

## The Image of God and the Imperative of Law

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“The Gentiles . . . show that the *work of the law* is written on their hearts” (Rom 2:14–15).

The thesis I shall address in what follows is that *theological doctrine and evangelism require it to be noted that the text of Romans 2:14–15 states, not that the law, but that the work of the law is written in the hearts of all people*. Significance attaches to appropriate exegesis at that point.

An address to the thesis as stated requires a preliminary understanding of the state of man as the image of God. For no conception drives the reflective mind more securely to the heart of the biblical revelation than that of man’s relation to God, as that was established, first, in its pristine, prelapsarian potential, and then as it was influenced by the entrance of sin. The understanding of what is involved on that level throws its light on the scope of human capacities and endowments. God created our first parent, Adam, as his own image, created in knowledge, holiness, and righteousness (Gen 1:26–27; Col 3:10; Eph 4:24). Adam’s initial standing under the terms of the covenant of creation (also referred to as the covenant of works), and his repudiation in due course of the obligations to which he was subject under that covenant, converge in their explanation of the contemporary human condition. For when Adam sinned, *it was the image of God who sinned*, and the question that is now to be addressed is that of the respects in which God has continued to have dealings with man, his fallen image. What, then, is to be said of the status of postlapsarian man in relation to God and to the reality that God spoke into existence; why is his nature and status and potential for right conduct what it is; and what, after his fall, is his newly established relation to the law of God? What, in short, is the law itself to which he is now subject?

We have said that Adam was created in knowledge. For him, to *be* was to *know*. Adam knew with reflex consciousness that he had come from the hands of a Creator-God. In his finitude he knew that he was under obligation to God who had graciously communicated to him certain mandates and explanations of what he was privileged to do in his offices of prophet, priest, and king. Our first parent was created in holiness and righteousness. Holiness referred to the character of his essential state and being. Righteousness referred to his actions which, as he stood at the beginning, were consistent with that state of holiness. But in order to observe the implications of that initial status for man’s subsequent character and ethical potential, it is necessary to be clear regarding the initial state of holiness itself. For Adam, the biblical doctrine insists, was created in a condition of essential, intrinsic holiness. God did not create man and then subsequently impose his image and holiness upon him. Adam’s holiness was not a *donum superadditum*, a “gift-added-on” after he had been created. His holiness was essential to the nature of being as, and in which, God had established him. If Adam’s initial holiness had been simply a *donum superadditum*, he could be said, then, to bear the image of God.

Adam would be God's image-bearer. But we do not say that man *bears* the image of God. Rather, the Scriptures tell us that man *is* the image of God. Adam was created as the analogue of God, in that he was like God in every respect in which a finite person can be like and can reflect the being and character of an infinite God. But he was not identical with God. Adam was, and man is, the image of God in that he is the analogue of God as to both his being and his knowledge. Man is the image of God in that he is a rational, immortal, spiritual, moral, and speaking person. He thinks and speaks because God thinks and speaks. He is rational because God is rational. He is immortal in soul because God is immortal (1 Tim 6:16). He is moral because God is moral. Man as created, that is, is characterized by derivative personhood and is endowed with derivative immortality, because absolute personhood and absolute immortality reside in God.

We make one brief comment on the importance of that realization. It carries significant implications for the understanding of the state into which man fell as a result of Adam's first transgression. Certain theologies, notably that of Roman Catholicism, argue that man as created stands in a "chain of being" in relation to God. The philosophic underpinning of such a claim is the assumption that there exists what is reckoned to be a "being-in-general" in which God, if he exists, and man both share.<sup>1</sup> On those grounds it is then supposed that when man fell, all that happened to him was that he lost the holiness that had been given to him as a *donum superadditum* in the first place, and that he fell, therefore, to a lower level in the chain of being. Sin is then seen as a *metaphysical or ontological lapse*. The continuity of being remains, it is said, but man's status within it is assumed to have been changed and lowered. But to the contrary, the fall, in the bequest of which all of Adam's natural posterity have participated, is to be understood properly, not as an *ontological* but as an *ethical lapse*. It was ethical in that Adam did what he ought not to have done. He ate the forbidden fruit. But metaphysically, he remained the image of God, in integral personhood and morally responsible to God (Gen 9:6; James 3:9).<sup>2</sup>

Clearly, the biblical data prohibit such arguments as assume a continuity of essence between God and man and a consequent claim regarding man's postlapsarian state. Holding to the pervasively important reality of the Creator-creature distinction, we

