

Preaching Christ Only

I am about to wear a hat that does not fit me, one for which I am ill-suited; and I will likely wear it poorly: The white hat of peacemaker. Too often I am the provocateur, the black-hatted villain who stirs up strife among brethren, the gadfly that irritates and makes people restless and hostile. But a rift among brethren has been developing and widening for some years (to which I have likely made no small contribution), which, left unchecked, will surely give the enemies of the Lord occasion to blaspheme.

The extreme insults which each side in this controversy hurl at each other are Antinomianism and Legalism. Milder language may be couched in the imagined tension between Law and Grace, what may be termed by some as Christian Liberty over against a New Testament mandate for holy and separated living.

This controversy was provoked, I believe, in part, by the recent rediscovery by Baptists of their historical roots in Sovereign Grace. This has put a great deal of men to reading Puritan literature, written largely by Anglican and Presbyterian divines. It has also moved a number of men close to their Presbyterian "brothers-in-Sovereign Grace", and these men have derived from this association an unbaptistic emphasis on law that is inherent in a denomination that has never clearly broken with sacralism.

Other factors have had no small part: Preaching from all quarters for several decades has been singularly cursed with a lack of theological content, especially in the area of Biblical Christology and soteriology. TV preachers faced with the desire of pleasing their audiences enough to win its financial support, yet knowing the necessity of maintaining some sort of prophetic image, have seized upon the profitable practice of preaching against "safe" sins: Adultery, fornication, drunkenness, abortion, cursing, murder, civil anarchy, etc. This so-called "moral preaching" offends none of their religious listeners, enforces their own perception of their self-righteousness and persuades them that they are accepted before God because they do none of these things. Such a TV preacher can thus gain a reputation of being a preacher of righteousness, raise great sums of money from pharisaical hypocrites, while the offense of the true gospel is buried under a mountain of moralistic ranting.

Closely akin to the above is what is erroneously called by some legalistic preaching. It cannot be properly called legalistic, because it is not based upon God's positive laws, but the personal convictions or preferences of the preacher. I speak of preaching against such things as total abstinence from alcohol, smoking, dipping, chewing, long hair on men, short hair on women, rigid prescriptions of dress (women's pants, etc.), movies, television, "mixed bathing", working wives, or a host of other gnats that any local culture might assiduously strain out of its diet. Now I have done it again! See, I told you the white hat would not fit me. I have offended you, and you are ready to turn me off. Please bear with me a little longer.

In a general sense, the likes of the above must be called indifferent, because they are neither explicitly forbidden nor enjoined in the scripture. You may well believe that you have good reason to preach them, because the *principle* under which they are practiced is forbidden, or the situation or culture in which you minister mandates that they be condemned. I am not denying that. What I am saying is that the harping on these things to the neglect and obscuring of the gospel will raise nothing but a flock of impersonal zombies programmed and cloned to a particular pattern and lifestyle, strangers to Christ, grace and salvation. This is *not* the gospel.

A good number of preachers have decided that the best cure for this "reformed Baptist" bent, this erosion of justification by faith, the obscuring of the gospel as it is revealed in the Person and glory of Christ, is to preach nothing but Christ. Pointed declarations are made that the theme of their conferences and their ministry is "nothing but the Person and Work of Jesus Christ".

Now, no one can argue with that and still call himself a knowledgeable Christian. Jesus Christ is the objective, end, means, and purpose of all that is written in the scriptures. He is the Creator of Genesis one, the Alpha and Omega of Revelation 22, the root and offspring of David, the bright and morning star. He is prefigured in the slain lamb whose skin covered our first parents' nakedness, the innocent victim of every Old Testament sacrifice for sin. It was in the Spirit of Christ that Noah preached, and by His faith that he built the ark. He is the rejected Elect, the hated "Joseph" sold into Egypt by jealous brethren, Whom God raised up and made their deliverer and judge. He is Jacob's Ladder that bridged the gulf between heaven and earth, by which angels come and minister to us. He is the Rock that followed the Hebrews in the wilderness, the Water that quenched their thirst, the Angel that kept and guarded them. He is fallen Naomi's giver of life, alien Ruth's near kinsman. Simeon saw the Babe as Jehovah's Salvation. John saw Him as "The Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world". He is the prophet's Messiah, the Lion of Judah, the Gentile's hope, the church's Husband, God's appointed King, the new Creation's Covenant Head. He has the keys of death and hell. All principalities and powers have been put under His feet, and He has been given a Name above every name. He is our salvation, our righteousness, our Surety and our sanctification. In Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily. And all that pertains to life and godliness is given to us through the knowledge of Him.

