

CHRISTIAN STUDIES

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*Institute for
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1909 University Avenue
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(512) 476-2772
Fax: (512) 476-3919*

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Foreword

As this convulsive century moves toward its conclusion, many new problems rightly call for attention. In our concern to address new issues, however, it is crucial that we not neglect thorny problems which have beset Christians for centuries. Lives are still regularly damaged by “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.”

This issue of *Christian Studies* addresses a cluster of issues relating to the nature and function of law and grace in biblical faith and in the Christian life. Misunderstandings abound. Biblically, grace is not lawless, law is not graceless, and “legalism” is a distortion of both grace and law.

These essays are not intended to settle the dust on the issues they address. They are intended to invigorate and in some instances reformulate conversation about familiar issues. Readers are invited to reflect on, discuss, and circulate the essays. As always, responses are invited.

Michael R. Weed, *Editor*

Delighting in the Law:

Psalm 119 and the Christian Torah

R. Mark Shipp

The word “law” conjures up conflicting images in our minds. Law restrains, sets boundaries and limits. Law exacts punishments and penalties. Many other similar images come to mind, but we generally do not associate joy or delight with the term “law.” Many Protestants are under the impression that Jesus died to take away the demands of the law, which were impossible to keep anyway. To many in the church, law and grace are in opposition, with law symbolizing impossible demands and punishment, and grace symbolizing freedom and life.

When one compares the consistent view of the Old Testament relative to the nature of the law, one is immediately impressed with the difference in the way the law is characterized. We are repeatedly told in the book of Deuteronomy that the law gives life and in Psalm 119 the law is a delight. How should we understand the Old Testament’s view of the law? Is this view somehow sub-Christian?

It is customary to characterize the sixteenth-century reformation as a return to New Testament grace against the Roman Catholic dependence on law. As applied to Martin Luther there is some truth to this statement, as he has been accused of emphasizing the punitive nature of the law. John Calvin, on the other hand, emphasized the positive nature of the law and that it is a gift of grace. Perhaps it is best for us to avoid the use of the term “law” altogether, with its forensic and often negative connotations in modern culture. In the Old Testament there is not a single meaning for the word we often translate “law,” torah in Hebrew, but a single English

word comes closer than any other in capturing the essence of its meaning: the word “instruction.” In the Pentateuch, this instruction takes many forms. It includes legal statutes and ordinances, instructions about rituals and worship, and the story about God’s gracious deeds on behalf of the Israelites. It is important to understand that torah is the instruction about God’s grace and the response of his people to that grace in faithful living.

Psalm 119 contains some of the most positive statements anywhere about the law. As a result of these positive statements and its unusual organization, this psalm, perhaps more than any other in the entire Psalter, has been characterized as artificial, pedantic, and sub-Christian. How are we to account for this discrepancy of perspective relative to law? Above all, how are we to account for the intensely positive functions of the law promoted in this psalm? It is the purpose of this paper to explore the positive functions of law in the life of the believer: first, the law brings order and stability; second, the law brings freedom; and third, the law is a gift of God’s grace.

The Torah Brings Order and Stability

According to Psalm 119, the law provides order, stability, and structure. I want to underscore this point with two observations; the first is a literary observation about law and structure and the second is a theological observation.

If Psalm 119 were written in English, we would be able to see immediately its most striking characteristic: it is composed of eight verse stanzas, each line of which begins with the same letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Each succeeding section of eight lines begins with the next letter of the alphabet and so on through the entire twenty-two letter alphabet. Equally important to the organization of the psalm is the fact that most verses have one and only one synonym for “torah of God” except for six verses which contain no synonym and six which contain two, for a grand total of 176.¹ These terms are “torah,” “commandment,” “statute,” “precept,” “word,”

¹ Will Soll, *Psalm 119: Matrix, Form, and Setting (CBQ Monograph Series 23;* Washington, D. C.: Catholic Biblical Association, 1991) 46-47 and David Noel Freedman, “The Structure of Psalm 119,” in *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish, and Near Eastern Ritual, Law, and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom*, David P. Wright et. al., eds. (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1995) 725-756, count 177 torah terms based on eight synonyms for torah; Soll resorts to emending the text to do so, while Freedman refrains from

“utterance,” “path,” “way,” “judgment,” and “testimony.”² It is likely that the author’s intent was at least to come close in the use of synonyms for torah to the total number of verses in the psalm.

Related to the striking order manifested in the literary structure of the psalm is that of the placement of the psalms of torah in the book as a whole.³ First of all, there are three such torah Psalms: 1, 19, and 119. The placement of these psalms within the Psalter is suggestive of symmetry and intentionality, but besides this, each psalm internally is characterized by symmetry and perfection. Psalm one comes to us in two sections: verses 1-3 and verses 4-6. Verses 1-3 show the characteristics of the righteous person, while 4-6 give the characteristics of the wicked. On the one hand, the righteous person is like a strong, deeply rooted tree, receiving abundant sustenance, while on the other, the wicked person is like useless chaff, good for

such emendation. Jon Levenson [“The Sources of Torah: Psalm 119 and the Modes of Revelation in Second Temple Judaism,” in *Ancient Israelite Religion*, ed. by Patrick D. Miller, *et. al.* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) 562] finds ten torah synonyms as I have done and counts 182 such terms. See note two below for the justification for my count of 176 such terms.

² These terms in Hebrew are *torah*, *mitswah*, *huqqah/hoq*, *dabar*, *piqqûd*, *imrah*, *mishpat*, and *edôt/edût*. In addition, there are several occurrences of the terms *orah*, “path,” and *derek*, “way,” which may also be structurally important to the psalm. Soll rejects these two terms as synonyms for torah. He does so on the grounds of coming up with exactly 176 such terms, occurring once and only once per verse, corresponding to the number of verses in the psalm, but he often has no text-critical or literary grounds for so doing. For example, he emends *derek*, “way,” to *dabar*, “word” in v. 3 with no appeal to manuscript evidence in support of such emendation. In fact, Soll may be correct on grounds totally other than the ones he has argued. First, one must agree with Levenson that there are at least ten torah words in the psalm, rather than eight. There is no good basis for excluding “path” and “way” from the list of synonyms, particularly when they occur in synonymous parallelism (see v. 15). If one counts all occurrences of these ten terms, excluding those which refer to attributes of the Psalmist or the wicked rather than God, one arrives at a total of 181 torah synonyms in the psalm, five more than the total number of verses. Another method of counting, however, may be the key to understanding the use of torah synonyms in the psalm: one should count all ten torah synonyms when they are in a genitival (construct) relationship with a designation for God or with a pronoun suffix referring to God (usually second masculine singular); for example, “torah of God,” “your testimonies,” etc. This count excludes a few synonyms for torah which do not refer directly to God by means of a pronoun or genitival relationship (such as vv. 43, 49, 84, and 128), refer to the psalmist himself (vv. 121 and 122), or use the term *emûnah*, “faithfulness,” a synonym for covenant loyalty elsewhere in the Old Testament, but not for torah (see especially v. 90). With this method one arrives at a count of 176 terms for torah, corresponding exactly to the number of verses in the psalm, without resorting to conjectural emendation.

³ For a good discussion of the importance and place of the psalms of torah in the book of Psalms, see James Luther Mays, “The Place of the Torah Psalms in the Psalter,” *JBL* 106 (1987) 3-12.

nothing but scattering. Psalm 19 is another psalm about torah. Verses 1-6 of this psalm relate to God's creation and the perfection of the sun and the heavenly bodies, which illuminate and follow the perfect paths and functions God laid out for them. Verses 7-15 praise the perfection and righteousness of the torah, which, like the heavenly bodies, illuminates and guides. Finally, Psalm 119 illustrates symmetry and structure as does no other Old Testament passage.

These features have prompted considerable discussion about the purpose of such a composition. A recent article suggests that it is a youthful composition, possibly a school exercise, by a young scribe who wished to toot his own horn by means of an artificial composition.⁴ Others have recently suggested that there is movement and structure to the whole psalm, other than in eight line stanzas, in short, that there is art and not just mechanics involved.⁵ Perhaps the most convincing of all such recent suggestions is that of a recent monograph on Psalm 119, in which the author suggests that the overarching structure of the psalm is that of the individual lament, in which the psalmist addresses God, laments his present evil circumstances, remembers past goodness, voices his lament and petition to God, rejoices in answered prayer, and vows to praise and thank God in the community of the faithful. Psalm 119, therefore, demonstrates order in its poetry (an acrostic in eight verse stanzas), literary style (the individual lament), and use of terminology (176 synonyms for the torah of God).

The second issue relates to theology. In what way does Psalm 119 reflect order and symmetry theologically? Perhaps the most significant feature related to the stability and order of torah is its relation to creation. Torah is said to be reliable, firm, built into the very fabric of creation, and, indeed, its dynamic and generating force:

Forever, O Lord, thy word is firmly fixed in the heavens (v. 89).

Thy faithfulness endures to all generations; thou hast established the earth, and it stands fast (v. 90).

By thy appointment they stand this day, for all things are thy servants (v. 91).

⁴ White, R. E. O., "The Student's Psalm?" *Expository Times* 102 (1990) 71-74.

⁵ Freedman, David Noel, "The Structure of Psalm 119, pt. 2," *Hebrew Annual Review* 14 (1994).

The torah of God is reliable and stable precisely because it is not bound by the changes and vicissitudes of history. God's word (*dabar*), a synonym in Psalm 119 for torah, is reliable because it is permanent and unchanging, generating the created order and being reflected in it. The one who laments and cries out to God may therefore depend on God's unchanging grace manifested in creation, but also made clear in His covenant commitment to be near to those who cry out to Him (see "torah and the covenant of grace" below).

Because the torah is manifested in creation and creation demonstrates symmetry (Psalm 19, Psalm 119:89-91) and perfection, torah itself is perfect. Verse 96 is particularly telling in this regard:

I have seen a limit to all perfection; but thy commandment is exceedingly broad.

Finally, the psalmist understands in verses 5-6 that only in the torah of the Lord are true life and stability to be found:

O that my ways may be steadfast in keeping thy statutes!
Then I shall not be put to shame, having my eyes fixed on all thy commandments.

For the psalmist, the torah is perfect, stable, and ordered like the creation. We may, in turn, partake of that order and stability if we focus our attention and devotion upon it.

The Law Brings Freedom and Life

This is an interesting statement in light of the popular characterization of the law as that which brings slavery and condemnation. Nevertheless, it is explicitly stated in the psalm. Psalm 119 calls this freedom a "broad" or "wide" place:

I shall indeed walk in a wide place, for I have sought your precepts (v. 45). The RSV translates the words "wide place" as "liberty." What is it about keeping the law which brings liberty? There is something about *not* walking in the precepts of the Lord which is limiting; to the psalmist, it is to walk in a narrow and confining space.

First, notice the heart, or understanding of the one who walks in the way of the torah as opposed to the ones who do not follow God's will:

Their heart is gross like fat, but I delight in your law (v. 70).

Contrary to the fatness, or numbness and difficulty of perception, of the wicked, is the

perceptive heart of the psalmist:

I will run in the way of your commandments when you make my heart wide
(v. 32).

There is a freedom in keeping the torah which gives one space to live and depth of understanding.

How do we achieve this love of the law and wideness of heart? It is only through the discipline of keeping the righteous judgments and statutes and this in turn only occurs through the discipline of affliction and study:

If the law had not been my delight I would have perished in my affliction (v. 92).

It was good for me that I was afflicted, that I might learn thy statutes (v. 71).

In fact, nine times the psalmist entreats, "Teach me your torah!" This instruction occurs through the disciplined and focused devotion to the learning and observation of torah as well as through God's correcting rod.

The wicked, on the other hand, are ignorant and shameful, because they do not know or obey the torah:

Your commandment makes me wiser than my enemies, for it is ever with me
(v. 98).

You rebuke the insolent, accursed ones, who wander from your commandments (v. 21).

And finally,

You spurn all who go away from your statutes, for their cunning is in vain
(v. 118).

Freedom, paradoxically in the Old Testament or the New, comes about only through disciplined service. For example, I am not free to play the piano for I have never studied it, while others who have exercised the discipline of study can run in the wide space made available through that discipline.

Perhaps the clearest statement relating to the torah and freedom is that used in another connection above:

I have seen a limit to all perfection, but thy commandment is exceedingly broad (v. 96).

The word translated "broad" here is the same as that which the RSV translates as

“liberty” in verse 45. The point is, even the most perfect of human endeavors is limited and narrow in comparison to the perfection and spaciousness of torah.

Torah and the Covenant of Grace

Law and grace are opposing principles in Romans and Galatians. How then can law be a gift of God’s grace? Jon Levenson has recently stated that Psalm 119 reflects a theology of torah separate and apart from covenant theology. It is true that the term “covenant” is not used in the psalm and that torah in Psalm 119 has a much more cosmic and universal application than simply a reference to the “law of Moses,”⁶ but Levenson is at least overstating his case. We have seen previously that torah is connected in Psalm 119 with the stability and immutability of creation, but the psalm also connects it with God’s covenant of grace. It does so by the means of words which are used predominantly in the Old Testament in connection with God’s covenant with his people.

There is perhaps no better place to turn than to Hosea 2:18-20 for a description of terms relating to God’s covenant loyalty and faithfulness. Hosea describes God’s faithfulness to Israel in spite of her “adultery” with the gods of the nations, poignantly portrayed in the “living parable” of Hosea’s relationship to Gomer:

I will make a covenant with them in that day,
With the beasts of the field and with the birds of the heavens, and the
creeping things of the earth . . .
And I will make them lie down securely,
And I will betroth you to myself forever;
And I will betroth you to myself in righteousness and in justice and in
loyalty and in mercy,
And I will betroth you to myself in faithfulness, and you will know the Lord.