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<sup>1</sup> Cornelius Van Til refers to "The Thomistic notion of the mind of man as potentially participating in the mind of God . . . The whole scheme of the philosophy of nature is made into a 'Chain of Being' idea, fitted into a pattern of ever-increasing universality," *The Reformed Pastor* (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1971), 89. Van Til refers at that point to A. O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being*. Again, "Thomas starts from the abstract concept of *Being* and introduces the Creator-creature distinction afterwards. He reduces the Creator-creature distinction to something that is consistent with the idea of God and the cosmos as involved in a chain of being, with varying degrees of intensity," Van Til *ibid.*, 91. In his discussion of Thomistic thought as underlying the Roman Catholic theology, Van Til quotes Thomas (*Summa Theologica*, Q. II, 277) in the context of the question of cause: "But only good can be a cause, because nothing can be a cause unless it is a being, and every being as such, is good." Van Til observes that what that means is: "To the extent that man has being he participates in the being of God," *ibid.*, 104. See also John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 216.

<sup>2</sup> The meaning of sin as an ethical and not a metaphysical lapse was clearly understood by Van Til. Referring to sin as "ethical alienation" from God, Van Til goes on to observe that "it should be remembered in this connection that because man is a creature of God, it is impossible that he should ever be alienated from God metaphysically," *A Survey of Christian Epistemology* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed for the den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1969), 197.

hold that man, created as the finite analogue of the infinite God, was, as he came from the hands of God, intrinsically holy. He was in that state, however, mutable and defectible. It was possible for him not to sin, *posse non peccare*. And if, as the Genesis record makes clear, Adam had sustained his probation and remained obedient to the mandates that God had given him, he would have been confirmed in moral state and raised to indefectible eternal life. But the record of our first parent's failure of probation is all too clear and well-known.

We shall return to the question of what, then, our first parent retained as the image of God after his fall. And in that, we shall observe the nature and capacities of man's continued relation to God. That will enable us to see further into the meaning of our present text.

### **The law and the Adamic dereliction**

Quite apart from Adam's intrinsic awareness of God and the knowledge he inherently possessed as he came to self-consciousness, he was the recipient of God's special revelation as "God walked with Adam in the garden in the cool of the day" (Gen 3:8). At that time God, in his identity as the Second Person of the Godhead in preincarnate form, communicated to Adam the necessary laws of morality and conduct. That communication of law, or of God's requirements for life in his presence and under his all-seeing eyes, was subsequently republished and recapitulated in the moral law, the Ten Commandments as they were given to Moses. The Mosaic moral law is understandable in its full extent and intention as it is seen in that way to have been a rearticulation of the initial law as given to Adam. The implication of the point warrants comment and can be noted briefly. The moral law, by reason of its grounding in God's communication to Adam at his creation and before his fall, is to be understood as a creation ordinance, and because it is a creation ordinance it is binding on all people, in all places, and at all times. Now the question that arrests us at this point, a question whose answer is preparatory to comment on the statement that "the work of the law is written on the hearts of men," has to do with two implications of what has been said to this point. First, what is now, after Adam's fall, the status of man in relation to the law of God; and second, what, precisely, is the "law" that is in view in Paul's statement?

Adam, as he was created, was a public person. He was the federal head and representative of all those who would descend from him by ordinary generation. "The covenant being made with Adam, not only for himself, but for his posterity, all mankind, descending from him by ordinary generation, sinned in him, and fell with him in his first transgression."<sup>3</sup> By reason of Adam's first sin, the guilt of that sin, but not the guilt of Adam's subsequent sin, was imputed to all men (Rom 5:12). That is to say, Adam sinned as a public person, but it was as a private person, by his individual trust in God and his promise of a redeemer (Gen 3:15), that he was subsequently admitted to reconciliation with God.

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<sup>3</sup> Westminster Shorter Catechism, Question 16.

In view of the relation between Adam and his posterity that we have in view, it will be useful to add a brief note on that last-mentioned point of our first parents' reconciliation with God. As to the history of theological commentary, it has been widely held in the Reformed tradition that the Scriptures bear adequate testimony to that reconciliation.<sup>4</sup> Aside from the data in the footnote below, consider the implications of Eve's exultation when, on the birth of Cain, she said, "I have gotten a man from the LORD" (Gen 4:1). Might a righteous Eve had in contemplation at that time the first promise of the coming of a redeemer as in Genesis 3:15? And what, it might be pondered, is the significance for life in righteousness before God of the fact that our first parents had, to all appearances, trained their offspring in the importance and necessity of blood sacrifices? The significance of Abel's sacrifice of "the firstlings of his flock" (Gen 4:4) is well known.

