
Auburn Pastors Conference 2002—Covenant Series

I. Covenant Reading

by Steve Schlissel

I want to set the stage by saying that our times are desperate.

It is hard for us to recognize the desperation of our times because materially we are still quite successful. After the tragedy of 9/11 the amount of money that poured into New York City, including Messiah's 9/11 Relief Fund, was overwhelming. Billions came into the city, and people were talking of scores of billions of dollars. In such an economy and under such circumstances we are slow to feel our poverty and the crisis that is upon us. Nevertheless, we still face this crisis and we should know that there are precedents for great prosperity accompanied by an even greater spiritual crisis. In the northern kingdom of Israel in Hosea's time and not long before the destruction of that kingdom the people were experiencing unrivaled prosperity—but that didn't keep them from facing the judgment of God. Will unrivaled prosperity keep us from facing the judgment of God?

Over a hundred years ago Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck wrote about the conflict that would be presented to the world at the dawn of the twentieth century (the article first appeared in English translation in, of all places, the *Methodist Review*, which, of course, today would cause him to be brought up on charges). He stated:

It is well known that at present this conflict is no longer confined to one or another article of our Christian confession, to the authority of Scripture or tradition, to justification or election; and not even any longer to the Deity of Christ or the personality of the Holy Spirit. But in the spiritual conflict which is now waging in every part of the civilized world, the points at issue more and more are the principles of Christianity itself, and the very fundamentals of all religion and of all morality. This conflict extends the whole length of the line. More serious and fiercer than ever before the conflict is between the old and the new world-view. For man has undertaken the gigantic effort of interpreting the whole world, and all things that are therein, in their origin, essence, and end, what is called purely and strictly scientifically, that is, without God, without any visible, supernatural, spiritual element, and simply and alone from the pure data of matter and force. ("Creation or Development," *Methodist Review*, Nov. 1901)

It is a fearful thing to survey our situation a hundred years later. The development and the consistency of humanism has just about gobbled us up so that our children have been given over to humanist education, our institutions have been given over to humanism, and our courts are governed by humanism—all by the very principle that Bavinck warned against. We have forgotten that there ever was a time when a Christian consensus prevailed in our country. The two coasts have obliterated the middle, which has still a large segment of faith; so that the East Coast and the West Coast dictate what we are and what our identity is as a nation. We have even forgotten that there is a conflict. Anybody who says that there is a spiritual conflict is considered to be an oddball; instead, we're supposed to go with the flow and be "nice guys," no matter what.

The courts, the institutions of higher learning, and certainly the media—the elite—all believe that humanism is a given. That is their starting point. There is no God to measure our rightness or wrongness in any idea, in any concept, in any ruling. Therefore, justice has become unpredictable. Education to a large measure is totally relativistic, except for certain measurable things; that is to say, an inch might still be an inch, although Doug Wilson has stories about math standards being flexible now in certain tests. *You are getting it close, and so you are right.* Of course, you have to argue about what *close* is. So, we see the decline of standards because of man becoming the center of the universe. All things being done by him, measured by him, and determined by him has overtaken the entire culture of Western civilization.

The crisis is accelerating because we have a Muslim answer. The Islamic world is not afraid to say that there are absolutes, nor are Muslims afraid to say that these absolutes ought to be applied culturally. They are not afraid to say that you should be willing to die for this. They are not afraid to hijack airplanes and bomb them into buildings and have people die in their cause. Meanwhile, we have our church groups that say, "Come in! You won't feel threatened by our little gathering. We'll just share good feelings and affirm one another." In answer to the Muslim attack on the West we have a feminized church that gets more feminine each day.

The Muslims will win as a result of their boldness, since America is lost in a vast wasteland, doesn't know which way to turn, and is vulnerable to anybody who stands up and says, "Follow me!" We saw this recently with 15-year-old punk crashing an airplane into a building in Florida. The Islamic conversions from a once Christian nation have quadrupled in the U.S. since September 11. They have

never had so many people converting to Islam in America.