With the exception of the actual word “covenant” (*berith*), all these “covenant terms”

⁶ Indeed, the term “law of Moses” is not to found in the psalm, nor even a reference to Moses! As Levenson has pointed out, this does not mean that torah in Psalm 119 excludes the law given to Moses, but that God’s torah includes utterances and instruction beyond that law. He even suggests that the reason for the writing of the psalm is to induce in the reader “the psychic conditions conducive to the spiritual experience he seeks” (Levenson, 566). Levenson has alerted us to the fact that torah as instruction goes beyond a simple equation with the Pentateuch, bearing close resemblance to wisdom in the book of Proverbs. If

occur repeatedly in Psalm 119. They are “righteousness” (*tsedeq*, 12 occurrences), “justice” (*mishpat*, 23 occurrences; also used as one of the synonyms for torah in a way similar to Deut. 12:1), “mercy” (*rahamim*, 2 occurrences), and “steadfastness” (*emûnah*, 5 occurrences). Against Levenson, there is no dichotomy in Psalm 119 between torah as a “pneumatic” gift separate from his great deeds in Israel’s history and that manifestation of God’s instruction given to Israel in covenant at Sinai.⁷ Torah is reliable and a sign of God’s grace because it is based in creation (Psalm 119:89-90) and therefore not capricious or subject to change. It is also a manifestation of God’s grace because it demonstrates his mercy, loyalty, and steadfastness to his covenant people. This steadfastness the psalmist affirms, but more than this, he cries out for God once again to manifest his mercy and loyalty to him in his suffering as he has so often to his ancestors in the past. As a lament, the purpose of this psalm is to confess the stability, freedom, and grace which walking in the path of God’s torah can afford as well as to cry out for God’s help, because stability, freedom, and grace seem far from the psalmist.

Many examples could be cited of God’s covenant loyalty and grace and their relationship to torah in Psalm 119, but these will suffice:

The earth, O Lord, is full of your covenant loyalty (*hesed*); teach me your statutes! (v. 64).

I know, O Lord, that your judgments (*mishpatim*) are right, and that in faithfulness (*emûnah*) you have afflicted me (v. 75).

I have done justice (*mishpat*) and righteousness (*tsedeq*); do not leave me to my oppressors! (v. 121)

Let your mercy (*rahamim*) come to me, that I may live; for your law is my delight (v. 77).

A final quote is particularly telling relative to the place of torah in the life of the believer:

Put false ways far from me and in your torah be gracious to me (*haneni*) (v. 30).

the psalm is a lament, as Soll has insisted, then the point of the psalm is not to “induce psychic conditions,” but to invoke the presence of the covenant-keeping God.

⁷ Levenson, 564-566.

Conclusion

There are many ways in which torah incorporates and prescribes rituals and observances which are time and culture-bound, which cannot be practiced in our day, particularly on this side of the cross of Christ. Psalm 119, however, teaches us that torah is far more than such external observances. Torah is “instruction.” For the Christian as well as the Jew it is the “good way,” the way of stability in an uncertain world, the way of freedom through discipline, and the way of loyalty to our covenants and commitments. Who can deny that the stability and immutability of God’s torah are needed in a world where the only constant seems to be change? In a culture where the words “responsibility” and “discipline” are rarely used and where the disciplined life often gives way to easy pleasures, who would disagree that the “wide place” afforded by disciplined living is sorely needed? In a time when covenants and commitments are easily made and easily broken, who would deny that the world cries out for faithfulness to commitments? The way of torah is not an easy way, but it brings us near to the God who established order out of chaos and who still creates stability out of the disorder of this world. Through its exercise, the discipline of righteous living commended by torah sets us free to enjoy the higher benefits of the presence of God and the community of the faithful. The way of torah is also the way of covenant loyalty, for it teaches us that God keeps covenant with his people and shows us how to keep covenant with one another.

But to focus on the positive statements of torah in Psalm 119 and its benefits to the believer is to understand the psalm only partly. As we noted above, the psalm is a lament. We do not possess this psalm because its author lived a life characterized by stability and freedom. Psalm 119 is structured grief. It is the cry of faith of one who has seen the good way, but it is far off from the psalmist, so he cries out to God in faith that the one who redeemed and rescued his ancestors will once again act decisively to redeem him from his own troubles.

The experience of many in the church is not unlike that of the psalmist. Many perceive order, discipline, and covenant relationship as realities far off and not to be grasped. Their lives are characterized more by chaos than stability, by restraint more than freedom, and by breach of covenant more than commitment. Psalm 119 commends itself to these believers in the confidence of the psalmist that, in spite of

distress, persecution, and grief, God still responds to those who cry out to him and is still the one who creates order out of chaos and calls light out of darkness.⁸

As a legal principle, the law could save no one, nor was it ever the intent of the law to do so. As instruction in righteousness and the grace of God, torah instructs, provides stability, disciplines us, and creates covenant-keeping communities. Because of this, torah is called a delight ten times in Psalm 119:

For I find my delight in your commandments, which I love (v. 47).

⁸We began by suggesting that John Calvin emphasized the positive function of the law as it related to God's covenant. Mary Potter has given us seven general principles about the law in relation to God's grace found in Calvin's theology

- 1) The law is a revelation of the eternal will of God in time.
- 2) The law is not contradictory to the covenant of grace but an aid to its fulfillment.
- 3) The law's form is not unchanging, though its intent (to guide humans down the path of salvation) and its content (the rule of righteousness) are.
- 4) The law is a gift and a blessing to be celebrated.
- 5) The law is a mode of instruction.
- 6) The law is addressed to the whole person.
- 7) The law is twofold, guiding one's relation to God (piety) and to other people (justice).

These seven principles are taken from Mary Potter, "The 'Whole Office of the Law' in the Theology of John Calvin," *The Journal of Law and Religion* 3 (1985) 117-139.

The Servant-Christ:

Matthew's Answer to Legalism

Allan J. McNicol

Few passages of scripture focus attention more on important matters than Matthew's powerful description of the final differentiation of humankind into two separate groups at the Last Judgment (Mt 25:31-46). The powerful metaphor of the Lord separating the nations as a shepherd separates sheep from goats grips our attention. Who are the sheep? Who are the goats? On what grounds does the shepherd make the final separation? Is there a clearly definable way of following certain rules so that we can pre-determine at the last day we will be numbered among the sheep? How does the following of "right doctrine" fit into this synthesis?

The Universalistic Interpretation

Almost as familiar as these images is the popular interpretation of the passage within the church and in contemporary culture. It goes something like this. At the end of the age all peoples will be gathered before the Son of Man. Then the final separation of the just and the unjust will take place. Those (including church members) who have performed a large number of humane acts in this life, and who have gone out of their way to do various deeds of beneficence, will be ushered into the kingdom. When it is said that actions such as clothing the naked and feeding the hungry are done "to the least of the brethren" this is understood as a reference to those who practice random acts of kindness to the poor (Mt 25:35-40). The belief is widespread that somewhere someone is keeping an account of these things. No one

knows for sure how many of these acts are needed for us to be finally acceptable; but it does not hurt us from time to time to receive some exhortation on the matter as we go about our daily lives.

Clearly, we have major precedents in the Bible to warrant a commission to minister to the needy of this world. These stretch from the denunciations of Israel by the Old Testament prophets for displaying covenant unfaithfulness in its lack of care for the poor down to the book of James. These mandates are a given for the people of God. One may grant all of this, however, and yet one may question whether Matthew had anything like this in mind when he portrayed the great Final Judgment at the culminating point of Jesus' ministry immediately preceding the Passion Narrative. Indeed, just a moment's reflection should give us considerable pause. Do we really mean to say that despite all the New Testament teaches about the atoning work of Christ for our sins, it comes down to being justified by our works? Even if we argue that Matthew presumes that faith in Christ is a pre-requisite for entrance into the kingdom (and Matthew 25 is silent here), it still amounts to the same thing.¹ Whether it be the liberal who finds a warrant in this text for his or her call to common humanness, or the conservative who claims that obedience to God's demand can only be factored in the context of right doctrine, if we follow this interpretation, it appears to come down to a matter of our sheer performance. Under the conventional interpretation we seem to have before us a particularly clear appeal to *works*

1 The sub-title of this essay, "Matthew's answer to legalism," will, no doubt, raise questions in some minds. There is a widespread perception that Matthew, with his strong emphasis on the abiding significance of the law and his constant stress on performance, comes dangerously close to a particular version of legalism (cf. Mt 5:17-20). This explains why F. W. Beare, in the preface of his commentary, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981) vii, could say, "Matthew has given us a grim book, singularly lacking in those notes of joy that sound through the writings of Luke. The Christ that he presents on the whole is a terrifying figure. . . . There is little trace here of a gospel of grace abounding to the chief of sinners." Needless to say, we believe that such comments represent a major distortion of Matthew's perspective. On the contrary, we intend to argue in this essay that Matthew, properly understood, unmasks legalism and gives an appropriate description of the relationship of grace to God's demand. The matter has about been discussed to death. But M. Mu>ller, "The Gospel of St. Matthew and the Mosaic Law," *Studia Theologica* 46 (1992) 118-119 is not for from the truth when he claims that the author of Matthew transfers the Mosaic Law to a Christian context. Christ is not viewed as the giver of a new law but by accepting his Lordship and the redemption that is in him one is able to keep joyously these demands as differentiated by Jesus.

righteousness. Is the Gospel of Matthew this far out of line with the gospel of grace in the rest of the New Testament?

Our Argument

In this essay we will assert that the conventional interpretation of the text is mistaken. It is mistaken because for Matthew the follower of Jesus is not pictured as a solitary individual at the Last Judgment waiting among “all the nations” to see how it all is going to turn out. Rather, for Matthew the believer is identified under the cipher “one of the least of the brethren.” It will be the response to his or her conduct and lifestyle that will be the basis for the determination of the destiny of humankind at the end of time. For Matthew, among the great throngs at the Last Judgment are the ones who showed hospitality to “the brethren.” Indeed, to be precise, “the least of the brethren.” These people will be rewarded. Because they were hospitable we are told that by such actions they “did it to me.” That is to say, in the welcoming of the brethren and their mission they welcomed Jesus. Matthew 25:31-46 is not a literal description of every detail at the end, but a vignette which anticipates the outcome of the mission of the disciples to the nations in Matthew 28:16-20. In short, the vignette focuses upon the outcome of the Christian Mission. Those among the nations who welcome the disciples ultimately welcome Christ and his claim to universal authority. By acknowledging and acting upon this claim they will be rewarded. Those who do not will be separated from him.

Therefore, Matthew 25:31-46 is not a text calling for the church to start more soup kitchens and out-do the world in benevolent work. Neither is it saying that “anonymous disciples” who have nothing to do with the church but do good works will be saved. Instead, it is an anticipatory glimpse of the outcome of the mission of the church to bring the world under the Lordship of Christ. It indicates that a welcome reception of that message is what will count as the ultimate reality on that day. If there is any mandate for the church at all in this text it is a mandate to be the very embodiment of the obedient disciples of Jesus symbolized by what the first Gospel calls “the least of the brethren” or “the little ones.” The “least” or the “little ones” are those who live their lives in conformity with the example shown by the Teacher himself in his earthly ministry. By conforming to the model of Christ the disciple is not one who is to live in fear of the Last Judgment. Rather, as the very

embodiment of the power of the Servant-Christ, the witness of that disciple will be the standard for the judgment of others.

The Least of These My Brethren

Now, let us begin to show how this argument is congruent with the total thrust of the book of Matthew. As already noted, a critical issue in interpretation of this text is understanding to whom Matthew is referring when he speaks about “the least of these” (Mt 25:40, 45).² Under the conventional universalistic interpretation “the least of these” is supposed to be a reference to the poor and needy of this world. It is argued that the final outcome at the judgment depends on the level of one’s concern for the needy.³ The obvious appeal to a sense of our common humanness accounts for the widespread attractiveness of the conventional interpretation.

But, as we have noted, almost certainly this was not what Matthew intended to say. The reference to the “least of the brethren” goes back to an earlier mission charge to the disciples to evangelize the lost sheep of the house of Israel in Matthew 10:5-42. The phrase “one of these least” (25:40, 45) is almost the same as the phrase “one of these little ones” that occurs at the conclusion of this charge in 10:42.⁴ There, in context, it refers to the disciples. The connection between Matthew 25:31-46 and the mission charge in 10:5-42 warrants close scrutiny.

Up until the mission charge Matthew has carefully arranged his account of Jesus’ instructions to a circle of followers to fall between two great summarizing passages (Mt 4:23/9:35). In both these passages Jesus emerges as the Proclaimer of God’s new saving power and as Teacher, and Healer. In between Matthew 4:23 and 9:25 Jesus gives the Sermon on the Mount and performs ten great acts of power. Thereupon, Jesus selects the Twelve (Mt 10:1-4) from the circle of his followers and

² Mt 25:40 reads in most ancient manuscript traditions, “the least of these my brothers.” There is a small body of manuscript evidence that omits “my brothers.” But it is not sufficient to cause us to discount the accepted reading. Throughout Matthew the term “brother,” outside of references to blood relationships, always refers to fellow believers.

³ Ulrich Luz, *The Theology of the Gospel of Matthew*, trans. J. Bradford Robinson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 129, attests to the widespread popularity of this view.

