CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER
717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500
Website: www.churchredeemeraz.org

Series: **The Local Church** **Pastor/Teacher**
Number: **7** **Gary L. W. Johnson**
Text: **Hebrews 12:18 - 29**
Date: **July 17, 2011 (a.m.)**

A TALE OF TWO MOUNTAINS AND THE REGULATIVE PRINCIPLE

Cowboy churches have popped up all over the country since the first one made headlines in *USA Today* back in March of 2003 (there are six in Arizona). Visitors are given a *Cowboy Bible* (NIV) that has on the inside cover the Cowboy Ten Commandments: Just one God; Honor yer Ma & Pa; No telling tales or gossipin'; Git yourself to Sunday meeting; Put nothin' before God; No foolin' around with another fellow's gal; No killin'; Watch yer mouth; Don't take what ain't yers; Don't be hankerin' for yer buddy's stuff. Baptisms are performed out of a horse trough, and "Happy Trails To You" constitutes the sung benediction. What's next? Well, believe it or not, there are Surfers churches and Skateboarder churches![1] What about a church designed around California Valley Girls? Or one especially for Turner Classic movie watchers? This prompted Terry Johnson to opine: "Where is the unity of the saints and the catholicity of the church if we are constantly dividing into smaller and smaller divisions? Where does it all end? Roger Williams sitting in a closet with his wife? Unless I have exactly the culture, the language, the music that appeals to me, I guess I can't worship with anyone else. And so the course we're on is a course that will divide and subdivide the church further and further. The worship wars are raging, tearing apart churches and denominations, and giving shape to the life and piety of generations to come."[2] The concept of worship in the New Testament is first and foremost a matter of theological perspective. Sadly, in many churches today, Christians have little if any interest in things distinctively theological.[3] Instead, there is a preoccupation with the *emotions.* How does this make us *feel?* How can we have a more heightened *sense* of the divine in our worship? We want an atmosphere where our *experience* of the transcendence is real! The history of the Christian Church is very instructive when it comes to this subject. Throughout the history of the Church, Christians have always been tempted to follow after more physical, more sensory forms of worship. For instance, one of the factors that lead to the heretical developments of the early Roman Catholic Church was that they adopted a form of worship that reflected the Old Testament Temple. And so they introduced an altar, and they established priests with beautiful robes and trappings. And they began to light candles and incense and have all sorts of ceremonies and rituals. And the sacrificial system became the Mass, and the whole sacerdotal system was installed whereby God's grace was mediated through a Priest and the sacraments *ex opera operato* (by the action or work performed in the Church by the Priest). And this in turn produced other problems. How so? "Firstly, it was the *church of the sacrament.* Very great emphasis was laid on the sacraments, in particular on Holy Communion. God gave these sacraments to His church in order that the latter might mediate His grace to believers. This meant that the church was primarily the '*mater fidelium,'* the mother of the believers, and as such the dispenser of grace. Connected with this was the next characteristic: it was the *church of the priest.* The priest, as the administrator of the sacraments, is the intermediary between God and man. Only through his activity can the believer receive the divine grace. In its turn, emphasis on the indispensability of the priest, almost naturally, led to the conception of the church as an *institution of power.* This found its clearest expression in the famous bull *Unam Sanctum,* by Boniface VIII (1302), where we read: 'We learn from the words of the Gospel that in this Church and in her power are two swords, the spiritual and the temporal. . . . The latter is to be used for the Church, the former by her; the former by the priest, the latter by kings and captains, but at the will and by the permission of the priest. The one sword, then, should be under the other, and temporal authority subject to spiritual.'"[4] The problem was distinctively theological, but in essence it was the natural human desire for tangible, physical, sensory worship—worship you could touch, worship that created an experience of the senses.

The Reformers came along and said, "No, New Testament worship is not focused on the physical; worship is designed to be specifically spiritual in nature." And so they got rid of all the pomp and rituals and candles and incense and priests and spectacle. This was all in effort to get back to purely spiritual, non-physical worship as defined by Christ in John 4:24. "God is Spirit and those who worship Him must worship in Spirit and Truth."

During the Great Awakening and in Jonathan Edwards' lifetime, we find the beginning of another shift to define Christian worship as physical. The Awakening that occurred under his preaching was purely spiritual – it was clearly from God. But when people saw what was happening, many people began to define what was going on by some of the physical excesses. So by the time of Charles Finney, many Christians defined Christian experience by external, physical, sensory kinds of experiences. But now, instead of using rituals and incense and ceremonies to create physical, sensory experiences, Finney and others began to use certain kinds of music, and emotionalistic preaching and other exciting methods to create this kind of experience.