Remove Christ from the Bible and you have emptied it. Take Him out of your preaching and you have nothing but superstitious paganism or humanistic moralizing. *He* makes the sold difference between Christianity and the world's religions.

The New Testament relates Christ to every truth that it teaches. Christ is our justification. He is our sanctification. In Him is found our wisdom and knowledge. It is in Him that we learn and obtain righteousness. It is in Him that we learn the "fulfillment" of the law and find in Him the power of obedience. He is the principle of life that motivates, enables, energizes and sanctifies every good work. Every truth of the Bible finds its right perspective and full realization in Him. To preach Christ in this manner is to be free to have infinite diversity in subject matter, yet perfect unity; for all things are of Him, through Him and to Him. Everything finds unity in Him, and there can be none outside of Him.

Unhappily, Christ is not always preached in this manner. Some men preach Christ only in free justification by faith. And they do a magnificent job of it. It is not my intention to malign or discredit the ministry of men who feel it is their calling to do this and no more. To their own Master they stand or fall. Rather, I would praise God for their excellent ministries. Some of the finest preachers in the country preach nothing but the free offer of salvation in the substitutionary work of Christ to lost sinners.

The fact that some men do this and no more is not the problem. God has plenty of other preachers who address other issues of the gospel. This is explicitly taught in the diversity of the members of the body of Christ and their diverse gifts, ministries and operations. The problem begins when men who only sound one note feel compelled by some reason to rail against those who sound a different note, when other preachers are caricatured as “law preachers” or “moral preachers”, as if it were impossible to preach law or morality while preaching Christ. I submit that it is impossible to preach Christ fully without preaching law and morality. Christ is the Saviour of sinners, and sin has absolutely no point of reference apart from God’s law. The only morality that has ever existed is that which is revealed to us of the Person of God, verbalized in His law and Personified in His Son.

While it would not be charitable or strictly accurate to call these preachers Antinomian, their preaching does take on a decided anti-law, anti-morality bias. And whether they intend it to do so or not, it does certainly lead to an Antinomian life-style. If we repeatedly hammer on the Biblical truth that God justifies the wicked and sends the morally upright man to hell, *leaving out* the sanctifying work of Christ in the believer, we generate the impression that the wicked and immoral are more accepted in God’s sight than the morally upright. I have heard that very point made. “Here is a man who prays, fasts, keeps the law and pays tithes of all his income. God sends him to hell. Do you want to see a man after God’s Own heart? Look at David. He is an adulterer. He steals a man’s wife and has her husband murdered to cover his sin. That’s the kind of man God loves and saves”. Those are Biblical *facts*, but they do not tell the truth. Left alone, the hearer will believe a lie. God did not love and save David because of his sin as the preacher has implied, but in spite of it, *and that not* apart from his *repentance* and *that not* apart from the knowledge of his sin by the holy law of God (Romans 7:7). God did not send the Pharisee to hell because of his righteousness, but because he trusted it and despised the righteousness of God.

Why these men feel compelled to attack the law and moral element in preaching Christ, I cannot positively say. I think it began with an honest and sincere desire to expose and refute some of the travesties of gospel preaching we mentioned above. Later on it was taken up by men of lesser spiritual stature, with less noble motives, who only wished to emulate those whom they perceived to be spiritual leaders. At any rate, I think all anti-law gospel preaching springs from three primary errors:

1. Confusion over the term “law” itself. The word usually translated law in the Old Testament is *torah*. “Torah” carried none of the negative legal connotations associated with the word “law” today. It simply meant teaching, instructions. Now, if such teaching and instructions come from God, who wants to quarrel about that? Shall we throw out God’s teaching? The New Testament equivalent of *torah* is *nomos*, meaning essentially custom or tradition. What has been God’s teaching in the Old Testament has become customary or traditional. When we consent that the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament and all those that had to do strictly with the Hebrew Theocracy were all abolished, who wants to throw out that law which is God’s moral and wise instructions for all His people of all time? The broad definition, then, of law is the revelation of God. His character and his will for us. Whatever God reveals that He is pleased with or not pleased with becomes law to us. Man is never out from under God’s law in that true sense of the word. He can no more get away from God’s revealed will and the obligation of obedience than iron can escape the law of gravity, or the sun can escape God’s established laws of seasons. No true believer wants to. That is why David extols his love for the law of God and the Apostle Paul delights in the law of God *after the inward man* (not just legal externalism). Our Lord calls judgment, mercy, and faith (Matthew 23:23) weightier matters of the *law* (Matthew 23:23). And it was the law of written commandments that Jesus had in mind when He declared that whoever should break and teach men to break the least of those commandments should be called *least* in the kingdom of heaven (Matthew 5:19). (Using that standard of measure, some who are perceived by some to be spiritual heavyweights might better belong to the pee-wee circuit). Christ then methodically takes those precepts of the Decalogue, and , one by one, lifts them out of the mere external setting to which they had fallen under the old Theocracy and lifts them up to Christian level of the New Covenant. Christ has thus firmly identified Himself with the law.
2. The second error is a misunderstanding of the prophecy of Jeremiah (31:33), quoted in Hebrews 8:10-11 and alluded to 1 John 2:27. God has abolished the old covenant, given a new one, and written His law in the hearts of his people so that there is no need for one to be taught by his neighbor and his brother to know the Lord. Anti-law preachers say from this that since God has written his law in our hearts it is no longer necessary that men should teach it. They say that the teaching of the law is no longer a legitimate means of sanctification. Now, whatever Jeremiah 31:33 and Hebrews 8:10-11 means, it certainly does not mean that in the new covenant God has abolished all ignorance in the minds of believers. We are all living testimonies of great caverns of ignorance. The greater part of the revelation of God’s will (His law) is in the Bible. How can we say that preaching of the truth of God is a means of sanctification and deny that the revelation of God’s law is not a vital part of that truth we preach? How can men align their lives in accordance with God’s will unless they are taught that will? While it is certainly true that the threats and curses of the law are of no use to motivate Christians to holiness (they are not *under it* in that sense, since Christ has borne our punishment and delivered us from its condemnation), it would be silly to deny its didactic value in sanctification. Anti-law preachers assert that preaching the moral law is of no use is motivating the sinner to repentance. It does no good, they say, because the sinner cannot be made to see his sin unless and until he is enlightened by Christ. Yet these same preachers who deny the usefulness of God’s holy law in the conviction of sinners go to great lengths to preach on depravity. All sorts of extravagant metaphors are invented to describe how God views mankind: “maggot dung”, “a glass of warm spit”, “regurgitated mucus”.

The person who has been awakened by God to his true condition knows that even these repulsive figures are inadequate to describe his sensibility of personal wickedness. Yet to the unregenerate sinner they mean no more than the law does. Job steadfastly maintained his righteousness until he saw God. Then, and only then, did he perceive himself as unspeakably vile. Paul declared himself to be alive without the law once (Romans 7:9). There was never a time in Paul's conscious existence when he was not taught the law. But it never laid hold on him until his spiritual quickening by the Lord Jesus Christ. Then all that he had been taught of it laid hold of him and utterly "slew him" (Romans 7:11). Therefore, preaching the moral law of God will not in itself awaken a dead sinner. Its truth lying dormant in the mind of that sinner becomes a living and powerful sword in the hand of the Spirit in regeneration. No man was ever convicted apart from the knowledge of sin. Knowledge of sin apart from the law is impossible. It is imputed only where law is, and conviction of sin happens only where law is known (Romans 5:13).

3. The third error comes from confusing justification with sanctification. These two cannot be separated, since sanctification can only occur where there is justification, and is certain to follow it. Sanctification flows out as a fruit of justification, but it is not the same. Justification is imputed: Sanctification is imparted. Perfect holiness is imputed in justification: Imperfect righteousness is imparted in sanctification. (Ephesians 1:4: Justification; Matthew 5:20: sanctification). Justification is immediate and instantaneous: Sanctification is mediate and progressive. In justification we are passive: It is something God does for us (1 John 3:1). In sanctification we are active: it is something we do (1 John 3:3) by the power of Christ in us.

