

Grace and Law (An Overture of Peace)

The current Antinomian/Legalism controversy is not new. It is at least as old as Christianity. Jesus certainly envisioned those who would advocate abolition of law and would challenge the necessity of personal, practical righteousness when He spoke the words recorded in Matthew 5:17-48. Paul was manifestly accused of Antinomianism, for we find him defending himself against it in Romans 3:8 and 6:5. He also reserved his harshest imprecations for those Judaizers who sought to add law works to Christian grace (Galatians 1:8-9). Peter, the apostle to the circumcision, felt constrained to write an epistle “*testifying and exhorting the true grace of God*” (1 Peter 5:12). John strikes out at the concept of imputed righteousness apart from practical righteousness in 1 John 3:3-10. Succeeding generations of Christians have all had their running skirmishes with their various concepts of law, grace and liberty.

Expectations

Nor do I expect to put the matter to rest with this little paper. Every generation of believers is made up of people, each of whom must begin as a babe in Christ and learn everything for himself. They will all bring their peculiar predispositions to the Bible, fall into the same traps, engage in the same excesses, and subscribe to the same errors as their predecessors. Hopefully, our faithful Shepherd will lead them out as we trust Him to do for us in our day.

What I do hope to accomplish is to make peace and maintain a unity with the brethren in Christ with whom I am privileged to walk and work in my time. I am persuaded that most of us are agreed on the essential truth in this matter, and that what alienation might exist among us comes from wrongly imputing to one another the erroneous views, motives and behaviour of some of the more radical elements.

Exclusions

These radical elements are specifically excluded from this overture. There is no realistic expectation of harmony with them, for their fruits betray a woeful absence of too many Christian graces. Whether they be true brethren or not is not mine to determine, but there is too much distance between us to attempt to walk together. Those be such as the following:

1. Preachers who are so insecure in their offices that they must tyrannize the saints, and intimidate them with threats of God’s judgment and punishment for infractions of a set of rules and regulations, whether these rules come from Scripture or their own contrivance.
2. The tradesman or merchant, who out of no necessity in his service or needs, wants to work or do business on the Lord’s Day, simply to gain advantage over competitors or to earn more money.
3. The moralist who, knowing nothing of the gospel of grace, prides himself on keeping a string of external standards, “convictions”, which he imagines sets him apart from sinners.
4. The sensual lover of this world’s pleasures whose heart is set on indulging the flesh, and who maintains that salvation is nothing more than substitutionary atonement which works no radical, subjective change or spiritual growth in the elect.
5. The “scholar” who has a vested interest in his studies, lectures, sermons and/or writings, and has so committed himself to a position that his puffed-up ego will not permit him to consider that he may have been mistaken, or to even make concessions when he has been proven to be wrong.
6. The elitist who fancies that he has earned for himself a more favored status in God’s eyes by superior law-keeping.
7. The “labelist” who dismisses all who disagree with him, not by meeting their arguments head-on scripturally, but by crowding them into some theological pigeon-hole he already has marked as bad.

Expertise

If it be inquired by what authority or expertise I might think myself qualified for this undertaking, God is my sufficiency even as He is yours. Someone *ought* to do it, and it has not, to my knowledge, in my day, yet been done. In sixty-one years, thirty-eight of which have been in the grace of God, I have stepped in just about every snare the devil has set in my path, and have been mercifully disentangled and set on my way again by the great Shepherd of our souls. Each of these debacles has left me a little less foolish, and with a story to cry to the next fellow coming down the same road. I certainly do not know all the pitfalls, but I can tell you what is in those into which I have fallen. Legalistic bondage and licentious “grace” are two that I do know something about.

After my conversion, I received my early Christian training and conditioning in the setting of a deep-South, Arminian, pre-trib-rap, premil, fundamental, legalistic, soul-winning Baptist church in the early 1950’s. Those were the years of a spurious, post-World War II revival when people were joining churches by the hordes, and churches were in a period of phenomenal growth. Theological ignorance was the rule of the day, and about all anyone (who was not a liberal or modernist) was preaching was a shallow, easy-believism, fervent soul-winning, and legalistic moralisms. A constant bombardment of these moralisms (few could properly be called legalisms, since they are not spelled out in the letter in God’s law), principally, smoking, drinking, fornication, adultery, dancing, indecent dress, church loyalty, church attendance, tithing, etc., was essential to maintain any semblance of piety among these masses of unconverted people who had “accepted Jesus” and joined the church. It was also necessary for the preacher to ride high in the saddle. He had to constantly assert his authority and demand unquestioned submission or he would very soon be the ousted victim of this swarm of spiritual outlaws who did not relish having their flesh denied.