When, then, Adam fell, a result in two respects followed. First, his faculties of soul, the mind or the intellectual faculty, the emotional or affective faculty, and the will or the volitional faculty, were not destroyed. Adam fell, as the biblical doctrine states it, into a state of "total depravity." That does not mean that he was immediately and henceforth as sinful as he could possibly be. The common grace of God operates as a restraint on sin, as that comes to expression both in the world at large and in the hearts and actions of men. Man, who now lives in the state of sin, a condition of original sin that follows from the fact that he was constituted a sinner at Adam's fall, will be a sinner in its full and hell-deserving potential at the day of judgment, at the crack of doom, when God's common grace will have come to an end. But man is totally depraved, it is now to be said, in the sense that all of the faculties of soul have been affected and disabled as to the possibility of being pleasing to God by the state of sin into which he has fallen. Man in his soulish aspect is now altogether turned away from God. He is, as the apostle stated it to the Romans, a "God hater" (Rom 1:30). And further, by reason of the imputation of the guilt of Adam's sin, and the fact that at the fall all men were thereby constituted sinners, all men come into this world with a fallen nature. It is not that all men are characterized as fallen in nature because they commit sin. The contrary is true. All individuals commit sin because they come into the world with a fallen nature. At the very point of their entry into the world God regards them as sinners.

That vital theological doctrine follows from what, in interpreting the bequest of Adam's fall, is referred to as the *immediate* imputation of his sin and guilt. The "immediate" in that sentence does not refer simply to the point in time at which the imputation was made. Certainly it is true that in that temporal sense the imputation was made immediately at the point in time at which Adam sinned. But what is at issue in this

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Joel R. Beeke and Mark Jones, *A Puritan Theology: Doctrine for Life* (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2012), 226–27. The relevant doctrinal proposition is that if Adam had not sinned he would have been confirmed in moral state and raised to eternal life. It is of interest, however, that some of our Puritan fathers held varying views as to the state in which Adam would have lived if he had been obedient to the terms of his probation. Thomas Goodwin, for example, "argued that Adam's end would have been continual life in the garden of Eden; he would not have been rewarded with life in heaven, which only Christ could acquire. Others (for example, Francis Turretin) believed that Adam's supernatural end would be life in heaven according to the terms of the covenant. And still others (such as Owen) remained agnostic on the question." (Beeke and Jones, op, cit., 13).

important doctrine is that God imputed the guilt of Adam's sin to his posterity *immediately* in the sense that there was no *mediating* entity or causal ground or reason between the guilt imputed and the recipient effects on Adam's posterity. That is to say, the imputation is *immediate* and not *mediate*. If the contrary to the position just stated were correct and the imputation was *mediate*, the question would follow as to what was the cause or origin or nature of the mediating entity that was involved. In that case it might be supposed that the fallenness of nature was the responsible entity. But *immediate imputation* stands in denial of that possibility. Adam's sin and guilt was imputed directly, immediately, without any further cause than the fact that God had constituted our first parent as our federal head. That, in shortest terms, is the meaning of the statement in the Catechism, culled from such textual data as that of Romans 5:12, that "we sinned in Adam."

But secondly, notwithstanding his fallen condition, man remains the image of God. With the possession of creatively-endowed faculties, which, as we have stated, are depraved but not destroyed, man is still a rational, immortal, spiritual, moral, and speaking person. It is that fact, and his consequent continuance as the image of God, that implies that in his indestructible personhood man remains under obligation to the righteous requirements of God's moral law. He retains accountability to God, for good or ill, and he will at last be subject to the judgment of God on the grounds of his life and conduct in relation to the law of God. There will be at last a judgment, the grounds of which will be the works of men in this world. By that is meant, first, that as Hodge has put it in his commentary on the text under discussion, and taking into account particularly "the Gentiles who do not have the law," "Men are to be judged by the light they have severally enjoyed. The ground of judgment is their works, the standard of judgment is their knowledge."<sup>5</sup> We shall refer to that conclusion again in a fuller context. In that respect, we shall see below what it is that establishes the judgment of those who, as the apostle said at that point, are without the law, and the relevance of their works as the ground of judgment. And we shall observe also that in the case of those who have the law in the articulated written form in which it has been given, the judgment in terms of which their works will be assessed will be related to the question whether or not their works have been covered by the merit of the substitutionary work of Christ that he performed on their behalf. We shall return to the point. As to what is now being said, it can be anticipated that those who are saved will be saved by works. We hold to a salvation by works; but remarkably, not to a salvation by individual works, but by the work of Christ on the behalf of those whom the Father gave to him to redeem (John 17:6, 9).

