

The Two Questions of Covenant

LIVING BY THE WAY OF GRACE

Introduction

AND LET US CONSIDER HOW TO SPUR ONE ANOTHER ON TO LOVE AND GOOD DEEDS.
HEBREWS 10:24

Church is messy. Movements are messy. Teams are messy. Whenever Christians enter together into a form of covenant community, each individual brings his or her own gifts, expectations and strengths along with his or her own preconceptions, misconceptions, weaknesses, needs and sinful impulses. Grace-based community does not happen without considerable effort, which can sound like a contradiction. Does grace-based community come by grace or by human effort? As you might expect, the answer is a bit messy.

Christians struggle to live by grace. They know they must contribute their own effort to living for God, but how to do that and still live by grace? I observe various evangelical movements and churches that seem to do a truly exceptional job when communicating the gospel of grace to outsiders. They exhort non-believers to come as you are to the cross, to believe in Jesus and receive by grace through faith the gift of salvation. The initial entry into the new community is often followed by a honeymoon period, joyful and full of acceptance. But over time, new believers often find that those same evangelicals who so clearly communicated the message of grace struggle to extend grace to one another as they live together in community. It can seem as though grace is for those on the outside while it is back to law for those on the inside.

To experience new covenant grace-based community, we need to unravel several questions. What does grace in covenant community really look like? How do we exhort one another on to good deeds without being legalistic? What is legalism? In the Bible the concepts of law and grace come to us packaged together with the concept of covenant. The better we understand covenant and the roles of grace and law in various covenants, the better equipped we are to understand and pursue grace-based churches, movements and teams.

Two questions, in particular, will help us to clarify the issues and enable us to provide clear, confident answers regarding the role of grace and law in community. These two questions, the two questions of covenant, enable us to hold onto radical grace as we exhort one another toward biblical righteousness.

The four sections of this essay lay the groundwork for a biblical understanding of law and grace in community. Each section takes a biblical theology approach. By biblical theology, I mean observing carefully the theology of one passage or book of the bible to understand well the teaching presented by that author in the context of that passage or book. This is a bit different from systematic theology which seeks to gather what can be known from the whole of the Bible on a particular subject. For example, a student of the word could begin by surveying the whole Bible to develop a theology of the divinity of Christ or the student could take a biblical theological approach to the same issue by beginning with a thorough study of the gospel of John. Employing the biblical theological approach, we will keep in mind the whole of Scripture, but not attempt to be comprehensive, preferring rather to focus in on select passages or books as a starting point in developing a biblical understanding of law and grace in covenant community.

Sections one and two, establish the base for understanding biblical covenant, first in Genesis and then in Exodus. The third section clarifies the two questions of covenant, going to Paul's letter to the Romans to define more precisely how law and grace operate in the new covenant. The fourth section depends on Paul's letter to the Ephesians to address how to apply the two questions of covenant in community.

1. Radical Grace: Covenant Background and the Promise

WITH A SPECIAL FOCUS ON GENESIS 15

A survey of biblical covenants

When God chose to make a people for himself from childless Abraham and Sarah, he chose to use a known form of human contract to express his relationship with this new people. The form of contract God chose is most closely related to the suzerain-vassal treaties of Ancient Near Eastern Kings. God even seems to foreshadow this type of covenant beginning with the Genesis chapter one story of his relationship with the first humans Adam and Eve. God, who is the King of kings, creates a domain and establishes Adam and Eve in that domain as his representatives. They are created in his image to reign over the creation. Genesis chapter two, referring to God by his covenant name Yahweh, further defines this relationship by giving Adam a command, promising blessing for faithfulness and warning of curse for disloyalty.¹ This covenant relationship includes special intimacy, which we see in the walks Adam and Eve shared with their Lord in the garden.

The first explicit mention of covenant comes later when God's promise of deliverance to Noah (Genesis 6:18). As with Adam, the covenant with Noah includes all of his descendants, which is all humankind. The covenants with Adam and Noah are perhaps best understood as a single covenant package. In the Ancient Near East, a suzerain (great king) who had made covenant with a vassal (lesser king) might choose to reaffirm that covenant with a son of the vassal. For example, in the mid-2nd millennium the Hittite suzerain Mursilis renewed covenant with his vassal Duppi-Tesub, after Duppi-Tesub's father died.

To be sure, you were sick and ailing, but although you were ailing, I, the Sun, put you in the place of your father and took your brothers (and) sisters and the Amurru land in oath for you. When I, the Sun, sought after you in accordance with your father's word and put you in your father's place, I took you in oath for the king of the Hatti land, the Hatti land, and for my sons and grandsons.²

The concept of covenant renewal provides a way to understand the relationship between the Adamic and Noahic covenants as one covenant package between God and all people.

After the tower of Babel incident, God chose to enter into a more specific covenant relationship with a special people. Rather than dealing with all humankind as one, God moves to a divide and conquer strategy, dividing the peoples into different languages and cultures and then enabling one chosen people to reflect his glory out to all others. To enhance the display of his glory, God did not choose a wealthy, powerful, or even good people. He chose a people who were not yet a people. He chose an old, childless couple from Ur and made a promise with them, that he would be there God and they would be his people. The covenant of promise made with Abraham was renewed with his son Isaac (Genesis 26:3-5), as a suzerain would renew a covenant with the son of a deceased vassal and so, also with Isaac's son Jacob (Genesis 28:13-15; 35:10-12). Here we have another covenant package: the covenant of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, more simply referred to as the Abrahamic covenant.

After Israel grew into a people, God formalized his relationship with the entire nation as his own through the covenant of law mediated through Moses. This covenant was also preserved for later generations as a covenant package. The first generation out of Egypt made covenant with God at Sinai as recorded in Exodus. That generation failed to follow through with their mission to establish God's kingdom in the promised land. In Deuteronomy, God renewed that same covenant with the second generation out of Egypt in preparation for their attempt to enter into the promised land. The covenants recorded in Exodus and in Deuteronomy represent one covenant package with the people of Israel.

¹ Though the word covenant is not used explicitly in Genesis 1 and 2, the narrative suggests covenant between a suzerain and vassal. More directly, Hosea 6:7 refers to Adam's sin as a transgression of covenant.

² James. B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament (ANET)*, (Princeton University Press, 1969), 203–205.

The Lord made one more further specialization of covenant in the Old Testament when he declared to David, “Your house and your kingdom shall endure before Me forever; your throne shall be established forever” (2 Samuel 7:16). Connected to, yet distinct from the Mosaic covenant, this covenant with David promises kingship to his house. God renewed the Davidic covenant through the line of Davidic kings, finding fulfillment in Jesus Christ. To summarize, in the Old Testament God spoke through five mediator prophets to bring covenant. Through Adam and Noah he established universal covenant. Then through Abraham, Moses and David he established specialized covenant with a particular group of people. These covenants find fulfillment in the final new covenant mediated through Jesus Christ.

“Cutting” Covenant

The Bible uses curious language when God establishes a covenant. The Hebrew phrase *karath berith* (כָּרַת בְּרִית) usually translated as “made a covenant” literally means “cut a covenant”. Covenants are not made. They are cut. Cutting refers to the ceremony used to ratify a proposed covenant. In modern western society, contracts, such as a marriage contract, are ratified in the presence of a legal representative of the state through the signing of a legal document by those entering into the contract and by the witnesses. In the Ancient Near East, a covenant was made legal through a symbolic sacrifice and an oath. Consider the following explanation of the symbolic sacrifice in the Suzerain-Vassal treaty made between Ashurnirari V of Assyria and Mati’ilu of Arpad in the 8th Century BC. The first step had been to decapitate a lamb.

This head is not the head of a lamb, it is the head of Mati’ilu, it is the head of his sons, his officials, and the people of his land. If Mati’ilu sins against this treaty, so may, just as the head of this spring lamb is torn off, and its knuckle placed in its mouth, [...], the head of Mati’ilu be torn off, and his sons [...]. This shoulder is not the shoulder of a spring lamb, it is the shoulder of Mati’ilu, it is the shoulder of his sons, his officials, and the people of this land. If Mati’ilu sins against this treaty, so may, just as the shoulder of this spring lamb is torn out, and [...], the shoulder of Mati’ilu, of his sons, his officials, and the people of his land be torn out.³

In the oath of the ratification ceremony, Mati’ilu promises to obey all the stipulations of the covenant with his suzerain Ashurnirari with the understanding that if he fails in his obligations his limbs will be ripped off and stuffed in his mouth. Mati’ilu’s oath is the proclamation of a curse upon himself if he fails to keep covenant. The same idea is present in Jeremiah who legally prosecutes the leaders of Israel for widespread failure in holding to the covenant established with God.

I will give the men who have transgressed My covenant, who have not fulfilled the words of the covenant which they made before Me, when they cut the calf in two and passed between its parts—the officials of Judah and the officials of Jerusalem, the court officers and the priests and all the people of the land who passed between the parts of the calf—will give them into the hand of their enemies and into the hand of those who seek their life. And their dead bodies will be food for the birds of the sky and the beasts of the earth. (Jeremiah 34:18–20)

So far, in our brief overview of covenants, we have demonstrated that God used covenant language to clarify his relationships with people, both with humankind in general and with the special people called by his name. Like other contemporary Ancient Near Eastern covenants, God regularly renewed covenant with successive generations. Also like other Ancient Near Eastern covenants, the biblical covenants were established or “cut” through a sacrificial ceremony accompanied with an oath. Since both the old covenant and new covenant trace back to the Abrahamic covenant, we learn much about the nature of biblical covenant by giving careful consideration to Abraham.

³ ANET, 532-533.