It was, therefore, quite natural that when I began my own ministry, I took up these ways with a gusto. All my preacher models, the men whom I admired and hoped to emulate were gifted, dominating, letter-legalistic, arrogant authoritarians. It was the

only way to be successful among a people whose hearts had not been conquered and won by the Sovereign Lord. But the more I studied the gospel and observed the fruits of my ministry, the more uncomfortable I became with this approach. It seemed all the works of the flesh, of man, not the power of God. People would act right as long as I stayed on top of them. But if I relaxed my grip, my drive, my energies just a little, they reverted back to “brute beasts”. Where was the power of God in all this? Does Christian grace depend upon an arm of flesh wielding a club of intimidation? If so, then their survival was tenuous indeed, for I was growing very, very tired. Easy-believism and once-saved-always-saved were the only ideas that held out any hope for these “Christians” at all. And I was having trouble reconciling those ideas with New Covenant truth and Christian life. It gradually dawned upon me, that whatever depended upon my efforts to stand, wasn’t worth the effort to hold it up. If there were no God with power enough to preserve His people, this frail preacher was certainly no saviour. I became thoroughly disgusted with bullying and pleading with people to do what they had no heart to do.

It was at about this time that the biblical truth of God’s sovereign grace began to sink into my mind, and it captured my heart completely. Like a starving horse at a full trough of corn, I almost foundered myself. Without a sovereign grace book in my library other than the Bible, I nearly became a hyper-Calvinist. After all those years of struggling in the flesh to get something done, it was an unspeakable joy to learn that it had all already been done by a sovereign God. His works were finished from the foundation of the world (Hebrews 4:3). This tired preacher was resting, resting, resting in the joy of Who Christ is! God be praised for bringing me to such truth, not by the purely academic and objective route which has sterilized so much of Sovereign Grace movements, but in an experiential realization of dynamic union with an All-Sufficient Christ. The purity, power and love of a living Person became my real and entire existence. To me, “preaching Christ only” was not merely His substitutionary atonement, but the very *life* of the believer. With such a Sovereign Christ as my Lord, His life my own, external requirements of the law, which before had seemed the all-important definitions of Christianity, now appeared only an empty shell in view of the inner holiness wrought by the grace of God.

Such passages as Romans 6:14; 7:4-6; 1 Corinthians 3:6-13; Galatians 3-5 and Colossians 2:14-22, began to loom large in my mind. Rejoicing in this blessed, newly-found liberty in Christ, I slipped into an erroneous pattern that is all too common among us in our studies of the Scriptures, that is, that when we discover a new truth that is especially striking and pleasing to us, we tend to interpret every Scripture as some expression of this doctrine *as we would like it to be*. We thus lose our objectivity, and poorly exegete the Scripture. The practical outworking for me in this case, was my abolition of the law. “Love God and do as you please” seemed a most suitable axiom. Had not the schoolmaster now brought me to Christ, so that it was no longer necessary? Were not God’s laws now written in my heart? Did I not now have the mind of Christ, an infallible inner guide to direct me as to what I should and should not do? Was not love the fulfilling of the law, and was not the love of God shed abroad in my heart?