The result of Adam's fall was that he lost the endowment of knowledge, holiness, and righteousness in which he had been created. He was in no sense diminished to a lower level in an imagined chain of being. Retaining all of his faculties of soul and natural soulish capacities, the depravity of the faculties implied that he did not any longer, and in fact could not, by reason of his loss of primeval innocence, know God for who he is or desire to love and serve him in the ways of his initial appointment (1 Cor

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<sup>5</sup> See Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1739), 44.

2:14). For now, as to the intellectual faculty of soul, “the god of this world has blinded the mind” (2 Cor 4:4), the affective faculty is altogether turned away from God, “the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked” (Jer 17:9), and as to the will or the volitional faculty, man is the enslaved dupe of the devil. “You are of your father the devil,” our Lord on one occasion stated to the Jews, “and your will is to do your father’s desires” (John 8:44). Such is the sorry state to which the fall reduced mankind. But in it all, though the original knowledge, holiness, and righteousness in which man had been created was lost in the fall, and while the faculties could henceforth, apart from the renewing, regenerating grace of God, operate only in a fashion that biased the man away from God, man nevertheless remained an ethically responsible and accountable image of God (Gen 9:6; James 3:9).

We have said that at the fall man lost the endowment of knowledge. By that we mean that God had at the beginning conveyed to Adam the principles and criteria of proper interpretation of the meaning of the reality-environment in which our first parents had come to self-consciousness. On the level of intellectual cognition, the effect of the fall was that man lost those principles of interpretation and meaning. That is clear from the fact that only in due time did the Second Person of the Godhead come into the world to become Jesus Christ for the redemption of sinners and to reveal that only in him “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col 2:3). All meaning comes from, and terminates in, Christ.

At the fall, man suffered the deprivation of original holiness and the depravity of soulful faculties that was involved.<sup>6</sup> But when we say that apart from that deprivation and depravation man remained the image of God, a critically relevant aspect of that is to be held in view. By reason of the fact that man was created as the image of God, and by reason that in spite of the fall aspects of that image were indestructibly retained, there remains in the soul a sense of God from which man cannot escape. There is naturally in man a phylogenetic memory of paradise.<sup>7</sup> At his creation there were embedded in the soul both the *sensus deitatis*, the ineradicable sense of God, and the *semen religionis*, the seed of religion that makes man an essentially religious being. As such, man must, and he does, worship some one or the other god. That is because worship, and the need to worship, is integral to the essential nature of man as man, of human personhood. Man will, by the very nature of who and what he is, worship the true God or he will worship a god of his own construction or imagination, a god, in one way or another, that is made in man’s own image.

What is now at issue is that, as a result and by reason of the continuing image of God in man and the universal and inescapable *sensus deitatis*, a moral consciousness is

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<sup>6</sup> The relation between *deprivation* and *depravation* is implicit in the statement of the Westminster Shorter Catechism at Question 18: “The sinfulness of that estate whereinto man fell, consists in the guilt of Adam’s first sin, the want of original righteousness [deprivation], and the corruption of his whole nature [depravation], which is commonly called original sin, together with all actual transgressions which proceed from it.”

<sup>7</sup> I am indebted to David Green for suggesting that quite apart from the testimony to the *sensus deitatis* in Romans 1, the fact that all men naturally remember paradise, the collective memory of the race that descended from Adam by ordinary generation, is reflected in Ecclesiastes 3:11b., “he hath set the world in their heart.”

ineradicably embedded in the soul. What that moral consciousness entails is the awareness that *God is*, that *God has spoken*, and that man is subject to a moral compass which, darkened by sin though his sensibilities are, ensures man is inevitably aware of principles of right and wrong action and of his ultimate accountability for those actions. That indelible awareness, as the apostle spelled it out eloquently in the first chapter of his letter to the Romans, is denominated by the Scriptures as a “law” that resides in the heart of man, to the demands of which he is accountably liable.

