

To The Jew First: A Reformed Perspective

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I am delighted to see representatives from so many evangelical groups participating in this conference on gospel ministry to Jews who have not acknowledged Jesus as Messiah. We should all be encouraged at witnessing such widespread, inter-denominational interest in this important topic. It is also encouraging to me that the organizers of this conference included my branch of the church, the Reformed tradition, within this discussion. I am convinced that the Calvinistic tradition has many things to learn in this area, and perhaps a few things to contribute to an inter-denominational forum like this one.¹

In this essay, we will look at four major Calvinistic doctrines which have implications for gospel ministry to non-Christian Jews. Several goals have shaped our treatment of these doctrines. First, we will focus only on longstanding doctrines on which the Reformed tradition has been relatively unified, rather than on my own personal views. Second, to insure that the perspectives here reflect some breadth of agreement, we will draw upon confessional resources, especially the *Westminster Confession of Faith*,² rather than direct exegetical work with the Bible. Third, we will direct attention to some of the practical implications that each of these doctrines has for gospel ministry to Jews who do not follow Jesus as their Messiah.

At least four theological emphases within the Reformed tradition demand attention. First, we will review the doctrine of the Covenant of Grace. Second, we will touch on Calvinistic perspectives on the people of God. Third, the relationship of law and gospel will come under consideration. Fourth, the Reformed doctrine of eschatology will draw attention to several important issues.³

¹ Much thanks belongs to Ra McLaughlin, webmaster and editor for Third Millennium Ministries, for his editorial work with this manuscript.

² The *Westminster Confession of Faith* (WCF) with some modifications is the official doctrinal standard of many Reformed and Presbyterian denominations. It therefore adequately represents some of the central features of the Reformed theological system.

³ It should be noted that these and related topics appear in a number of important writings by Reformed theologians. See for instance: Hoekema, Anthony A. *The Bible and the Future*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979. Holwerda, David E. *Jesus and Israel — One Covenant or Two?* Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995. Berkouwer, G.C. *The Church*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976. Berkouwer, G.C. *Faith and Sanctification*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1952. Berkouwer, G.C. *The Return of Christ*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1972. Murray, Iain H. *The Puritan Hope*. London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1971. Murray, John. *The Covenant of Grace*. London: Tyndale

The Covenant of Grace

The term “covenant” is so closely associated with Reformed theology that the words “covenant” and “reformed” are often used interchangeably. In many circles, “Reformed theology” is “covenant theology”; “covenant theology” is “Reformed theology.” This close association reflects the fact that a central feature of Reformed systematics is the doctrine of covenant.

We should note that Reformed covenant theology has undergone significant historical developments. Covenant did not dominate early Calvinistic thinking, but rose to prominence through the Reformed scholastics of the seventeenth century. Since then, however, covenant has played a formative role in nearly every corner of the tradition.⁴ In contemporary Calvinism significant adjustments have been made in the light of recent analyses of ancient Near Eastern texts, but covenant remains a central organizing feature of Reformed theology.⁵

One of Reformed covenant theology’s most important features is the idea of the covenant of grace outlined in the *Westminster Confession*.⁶ To understand this doctrine we must remember that the highly scholastic Westminster Assembly did not use the term “covenant” in precisely the same way that the Bible does. Rather, the term was used as a theological construct to designate the manner in which God reveals himself to humanity.

In this framework, God reveals himself in two covenants. The Westminster Assembly called the first covenant the “covenant of works”⁷ or “covenant of life.”⁸ This

Press, 1954. Gospel ministry to non-Christian Jews has come under consideration in the declarations of Presbyterian churches in the United States in recent years. See Appendix.

⁴ For a summary of covenant in Reformed theology see: Vos, Geerhardus. *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation*. Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980, pp. 234-267.

⁵ Robertson, O. Palmer. *The Christ of the Covenants*. Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1980, pp. 201-227. Kline, Meredith G. *Treaty of the Great King*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1963; *The Structure of Biblical Authority*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1997; *Kingdom Prologue*. S. Hamilton: M.G. Kline, 1993.

⁶ *WCF* 7.3-7.6; 14.2; 17.2; 27.1; 28.1; *Westminster Larger Catechism (WLC)* 30-36,162; *Westminster Shorter Catechism (WSC)* 20,94. As we describe the covenant of grace, we should note that the viewpoint of the Westminster Assembly is a theological construct. It was not directly dependent on specific biblical passages or vocabulary of covenant. Instead, it summarized an assortment of biblical teachings on divine-human relations, much like the doctrine of the Trinity brought together many affirmations about the godhead into one doctrine.

⁷ *WCF* 7.2; 19.1; *WLC* 30

covenant describes the relationship between God and our first parents during their probation in Eden. The Assembly identified the second covenant between God and humanity as the “covenant of grace.” This covenant was made with Christ and governed divine-human relations from Genesis 3:15 to Christ’s second coming. At times, this traditional vocabulary leads to confusion because many evangelical groups associate the “covenant of works” with Moses, and the “covenant of grace” with the New Testament. By contrast, the Reformed tradition limits the “covenant of works” to the time before the fall, and assigns the entire history of redemption, including both the Old and New Testaments, to the “covenant of grace.”

