

# DANIEL P. FULLER'S

## GOSPEL AND LAW: CONTRAST OR CONTINUUM?

*A Review Article*

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Daniel P. Fuller, professor of hermeneutics at Fuller Theological Seminary, has addressed with this book a subject of perennial interest throughout the history of the Christian church. Particularly today, with the current ascendancy of evangelical scholarship, the topic is timely.

My own theological pilgrimage dictates a special interest in Fuller's subject. I was raised in an evangelical presbyterian church, but was early educated in the footnotes of the (old) Scofield Bible. I learned the "five points of Calvinism" from a professor of Dallas Theological Seminary who affirmed them all himself. I spent many Sunday afternoons as a young Christian listening to evangelist Charles E. Fuller, and enjoying letters addressed to the Old Fashioned Revival Hour as they were read by Mrs. Fuller. Today I regard myself as a "covenant" theologian, but continue to appreciate many of the positive aspects of the ministry of dispensational brethren.

In his earlier days as a theologian, Fuller rejected dispensationalism in favor of covenant theology because he perceived that Scripture presented one people of God rather than two. He judged that since the Gentiles were "grafted" into the trunk, they were indeed one with Israel.

But then Fuller, spurred by questions from his students, concluded that covenant theology like dispensationalism failed to perceive the continuum between the Mosaic law and the gospel. Since faith also was required under the Mosaic era, the covenantal concept of a "covenant of works" under Moses in contrast with a "covenant of grace" under the gospel could not stand. So he now has determined that he must reject covenant theology in order to promote a theology of genuine continuum between the two testaments.

### **Fuller's Central Thesis**

At the outset of this review, it may be helpful to state Fuller's central thesis without attempting to evaluate the correctness of his perception of dispensationalism and covenant theology, or their relation to one another. The central thesis may be stated as follows:

Contrary to dispensationalism's "two ways of salvation," and contrary to covenant theology's distinction between a "covenant of works" and a "covenant of grace," a continuum must be seen between "law" as administered under the old covenant and "grace" as administered under the new. This continuum is achieved by noting the centrality of the "obedience of faith" as the fulfillment of the law in every age.

### **Fuller's Analysis of Covenant Theology and Dispensationalism**

Interestingly, Fuller sees a remarkable similarity in covenant theology and dispensationalism in the matter of law in relation to gospel. In his estimation, both systems build on a deep contrast between law under Moses and gospel in the present age.

#### **Covenant Theology**

According to Fuller, the Reformed tradition has maintained since the seventeenth century a "covenant of works" embodied in the law of Moses in contrast with a "covenant of grace" as set forth in the gospel (p. 6). Fuller quotes several sources of covenant theology to establish this root distinction between a covenant of works under Moses and a covenant of grace under Christ (pp. 27, 43, 51-53).

#### **Dispensationalism**

The essence of this same distinction is to be found in dispensationalism. As a matter of fact, according to Fuller, the rigid distinction between "Israel" and the "church" in dispensational thinking stems from a determination to keep law and gospel altogether separate from one another (p. 3). More recent dispensationalism may have made some efforts to minimize this distinction. The raw wording of the (old) Scofield Bible has been modified which stated that under the present dispensation of grace the point of testing is "no longer legal obedience as the condition of salvation..." (p. 27). Yet the more contemporary statements of dispensationalism, according to Fuller, have only served to eradicate all substantive distinctions between itself and covenant theology. For, says Fuller, now both groups "regard God as confronting men with what is generally a legal revelation so that they will despair of their ability to save themselves and respond to revelation setting forth salvation by grace" (p. 45).

### **Fuller's Proposed Alternative: A "Theology of Continuum"**

Fuller rejects the idea that the law of Moses is a "covenant of works" that leads men to despair so they will come to Christ. Instead, the law of Moses presents a law of faith which *may be kept*. Always salvation has been by the "obedience of faith." When properly understood, the consistent demand in scripture for the "obedience of faith" explains why some promises in the Old Testament and the New Testament seem to be contingent on "obedience" (p. 113). Throughout scripture, it is the "obedience of faith" that is necessary for salvation.

