When the “remnant” is brought to view in Revelation, our attention is directed to God’s intent that the movement be defined by a specific theological construct:

“And the dragon was wroth with the woman, and went to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ” (Revelation 12:17, KJV).

“Here is the patience of the saints: here are they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus” (Revelation 14:12, KJV).

The “and” here describes not so much a balancing act between faith and obedience, but rather a powerful relational dynamic between the two. The point of the gospel is not faith and works, but rather faith that works. The good news is not that God will save you if you obey His law, but rather that the free gift of salvation is itself so transformative that it creates in the believer a returning current of love to God, and that love manifests itself in obedience. Right here, according to Revelation, is the key insight to be understood regarding the theological identity of the remnant.

...not so much a balancing act between faith and obedience, but rather a powerful relational dynamic between the two.
In Adventist history the right relation of the law to the gospel was brought to the forefront in 1888 when A.T. Jones and E.J. Waggoner, supported by Ellen White, preached with clarity that in Galatians Paul is speaking “especially of the moral law” (Ellen White, Selected Messages, vol. 1, p. 234). This was scandalous to the ears of Adventist preachers due to the fact that they had been trained by prominent leaders to argue against the antinomians by attempting to prove that the law in Galatians is the ceremonial law, allowing for the evangelistic left hook, “Therefore, you still must obey the Ten Commandments!”

And yet, even as we were preaching the law with evangelistic gusto, it was precisely our failure to preach the law as it is actually taught in Scripture that led Ellen White to point out the painful fact that we as a people had earned a tragic reputation: “Seventh-day Adventists talk the law, the law, but do not teach or believe Christ” (Ellen White, Testimonies to Ministers, p. 92). Over and over again she warned that we—“the commandment-keeping people of God”—were mishandling the commandments of God. At one point she was so tired of hearing our preachers hammer away defending the law that she said this:

> “Let the law take care of itself. We have been at work on the law until we get as dry as the hills of Gilboa, without dew or rain. Let us trust in the merits of Jesus Christ of Nazareth”
> (Ellen White, Sermons and Talks, vol. 1 p. 137).

We see here that she wasn’t merely weary of hearing too many sermons on the law. The issue was not that we were simply talking about the law too often, but rather that we were preaching the law in a wrong light and thereby creating a serious theological problem for ourselves. We were preaching the law in such a manner that we were compromising the gospel and losing sight of “the merits of Jesus.”

But once we follow the lead of God’s prophet to the remnant by allowing ourselves to see that the law in Galatians is “especially” the Ten Commandments, it is then that the theological mission of the remnant really begins to come clear. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul articulated the relational dynamic of the law and the gospel with such crucial beauty that, once we get it, our entire theological vision changes and Adventism begins to make sense in ways it never could otherwise.

Watch how Paul reasons us forward:

> “Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified” (Galatians 2:16, KJV).

> “For if the inheritance is of the law, it is no longer of promise; but God gave it to Abraham by promise. What purpose then does the law serve? It was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made. ...Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not! For if there had been a law given which could have given life, truly righteousness would have been by the law. But the Scripture has confined all under sin, that the promise by faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. But before faith came, we were kept under guard by the law, kept for the faith which would afterward be revealed. Therefore the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor” (Galatians 3:18-25).
To this day we Adventists do not generally preach these passages to our own people, and certainly not to the world at large in our evangelism, except in the efforts we still put forth to “prove” that Paul must be talking about the ceremonial law. The fact that we scarcely know what to with the law as it is set forth in Galatians, let alone preach it with systematic clarity and power, is a glaring manifestation of our ongoing Laodicean nakedness, poverty, and blindness (Revelation 3).

In Galatians Paul is not saying something peripheral or minor or optional or fuzzy about the Ten Commandments. To the contrary, he is teaching the definitive, precise, and vital truth about the law that must pervade Adventist preaching if we are ever to truly inhabit our remnant identity. Those who “keep the commandments of God” cannot be who they’re called to be as long as they’re uncomfortable with what Scripture actually teaches about the commandments of God!