The Charismatic Movement is another example of desiring physical experience in worship instead of simple, spiritual, immaterial worship. The charismatic movement took root and began to grow during the 60's and 70's, a period of time in which our society/culture was likewise in transition. The accent was upon the experiential and the emotions as an expression of self-realization. Was it simply a coincident that this also typified the charismatic movement? Again, the problem with the Charismatic Movement is largely theological. Members of what goes by the name, the Third Wave of the Charismatic Movement believe that the charismatic church is the Kingdom here and now, and so they believe that we should experience all of the physical, sensory, supernatural phenomena that are promised for the Kingdom - that is to come.

Over and over again throughout the history of the Church we see the same kind of temptation that these Hebrews were experiencing – a desire for worship that we can feel, worship we can experience, worship we can touch. This is only natural – we are physical beings, and we can't see God, so we really want to experience Him physically.

I personally believe that this is the same kind of problem going on in many churches today. When people worship, they really want to *feel* something. They want to *experience* something. They want to *"encounter"* God. They want something physical. And so instead of rituals or incense or ceremonies, they use pop music and drama and humor and video and lights and smoke to create an atmosphere and a physical experience of the senses.[5] But an even greater concern arises when this approach to worship is conceived of as being a means of securing God's favor. In other words, our worship becomes a work that serves to secure the grace of God – but this blending of Law and Gospel ends up with no Gospel at all.

Why was the book of Hebrews written? What was the central purpose in the mind of the author as he penned these words? "The purpose of Hebrews is made clear by its content. The writer warns Christians not to fall back from faith in Christ in the midst of trials and exhorts them instead to press on to full maturity. The letter should not be thought of as a theological treatise, but as a sermon written by a pastor to a congregation from which he is separated. The writer describes it as 'my word of exhortation' (13:22). His method is to point out the supremacy of Christ over everything to which the readers might be tempted to turn; he is superior to angels, to Moses and the prophets, to Aaron and the Levitical priests, to the blood sacrifices of the old covenant, and to the tabernacle and temple themselves. Since Jesus is the true messenger, the true prophet, the true priest, and the true sacrifice, to renounce him is to lose salvation altogether. Therefore, the readers must hold fast to Jesus Christ."[6]

The Epistle to the Hebrews contains five "warning" passages (cf. 2:1-4; 3:7-4:13; 5:11-6:20; 10:26-31; 12:18-29); laced in between are other admonitory passages, but these five are the standouts. "These Passages," remarks Hughes, "serve to demonstrate that the teaching of this epistle is not merely theoretical and unrelated to the realities of everyday life, but is intensely practical and therefore full of intense seriousness. This is true of all the doctrine of the New Testament, in which theology is unfailingly wedded to practice. Theology and life go together."[7]

I. THE CONTRAST BETWEEN THE TWO MOUNTS

A. The Description of Mt. Sinai

1. "What may be touched"
2. "a blazing fire"
3. "darkness"
4. "gloom"
5. "a tempest"

B. The Description of Mt. Zion

1. "the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem"
2. "innumerable angels in festal gathering"
3. "The assembly of the first-born. . ."
4. "a judge who is God of all"
5. "the spirits of just men made perfect"

6. "the sound of a trumpet"
7. "a voice . . ."
8. "The Reaction of the People"
9. "The Response of Moses the Mediator"

6. "Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant"
7. "the sprinkled blood . . ."
8. "Sober Warning"
9. "The One who is speaking"

II. TWO COVENANTS

Martin Luther famously declared that the Law ought never to be preached apart from the gospel – and the gospel ought never to be preached apart from the Law.[8] The noted Scottish divine, John Colquhoun (1748-1827) wrote a magnificant book on this subject, which I will summarize. Colquhoun begins by declaring that the law of the Ten Commandments as a covenant of works was repeated and displayed on Mount Sinai in subservience to the covenant of grace appears evident:

A. From the thunderings and lightnings, the noise of the trumpet and the mountain smoking, the thick darkness and the voice of the living God, speaking out of the midst of the fire on that awful occasion (Exodus 20:18; Deuteronomy 5:22-26). These terrible emblems signified the vindictive and tremendous wrath of God which is due to all the race of Adam for their breach of covenant (Galatians 3:10). They represented also the extreme danger to which every sinner who continues under the law in its covenant form is exposed as being liable, every moment, to the eternal execution of its dreadful curse. This awful display of the law as a covenant of works, though it was not the principal part, yet it was the most conspicuous part of the Sinaic transaction; for "the people saw the thunderings and the lightnings, and the noise of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking." And so terrible was the sight that Moses said, "I exceedingly fear and quake" (Hebrews 12:21). Now the covenant of works was displayed in this tremendous form before the Israelites in order that self-righteous and secure sinners among them might be alarmed, and deterred from expecting justification in the sight of God by the works of the law; and that, convinced of their sinfulness and misery, they might be persuaded to flee speedily to the blessed Mediator, and to trust in Him for righteousness and salvation. That terrible display, accordingly, contributed in some measure to humble them, to lessen that self-confidence which they had formerly discovered, and to show them their need of the divine Redeemer, and of union with Him by faith, in order to their being qualified for performing acceptable obedience. This appears from their own words to Moses after the dreadful sight which they beheld: "Speak thou unto us all that the Lord our God shall speak unto thee, and we will hear and do." Standing afar off, they do not say, as they did before the publication of the law at Sinai, "All that the Lord hath spoken, we will do," but "We will hear and do. We will first hear or believe, and then do." For speaking in this strain, the Lord commended them thus: "They have well said all that they have spoken. Oh, that there were such an heart in them" (Deuteronomy 5:27-29). Hearing applies to the words of the gospel as well as to those of the law. They said well in that they made hearing or believing the principle of acceptable obedience (Hebrews 11:6). The law then, as it is the covenant of works, entered at Sinai "that the offense might abound," not in the life by the commission of it, but in the conscience by conviction (Romans 5:20); it entered that it might be their schoolmaster to bring them unto Christ, that they might be justified by faith (Galatians 3:24).

B. That the law as a covenant of works was displayed on Mount Sinai appears also from this: the Ten Commandments, written on tables of stone, and so given to Moses on Sinai, are, by the Apostle Paul, called "the ministration of death, written and engraven in stones" (2 Corinthians 3:7). Now it is manifest that these commandments are no otherwise the ministration of death than as they are in the form of the covenant of works. In this form they were delivered to Moses to be deposited in the ark in order to prefigure the fulfilling of them by Messiah, "the Surety of a better covenant," and the concealing of that form, or the removal of it from them, to all who should believe in Him.

C. The moral law, as it was delivered from Mount Sinai is in Scripture expressly called a covenant. These are the two covenants: the one from Mount Sinai (Galatians 4:24). The law, in that promulgation of it, was such a covenant as had the appearance, through misapprehension of its design, of disannulling the covenant of grace made with Abraham. "The covenant," says the Apostle Paul, "that was confirmed before of God in Christ, the law, which was four hundred and thirty years after, cannot disannul, that it should make the promise of none effect" (Galatians 3:17). The law included a way of obtaining a title to the heavenly inheritance, typified by that of Canaan, so very different from that of the promise made to Abraham as to be incompatible with it. "For if the inheritance be of the law, it is no more of promise;" but God gave it to Abraham by promise

(Galatians 3:18). The covenant of the law from Mount Sinai, then, was the covenant of works; which contains a method of obtaining the inheritance inconsistent with that of the promise, but which cannot disannul the promise or covenant of grace. Besides, Moses, speaking of that law under the denomination of a covenant, affirms that it was not made with the Patriarchs, or displayed publicly before them. "The Lord our God made a covenant with us in Horeb; the Lord made not this covenant with our fathers but with us" (Deuteronomy 5:2-3). This covenant displayed on Sinai, then, was not the covenant of promise made with the fathers of the Israelite people.

D. The covenant of works is, in the New Testament, introduced and illustrated from the law as given by Moses. Our blessed Lord, in replying to one who asked Him what good thing he should do that he might have eternal life, said, "If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments;" namely Thou shalt do no murder, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Honor thy father and thy mother. . ." (Matthew 19:17-19). These being some of the commandments promulgated from Mount Sinai, our Lord repeats them to him in the form of the covenant of works. And the Apostle Paul, when mentioning the promise of the covenant of works, says, "Moses describeth the righteousness which is of the law, that the man which doeth those things shall live by them" (Romans 10:5). In expressing also the penal sanction of that covenant, he says, "As many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written (Deuteronomy 27:26), 'Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them'" (Galatians 3:10). That a conditional promise (Leviticus 18:5), then, and a dreadful curse (Deuteronomy 27:26) as well as the Ten Commandments were published to the Israelites is plain; and it is no less evident that, according to our apostle in the passages cited above, they are the *form* of the covenant of works.