As we move now to the interpretation of our epigraph text, what has been said to this point will be seen to throw its light on our further argument.

### **The work of the law**

Before we adduce certain necessary details in the exegesis of the text, we take note of some negatives that must be addressed in relation to it. First, the context in which the text stands forms a parenthesis between the twelfth and the sixteenth verses of the second chapter of Paul’s letter to the Romans. That parenthesis is concerned directly with the question of judgment, as that may fall on the Gentiles or the Jews respectively. That is not seen clearly in certain translations that omit the parenthesis in their printing of the text. The recent English Standard Version, for example, is defective in that respect. But as a matter of exegesis, the words at the beginning of the sixteenth verse, “in the day when God shall judge the secrets of men,” are to be understood as following and referable to the final clause in the twelfth verse, “As many as have sinned in the law shall be judged by the law.” The matter of the day of judgment in the sixteenth verse is not to be understood as referable to the statement of the fifteenth verse at the end of the parenthesis, where it is said that “conscience” is a “witness” to all men.

It has been a matter of exegetical dispute as to whether verses 13 to 15 in Romans 2 are, in fact, to be understood as a parenthesis within the apostle’s main line of exposition at that point. But it is relevant to our present argument regarding the “work” of the law in the hearts of the Gentiles to hold to the older view of parenthesis. For as I have suggested, the successive statements in the parenthetical verses have to do pointedly with the matter of judgment. There is nothing in them about salvation or justification. And the judgment in view for, respectively, those who have, and those who have not received the law, will be seen to turn on the extent of the knowledge, that is knowledge of the law or not the law, of which they were capable and to which they are exposed in this life. Those who have not received and have not known the law will not be judged by the law. The grounds of their judgment, as we saw Hodge to observe, will be their works, such as are referred to here parenthetically, and the standard of their judgment will be their knowledge; in other words, they will be judged according to the extent to which their works and the manner in which they had lived accorded with the knowledge they possessed. I shall return to that important point which, in itself, demands further explication and is to be carefully understood.

It is stated in verse 15 that for those in whose hearts the “work” of the law is written, the Gentiles who did not have the law and have had no opportunity to know the law, their conscience bears witness and either accuses or excuses themselves and one another. But it is to be understood that that work of conscience is on-going in this life.

That fact is not seen clearly by translators and expositors who run together verses 15 and 16. For when that is done it is made to appear that the reference to conscience there has to do with what will occur at the day of judgment. Lloyd-Jones has commented appropriately on that point as follows: “The Apostle, in verse 15, is saying what is true of the Gentiles now, not what is going to be true of them then. They will not be ‘accusing or excusing one another’ on the day of judgment. It will be too late for that then. They will be so overwhelmed by the promulgation of the sentence, that there will be no arguing with themselves or one another. It is quite inappropriate, therefore, to connect verse 15 with verse 16, and it is a pity that these Revised Versions [and the ESV] do not indicate clearly, for the aid of all readers, that this is a parenthesis.”<sup>8</sup>

At issue in the parenthetical text is the distinction drawn between the Gentiles, those who do not have the law in its comprehensive form as it was given to the Jews, and the Jews who did have that law. That distinction between the Gentiles and the Jews is reflected in other contexts of Paul’s dealing with the matter of law. In the important third chapter of his letter to the Galatians, for example, he argues that Christ bore the curse of the law for the believing Jews. The Gentiles, on the other hand, who did not have the law in the same promulgated sense as did the Jews, could not be understood to be under the curse of the law in the same sense. The Gentiles were, of course, under a curse. But that curse emanated from the fact that they were under obligation to the law as it had been given to Adam at the beginning, and they had failed to honor those obligations. Of course, as the Galatian text again makes clear, the Gentiles, to whom the doors of the kingdom of Christ were thrown wide open when God had terminated his special relation with the Jews (Israel), were the beneficiaries of the removal of the curse that the work of Christ effected. But the curse the Gentiles sustained followed from a different conception of liability under law from that of the Jews. Here, in the parenthesis in this second chapter of the letter to the Romans we have the same distinction and differentiation.