To the Johnny-come-latelys who would persuade me to enter into their lawless Christianity, I am not proud to admit that I ran eagerly all the way to the empty and disappointing end of that bypath over 20 years ago. “Sunday is no holier than Tuesday, and Friday just as sacred as the Lord’s Day,” I said, and tried to live in that mentality. But it was an unreal pretense, grievous to my spirit every second. Like the “liberated” woman trying to deny her femininity by burning her bra, and sneering at homemaking, I was found to be flying in the face of my Creator’s naturally ordained order. The Sabbath was not made just for the Old Covenant Jew, but for *man*. I had trouble embracing parental disrespect, stealing, lying, murder, and fornication as liberating. And I could not, in good conscience, retain the tithe for my own selfish end. It did not seem to help to say, “It is all God’s, not just the title,” and then do as I pleased with the whole of it. I did try to dabble in the “indifferent” things of the more carnal appeal. But these proved tasteless and disappointing. I probably could have gone back to tobacco and beer, but the possibility of stumbling just one of God’s little ones was far too painful a prospect to risk for a paltry selfish pleasure. I found I had no heart for sports, sensual entertainments and most time-wasting diversions. When I did attempt to indulge them, they left my soul lean and cold. Even what is called “high living,” the status symbols of big car, fine house, expensive furnishings, designer clothes and gourmet foods, had lost their appeal. They seemed so senseless and meaningless. Pursuit, acquisition and maintenance of these appeared more like bondage than liberty. Contentment with food and raiment (1 Timothy 6:8), and “godliness with contentment” seemed far more liberating. Whatever Christian liberty might be, I found it certainly was none of the above. To go back to that was indeed to be “entangled again with the yoke of bondage.”

No, thank you. I have already had some of that, and found it all to be a bitter and vain illusion. I have found my rest, joy, and liberty, in the right, perfect, sweet and delightful precepts of God’s holy Word . . . *all* of it.

With that as my credentials, perspective and bias, may I now propose some common ground on which we all, whether we be inclined toward the right-hand side path of legalism, or the left-hand side path of Antinomianism, may meet and walk?

Explanations

Thus far I have given but few specific Scripture texts. I have likely read and heard about as many excellent arguments from each side, based on point-of-view exegeted proof texts, as the next fellow. Some of these had enough novel appeal to make a momentary impression, but carried no more force against an equally set point-of-view exegesis of other proof texts from the other side, than a spit into a gale. That will get us nowhere. Nor may we set aside the Word of God and settle the matter on philosophical grounds. There is a third alternative. If we are to have any harmony, it must be found around truth and conclusions in line with the analogy of faith, that which devout and informed Christians have known and embraced throughout the centuries.

Definition of Law

First, let us consider our use of the word “law”. It is translated most often in the Old Testament from the Hebrew *torah*, which simply means teaching or direction. The New Testament equivalent is *nomos*, which not only denotes ordinance, but also custom, that which is established and set forth to be just and right. Neither of these carry the negative connotation of tyranny and oppression we sometimes impute to law. In the Bible, the word is used variously to denote the Decalogue only, the Pentateuch only, a body of ceremonial observance only, the whole of the Old Testament, and observed, consistent force or phenomenon, or even the

whole of the Word of God. So when we use the word “law”, we must be careful to qualify in what sense we are using it, and when we read it in the Bible, we must be equally careful to determine in what sense it is being used there. Much misunderstanding, error, grief and alienation can be laid at the feet of our carelessness here. For my purposes in this paper, I ask that it be considered in its purest and most fundamental sense, that is, *the revealed will of God for His rational creatures*. Even this must be qualified as that which comprehensively includes all men of all ages. For example, we know that all evangelists are not forbidden of the Holy Spirit to preach the gospel in Asia, as were Paul and Silas on one occasion. Even so, we realize that God had specific purposes to fulfill in the Hebrew people under the Old Testament theocracy, and that they were given certain commandments that applied to them at the time and to know one else. All such temporary commands to a specific people are exempted from the considerations of this paper. The law that I speak of is that permanent will of God that applies to man in his present state of existence on this earth everywhere.

We believe that God is, that He is the sovereign Ruler, that He is wise, just and gracious. As King, He must rule His creation. If He is to govern us, we can be certain that He expects certain sacred and moral duties. In order to secure these, He must communicate to us what these duties are. When and in whatever way He does that, we call that the revealed will of God, or law. Now, it is not reasonable to call such sacred and moral obligations which He has put upon us as “that which was against us”, “contrary to us”, “elements of the world”, “weak and beggarly elements”, is it? Whatever these things described as such may be, they must not be called the revealed will of God. Nor may we say that this perfect law of His was what was found to be defective and had to be modified, changed or abolished.