Despite the historical breadth of the covenant of grace, the Reformed tradition has always acknowledged differences between the Old Testament and New Testament periods. Yet, it has also insisted that both Testaments are substantially unified and differ only administratively. As the Westminster Assembly put it, the one covenant of grace “was differently administered in the time of the law, and in the time of the gospel,”⁹ but “there are not ... two covenants of grace, differing in substance, but one and the same, under various dispensations.”¹⁰

To be sure, this theological perspective raises many questions. What precisely is the difference between the “substance” and “administration” of a covenant? Are not “substance” and “administration” reciprocally related? Reformed theologians continue to explore these interesting questions, but we must set them aside in order to focus our discussion in a different direction.

Perhaps the most important implication of the covenant of grace is that there has always been only one way of salvation. The way of salvation in the Old Testament era was essentially the same as it is for Christians today. As the *Westminster Confession* put it, Old Testament believers looked to “the promised Messiah, by whom they had full remission of sins, and eternal salvation.”¹¹ The divine purposes behind the religious arrangements of the Old Testament were “for that time, sufficient and efficacious, through the operation of the Spirit, to instruct and build up the elect in faith in the promised Messiah.”¹²

No doubt, many aspects of this affirmation need to be clarified. How did the concept of the eschatological Messiah develop in the Old Testament? How much did Old Testament believers understand about Christ? While Reformed theologians may answer these questions differently, all agree that Christ was the implicit or explicit object of saving faith even in the Old Testament. His death and resurrection have always been the basis of salvation for all who believe.

⁸ *WLC* 20; *WSC* 12

⁹ *WCF* 7.5

¹⁰ *WCF* 7.6

¹¹ *WCF* 7.5

¹² *WCF* 7.5

The Calvinistic emphasis on one way of salvation in the one covenant of grace has at least two significant implications for gospel ministry to non-Christian Jews. In the first place, we may speak of the need to stress retrospective continuity. Evangelism of non-Christian Jews from a Reformed perspective should stress the continuities between Old Testament and New Testament faith. Because Gentiles have dominated in the church for so long, Christianity has transformed remarkably from its biblical roots. To be sure, some of these changes have resulted from encroachments of paganism, while others have rightly come about as the church has sought to “become all things to all people” as Paul put it in 1 Corinthians 9:22. Nevertheless, the distinctively Gentile flavor of most denominations often makes Christianity appear to be an entirely Gentile religion. This appearance, in turn, erects enormous barriers between the church and non-Christian Jews.

The manner in which Christians present the gospel can either ameliorate or exacerbate this unfortunate situation. Christian groups who have no doctrine that unifies the Testaments, like the covenant of grace, often run the risk of worsening the tension. Many feel free, if not compelled, to present Christianity in ways which focus on distinctively Gentile interests and needs. Reformed theology, however, can help resolve some of these tensions because it stresses the continuities between the Testaments. Because the Reformed tradition enthusiastically embraces the Old Testament’s authority over the modern church, it can present Christ in ways which emphasize the Old Testament concerns that many Jewish communities still treasure so highly.

In the second place, we may also speak of the need for evangelism to stress prospective continuities between the Testaments. The unity of the covenant does not simply draw New Testament believers retrospectively toward Old Testament faith. It also presses those oriented toward Old Testament revelation to look prospectively toward Jesus and the New Testament. Unfortunately, so many Christian groups have characterized our day as a distinctly “Gentile age” that a number of evangelicals have tended to minimize the call for Jews to place their faith in Jesus as the Messiah. At times, these evangelicals come close to treating Old Testament Israelite faith and Christianity as different but equally legitimate ways to reach the same goal of salvation.

According to traditional Calvinism, nothing could be further from the truth. The unity of the covenant of grace portrays Christian faith as the unwavering focus and goal of the Old Testament. The faith structures of the Old Testament always anticipated Jesus. As the Westminster Assembly put it, they were “all foreshadowing Christ to come.”¹³ In this sense, God designed Old Testament faith to point to Jesus and the faith structures he and his apostles taught. To reject explicit commitment to Jesus of Nazareth, therefore, is to reject Old Testament faith itself. The Reformed concept of the unity of the covenant of grace makes evangelism of non-Christian Jewish communities an absolute necessity, whether those communities are faithful or unfaithful to Old Testament religion.

¹³ *WCF 7.5*

The People of God

A second Calvinistic outlook which has significant implications for our topic is the doctrine of the people of God. This doctrine addresses the relationship between Old Testament Jews and the New Testament church. Unfortunately, many evangelicals hold one of two common positions on this issue: 1) separation theology; or 2) replacement theology. As we will see, however, the Reformed tradition actually holds a third position.

In the first place, separation theology views Israel and the New Testament church as two relatively separate peoples of God. This viewpoint has become popular in recent decades through Scofieldian Dispensationalism, and continues to varying degrees in many contemporary expressions of Dispensationalism. In general, separation theology radically distinguishes the divine program for ethnic Israel from that of the New Testament church. Ethnic Israel often receives the designation of “the earthly people of God” because they are thought to be destined to receive the land of Canaan and to experience an earthly salvation in the millennium and beyond. The Gentiles of the New Testament church are frequently described as “the spiritual or heavenly people of God” because they are thought to be destined to receive the inheritance of an eternal heavenly existence. These Old Testament and New Testament promises continue alongside each other as largely independent programs.

In the second place, replacement theology holds that ethnic Israel has ceased to be special in the eyes of God. This outlook has dominated a number of denominations throughout the centuries. In this view, God has abrogated the special covenant status of ethnic Israel and replaced Israel with the Christian church. At times, this replacement is thought to be so categorical that Jews no longer have any special role whatsoever in the plan of God.