First Paul informs us that that the faith by which we are saved is “the faith of Jesus.” Notice that it is His faith, not ours, that saves. Paul wants us to understand that we encounter God’s faith operating in Jesus before we exercise faith in Him. Within the narrative framework of the gospel, God had made promises through the Hebrew prophets. In fact, the entire Old Testament constituted a covenant document laying out all God promised He would do through the coming Messiah in order to maintain relational faithfulness to fallen humanity at any and all cost to Himself, even to the point of death. That’s the whole Old Testament in a nutshell. “The faith of Jesus” is the New Testament term that encapsulates what this entire covenant-keeping reality looks like. It means that God, in Christ, acted with perfect faith toward fallen humanity.

And that is where the gospel resides!

The good news is that God is a God of covenant-keeping love. He is completely trustworthy, reliable, constant and unswerving in His love for us. He is faithful, or full of faith, toward us even when we are faithless toward Him. Our sin cannot change His position of devoted commitment to us. This is what Ellen White articulated as God’s “changeless love for the human family” (Ellen White, Testimonies to Ministers, p. 92).

...if we expect God’s favor in response to our law-keeping, then we stand in denial of His covenant promise.

Jesus is the complete fulfillment of God’s covenant promise from both the human side and the divine side of the relationship. As God, He was relationally faithful to humanity. As man, was relationally faithful to God. The circle of faithful love that was broken by sin was reconnected and set in reciprocal motion—where?—in Christ!

So, then, because Paul is reasoning forward from this Old Testament foundation of God’s covenant faithfulness to us, he does not tell us to exercise faith in Jesus in a relational vacuum, but rather on the solid premise God’s faithful love brought to light and life in Christ. The faith of Jesus, Paul reasons, is the impetus for our faith in Jesus.

Therefore, Paul warns us against imagining that the restoration of the broken relationship falls to us, “by the works of the law.”

Absolutely not!

To operate from that premise is to deny God’s good character, to deny His faithful love, to deny the fact that He kept His covenant promise in Christ. “For if the inheritance is of the law, it is no longer of promise,” Paul reasons.
That is, if we expect God’s favor in response to our law-keeping, then we stand in denial of His covenant promise. Legalism isn’t merely a misguided expenditure of effort, it is a refusal to believe in God for who God really is. Legalism assumes that I am better than God, that He is the one in the hard, cold, estranged state and that I, by my initiative, get God to move toward me.

OK, then, Paul questions, “What purpose then does the law serve?” If God didn’t intend for us to keep the law as a means of salvation, what’s it for? And here comes the masterstroke of Paul’s theology:

“It was added because of transgressions, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made... The law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith. But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor” (Galatians 3:19; 24-25).

While the law possesses no power to save—more precisely, while my obedience to the law possesses no power to save—it does serve the vital role of a tutor. The law was made necessary because of sin, to serve as a teacher to keep human conscience alive with a sense of our guilt, and thereby to arouse in us a sense of need for a Savior.

Here’s where we Adventists get nervous. Because Paul speaks of the law in a past tense role—“it was added ... till the Seed should come...the law was our tutor...after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor”—we feel like Paul can’t possibly have the moral law in mind, because the moral law is eternal, isn’t it? And if it’s eternal, Paul would not speak of it as if it only served a temporary purpose, until Jesus came, would he?

But that is precisely what Paul does say.

Paul can’t possibly have the moral law in mind, because the moral law is eternal, isn’t it?

So we can either continue with our uncomfortable but obvious avoidance of Paul’s teachings about the law, or we can process what he’s saying and be theologically, experientially enriched by the gospel. The only way around our nervousness in the face of what Paul has to say about the law, is to back up from the way we as a people have thought about the law and realize that we need a radically transformed theology on God’s law that aligns with Paul’s inspired thinking.

Paul’s logic is tight. To live toward God as if outward compliance to the law could earn His love is, in fact, a denial of the gospel. Salvation by works is a futile attempt for the simple yet profound reason that we cannot get from God by our law-keeping what He’s already given by His free grace. The only thing that will do is for the sinner to undergo a complete shift of focus, a total redirecting of dependence, from reliance on anything he might do to reliance on the already-achieved fact of God’s merciful love given in Christ, apart from the works of the law.

After having negated the law as a means of salvation, Paul then articulates what we might call the power equation of the gospel. Don’t miss this, because it is right here that we discover the very thing that must become central to Adventist theology and evangelism if we are ever to rise to our prophetic potential.