E. That the law in the form of a covenant of works was displayed on Mount Sinai appears, likewise, from the opposition between the law and grace often mentioned and inculcated in the New Testament. We there read that, "The law was given by Moses, but grace and truth by Jesus Christ" (John 1:17), and that, "The law is not of faith; but the man that doeth them shall live in them" (Galatians 3:12). But it is in its covenant form only that the law in Scripture is contrasted with grace.

F. In the Sinaitic transaction, the hewing of the latter tables of stone by Moses, before God wrote the Ten Commandments on them, might be intended to teach sinners that they must be convinced of their sin and misery by the law as a covenant of works before it can be written legibly on their hearts as a rule of life.

G. Last, the same also appears from these words of the Apostle Paul cited above, "These are the two covenants; the one from the Mount Sinai, which gendereth to bondage" (Galatians 4:24). The covenant which genders to bondage is the covenant of works, made with Adam as the head and representative of all its natural posterity, and displayed on Mount Sinai to the Israelites. This covenant genders to bondage for, according to the apostle, the children of it, or they who are under it, are excluded from the heavenly inheritance, as Ishmael was from Canaan the typical and earthly inheritance. "Cast out the bondwoman and her son; for the son of the bondwoman shall not be heir with the son of the free woman" (Galatians 4:30). The generating of bondchildren, excluded from the heavenly inheritance, is a distinguishing property of the covenant of works; and it cannot be a property of the covenant of grace under any of its dispensations. It is the covenant of works only that has a tendency to beget a servile and slavish frame of spirit. It is evident, then, that the covenant of works was displayed on Mount Sinai. It was there displayed, together with the covenant of grace, in order to subserve the latter, and particularly to represent to the Israelitish church that the discharging of the principal and penalty of the covenant of works was to be required of Messiah, the Surety of elect sinners, as the proper condition of the covenant of grace.[9]

CONCLUSION: The confusion over Law and Gospel is very widespread. One obvious example is mega-pastor Joel Osteen and his run-away best-seller, *Your Best Life Now: Seven Steps to Living at Your Full Potential*, and the sequel, *Become a Better You*. Beyond his charming personality and folksy style, Osteen's phenomenal attraction is no doubt related to his simple and soothing sampler of the American gospel: a blend of Christian and cultural elements that he picked up not through any formal training, but as the son and television producer of a Baptist-turned-prosperity evangelist who was a favorite on the Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN). But Osteen's Gospel is NO Gospel at all, as Mike Horton points out. "There is no

condemnation in Osteen's message for failing to fulfill God's righteous law. On the other hand, there is no *justification.* Instead of either message, there is an upbeat moralism that is somewhere in the middle: Do your best, follow the instructions I give you, and God will make your life successful. 'Don't sit back passively,' he warns, but with a gentle pleading he suggests that the only reason we need to follow his advice is because it's useful for getting what we want, God is a buddy or partner who exists primarily to make sure we are happy. 'You do your part, and God will do his part.' 'Sure we have our faults,' he says, but 'the good news is, God loves us anyway.' Instead of accepting God's just verdict on our own righteousness and fleeing to Christ for justification, Osteen counsels readers simply to reject guilt and condemnation. Yet it is hard to do that successfully when God's favor and blessing on my life depend entirely on how well I can put his commands to work. 'If you will simply obey his commands, He will change things in your favor.' That's all: *simply* obey his commands.

Everything depends on us, but it's easy. Osteen seems to think that we are basically good people and God has a very easy way for us to save ourselves—not from his judgment, but from our lack of success in life—with his help. 'God is keeping a record of every good deed you've ever done,' he says—as if this is *good* news. 'In your time of need, *because of your generosity,* God will move heaven and earth to make sure you are taken care of.'

It may be *Law Lite*, but make no mistake about it: behind a smiling Boomer evangelicalism that eschews any talk of God's wrath, there is a determination to assimilate the gospel to law, an announcement of victory to a call to be victorious, indicatives to imperatives, Good News to good advice. The bad news may not be as bad as it used to be, but the Good News is just a softer version of the bad news: Do more. But this time, it's easy! And if you fail, don't worry. God just wants you to do your best. He'll take care of the rest.