⁴ Clement of Alexandria (circa 200 A. D.) seems to understand the Matthean terminology of the “least of these” and “the little ones” as co-terminous (*Quis Dives Salvetur* 30:2-4; *Protrepticus Paedagogus* iii, 9:35).

sends them on a mission to announce the arrival of God's Kingdom to the "lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Mt 10:5, 6 and 10:23).

The mission of the twelve to the lost sheep of Israel is characterized by instructions to the disciples not to be dependent upon their own resources (Mt 10:9-10) but to rely upon the hospitality of those who are the recipients of their message. Toward the end of this charge the disciples are told, "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me" (Mt 10:40). And in Matthew 10:41 we learn that "Whoever welcomes God's prophetic messengers . . . will share in the messenger's reward." Finally, in Matthew 10:42 we are told that, "Whoever will give a cup of cold water to the prophetic messengers" described as "one of these little ones," will receive a reward. Here "the little ones," without question, refer to the Twelve (Mt 10:1; 11:1). But in both these verses the Twelve are also called disciples; and in Matthew 18:6, 10, 14, similar terminology on "the little ones" is expanded to function as a transparency for those who are vulnerable in the social world of the first-century Christian-Jewish community founded by Jesus (i.e. the Church). Thus the instructions to the disciples in Matthew 10 are an anticipation of the self-understanding of the church as it will go about the conduct of its life and mission to Israel in obedience to its Sovereign Lord. As noted by Ulrich Luz, for Matthew, the essence of what it means to conduct this mission is to live a faithful life in conscious imitation of *the pattern* of Christ's life.⁵ And the core of his life was centered in a process of absolute dependence characterized by his asking and receiving from the heavenly Father (Mt 6:8; 7:7-11; 21:22; 26:39). This has an analogue in the way in which the disciples were to conduct themselves in daily life. A disciple is not above his teacher (Mt 10:9-25). Thus Matthew 10 is a manual on Christian discipleship.

When one looks at the specifics of this model it is clear that Matthew 10 has many echoes in Matthew 25. In 10:9-14 Jesus exhorts his disciples to rely for their food and drink upon those with whom they share the word (cf. Mt 10:43). In 25:33

⁵ Ulrich Luz, *Matthew in History: Interpretation, Influence, and Effects* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994) 48.

those vindicated at the last day are those who freely offered the hospitality of food and drink. In 10:17-18 Jesus prepares the disciples for the grim reality of rejection and imprisonment. In Matthew 25 those vindicated at the last day are those who made visits to the prisons to see the little ones (Mt 25:36, 39). Indeed, Paul's description of his hardships sounds like a repetition of circumstances faced by "the little ones" in Matthew 25:34, 36. Paul suffers hunger and thirst and was often homeless and without adequate clothing (1 Cor 4:11; 2 Cor 11:27). He was sick (1 Cor 4:10) and often imprisoned (2 Cor 11:23).⁶ The point is that for both Matthew and Paul these marks of the life of the "little ones" are the marks of true discipleship. Those, among the nations who will welcome and respond to this witness are those who will be vindicated at the last day.

Indeed, as noted earlier, at the last day, those among the nations who are vindicated because they received and welcomed the "little ones" will be surprised to learn that by these actions they welcomed Christ himself (Mt 25:37-40). This is the real "shocker." The very hidden power of God initially exemplified in the servant ministry of Jesus (cf. Mt 12:17-21) and instantiated in the life and mission of the disciples to the nation of Israel (Mt 10:23) will be shown to all the nations. Simply put, Matthew 25:31-46, is a highly symbolic representation of *the ultimate outcome of the impact of this Jesus mission to the nations*. The passage is saying that what will determine the destiny of the nations at the last day is the nature of their response to those who embodied the way of Christ. Those who respond favorably will be ushered into the heavenly kingdom. Those among the nations who treat this mission either with indifference or with overt hostility will be refused entrance.

The perspective that we all will be held accountable for our lives is a consistent theme of Matthew's theology. Matthew tells us that accountability applies both to the life of the Christian in the church and to the reception of the church's mission among all of the nations of the world. With respect to the church, Matthew

⁶ The parallels between Paul's description of his ministry and Matthew 25 are well noted by John R. Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable: Metaphor, Narrative, and Theology in the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968) 122. Earlier J. R. Michaels, "Apostolic Hardships and Righteous Gentiles: A Study of Mt 25:31-46," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 84 (1965) 27-37 made some similar points.

understands it is a *corpus mixtum* (“a mixture of good and bad”) who live and exist in one community until the genuine disciples who lived their lives in imitation of the pattern of Christ’s life will finally be separated from the unfaithful at the Last Judgment (Mt 13:36-43;47-49; 24:36-25:30). Matthew 25:31-46 has a similar theology of accountability but a different focus. Anticipating the great mission to the nations in 28:16-20, this text is simply shifting the focus from a description of the evaluation of the church itself in Matthew 24:36-25:30 to an image of the accountability that will be demanded of the nations when the Gospel is taken to them. They will be judged on whether they received Christ in the witness of those who followed the model of his life.

Matthew and Legalism

As already indicated, a pursuit of the popular interpretation of Matthew 25:31-46 can often degenerate into an unhealthy involvement with legalism. This can be true for either liberal or conservative interpreters. For the liberal the danger is to take the passage out of its particular setting and to assert that the universal impetus to do good and show kindness is all that is needed. The good-hearted person, no matter his profession, will be saved. We are justified by our performance. But it is not this version of legalism on which we wish to concentrate our attention in this essay. With the exception of a few who have acted as though the church or the government should be nothing more than a social-service agency, this perspective has not proved especially troublesome to Churches of Christ. Matthew confronts another kind of legalism that does pose a problem for conservative fellowships. Matthew has strong things to say to those who have the arrogance to claim that since they understand fully the commands of God, they therefore know exactly both what is needed, and who will and will not make “the cut” on the last day. This is the legalism of doctrinal sectarianism.

With the release of Richard Hughes’ book on the history of Churches of Christ in America the debate about the role of legalism in our theological tradition is again about to be revived. Hughes is no friend of legalism.⁷ He argues that our flirtations with it started early when Alexander Campbell made some too subtle

⁷Richard T. Hughes, *Reviving the Ancient Faith: The Story of Churches of Christ in America* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996).

distinctions in his descriptions of grace.⁸ According to Hughes, Campbell taught that salvation is only possible as a result of God's gracious purposes shown in his self-revelation in scripture, the capstone of which culminated in the commands of the New Covenant. But the reception of that salvation was also totally dependent upon a free human response to this originating grace present in the giving of the commands.⁹ However, as Hughes points out, this delicate tension between God's sovereign purposeful grace and human response, envisioned by Campbell, was quickly distorted.¹⁰ For many, the focus shifted to an emphasis on obedience to the commands themselves. And in its wake came a pre-occupation with both determining the precise number, structure, and form of the divine commands, and what is entailed in obeying them. Thus we arrived at the gates of legalism.

Regardless of whether Hughes' explanation is correct in its details, one cannot deny that there is an entrenched position among certain interpreters in Churches of Christ which has as its basic *raison d'être* an attempt to extract from the New Testament scriptures a certain pattern of commands deemed necessary to follow in order to obtain salvation. Furthermore, once the pattern was determined, a monumental effort has continued to be extended in sectarian discussion to refine the particularities of the pattern especially with respect to who is following it and who is not.¹¹

Interestingly enough, the Gospel of Matthew has often been drawn into this orbit. Within the heritage of Churches of Christ one of the most frequently quoted verses from Matthew has been 15:9:

In vain do they worship me teaching as doctrine the commandments of men.

The connection with the issue at hand is very clear. This verse has been

⁸ *Ibid.*, 28, 171-172.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Even the terminology of certain publications can be indicative of such a mind-set. The recent book, in excess of six hundred pages, by Goebel Music, *Behold the Pattern* (Pensacola, Florida: Austin McGary and Company, 1991), is a case in point.

understood as part of a wider discrimen that presumes that there are certain scriptures which outline with great specificity God's commands and which warrant the view that there is a clear and unfailing blueprint for all aspects of the Christian life including the worship and the organization of the church. It is alleged that the Pharisees were scored by Jesus because, within Israel, they had substituted their own opinions and rulings on Torah in place of pure obedience to the letter of the law. By analogy, under the New Covenant, those who deviate in the slightest way from the perceived pattern of God's commands, will surely receive the same disapprobation that Jesus extended towards the Pharisees.¹² Indeed, given this pre-understanding, it is then possible to extend this hermeneutical gambit to many more texts in Matthew. So, for example, the ending of the Sermon on the Mount with its emphasis on hearing and doing the teaching of Christ (Mt 7:24-25) is now interpreted not so much as a general call to good works in imitation of Christ, as it is an emphasis on whether one is following the prescribed conditions of salvation and is observant of the purported blueprint for the New Testament church.¹³ The call for the twelve to be leaders in the proclamation of the kingdom in the face of relentless opposition in Matthew 10:32, 33 is cited as a warrant to demand the good confession before baptism.¹⁴

Although the respect for the authority of Scripture which undergirds this viewpoint is commendable the end result of this legalistic outlook is spiritual malnourishment. This is so because such a system of religion inevitably leads many of its adherents to the position that what is primarily determinative for being faithful is a resolution to meet a set of pre-determined requirements. Once one knows the rules (i.e. in the case of the church: where the boundaries are, and the conditions for entrance and maintenance within the boundaries) it is practically inevitable that the central religious obligation is not to live faithfully upon the dependability of the Father but simply to keep the commands. And once one has kept the commands what

¹² L. E. Ellis, *The Church that Jesus Built* (Chula Vista, California: Ellis Publications, 1981) 42, 58.

¹³ Cf. W. Terry Varner, "The Wonderful Harmony of Titus 2:11 and Matthew 7:13-27," *Spiritual Sword* 17, 4 (July, 1984) 26.

¹⁴ Ellis, *The Church that Jesus Built*, 53.

further need is there for spiritual development.¹⁵ Indeed, “spiritual growth” equals “keeping commandments.”

Ironically, although the legalist presumes that the Matthean Jesus is on his side it may well be that, in fact, the opposite is the case. For indeed, much of what Jesus found objectionable in Pharisaism is analogous with contemporary versions of legalism we have outlined above.

The Pharisaic party of the first century era was, above all, a community intent upon drawing power into its own hands.¹⁶ Procedurally, this was done through the inculcation of a world-view that claimed that they (i.e. the Pharisees) were the guardians of a legacy of an authoritative scribal tradition reaching back to Moses. This perspective was regularly validated in the legal process operative amongst the Jews in this period. The Gospel of Matthew provides ample evidence of its pervasiveness. The Pharisees maintained an authoritative interpretative tradition for such varied areas of life as observance of the Sabbath law (Mt 12:1-14); oaths and vows (Mt 5:33-37; 23:16-23); taxes (22:15-22); divorce (19:3), and countless others. In short, the Pharisees as described in Matthew had developed a way of viewing the world very similar to patterns followed by many contemporary legalists. It was presumed that God had provided a comprehensive pattern for all areas of life for which he demanded strict adherence and complete obedience. And it is assumed that he appointed certain elites who had the power to administer and refine the system. It is interesting to note the response of the Matthean Jesus to this kind of legalism.

Servanthood Not Legalism

Emerging in the middle of Matthew 11:28-30 is a word from Jesus that has for centuries been a treasure of the church:

Come to me all who labor and are burdened down and I will provide rest for you
Put my yoke on you and learn from me because I am meek and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls
For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

¹⁵ Such a position may even breed a certain kind of arrogance and contempt for others who have not met the requirements. That is hardly becoming of the qualities of discipleship outlined in the Sermon on the Mount in Mt 5:3-11.

¹⁶ A. E. Harvey, *Jesus and the Constraints of History* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1982) 58.

These words, above all, constitute a paradox. Up until this time everything we have learned from Matthew is that the prospect of following Jesus appears to be a stern and demanding duty (cf. Mt 5:20; 10:34-39). And yet we are told in Matthew 10:30 that Jesus' yoke is easy and light!¹⁷ In contrast to the Pharisaic system (Mt 12:1-14, 23:4), the taking up of Jesus' yoke holds out the promise of refreshment and rest.

What is equally startling is that the ones to whom these words are spoken (more than likely disciples) are pictured as people who labor and are burdened down.¹⁸ Here we notice that the description of the disciples corresponds with similar terminology ("the little ones" and "the least of the brethren") given to Jesus' followers elsewhere in Matthew. Paradoxically, it is these bedraggled ones who find relief. What has Matthew in mind?

Surely, it is nothing more or less than the claim that the situation and destiny of the disciples mirror the situation and destiny of Jesus himself (cf. Mt 10:24-25). As Jesus will pass through the crucible of a life tested in every degree, ultimately to be vindicated, his followers must do the same. But they do not journey alone. They are assisted by divine power. Indeed, at the end of time, the lifestyle of the disciples themselves, as the embodiment of Jesus' own ministry, will be the very standard whereby the world will be judged (Mt 25:40)! Matthew's story of Jesus constitutes a manual whereby prospective disciples will come to the dawning realization that though they may appear often bedraggled and beaten down on the journey, the hidden power of the crucified Christ will be shown in them; and, in the end, they will share his victory.

¹⁷ For a fuller discussion of the passage the reader is referred to the author's earlier article, "Jesus of Nazareth: A Liberal and a Legalist," *Institute for Christian Studies Faculty Bulletin* 5 (1984) 42-49.

