be their admiration of His character. As Jesus opens before them the riches of redemption and the amazing

achievements in the great controversy with Satan, the hearts of the ransomed thrill with more fervent devotion, and with more rapturous joy they sweep the harps of gold; and ten thousand times ten thousand and thousands of thousands of voices unite to swell the mighty chorus of praise.

And every creature which is in heaven, and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard I saying, Blessing, and honor, and glory, and power, be unto Him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever and ever.”— Rev. 5:13.

The great controversy is ended. Sin and sinners are no more. The entire universe is clean. One pulse of harmony and gladness beats through the vast creation. From Him who created all, flow life and light and gladness, throughout the realms of illimitable space. From the minutest atom to the greatest world, all things, animate and inanimate, in their unshadowed beauty and perfect joy, declare that God is love.