So who needs Christ? At least, who needs Christ as 'the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world' (John 1:29)? The sting of the law may be taken out of the message, but that only means that the gospel has become a less demanding, more encouraging law whose exhortations are only meant to make us happy, not to measure us against God's holiness."[10]

Long ago, one of the Puritans. Samuel Petto clearly saw the danger in such confusion. "…when the children of Israel had sinned egregiously in making the calf, and the Lord severely threatened even to consume them, Exod. xxxii. 10, 11. Moses, in interceding for them, does not plead the covenant newly made at Mount Sinai, but that with Abraham—verse 13. *Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, thy servants, to whom thou swearest etc. & c.* He saw he could not ground his plea upon the Sinai covenant, already violated by them, and, therefore he flees to another, founded upon free grace. So, Deut. ix. 27, 2 Kings xiii. 23. *The Lord was gracious to them, and had compassion on them, and had respect to them.* He does not say, because of his covenant with Moses at Mount Sinai, but because of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, & c.; so that whilst the Sinai covenant was in force, yet that with Abraham (which went before) was not swallowed up or missed on it, but remained entire and distinct still, dispensing out blessings to the subjects of it; they were not one and the same covenant in that day. O then let Christians beware of mixing and confounding the old and new covenants, which are so distinct. It is the great design of the Epistle to the Romans and Galatians to beat off from this mixture; both have their great use, but they must have their due place—Gal. iv.24."[11]

When the two covenants are confused, then Law and Gospel are conflated, turning the covenant of grace into a covenant of works by adding one's own works righteousness to faith in Christ as a means to acceptance with God. Don't go confusing the Covenants!

ENDNOTES

[1] Cf. surferschurch.com/andskateboardchurch.com/

[2] Http://www.banneroftruth.org/pages/articles/article_print.php?418

[3] Al Mohler, in a recent commentary on a lead article by Lisa Miller in *Newsweek*, "Are We a Nation of Hindus?" correctly observed – "Another aspect of the story is this: Many Americans have such a doctrineless understanding of Christianity that they do not even know what the Gospel is – not even remotely. A greater tragedy is that so many who consider themselves Christians seem to share in this confusion. Many observers who trace these trends see this doctrinal shift among Christians as a good development. After all, if you hold to nothing more than a functional view of religion, this might seem to promise less conflict among religious believers. But, if you believe that truth is essential to Christian faith, there is every reason to see these trends as nothing less than catastrophic. Nothing less than our witness to the Gospel of

Christ is at stake. Are we becoming a nation of Hindus? Well, in this sense it appears we are. The really urgent question is whether the Church will regain its theological sanity and evangelistic courage to resist this trend. If not, being described as a nation of Hindus will be the least of our problems." http://www.albertmohler.com/blog_print.php?id=4336 Over a decade ago, David Wells bemoaned this trend, "There is in present day evangelicalism a hunger for God but an aversion to theological definition of that experience. There is a hunger for God but a disenchantment with dogma or doctrine." *God In The Wasteland* (Eerdmans, 1997) p. 99. However, this very thing was actually celebrated in the cover story of *Christianity Today*: "Reaching the First Post-Christian Generation" (12 September 1994, 18-23), especially page 22, where we read "an emotional experience of God is more important than its theological content." The danger inherent in such a position, as C. S. Lewis pointed out (*God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* [Eerdmans, 1970], 141), is that "religious experience can be made to yield almost any sort of God."

[4] Klaas Runia, *Reformation Today* (The Banner of Truth, 1969) p. 34.

[5]This analysis of trends in Church history is taken, with my modifications, from http://religiousaffectionsministries.org/articles/worship/worship-cannot-be-touched-hebre..

[6] Richard Phillips, *Hebrews: Reformed Expository Commentary* (P & R, 2006) p. 8.

[7] Philip E. Hughes, *A Commentary on The Epistle to The Hebrews* (Eerdmans, 1977) p. 53.

[8] *What Luther Says: An Anthology II* (Concordia, 1959) p. 739.

[9] J. Colquhoun, *A Treatise on The Law and The Gospel* (rpt. Soli Deo Gloria, 1999) pp. 56-59.

[10] M. Horton, *Christless Christianity* (Baker Books, 2008) p. 69.

[11] Samuel Petto, *The Treat Mystery of The Covenant of Grace* (rpt. Tentmaker Publications, 2008) p. 109. He elsewhere declared, "Doubtless men are obliged, at all times, to let the streams of their love run towards God; to love him with *all their heart, with all their soul, with all their mind, and to love their neighbour as themselves.*…the fulfilling of these is the keeping of the law. Christians are under the law, but it is *to Christ*, 1 Cor. ix. 21. They take it not from the hand of Moses, in its terror and rigour, but from the hand of Jesus Christ, who has redeemed from the curse of it" (p. 72).