On the one hand, we have a wasteland of humanism that has obliterated our Christian consciousness, our Christian history, our sense of having a past that has done glorious things by the grace of God. On the other hand, we have a religion that is not afraid to assert itself as a world power and calls upon people to follow it with a voice that appears to be authoritative. Meanwhile, Christians are in the middle consuming one another, biting and devouring each other, having lost the character of even the Gospel.

The Reformed people, who should be the most responsible and the most mature, have not been as responsible and mature as they should be. We continue, I am afraid, as Reformed and Presbyterian people to think that time was frozen if not in the sixteenth then, at least, in the seventeenth century. We think that once the Westminster Standards were written, truth was frozen, and we can never reopen and reconsider anything again—as if it were necessarily an act of apostasy to develop in our understanding in the application of Scripture.

We have this notion that we should go back in time. However, the only reason that these historic accomplishments were successful is that our Reformed forefathers were building on Roman Catholic capital in a Christianized Europe, but this is no longer the case. Even if we wanted to go back, we couldn't go back for that and a hundred other reasons. Everybody had better wake up and smell the coffee. We are never going back to 1645. We are not going to have an act of parliament to decree that the Westminster Standards are to be the standards for our entire nation. These are desperate times, and any Pollyanna notion that there is a moment in history that is to become the norm for now is false and dangerous. We must not think that the high point of all Christian history was reached at a certain point in time and that every act of reformation is simply a return to that point. We had better begin to understand that we live *today*. This is where God has put us, and we have an obligation to find out what His will is for our generation and for our children's generation. Reformation is a return to the Word of God and the Holy Spirit enlightening us to understand what our responsibilities are in any generation in which we might find ourselves.

Look at how the Scripture speaks about being found righteous in one's generation. It begins with Noah. He was found righteous in his generation. We have gotten to a point where we have abstracted the Word of God, set it up on flash cards into various propositions, and deceived ourselves

into thinking that simply to return to these particular *solas* is all that is necessary for us to make the progress that God would have us make. That is not the case. We have to go back and say that maybe we have been asking the *wrong* questions. Maybe we have approached the Scripture demanding that it conform to certain scholastic or Enlightenment categories. Maybe the error lies in our demand and our approach to Scripture—that it must say what *we* want it to say or answer the questions that *we* want it to answer.

To move from where we are *asking* the Scriptures certain questions to *hearing* what the Scripture would have us ask is a very difficult task. I don't know how to do it. I tried to do it up in Ontario, Canada, recently and almost got killed. The response afterward was very discouraging. One professor of a prominent Reformed seminary wrote in reaction to this speech, "When it comes to the question, *Upon what basis and for what reason am I right with God and an heir of eternal life?* Reformed believers have insisted as rigorously as Luther that the law is repugnant (Calvin's language) to the gospel." He claims that he is quoting Calvin. Well, you can quote Calvin to make him say anything you want. When you have authors like Calvin who wrote so much, then anybody who wants to make him say anything can just go over to the shelf or a CD-ROM to do a search and say, "You know what Calvin said?" Of course Calvin said that, but it wasn't qualified. The same with Luther. He may have said that, but how was it qualified? How does the Bible speak and how does the Bible qualify itself? Is the law "repugnant" to how we stay right with God? Is the *law of God* ever truly repugnant?

This law/Gospel dichotomy is a false one. It is unbiblical. It is a result of asking and demanding that the Scripture answer the *wrong* questions. It has made us unable to hear things to the point where we actually have people who divide the Bible into discreet verses, every one of which is regarded as a proposition of demand for law *or* Gospel. Everything in the Bible is either law *or* Gospel.