Sadly, it has been my experience that many Christians outside the Reformed tradition characterize the Calvinistic position as replacement theology. I suspect that this misperception stems largely from the strong rhetoric many Reformed theologians employ against the separation theology of Dispensationalism. It is important, however, to understand that the Reformed position differs from both separation and replacement theologies.

It is more accurate to describe the Reformed view on the people of God as “unity theology.” In this outlook, the New Testament church is one with Israel of the Old Testament. The promises to Israel are not abrogated, but extended and fulfilled through the salvation of both Jews and Gentiles in the New Testament community.

Reformed theologians have displayed their unity theology in a number of ways. For instance, Calvin’s interpretation of Paul’s statement in Romans 11:26 that “all Israel will be saved” points to this strong sense of unity. In Calvin’s view, “all Israel” refers neither to believing Jews alone, nor to believers within the New Testament church alone. Instead, “all

Israel” denotes the combined number of believing Jews and Gentiles from both the Old and New Testaments periods. As Calvin himself put it,

When the Gentiles shall come in, the Jews also shall return ... and thus shall be completed the salvation of the whole Israel of God, which must be gathered from both, and yet in such a way that the Jews shall obtain the first place, being as it were the first born in God's family.¹⁴

Whether or not Calvin’s interpretation of this verse was correct, it set the course for a continuing posture of the Reformed tradition. In line with Calvin’s view, it is common for Reformed theologians to speak of Israel as the church and the church as Israel.¹⁵ This interchangeability of terms points to the organic unity which Reformed theology understands to exist between Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church. From the Reformed perspective, believing Gentiles have always been adopted into the family of Abraham by faith in Abraham’s great Son. Gentile believers are made a part of Israel, and thus they inherit the promises given to Abraham alongside Jewish believers from both Testaments. There is neither separation nor replacement. Instead, the two have become one.

We may further explain this unity theology by drawing attention to several beliefs that characterize the doctrine of the church in the Reformed tradition. In the first place, we should note that the Reformed outlook on the invisible church makes absolutely no distinction between ethnic Israel and the church. The *Westminster Confession* defines the invisible church in this manner:

The catholic or universal church, which is invisible, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the Head thereof.¹⁶

The full number of the elect from all ages and nations comprise the one invisible church. In this respect, absolutely no distinction exists between the believing Jews of the Old Testament era and the Christian Jews and Gentiles of the New Testament era. All the elect have equal status and utter unity in the invisible church.

In the second place, Reformed theology also stresses the unity between the visible communities of God’s people in the Old and New Testaments. The Westminster Assembly defined the visible church as that community which

¹⁴ Calvin, John. *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993, pp. 437.

¹⁵ Clowney, Edmund P. *The Church*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995, pp. 42-44. Hodge, Charles. *Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993, vol. 3, pp. 548-552.

¹⁶ WCF 25.1

consists of all those throughout the world that profess the true religion; and of their children: and is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation.¹⁷

In this regard, however, the *Westminster Confession* notes one important distinction in a parenthetical comment within 25.2. It remarks that the during the New Testament period the visible church is “not confined to one nation, as before under the law [but] ... consists of all those throughout the world that profess true religion.” The visible New Testament church simply extends the visible Old Testament church to all the nations of the earth. Even on the level of visible communities, Old Testament Israel and the New Testament church are not two separate peoples, existing alongside or in opposition to each other.

Third, the unity of the visible communities is also evident in the ways Reformed theology has taught that the New Testament visible church includes both believers and unbelievers, just as Old Testament Israel did. This outlook on the church differs from that of many groups who teach that the New Testament church consists only of true believers. In the Reformed tradition, Jeremiah’s promise that “everyone will know the Lord” (Jer 31:34) in the New Covenant is not completed until the return of Christ. For this reason, at the present time membership in the visible church consists of believers and unbelievers, just as citizenship in Old Testament Israel consisted of believers and unbelievers.

Fourth, the unity of the visible Old and New Testament communities appears in the Calvinistic belief that the children of believers are part of the visible New Testament church.¹⁸ As the Westminster Assembly put it, the visible church consists of those who “profess the true religion ... and ... their children.”¹⁹ All Reformed paedobaptists and a number of Reformed baptists believe that children within the New Testament church hold a status much like that of Israelite children in the Old Testament. They are the expected (though not guaranteed) heirs of the promises of grace. This biological dynamic rests on the conviction that the New Testament church is a continuation of Old Testament Israel.

Fifth, Reformed theology has emphasized the unity of Israel and the church by applying Old Testament remnant theology to the church. This connection appears in two ways. On the one hand, the threat of divine judgment stands over the New Testament church just as it stood over Old Testament Israel. Calvinism does not distinguish Old Testament Israel as under judgment and the New Testament church as under grace. The Westminster Assembly plainly stated, “Some [churches] have so degenerated, as to become no churches of Christ, but synagogues of Satan.”²⁰ As Old Testament Israel experienced divine judgment for flagrant apostasy, New Testament apostates will suffer divine wrath individually and corporately, temporally and eternally.

¹⁷ *WCF* 25.2

¹⁸ Compare *London Baptist Confession* (1689) 26.2.

¹⁹ *WCF* 25.2

²⁰ *WCF* 25.5

On the other hand, just as the Old Testament promised that a righteous remnant would continue even through Israel's darkest hours, so the Reformed tradition has affirmed that "nevertheless, there shall be always a church on earth, to worship God according to his will."²¹ This application of Old Testament remnant theology points again to the Calvinistic belief in the unity of the people of God in both Testaments.