¹⁸ As noted by Graham Stanton, *A Gospel for a New People: Studies in Matthew* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1992) 374, the verb *kopia'n* ("to labor") found in Mt 11:28 is used by Paul (see above) to speak of his Christian service (cf. 1 Cor 4:12; 15:10; Gal 4:11; Philipp 2:16; 1 Thess 5:12).

Thus Matthew has gone out of his way to view the life of a disciple as a mirror of Jesus' fulfillment of the hope of Israel's deliverance by the Messianic Servant given in Isaiah 42-53.¹⁹

Already in the account of Jesus' baptism Matthew connects Jesus' ministry with that of the Servant (Mt 3:13-17). We learn that Jesus' baptism is to fulfill all righteousness (Mt 3:15). This seems to echo Isaiah 53:11 where we learn that the Servant will make many to be accounted righteous.²⁰ In the first words spoken by Jesus in Matthew there is the promise that his mission will bring righteousness. In the episode of the description of the Final Judgment (at the end of the mission outside of Jerusalem), those who respond to Jesus in the work of his followers are designated in Matthew 25:37, 46 as οἱ δίκαιοι ("the righteous ones"). In between Jesus emerges as the Servant who fulfills the Isainic hopes (Is 42:1/Mt 3:17) and commissions his followers to carry on in his steps after he is gone.

This theme continues in 8:17 after the initial cycle of Jesus' deeds. Matthew identifies Jesus as the fulfiller of the hopes of healing in the coming restoration of Israel. The actual configuration of that restoration prefigured in Isaiah 25:8; 26:19; 29:18-19; 35:5-6; 42:7; 43:8; 61:1-3 is recounted in response to John the Baptist in Jesus' own recital as the ambassador of relief to those who suffer (Mt 11:4-6).²¹

After Jesus and the disciples carry out the mission of preaching, healing, and teaching in chapters 11-12, Matthew gives a lengthy fulfillment quotation from Isaiah 42:1-4 that summarizes the impact of Jesus' work. The culminating point of the passage is that the Servant is the one who is destined to bring justice to all the nations (Gentiles). In his name they will find hope.

As Donahue notes, this is a rather odd statement, since at this period Jesus had restricted his mission only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Mt 10:5-6,

¹⁹ Luz, *The Theology of the Gospel of Matthew*, 80.

²⁰ Adrian M. Leske, "The Influence of Isaiah on Christology in Matthew and Luke," *Crises in Christology: Essays in Quest of Resolution*, William R. Farmer ed. (Livonia, Michigan: Dove Booksellers, 1995) 248, also sees echoed here Is 59:16-17; 60:17, 21; 61:11.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 252-254. As Leske notes, this theme is continued in Mt 11:28-30 where the servant, as one who is meek and lowly in heart fulfills the call for relief by the faint and weary in Is 40:28-31.

23).²² Apparently Matthew envisioned the limited commission to go only to Israel to extend later to the Gentiles whom the earthly Jesus never visited (Mt 28:16-20).²³ But not only that, Matthew claims that Jesus will be present in that mission as the "Servant." When the church goes about its task of proclaiming, teaching, and healing encountering both acceptance and rejection by the nations Jesus, hidden in the work of his disciples, is accomplishing his mission.²⁴ Thus, Jesus as Servant, in the work of the "least of the brothers," is God's agent and is the one destined to bring the restoration of God's order and claim (justice) over humankind. As the Servant who was prepared not to quit even to the point of his life becoming a sacrifice (Mt 16:21-28; 17:22-23; 20:18-19) so his followers must mirror his defenselessness and brokenness as they go forth among the nations.²⁵ Being the very image of Jesus himself they will constitute the very criterion by which all men will be judged (Mt 25:37-40, 44-45). Thus, the model of servanthood, fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth, and embedded in the church (Mt 10:5-42 et al.) is the dynamic discipleship that overcomes the legalism of the Pharisees and their contemporary analogues.

Conclusion

We began this essay by directing attention to the powerful metaphor of the Lord separating the nations at the Last Judgment as a shepherd separates the flock of sheep from the goats. We asked the obvious question, "How can one be reckoned as one of the sheep? Is it primarily a matter of teaching "right doctrine?" Our analysis has brought us to the following conclusion. The vignette in Matthew 25:31-46 is an image of the outcome of the mission of the Servant-Messiah in the person of his disciples (the church) to the nations of the world. Matthew was addressed to Christian believers. But in Matthew 25:31-46 the believer is not a lone individual among the nations waiting to hear a pronouncement on the final destiny of his soul

²² Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable*, 117.

²³ For a fuller analysis of the nature of mission among Jews and Gentiles in Matthew, see Allan McNicol, "Discipleship as Mission: A Missing Dimension in Contemporary Discussion on Matthew 28:18-20," *Christian Studies* 10 (1989) 27-47.

²⁴ Donahue, *The Gospel in Parable*, 117.

²⁵ Luz, *Theology of the Gospel of Matthew*, 79-80.

but one of the “least of the brethren” whose work and mission constitute the standard by which the nations will be judged.

Of course, this does not mean that the believer will not be held accountable at the end (cf. 2 Cor 5:10). As we noted, Matthew clearly indicates that the church in the present age is a *corpus mixtum* and that at the end one will be taken for judgment and the other left to enjoy the blessings of the messianic kingdom (Mt 24:40-42 which occurs in the larger context of what constitutes the accountability for disciples in Mt 24:36-25:30).

Well, if the disciples of Jesus are going to be held strictly accountable, despite all that we have said, do we have any basis for understanding what will count on our behalf at the Last Judgment? Manifestly so! Our study of Matthew has shown that the static righteousness of passing of a checklist will be inadequate. This spells doom for the legalist. The demands of God can never be reduced to mere calculation. God’s demand still stands. But it can only be differentiated and fulfilled by following dynamically in the way of life pioneered by the Servant-Messiah. It is only in taking up this way that the weightier matters (justice, mercy, and faith) will be accomplished and we will be found to be in good standing before the Divine One at the last day.

“And They Were Silent”: Reflections on Legalism

Michael R. Weed

It is not virtue which is the opposite of sin,
but faith, just as it is not vice which is the
essence of sin, but unbelief.

Emil Brunner

“Legalism” is widely used as a term of reproach. It is generally used to indicate moral systems or practices characterized by rigid and excessive attention to laws, rules, and regulations. In the following comments I will sketch what I take to be the basic structure of Christian legalism, the manner in which legalism shapes character, and Jesus’ and Paul’s encounters with legalism. I will then address the central theological and moral problems of Christian legalism. In conclusion, I will make pastoral observations regarding legalism.

As a Moral System

As a moral system or ethic, legalism views the entire moral life in terms of rules and regulations. Being moral or ethical consists of knowing, applying, and following the correct law, rule, or regulation. As a religious ethic, legalism views the religious life in its entirety in terms of strict adherence to laws, rules, and regulations. Whether these are derived from natural law (known to human reason), an official teaching office (as in Roman Catholic moral theology), or from authoritative scripture (as in Protestant and fundamentalist ethics), the whole of the religious and moral life

is governed by knowledge of the law and correct interpretation as to how it should be applied in given circumstances.

Further, legalism may take the form of both rigorist and laxist approaches to morality. Regarding the latter, one may hold that only that which is explicitly proscribed (or readily deduced on the basis of that which is explicitly proscribed) is morally illicit. In such approaches, the legalist, while devoutly and scrupulously complying with a core of moral imperatives and religious requirements, views the larger portion of life as morally neutral (*adiaphorous*). The laxist version of legalism demonstrates what has been referred to as the “liberalism of legalism,” *i.e.*, that which is not prohibited is permitted.¹ By contrast, rigorist versions of legalism know of no “neutral zone.” All of life is juridicized, as moral laws and regulations are multiplied and expanded to cover virtually every conceivable circumstance. Theoretically, each law has countless applications and each application admits to infinite qualifications.²

For both laxist and rigorist approaches, however, the essence of religion and ethics resides in the correct observance of rules, regulations, and rituals.

Character

Not surprisingly, attention to religion and morality from legalistic perspectives gives rise to a character-type fundamentally marked by basic attitudes and dispositions which distinguish the legalistic self. Some, in fact, would argue that the real problem with legalism is the legalistic mindset which accompanies legalistic moralities. Obviously, with its objective standards and moral seriousness, legalism may seem commendable--especially in times of moral dissolution. Legalism certainly promotes a concern with being right and correct in application and performance of the law. Because of its concentration on correct interpretation, application, and performance of the law, however, legalism inescapably promotes a preoccupation with minute details and subtle distinctions which obscure the original intent of the law. That is, the

¹ For example, one occasionally encounters Christian legalists who maintain that abortion is not a moral issue on the grounds that there is no explicit prohibition of abortion in scripture.

substance of moral and religious obligation is transmuted into scrupulous attention to a maze of laws and regulations.

Finally, the legalist aims at performing precisely what is required by the moral law--no less and no more. Herein arises an overriding concern for being correct in application and performance. The legalistic vision of the moral life, and moral growth in particular, is virtually static. Especially important in terms of its impact on the formation of character is the fact that legalism does not aim at making one good, much less compassionate. Legalism simply equates being *good* with being *right*. Thus the preoccupations of legalism may evoke a callousness and insensitivity to human concerns, since the focus of legalistic morality is not other persons but the law.³

It is helpful, before more fully examining the underlying structure of legalism, to look first at perspectives provided by Jesus and Paul. Both encountered forms of religious legalism among the Jews of their time, particularly as represented by the Pharisees.

Jesus and Legalism

The gospels are replete with stories of Jesus' encounters with those who conceive of the religious and moral life primarily in terms of law (including various rules and regulations which detail the specific entailments of the law). In fact, many Pharisees in Jesus' time had expanded the Sinai covenant into more than six hundred prohibitions and requirements, including thirty-nine "main tasks" proscribed by the fourth commandment to "honor the sabbath."⁴

² Cf. Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil* (Boston: Beacon, 1969, orig. 1967) 144. Ricoeur states that the atomization of law into a multitude of commandments leads inevitably to the expansion of the law into "an evil indefinite."

³ Cf. Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt* (Philadelphia: Westminster, first Eng. trans. 1939). "It [legalism] does not make the heart strong, like real faith; it makes the heart hard" (167).

⁴ Cooking, for example, was subject to close regulation and continuing debate: "If a double-stove had been heated with stubble or straw, cooked food may be set on it; but if with peat or wood, cooked food may not be set on it until it has been swept out or covered with ashes. The School of Shammai say: Hot water but not cooked food may be set thereon. And the School of Hillel say: both hot water and cooked food. The School of Shammai say: They may be removed [on the sabbath] but not put back. And the School of Hillel say: They may also be put back" (Mishnah, tractate Shabbath 3:1; trans. H. Danby, *The Mishnah* [Oxford: Oxford University, 1933] 102). While such discussions may appear unedifying, they are hardly less so than many similar debates among contemporary legalists.

The gospels present a consistent picture of Jesus' encounters with this religious and moral attitude. In one of the most revealing of such encounters, Jesus asks the legalists of his own day, "Is it lawful on the sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to kill?" (Mk 3:4). The gospel tells us poignantly, "and they were silent."

The silence of Jesus' opponents disclosed far more than their words. Jesus saw that persons may actually evade moral and religious responsibilities through their religious devotion and moral seriousness (Mk 7:10-13). Further, persons may become so preoccupied with correct and exact observance of laws and regulations that they completely lose sight of the original purpose and intent of the law (*e.g.*, sabbath regulations).

These insights lie behind Jesus' marked tendency for showing compassion toward the "sinner who sins," while severely criticizing those "whited sepulchers"--"sinners who do not sin" (Lk 2:16, 17; 18:9-14). Persons who are aware of their own moral and spiritual frailty and who know themselves to be sinners are in a position to comprehend their total dependence upon God and gratefully to accept his love and mercy. By contrast, the "sinner who does not sin," secure in the confidence of his own knowledge, ability, and achievements, inevitably views his relationship with God (and others) on the basis of his own ability and performance. In actuality, the "sinner who does not sin" places his confidence in himself, not in the Creator's goodness and mercy.

Jesus' encounters with legalism illustrate two radically different ways of looking at reality. Ultimately, behind superficial similarities these two views reflect very different understandings of God. Jesus invites his hearers to respond to the Father who sustains them every moment by his covenant love. Legalism is confined within its own vision of a God constructed by the finite human mind. In Matthew, Jesus thanks the Father that he hides his revelation from the "wise and understanding" and discloses himself only to those whom the Son chooses (Mt 11:25-30).

But it is in the Fourth Gospel that it becomes inescapably clear that the distance between the two worlds represented by Jesus and Jewish legalism (above/below, spirit/flesh, truth/appearance, light/darkness), is insurmountable from the human side. The two worlds intersect only in Jesus, the true Light. Those from "below" and in "darkness" do not possess criteria to weigh and assess--much less to

judge--the light. And it is precisely their presumed knowledge, even their knowledge of scripture (5:39), which renders those in darkness incapable of coming to Jesus. Blinded by their own wisdom (*e.g.*, ch. 9), they are tragically unable to come in order that they may see (1:30, 46; 4:29). They remain in darkness because they prefer the artificial light of their own minds (theories and interpretations) to the true Light which comes from above.⁵

The gospels give little indication that the self-confinement of legalism may be broken from within, *i.e.*, that legalists may "think" their way out of their self-entrapment. Only a radical act of God can free them; they must be born from above (Jn 3:3,5).