Talk about the wrong medicine at the wrong time! Is it possible for anyone to look at our culture today and say that the deepest problem that we are facing as a church is that Christians are trying too hard to *obey* God? Is following the law the problem of our day? Does the *law* stand opposed to the *grace* of God? "The law of the Lord is perfect," the Psalmist says, "converting the soul" (Ps. 19:7). The Scripture testifies that we should get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in us, which can save us. We are not merely to listen to the Word and deceive ourselves but to do what it says. A man who listens to the Word and does not do what it says is like a

foolish man who looks at his face in a mirror and after looking at himself goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. In contrast, a man who looks intently into the perfect law, which gives freedom, and does not forget what he has heard but does it will be blessed. He will have the peace of God, the *shalom* of God. He is the man who is saved.

The psalmist commanded the people to listen to him and to hear his teaching.

² I will open my mouth in parables,
I will utter hidden things, things from of old...

⁵ He decreed statutes for Jacob
and established the law in Israel,
which he commanded our forefathers
to teach their children,

⁶ so the next generation would know them,
even the children yet to be born,
and they in turn would tell their children.

⁷ Then they would put their trust in God
and would not forget his deeds
but would keep his commands. (Ps. 78) ¹

The keeping of the commands of God is identified as putting trust in God; it is contrasted with forgetting God and disobeying God. To be in the Gospel, then, is to be in the law of God.

The question has always been *What does the Lord require?* We have changed the question since Luther's day—perhaps imperceptibly to some but quite drastically if you look at it carefully. The question today is commonly *What must I do to be saved?* But that is the *wrong* question. The biblical question is *What does the Lord require?*

If we don't begin to retool our churches to turn around from *What must I do to be saved?* to *What does the Lord require?* we are going to die. In answering *What must I do to be saved?* we move in the idea of *sola, sola, sola*. Then we embrace the *sola fide* and teach that we are only saved by faith apart from any activity or any response to God's Word. But what kind of faith is *sola fide* faith? There is a certain quality to this saving faith, and there is the spurious faith and there is the pretentious faith. Then the pulpits want us to begin examining our faith. Then we have to "bring up" our faith. Before you know it, everybody thinks that he or she is *not* saved. "How can I really and truly be saved?" To find out, come back next week and the preacher will make you feel guilty, by golly. Week after week

1. *The New International Version*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House) 1984.

the people are berated. Bullied, and tortured in their consciousness on the presupposition that God is as niggardly as the preacher believes Him to be. God only saves with the greatest possible reluctance. When somebody manages to squeak into the kingdom, He snaps His fingers and says, “Shucks! Another one made it. I was hoping that he would be deceived into thinking that he had saving faith when he really didn’t have it.” The whole notion of God is distorted, as if Paul preached a Gospel so full of qualifiers that *faith* becomes a new *work*—and outdoes what the most wicked, abominable, self-righteous Pharisee (as our own Reformed fathers viewed the Pharisees) ever taught about works that had to be performed to enter the kingdom of God.

When we ask the right question (What does the Lord require?), we find that our reorientation is successful. Within this question we come up with the answer that if it were to depend on our righteousness, then we would never attain; however, God has made a provision for us and our children in Jesus Christ. We are the people of the atonement. We have been covered by God. God has given us His Son and the portion of the Holy Spirit without measure through His Son. He has given us sanctification and every grace in Him. We are the people who are now called upon to live in terms of His entire Word. When we ask What must I do to be saved? we end up with Baptist Americana. But when we ask What does the Lord require? we have the possibility of reaching the world.

The difference between these two questions is dramatic and can be seen in the illustration of Archimede’s lever. He understood that with a place to stand and a lever long enough he could move the entire earth. Luther set one foot on the Bible, and with a broken lever he shook the world. Imagine what Luther could have done if he had both feet on the Bible—that is, the Old Testament and the New Testament without imagining an antipathy between them—and used the covenant rather than his mere personal salvation as the lever. Our world can be rocked by people standing solidly on the whole *Word of God* with the lever of the *covenant*.