The Promise

What good news first attracted you to trust God? What good news, what promises did you believe when you said, “Yes!” to Jesus?

In Genesis 12:1-3 we read of a fabulous promise the Lord made to Abraham. It went something like this, “Trust me, follow me and this is what I will do for you. I will give you land, and on that land I will make your descendants grow to become a nation. I will provide for you with blessing, and I will protect you by cursing your enemies. Even more, I will give your life incredible purpose by making you a blessing to the peoples of the earth.”

Abraham said, “Yes!” to the promise of God and moved with his wife Sarah and nephew Lot to the land of Canaan. To be sure Abraham faced serious challenges moving his people and possessions the 650 kilometers from Haran to Shechem, but these were the challenges of the task. This was adventure. Abraham arrived in the promised land and worshipped, building an altar to Yahweh at Shechem, moving on to Bethel and building another altar there. Abraham had arrived, not realizing that great trial lay ahead. New, emotional and spiritual challenges followed the initial success of the journey, beginning with famine and a quick exit from the promise land, followed by fear and failure in Egypt, conflict with Lot’s household and war with raiding kings.

Abraham did not walk away from God. He kept building altars of worship. Still, almost ten years after receiving the good news of the promise, Abraham finds himself without an heir in a land populated by Canaanites. This brings us to Genesis 15 and the cutting of covenant. The organization of the text places the necessary, yet frail, human response of faith solidly on the firm foundation of Yahweh’s unfailing, incredibly abundant grace.

Genesis 15 presents an organized dialogue between the Lord and Abraham. The connection between Abraham’s faith and righteousness is given central place in the organization with the importance of God’s grace being revealed in the shocking conclusion.

A	God restates the promise	15:1
B	Abraham questions God (regarding descendants)	15:2-3
C	God affirms with an illustration	15:4-5
X	Abraham believes and is considered righteous	15:6
A	God restates the promise	15:7
B	Abraham questions God (regarding land)	15:8
C	God affirms by cutting covenant	15:9-21

The chapter opens with God restating his promise to Abraham. Though only three chapters have passed since the promise, these chapters represent 10 years of life for Abraham. His response to God reveals a troubled heart. Does this sound like faith to you?

Abram said, “O Lord GOD, what will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?” And Abram said, “Since You have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir.” (Genesis 15:2-3)

Paul assures us “that with respect to the promise of God, Abraham did not waver in unbelief, but grew strong in faith” (Romans 4:20). And yet, the consistency of Abraham’s faith does not preclude struggle in regard to that which he believed. Abraham had questions regarding the promise. “How will I have descendants? I have no child. So much time has passed. I am old. I cannot see it Lord. How?”

God does not rebuke Abraham for his question, though he could have. Consider Jesus and the rich young ruler or, more poignantly, Jesus’ rebuke of Peter. God’s varied responses to individuals are a characteristic of biblical narrative. God speaks beyond the words to the reality he sees in the human heart. In this case, God strengthens Abraham by enlivening the vision. He takes Abraham outside, telling him to look at the stars. “So shall your descendants be!”

Characteristically of biblical dialogue with God, Abraham is not given an answer to the underlying “how” question. God does not give an explanation. God’s words exhort Abraham to continue on in faith, to become strong in faith. Abraham responds to God’s exhortation with faith and this faith is credited to him as righteousness. In Romans chapter four, Paul exegetes this one verse, Genesis 15:6, as an established precedent for the new covenant message that justification comes only through faith in Jesus Christ. The specifics of Abraham’s faith are not described beyond the promise of Genesis 12:1-3. We are given a hint in Hebrews 11:10 that Abraham’s understanding of the promise land had a far-reaching spiritual dimension. Also, in Hebrews 11:19 we are told Abraham even considered God’s ability to raise Isaac from the dead, if necessary. Abraham’s faith, while certainly consisting in part of the personal blessing to himself, also consisted in trusting God to bring about a plan of spiritual blessing to the nations. Considering that which was revealed to him, Abraham trusted God to bring forth his promises.

After Genesis 15:6 declares Abraham righteous because of his faith, the Lord again affirms the promise, this time focusing on the promise of land. Abraham again responds. How does his response sound to you? Does this sound like strengthened faith?

And he said, “O Lord God, how may I know that I shall possess it?” (Genesis 15:7)

Again, Abraham’s faith sounds lacking. Again, he struggles with the reality of his present circumstances. The land is full of Canaanites. None of the land belongs to him. In fact, before his death none of the land will belong to him other than the cave which will serve as a tomb for Sarah and for him. “How Lord? I believe, but how can it be? I can’t see it Lord?”

Even now, God does not rebuke Abraham. He affirms Abraham though not with an illustration. God intends to formalize the promise. He intends to cut covenant with Abraham. The preparation process described in verses 9-11 likely made sense to Abraham and to Moses’ initial audience. This is the stuff of covenant ratification. The cutting of the animals and laying out a path bordered by the bloody halves indicates to the Ancient Near Eastern reader what comes next. In verses 12-16 God as suzerain promises the blessing of land, though it will take four generations to accomplish. The promise by the suzerain demands a response from the vassal. Everyone knows what must happen next. The vassal must walk through the animal carcasses and so declare, “If I break covenant with you Great King, let me be torn in two and left as food for the beasts of the earth and the birds of the air.”

The shock comes in verse 17. As he sleeps, Abraham sees a smoking pot and flaming torch pass through the slain animals. If not understood immediately, the question raised initially about the significance of the smoke and the flame gets answered as the reader continues the story of the Pentateuch – the burning bush, the fire and smoke on Sinai, the pillars that lead the Israelites through the wilderness – all these visually represent to men the holy presence of God. While Abraham slept, the holy presence of God passed through the covenant sacrifice, thus proclaiming, “If you fail to keep covenant with me O man, then let me die. Let the curse fall on me.”

Just as terror and great darkness fell on Abraham, so also, two thousand years later, from the sixth hour to the ninth, darkness fell upon the land and the guards standing there became very frightened, saying “Truly this was the Son of God!” (Matthew 27:45-54). Thus, God took upon himself the curse of covenant breaking that belonged to Abraham and to his descendants. In grace, God offered himself, so that Abraham’s faith might be reckoned as righteousness.

In what way can Abraham “know for certain” (15:13) that the promises of God will surely come about? How can any man know for certain that a covenant with God will be maintained? The one thing we know for certain is that we will break covenant with holy God. If peace with God depends even only 0.01% on my ability to keep holy my actions, or my words, or my thoughts, then I am torn in two. I must die. The curse is the one certain outcome in covenant with God. How can the promise be kept if any bit of that promise depends on me? This is the essence of Abraham’s problem. How can I know if it depends on me? You can know because it does not depend on you. The promise is secure because it depends wholly on the grace of God.

2. Radical Grace: Covenant Background and the Law

WITH A SPECIAL FOCUS ON EXODUS 32-34

Defining the Law

Taking a cue from Paul's letter to the Romans, we will use the simple labels of Promise, Law and Grace to refer, in that same order, to the Abrahamic, Mosaic and new covenant. In determining the relationship between law and grace, it is important to know what someone means when they refer to the law. The common Jewish use of the term law refers to the first five books of the Old Testament, the books of Moses, the Torah. However, modern Christian language often uses law in the sense of commandment: "Do this and don't do that."

Recognizing the form of covenant in the Ancient Near East at the time when Moses wrote helps clarify terms. A suzerain, or king of kings, such as the ruler of the Egyptian, Assyrian or Hittite Empire would require a vassal, or lesser king, to enter into a treaty. Archaeology has uncovered numerous suzerain-vassal treaties from the second millennium which indicate a standard form. God used a known form in order to communicate forcefully and clearly to Israel, as he formed them into a kingdom of priests who look only to him as their King of kings.

As can be seen below, the standard treaty form begins with a title or titles of the great king. The title is followed by a historical prologue detailing the relationship between the great king and the vassal people. The stipulations, given both in basic and detailed form, list requirements the vassal people must follow, such as giving regular tribute and fighting for the great king against enemies. In the deposition, copies of the covenant are deposited in the temples of the great king's god and the vassal's god with instructions for reading the covenant. Gods are called in as witnesses, making this an element that does not appear in biblical covenant, except perhaps by the symbolic calling of heaven and earth to witness. The blessings detail the benefits the great king will bring to the relationship, while the curses detail what he will do in the case of covenant breaking by the vassal. Finally, a sacrifice is cut and an oath is taken by which the vassal identifies with the sacrifice, essentially saying, "Let me be cut open like this sacrifice if I break covenant with you great king."

The books of Moses go beyond a standard treaty form, yet the form is noticeable, giving insight to the initial covenant established on Sinai and to the renewal of the covenant in Deuteronomy.

2nd Millennium Suzerain-vassal treaty form.