For Jesus, the underlying problem is clearly the human heart's resistance to the claim of its Creator. Thus according to the gospels, the full intent of the law is captured in the two-fold command to love God with all one's heart, soul, and mind, and to love one's neighbor as oneself (*e.g.*, Mt 22:36-40; Mk 12:28-31). Jesus here places the self at the juncture of two absolute and unlimited demands. For love requires more, not less, than law. The disciple owes the Father everything ("heart, soul, and mind"), and to the neighbor he owes the same degree of concern he has for himself. While such love may give rise to laws, it can never be reduced or confined merely to satisfying a set of legal requirements.⁶

The obligations of being a parent, for example, cannot be reduced to a fixed number of piano lessons, Little League games, or sleepless nights. It may in fact entail major sacrifices. If one were to pose the question in this fashion we would immediately recognize that the fault lies in the questioner and his concept of parenthood. While there may be guidelines and principles to aid parents, being a parent cannot be reduced to specific requirements to be met, whether few or many.

⁵ The Fourth Gospel portrays the moral and religious blindness of the Jewish leaders with biting irony as they demonstrate concern for ceremonial laws while they seek the execution of the Messiah (see 18:28; cf. 19:31).

⁶ Cf. Bernard Häring, *Free & Faithful in Christ, Vol. 1* (New York: Seabury, 1978): "Only if the believer turns his attention to the love of God and to all the many signs and gifts of God's love, can he be set free for his neighbour and become faithful in Christ. When this boundless love of God becomes his main orientation, he no longer looks for the minimum response but aspires, rather, to 'let your goodness have no limits, just as the goodness of the heavenly Father knows no bounds' (Mt 5:48)" (250).

Love does not approach its tasks in terms of "how many?" or "how much?" (Mt 18:21, 22).⁷

Jesus tells his followers that their perfection must exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees. Their perfection must be that of the Father, *viz.*, radically selfless love for the neighbor, especially the "enemy-neighbor" (Mt 5:20, 43-48).

Paul and Legalism

The apostle Paul, a Pharisee and a trained rabbi, offers profound insights into the function of law in the moral and religious life. Essentially, Paul argues that although the law given to Israel is in itself "holy and righteous and good" (Rom 7:12), it becomes used by the human heart in an evil manner. At one level, the law discloses God's will for human life. In doing this, the law also brings into awareness the self's failure to live up to God's intentions. Thus the law, while disclosing God's will, also evokes a consciousness of the reality and seriousness of human sin.

In Romans 7 Paul contends not merely that the law conveys an awareness of sin. Nor is his argument the fact that law awakens the desire to sin (vss. 7, 8). While it is an important psychological fact that prohibitions may awaken desires (Augustine's observation that "forbidden pears taste sweeter"), Paul's insight penetrates to a more profound level. He describes not only an experience of having sinful desire awakened, but of the religious self being *deceived*: "sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, deceived me . . ." (vs. 11). That is, the law not only awakens deep within the self a consciousness of sin but, more precisely, it arouses "covetousness" (vss. 7, 8, Gk. *epithumia*, "desire," "passion"). The deception to which Paul refers lies in the fact that the self, conscious of its sinfulness, is

⁷ Cf. Richard M. Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith: Foundations of Catholic Morality* (New York: Paulist, 1989): "Legalism stifles creativity, initiative, and conversion. Where legalism abounds moral minimalism and spiritual laziness are not far behind. Asking 'How far can I go?' for example reflects such a posture" (250).

deluded into seizing upon the law as a means for addressing its awakened passion for righteousness.⁸

Paul's moving cry, "Wretched man that I am" (7:24), arises from his insight into the dilemma of sinning either by breaking the law, or by keeping the law out of the sinful desire to be righteous. It is this latter form of sin to which Paul refers when he states, "I do not do the good I want" (vs. 19), *i.e.*, become righteous. Paul is not saying that he fails to measure up to the law's requirements, much less that he suffers from a bad conscience. On the contrary, Paul's own experience was that of having been a good Pharisee, of having been blameless under the law (Phil 3:6; Gal 1:13; Acts 23:1). Paul realizes that the deceitfulness of sin permits persons to become cut off from God precisely on the basis of their desire for moral and religious rectitude and good consciences. Paul saw that the self, secure in its performance of legal, moral, and religious requirements, unintentionally solidifies sin's jurisdiction over itself. The law, in spite of its goodness, cannot cancel the deceitful power of human sinfulness. The law invites the self to recognize and address specific sins, but it cannot address the deeper problems of the heart wherein resides the mystery of human sinfulness.

Accordingly, Paul recognizes that no one is justified by the law (Gal 2:16; 3:11). One becomes a child of God not through law-keeping but by radical faith in God, a faith which involves wholly abandoning confidence in one's own knowledge and abilities--ultimately, in one's self. Thus in Philippians, when Paul refers to "forgetting what lies behind" (3:13), he is not referring to personal shortcomings or failures. Rather, it is precisely his accomplishments and grounds for confidence as a Jew that he counts as "refuse" (vss. 4-6). By contrast, the perfection which Paul presses forward to "accomplish" is not performance of laws; it is conformity to the self-emptying of Christ (2:5-11). Christ, for Paul, does not bring a new law: he brings the possibility for a new self.

⁸ Cf. Günther Bornkamm, *Paul* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971, Ger.orig. 1969) 120-134. See also Paul W. Meyer, "Romans" in *Harper's Bible Commentary* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988). Meyer states that sin's "deceit lies in its taking advantage of just those religious aspirations that make a person look to the law for life. By using the law precisely where it is honored and treasured and even obeyed, it destroys the integrity of a person's relation to God, corrodes trust and replaces it with a defensive posture no longer gratefully dependent upon God nor unreservedly accountable to him" (1149).

Accordingly, Paul can state not only that confidence in one's abilities and accomplishments must be abandoned. The sinful self must also surrender; it must "die" in order to be reconstituted by the Spirit of God. Those who die to the old self in baptism (Rom 6:6) receive the Spirit of Christ in their hearts (Gal 4:6; cf. Rom 8:11). They live no longer for themselves but for the sake of Christ whose love now controls them (2 Cor 5:14,15). Indeed, they are now the righteousness of God (2 Cor 5:21); they are now enabled to live according to the law of Christ (1 Cor 9:21; Gal 6:2). Herein the law is established, in that its original significance is recovered (Rom 3:31). Now that the self-seeking self has relinquished its claim to righteousness--indeed, now that the self has been crucified with Christ--the love of one's neighbor becomes the fulfillment of the law (Rom 13:10; Gal 5:14).⁹

Paul, like Jesus, understands that the self, estranged from its Creator, does not need information, much less new laws and regulations. For both, what is needed is a new heart and mind--a new self "born from above" (Jn 3:3, 7, 8) and living by the power of God (Gal 2:20).

The Heart of the Problem

The fundamental problem with legalism lies deep within the human heart, at the very dawn of moral consciousness.¹⁰ While sin makes its appearance as the violation or infraction of a rule or law, this fact obscures the origin and essence of sin. A breaking of trust with the other, ultimately with the Creator, is the origin of sin. It is this primal sin which does not admit to degrees of "greater" or "lesser," that underlies and impels all subsequent sins. These "secondary sins" clearly do admit of evaluation and comparison in terms of being more or less malicious or harmful, greater or less flagrant violations, and so on.

The fact that sin makes its appearance in terms of such violations, and that they may be measured and evaluated in terms of degrees of "greater" or "lesser"

⁹ Thus, for Paul, while baptism is necessary, it is not merely a requirement that can be met by the old self. Baptism is the self's renunciation of its ability to make itself righteous; it is the death of the old self that would attempt to be righteous on the basis of its ability to meet requirements, keep laws, and observe rules and regulations.

¹⁰ For a discussion of the experiential matrix of legalism from phenomenological, sociological, and psychological perspectives, see Michael R. Weed, "The Moralistic Experience: An Enquiry," *Restoration Quarterly*, 15:2 (1972) 65-83.

compliance or non-compliance with specific laws, rules, and regulations invites us to view the moral and religious life wholly at this level. Legalism yields to this invitation and succumbs to its deception. Legalism views sin solely in light of secondary sin, and in so doing conceals its own origin and nature. Like a scab covering an infected wound, legalism conceals the primal sin of broken trust with God. Legalism, failing to grasp sin in its true depth, erects its elaborate systems over the rupture between the self and its Creator. Unknowingly, legalism operates solely within and under the conditions of the self's estrangement from God. By its very nature, legalism cannot grasp, much less correct, the primal sin.

Legalism thus offers a false independence and security, enticing one to place confidence in one's own knowledge and performance. As if by evil design, legalism spawns strategies which serve to draw the self more deeply into its estranged condition and to ensconce it there securely. Thus, for example, scrupulously correct and conscientious performance of rules and requirements reinforces confidence in the self's own moral and religious rectitude while at the same time distracting attention from the self's broken and estranged relationship with its Creator.

One additional and particularly destructive strategy of legalism helps to ensure legalism's control over its victims. That is, legalism demands an incessant scrutiny and criticism of others. This "blaming" activity is absolutely crucial to legalism and serves several purposes: it further distracts energies from honest self-examination; it confers a sense of self-righteousness upon the blamer(s); and, it reinforces a sense of the correctness of the standards held.¹¹ Indeed, this activity is so central to legalism's existence that the religious life of the legalist is frequently devoted to monitoring and criticizing the behavior and beliefs of others.

¹¹ While learning to accept and to assess blame is an important step in becoming a mature person, when one becomes dependent upon the pleasures and satisfactions associated with judging others, blaming becomes a pathology. Common features associated with pathological blaming include: (1) a quasi-pleasurable interest in the other's wrong-doing; (2) moralistic attacks on the person or character of the "wrong-doer"; and (3) a sense of accomplishment derived from the whole blaming activity. For the legalist, blaming becomes a compulsion which frequently drives to unprincipled and dishonorable behaviors condemned by the legalist's own moral and religious principles, e.g., intentional misrepresentation, deceptive exaggeration, and outright dishonesty. For an insightful discussion of "blaming," see Herbert Fingarette, *The Self in Transformation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965) 115-145.

Finally, it should be remembered that behind its various religious and moral machinations, legalism has no place for transcendence. Religious legalism's references to transcendence are self-deceptive attempts to legitimate its own humanly constructed systems. Legalism's "transcendence" is domesticated and rationalized; it is a false transcendence. Legalism is thoroughly self-referential.¹² However much the attempt is made to work God into its system, legalism is ultimately rooted in confidence that the self, shielded from the fact of its estrangement from its Creator, achieves rectitude through its own knowledge and performance of moral laws and religious requirements. In the final analysis, the only righteousness which legalism aspires to is that which the self achieves for itself--self-righteousness.

Conclusion

While this essay has given attention to legalism's religious expressions, it should be remembered that legalism is a common and widespread human phenomenon. Legalism is not confined to religious forms and certainly not to its development within any particular religious tradition. As we have seen, legalism is rooted deep in the human heart's stubborn unwillingness to surrender its claim over itself and to live in a relationship of obedient trust in its Creator. Legalism is a form of human life under the conditions of estrangement from God; it arises within and is confined to the circle of human sin.

Undoubtedly, legalism is an exceptionally virulent spiritual disease. Its particular tenacity lies in its ability to mask its evil origin with a deceptive attractiveness. For morally serious and spiritually sensitive persons, legalism initially presents itself as a reasonable and attractive answer to the human dilemma: conscientious obedience to objective moral laws and religious requirements. Herein, however, lies one of the sources of legalism's perverse hold over human hearts and minds. Legalism is able to encourage the self's nobler impulses and aspirations while at the same time drawing them into a deadly self-deception.

Devotion to clarifying, refining, and arranging moral and religious obligations diverts attention from the underlying claims which define human

¹² Brunner, *Man in Revolt*. "The final motive therefore in legal morality is self-respect; responsibility to God and to one's neighbour has been distorted into the self-responsibility of the rational self towards itself" (158).

existence: love of God and love for neighbor. Legalism blunts, dilutes, and inevitably weakens the primal obligation; it is either fragmented into countless rules and regulations, or it is reduced to being only one among numerous equally binding requirements and regulations. The latter are arranged into an overarching system whose particular stipulations, because concrete and specific, become the focus of continual qualification and refinement. Indeed, the religious life itself becomes an unending debate about fine points of interpretation. The result is the thoroughly juridicized life.

Two pastoral observations conclude this discussion. First, given the energies legalism invests in maintaining its intellectual and juridical system, and its parasitical need for others to criticize and blame, there may be little value in entering into discussion with representatives of legalism. Not only is such discussion seldom instructive or edifying, it almost invariably serves to reinforce legalism. Since any attention, however unflattering, serves to fuel legalism's intensity, legalism may best be dealt with through intercessory prayer and refusal to engage in discussions with legalists. Left to its own devices, legalism collapses under its own excesses; or, in the absence of opponents, legalists turn on each other. Ultimately, legalism must fail because it cannot satisfy the heart's deep hunger for reconciliation with its Creator.

Second, those who have seen the evil of legalism are tempted to react against all forms of moral and religious obligations and duties. More precisely, those haunted by the specter of legalism are especially tempted to equate "anti-legalism" with "grace." While this is understandable, it is as spiritually immature and destructive as the legalistic systems to which it reacts.¹³ It should be remembered that legalism is ultimately a minimalist ethic and an external religion; legalism always demands less, not more, than covenant love.