To be sure, Reformed unity theology raises questions that need to be explored further. For example, Reformed theologians still have not reached much consensus on the status of physical descendants of believers after multiple generations have passed with little or no evidence of saving faith. In this regard, non-Christian Jews today may have a status among God's people similar to non-Christian Gentiles who have distant Christian ancestors. One thing is clear to all in the Reformed tradition. Physical descent does not determine salvation. Yet, Paul's remarkably paradoxical statement in Romans 11:28 strongly suggests that a special status extends through multiple generations. Speaking of non-Christian Jews he says, "As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies on your [the Gentiles'] account; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable." This passage asserts that a special status of some sort continues for Jews who are distant physical descendants of the Old Testament believers. Perhaps a similar status applies to Gentiles with Christian ancestry as well, but this issue remains to be explored more fully in the Reformed tradition. Despite a number of lingering uncertainties, Reformed theologians unquestionably affirm continuity between the visible people of God in both Testaments.

The Reformed perspective on the unity of God's people has at least two important implications for gospel ministry to Jewish communities. First, Gentiles must carry out evangelism of non-Christian Jews with a strong sense of indebtedness. Throughout the history of Christianity, Gentile Christians have evangelized Jewish communities with apparently little awareness of the gratitude they owe to ethnic Israel. Even when anti-Semitism has not dominated Gentile Christian attitudes, outreach to the lost in ethnic Israel has not differed noticeably from outreach to lost pagans. Yet, if the Reformed perspective is right, then Gentile Christians owe a tremendous debt to ethnic Israel because Gentile Christians practice a faith which they inherited from Jews. In this regard, we should be mindful of Paul's words to the Gentiles in Rome: "Do not boast over those branches [non-Christian Jews]. If you do, consider this: You do not support the root, but the root supports you" (Romans 11:18). Calvinistic unity theology stresses the gratitude that every Gentile believer owes to ethnic Israel. Although we must not diminish the teachings of the New Testament that may offend non-Christian Jews, the practices of Gentile Christian evangelists should demonstrate the utmost appreciation for the ethnic Israel to whom they owe so much.

Second, the Reformed tradition also reminds us that the visible Christian church has no claim to moral superiority over ethnic Israel. Throughout its history, Gentile Christians

²¹ *WCF* 25.5

have frequently disdained Jews as “covenant breakers,” “God haters” and “Christ killers.” Most of the time, this treatment of ethnic Israel has been coupled with the belief that the Christian church is of a higher moral character. According to the Reformed doctrine of the visible church, however, the New Testament church also contains much impurity. Such terms as “covenant breakers,” “Christ killers” and “God haters” may be applied as readily (if not more readily) to the visible Church as to ethnic Israel. In Romans 11:18-21 the apostle Paul warned Gentile Christians of his day not to “act arrogantly” toward unbelieving Jews under divine judgment because apostasy and divine judgment were possibilities for the Gentile visible church as well. Judgment can come upon them as “unnatural branches” as it came upon the “natural branches” of Old Testament Israel. As history has demonstrated repeatedly, Paul’s warning has become reality. It is a matter of record that the predominantly Gentile church has repeatedly turned from covenant fidelity and has suffered the judgment of God for these apostasies. For this reason, evangelism of non-Christian Jews must be carried out with a high degree of humility. We must always be ready to admit the enormous failures of the Christian church.

Law and Gospel

The Reformed tradition has also espoused an outlook on law and gospel that should inform gospel ministry to Jews without Christ. In Reformed confessions and catechisms, the terms “law” and “gospel” commonly distinguish the Old Testament from the New Testament, but it is important to see that this distinction is by no means absolute.²² In the Calvinistic perspective, the gospel of Christ held an essential a place in the law of Moses, and Mosaic law plays a central and positive role in the age of the gospel. law and gospel are not in opposition, but are two harmonious dimensions of life under the mercy of God in both Testaments.

In this respect, important differences arise between the Lutheran and Reformed traditions. Put simply, in contrast with Reformed theology the Lutheran Church has exhibited a largely negative assessment of the law. It is well known that Luther’s catechisms and sermons on the law primarily focused on the *usus pedagogicus*, the law as an instrument of sin leading to belief in Christ. The *usus civilis*, law as restraining sin, also received attention quite early. Luther himself, however, never formally established a place for the third use of the law as a moral guide for believers (*usus normativus*). Given Luther’s personal religious history, his orientation is not surprising. It was not until the Melancthonian *Formula of Concord* (1577-1580) that the Lutheran tradition formally affirmed the *tertius usus legis* (“third use of the law”), the law as moral guide for followers of Christ.²³ Still, the third use of the law has not held a strong position in Lutheran

²² WCF 7.5; 20.1; 25.2

²³ *Formula of Concord*, Article 6.

theology. Luther's negative assessment of the law continues to characterize the Lutheran tradition in this regard.²⁴

Calvinism, however, has taken a very different approach. In Calvin's commentary on the seventh chapter of Romans, he argued that the law as moral guide was actually the primary use of the law. This position led Calvin to a much more positive assessment. Commenting on Romans 7:10 Calvin said,

The commandment shows us a way of life in the righteousness of God, and ... was given in order that we by keeping the law of the Lord might obtain eternal life, except our corruption stood in the way. ... We must thus distinguish between the character of the law and our own wickedness. It hence follows, that it is incidental that the law inflicts on us a deadly wound, as when an incurable disease is more exasperated by a healing remedy. ... this remains unaltered, that it is not in its own nature harmful to us, but it is so because our corruption provokes and draws upon us its curse.²⁵

From Calvin's viewpoint, the law of Moses reflected the moral nature of God and was designed in the first place to show humanity the path to life. The law increased sin and led to death only because of humanity's fall into sin. For this reason, Calvin stressed the law as a gracious gift from God.²⁶ It is a blessing even for Christian believers, and guides them in the way of grateful living before God.²⁷ In a word, Calvin was much more positive than Luther in his assessment of the Mosaic law as a guide for Christians. This more positive outlook has characterized Reformed theology throughout the centuries.