1 Title	"I am the Lord your God."	Ex. 20:2a	Dt. 5:6a
2 Historical Prologue	"who brought you out of Egypt"	Ex. 20:2b	Dt. 1-3
3 Stipulations			
a. basic	ten commandments	Ex. 20:3	Dt. 5:7-21
b. detailed	more specific commandments	Ex. 21-23	Dt. 12-26
4 Deposition and regular reading	deposition delayed	Ex. 24:7, 40:20	Dt. 31:10, 26
5 Witnesses	-		Dt. 31:19, 28
6 Blessings	"He will bless your bread..."	Ex. 23:25-32	Dt. 28:1-14
7 Curses	-		Dt. 27:11-26
8 Oath	"All that is spoken we will do..."	Ex. 24:7-8	Dt. 29:12; Joshua 8:30-35

The Suzerain-vassal treaty form provides a model for understanding the covenant of Law as much more than commandment. Covenant includes blessings, curses and historical narrative. Historical narrative, in fact, makes up a considerable portion of the books of Moses with commandment or stipulation is provided throughout the narrative. Genesis contains little stipulation. Leviticus contains only a bit of narrative. But a considerable amount of both is found in Exodus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. To know the specifics of the Law, one must study the whole Torah. Studying the whole Torah means reading the narratives. Here then are two principles to understanding the broader term of Law. First, God established covenant with Moses adapting an Ancient Near

Eastern treaty form which communicates much more than stipulations. (The Law is not just Leviticus.) Second, God contextualized his commandments by providing them within a true historical narrative.⁴

When Law is used to refer to the covenant of Moses, stipulations are included, but much more than stipulations. A covenant defines a relationship. The Torah defines the relationship between man and God by revealing who God is, who we are and what is our purpose. Torah reveals how sinful man can exist in relationship with holy God. Torah teaches how our great King expects us to live and what he will do when we fail to live that way. This is the Law. Much more than stipulation. Before considering more closely the presence of grace in the Law, we should first address whether law is present in grace.

Law in the Covenant of Grace

For the moment, we will avoid the question of how law and grace relate. (Are we saved by law? May it never be!) Here we are simply showing that law exists in the covenant of grace. The “Law” does not exist in the covenant of “Grace,” where the labels Law and Grace stand for the whole of two different covenants. The older covenant of Law has passed away, replaced by the better covenant of Grace.⁵ The new covenant of Grace, however, abounds with laws in the form of stipulations or commandments.

In the sermon on the mount, Matthew 5-7, Jesus reveals the spiritual heart behind stipulations of the old covenant teaching that the commandments apply not only to extreme action, such as murder and adultery, but to lesser actions, to words and to our very thoughts and intentions.

There is no easy way around Jesus’ moral commands when we recognize that the apostles drew from those commands as they taught the churches. It is quite easy to feel “under the law” in the New Testament. Simply read Romans 12-14: “Love without hypocrisy...be devoted to prayer...be at peace with all men...pay taxes...set aside deeds of darkness.” Or read Ephesians 4-6 “do not let the sun go down on your anger...let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth...be kind, tender-hearted to one another...there must be no coarse jesting...make the most of your time...do not get drunk...love your wives...do not provoke your children to anger.” Or read James or John or Peter.

In our new covenant, God is still our King of kings and also our Father and our Lord. Whatever way we define the relationship, he has authority over us, and it is right for him to issue commandments and expect obedience, whether as our great King, heavenly Father, or Holy Lord. Jesus described this relationship of authority to his disciples the night before he went to the cross. To love one in right authority over you, involves recognizing his right authority and willingly submitting to that authority.

He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me; and he who loves me shall be loved by my father, and I will love him, and will disclose myself to him (John 14:21).

At some point, we ought to look more deeply into the heart relationship of the new covenant. For the moment, it is enough to recognize that the new covenant of grace includes a whole host of laws or commandments that we are called to obey. There is law in the new covenant, which we are not saved by, but which is there. Jesus expects us to obey, so we ought to work to rightly understand its place.

Grace in the Covenant of Law

Just as the new covenant contains law, so also the old covenant contains grace. With the emphasis of the Torah on establishing a people group as a nation governed by moral, civil and ceremonial law, a reader can miss the parallel emphasis on Israel’s desperate need for God’s gift of forgiveness. God provides markers of grace through the Torah to instruct his people that relationship with him cannot be obtained or kept through the keeping of law. Consider the following monuments to the grace of God in the Torah.

⁴ This contextualization of commandment within historical context continues in the New Testament with the majority of instruction to Christians being embedded in the gospel narratives of Jesus and letters to churches and individuals.

⁵ Hebrews 8:6.



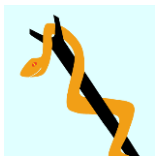
Genesis 15: God established covenant with Abraham using a recognizable ceremony in which the vassal declares in an oath, “Let me die like these animals if I break covenant with you O King.” Shockingly, in this case, the vassal remains completely passive, asleep, as the great King passes through the slain animals indicating to the vassal, “If you break covenant with me, then I will take the curse of death.”



Exodus 12: In the final plague on the Egyptians, the angel of death passes over the land, killing every first-born son, except in the houses whose doors had been marked by the blood of a lamb that was slain as an act of faith in God to save. John the Baptist connected the Passover lamb to Jesus when he called out, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29).



Leviticus 16: On the Day of Atonement, one goat was set free in the wilderness to depict the removal of sin from the people, while a second goat was sacrificed. The blood of the second goat was taken into the Holy of Holies and sprinkled below the presence of God, onto the ark of the covenant, covering the tablets of law. Thus, atonement was made for the breaking of law. Paul identifies Jesus as the sacrifice of atonement (Romans 3:25).



Numbers 21: Following continual rebellion by the first generation out of Egypt, God sends poisonous vipers into the camp to turn back the hard of heart. God instructs Moses to lift a bronze serpent on a pole. Anyone who looks on the curse in faith is healed. Jesus became our curse, taking on himself the death of man for sin. Whoever believes Jesus took the curse and looks to him in faith is saved (John 3:14-15).



Deuteronomy 30: Suzerain-vassal treaties include blessings for the vassal’s obedience and curses for disobedience. Such treaties never include promise of restoration after punishment is exacted, never except in the case of God’s treaty with Israel. Recognizing the inability of his people to obey, God foretells the curse of exile from the land, but also foretells the grace of restoration and the gift of a new heart.

Why the Burning Bush?



Moses records the historic moment of establishing covenant between God and the nation of Israel in Exodus 24:5-8. Covenant is cut, the oath is taken and instead of walking through the halves of the animals, the blood of the sacrifice is sprinkled on the Israelites. The covenant is cut and is now legal and binding.

The story of Israel’s rescue from slavery began back in chapter three with the humbled Moses experiencing the holy presence of God as fire on a bush. Why the burning bush? In one sense the burning bush represents an individual-sized experience of the presence of God, while the fire and smoke on the mountain projected a nation-sized experience of the presence of God. But there is deeper symbolism in the burning bush.

What do you think it is? What does the burning bush symbolize? Think about that. We will come back to it later.

Moses begins his encounter with God by asking the wrong question. God has just told Moses that he would go and lead the Israelites out of Egypt. Moses asks, “Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh.” That’s a most natural human response, to question one’s ability in the face of an enormous challenge. It is also the wrong question. When God asks you to do something, it is not critical to establish your own credentials, your own name. It is critical to know God’s name. Not, “Who am I?” but, “Who are you?”

Moses does get around to questioning God about his name. “Now they may say to me, ‘What is his name?’ What shall I say to them?” God answers, “I am who I am....tell them I am has sent you.” This is God’s covenant name Yahweh. The name God emphasized in his covenant with Adam and with Abraham. The name that tells us God is who he is and will be whom he will be. The name that declares he is dependent on no one and able to fulfill all his promises. “I am!”

He is also the holy one who finally burns with anger at Moses' repeated refusal to accept his commission to lead Israel out of Egypt. "Then the anger of Yahweh burned against Moses" (Exodus 4:14). This is getting us closer to the symbolism of the bush.

Moses does return to Egypt, and God unleashes his power, cursing the land in a series of plagues designed to demolish the false gods of Egypt.⁶ The people are simply asked to trust God in faith, to sacrifice a lamb and to prepare to leave. They do nothing to contribute. Freedom from slavery and the oppression of Pharaoh comes by the hand of God as a gift of grace to the Israelites and anyone willing to go out with them.

God brings the people to the site of the burning bush, only now the mountain burns as a holy place, visually displaying the glory of God. After cutting covenant with Israel, God invites Moses up on the holy mountain to receive the tabernacle pattern. The crisis of Egypt has passed. The story moves towards resolution. Moses will build the tabernacle, and God will dwell among the people. That is how the story is supposed to end. Tragically, even though Egypt terribly oppressed Israel, the people brought a more insidious enemy to Sinai. They brought their own sinful hearts. Now we face the real climax of the narrative.

In Exodus chapter 32, less than forty days after the people affirmed on oath, "All that Yahweh has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient!", the Israelites gave up on Moses, crying out to Aaron, "Make us Elohim⁷ who will go before us." Aaron complied, taking gold from the people to fashion an idol. Once done he announces, "Tomorrow shall be a feast to Yahweh" (Exodus 32:5). They broke the second commandment making Yahweh into a god of the kind they had seen in Egypt.

God sent Moses down at once, telling him, "Let me alone, that my anger may burn against them, and that I may destroy them" (Exodus 32:10). God reveals part of himself to Moses, his wrath, in order to draw Moses more fully up into his heart. Faced with the burning wrath of God, Moses pleads with God for compassion, "Turn from your burning anger and change your mind about doing harm to your people" (Exodus 32:12). Both aspects of God's heart are involved here, both his holy anger against the sin of rebellion and his deep compassion for these fallen human beings. God's interaction with Moses draws out both aspects in him as well. Moses first pleads with compassion and then, upon reaching the people and confronting their sin, like God, Moses also burned with anger (Exodus 32:19). Coming again back to God, Moses' compassion dominates, "forgive their sin – and if not, please blot me out from your book which you have written!" (Exodus 32:32).

God's next words reveal the problem of the burning bush, the great dilemma of holy God and fallen man.

Go up to a land flowing with milk and honey; for I will not go up in your midst, because you are an obstinate people, and I might destroy you on the way (Exodus 33:3).

How can fire rest on a bush without burning it up? How can a holy God dwell in the midst of a combustible people?⁸ They are a pile of dry wood, waiting for a spark to go up into flames. God cannot go to the promise land with this people. But Moses understands that God must go.