The radical claims of covenant love are not rooted in human abilities (*e.g.*, "You must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect," "love one another as I have loved you," "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you"); they are reflective of the incalculable and inexhaustible goodness of God shown in Jesus

¹³ Those responsible for the spiritual care and instruction of former legalists must be especially sensitive to this temptation. Nor is it unusual for many anti-legalists to display a harshness not dissimilar to that of so many legalists. Another spiritual malady

Christ. Covenant love demands more than legalism because the Father is giving and enabling more; he asks no less of us than he gives.

occasionally encountered is that of refugees from legalism who in actuality have simply abandoned one version of legalism for another.

A Response To “And They Were Silent”

Charles A. Siburt

Carlyle Marney was a one-of-a-kind minister who ran a place called Interpreter's House in North Carolina, a place where disillusioned, struggling ministers from all over the country would come for help. A minister asked him one time what his experience had shown to be the most important principles for a minister to learn in order to keep his emotional and spiritual balance. He said, “There are two: (1) A minister must learn how to say “I”--he must know his own self-worth before God so that he will have the ego-strength to do his job; and (2) he must learn the real difference between saints and sinners.” The second one is essential, he said, because sincere Christians become hypocrites the moment they begin to think of themselves as a separate human species superior to all other humans.¹

One specific contributor to the mindset which does not understand the real difference between saints and sinners is legalism. Legalism is misplaced confidence. It is the enshrinement of confidence in our certainty that we know what God wants most, in our ability to give God what he wants better than most other people, and in our self-justifying condemnation of those who do not give that to God as well as we do. Legalism is a short-cut security blanket for the insecure, an illegitimate advantage for the dishonest, a tragic wedge of defensive denial which stands between self-deceiving sinners and the grace which they so desperately need but cannot afford to

¹ Taken from a live sermon delivered in Tyler, Texas in 1976.

accept because it would require them to face and confess the truth--“ . . . Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the worst” (I Tim 1:15).

Michael Weed's reflections have skillfully analyzed the dynamics involved in the sick religion we know as legalism. With precise and insightful analysis he has excavated the sources and elements of legalism, both ancient and current, and has accurately described its consequences in faith and practice. Weed has rightly labeled legalism as a pathology because it is a sickness which is especially common among the neurotically (nervously) religious. It plagues those who are most diligent in their search to “get it right.” One such person is described in Luke's Gospel.

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” “What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?” He answered: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind’ ; and, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” “You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.” But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:25- 29, NIV).

The interesting thing about this expert in the law, i. e., legalist, is that he cannot follow Jesus because he is too enmeshed in his fixation on correct study of scripture to discern and do the will of God. What he cannot do is to love his neighbor like the Samaritan, an outsider, loved a total stranger who needed compassion. This legalistic student of scripture is too busy trying to justify himself--“getting it right”--to be a good, loving person. This constant obsession with self-justification leads religious persons to employ their own fleshly efforts to make themselves right, to make themselves self-righteous in ways that distinguish them from other lesser souls so that they can say, “Lord, I thank you that I am not like others, e. g., you know, sinners, publicans, and other people like them . . .” (Luke 18:9-14).

Weed's observation that legalists inescapably employ blaming as a favorite tool is profoundly true. It does undermine honest self-assessment; it does bolster the blamer's sense of superiority; it does reinforce the correctness of the criteria for measurement of others. Besides, the sick habit of blaming causes the blamer to take delight in picking at the flaws of the sinner, to feel justified in dispensing immoral and inhumane treatment upon the sinner, and to derive a false sense of “having done

the right thing” merely for blaming other imperfect people. And blaming can take a variety of forms of correctness criticism.

One form may be called Spiritual Correctness with its meticulous competitive monitoring of the frequency and duration of prayer times, or its dutiful submission to spiritual disciplines (both classic and contemporary), or its constant, insistent use of pious sounding but wearisome, escapist phrases attributing everything to the working and will of God and virtually nothing of significance to the will and trusting of the believer. Or it may come in the form of Worship Correctness with its intolerant prejudice that only certain traditional or contemporary formats, styles, music forms, and leadership roles are kosher. And it may appear in the form of Moral Political Issue Correctness with its rigid certitude that only certain positions on such issues as abortion, prayer in schools, creationism, sex education, or homosexuality are truly Christian.

A common phrase from the field of Conflict Management says, “Remember. Never wrestle with a pig. You both get dirty, and the pig likes it.” The problem is that legalists are not good (moral, ethical) people; they are not people with whom it is possible or feasible to attempt to work in good faith because they do not know how to work in faith at all. They are not about faith; they are about reassuring themselves that they are right and, therefore, have no need to be honest, to repent, and to change their behavior to bring it into compliance with the will of God. They are not about God’s will; they are about their own will. Legalists are not concerned with being good people; they are only concerned with being safe, secure, and superior people.

Legalism is a tragic disorder, a spiritual disease whose carriers are its worst victims. More than depriving others of God’s favor, it deprives its perpetrators of the love God waits to shower upon them. In the Parable of the Prodigal Son the elder brother hears the music and dancing of the celebration his father is throwing for the rebellious little brother, hears the explanation for what is going on, and then gets furious.

The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So his father went out and pleaded with him. But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for

him!’ “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours’ ” (Lk 15:27-31, NIV).

The problem is not that the father will not celebrate his older son’s obedient compliance to the household rules and give him due affirmation for being a good son. The problem is that the son has been working so hard to be a perfect rule keeper that he has never felt any need or inclination to let his father enjoy him; he has never needed his father’s gracious, merciful, forgiving, renewing love. His father and everything his father can provide have always been there for him, but he has never felt the need or the confidence to ask for it. “All you had to do was ask,” the father says to the irate son. But the asking is the hardest part for him. He can’t grant grace to his brother (the “sinner who sins”) who needs it, and he can’t need it for himself (the “sinner who doesn’t sin”), much less ask for it. That is the ultimate tragedy of legalism--the legalists’ inability and unwillingness to allow God’s love to gush out on themselves or on others who really need it.

Two caveats are in order. One is the reality that legalists do not set out to be legalists; they set out to be faithful and loyal servants of God and his truth, totally devoted to what they understand to be his purpose for their lives. The problem, initially at least, is not the absence of good intentions or the presence of perverted motives hidden away in ungodly hearts. The problem is the unwitting distortion and calcification of very good motives and zealous intentions. Somewhere between earlier, purer surrender to God’s will and the blind, venomous hostility that finds them participating in the stoning of some of some designated “heretic” the eyes of faith have been clouded with cataracts of fear and suspicious anxiety; the hands of ministry have been paralyzed by the arthritic rigidity of jealousy and even hate. What may start out to be a mission for God’s sake can end up as a misdirected frenzy for the legalist’s sake. But this is not what they intended to happen.

As well-intentioned but now pitiful victims of their own distorted perspectives, legalists may often deserve or actually need firm accountability for their own sake and for the sake of their targets. More than anything, however, legalists need the grace of God ministered to them through those who see beyond the ugly exterior of their offensive behavior to the sad longings and fatigued spirits that languish inside their burdened hearts. They are every bit as victimized by their disease as any alcoholic or eating disordered person, perhaps more.

If we can readily muster up patient compassion for other victims of brokenness, can we not find some compassion within our hearts for victims of twisted faith? And if we cannot, then could our inability to be vessels of God's saving grace to them be rooted in being legalistic toward legalists? Even on his cross, Jesus was moved to beseech the Father in behalf of his persecutors, "Father, forgive them; they don't know what they're doing."

And the second caution is that there may be no legalists as legalistic as anti-legalists. Those who serve as mediators to churches afflicted by various conflicts and maladies know that wherever there are legalistic hardliners on the more traditional side of things there are equally legalistic hardliners on the non-traditional side. The main difference is just that the legalism of the traditionalists is obvious to the non-traditionalists; their own legalism is still hidden from their insight. The most dangerous legalists are those who do not know that they are legalists and those who defiantly protest that they are totally incapable of being legalistic. The only church members who are more legalistic than those who resist any and every vestige of change away from the security and familiarity of the past are those who with red face and clenched teeth stridently stand as gladiators of freedom in defense of the new traditions they would establish in place of the old traditions. This is especially true of those who espouse the tradition of being non-traditional in theology, worship, format, style, or methodology. When they demand that anything done in the past is unacceptable while anything wearing a "new" or "different" label is superior, they are eligible for the patient compassion that all legalists, traditional and non-traditional, require.

What makes legalism so slippery is that any belief or value we believe in strongly is thereby susceptible to becoming a statute within our personal legal code. Ultimately, the only solution for our proclivity toward legalism is an unwavering, non-negotiable, self-surrendering grasp of "how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge" (Eph 3:18,19, NIV).

Not The Only Christians:

Campbell on Exclusivism and Legalism

Gary Holloway

Some of our brethren were too much addicted to denouncing the sects and representing them *en masse* as wholly aliens from the possibility of salvation--as wholly antichristian and corrupt.

Alexander Campbell.¹

It was customary for Alexander Campbell to introduce topics for discussion in his journal *The Millennial Harbinger* by quoting extracts from letters he had received. The following letter caused more discussion and correspondence than any other he printed.

Dear brother Campbell--I was much surprised to-day, while reading the Harbinger, to see that you recognize the Protestant parties as Christian. You say, you "find in all Protestant parties Christians."

Dear brother, my surprize [sic] and ardent desire to do what is right prompt me to write to you at this time. I feel assured, from the estimate you place on the female character, that you will attend to my feeble questions in search of knowledge.

Will you be so good as to let me know how any one becomes a Christian? What act of yours gave you the name Christian? At what time had Paul the name of Christ called on him? At what time did Cornelius have Christ

¹ *Millennial Harbinger* (1837) 564.

named on him? Is it not through this name we obtain eternal life? Does the name of Christ or Christian belong to any but those who believe the gospel, repent, and are buried by baptism into the death of Christ?²

This letter, by an unnamed woman from Lunenburg, allowed Campbell to answer several questions: Are only those immersed as believers entitled to the name Christian? Are all the Christians in the world to be found in the movement led by Campbell? Can we call the unimmersed "Christians" and still insist they be immersed?

Exclusivism and Sectarianism

Campbell is adamant in his reply to the letter: there must be Christians among the Protestant sects. Otherwise, he argues, there are "no Christians in the world except ourselves, or such as us as keep, or strive to keep, all the commandments of Jesus."³ Campbell thinks it obviously absurd to claim that his followers (and perhaps not all of them) are the only Christians. If they are, then "for many centuries there has been no church of Christ, no Christians in the world."⁴ Thus the promise of Christ in Matthew 16:18 has failed and the gates of hell have prevailed against the church. Campbell says, "This cannot be; and therefore there are Christians among the sects."⁵

This gives some insight into Campbell's view of Restoration. He never thought the church has disappeared and he and others had rebuilt it from the ground up. Instead he thought the church had lost certain things that needed to be restored to it. In particular, sectarianism had obscured the true gospel, so Campbell and others called for believers to leave the sects and become Christians only.

This plea for unity, to "come out" of sectarianism, itself implies that there are Christians in the denominations. In Campbell's words,

² *Ibid.*, 411.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*

1. Let me ask, in the first place, what could mean all that we have written upon the union of Christians upon apostolic grounds, had we taught that all Christians in the world were already united in our own community?

2. And in the second place, why should we so often have quoted and applied to apostate Christendom what the Spirit saith to saints in Babylon--“Come out of her, my people, that you partake not of her sins, and that you receive not of her plagues”--had we imagined that the Lord had no people beyond the pale of our communion!⁶

In other words, to plead for unity necessarily means there are Christians to unify. Unfortunately, there were some even in Campbell's day who thought he wished to “make and lead a large exclusivist party” who claimed to be the only ones who were saved. He vehemently denies this by saying:

Now in this acceptation of the word [Christian], I think there are many, in most Protestant parties, whose errors and mistakes I hope the Lord will forgive; and although they should not enter into all the blessings of the kingdom on earth, I do fondly expect they may participate in the resurrection of the just.⁷

Thus those in his day and our own who think we are the only Christians cannot claim the restoration heritage of Alexander Campbell. Some have tried to paint him as inconsistent on this issue, claiming the “early Campbell” was a strict restorationist who saw his followers (or perhaps all the immersed) as the only Christians, while the “later Campbell” abandoned that position and became more ecumenical.⁸ Campbell himself refutes this charge by quoting his writings from the early years to show “. . . the opinion now expressed [that there are Christians among the sects], whether true or false, is one that I have always avowed.”⁹

In this opinion Alexander Campbell was reflecting the teaching of his father Thomas expressed twenty-eight years earlier in the *Declaration and Address*. Thomas called for all Christians to unite on what the Bible expressly taught. It is clear by this appeal that he thought there were Christians in the denominations:

⁶ *Ibid.*, 561.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 567.

⁸ Richard T. Hughes, “Churches of Christ,” in Samuel S. Hill, ed., *Encyclopedia of Religion in the South* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University, 1984) 167.

⁹ *Millennial Harbinger* (1837) 561.

The cause that we advocate is not our own peculiar cause, nor the cause of any party, considered as such; it is a common cause, the cause of Christ and our brethren of all denominations.¹⁰

Alexander Campbell did not soften his stand on restoration, but rather he tenaciously clung to the ideals of both restoration and unity he received from his father.

Legalism and Baptism

The belief that there are Christians among the sects raises the question of baptism. As the Lunenburg letter asks, "What act of yours gave you the name of Christian?" In his preaching, his writing, and his debates, Campbell had strongly defended believer's immersion as the biblical form of baptism and had called on those baptized as infants to be immersed as adults. This emphasis led some of his followers to assume that only the immersed were Christians. They were shocked to find Campbell calling at least some of the unimmersed "Christians," and they accused him of abandoning his position on the importance of biblical baptism.