“Righteousness,” Paul explains, only comes “by faith” (Galatians 5:5).
I cannot attain righteousness by pursuing it as an end in itself, as a moral goal to be achieved, as something we do by doing it, by trying hard enough. Faith alone is the means by which righteousness can be attained. That’s the first thing Paul wants us to get clear in our heads. But then he goes one vital step further:

While righteousness is only attained by faith, faith only “works by love” (Galatians 5:6, KJV).

Boom!

The word here translated “works” is energeo in the Greek, from which we get the word energy. Paul is saying that God’s love, as revealed in Christ, is the power source that awakens faith to action.

Righteousness is the what, and faith energized by love is the how!

There is an axiomatic relationship between righteousness, faith and love, and love is the catalyst that sets the experience in motion. Once we understand this relational dynamic, it becomes evident that God’s love must be our studied, passionate focus.

When Ellen White was asked to define righteousness by faith, she brilliantly got to the heart of the matter by saying, “it is the active principle of love imparted by the Holy Spirit” (Ellen White, Testimonies to Ministers, p. 468).

This is why it is vitally important that the law never be preached except in the context of the gospel. To preach the law without the gospel, Paul explains, is spiritually dangerous. “The letter kills,” he warns (2 Corinthians 3:6). That is, preaching of the law apart from the gospel slaughters people spiritually, emotionally, relationally, because the law without the gospel can only impose “condemnation” (verse 9), which can only drive people to either legalism or despair.

God’s love is of such an independent and free quality that He needs no incentive to give it.

If we genuinely embrace what Paul teaches in Galatians about the moral law, then, on a deep mental and emotional level, we will be thrust with helpless dependence upon God’s grace for our rescue. All sense of self-dependence will be shattered in one painful yet liberating burst of self-negating realization. The deep, subconscious, carnal security we find in our natural human legalism will be yanked from our ego-centric souls and we will run in nakedness to Christ for the covering that His righteousness alone can provide. This is what Ellen White was getting at when she gave the following definition of justification by faith:

“What is justification by faith? It is the work of God in laying the glory of man in the dust, and doing for man that which it is not in his power to do for himself” (Ellen White, Testimonies for Ministers, p. 456).

When we allow ourselves to be confronted with the fact that there is no virtue or value whatsoever in obedience to the law to secure favorable standing with God, it is then that the pure genius of the gospel dawns upon our hearts with warm, healing light. God’s love is of such an independent and free quality that He needs no incentive to give it. “God is love” in the most pure sense imaginable, so that there is nothing we can do to make Him love us more than He already does. He’s already there without any help from us to earn His love!
How devastatingly humbling!
And how deeply liberating!

Once we begin to grasp the truth of righteousness by faith, a power we have never known before grips us deep on the inside and we are born again into the glory of the new covenant. A vital seismic shift of consciousness occurs and we are genuinely free for the first time in our lives.

This is why God’s end-time prophet insist:

“There is not a point that needs to be dwelt upon more earnestly, repeated more frequently, or established more firmly in the minds of all than the impossibility of fallen man meriting anything by his own best good works. Salvation is through faith in Jesus Christ alone”
(Ellen White, Faith and Works, p. 19).

But isn’t that imbalanced?

Shouldn’t we, rather, preach a balance of grace and law, forgiveness of sin and victory over sin, God’s part and the sinner’s part?

Actually, no.

The Bible does not think in terms of balance, but rather in terms of dynamic relationship. It does not speak of giving equal emphasis to grace and obedience. Rather, the Bible speaks of a relationship between grace and obedience as a single dynamic unit. Grace and obedience constitute one seamless continuum, not two separate items. Grace and obedience are one connected, cohesive truth. Where there is no grace, there will be no true obedience. There may be an outward compliance to the law, but that isn’t obedience. Legalism isn’t obedience. It’s rebellion wearing a mask of obedience.

The biblical idea is not, God forgives you by His free grace, but you also must to obey His law. Rather, forgiveness is the birth place of true obedience. This is why Ellen White sees no danger in preaching, without reserve or qualification, that there is absolutely no value in obedience for salvation, and this is why she is completely comfortable in placing the weight of our preaching emphasis on the good news of what God has done for us in Christ.

She explained the idea like this:

“The theme that attracts the heart of the sinner is Christ and Him crucified. On the cross of Calvary, Jesus stands revealed to the world in unparalleled love. Present Him thus to the hungering multitudes and the light of His love will win men from darkness to light, from transgression to obedience and true holiness” (Ellen White, Review and Herald, Nov. 22, 1892).