Paul’s construction here is consistent with the emphasis of his argument in his letter as a whole. But here he is concerned to establish that while differences of legal liability exists, all men, including both Jews and Gentiles have sinned against God, and in doing so have violated their covenantal obligations. There is no distinction between the Gentiles and the Jews in the respect that “all, both Jews and Gentiles, are under sin . . . none is righteous, no not one . . . there is no fear of God before their eyes,” (Rom 3:9–11, 18). “There is no difference: For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:22–23). In the context immediately before us, then, the apostle is saying nothing at all about any possible way of salvation. He is most decidedly not speaking about the possibility of salvation by obedience to law. His sole interest is to speak of everyman’s exposure to judgment. Some will not have had the law disclosed to them in its written and articulated form. The ground of their judgment is stated in a particular way, on which we shall comment further below. And on the other hand, the privileged Jews who did have the law in the full sense of its divine promulgation would be judged against the requirements of it.

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<sup>8</sup> D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: An Exposition of Chapters 2:1 – 3:20: The Righteous Judgment of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 102.



The second negative that informs the exegesis of our text strikes to the very center of the apostle's immediate concern. It has to do with what the text does not say. It is not said here that the Gentiles have the law written in their heart. It says, to the contrary, that they have the *work* of the law written on their heart. The difference is vital to the understanding of the issues with which we began; namely, the entire question of the God-man relation and the way in which that comes to expression as man stands after, and as a result of, Adam's fall. Our summary observations on that latter level can now be seen as directly relevant to the further explication of the apostolic argument we are addressing.

The propositions I am now advancing are in no sense an exegetical idiosyncrasy of the present writer. A long line of Reformed commentators have addressed the matter in similar terms. Robert Haldane, for example, who went to Geneva in 1816 and expounded Paul's letter to the Romans to a group of students that included the famous Merle D'Aubigné, the author of the classic *History of the Reformation*, is insistent on the point. In his comment on Romans 2:15 Haldane states: "We have here a distinction between the *law* itself, and the *work* of the law."<sup>9</sup> As to what that *work* of the law is, Haldane observes that "The work of the law is the thing that the law doeth—that is, what it teaches about actions, as good or bad. This work, or business, or office of the law, is to teach what is right or wrong. This, in some measure, is taught by the light of nature in the heart of every man. There remains, then, in all men, to a certain degree, a discernment of what the law requires, designated here the 'work' of the law; the performance or neglect of which is followed by the approbation or disapprobation of the conscience."<sup>10</sup>

Haldane has here seen the importance of noting in the textual parenthesis that what is at issue is what those who did not have the written law, the Gentiles, do *by nature*. We are required to address, then, what it is about man's nature in his fallen state that brings to focus the judgment by God against sin to which he is liable. That turns on what has already been said about the state of soul as man continues to be, and to be responsibly liable because he is, the image of God. There remains in every man the *sensus deitatis*, the realization that God is, and that a consequent responsibility to God that cannot be voided exists. As that comes to issue in Romans 2:15, the "law," the works of which are naturally present and exert their claim in the heart of all men, is the *moral consciousness* from which there is no escape. Haldane's reference to man's conscience, and to the approbation or disapprobation of conscience, takes up and elucidates Paul's statement that those who do not have the law exhibit the "work of the law," "their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another" (Rom 2:15).

Francis Turretin, the successor to Calvin in Geneva following the Reformation, understood the apostle's argument in the same sense. Regarding man in his fallen state and addressing the question of his essential being, Turretin observes that "although God had not subjected him to an external law, conscience and the dictates of right reason would have been a law to him (which the apostle calls 'the work of the law,' Rom.

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Haldane, *Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans* (London: Banner of Truth, 1960), 91.

<sup>10</sup> *Idem*.

2:15).”<sup>11</sup>

Martyn Lloyd-Jones has devoted three sermons to the text in his *Romans*, and argues that the Gentiles who, as Paul said in his parenthesis, “do not have the law as the Jews had, are ‘a law unto themselves’ . . . They do not come under the law of Moses but they come under . . . this kind of other law which is in terms of their *moral consciousness*, and which leads to a sense of responsibility.”<sup>12</sup> And Lloyd-Jones follows by stating that “The Apostle does not say that they show the *law* written in their hearts; he says that they show the *work* of the law written in their hearts.”<sup>13</sup> In the light of that, the distinction between the Jews and the Gentiles that Paul is concerned to address informs Lloyd-Jones’ further summary: “The Jew is judged as to whether he keeps the law or not, the Gentile will be judged according to his conformity to what he does know, this law unto himself, this moral consciousness.”<sup>14</sup>

Calvin comments with reference to “the work of the law” that “there is imprinted on their hearts a discrimination and judgment by which they distinguish between what is just and unjust, between what is honest and dishonest. . . . He [Paul] speaks not of the power to fulfill the law, but of the knowledge of it.”<sup>15</sup> Calvin continues: “Nor can we conclude from this passage, that there is in men a *full* knowledge of the law, but that there are only some seeds of what is right implanted in their nature.”<sup>16</sup> Calvin has here grasped the apostle’s intention to direct our thought not to God’s comprehensive and well-articulated law, but to what resides in man in general by reason of the “nature” in which he stands after Adam’s fall.