We all know that if the keeping of his law (our moral and devotional duty to God) is to earn us any standing before Him, then it must be kept perfectly. That is, one sin, failure or infraction renders us sinners and worthy of judgment and death. Imperfect law-keeping neither gains us status before God nor improves our depraved flesh. And since none of us is able to keep it perfectly, we cannot look to our law-keeping for either favor with God or spiritual growth. For the first of these we must look to Christ in His sinless life and atoning death. For the second, we cleave to Christ, “put Him on”, and through the Spirit, mortify the deeds of the flesh.

This law, our sacred and moral obligation, is written in two places: in tables of stone (or the Holy Scriptures) and in the hearts of regenerate men. We hold that the new birth generates a new man, created after God in righteousness and true holiness, with God’s laws written in his heart. We also confess that this righteous law written in the heart is no different from that written in the Scriptures. Else we must have either two Gods or One Who changes.

But this inward law in the heart does not make the Christian an infallible law to himself. He is also cursed with a corrupt mortal body, motions of sin in his members, fleshy lusts, lying and seducing spirits. He is the potential victim of false prophets and teachers, the vanities of this world and his own vain and foolish imaginations. A Christian can indulge in no greater folly than to think that because he wants to do God’s will, that everything he wants to do is God’s will. And he is in greatest danger of deception who thinks he cannot be deceived.

The law is useless to gain us favor or improvement before God. It cannot be used as a threat to induce the justified person to do right, because there *can be* no condemnation for him. God will not impute his sins to him, for Christ has paid for them. Nor is any such threat necessary, for the believer wants to do the will of God anyway. But the law can, and *must*, serve us in a didactic capacity . . . as *torah*, our instructor and teacher . . . as *nomos*, revealing and defining that which is accepted and right. Righteousness is a big word in the Bible, occurring over 450 times. What does it mean? Look it up wherever we may please, and we will always find the same answer – conformity to an external standard. What is the standard? There can be none other than God’s revealed will. Apart from law in this sense, the words “right”, “correct”, “just”, or “righteousness”, are evacuated of any content whatever. It is utter nonsense to speak of moral obligation when we have abolished law. Absolutes exist solely because of God’s law. Without it, neither sin nor righteousness are real, and the words have no meaning. Without this *verbalized* law, the Christian has no *objective* rule to guide him in worship and work. He is an easy victim of his own capricious feeling.

John 1:17 can no more mean that there is no law in the New Covenant than it can mean there that there was no grace in the Old Covenant. All who were saved prior to the advent of Christ certainly, as Noah, found grace in the eyes of the Lord. The Blood of the Everlasting Covenant is timeless. We have only one Substitute, Whose life and death is imputed to all who look to Him. Likewise, Christ does not come to us with no revelation of God’s will. He *is* the revelation of God, His will and His word, fully and finally. He opened His mouth and taught us certain things we must do, and warned us against other things which we must not do. In the Bible sense, that is law. It certainly cannot be called advice or recommendation, that we may as well reject as accept. We must agree that these commandments from our Lord must be received, enacted and ministered in spirit, not letter, if they are to quicken rather than kill. But his ministry of spirit rather than letter is not peculiar to law in the New Covenant. We know that the Decalogue itself was not intended to spell out in letter detail all of God’s requirements for man, but merely a verbalized framework of principles that could only be fleshed out fully in supreme love to God and equal love to other men. The chief error of the Judaizers was to letterize what was spiritual, and then, by their own derivatives and traditions, to nullify the law.

The Lord’s Day

We who hold a high view of the Lord’s Day must readily admit that no one strictly keeps the Sabbath, certainly not in the letter of the law, nor may we insist upon it. We also consent that many devout believers are obliged by the necessity of their services or the peculiarity of their employment, to work on the Lord’s Day.