The crux of this confounding of justification and sanctification is stated in the cliché "love God and do as you please", the idea being that if you have been truly justified and love God with all your heart than you cannot possibly desire anything that would not be godly. Now, any Christian above the level of spiritual idiocy knows better than that.

It is true that God has made us as a new creation in the Lord Jesus Christ and has enabled us to bring forth holy fruit, that we have renewed desires and will, that we do sincerely and wholly desire to do the will of God. But it is also true that we have not yet rid ourselves of "the motions of sin in our members". What the old Baptists called "remaining sin" is a reality that must be dealt with. Let any man who thinks he can follow any impulse or desire that rises up within himself, that he by virtue of his regenerate nature alone is an infallible judge of right and wrong, simply act according to that view for one day, and he will quickly discover that he needs a guide outside himself. Nor will it help this fellow to tell him that "Christ is your guide to righteousness." He will say, "Do not I have the spirit of Christ in me?" Then he is back to square one with nothing but his own desires and will as a rule of life. We still need an objective guide outside ourselves to be able to rightly discern that of us which yet needs to die.

Sanctification is spoken of in the terms of taking up a personal daily cross, of mortifying the unholy members of our body, of yielding them up to death. Much of what we are pleased with must die. How shall we know what should live and what should die, except by God's objective standard given in His holy law? How should an anti-law, anti-moral preacher deal with the church at Corinth which was so "puffed up" over its "Christian liberty", that it allowed incestuous fornication to go unjudged? If morality based upon God's law is thrown out, then how shall you argue with a fornicator who says, "All things are lawful for me."? From 2 Thessalonians 3:6, it seems that Paul took some pains to teach the churches something about Christian behaviour, and expected them to strictly adhere to it. Law cannot make us righteous, and our righteousness can never earn us standing with God. Christ has done that for us completely and perfectly. But that law can tell us what is righteous; and our Lord Jesus Christ can enable us to mortify all of us that sets itself in opposition to God's revealed will, and bring us in steady spiritual growth toward that ultimate predestined objective, conformity to the image of Christ Himself.

Preaching the substitutionary work of Christ is the primary thrust of Christ our Justification. But when we come to Christ our Sanctification, we need to set our eyes on our identification with him. The substitutionary sacrifice has validity and value only because the sinner is identified with his substitute. God has objectively justified the sinner because He identifies him with the death of his Substitute. Now the believer finds grace and power for the mortification of the old man by *reckoning* on his identification with the Lord in His death (Romans 6:6) and experimental victory over sin by identifying himself with the risen sinless Saviour Who *is* his life (Ephesians 2:6, Colossians 3:1-3). It would be impossible for me to describe the joy I began to experience when these truths that revealed Christ's life to be my life in sanctification as well as His death, my death in justification were opened to me.

Preaching nothing but Christ, therefore, does not mandate that our message be confined to substitutionary justification. We are charged with feeding the flock of God, with making disciples of believers, rebuking sin and sinners sharply, with exhorting to good works, with provoking men to love and good works, with "teaching them all things whatsoever He has commanded us". The burden of the New Testament writings is Christ our life. And the vast majority of that is written to professed believers. Preaching Christ our justification is aimed primarily at converting the lost. Preaching Christ our life in spiritual growth and good works is aimed primarily at building up the saints. It will not be possible for us to effect the conversion of less than the number of the elect. But is certainly possible for us to feed less than the number of God's sheep, to fail to make disciples of them, to leave them in ignorance of the riches and graces in Christ. We may erroneously think we have raised a crop of spiritual giants, simply because they have learned from us all that man can know about the substitutionary work of Christ in justification. What may actually be the case, is that we have brought up a host of people utterly unable to cope with the practical issues of temptation, sin, worldliness, the flesh and the devil. We have robbed them of their spiritual heritage in Christ by keeping them in ignorance.

If we ever get a vision of the enormity of the task of growing the church up into the measure of the stature of the Man, Christ, we will likely be far too busy to be slapping at men who are not whistling our particular tune. We will be more than delighted to have them with us in the fields of harvest. They are likely supplying a deeply needed ministry and service for which the Lord has not fitted us. He that is for Him is not against us.