The same issue was addressed by the Puritan commentators. Matthew Poole confronts the question of “the work of the law,” and in looking at different possible meanings he comments that it refers to “the office of the law, which consists in directing us what to do, and what to leave undone,” and he then asks “How then is it predicated of the Gentiles?” Poole notes that in that case it cannot refer to the “law written in the heart” in the full sense that is promised in Jeremiah 31. Rather, the distinction obtains that “Jeremiah speaks there of a special and supernatural inscription or writing in the heart by grace; and the apostle here [in Romans 2], of that which is common or natural.”<sup>17</sup> Matthew Henry also comments on the fact that the Gentiles “*had the work of the law.*” That means, Henry observes, “that work which the law does. The work of the law is to direct us what to do and to examine us [by conscience, as Paul went on to say] what we have done.” And Henry follows that by the explanatory conclusion that “They had that

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<sup>11</sup> Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, Translated by George Musgrave Giger, Edited by James T. Dennison (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1992), 464, parenthesis in original.

<sup>12</sup> D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: An Exposition of Chapters 2:1 – 3:20: The Righteous Judgment of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 117, italics added.

<sup>13</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>15</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary upon The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: Baker, n.d.), 97.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>17</sup> Matthew Poole, *A Commentary on the Holy Bible, Volume III: Matthew to Revelation* (London: Banner of Truth, 1963), 485.

which directed them what to do *by the light of nature*.”<sup>18</sup>

In his commentary on the Greek text, James Denny adverts to the same issues we have raised, the fact that the Gentiles as Paul refers to them here in his parenthesis at Romans 2:13–15 did not have the law but nevertheless exhibited the *work* of the law. Denny observes that “to the apostle it was less than the great revelation of God’s will, which had been made and interpreted to Israel, but nevertheless a true moral authority.” Denny appropriately takes note of the threefold demonstration of that as Paul represented it in his text: “(1) The appeal to their conduct; (2) the action of conscience; and (3) their thoughts [either accusing or excusing them].”<sup>19</sup>

### **Judgment based on the work of the law**

Our discussion to this point has aimed to establish two points. First, Paul, in the text we have cited, is not claiming that the law, in whatever sense it might be understood, is written on the hearts of the Gentiles, or, we may say, on the hearts of men in general in their natural and unregenerate state. What is written on the heart is the *work* of the law. Second, what, then, is meant by the *work* of the law? It is the thing that what *is* written on the heart directs the individual to do.

What, then, is written on the heart? As we have seen, it is certainly not what Jeremiah had promised would establish the state of God’s redeemed and regenerate people. That latter reality and blessing would be part of the essence of what the secret, sovereign, and unsolicited work of the Holy Spirit, in his act of conveying the grace of regeneration, accomplishes in the heart of an individual. By that sovereign act of regeneration the Holy Spirit applies to those for whom Christ died the benefits and blessings and gifts that he purchased for them. We cast our minds back to earlier conclusions regarding the extent to which, and the manner in which, the image of God continues and remains in man in his fallen state. What remains is an *ineradicable moral consciousness*. That moral consciousness is embedded in the heart, meaning by that not initially or primarily the emotional capacity of the soul, but the innermost essence of human being and personhood. It is that moral consciousness that provides the springs of action that might or might not accord with the canons of right, as opposed to wrong, action and behavior. The *work* of the law, then, is what that moral consciousness guides an individual to do. And it is that that the apostle contemplated when he referred in his parenthesis to the case of the Gentiles to whom the codified law as the Jews had received it had not been given.

To reflect on that outcome more precisely, we recall again the observation of Charles Hodge when, contemplating the separate positions of the Gentiles and the Jews, he concluded that “Men are to be judged by the light they have severally enjoyed. The ground of judgment is their works, the standard of judgment is their knowledge.”<sup>20</sup> As

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<sup>18</sup> Matthew Henry, *An Exposition of the Old and New testament: Vol. IX—Romans to Revelation* (London: James Nesbit, 1880), 14, italics added.