Tithing

Whatever our views might be with respect to tithing, we cannot deny that it is at least commended in the New Testament, and that *proportional giving* is enjoined. If it is to be according to the measure God has prospered, and our ability to give, is there any reason to despise the tenth? We are not advocating, mind you, a meticulous, legalistic calculating of a precise ten percent, but must it

not be some proportion? If we have any legitimate objection, I think it would be that the tenth is too small. It is certain that when New Testament requirements are compared to Old Testament ones, those commanded by Christ exact more of us than those by Moses. Should Christian giving be less loving, sacrificial and generous than tithing under the Old Covenant? I don't think anyone would have a quarrel with the person who wants to bury the ten percent with twenty or fifty percent more. Our God was not unwise in ordaining this means of financing the ministry of His Word, while delivering us from the bondage of covetousness. We ought to be careful that our spiritual liberty is not disguised greed.

Christian Liberty

Next, let us consider our understanding and view on Christian liberty. If by liberty we mean absolute freedom from restraint or constraint by either internal or external desires, commitments, obligations, ordinances or responsibilities of any kind, such freedom is neither possible nor desirable. Who really wishes to be as chaff drifting in the breeze, clouds driven by tempests, wandering stars, rootless, fruitless plants, unanchored, faceless vagabonds? No one is that much hobo! We will be slave to someone or something. We must not make too much of the word *slavery* itself in reference to being under law and sin, for the same word is used to describe our condition under grace. Slavery is undesirable only when the duties required are contrary to our nature. True liberty consists in being committed only to that which is in harmony with what we are. We are no longer slaves to sin, but to righteousness. We no longer cringe in bondage, trembling under Mt. Sinai's threats. But we are enslaved in a more firm bondage in free, joyful service to righteousness in Christ Jesus.

Christian liberty cannot be freedom to sin. It can only be freedom from sin . . . its penalty, power, and ultimately, its presence. The righteousness to which we are slaves is no different from the righteousness that came down from Sinai, for it proceeds from the same unchanging God. What was right then, is yet right now. The change has been, not in the law, but in *us*!

The greatest liberty and freedom possible is when one's true inward desires and outward actions are in perfect harmony with the revealed will of God. Sin can do nothing but abridge that liberty.

Indifferent Things

Finally, we might want to reflect on what may be called indifferent things, those actions that are not particularly commanded or forbidden in the revealed will of God. If we consider the code spelled out to the letter in the Old Testament only, we might come up with a wide range of things that are not said to be particularly good or evil. But if we take the *spirit* of what is written, especially in the New Testament, where we are told that the object of the law is love out of a pure heart, and a good conscience and faith unfeigned, then the list of such indifferent things might shorten considerably. For there are few activities that do not in some way bear upon our love to God or our loving behaviour toward other people. Can we do these things in good conscience "to the glory of God"? We might feel our Christian liberty gives us a right to indulge our own pleasures, irrespective of what it may influence others to think or do. Do we walk lovingly? Are we to live the "rest of our time in the flesh" to the lusts of men, or the will of God? How much better to say of those whose lives our lives have touched, "my joy and crown", than "for my meat, my weak brother perished"!

I am not saying that there are no indifferent things, but I do not think that they can be found among fleshy lusts which war against the soul, or carnal worldly behaviour and pursuits that are not worthy of our calling. A grace of God that teaches us to live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, surely means some things in particular. We may not, under the pretext of Christian liberty and indifferent things, empty that teaching of the grace of God of any lawful restraint on our unregenerate flesh.

Now my earnest, though poor it may be, plea for unity is about finished. Despite my efforts to hold a high ground of common faith, some will doubtless wish to take issue even with some of this. If you find yourself among such, you might ask yourself the following: Am I not setting myself against the faith of the great majority of Christ's redeemed saints of all ages, among whom are found the holiest and most exemplary? Is it likely that I have been clever and wise enough to discover what all these divines missed? Even if I am right, is my contention worth the division and alienation I stimulate by my polemics on the matter? Could we not better use our time and energies in a united front against the gates of hell to the glory of Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour?

The common ground upon which we can all walk together, I do not think, will be some compromise or middle-of-the-road position between law and liberty. Rather, I thin grace teaches us that we must walk the road of law, God's revealed will, one hundred percent. At the same time, the same grace teaches us that in the New Man, we will walk the way of absolutely unfettered liberty in Christ. We slaves, being called, are the Lord's freemen; and we freemen, being called, are the Lord's slaves. "*As free . . . but as the slaves of God*" (1 Peter 2:16).

- C. M.