The *Westminster Confession* devoted an entire chapter to the subject: "Of the Law of God." First, the Westminster Assembly declared that the moral structures of God's law actually preceded Moses. As the first and second paragraphs of chapter nineteen declare, "God gave to Adam a law"²⁸ and this same law was "delivered by God upon Mount Sinai, in Ten Commandments."²⁹ In this view, it was never morally acceptable to steal, break

²⁴ Berkhof, Louis. *Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1966, pp. 614-615. Spitz, Lewis W., and Wenzel Lohff, eds. *Discord, Dialogue, and Concord*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977, pp. 93-94.

²⁵ Calvin, John. *Commentaries on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993, p. 256.

²⁶ Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.7.4; 2.7.7.

²⁷ The *Heidelberg Catechism* reflects Calvin's perspective when it sets the Ten Commandments under the rubric of "Of Gratitude" or "Of Thankfulness" (questions 92-115).

²⁸ *WCF* 19.1

²⁹ *WCF* 19.2

Sabbath, dishonor parents, etc. These laws were codified in the days of Moses, but had already “bound [Adam] and all his posterity.”³⁰

Beyond this, in the Calvinistic outlook God added two features to this pre-existing moral law through the ministry of Moses. On the one hand, in the language of Westminster, God ordained for Israel “as a church under age, ceremonial laws.”³¹ On the other hand, he gave to Israel “as a body politic ... sundry judicial laws.”³² Undoubtedly, establishing sharp divisions between moral, ceremonial, and judicial laws is problematic. Countless theologians within and without the Reformed tradition have challenged the value of these categories. Nevertheless, even operating with this threefold division, the Reformed tradition has affirmed the moral relevance of all aspects of Mosaic law. As the Westminster Assembly put it, the moral law is “binding in all times and circumstances what ever it says.”³³ Even though the ceremonies of the Old Testament, such as sacrifice and temple worship, are not to be performed by New Testament believers, they are not irrelevant because they “prefigur[ed] Christ” and “[held] forth divers instruction of moral duties.”³⁴ Moreover, even the judicial laws maintain relevance for the New Testament period as far as “the general equity thereof may require.”³⁵

It is not surprising, then that Reformed theologians have emphasized that followers of Christ benefit tremendously from attention to the law of God. In fact, the *Westminster Confession* devoted the overwhelming majority of its attention to the law of God to positive declarations of its usefulness and value for life in the New Testament period. Consider the following sample:

Although true believers be not under the law, as a covenant of works, to be thereby justified, or condemned; yet it is of great use to them, as well as to others, in that, as a rule of life informing them of the will of God, and their duty, it directs and binds them to walk accordingly. ... It is likewise of use to the regenerate, to restrain their corruptions.³⁶

As this passage makes clear, from a Reformed perspective the law of God is “of great use” to believers and unbelievers alike even in our day.

If this confessional statement does not make the point clear, the positive outlook on Mosaic law in the Reformed tradition should be evident in various Calvinistic political experiments. For example, the social structures of Calvin’s Geneva, the Puritans’ England,

³⁰ *WCF* 19.1. In this way, the Reformed perspective on Mosaic law is similar to rabbinical declarations of the eternity of Torah (see *Pirque Abot* 1.2; 3.23).

³¹ *WCF* 19.3

³² *WCF* 19.4

³³ *WCF* 19.5

³⁴ *WCF* 19.3

³⁵ *WCF* 19.4

³⁶ *WCF* 19.6

and the Puritan colonies of America demonstrate how prone Reformed theologians are to view the Mosaic law as a positive resource for guiding moral and political life. Even in our own day, it is not uncommon to hear Calvinists, often known as “theonomists” or “reconstructionists,” enthusiastically recommending that contemporary civil governments enforce Old Testament judicial laws as much as possible. To be sure, Reformed theologians disagree about the details of these views, but the propensity of the Reformed tradition to emphasize the third use of the law appears throughout its history.³⁷

What are some implications of this focus of Reformed theology for gospel ministry to non-Christian Jews? At least one important implication comes to mind. Evangelism guided by Reformed theology insists that the law of Moses remains God’s law for his people today. Contrary to many Christian traditions, Reformed theology does not present Christianity as opposed to the guidance of Mosaic law. Christian traditions that tend toward antinomianism often require Jewish converts to abandon their traditions such as Sabbath-keeping, annual Feasts, and dietary observances. In effect, these converts are told that they must live as Gentiles to demonstrate loyalty to their Jewish Messiah Jesus.

Happily, in recent years a number of Christian Jewish congregations have resisted this widespread antinomianism. These churches endorse practices which many Gentile Christians are likely to consider contrary to the teaching of the New Testament. Yet, the members of these congregations see themselves as coming to completion or fulfillment as Jews when they receive Jesus as the Messiah. They see no need to abandon all biblical or biblically based post-biblical traditions.