The Bible as a whole is a covenantal book, but I fear that we have brought our Greek ideas and Greek categories to it. To a certain extent that was necessary. As the Gospel made its way past Jerusalem to overtake the world, the Semitic answers of God to the Greek questions had to be cast in Greek terms. It was unnecessary, however, for the whole church to embrace Greek categories and remain there; rather, it was only necessary to capture the Greek mind and inform it of the covenant—and then continue to make progress. If we have faltered we have to go back to where we made our

mistake.

One of the falterings, or errors, has been in our antipathy to the law, imagining that the Bible views it as Luther viewed it. But the Lord told us in Micah,

Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams,
with ten thousand rivers of oil?
Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression,
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?
⁸ He has showed you, O man, what is good.
And what does the LORD require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God. (Micah 6:7-8 NIV)

Do we see a religion of works here? Is this an example of legalism? No. God has simply told us what He wants from us: do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with Him.

In Genesis 18 God tells us that as He was musing within Himself He chose Abraham, so that he would direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord. By doing what is right and just, Abraham would receive what the Lord had promised him.

The book of Samuel says, “Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams.” “To do what is right and just,” says Solomon “is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice.” In his ruminations about life at the conclusion of Ecclesiastes, Solomon writes, “All has been heard. Here is the conclusion: fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.” When someone says the same thing today he is accused of legalism. To make such a charge borders on apostasy in and of itself. This modern view is a wholesale departure from the Word of God in order to serve an abstract conception of what the Word ought to teach based upon what I want it to teach, which is, How I can personally be saved? This view puts God in the position of being the debtor to man, because somehow I will bring to Him something good enough—if not my external works, then the quality of my personal faith.

In stark contrast to this modern view, what if we begin with the idea that we need *grace* from God? What if we begin with the radical idea that He has given it to us and move to the even more radical idea that He has given it to our children? Then where will we go? Will we teach our children to

doubt God afresh in every generation? Or will we take what He has given us and move it into action and application in the world? “Wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight. Stop doing wrong. Learn to do right. Seek justice.”

In Deuteronomy God tells Israel what they should be absorbed with. “Justice, justice, thou shalt pursue.” He puts it in front of their faces and says, “The mighty king loves justice. He has established equity.” Look at the Jewish community today in its unbelief and see how it has maintained this antithetical mindset and has made application of the Word of God, while we play church. In the Bet Din, or the house of judgment, the Jews resolve their difficulties themselves, because they believe that it is shameful to bring their cases before pagan courts. Of course, there are problems (I can spend a good deal of time telling about the difficulties that they have), but overall their conception of keeping the matter of justice among the covenant people is something that puts us to shame.

We have created this dichotomy between the *church* (the ecclesiastical institution) and the Christian *community* of believers. Therefore, when the church gets together at presbytery or classis meetings, it only handles church business; it doesn't handle covenant community business, which is taken care of outside in other venues. The reason for this division is that we have become experts or adept at *confessional* issues that only deal with narrow concerns but not *life* issues that deal with the application of the faith. One of the first problems that the Talmud deals with is a matter of two men coming into a Bet Din, both handling a cloak and each one claiming that the cloak is his. The Talmud discusses the way to resolve this case. One case after another is brought forth. We reject all that practical wisdom and call it traditionalism, but it is not merely traditionalism; rather, it is an effort to apply the Word of God as found in the laws of God and worked out in history among the covenant people.

In our day our people don't even know the Ten Commandments. We think that we know the Gospel because we have reduced it to four spiritual laws. Not long ago we held a Bible study on Wall Street with about a dozen professing Christians from Prudential Securities and other financial firms. On a lark one day I asked, “Does anybody here know the Ten Commandments?” Not a soul knew them. “Anybody know where to find them?” One person got it to the right testament and had an inkling that they were in Exodus. No one knew that they were repeated in Deuteronomy. This incident reflects the state of our affairs.