He replies by accusing some of his correspondents of being "ultraists," that is, legalists, on the subject of baptism. They have made baptism itself a savior, claiming it was the single standard by which one is judged to be a Christian. Such "water salvation" was never taught by Campbell:

I cannot, therefore, make any one duty the standard of Christian faith or character, not even immersion into the name of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and in my heart regard all that have been sprinkled in infancy without their own knowledge and consent, as aliens from Christ and the well-grounded hope of heaven . . .

Should I find a Pedobaptist [one baptized as an infant] more intelligent in the Christian Scriptures, more spiritually-minded and more devoted to the Lord than a Baptist, or one immersed on a profession of the ancient faith, I could not hesitate a moment in giving the preference of my heart to him that loveth most. Did I act otherwise, I would be a pure sectarian, a Pharisee among Christians.¹¹

¹⁰ Thomas Campbell, *Declaration and Address*, in Charles Alexander Young, ed., *Historical Documents Advocating Christian Union* (Joplin, Missouri: College, 1985) 91.

¹¹ *Millennial Harbinger* (1837) 412.

Although baptism is important, it is not more important than Christian character. To deny the name Christian to those who display the character of Christ is to be the worst kind of sectarian. It is to promote the kind of legalistic, exclusivist barriers that Campbell worked all his life to tear down.

So if the unimmersed are Christians, does that mean immersion is not essential for salvation and is relatively unimportant? No, Campbell says, baptism is still unto salvation. How then can the unimmersed be saved? Campbell's answer is that some of the unimmersed who were baptized as infants have never thought to inquire whether their baptism was scriptural, but took such for granted. Paul talks of one who does not have outward circumcision, but has inward circumcision. In the same way, Campbell asks, "Can a person who simply, not perversely, mistakes the outer baptism, have the inward?"¹²

Obviously, one can willingly neglect immersion. If one is shown that he should be immersed as a believer, but refuses to do so, he does not have "inward baptism." But if one is simply ignorant and assumes that infant baptism is correct, one will be forgiven of the ignorance. In a lengthy paragraph, Campbell summarizes his position:

The case is this: When I see a person who would die for Christ; whose brotherly kindness, sympathy, and active benevolence knows no bounds but his circumstances; whose seat in the Christian assembly is never empty; whose inward piety and devotion are attested by punctual obedience to every known duty; whose family is educated in the fear of the Lord; whose constant companion is the Bible; I say, when I see such a one ranked amongst heathen men and publicans, because he never happened to inquire, but always took it for granted that he had been scripturally baptized; and that too, by one greatly destitute of all these public and private virtues, whose chief or exclusive recommendation is that he has been immersed, and that he holds a scriptural theory of the gospel: I feel no disposition to flatter such a one; but rather to disabuse him of his error. And while I would not lead the most excellent professor in any sect to disparage the least of all the commandments of Jesus, I would say to my immersed brother as Paul said to his Jewish brother who gloried in a system which he did not adorn: "Sir, will

¹² *Ibid.*, 567. In addition to this parallel to Paul's circumcision argument in Romans 2:25-29, Campbell also quotes Jesus who says "salvation is of the Jews," but then praises the faith of the Syrophenician woman. To Campbell, salvation belongs to the baptized, yet the unimmersed may be accepted because of their faith. These are the only two biblical illustrations Campbell uses to defend his position on baptism in his reply to the Lunenburg letter. It is surprising that he does not refer to those in Ephesus who are called "disciples" even though they had not been baptized in Jesus name (Acts 19:1-7).

not his uncircumcision, or unbaptism, be counted to him for baptism? and will he not condemn you, who, though having the literal and true baptism, yet dost transgress or neglect the statutes of your King?"¹³

Campbell strongly denies that admitting there may be Christians among the sects detracts from the importance of baptism. He sees himself steering a middle course between essentialists and non-essentialists on baptism:

The preachers of "essentials," as well as the preachers of "non-essentials," frequently err. The Essentialist may disparage the heart, while the Non-essentialist despises the institution. . . . My correspondent may belong to a class who think we detract from the authority of an institution the moment we admit the bare possibility of any one being saved without it.¹⁴

Campbell was not a legalist on baptism. Unfortunately, some of his followers are. We in Churches of Christ have been accused by many of believing in water salvation or baptismal generation. For most of us, that charge is untrue. However, there are those who make baptism a legalistic requirement for salvation. These "Essentialists," as Campbell calls them, so emphasize the act that they ignore the heart of the command. Some will not even accept all immersed believers as Christians, but only those who hold correct positions on a long list of issues. I once heard one of the prominent preachers in this group say that at times he thought he and his wife were the only faithful people left on earth and sometimes he was not too sure about her. I'm not completely convinced that he was joking. Such an attitude was Phariseeism to Campbell. More importantly, it is Phariseeism to Jesus.

So if Campbell believed immersion was not absolutely essential to salvation, did he advocate open membership in the church and an easy-going ecumenism? No. He would not call everyone "brother" who called God "Father." Obedience to Christ and his ordinances (including baptism) were essential to salvation. In this Campbell claims to agree with all Christians:

All professors of christianity, I mean all parties, make baptism, under certain conditions, essential to salvation. Roman Catholics believe so. Protestants say, that any one who knows that it is a christian ordinance, and wilfully

¹³ *Ibid.*, 565.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 413.

disdains or neglects it, cannot be saved. I have never written or spoken any thing stronger than that.¹⁵

Campbell did not place himself with the "Non-essentialists" who despises the command to be immersed.

But one can obey only to the extent of his knowledge. If one does not know baptism is believer's immersion, then one cannot obey. However, one who knows and rejects the ordinance is without excuse. Campbell told all who would listen to him that scriptural baptism was immersion for forgiveness of sins. Such was required to be recognized as a member of his congregation. He did not downplay baptism to increase numbers. Neither did he judge all the unimmersed to be outside of Christ.¹⁶

The Continuing Struggle Against Legalism and Sectarianism

Not only was it Campbell's opinion that there were Christians among the sects, but this has been the teaching of prominent leaders in the church into the twentieth century. David Lipscomb (1831-1917) was the most influential leader among Churches of Christ in his day, a man known for piety in life and for soundness in doctrine. Lipscomb, like Campbell, believed there were Christians in the sects and called them to come out and be Christians only. He also saw a rising sectarianism within Churches of Christ that prevented some from leaving the sects:

There are some in nonsectarian churches who are sectarians, who violate the laws of God in order to oppose sectarians. They are sectarians in their opposition to sectarians. There are some in sectarian churches who will obey God and follow him in spite of the sectarianism of the churches in which they find themselves. As examples, there are persons in the Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian Churches who were baptized to obey God rather than to please the sects. In this they rise above the sectarian spirit, despite the

¹⁵ *Campbell-Rice Debate* (Lexington, Kentucky: A.T. Skillman and Son, 1844) 458.

¹⁶ Richard T. Hughes and C. Leonard Allen say Campbell "sometimes engaged in a great deal of theological double-talk concerning baptism," *Illusions of Innocence* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1988) 179. However, if one looks at their citations from Campbell in context, one finds not double-talk, but a consistent position: Campbell taught that one must be immersed to enter the kingdom, but also taught that the sprinkled who show true devotion to the Lord may have their baptism counted as lawful. See *Christian Baptist* 4 (1827) 172, 188-189.

parties in which they find themselves. They ought to get out of the sectarian churches, but they see so much sectarianism in the nonsectarian churches that they think they are all alike.¹⁷

In the generation after Lipscomb, no one was more respected than N.B. Hardeman (1874-1965). An educator and preacher, between 1922 and 1942 he spoke at five series of important meetings in Nashville, known as the Hardeman Tabernacle Sermons. The 1923 series emphasized the theme of Christian unity. Hardeman made it clear that he thought there were Christians in the denominations:

I do not claim, and have never done so, that those who have taken no stand with denominations are the only Christians upon the earth; but here is the contention: Having simply believed and obeyed the gospel, we propose to be Christians only. Now there is a wonderful difference between saying that we claim to be Christians only and we claim to be the only Christians. The Bible clearly predicts that the Lord's people, some of them, will be engaged in a state of confusion; and the Lord bids his people to come out of that state and just stand, if you please, as humble Christians only.¹⁸

In the years following Hardeman, there appears to be a hardening of positions in many leaders of the Churches of Christ. Abandoning the position of Campbell, Lipscomb, Hardeman, and other earlier leaders, some came to see the group known as Churches of Christ as the only Christians. They went beyond a legalistic stance on baptism to a legalistic insistence that one must be correct on all the "issues" (which they defined) in order to be a Christian.

As early as 1929, G.C. Brewer saw this sectarian approach entering Churches of Christ. He blamed it on "big preachers" who lacked the education and balance of earlier leaders in the movement. Thus the big idea of being "Christians only" entered the little minds of a later generation and was perverted into "we are the only Christians." Brewer says the "big preachers" of his day enforced their sectarian view by leading their followers "to suspect and to disfellowship" anyone who knew more
than

¹⁷ David Lipscomb, "Sectarians Taking Part in the Worship," *Questions Answered by Lipscomb and Sewell* (Nashville: McQuiddy Printing Company, 1952) 592.

¹⁸ N.B. Hardeman, *Hardeman's Tabernacle Sermons*, vol. 2 (Nashville: Gospel Advocate Company, 1923) 252-253.

they did.¹⁹

Ironically, some today claim they are the only Christians in the guise of following the “old paths.” As we have seen, their “old paths” are not old enough. They are directly contrary to the paths trod by the early leaders of the restoration movement.

Campbell quotes and refutes the Lunenburg letter because he thinks it contains insidious errors: legalism, sectarianism, and exclusivism. He insists on the value of immersion without making it a legalistic requirement. He attacks the exclusivist view that “we are the only Christians,” unmasking it as ungodly sectarianism. He calls Christians from all sects to come to the pure gospel and be Christians only. His voice and the voices of Lipscomb, Hardeman, Brewer, and countless others, both past and present, should be heard today.

¹⁹ G. C. Brewer, “More Criticism,” *Gospel Advocate* 71 (March 14, 1929) 245.

Book Reviews

Neil Postman. *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*.
New York: Knopf, 1992. Pp. 222.

Reviewed by William W. Stewart

In *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*, Neil Postman sternly warns preachers: A preacher who confines himself to considering how a medium can increase his audience will miss the significant question: In what sense do new media alter what is meant by religion, by church, even by God? Marshall McLuhan's "The medium is the message" haunts Postman's analysis of technology's radical influence upon American values. Drawing from history, Postman characterizes the values peculiar to an oral culture as "group learning, cooperativeness, and a sense of social responsibility." These values, necessary for community, are rapidly retreating as the values inherent in television engage the values inherent in the printed word. According to Postman, those most immersed in technology "think they can clearly see the direction in which a new technology will take us" but have historically failed to account for unforeseen consequences of technology. The counter culture of faith is thus warned and must now out think the ideology of technology.

In two chapters on medical and computer technology Postman deflates the idea that technology is value neutral. The computer redefines "humans as 'information processors' and nature itself as information to be processed." Our very nature, its biology, emotions, and spirituality, is subordinated to the new ideology of the computer.

Postman traces the rise of technology in Western culture from the theologically unified world view of the Middle Ages, in which tools were subordinated and integrated, to the technocracy of the Nineteenth Century, which “disdained” tradition in favor of “new freedoms and new forms of social organization.” Though subordinated and humiliated by the more powerful world view of technocracy, the theological world view continued to provide meaning for life and a meaningful way to live. Noting that enthusiasm for new technologies occurs “in cultures that have a democratic ethos” and “relatively weak traditions”, Postman develops the point that only in the United States has technology become totalitarian, making the theologically unified world view “invisible and therefore irrelevant.” It is this totalitarian goliath he names “Technopoly.”

The rise of technology occurred in five steps: the invention of the printing press in the sixteenth century, the telegraph and photography in the mid nineteenth century, and broadcasting and computer technology in the twentieth century. The trivialization of Christian symbols by commerce and the destruction of the biblical narrative by science have accompanied this rise.

The scarcity of Christian symbols before the graphics revolution of this century “contributed to their special power.” According to Postman, their “journey to meaninglessness. . . is a function not only of the frequency with which they are invoked but of the indiscriminate contexts in which they are used.” The commercial exhaustion of Christian symbols at Christmas time Postman calls “a form of cultural rape.” One might ponder the implications for sacred hymns with the rise of Christian music as entertainment.

The first blow to the biblical narrative Postman attributes to Kepler, who separated moral values from intellectual values. Aided by Bacon’s modern conception of science, the result was a loss of power and meaning in the conception of God. In the famous Scopes “monkey” trial of 1925, “inductive science” undercut “the great narrative of Genesis.”

By calling into question the truth of such accounts in one realm, science undermined the whole edifice of belief in sacred stories and ultimately swept away with it the source to which most humans had looked for moral authority. With the decline of “the great Bible narrative” came the rise of “the great narrative of Progress” which, with the narrative of science, has fed the growth of the technological

goliath. The resulting flood of information has “laid waste the theories on which schools, families, political parties, religion, nationhood itself are based.”

Technopoly controls that flood through technical experts who “tend to be ignorant about any matter not directly related to their specialized area,” yet they “claim dominion in moral affairs.” Their god speaks of efficiency, precision, objectivity. And that is why such concepts as sin and evil disappear in Technopoly. They come from a moral universe that is irrelevant to the theology of expertise. And so the priests of Technopoly call sin “social deviance,” which is a statistical concept, and they call evil “psychopathy,” which is a medical concept. Sin and evil disappear because they cannot be measured and objectified, and therefore cannot be dealt with by experts. Preaching must lovingly resist the values of Technopoly while restoring values peculiar to the Christian community.