As might be expected, the existence of these Jewish Christian communities has raised tensions in the broader Christian church. Their beliefs and practices are so different from those of typical Gentile churches that many Gentiles view these congregations as unusual to say the least. On occasion, these Christian Jewish churches react with an attitude of superiority over their Gentile brothers and sisters. It would appear that we are not far from the ethnic tensions that severely divided the first-century church. This disharmony compels us to examine more closely how we should relate the law of Moses to life in Christ.

The positive Reformed outlook on Old Testament law can greatly mollify these divisions. Reformed theology finds all Mosaic law valuable for Christian living, and promotes open attitudes toward Jewish Christians who wish to preserve their distinctively Jewish practices. Just as the book of Acts indicates that the apostles did not forsake all of their Jewish traditions as they followed Christ,³⁸ so Reformed evangelism today should not discount many of the practices of contemporary Jewish Christian congregations.

³⁷ See Barker, William S., and W. Robert Godfrey, eds. *Theonomy — A Reformed Critique*. Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1990.

³⁸ Acts 2:46; 3:1; 5:21,25,42; 18:18; 21:20-26; 22:17; 23:4-5; 24:10-18; 25:8.

To be sure, disagreements will arise over how biblical and post-biblical Jewish traditions should be applied today. It is unlikely that full agreement will ever be reached on these matters. Yet, the Reformed emphasis on the law as a moral guide for believers should at least help us clarify where the crucial issues lie. From the vantage point of Reformed theology, there is no problem for Jewish Christians to explore the applications of Old Testament laws to life today. In fact, this exploration should be applauded and pursued by Gentiles as well.

The Reformed outlook on Old Testament law also clarifies the nature of Jewish conversion to Christianity. On the one hand, to be a Jewish Christian does not mean lessening one's pursuit of obedience to the law of Moses. On the contrary, it implies a new empowerment from the Holy Spirit to fulfill the requirements of the law under the Lordship of Christ. Even those post-biblical Jewish traditions which aid in the process of sanctification are acceptable in principle. In a word, Reformed evangelists should be clear that Jews do not have to become Gentiles in order to follow Jesus.

At the same time, Reformed theology encourages Christian Jews to remember that all traditional practices must be reinterpreted and modified in light of the revelation of Jesus Christ. For instance, it may be acceptable to maintain a Kosher diet for reasons of health or tradition, but to do so in order to separate oneself from Gentile Christians contradicts New Testament teaching on the unity of the church.³⁹ Similarly, celebrating the Passover may in fact be quite beneficial, but to sacrifice a lamb as part of that celebration insults the sufficiency of Christ's atonement. While the Reformed tradition does not ask Jews to forgo their Jewishness in order to follow Christ, it does insist that their Jewishness be completely defined by Christ. Moreover, while in principle Jews need not live like Gentiles in order to be Christian, they must at times be willing to accommodate themselves to Gentiles for the sake of the gospel.⁴⁰

Nevertheless, it is incumbent upon Jewish and Gentile Christians alike to pursue obedience to God's law together. The question before Reformed churches is not *whether* the law of Moses applies to the Christian life, but *how*. To neglect the law of Moses is to neglect the moral perspectives of Jesus himself, who insisted that "anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:19). Our task is to discern how to observe the Mosaic law in the New Testament era. Should these observances be the same for Gentiles and Jews? To what degree should cultural and personal variations be permitted?

In all events, it should be clear from a Reformed perspective that evangelism of non-Christian Jews should never give the false impression that loyalty to Moses precludes love for Christ. On the contrary, Christian evangelism should affirm that wholehearted devotion to Christ expresses itself in wholehearted devotion to Mosaic law.

³⁹ Acts 10:1–11:18; Gal. 2:11–21; Eph. 2:11–22

⁴⁰ 1 Cor. 9:20–22; Gal. 2:11–21

Eschatology

The Reformed perspective on eschatology also provides significant guidance for evangelizing non-Christian Jews. Unfortunately, the terms “Reformed” and “eschatology” do not go together in the minds of many Christians. Most evangelicals have difficulty believing that Reformed theology has much to say about eschatology. There are at least two reasons for this misperception. First, unlike many contemporary evangelical groups, Reformed theologians seldom give themselves to sketching out particular end-time scenarios. We have remained largely skeptical of proposed dates and sequences of events. Second, Reformed ecclesiastical bodies have normally allowed a wide variety of views among their members and officers. Reformed confessions and catechisms do not endorse particular positions on questions that preoccupy many evangelical groups. They simply affirm basic beliefs such as the return of Christ in glory, the resurrection of the dead, judgment, and the final new creation.

Despite this variety, it is fair to say that the Reformed tradition has largely been divided between amillennial and postmillennial eschatologies. On occasion, premillennial Reformed theologians have appeared, but this position has not been widespread. For this reason, we will concentrate our attention on the eschatological hopes of Reformed theologians who endorsed amillennial or postmillennial positions.