So a continuum may be achieved between the demands of the law and the invitation of the gospel by understanding the "obedience of faith" as fulfilling the demands of the law. The revelatory law of Moses demands only faith and its consequences, an achievable goal, as the way of salvation.

### Critique

In responding to Fuller's salutary effort to reconcile law and gospel, some evaluation may be offered of his analysis of dispensationalism and of covenant theology. But ultimately, some response must be made to Fuller's analysis of Paul.

#### Fuller's Analysis of Dispensationalism

In sum, Fuller's analysis of dispensationalism may prove to be the most helpful part of his book. His response to dispensationalism both from a historical and an exegetical perspective is indeed insightful. His thorough analysis of the significance of Amos 9:11, 12 as quoted in Acts 15 deserves special attention (pp. 177-182). Essentially he is correct in noting that when dispensationalism finds grace in the Mosaic law it is not far from covenant theology's concept of a single purpose of God that spans the ages.

#### Fuller's Analysis of Covenant Theology

Fuller is correct in noting that covenant theology builds on a distinction between the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. He also is correct in pointing out that covenant theologians understand men today to be *condemned* under the covenant of works as originally instituted by God.

But his reading through, around, and over the very statements of covenant theologians which he quotes about the Mosaic covenant is somewhat baffling. In succession he cites O.T. Allis (p. 20), the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (pp. 20, 21), Charles Hodge (p. 27) and Louis Berkhof (p. 53), totally ignoring their unanimous assertion that the Sinaitic covenant was not a covenant of works. Despite their consistent disclaimers, he equates a "legal element" in covenant theology with the idea that God actually imposed a "covenant of works" on post-fall man for his salvation. The extreme to which Fuller is willing to go in this direction is found in his assertion that John Calvin was guilty of the Galatian heresy (p. 117).

It might be observed that Fuller's rejection of covenant theology has arisen out of a grave misapprehension. Indeed, Adam at creation was under a covenant of works. No blessing was promised despite the demerit of sin in God's original commitment to man. But under Moses man clearly was saved by faith despite his violation of the laws of God.

This serious misapprehension of covenant theology is regrettable. It certainly cannot advance understanding among evangelicals if that which is repeatedly stated can be so totally ignored.

#### Fuller's Analysis of Paul

Now we come to the most disconcerting part of the book. For Fuller has understood Paul in such a way that his formulation of Paul's theology almost certainly will mislead the church despite all good intentions.

### The Central Message of Galatians

Fuller asserts that the central message of Galatians is sanctification rather than justification (pp. 114, 115). This declaration occurs despite the repeated usage of the term "to justify" throughout the crucial section beginning at Galatians 2:15, and despite the significant role Galatians has played in controversies over justification throughout the history of the church.

Of course, it could be that sanctification rather than justification is the central concern of Paul's letter to the Galatians. But it seems much more likely that in a passage such as Galatians 3:1-6, Paul is arguing from the experience of the Galatians in sanctification to the way of justification. When Paul insists on sanctification as the natural outworking of justification, he has not shifted the center of his polemic to the subject of sanctification. He simply is noting the vital life that inevitably will result from the gloriously liberating divine decree of justification (Gal 2:20). Justification, not sanctification, is the center of Galatians.

Missing the center of Galatians is symptomatic of the central problem in Fuller's major thesis. His book purports to resolve the question of the relation of gospel to law. Yet hardly any evidence is given of a proper understanding of the necessary distinction between the role of law in *justification* and in *sanctification*. Since the time of Paul (not to speak of the protestant reformation), it seems unthinkable to attempt to resolve the law-gospel question apart from a clear distinction between justification and sanctification. Yet Fuller never introduces with any force the distinction between a righteousness performed *for* us by Christ which is legally imputed to the ungodly sinner, and a righteousness worked *into* us by Christ through the processes of sanctification. By this omission, the most basic categories for resolving the question of law in relation to gospel have been ignored by Fuller.