Then he said to Him, "If Your presence does not go with us, do not lead us up from here. For how then can it be known that I have found favor in Your sight, I and Your people? Is it not by Your going with us, so that we, I and Your people, may be distinguished from all the other people who are upon the face of the earth?" (Exodus 33:15–16)

⁶ Exodus 12:12.

⁷ The reference to god or gods (depending on the translation) in verses 1, 4 and 8 is in Hebrew "Elohim", which is translated as God when used with a singular verb as in Genesis 1:1 and throughout most of the Old Testament, but being a plural noun can also mean gods. The question in this text is whether the people wanted to make an image of the one God, Yahweh or whether they were making some other gods. Since only one golden calf is fashioned and since Aaron states in verse 5 that the feast would be to Yahweh, it is better to use the singular translation of god.

⁸ Gordon Hugenberger, *Introduction to Pentateuch Lectures*, (Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Semlink, 2008).

What is the point of going without God? What is the point of any movement, any church attempting to accomplish the mission of God if God is not present there among them? If we exist as a people or a movement to display the glory of God through changed lives and the presence of the Spirit, then what hope have we if God dwells not among us? The whole point of Israel fails without God and yet, the inevitable sinfulness of the people invites the burning wrath of God.

Nevertheless, God agrees with Moses agreeing to go up among the people. Having now understood the problem, however, God's decision to go among them unsettles Moses. He must be thinking, "It is good you go up with us, but how will you not burn us up? How can you go up among us? How can this be?" So, Moses asks God to reveal himself, "I pray to you, show me your glory!" (Exodus 33:18). God responds that no man can see my glory, but I will pronounce my glory to you. I will tell you my name. You will know the depth of my character. Just as God had proclaimed the name Yahweh at the burning bush, so now he proclaims his name more fully.

Then the LORD passed by in front of him and proclaimed, "The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth; who keeps lovingkindness for thousands, who forgives iniquity, transgression and sin; yet he will by no means leave the guilty unpunished, visiting the iniquity of fathers on the children and on the grandchildren to the third and fourth generations (Exodus 34:6–7).

Yahweh proclaims himself as a god of justice who will hold people accountable for sin. Even so, his compassion and grace, his patience, love and truth will overwhelm. He will find a way for love and justice to meet. When the sin of man moves him to the evil in his heart, kindling the holy fire of God's wrath, the love and grace of God will find a way. In the mire of the pit of his own sin, this is the truth that David clung to.

Be **gracious** to me, O God, according to Your **lovingkindness**; according to the greatness of Your **compassion** blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. (Psalm 51:1–2)

Ironically, it is this same understanding of God's glorious nature that motivated Jonah to refuse the call to preach to the Assyrians, being afraid that God might actually forgive these hated enemies.

He prayed to the LORD and said, "Please LORD, was not this what I said while I was still in my *own* country? Therefore in order to forestall this I fled to Tarshish, for I knew that You are a **gracious** and **compassionate** God, **slow to anger** and abundant in **lovingkindness**, and one who relents concerning calamity. (Jonah 4:2)

God reaffirmed covenant with Israel, forgiving the sin of the gold calf by the grace of his name. Moses built the tabernacle in the exact manner that God had instructed. And the glory of God came down to rest on the tabernacle in the midst of Israel.

Even in light of God's radical grace to Israel, the Old Testament history records persistent failure by the people of God to respond to him with lives of holiness. The later prophets began to lose hope in the old, looking forward to something new; to a covenant with God that would enable believers to live out the covenant in love and honor to their King.

3. The Two Questions of Covenant

WITH A SPECIAL FOCUS ON THE LETTER TO THE ROMANS

The First Question of Covenant

For a vassal people of a great King, relationship finds expression through covenant. In the biblical covenants of Promise, Law and Grace, God defines special relationship first with the family of Abraham, then with the nation of Israel (old covenant) and now with all those who believe in Jesus (new covenant). In each case, questions concerning the relationship between the people and their king are answered by the covenant. There are two primary questions the people need the covenant to answer. We will address each question in turn.

In order to answer both questions of covenant, we need to know what is God's part and what is our part. God's part is freely given. Man's part is the response required by God. We will use the term grace to describe God's part and the term law to describe man's part. The use of the word law here does not mean Torah or old covenant as in "the Law". When discussing man's part in a covenant, law can mean the expectations of God expressed in the form of stipulations or commandments. Expressed commandments or laws exist in both the old and new covenant. Laws in this sense are the practical "dos" and "don'ts" of covenant.

The first question of covenant concerns the basis of relationship. We can ask the first question in this way, "What makes me acceptable to be in relationship with God?" In answering this question, we need to know how much is up to God and how much is up to us. What percentage of the first question of covenant depends on grace and what percentage depends on obedience to law? Take a moment to think about that. On a scale of 0-100%, what percentage is up to God (grace) and what percentage is up to man's effort (law)? Write in an answer before you continue reading. Even if you are not sure, make a guess.

"What makes me acceptable to be in relationship with God?"

Grace	Law
%	%

Recognition of the need for grace was built into the old covenant. The sacrificial system of Israel emphasized the inability of individuals to become acceptable to God through their own works. They would always fall short. This is the point of the sacrificial lamb at Passover (Exodus 12) and the goat's blood spilled on the arc of the covenant on the day of atonement (Leviticus 16). No one stands righteous before God. A sacrifice of atonement must die in our place. What makes you acceptable? Moses warns the Israelites not to forget the grace of God and become proud of heart; not to say, "My power and the strength of my hand made me this wealth...because of my righteousness the Lord has brought me in to possess this land" (Deuteronomy 8:14, 17; 9:4).

No other book in the New Testament addresses the question of law and grace more thoroughly than the letter to the Romans. In Romans 1:18-3:30 Paul uses the language of the courtroom to clarify the huge problem in becoming acceptable to God. As a prosecuting attorney, Paul brings the case against all people. In 1:18-31 Paul first condemns the pagan person who has turned away from worship of God. That person has been given over to wrath in this present life, being degraded by their own thoughts and desires. The pagan is not Paul's primary target. In 2:1-16 Paul condemns the moral person who wrongly thinks that kindness from God in this life shows how acceptable they are to God. They are mistaken and only store up wrath for the future day of judgment. Realizing the force of Paul's argument that it is not enough to know the law, but you actually have to do it, the moral person may fall back on the religious ritual of law to make them acceptable. So, in 2:17-29, Paul includes the religious person in his prosecution. It is not enough to know the law and be ritually circumcised. If you want to establish your case of acceptability before God based on your own works then you still must successfully obey

the law, completely and persistently. Failure to do what is right brings condemnation. Concluding in 3:9-20 Paul finds for the prosecution that every single human being is condemned on the basis of law.⁹

Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God; because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight; for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin (Romans 3:19-20).

On what basis can a person be declared acceptable? Or to use Paul's language, on what basis can a person be declared righteous? After the prosecution, which condemns all people, Paul's verdict comes as a surprise. It is possible for a person to be declared righteous, but only if that person pleads his case on a standard of grace as opposed to a standard of law. So, we find the answer to our first question of covenant. "What makes me acceptable to be in relationship with God?" The answer is faith in Jesus Christ. How do grace and law relate in answering this question? Grace contributes 100%, law contributes 0%. To require law to contribute even 0.01% is to stand before God, in some part, on the basis of law. The verdict in which case is guilty and the penalty is death. Paul's argument is consistent throughout, "If it is by grace, it is no longer on the basis of works, otherwise grace is no longer grace" (Romans 11:6). As the defense you have a choice to make. Will you plead your case on the basis of grace or will you plead your case on the basis of your obedience to law?

The truth that human beings become acceptable by being declared righteous by grace through the atoning death of Jesus is not a new basis for covenant relationship. This has been the basis of covenant relationship all along. The Passover lamb, the goat of atonement, all the old covenant symbolism pointed into the future to the one effective sacrifice that would serve as the basis for God's forgiveness. The righteousness of God is not new, its manifestation in Jesus is new. Before Jesus, we did not have full revelation regarding how God would make atonement for sin, but now God's way of righteousness has been made known in Jesus Christ,

...whom God displayed publicly as a sacrifice of atonement in his blood through faith. This was to demonstrate his righteousness, because in the forbearance of God he passed over the sins previously committed... (Romans 3:25)

Believers under the covenants of Abraham and Moses were declared acceptable based on a sacrifice of atonement that would be made in the future. They were saved even as we are by grace through faith in God's plan of salvation. This is the final piece of Paul's argument in 3:31-4:25. By exegeting Genesis 15:6, Paul provides a precedent for the verdict, declared righteous by faith. This is not only true now, but was true in God's covenant with Abraham.

Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:3).

Paul includes David, showing consistency from Abraham all the way through to Jesus.

Blessed are those whose lawless deeds have been forgiven, and whose sins have been covered.
Blessed is the man whose sin the Lord will not take into account. (Romans 4:7-8, Psalm 32:1-2)

⁹ In the above overview, we skipped over 3:1-8 which is a forecast of what is to come in Paul's argument. The moral and religious person Paul condemns is the Jew. Paul takes the most difficult case to oppose. If the Jew, who has been specially chosen by God and given the very word of God, cannot be declared acceptable on the basis of what they do, then neither can anyone else. In condemning the Jews, however, Paul opens his gospel up to two criticisms. First, is God then unfaithful in his promises to the Jews? Second, if the law is not required, isn't it true that believers will embrace sin? Paul recognizes these questions here, giving each a very short, unsatisfying answer and then returns to his present argument. Once Paul has established that the only way to be declared righteous is through faith in Jesus (3:21-4:25), then he returns to these two questions in reverse order. In chapters 5-8, which correspond to 3:5-8, Paul argues that, in fact, grace has power to produce righteous living, law does not. Then, in chapters 9-11, which correspond to 3:1-4, he argues God's faithfulness to Israel, explaining why in the present so many Jews reject the gospel while so many Gentiles believe and are saved.