<sup>19</sup> James Denny, *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Romans*, in *The Expositor’s Greek Testament*, edited by W. Robertson Nicoll (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 198.

<sup>20</sup> Hodge, *op. cit.*, 44.

Lloyd-Jones sums up the same point, “Paul establishes his case that the mere fact that the Gentiles were not aware of the law of Moses does not for a second mean that they cannot be judged. The Jew is judged as to whether he keeps that law or not, the Gentile will be judged according to his conformity to what he does know, this law unto himself, this moral consciousness.”<sup>21</sup>

Two things follow. First, the Jew would not escape judgment simply on the ground that he had been blessed by God in having been given the law. It was not the possession of the law that would save him, not, as said in the text, the mere hearing of the law. The criterion of judgment would be not the law as such, the law in and of itself, but whether the works that followed from the law were or were not works of obedience. Second, the Gentiles would not be saved simply on the ground of the fact that they were ignorant of the law. For they were not ignorant. They possessed, as we have seen, a law of right moral conduct, of the kind that was, in itself, of the essence of what God had communicated more expansively to the Jews. No excuse was available, therefore, to either the Gentiles or the Jews. There is no respect of persons with God. All men were guilty by reason of the immediate imputation of Adam’s sin, and all therefore stood under the judgment and wrath of God whose holiness sin had outraged.

Let us ask, however, what might appear a foremost present-day analogy of the argument as we have advanced it. Consider the case of people, perhaps some in earth’s remotest regions, who have never heard the gospel of Jesus Christ and who have never had communicated to them the biblical disclosures. At the last day, we may ask, will their ignorance imply that they will not be judged? We answer: Most certainly not. For again two clear observations apply. First, as we have now seen, all individuals, including those in the situation we have just contemplated, have written on their hearts the moral consciousness as we have elaborated it. So that, when as Hodge, for example, has done, it is said that such people will be judged by their works, the relevant question will be whether they did or did not obey the soulish dictates of that moral consciousness. That is what is meant by saying that while the ground of judgment is their works, the standard will be their knowledge, or, that is, the nature of, and extent of their knowledge.

Before we make a further conclusion regarding such cases where the special, as opposed to the general and natural, revelation of God has not penetrated, let us observe the vastly different case of those individuals who, in the providence of God, have been privileged to live within the hearing of the gospel of Christ. The meaning of their lost estate before God and the way of redemption and reconciliation with him in Christ has been adequately declared among them. The standard of judgment in their case will clearly be, as the Scriptures copiously declare, whether or not they have fled for refuge to the cross of Christ. The level of knowledge in their case is thoroughly different and establishes a different criterion of judgment, though as the apostle contemplated in the first chapter of his letter to the Romans, they may have habitually suppressed that knowledge whenever it rose to the level of conscious awareness.

Our conclusion must therefore be the following. There is no salvation for anyone outside of Christ. So that those who have not heard of Christ cannot be saved by any

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<sup>21</sup> Lloyd-Jones, *op. cit.*, 120.

other means or processes. Does that mean that those who remain ignorant of Christ, such as those we imagined on the remotest parts of the earth, have no way of salvation? That is precisely what it means. It is precisely that that gives meaning and urgency to the entire missionary enterprise.

Perhaps we can underline the reasons why that is so by noting Lloyd-Jones' summing up as he reflects on the argument. Referring to the meaning and message of Paul's parenthesis in Romans 2:13–15, he concludes judiciously that "What [Paul] is actually saying here, and in the entire passage, is that *no one ever lives up to the light that he has*, whether he be a Jew or whether he be a Gentile. The light that the Jew [and those who live in the regions of the gospel declaration] has is the light of the law given through Moses – *and none of them live up to it*. The light that the Gentile [and those who today have never had the gospel available to them] has is this moral consciousness – *and none of them live up to it, either*. . . . They have all sinned."<sup>22</sup>

Should we not give praise and thanks to God that he has directed us, burdened and heavy laden by the guilt of sin, to the cross of his beloved Son whose substitutionary life and death has availed for our definitive redemption? May we by his grace, and by the ever-present work and ministry of his Holy Spirit within us, fashioning these poor lives of ours after his likeness, strain every nerve to be faithful to him.

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<sup>22</sup> Lloyd-Jones, *op. cit.*, 126, italics added.