When Fuller asserts that covenant theology cannot affirm sanctification by faith alone as well as justification by faith alone, he has completely overlooked the reformed tradition, both ancient and modern (*cf.* G.C. Berkouwer's *Faith and Sanctification*, pp. 42-44). Sanctification is by faith alone because the justified sinner looks by faith alone to the work of Christ alone *in* him, even as he looked by faith alone to the righteousness of Christ alone *for* him.

The implications arising out of Fuller's failure to distinguish with precision and clarity between gospel and law in justification and gospel and law in sanctification have the potential for disturbing the entire spectrum of theology. Let it be remembered that the blood of the reformers was solemnly shed over this distinction.

### The "Obedience of Faith"

In substitution for the biblically clear distinction between the legally imputed righteousness of justification and the vitally infused righteousness of



sanctification, Fuller opts for the flexible meanings that may be introduced into the phrase, the "obedience of faith." Unwittingly it seems, Fuller plays on an ambiguity inherent in the phrase. When he speaks of "salvation" by the "obedience of faith," does he mean

- (1) faith as attaching to Christ altogether?
- (2) the obedient actions arising from faith?
- (3) faith considered in itself as an act of obedience?

Because of the ambiguity inherent in the phrase, Fuller may slide among its various meanings. A sample selection of passages showing lack of clarity includes the following:

"...the (Mosaic) law is, indeed, a law of faith, enjoining only the obedience of faith and the works that proceed therefrom..." (p. xi).

"I have further concluded that compliance with the Mosaic law is an 'obedience of faith' (Rom 1:5; 15:26)" (p. xi).

"...the objective standard of the Mosaic law itself taught nothing but the obedience of faith which excludes all boasting" (p. 74).

"When one understands what a 'work of faith' is, he ceases to be troubled by those Bible passages which stress the works one must do in order to be saved, or more fully blessed, while others speak only of believing...a 'work of faith' or the 'obedience of faith' presupposes an inseparable connection between faith and resulting works" (p. 113).

"...the works of faith involved doing all that is commanded in Scripture. That is why the Mosaic law is a 'law of faith' (p. 110).

"...a holy God would never require anything from sinful men except the obedience and works of faith..." (p. 156).

"...the promises conditioned upon the fulfillment of specific works...are [conditioned on] nothing but the works of faith" (p. 161).

Taken in themselves, each of these statements may be read as being a positive statement of biblical truth. But in context, Fuller is saying that a continuum may be established between law and gospel when it is recognized that the revelatory law of Moses never required anything other than the "obedience of faith," meaning sometimes the obedience which is faith and meaning at

other times the obedient actions done in faith. In other words, man is saved by *doing*, by keeping the revelatory law of Moses, which is a law of faith.

Now, some questions are in order.

(1) Does Fuller mean that the standards of righteousness laid out by the ten commandments actually are achievable by fallen man as he acts in faith?

(2) Does Fuller mean that the imperfect and flawed obedience of a believer is viewed by God as fulfillment of the law's demands, so long as that flawed obedience is done *in faith*?

(3) Does Fuller propose that the obedience demanded of man *before* the fall was different from the obedience demanded of man *after* the fall in that the obedience demanded before the fall was to be done *without* faith while the obedience demanded *after* the fall was to be done *in* faith?

(4) Since the revelatory law of Moses demanded nothing more than the "obedience of faith," and since this phrase may be understood to mean "obedient acts performed in faith," may it be said that a sinner can be *justified* by his obedient acts done in faith?

It may be hoped that Fuller would not be willing to affirm that the sinner is "justified" by the obedient actions done in faith. Most frequently he speaks of the "works" of obedience as the inevitable *result* of faith. It is to be hoped that if asked he would affirm that it is the obedient acts done in faith *by Christ* that are legally reckoned to the sinner by faith alone for his justification.

But the ambiguity is troublesome. The phrase "obedience of faith" cannot in itself provide the final resolution of tension between "law" and "gospel" because the phrase, though Scriptural in itself, fails to provide a distinction between righteousness imputed in justification and righteousness infused in sanctification.