Paul points out in Abraham’s case that “the law brings about wrath, but where there is no law, neither is there violation” (Romans 4:15). Again, this has to do with the standard by which a human being is to be judged. If a person stands on the defense of lawful behavior then they are guaranteed wrath. “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). But when a person no longer stands on the basis of law, when law is removed from consideration, then there is no way to violate that law. “For this reason it is by faith, that it might be in accordance with grace, in order that the promise may be certain...” (Romans 4:16). What laws, commandments or stipulations did God require Abraham to obey in order that covenant might be cut (Genesis 15)? None! Abraham does not receive a single covenant requirement for at least another 13 years when he is commanded to introduce circumcision as the sign of the Promise (Genesis 17). What part did Abraham play in the actual covenant ceremony with God? None! God’s presence passed through the slain animals. God performed the oath. God took the curse of covenant breaking. Abraham was fast asleep. He could not have been more passive without being dead.

100% Grace! 0% Law!

Our answer to the first covenant question must be clear and must be radical. There is no place for law in becoming or maintaining acceptability in relationship with God. The instant law comes into the picture we lose everything. We declare with Paul:

Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have obtained our introduction by faith into this grace in which we stand; and we exult in hope of the glory of God (Romans 5:1–2).

In light of the fallen state of human kind, the question of how a sinful person can enter into a covenantal relationship with God must satisfy the requirements of holiness and justice. God has done this through the atoning death of his son. This is not the only question of acceptability. Why would God want to be in covenant with human beings in the first place? The answer to this question goes back to the very first covenant God made with Adam and Eve. Human beings are made in the image of God and so, we are precious to him. He accepts us because we are valuable to him. This is what God tells Israel, “on your fathers did the Lord set his affection to love them” (Deuteronomy 10:15). This too is God’s grace to us. We do not deserve to be in covenant with him, but he wants us in covenant with him. So he made a way.

Who will bring a charge against God’s elect? God is the one who justifies; who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us. Who will separate us from the love of Christ? (Romans 8:33–35).

The Second Question of Covenant

If in answering the first question of covenant you found it hard to put 0% law, that is not wholly bad. Though we stand absolutely firm on radical grace, 100% Grace and 0% Law, in answering the first question, there is a right desire in the believer’s heart to want to affirm righteous behavior. Biblical covenants help define how we should live out our covenant relationship with God. The second question of covenant asks this question, “How do I live for my God who has accepted me?”

The Bible encourages us to ask this covenantal question in a variety of ways. “How do I love my heavenly Father?”; “How do I serve my King?”; “How do I worship my Lord?”

As with the first question of covenant, we need to consider the role grace and law play in answering this second question. How much of the answer to this question is God’s part, given by grace, and how much of the answer is our part, accomplished by our effort? What percentages would you give? Make a guess and write it in.

“How do I live for my God who has accepted me?”

Grace	Law
%	%

Again, the term “law” here is meant to communicate obedience to commandments, the things we do and say, our part in pleasing God. The old covenant communicates clearly the expectation that believers would pursue practical righteousness.

It will be righteousness for us if we are careful to observe all this commandment before the LORD our God, just as He commanded us (Deuteronomy 6:25).

The idea of practical righteousness fits well into this second question of covenant. Positional righteousness or a standing of righteousness that makes a person acceptable to be in relationship with Holy God is not at issue here. Positional righteousness is a first question issue. Mixing up the two questions results in the kind of confusion Paul faced with the Israelites of his day. By understanding practical righteousness as the means to gaining right standing with God (the first question of covenant), Jews rejected the idea that righteous must come from faith. So, “not knowing about God’s righteousness, and seeking to establish their own, they did not subject themselves to the righteousness of God” (Romans 10:3).

This same confusion can exist in Christian circles. By declaring clearly and assertively that our righteous position with God comes 100% by grace, we are then freed up to pursue practical righteousness in our lives, not as a means to earn standing with God, but as a response to his love and grace. We can use positively the language of pursuing righteousness as long as we understand we are talking about a second question issue, not a first question issue. This is Paul’s approach in the letter to the Romans. In chapters 1-4, he established positional righteousness by grace through faith in Jesus. In chapters 5-8, he turned to the question of whether grace will result in sin. His short answer is “May it never be!”

Paul’s longer answer for why grace does not encourage sin assumes that true faith involves a movement from the old kingdom of Adam and the flesh to the new kingdom of Jesus and the Spirit (5:12-21; 8:1-17). True faith involves an opening of the spiritual eyes by which the believer turns from corruption and death to the life and hope that is in Jesus. The underlying question of chapter six can be expressed, “Why would one who has turned away from the corruption of sin to the newness of life want to live in sin? That makes no sense.”

The new life in Christ, does not, however, rid us of the nagging desires of sin. We must “consider” what is true of us now in Jesus, and we must “present” ourselves to God. Notice the righteousness language Paul uses. This is second question righteousness, not to earn position with God, but to live out the new life he has given us, that we might please him in our behavior.

Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its lusts, and do not go on presenting the members of your body to sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves to God as those alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness to God (Romans 6:12–13).

So, law which in this case is human effort exerted to keep commands, plays a part in pleasing God. Having received salvation by grace through faith, you are now exhorted to “work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (Philippians 2:12-13). How then shall we answer our question regarding the percentage of grace versus the percentage of law in regard to the second question of covenant? Here are some ways others have answered the percentage question. How do you answer it?

“How do I live for my God who has accepted me?”

Grace	Law	
0%	100%	“This is my part.”
100%	0%	“I still depend on God for everything I do.”
50%	50%	“God does part, I do part.”
80%	20%	“I have a role to play, but God still does a lot more.”

Honestly, I do not like trying to determine a percentage for this question. This is relationship, and one thing I have learned from marriage counseling is that relationship is not best explained in percentages. Each person can feel they are giving more than they really are and the other gives less than they ought. So, if I have to answer in percentages, I will cheat by using the marriage counseling answer of 100% God's part and 100% your part.

God gives himself fully into relationship with you to enable you to live in a way that honors him. He gives you the assurance that you will never be separated from his love (Romans 8:37-39). He gives you empathy, groaning with you when you do not even know what you should pray (Romans 8:26). He guarantees the end, that you will one day be fully conformed to the image of his son and invited into his glory (Romans 8:29-30). He gives you a new heart and empowers you with his Spirit so that you can understand and do his will, that which is good and pleasing to him (Romans 5:5; 7:6; 8:15).

God's full on commitment of grace empowers you to give 100% of yourself back to him. You may never truly give a full 100%, but that does not stop you from trying with your full will "to present your body as a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship" (Romans 12:1).

Admittedly, figuring out the second question of covenant is a lot messier than the first question of covenant.

Do I pray enough?

Does being relaxed show that I am free or have I lost my first love?

Does being intense show I have zeal for God or that I am striving to prove myself?

Am I walking in the Spirit or depending on my own abilities?

Is my criticism a healthy desire for improvement or my own insecurity projected as judgment on others?

Why do I witness? Why do I not witness?

Do I do humanitarian work to hook people for the gospel or because I truly love people?

Should we be more strategic or more dependent?

Should I confront or be meek?

Do I raise support by faith or by effort?

Do I really want to be righteous or am I satisfied that people respect me as righteous?

Would I go to a prayer meeting if no one knew I was there?

Do I defend the gospel to prove myself right or because I truly care that others know Jesus?

The second question is not only about doing, but also about becoming. Paul teaches that we "groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body" (Romans 8:23). We are in an already/not yet state of transition. We are already redeemed (Romans 3:24), yet wait for the redemption of our bodies. We are already adopted (Romans 8:15), yet wait for the fulfillment of our adoption. We have the first fruits of the Spirit (Romans 8:23), yet wait for the glory to come (Romans 8:21, 30). We are in transition. We are becoming what he has created us to be. As Paul says elsewhere,

Not that I have already obtained [the resurrection of the dead] or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:12).

The exhortation of Romans 12:2 presumes that we do not yet know how to live as members of the family. We need to be transformed by the renewing of our mind so that we can test and see what is the good and pleasing will of the father. In many things, my behavior will not naturally please God. My brother's little adopted son spent most of his first year in the new family sitting in timeout, discipline being a new thing in his life. It feels like that sometimes in God's family. "Okay Lord, I messed up again. I know, I know, I'm going to time-out to think about what I did." We have to be transformed in our minds to learn how to live in the family.

God is not surprised at our struggle to live according to kingdom family values. We have entered into a process of becoming. Renewing of the mind leads to pleasing obedience and pleasing obedience enables further

renewing of the mind. Life is an exuberant struggle to become that which he has already declared us to be and which we one day most certainly will be.

Fortunately, the clarity we have in our answer to the first question of covenant allows for the mess of the second question. Radical grace empowers the pursuit of practical righteousness. Because our acceptability depends 100% on the work of his grace, we have 100% security in our relationship with God. God called you. God justified you. God's got you. What shall separate you from the love of Christ?

God's grace frees you and empowers you to pursue his pleasure!