This overriding concern with our own personal salvation is based upon a view that God doesn't

want to save anyone and is only playing games with us. So, we have to do something—if it is not by works that we have done then by a kind of faith (which we cannot even identify). For some reason this view is particularly present among Southern Presbyterians, who are essentially Baptists who sprinkle their babies. They think like Baptists. They don't believe that their children are saved by the grace of God. They are waiting for a decision—some sort of cogent, confessible experience of personal regeneration in transition from death to life—because they believe that their children are born in death. They have bought into the Baptist way of thinking, and it is an abomination. Does this mean that there is no legitimacy to spiritual experience? Of course there is. Why should it just be once? Why should it just be twice? It may not be at all; it may be a hundred times. There is growth and development. There are crises in people's lives. There is always the seeking of greater conformity to the entire Word of God, but we don't base salvation upon some supernatural experience that we are able to identify in our children, which differs from what the Word of God has told us. He has told us to look at His grace and that our children bear His name and belong to Him, not *maybe* but *truly*. And then what? *Then live for Him*. Well, how do we do that? *We have to learn His Word*.

If we are willing and obedient, we will eat from the best of the land.

¹⁸ “Come now, let us reason together,”
says the LORD.
“Though your sins are like scarlet,
they shall be as white as snow... (Isa. 1:18)

³ This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Reform your ways and your actions, and I will let you live in this place. ⁴ Do not trust in deceptive words and say, “This is the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD, the temple of the LORD!” ⁵ If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly, ⁶ if you do not oppress the alien, the fatherless or the widow and do not shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not follow other gods to your own harm, ⁷ then I will let you live in this place, in the land I gave your forefathers for ever and ever. ⁸ But look, you are trusting in deceptive words that are worthless. (Jer. 7:3-8)

Don't trust in deceptive words. *We are Reformed. We are Reformed.* Don't trust in deceptive words.
Westminster Confession. Westminster Confession.

You have to keep the whole Word of God and the fear of God in your heart and in your home. That is what God wants. “If you really change your ways and your actions and deal with each other justly; if you don’t oppress the alien, the fatherless, and the widow and you don’t shed innocent blood; if you don’t follow other gods to your own harm, then I will let you live. I desire mercy, not sacrifice” (Zech. 7). God desires mercy, not discreet propositions. This means acknowledgement of God rather than the right *solas*.

We are confessional church in Brooklyn. I know that is hard to believe; however, we do need to make contrasts of things, and I’m using a biblical way of speaking to make a point. Remember that in Amos God says, “I hate, I despise, your religious feasts. I cannot stand your assemblies.” Who authorized those assemblies? God did. Why does He say that He hates them? Because they were not accompanied by a whole-hearted fear of God in conformity to His Word. It is just as easy for God to say today, “I hate, I despise, your confessions of faith. Take them out of my sight. I am disgusted by your *solas*.” Why? Are they not true? Of course, they are true in a proper context, but they are not substitutes for the fear of the Lord. They are not substitutes for whole-hearted, biblical, covenantal religion.

“Seek the LORD, all you humble of the land, and do what he commands. Seek righteousness, seek humility; perhaps you will be sheltered on the day of the LORD’S anger” (Zeph. 2:3). John’s message to Israel was to produce fruit in keeping with repentance. We are told that repentance is a *work*. For pity’s sake, what have we done to ourselves? Don’t think that we can say to ourselves, *We have Calvin as our father*. I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children to Calvin. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

²⁸ One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”

²⁹ “The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.’ ³⁰ Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ ³¹ The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”

³² “Well said, teacher,” the man replied. “You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. ³³ To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

³⁴ When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions. (Mark 12:28-34 NIV)

Jesus Christ said that the commandments of God can be summarized. They can be summarized into love to God and love to neighbor. He didn't say, “I am going to trick you with a command that will put you in the same bind that Luther found himself in. When you finally despair of any hope, you might come out on the other side and be saved by grace.” Such thinking makes the transaction into something preposterous and fraudulent. Jesus looked at him and loved him. Jesus told him the truth. He wasn't setting him up with the first use of the law, or the second, or the third. The very idea of a first, second, and third use of the law is illegal and unbiblical. It demands that the law conform to what we want from it, and if it doesn't do so then we will have none of it. But the law itself is to be our life. “This is your life,” God says. “In the law I have given you atonement. In the law I have given you promises of forgiveness. In the law I have given you the way to live. In the law I have given you the key to life. In the law you will find grace abounding to the chief of sinners.”