The message of the gospel is not, God did His part, now you do your part.

“I believe in something better than possible obedience and necessary victory. I believe that obedience and victory are inevitable...”
When it comes to salvation, there is no such thing as God’s part and my part. All there is, is God’s part. The total reality of my salvation is His accomplishment. I have no part at all in achieving my salvation. God did it all in Christ. That’s the good news, and anything less isn’t good news at all, but merely good advice, which leaves me with a sense of self-serving obligation to obey, but without any internal power to actually obey.

A prominent old covenant preacher once challenged me like so:

“IIIIII believe that obedience to God’s law is possible and victory over sin is necessary. Do you, Ty?”

“Actually, no I don’t,” was my response. “I believe in something better than possible obedience and necessary victory. I believe that obedience and victory are inevitable, sure, and certain when the pure gospel is preached and believed.”

“Dangerous theology,” he retorted. “If you give people the impression that obedience isn’t necessary for salvation, they won’t obey. Too much emphasis on grace and love will make people feel free to sin.”

“Really,” I asked, “is the gospel that weak in your estimation? It doesn’t have that effect on me or those I see responding to the gospel. Actually, the more clearly I see and believe God’s unmerited grace for me, the more I want to live only for Him. If God’s grace makes you want to sin, maybe you haven’t yet encountered God’s grace for what it really is. Whatever it is you believe, it certainly isn’t the beautiful revelation of God on display in Jesus.”

“I believe the true gospel,” he insisted.

“And what is that?”

“Victory over sin! That’s the gospel. Jesus lived a perfect life of obedience to God’s law to prove that we can too.”

“Okay. I wish you well with that.”

The conversation ended there.

A few years later I ran into his wife. I asked how he was doing. Her eyes flooded with tears. “We’re divorced,” she said. “He was having an affair back when you knew us and I finally couldn’t take it anymore.”

This is something I’ve noticed over the years. Legalism is often a cloak for secret sin. Over and over again people I’ve known who were strident defenders of the old covenant “gospel” ended up having serious moral falls. Of course this is not a certain outcome of legalism in all cases. Some people are able to sustain the heaviness and misery of a law-centered, guilt-based focus for many years.

When the preacher centers the people’s attention on themselves—you must obey the law and you must overcome sin—they are setting them up for impotence and failure. Those who buy into this focus either become self-righteous Pharisees or they will give up in despair under the realization that they will never get the job done.

You can be certain that you are not hearing the gospel of Christ when the overall effect of the message is to produce in your heart either a sense of unresolved guilt and judgement toward others, on the one hand, or a sense of license to sin, on the other. The true gospel relieves the conscience of its guilt and simultaneously awakens the will to heartfelt obedience.
Comprehending the powerful dynamic of the gospel, Ellen White insisted that when you “see the matchless charms of Jesus,” an amazing thing will happen in your heart: “You will fall in love with the Man of Calvary” (Ellen White, Life Sketches, p. 293).

“Fall in love”?

Is that the language she used?

Yes it is!

Because she understood the gospel as articulate by Paul.

The true gospel relieves the conscience of its guilt and simultaneously awakens the will to heartfelt obedience.

She understood that righteousness only comes by faith, and faith is only energized by vital contact with God’s love in Christ.

You can know you are under the influence of the true gospel of Christ when you believe with complete liberty that there is no merit whatsoever in obedience … and yet you want to obey … because you are in love with God … because He first loved you.

The remnant of Revelation is not called to preach obedience to the law as a balancing polemic against the antinomianism of Protestantism. Rather, the remnant is called to preach the pure gospel of Christ, which places the law in its proper relation to the saving work of Jesus. God’s love must be made so large and clear and vivid to human hearts that it will awaken faith to action.

The theological identity of the remnant—at least as God intends it to be—is that they “keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus.” Ellen White understood this pregnant prophetic line to mean that the third angel’s message, which the remnant are called to proclaim, is none other than “the message of justification by faith … in verity” (Ellen White, Review and Herald, April 1, 1890).

The ominous question that hangs heavy in the air before all Seventh-day Adventists seems obvious: When will we inhabit the theological identity our Savior envisions for us?

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To read the original article on the Light Bearers Website, click here.