A Brief Word on Legalism

The two questions of covenant provide a way to carefully consider what we mean by the charge of legalism, a charge not uncommon in Christian circles, but often lacking clear definition. Simply put, legalism is the attempt to gain a desired goal by obedience to a law code. The first question of covenant asks the question, "What makes me acceptable to God?" Trying to gain the goal of acceptability in relationship with God through obedience to a law code is a legalistic approach. Any answer to the first covenant question other than "100 percent grace!" is legalistic. Faith plus baptism, for example, is legalistic. In this case, a person is made right before God or acceptable before God by what they do. A legalistic answer to the first question of covenant is **salvific legalism**.

The second question of covenant asks, "How do I live for God?" Living for God by holding to a "Christian" code of law is second question legalism. We can call this **sanctifying legalism**. Second question legalism is harder to identify and avoid than first question legalism because the new covenant does include commands that the believer is expected to follow as they live in relationship with God. Yet, there is a shift from old covenant to new covenant in how God expects believers to live for him. Paul's assertion in Romans 7:6, "that we serve in newness of the Spirit and not in oldness of the letter," indicates that the new covenant life is not simply an upgrade of the old covenant code. There is a new principle at work. new covenant life is most essentially a response of love out of a new heart made possible by God's indwelling Spirit.

Sanctifying legalism views new covenant life as essentially obedience to a law code, missing the shift in the new covenant to living out of the new heart. This shift which Paul understood, Jeremiah had prophesied as characteristic of the new covenant people of God, "I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people" (31:33b). The new covenant answer to the second question, "How do I live for God?" includes obedience to the commands of Christ, but as a response from a transforming heart, not as the keeping of a code.

We can go even further in missing new covenant grace. When obedience to a Christian code of conduct becomes required for staying "in" with God (though it usually means staying in with a particular church or group), then sanctifying legalism blends into salvific legalism. The issue is no longer "How do I live for God?", but has become, "What makes me acceptable to God?" Christian groups can do a great job proclaiming to non-believers that relationship with God is established through 100% grace, and yet, once those non-believers come into the body of Christ by grace alone, the same Christian groups can create an environment of insecurity and doubt in the believer regarding their acceptability to God. This insecurity comes from the communication that though you come in by grace, you stay in by your performance. This is salvific legalism.

A third category of legalism helps define a significant problem in Christian community. We will call this category unintentional legalism or **soft legalism**. Soft legalism occurs when the teaching or the tone of the group unintentionally communicates that a member of the group either becomes acceptable to God through obedience to a code (salvific legalism) or that the Christian life is essentially obedience to a code (sanctifying legalism). Legalism can be unintentionally communicated through continual teaching of the dos and don'ts of Christian moral behavior without regular emphasis on what we receive by God's grace in covenant relationship, such as, our identity in Christ, our assurance of relationship with God and the new heart and indwelling Spirit.

The fallen human heart feels that it must perform to be acceptable, to be worthy, to be loveable. Exhortation of what we must do, without reminders of grace, reinforces the naturally legalistic tendency of the human heart. Soft legalism is defeated by regular communication of God's grace in covenant and through the living out of that grace in love and acceptance of one another.

Even when we communicate grace and extend grace in relationship, people will feel at times judged. The legalistic tendency of the fallen heart remains strong. The one communicating cannot always successfully influence how their communication is received. Soft legalism is not completely avoidable in a Christian movement. We will at times unintentionally communicate in a legalistic manner, and our exhortation at times will be received legalistically even when given with a heart of grace.

4. Exhorting One Another from a Position of Grace

WITH A SPECIAL FOCUS ON THE LETTER TO THE EPHESIANS

The First Question of Covenant: Our Position in Christ

Expressing grace to others in the new way of the Spirit depends significantly on the clarity and freshness of our own experience of God's grace. The more clearly I preach to myself that God has accepted me and has declared me loveable, the more I will be able to extend that kind of acceptance and value to others. Remember the first question of covenant, "What makes me acceptable to God?" Let's answer this question again from a different angle by reviewing the context of Paul's classic one-line formulation of the gospel, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not as a result of works, that no one should boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

Paul begins the body of Ephesians in chapter two after a long introductory greeting and prayer in which he declares the abundance of spiritual blessing poured out on us who are in Christ. Chapter two starts with an honest look back to where we have come from. In our previous state of life, we were not alive, struggling for salvation. We were dead, completely separated from God, walking in sin. Three power sources kept us enslaved in our walk of sin: our own dead sin nature, the Prince of the power of air, otherwise known as Satan, and the world system with all the skewed assumptions, value-statements and behaviors of our culture. Paul looks back on the previous state of life with honest damnation. We were children of wrath (Ephesians 2:1-3).

Verse four begins in the Greek with two wonderful, little words "But God!" As much enslaved to our sin as the Israelites to the Egyptians, we had no way out. Our hearts were dead to God. "But God...made us alive!" He did not leave us enslaved. He took the initiative. Why? God acted out of his love, "being rich in mercy, because of his great love with which he loved us even when we were dead." (2:4) Are you loveable? You could not believe in Jesus if you were not loveable in the eyes of God. Your faith in Jesus is proof that God loved you even when you were dead to him. He loves you, so he made you alive.

Paul stands by his exuberant language of chapter one that every spiritual blessing has been poured out on us. Not only are we made alive. We are raised up with Christ into the heavenly realms, and we are seated with him: alive, raised, seated! In Christ all the glorious promises of eternal restoration are fulfilled. In this life we press on towards that for which Christ has already taken hold of us. Our position in the family is guaranteed by God. We have the Holy Spirit as a pledge of our inheritance (1:14). Our position depends not one tiny little bit on our own will or effort. We were dead. Our position depends 100% on being in Christ by the grace of God. It is hard to miss Paul's emphasis that our new position depends on being spiritually united with Christ. God "made us alive together **with Christ**...raised us up **with him**, and seated us **with him** in the heavenly places **in Christ Jesus!**" Not only did God find you loveable when you were still dead in sin, but he positioned you safely in Christ Jesus, so that in spite of any sin you might yet commit, your place in his love remains secure.

With all this focus on God's incredible pursuit of us, we might be tempted to make the story of redemption man-centered or me-centered. Without taking away from the language of abundant love poured out, Paul focuses this tale of rescue on the rescuer. God's overflowing grace places incredible value on those whom he has saved, all the more to the magnification of his wonderful character. In the ages to come, the surpassing riches of God's grace will continue to be displayed in his kindness toward us in Christ Jesus (2:7). His grace toward us displays his character. This is his name, "The Lord, the Lord God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in lovingkindness and truth" (Exodus 34:6).

Now we come to the famous formulation of verse 8-9 where Paul makes quite clear the answer to the first question of covenant. By Grace! Through faith! Not by works! How can we boast over one another? Who was not dead and made alive! Who is not held in position by Jesus Christ? Who was not loved by God while still a sinner?

Having been set free from earning our own position with God, now let's get to work! That's the oft forgotten verse 10 in this short gospel message. "For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them" (2:10). Paul affirms the radical, biblical answer to the first question of covenant. You are acceptable to God because of grace which has achieved your forgiveness and has united you with Christ Jesus to such a degree that you already sit with him in the heavenly realms! That work is finished. Now we can ask the second question of covenant. "How do I live out this covenant relationship I have with God?" Paul here answers, "Accept that God has made you and is making you into an incredible work of art." He is the master artist. You are his workmanship. What he is doing with you is unique, incredible, beautiful, though not easily achieved. In this work the artist grants free will participation by the work of art. You participate as you choose to walk in the good works God has prepared for you to do. This is part of your becoming who he has created you to be; a glorious and beautiful child of the king; a master work of art created in his image, sharing his work.

The Second Question of Covenant: Our Walk with Christ

Paul used the Greek word *peripateo* to frame his gospel message in Ephesians 2:1-10. *Peripateo* means to walk around and is often simply translated as "live." Unfortunately, the translation "live" misses both a sense of journey with God and the deliberate choices involved in choosing how to walk. Paul intends for us to imagine how we will walk through life with Jesus. In 2:1-2 Paul speaks of the past life of every believer in this way, "You were dead in your trespasses and sins, in which you formerly **walked**." Paul ends the section declaring that God has in mind good works for us to do, "that we should **walk** in them" (10). Formerly, you were zombies, dead men walking, unable to live out and become who God created you to be. Making you alive in Christ, God breathes in the Spirit of life, empowering you to live out your purpose as a true man or as a true woman. In chapters one through three of Ephesians, Paul proclaims the truth about us who believe in Jesus. In chapters four through six, Paul exhorts us to live according to that truth by considering the "walk" of the Christian from several different perspectives. He begins with the exhortation to walk worthy.

Having established that we are alive, raised and seated in Christ, completely secure in our position in him, Paul freely exhorts us to now "walk in a manner worthy" of that calling (4:1). At the end of the movie, *Saving Private Ryan*, the old World War II veteran walks among the graves of his comrades, asking himself whether he lived well enough to make meaning out of their sacrifice for him. What a terrible burden that question becomes in trying to answer the first question of covenant. "Was I good enough? Was I good enough to be worthy of their death from me?" And yet, how motivating when that same idea applies rather to the second question of covenant. "I will be good, I will be good. I will live out my life worthy of the sacrifice these men made. I will never attain to it, but I will pursue it. They gave themselves for me, willingly and with honor. I will live a life of sacrifice and honor not to earn their death for me, but to give honor to their sacrifice. I will live worthy of that which has been done for me." As a young man of the sixteenth century Count Ludwig von Zinzendorf, traveling through Europe, admired Domenico Feti's *Ecce Homo*, a portrait of Jesus wearing a crown of thorns. Beneath the picture he read, "All this I did for thee; what doest thou for Me?"¹⁰ Again, as a first question response, who can hope to repay Jesus for that level of sacrifice? Who can prove themselves worthy? No one! What a crushing burden. In answer to the heart question, "What can I do for you?", God gave Zinzendorf a vision of first fruits among the nations. Zinzendorf responded with second question motivation, spurred on by the love of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit to lead a renewal of the Moravian Church with a focus on reaching the unreached. This was the good work God had prepared for Zinzendorf to do. By the time of Zinzendorf's death God had brought in a harvest of changed lives "in Herrnhut, in Herrnhag, Herendyk and Pilgerruh, Ebersdorf, Jena, Amsterdam, Rotterdam, London, Oxford, Berlin, in Greenland, St. Croix, St. Thomas, St. John, Barbara, Palestine, Surinam, Savannah, Georgia, Carolina, Pennsylvania, Guinea, among Hungarians, heathen, and Hottentots, as well as in

¹⁰ John E. Hutton, *A History of the Moravian Church*, (Pantianos Classics, 1909), 66.