We turn it around and say, “No, we will have none of this! That's *law* as opposed to *Gospel*.” Was the problem of the unbelieving Jews of Jesus' day truly that they kept the law? That is what our Lord told them is exactly *not* the case. “I know that you do not have the love of God in your hearts. How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God? He who hates Me hates My Father also. If I had not done among them the works which no one else did, they would have no sin. But they have seen and hated Me and My Father. This happened that the word might be fulfilled which is written in their law, They hated me without cause.” They did not love God, and they did not keep His law. That was their problem.

We have a magnificent book, the Bible. It is God's Word. In this book we have book ends. It opens up with the Creation. It concludes with a New Creation. It opens up with a dwelling place for God and man. It concludes with a new dwelling place for God and man. In the beginning we read of a

bride being made for the first Adam. In the end we read of a bride being brought from heaven, the new Jerusalem, as a bride dressed for her husband, the last Adam. We read about good gold at the beginning and pure gold at the end. The first Creation was pronounced very good, the last New Creation even better. We see sin and misery enter the first Creation, and in the end we see sin and misery banished for eternity. We see the source of the river in the Garden at the beginning. We see a new source of a new river at the end. When sin entered we see the path to the Tree of Life closed. When sin is banished we see the path to the Tree of Life opened. In between these bookends is the covenant of God. This book is not reduceable to *solas*. It is not reduceable to abstractions. It is not reduceable to propositions. This book is your life. Eat it and live. Eat it as God told the prophets. Take it and absorb it. We don't use it in a way that serves our purposes; rather, we use it in a way to know how we can serve God first.

Among the biblical Jewish conceptions of the Word of God is that the Word of God comes to them and owns them. "The very idea of the word of God," wrote one modern theologian, "is different for the biblical Jew than it is for the Greek or the Hellenic-minded Christian. The word of God seems to interest us only to the extent that it reveals certain truths inaccessible to human reason. These truths themselves are conceived as separate doctrinal statements, and the word of God is finally reduced to a collection of formulas. They are detached from it, moreover, so that they can be reorganized into a more logically satisfactory sequence, even to the point of retouching them or remodeling them to make them clearer and more precise. After that the only thing that remains of the divine word seems to be a sort of residuum, a kind of conjunctive that of itself has no interest." In other words, we suck the doctrine out with our theological vacuum cleaner. Whatever is left over we just throw away, as if it was of no use.

The author continues: "Whether we realize it or not, the result is that the word of God appears as a sort of nondescript hodge-podge from which the professional theologian extracts, like a mineral out of its matrix, small but precious bits of knowledge which it is his job to clarify and systematize. In this view the word of God is no longer anything but an elementary, rough, and confused presentation of more or less shrouded truth. The theologian's task is to bring them out and to put them in order. But for the pious Jew [i.e., the biblical Jew in the Bible], who mediated the divine word at the end of all that we call the Old Testament, the divine word signified an intense living reality. It is not merely an idea. It is even less a proposition. It is God speaking to us, and God in speaking to us does not make himself a

theology professor.” Does that explanation mean that we don’t need theology professors? No, but based on a Hellenic notion, our seminaries treat theology and practical theology as separate departments of study. The mistaken idea is that *real theology* is not practical, so we invent something called *practical theology*, which is theology we can do something with.