The Reformed tradition has typically affirmed a very important eschatological role for ethnic Israel in at least two ways. In the first place, Calvinists have strongly affirmed that the land promises to Israel will be fulfilled when redeemed Israel possesses the entire earth. Many evangelicals assume that only premillennial eschatology affirms the abiding validity of Israel's land promises. In this view, to deny the premillennial return of Christ is to deny God's faithfulness to his earthly promises and to replace them with spiritual blessings. We should point out, however, that neither Reformed amillennial nor postmillennial eschatologies suggest that the earthly promises to Israel's patriarchs have failed. On the contrary, Reformed eschatology sees the fulfillment of Israel's land promises on a grand scale. It is true that amillennialism and post-millennialism do not typically make much of the recent establishment of the state of Israel. Nor do they believe in a thousand year reign to follow Christ's appearance. Instead, the land of Canaan was a mere foretaste, a first step toward total world dominion by the people of God.⁴¹ Reformed theology has looked to the eschatological new heavens and new earth as the fulfillment of Israel's hopes of a land. In the new creation, redeemed Jews and ingrafted Gentiles will possess the entire new earth, the geographical center of which will be the land of Canaan and the New Jerusalem.

⁴¹ Calvin, John. *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah*. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993, pp. 298-299. Calvin, John. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960, 2.11.2, pp. 451-452.

In the second place, Reformed theologians have dealt very seriously with the implications of Paul's paradoxical statement regarding Israel in Romans 11:28-29: "As far as the gospel is concerned, they are enemies on your account; but as far as election is concerned, they are loved on account of the patriarchs, for God's gifts and his call are irrevocable."⁴² As a result, Reformed theology has been united in maintaining a hope for the redemption of ethnic Israel.

This hope has taken two basic forms. On the one hand, some Reformed theologians have argued that Paul simply assured his readers that the Jews have not been cut off entirely from the grace of God. For this reason, the church will always have Christian Jews among its numbers.⁴³ On the other hand, other Reformed theologians have understood Romans 11 to teach that there will be a large scale conversion of Jews before the Second Coming. For example, the answer to *Westminster Larger Catechism* question 191 states that in the second petition of the Lord's Prayer ("Thy kingdom come"), we should pray among other things that "the Jews [may be] called." This too is the opinion expressed in the marginal notes on Romans 11:26 in the Geneva Bible.⁴⁴ Other well-known theologians have taken this position as well. For example, Charles Hodge wrote, "The second great event, which, according to the common faith of the church, is to precede the second advent of Christ, is the national conversion of the Jews."⁴⁵

This future hope for the widespread conversion of ethnic Israel has followed two basic patterns in Reformed theology. On the one hand, postmillennialists often look upon this event as the final stage of the Christ's victorious church. The gospel goes forth to all the world, and ethnic Israel joins in the worldwide redemption which ushers in the return of Christ. On the other hand, amillennialists tend to understand ethnic Israel's

⁴² Holwerda, David E. *Jesus and Israel — One Covenant or Two?* Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995, pp. 153-154, 168-175.

⁴³ See Hoekema, Anthony A. *The Bible and the Future*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979, pp. 143-147; Murray, Iain H. *The Puritan Hope*. London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1971, pp. 48-49, 61-65.

⁴⁴ Murray, Iain H. *The Puritan Hope*. London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1971, p. 41

⁴⁵ Hodge, Charles. *Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993, vol. 3, p. 805. See similar sentiments in: Owen, John. *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Second Edition, vol. 1, Edinburgh, 1812, pp. 443-444 and 454-455; Murray, John. *The Epistle to the Romans*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1984, vol. I, p. 28 and vol. II pp. xiv-xv and 76-101; Vos, Geerhardus. *Biblical Theology, Old and New Testaments*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1948, Tenth Printing, p. 79; *The Pauline Eschatology*. Baker Book House, 1979, p. 88; *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation, The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*. ed. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co. 1980, p. 35; Edwards, Jonathan. *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*. vol. 1, Banner of Truth Trust, 1976, p. 607; Henry, Matthew. *Matthew Henry's Commentary*. vol. 6, MacDonal Publishing Company, pp. 448-453, as cited by CHAIM [<http://www.chaim.org>].

eschatological conversion as a divine response to Gentile apostasy, not as a great climax of the gospel's victory over the world.⁴⁶

Despite these differences, one common element appears in the Reformed tradition on the future conversion of ethnic Israel: any large scale Jewish conversion must come through the preaching of the gospel. This position strongly opposes any eschatology that provides ethnic Israel with an alternative avenue of salvation. The Reformed vision of Israel's future absolutely dismisses the popular notion that non-Christian Jews will have the opportunity to believe in Christ when they see him coming in glory. When Christ appears in glory, it will be too late for unrepentant Gentiles and Jews alike. The Divine Warrior will strike out in judgment against the rebellious nations of the earth as well as apostates in Israel.

What are the implications of Reformed eschatology for gospel ministry to non-Christian Jews? At least two concerns come to the foreground. In the first place, the Reformed outlook draws attention to the kind of hope we offer to non-Christian Jews in the gospel of Christ. The Christian faith points to the fulfillment of Israel's hopes for earthly victory and prosperity. From the time of the exile of Israel and Judah until now, the persecution and suffering of the righteous in Israel has created severe theological and physical crises. The laments have risen heavenward throughout the millennia. What has happened to the promises to the patriarchs? Has God forgotten his promise to give Israel victory over the nations that have persecuted her? When will God bring justice and victory for his people? These hopes are concrete, physical and earthly, but they often seem foreign to the Christian gospel. From the Reformed perspective, however, these earthly hopes are nothing other than the inheritance we have been promised in Jesus.