Lettland, Estland, Lithuania, Russia, on the Caspian Sea, in Lappland, Norway, in Switzerland, on the Isle of Man, in Ethiopia, and Persia.”¹¹

Paul’s exhortation to live worthy, viewed as necessary for acceptance, presses down unbearably. But that is to misunderstand Paul. Paul’s call to live worthy follows his prayer that we “may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ” (Ephesians 3:18). Be in awe of the calling you have received and make it your ambition to walk worthy as a response to the amazing love of God!

In addition to walking worthy of the gospel, Paul exhorts us, “walk no longer just as the Gentiles also walk, in the futility of their minds” (4:17), “walk in love, just as Christ also loved you” (5:1), “walk as children of light for the fruit of light consists in all goodness and righteousness and truth” (5:9). Having begun with the lofty exhortation to walk worthy, Paul ends with the practical exhortation to walk wisely. “Be careful how you walk, not as unwise men, but as wise” (5:15). In the Greek, “be careful” is a visual command, meaning more precisely “look carefully.” As you walk through life, look up, look back, look down, look ahead, careful not to trip over a snare or step in a mess.

Without care, it is possible to dive into Ephesians 4-6 and be overwhelmed by the commands or “laws” in the chapters. We can feel judged by Paul’s exhortation, and we can use Paul’s exhortations to judge others. Consider how easily you might use these commands in judgment of a family member, church member or colleague who fails to live up to Paul’s exhortations. “With all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing forbearance to one another in love, be diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit...speak truth each one of you...let no unwholesome word proceed from your mouth, but only such a word as is good for edification...let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you...be kind to one another, tender-hearted...do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God...there must be no filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting...submit to one another...wives submit to your husbands...husbands love your wives...fathers do not provoke your children to anger...” Everyone fails to live out the demands of the new life in Christ. Everyone is vulnerable to judgment. Everyone is sensitive to feeling judged. How then do we exhort one another on to the high calling of walking worthy, without communicating judgment on our brothers and sisters who we hope to exhort?

The difference between legalistic judgment and loving exhortation begins with firmly internalizing the reality of grace which defines our value and acceptability according to our position in Christ and not according to the maturity or successfulness of our walk with Christ. The two questions of covenant help us to make this distinction. The first question of covenant urges you to recognize that your value and acceptability are a double gift from God, you are loved and loveable (1) because he has made you in his image and (2) he has taken away the staining guilt of your sin. You are in Christ - alive, raised, seated – fully acceptable, fully loveable. So, your success and failure at walking worthy, walking in love, walking in light, walking wisely, does not define your acceptability. You must enter a struggle with your mind to separate your failure and sin from your acceptability in Christ, confessing those failures and sins as part of your struggle to live for God, but not giving way to the temptation of allowing those failures and sins to define your value and acceptability to God. This is preaching the gospel to yourself. “Do I grieve the Holy Spirit? Yes! Does that mean that my heavenly Father is disappointed with who I am? No! I am certain he is disappointed with my behavior at times. Even so, he fully loves and accepts me. There is no question of kicking me out of the family. Kicking me in the butt – sure! What loving father does not discipline? But kicking me out – no! He really, actually, unbelievably loves and accepts me, because he has really, actually, unbelievably made me loveable and acceptable.”

Hard part number one is to accept this truth internally of myself. Hard part number two is to extend this same acceptance to family members, fellow church members and colleagues. If my loveability and acceptability are

¹¹ Edward G. Murray, *Fruit That Should Remain: An Analysis of Christian Spiritual Formation as Experienced in the Renewed Moravian Brethren Colony at Bethlehem, PA From 1742 Until 1752*, (Michigan: Dissertation Information Service 1979), 146.

gifted to me by the grace of God, then the people I love and interact with are also loveable and acceptable not by what they say, do and think, but by the grace that God has gifted them. They too are in his image and forgiven of their sin.¹² Ephesians 5:1 applies here.

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you, and gave himself up for you, an offering and a sacrifice to God as a fragrant aroma.

We imitate God by loving others in the same way that he loves us. Our position with him is secure because he loves us by grace. Can I extend that same kind of love to others? Are there others in my life who are secure in my love for them because I see them as loveable and acceptable, not according to the works I desire, but according to the grace I extend? Do I extend the same grace that has been extended to me?

The extension of the grace of acceptability (first question of covenant), does not mean that I do not exhort the people I care about to walk in the good works God has in mind for them. I want them to live out the second question of covenant with God because I love them. The extension of the grace of acceptability does change how and why I exhort the people I care about. Why do I exhort my children to good behavior? Because of how it makes me look to others? Because they are annoying me? Because I judge myself and so judge them too? Honestly, all these motives are at work in me, bad motives coming out of my flesh. These motives belong to the way I used to walk. God is working to replace these motives with new heart motives: with the desire to exhort my children so they will learn to love God from the heart, so they will learn to worship God with their lives, so they will learn to walk in the way of the wise. I want to shepherd their hearts toward Christ. The new “why” of exhortation that God is working in me is grace-based love. When I already fully accept the one I exhort, then I can exhort truly with a view to their benefit. They do not have to prove themselves to me.

I also need a new “how.” I have become aware that judgment is a deep part of my personality. When anything goes wrong, I immediately place blame. Usually on someone other than me. “You should have told me last night.” “You should have put that in first.” “Why didn’t you just call instead of texting?” “Why did you leave that there?” Usually, the tone of disappointment in my voice accompanies the words of my judgments. It can just be in the way I say my daughter’s name. You can say a person’s name a hundred different ways. With joy, with alarm, with recognition, with invitation...with disappointment. It may be done with no words at all. Just the look, the slightly shaking head and the pursed lips that combine to say, “You disappoint me.” I wish I were communicating, “That thing you did right there really hurt your sister. I know you love your sister. I want to see you showing that to her. I love you. I think you’re awesome. I want to see you grow in this area to be more of who you can be.” Instead, with the tone of my voice or the shake of my head, I say, “You disappoint me. You are hard to love. You don’t live up to my expectations.”

As we need to continually preach to ourselves the truth of our position in Christ, we also need to continually communicate our love and care for those who we would exhort. “Be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other, just as God in Christ also has forgiven you” (Ephesians 4:32). “Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another, because love covers a multitude of sin” (1 Peter 4:7). We create fertile soil for exhortation by regularly communicating through words and actions that we truly accept those around us based on the first question standard of grace. By grace I am loved, by grace I will love. **Why** do I exhort those whom I love? That we all might “attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man” (Ephesians 4:13). **How** do I exhort those whom I love? I exhort in a soil already tilled by grace and with words, tone and body language that communicate love and acceptance. At least that is the ideal to strive toward, as we all continue to grow up in Christ.

¹² We view all as forgiven of sin because our focus here is loving and exhorting fellow believers. We still view all people as acceptable despite their sin, since all people who are not yet actual brothers and sisters in Christ are made in the image of God and are potential brothers and sisters in Christ.

Still, we might wonder, “Why is it on me to exhort the people I love? Shouldn’t grace silently love and accept, trusting God to do the motivating and exhorting?” Sometimes, “Yes.” But, we are not let off that easily. We are called to community. We are called to mature together. We are obliged to one another.

Grace in Community

Paul recognizes the communal realities of faith in Christ by following his individually focused presentation of the gospel in 2:1-10 with a corporately focused presentation in 2:11-22. Both passages share the same before and after pattern. Paul starts with a view to each individual, writing, “You were dead in your trespasses and sins” (2:1) then moves on to declare, “But God...made us alive together with Christ” (2:5). Each of us who believe in Christ has individually been made alive, raised up and seated with Christ. We are each to be considered God’s workmanship. After Paul establishes the reality of individual salvation in Jesus Christ, he shifts to the group reality, addressing the Ephesians collectively as Gentiles.

Therefore, remember, that formerly you, the Gentiles in the flesh...you were at that time separate from Christ, excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world” (2:11-12).

“But now!” Paul again moves from the former reality without Christ to present position in Christ, declaring that two corporate groups, Jews and Gentiles, are now one new community in Jesus.

But now in Christ Jesus you who formerly were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ...that in himself he might make the two into one new man, thus establishing peace, and might reconcile them both in one body to God through the cross, by it having put to death the enmity (2:13-16).

Paul characterizes the members of this new community as one body (2:16); as citizens of a new kingdom (2:19a); as members of a new family (2:19b); and as the building blocks of God’s temple (2:21-22). We belong one to another. We are obliged to grow up together.

The joint emphasis on both the individual and the community finds beautiful expression with the strong call to be “diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit” coupled with the recognition of the variety of gifts God has bestowed on us as individual members of the body. In turn, these individual gifts are given “to the building up of the body of Christ; until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man” (4:12-13). Paul’s description growth in this particular passage is not the maturity of various men and women, but of growth into one mature man. This growth towards maturity as a community or team of believers requires “speaking the truth in love” (4:15) and the “proper working of each individual part” (4:16) that we might as one grow up in Christ.