The fact is that we have to read the Word of God as it is given to us. We have to read it with the unshakable conviction that the great doctrine of the New Testament is that there is no great new doctrine of the New Testament. The whole of Jesus’ ministry was predicated upon the facts that He was not surprising the Jews *and* their disbelief was thoroughly culpable, because they should have understood and received everything that He proclaimed.

Nicodemus furtively comes at night. A man has to be born from above. *How can this be?* Jesus says, “You are a teacher in Israel and you don’t know these things? I’m not telling you anything new. What’s the matter with you?” The rich man dies and says, “O, Abe, send somebody to my brothers so that they don’t come to this place.” *They have Moses and the prophets. Let them listen to them.* “Oh, no! No! I need something much fancier. If somebody rises from the dead they will listen.” *If they don’t listen to Moses and the prophets, why would they listen to somebody rising from the dead?* Paul preached, “We say to you nothing but what the prophets have told us. Everything that the prophets promised God has fulfilled for us, their children, in raising Jesus from the dead.” Peter said, “All the prophets from Samuel have prophesied these days.”

The truth of the New Testament is that there is no new truth in the New Testament. There might be a new administration because something unusual happened when the Gentiles came in. Paul tells it this way: “Surely you have heard about the administration of God’s grace that was given to me for you, that is the mystery made known to me by revelation as I have already written briefly. In reading this, then, you will be able to understand my insight into the mystery of the Christ, which was not made known to men in other generations as it has now been revealed by the Holy Spirit to God’s holy apostles and prophets.” What could this “mystery” be? “This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 3:2-6).

What is new is that the Gentiles can come into the kingdom of God by faith without going through ritual conversion as per the Jewish requirement—no need for circumcision, ritualistic laws, or

temple access of the Old Testament priesthood. The difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament is not a new God or a new Gospel, not a new doctrine of justification or sanctification; the difference is the fact that Gentiles can become the people of God without becoming Jewish. The New Testament teaches that God saves by grace; the Old Testament taught the same. Both the New Testament and the Old Testament teach that atonement comes by Christ's blood; atonement always and only came by Christ's blood. The New Testament teaches that salvation comes by faith and not by merit; the Old Testament taught the same. When Paul wanted to teach that salvation comes by faith, who did he call upon to prove it? Did he say, "As *Peter* said..."? No. He said, "As *Habakkuk* said... As we see in the life of *Abraham*..."

Lutheran antipathy between law and Gospel has come to be owned by the Reformed and Presbyterian churches. It has gripped our minds and hearts along with a heavy dose of Baptist, how-do-I-be-saved-ism. This influence has moved us away from the covenant and the whole Word of God. Now we don't even know what the covenant is. We don't know what the laws are. We don't even know that we should ask how the laws apply.

Let me offer a definition of the covenant that we read about in the Bible, the covenant that we possess. It is not an exhaustive one, but I hope that you will be dissatisfied with the idea of covenant as an agreement between two parties or a number of other less than desirable definitions. *The covenant of Scripture is God's rescuing His people from that which would harm or destroy them; calling them and their children to live intimately with Him in faith, love, and obedience, fearful of displeasing Him, and lovingly with one another; distinct from, envied by, and as a witness to the world; in humble expectation of receiving from Him at His appointed time everything that He has promised, signed, and sealed in blood through His appointed Mediator.*

The above definition takes away the sterile, one-dimensional, and one-sided idea that the covenant is simply God's rescuing His people, that is, us. Certainly, God has rescued us from that which would harm or destroy His people (i.e., the world, the flesh, and the devil); but what kind of God would He be if He rescued us but didn't tell us how to live and what dangers to avoid? That is why He says, "My Word is your life." He is not setting us up or playing chess with us. He is telling us to obey His law because He loves us, not because He hates us.

May God hasten the day that we grow up in the Reformation and apply the Reformation to

honor God. May we learn to ask the right questions. *What does God require of us?* is the question that must consume us, especially in this generation.