Everett Ferguson. *The Church of Christ: A Biblical Ecclesiology For Today*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996. Pp. 442.

Reviewed by Allan McNicol

Everett Ferguson's new book on the Church of Christ comes at a propitious moment in the history of our fellowship. As with most conservative religious bodies today, it is clear that a certain amount of balkanization has taken place between two extremes. On the one hand, there are those who wish to understand our mission as implementing a tightly drawn version of Restorationism based on reading the New Testament as a comprehensive blue-print for the origin, nature, and organization of the church. On the other hand, there are those who seem to desire nothing better than an unobtrusive merger into the evangelical community at large. In this book, Ferguson appears to move between the center of these extremes. This is a book that strongly affirms "the old paths"—albeit in an accent of scholarly argument. It is hoped that there will be a constituency in the center of our movement that supports the direction in which this book seeks to move us and values its skillful affirmation of our theological tradition. Sober, deeply reflective theological works of this kind are needed if we are to maintain our sense of identity.

Essentially, as the title indicates, this book is an exposition of the biblical doctrine of the church. Within our fellowship this has usually entailed a detailed account of its establishment, organization, and conditions of membership. It has also involved such key elements as an analysis of forms of worship, the structure of the ministry, and church discipline. In this book these items receive ample treatment, but there is much more. In most of the chapters a particular aspect of the life of the church is correlated with a function of Jesus' saving work. The discussion thus presents Christ as the Head of the church, dynamically working to perform his purposes within a living body. The church is not merely an organization constructed by reading Scripture as a metaphysical blueprint; the church can only be properly understood as the response of believers to the call of our living Lord. Ferguson skillfully avoids the taxonomical or landmark approach of so many earlier works on this subject produced within our fellowship. He makes us want to ask who is this Jesus that the church follows and what is the nature of His claim?

Thus, after an opening chapter where Jesus is seen as the fulfillment of Old Testament hopes (pp. 1-69), we have various aspects of the church discussed under the rubrics of Christ as Lord, Savior, High Priest, Bishop, and Teacher, and a number of other images. Although the work is comprehensive, it is not weighed down with massive technical discussions carried on with the wider ecumenical community. It stays with the text and continually probes issues that have been of a concern to our people. Clearly its purpose is not only to be comprehensive but to place the distinctives of our ecclesiology in a positive light.

I see this book as having special value for two kinds of readers: first, someone within our fellowship who may be looking for a solid foundation amidst all the experimentation and diversity which is taking place in the brotherhood; second, someone outside our fellowship who may be acquainted with us and who would like to know more. In either case one could do a lot worse than giving such persons a copy of this book. Without doubt this book sets the standards for works on ecclesiology by members of the Churches of Christ for this generation.

Obiter Dicta

Accommodation

When religious groups compromise their foundational beliefs in order to coexist with the late sensate culture rather than challenging it or standing against it, they in effect consent to their own liquidation. Those for whom the Christian religion or any traditional religion is vitally important must recognize that the conflict with the sensate culture will eventually result either in the suppression of all religious truth claims or in a substantial transformation of the culture.

Harold O. J. Brown, *The Sensate Culture*

Biblical Authority

A good practical rule . . . is to pay more attention to Scripture when it disagrees with what we want to hear than when it agrees. When the Bible disagrees with the spirit of our times, it is not always because the biblical authors are giving voice to a limited, out of date religious view; frequently it is because God's ways are not our ways.

Raymond Brown, *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*

Christian Mind

The Christian mind sees human life and human history held in the hands of God. It sees the whole universe sustained by his power and his love. It sees the natural order as dependent upon the supernatural order, time as contained within eternity. It sees this life as an inconclusive experience, preparing us for another; this world as a temporary place for refuge, not our true and final home.

Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind*

Christian Speech

Rather than converting and discipling the seeker, the church now uses the very language and methods of the world. So rather than educating the unbaptized in the language of the household of faith, the church now teaches communicants the language of the world.

D. G. Hart in *Chronicles*

The modern church has been willing to use everyone's language but its own. . . . Unable to preach Christ and him crucified, we preach humanity and it improved. As Walter Brueggemann said, when the preacher is uncertain about speech, a great deal of energy is expended reassuring the listener that nothing will be said that would require conversion in order to be understood, certainly nothing that would be regarded by cultural dispensers as either foolish or weak. By the time most of us finish qualifying the scandal of Christian speech, very little can be said by the preacher than can't be heard elsewhere.

William Willimon, *Peculiar Speech: Preaching to the Baptized*

Church Schools

The recent developments in American education raise the question of whether the church can tradition itself in a highly secular and pluralistic society without once again establishing church schools. This is a very difficult decision for many Protestants who have . . . identified public education with the kingdom of God. The secularization of public education, however, the teaching of courses in such a manner as not to leave open the possibility of faith, or to make faith in God an unnecessary hypothesis, endangers the faith at its very fundamental roots. Therefore Protestant churches, if they are to survive, will have to face with all seriousness the question of church schools in a way that has never been raised in American education until now. It is significant to note that the Protestant churches which are growing most rapidly in our society are precisely those which have established their own school system.

John H. Leith, *From Generation to Generation*

Diversion

In a free and affluent society the self is free to divert itself endlessly from itself. It works in order to enjoy the diversions that the fruit of one's labor can purchase. The pursuit of happiness becomes the pursuit of diversion, and in this society the possibilities of diversion are endless and as readily available as eight hours of television a day: TV, sports, travel, drugs, games, newspapers, magazines, Vegas.

Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos*

Escapism

Otherworldliness is escapism only if there is no other world. If there is, it is worldliness that is escapism.

Peter Kreeft, *Heaven*

Euphemisms

Euphemisms blind us to reality. Death becomes merely "passing away." Killing unborn babies becomes "terminating a pregnancy." Copulation becomes "going to bed with." Genocide becomes "population control." Sin becomes "antisocial behavior." Change the language, and you change people's perception of reality.

Peter Kreeft, *Making Moral Choice*

Fashion

. . . when John Wayne's belt buckle slipped to one side in a scene in the movie *Red River*, thousands of urban cowboys began to buckle their belts to the side.

Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos*

Missionary Frontier

[T]he most difficult missionary frontier in the contemporary world is the one of which the Churches have been . . . so little conscious, the frontier that divides the world of biblical faith from the world whose values and beliefs are ceaselessly fed into every home on the television screen. . . . [T]he development of a truly missionary encounter with this very tough form of paganism is the greatest intellectual and practical task facing the Church.

Lesslie Newbigin, *Unfinished Agenda: An Autobiography*

Moral Revolution

The Idea of virtue goes back to antiquity . . . But what was common . . . to the very idea of virtue, was a fixed moral standard--a standard by which all people at all times and under all circumstances would be judged. Today we have abandoned the idea of virtue and have adopted instead what we now call "values." Value is a subjective, relativistic term; any individual, group, or society may choose to value whatever they like. One cannot say of virtues what one can say of values, that anyone's virtues are as good as anyone else's, or that everyone has a right to his own virtues. This shift from virtues to values represents the true moral revolution of our time.

Gertrude Himmelfarb, *Religion & Liberty* 5:4

Music

I believe that God can work through any style of music, but that some styles are more appropriate than others . . . I want to argue that our current infatuation with contemporary Christian music, sacred pop and rock music, signifies the church's surrender to secular culture. While the tunes are often charming, they are often poorly constructed, cliched, and shallow. Some of them . . . are ill-suited to the purpose; they employ awkward leaps and rhythms that are difficult for congregations to sing. Some of their texts . . . are bad poetry. Designed for immediate effect, they rarely have the depth of character or longevity to challenge us to spiritual maturity.

Steven F. Darsey, *Connection*

Open Mindedness/Discernment

Having an open mind is like having an open mouth, Chesterton says: it is not an end but a means to an end. The end is closing the mouth (and the mind) on something solid.

Peter Kreeft, *Making Moral Choices*

Preaching/Communications Industry

The modern communications industry reverses the traditional order of homiletical achievement. Classically, preaching has arisen out of the substance of what is proclaimed. The Christian message determined the pattern and form of preaching. . . . The development of the communications industry, as well as the entertainment industry, jeopardizes good preaching by tempting persons to subordinate content to form and to practices which may be humanly effective but which are theologically destructive.

John H. Leith, *From Generation to Generation*

Progress

Most contemporary people . . . are deeply imbued with the idea of progress, which we tend to see largely in terms of technology and comfort rather than in the realm of ideas or spiritual values. If our comforts have increased, we consider this progress. If our ethics and morals have deteriorated and our arts have become increasingly degenerate and pornographic at the same time, we accept it as part of progress.

Harold O. J. Brown, *The Sensate Culture*

Secularism

By allowing the Christian mind to be destroyed, we have imposed an intolerable burden upon ourselves as individual Christians. It is not surprising that so many shift the burden from their shoulders. We have accepted secularism's challenge to fight on secularist ground, with secularist weapons and secularist umpire, before a secularist audience and according to the secularist book of rules. Having done so, we look around in dismay at the discovery that our followers are few, our predicament misunderstood, our cause misrepresented. Hastily we try to plug the gap by pouring out more and more sermons and books of instruction "explaining" our cause, but doctored to the secularist mentality. It is high time to shift our ground.

Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind*

Self-Deception

Clever indeed are the mechanisms of self-deception, and no one is more deceived than the one who feels free from self-deception.

Peter Kreeft, *Heaven*

Therapeutic Culture

The therapeutic culture, which includes the vast empires of psychotherapy and its related counseling and "helping" professions, is only infrequently classified as an ideology. But it often shares with the utopian ideologies of the twentieth century a faith in the limitless plasticity of reality and in the changeability of human nature. It

is, moreover, the perfect ideology for the age of anxiety. It both explains and embraces.

. . . the new psychological man turned inward to a self that could be shaped, molded, and created anew, the ultimate aesthetic act and perhaps the only one worth performing. With the self as the measure of all values, psychological man could transform the standards of morality, consequence, responsibility, and free will that had once seemed the unshakable pillars of bourgeois society.

Charles J. Sykes, *A Nation of Victims*

Therapeutic Religion

The triumph of the therapeutic can perhaps best be understood as the ascendancy of a substitute faith. Filling the vacuum created by the decline of institutional faith and the collapse of the moral order it has provoked, psychoanalysis has assumed many of the functions traditionally performed by religion, and has done so by translating many of the theological and existential issues of human life into therapeutic terms. What had once been the "cure of souls" by the church has now become the treatment of psychological illness by medical science.

. . . The prophets of the therapeutic seemed to agree, at least to the extent of recognizing religion as the greatest barrier and rival to their nascent movement. The doctrines that were to evolve into a sort of universal tolerance for every sort of peculiarity, deviance, abnormality, and even crime began with a virulent intolerance for traditional forms of faith.

Charles J. Sykes, *A Nation of Victims*

Tradition

. . . tradition is viewed as getting in the way of reaching out to people with the gospel and growing the church. In America the consumer is always right, and if the consumers want "Christianity Lite," then get rid of the vintage traditions. Replace the excess baggage of tradition with the garbage of today's pop culture. We're told we've got to quit being hide-bound to traditional ways of being church. We need to be more user-friendly, to make people feel that the transition from life in the secular world to life in the church is smooth and comfortable. In some of these megachurches there are no Christian symbols, not even a cross, because traditional symbols seem off-putting and unintelligible.

The new pagans cannot understand the meaning of things . . . that speak of mysteries not of this world, and whose symbols tell of the strange world of the Bible and its story of salvation. Preaching too must be like jello poured into the mold of the neo-pagan mind in search of self-fulfillment. . . . The sermon will be filled with Schuleresque "Be Happy Attitudes" and examples of the gospel of possibility thinking. So away with sin Away with the wrath and judgment of God. Talk like a humanistic psychologist who treats the "sickness unto death" with pills and techniques. What is lost in selling the church as a product is biblically revealed truth, the truth of God in Christ . . .

Carl E. Braaten, *Newsletter of the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology*, Summer 1996

Worship

We must insist that we worship God because he is God, not because we want something out of him. What a mean blasphemy it would be, to go through magnificent acts of public worship always with the dominant intention at the back of the mind--"This is really going to make a better chap of me!" What arrogance and presumption, to treat eternal God, throned in glory, as a visual aid to moral self-improvement.

Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind*

[C]ontemporary worship--and church life--depends increasingly on the products of popular culture, from its musical mode of expression, the liturgical skits which ape TV sitcoms, and the informal style of ministers which follows the antics of late-night TV talk show hosts. . . . This is remarkable for a Christian tradition that once found its identity in avoiding all forms of excesses of the music industry.

D. G. Hart, in *Chronicles*

Contributors

Gary Holloway is head of the Graduate Bible Program at Lipscomb University.

Allan J. McNicol is A. B. Cox Professor of New Testament at the Institute for Christian Studies.

R. Mark Shipp is Assistant Professor of Old Testament and Missions at the Institute for Christian Studies.

Charles Siburt serves as Director of the Doctor of Ministry program and as the Frazer Professor of Church Enrichment at Abilene Christian University.

William W. Stewart is a director in the Division of Student Services, Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. Dr. Stewart serves as an adjunct faculty member at the Institute for Christian Studies.

Michael R. Weed is Billie Gunn Hocott Professor of Theology and Ethics at the Institute for Christian Studies.