Community, being full of people, is messy.

Where no oxen are, the manger is clean,
But much revenue comes by the strength of the ox.
Proverbs 14:4

To keep the manger clean you have to get rid of the oxen, but what would that leave you, except an empty manger and failing farm. To guarantee no mess in community you have to get rid of the people, but what then is the point without the people? Community is by necessity messy. People are sinful. People have different values, different personalities, different limits, different levels of maturity, good days, bad days, good months, bad months. What are we to do? Even our different giftings from God can clash with one another, when at times, mercy drives one way, evangelism another, shepherding another.

God’s covenant with us provides a model for our communities. Applying again the two questions of covenant, number one asks, “What makes me acceptable in this community?” Number two asks, “As a member of this community, what is expected of me?” If the body of Christ is the community in question then our answers to

these questions ought to match God's answers to these questions. Remember again Ephesians 5:1-2, "Be imitators of God as beloved children; and walk in love, just as Christ also loved you." And the similar statement in Romans 15:7, "Accept one another just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God." When we apply the two questions of covenant to ourselves, we get these answers.

"What makes me acceptable to God?"

"Amazing grace!"

"Now that I am accepted, how can I live in a way that brings honor and glory to my God?"

"Love the Lord your God with all you are and love your neighbor as yourself!"

So now, modeling the love of God, we apply these two questions to others in the body of Christ. Looking at this brother in Christ or that sister in Christ, you think, "What makes him really acceptable to me? What is the basis of our relationship? Is it because...he likes me, he is polite to me, he fulfills his tasks, he lives above reproach, he does not get on my nerves, he shares my values? How is it that he proves himself acceptable to me?" If you are modeling yourself after the love of God you then answer yourself, "No. None of these things. He is acceptable to me by grace. As God has freely accepted him apart from his failure or success, so also I declare in my heart that he is a child of God, created in the image of God, being conformed into the likeness of the son of God, completely and fully accepted by my Father on the basis of grace. So, in order to be like you, my Father in heaven, I ask you to give me love for this brother, and whether or not I am successful in loving like you Father, I chose by faith to accept this brother by grace and grace alone." This kind of acceptance comes about by an ongoing, active choice of faith and dependence on the Holy Spirit. By nature we will slip into acceptance based on law. Our feelings will tend to conform to our natural judgements, if we do not actively remind ourselves why we accept that brother or that sister. Just as we naturally look at another human being and immediately judge their beauty or lack of beauty, their style or lack of style, we must train ourselves when we look at a brother or sister in Christ, to say in our hearts, "Beautiful. In Christ. Fully accepted. That is who she is. My natural and instinctive judgements hardly scratch the surface of her true self. Through faith I know more about her true self. She is child of God, a daughter of the king, accepted by grace." You must train your heart to live in a community of grace. That training begins with fully receiving God's loving grace to you and then moves on by applying that love and grace to your brothers and sisters in Christ.

The second question of covenant brings in more complication. I know that my own answer to that question is to love the Lord with all I am and to love my neighbors. I know everybody else should be about this, too. Yet, none of us is successful in living out this question. We are all in process. That makes it difficult for me to know what to expect both from myself and from brothers and sisters in Christ. Not only are we all in process, but we are also motivated differently. Even setting aside bad motivation for the moment and considering only when the most positive motivation, my motivation may lead me in one direction and my sister in another direction. Take for example of a couple struggling in marriage. A brother gifted in giving might be motivated by the Holy Spirit to offer to pay for a marriage retreat for the couple. A sister gifted in service might be moved to volunteer free babysitting on Friday nights. Another sister gifted in mercy might take the wife for coffee giving her space to spill out the burden of her heart. And another brother gifted in teaching might take the husband aside to give him advice from the word. What should we expect from one another when even our best motives vary? That alone is a messy question for which the one clear answer seems to be that we should not expect others to do what we would do. Our exhortation to good works in the body of Christ, the church, should include freedom for others to continue to grow in process and to live out good works according to how God is at work in them. In granting this freedom to the individual, we recognize the tension of working together as a community. Are we all just to do what we think best and be left at that? The larger the community, the more challenging it can be to define the proper expectations, we should have on another person. For example, what should I expect of the members of the body of Christ in my city? By narrowing the scope to a smaller specialized community, we can apply the covenant model with more clear expectations. Consider, for example, the more specialized covenant community known as the family.

As a covenant community, the family has a structure of authority and a code of behavior. The code or law is set by the parents. It is then up to the parents to communicate their expectations and to communicate the basis for acceptance in the family. Christian parents model family after the heavenly family and so should strive to model acceptance of their children according to God's acceptance of his children – by grace. Children in a Christian family are not necessarily children of God, but they are all potential children of God, and they are all created in the image of God, though fallen. In the covenant community of family, question one should be answered, “By grace!” And yet, parents have such regular opportunity to exhort their children and express disappointment in their children that children most naturally learn that their acceptance is based on their ability to live up to the expectations of their parents. To fight this natural tendency, grace-based love must be expressed with regularity in a way the child can hear that love. As Paul says, “Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord” (Ephesians 6:4). Expression of anger, sharpness of tongue, tone of voice, look of the eye, can each communicate, “You disappoint me,” which is quite distinct in the heart of a child than communicating “Your behavior disappoints me.” Grace-based love communicates, “You I love. You I accept. This behavior of yours, however, I do not accept.” In family, grace-based love provides fertile soil for fruitful exhortation.

Workers in a company form a different kind of covenant community. The covenant expectations in this case are specified in the work contract. We might call this a second-order community. It is not a community one is born into like the family or the body of Christ, but a community one joins if accepted. In this case, a Christian boss should still choose to communicate value and acceptance of his workers through grace-based love. At the same time, he must also hold workers accountable to the covenant agreement detailed in the contract. The Christian boss may find himself or herself in the position of communicating, “I care about you. I see real potential in you. You're fired. You missed work without telling me. I gave you a warning and a second warning. You have not lived up to the expectations of the contract, so I am firing you from this community.” Grace directs our expression of love and value, but does not nullify all consequences when covenant is broken.

How about the missionary team as a covenant community? Now we are getting even messier. The missionary team is not like church or family. One is not born into a missionary team. It is a second-order community. A person chooses to apply to a missionary team and may be accepted or not accepted based on the needs of the team and required qualifications. When a person is accepted onto a missionary team, that new member agrees to a covenant, likely in the form of both a legal contract and an expression of expectations from the missionary movement. Higher expectations are communicated than would be expected of a member of a local church. Still, the missionary team does in ways function like a church, recognizing that all are still in process and that there must be some freedom for growth and expression of love. As in the local church, restoration after sin is usually a high value for missionary teams. For missionary teams, then, not all expectations are equal. Some expectations relate to work performance or faithful commitment to carrying out the mission. Other expectations relate to growing maturity as a part of the body of Christ. The most important rule of exhortation applies to missionary teams - exhortation bears fruit in the soil of grace-based love. Do you view the members of your missionary team community as fully acceptable to you as children of God, fully accepted by him? Do the members of your missionary team community know that this is how you view them? Do you communicate acceptance of them with your actions, your words, your tone and your look?

Exhortation and accountability are essential to covenant community. Promoting an environment of grace-based love is essential to healthy exhortation. Covenant expectations and human effort are not contrary to grace, but rather elements of covenant community. In Christian community, the first question of covenant establishes value and acceptance on the basis of grace, motivated by love, and providing a basis for the second question of covenant to address the issues of mission, character, behavior and expectations. The language of grace can become confusing when addressing second question issues. For example, the team member who shows up twenty minutes late to the weekly team meeting, again, may counter any look of disapproval with, “Just give me some grace.” At this point, the team leader may validly respond, maybe best in private, “I do give you grace. I

truly accept you as my brother in Christ. Your repeated failure to show up on time to our weekly meetings is affecting the whole team. You committed to this team and you committed to showing up on time. That is part of your covenant agreement, and we expect you to live up to that. I fully accept you by grace, and I expect you to do better.” Depending on the tone of voice, the late team member’s request for grace may have been a way to countering the expectations of his team members before those expectations were expressed. He used grace to shift responsibility onto the team. It is not he who should work to be on time, but they who should show grace. He should not have asked for grace, but for mercy. In other words, he should have asked forgiveness for his poor behavior. Instead, avoiding vulnerability he transferred his responsibility for good behavior onto his team members. This is not how grace is meant to be applied.

Grace-based acceptance allows us to value one another by faith at the most fundamental level of being. Grace thus enables us to show understanding and forgiveness to one another in struggle, failure and sin. Grace does not contradict our exhortation of one another to live for Christ nor our need to keep one another accountable to our shared covenant commitment. The communication of grace as the basis of our value and acceptance for one another, a communication that occurs through action, words, tone and look, creates an environment in which members feel more valued than task, free to fail, secure in community. Priority to the development of a grace-based environment of love may not initially seem necessary to the mission. Much can be accomplished through good vision casting, strategic planning and youthful zeal. But the mission can go only so far without the growth of the body into maturity, which is God’s vision for all communities bearing his name.

This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends. You are My friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you. You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and that your fruit would remain, so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He may give to you. This I command you, that you love one another.

John 15:12-17

Young and growing believers love this passage, because it speaks to hearts that have tasted the love of Jesus and that long for human community rich in love. But it is the mature and wise who must hold onto the radical reality of grace, leading maturing communities with a firm commitment to and regular expression of grace-based love, which in turn provides fertile soil for righteous exhortation to take root, grow and produce fruit that remains to the glory of God.