The Christian gospel is the proclamation that these very real, corporeal, earthly hopes are fulfilled through the work of Christ. We announce that in Jesus we have the inauguration of that Kingdom. Already the stronghold of evil has been broken through the death and resurrection of Christ. In the ongoing work of the Spirit today, we see different aspects of this eschatological vision fulfilled throughout the world. Moreover, every hope of the faithful remnant of Israel will come to complete fruition in the return of Christ.

From the Reformed perspective, the Christian gospel which we announce to Gentile and Jew alike does not promise an individual salvation of eternal heavenly bliss. Instead, the Christian gospel announces that the earthly hopes of God's people Israel will become a never-ending historical reality on the new earth at Christ's return. At that time, the enemies of God's people will be destroyed, the earth will be renewed, and God's people will inherit the earth. This focus of the Christian gospel is often lost from contemporary evangelism,

⁴⁶ Berkouwer, G.C. *The Return of Christ*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1972, 323-358.

but it must be reaffirmed in the strongest terms, especially in ministry to non-Christian Jews.⁴⁷

A second implication of Reformed eschatology recalls that the Reformed tradition insists that like Gentiles, Jews can only experience the future glory of the Kingdom of God by receiving the gospel of Christ now. As a result, we have an urgent responsibility to bring the gospel to Jewish communities. Our hearts should break over the condition of Jews who live apart from their Messiah. Our love and high regard for the people who received God's irrevocable call should stir our hearts to bring them the good news of Christ so that they might be rescued from the coming judgment.

Moreover, whether we believe that there will be a large scale conversion of Jews to Christ or not, focusing evangelistic attention on Jewish communities is our eschatological responsibility. Evangelical organizations frequently focus on Jesus' words that "this gospel of the kingdom will be preached in the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come" (Matthew 24:14). As a result, they work diligently to spread the gospel to every identifiable Gentile people group. Of course, we should applaud these efforts. But when this focus on Gentiles entirely displaces evangelistic concern for ethnic Israel, we have gone too far. Insofar as we our eschatology leads us to expect our age to include the conversion of Jews, we are responsible not just to reach the Gentile world for Christ, but to reach Israel as well.

Conclusion

I began this paper by suggesting that the Reformed tradition has a lot to learn and some things to contribute to shaping gospel ministry to non-Christian Jews. This paper is a call for Reformed churches to reconsider their commitments to this task. Our tradition has been so oriented toward the Gentile world that we have often failed to seek the lost in Israel. It is time for us to follow through with the implications of Reformed theology by reaffirming and applying our commitments to this ministry opportunity. At the same time, it would appear that Reformed theology also has perspectives that can contribute to reassessments within other traditions. The unity of the Testaments in the covenant of grace, the one people of God, the harmony of law and gospel, and the eschatological vision of Israel's future offer outlooks that may enhance the efforts of other branches of the church as well. In all events, every Christian tradition should search deeply within itself and interact with other theological perspectives to find every legitimate and effective way to bring the gospel of Christ to those Jews who still have not found their Messiah.

⁴⁷ Hoekema, Anthony A. *The Bible and the Future*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979.

APPENDIX

Overture on Jewish Evangelism
 20th General Assembly
 Presbyterian Church in America⁴⁸

Whereas Messiah Jesus commanded that "repentance and forgiveness of sins be preached in His name to all nations *beginning at Jerusalem*" (Luke 24:47);

Whereas there has been an organized effort on the part of some who claim to profess the name of Christ to deny that Jewish people need to come to Him to be saved;

Whereas these people have spread a false hope and security that Jewish people can inherit eternal life apart from the faith in God's New Covenant promises foretold by the Jewish prophets (Jeremiah 31:31, Isaiah 53);

Therefore, the 20th General Assembly of the PCA re-affirms that we are "not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: *first for the Jew*, then for the Gentile" (Romans 1:16);

Re-affirms that "salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12) and "at the name of Jesus every knee should bow" (Philippians 2:10);

Re-affirms that anyone and everyone - Jewish or Gentile - who fails to receive Jesus, Messiah of Israel, as Savior and Lord, as taught in the New Covenant, will perish eternally; for Peter, appointed as Apostle to the Jewish people (Galatians 2:7), pleaded with the men of Israel, "save yourselves from this corrupt generation" (Acts 2:1-41);

Re-commits itself to prayer for all peoples - Jewish & Gentile, to turn to the God of Israel and His Holy Messiah Jesus in faith, as the Westminster Larger Catechism states, we are to pray that "the gospel [be] propagated throughout the world, *the Jews called*, the fullness of the Gentiles brought in" (Westminster Larger Catechism answer to Question 191);

Re-commits itself to the preaching of the gospel of Christ to all peoples - Jewish & Gentile, and condemns as the worst form of anti-semitism withholding the gospel from the Jewish people;

Condemns as erroneous the false teaching held by some that salvation for Jews today is possible *apart from the Gospel of Christ* due to the Abrahamic Covenant, for this heresy necessarily involves denying the completed atonement for sin accomplished through our Messiah (Hebrews 9:15).

⁴⁸ As cited by CHAIM [<http://www.chaim.org/ga.htm>]

We therefore *re-affirm*, in accord with the scriptures and the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms, that it is our duty, as Messiah's people, to take the gospel to all the peoples of the earth, including the Jewish people. We call the Jewish people, through whom Jesus came, to join us in faith in their own Messiah, obedience to their own King, Jesus the "King of the Universe", and in the proclamation of His gospel to all peoples, for that same Jesus will one day return to judge the world (Acts 1:11).