### **The Denial of the Existence of a "Covenant of Works" Principle**

Paul asserts in Romans 5:19 that as through the disobedience of one man the many were made sinners, so also by the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous. This assertion, rooted firmly in the total context of Paul's argumentation, embodies the essence of a "covenant of works" principle. This principle builds on the revelation of God as righteous. Since he will not deny own essence, God demands perfect and absolute righteousness from creatures made in his likeness. Life is impossible for an image-bearer of God apart from perfect righteousness.

So death, understood in part as the shattering of the divine image, must follow wherever unrighteousness appears. The first man came under the curse of death by his single act of disobedience. As the appointed representative of all humanity death came to all men by his sin, for "in Adam all died" (1 Cor 15:22).

Jesus Christ had to accomplish perfect righteousness for his people. If he had sinned a single time, he would have brought himself under the curse for his own unrighteousness. By living a perfect life, he achieved righteousness for all who would trust in him. In this sense, Christ was under a "covenant of works." Only by working in perfect righteousness could he achieve salvation for his people.

The historic fall of man changed neither the righteous nature of God nor his commitment to punish all transgressors with death. Men are condemned today because God in righteousness is committed to punish all sin.

Contrariwise, sinners are saved today, not because of faith, and certainly not because of obedient actions done in faith, for each of these actions contains some pollution of sin which condemns. Instead, men are saved today because of the obedient acts performed *by Christ*, which are legally imputed to the sinner, and received by faith alone. As Paul says, by the obedience of the *one* man, the many are made righteous. The righteousness of God demands a "covenant of works" principle as the basis for the condemnation of sinners, and for the perfect work of Christ.

But when a "covenant of works" principle is denied as the basis for man's *condemnation* and Christ's *work of salvation*, a theological system almost inevitably will introduce the demand for righteousness elsewhere. For the nature of man itself, being in the image of God, attests to the necessity of righteousness for life.

Fuller has refused to acknowledge a "covenant of works" principle as the basis of man's test in creation, as the basis of judgment unto condemnation for sinners today, and as the foundation of the saving work of Christ. As a consequence, he somehow must assert the necessity of righteous works elsewhere.

How, then?

By speaking of the "obedience of faith" as that which fulfills God's righteous requirements. Salvation according to Fuller is by righteous *works*, defined as works done by the guilty sinner in humble faith, rather than works done with a view to earning merit. His formula sounds attractive since it commends *faith* rather than a covenant of works, *humility* rather than merit-seeking, and *obedience* rather than easy-believism.

But in the end, it is not covenant theology that has offered salvation to the guilty, condemned sinner by his own actions of obedience. For covenant theology *explicitly denies* that the sinner is under a "covenant of works" as a way of salvation. Instead, it is Fuller who finally leaves himself open to being understood as commending *works* of faith (the "obedience of faith") as the way of *justification*.

Having rejected the "covenant of works" principle as it relates to Christ's *perfect* obedience for the sinner's salvation, Fuller ultimately will have to settle for an "obedience of faith" that achieves something less than God's standard

of *absolute* perfection. Otherwise, no hope of salvation at all may be offered to the guilty sinner who must keep God's law in faith (the "obedience of faith") for his justification.

### Conclusion

It may be somewhat unclear that current dispensationalism views the Mosaic covenant as a "covenant of works" which Israel had to keep for their salvation. But the dispensationalist certainly is true to the gospel in affirming that salvation today is by grace alone through faith alone.

Covenant theology has maintained consistently a continuum in the relationship between "law" and "gospel" for men since the fall. The good news of the gospel is that Christ does it all *for* us as well as *in* us. He has kept the original demands of God's law for all who will believe in him. He continues to enable renewed sinners more and more to die to sin (which is *law-breaking*) and live to righteousness (which is *law-keeping*).

But Fuller's central thesis contains many dangers. By coupling a denial of a "covenant of works" principle which alone explains the necessity of Christ's perfect life and atoning death with the commendation of an ambiguously formulated "obedience of faith," Fuller could in the end promote the very thing he desires so intently to discourage.