

Legalist or Libertine

Dirty gray smoke drifted across the street ahead as I strolled through town on an otherwise clear and cool Sunday afternoon. To my astonishment, the choking pollutant was coming from a number of burning leaf piles around the First Presbyterian Church. Scattered across the church yard several people were busily occupied raking leaves, mowing grass, cleaning windows, sweeping walks and other tidying chores. One young man was cleaning and changing bulbs in a sidewalk lamp. "You people do not believe in the Fourth Commandment any more?" I asked. A bit startled at first, he finally replied somewhat sheepishly "Guess you might say the ox is sort of in the ditch." I wondered what sort of answer these people might be able to vie to the neighbor who says that Sunday is the only day he has to do all his chores, and therefore has no time to attend services, read the Bible, pray, and otherwise look to the salvation of his soul.

Eunice and I made our way through the horde of cigarette waving communicants having their last few drags before going in to worship in the small Baptist church where special meetings were being held. We managed to get inside, but not before our ears were assaulted with a bit of casual cussing by one of the men at the front door. Inside, we took our seats after being welcomed in greetings carried along with a hefty blast of alcohol breath from another church member smiling sanguinely beneath a luminously rosy nose. We could as well be approaching a theater lobby, a lodge meeting or a political rally, I thought.

The preacher took his text. Malachi 3:8a. Wow! I thought to myself. Is he going to preach that here? What courage! He read only half the verse. "Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me." I thought, perhaps he is going to read the rest of the verse later as the message develops. So I thought!

He made a great deal of what a robber is, the audacity of robbing God, the creature robbing the Creator before His very face, of the insanity of the act, the awful consequences of it, the inevitable punishment that will follow. Then he asked the question, "How do men rob God?" Ah, here it comes, I thought. He is going to finish the verse and pursue the text. Actually, the scripture continues with "But ye say, wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings." But he didn't pursue his text. He abandoned it in the middle of the verse at the answer to his own question. "How do men rob God?" he asked. Here are the answers he supplied in the place of his text: Men rob God of His glory, by refusing to acknowledge His sovereignty. Men rob God of the gratitude due Him by attributing their prosperity to good luck or their own skill. They rob God of His rightful Lordship by refusing to obey Him. But he never said what the text said specifically: They rob God of tithes and offerings. Amazing!

Everything the man said about men robbing God was true in a *general* sense. But why did he so scrupulously and meticulously avoid saying what the text said in a specific sense? Why would he come so close to preaching what that very portion of the Bible which he chose for a text taught and then stop short of it? It is perhaps consistent with free grace to teach that we ought to obey God, but legalistic to insist that we ought to obey Him in any *particular* matter? May we acknowledge His Lordship and ignore His commandments?

I suspect he stopped short because he knew the particular breed of God-robbers he was facing would not stand to have their antinomianism exposed. They did not believe in tithing. They believed half the verse, but not the other half. Are these any more honest with the Scripture than those whom they soundly condemn for preaching only the last half of John 6:37, omitting the first part? I think not. Both represent a deceitful mishandling of the Holy Scriptures, but if one is worse than the other, then it is more cowardly to omit the responsibility in Malachi 3:8 than the comfortable theology in John 6:37.

Antinomianism is a name given to the thought that law is of no effect or use whatsoever to the believer since Christ has delivered him from the curse of the law. It is in effect "turning the grace of God into lasciviousness" (Jude 4), or "let us sin that grace may abound" (Romans 6:1). The older, more classic antinomianism was identified with a fatalistic, anti-missionary hardshellism. They reasoned that the elect were saved before the foundation of the world and that what God has determined will come to pass: therefore, men are freed from any responsibility toward repentance, faith and a godly life.

The modern antinomianism being espoused today is coming from more evangelical circles. And while many of its preachers stoutly affirm the Lordship of Christ, they dimly view any insistence that a Christian is responsible to obey God's holy law in any consistent way. Current reformed periodicals, books and Bible conferences are bristling with debates between "legalists" and "antinomians." Legalism is the claim and expectation that law-keeping earns for men *merit* before God, such as justification or a higher level of sanctification.

Modern anti-law teaching is partly a reaction against popular legalism with all its hypocrisies and inconsistencies, partly an honest effort to give more prominence to the grace of God and Christian liberty. In some areas it is doubtlessly a flimsy pretense for fleshy indulgence.

I can wholeheartedly sympathize with reaction against a gnat-straining, nit-picking brand of legalism among modern fundamentalists. I speak of a sort of external righteousness which is authenticated by meticulous Sabbath keeping, penny-splitting tithing, public praying performances, rigid specifications on hair (where and how long it grows), and clothing. We had one of these well-meaning zealots (a pastor) in one of our Summer Bible Camps confess that the Holy Spirit had convicted him of nakedness because he wore a short-sleeved shirt! If the bare forearm provokes evil lust, how much more a pretty woman's bare face? Put a sack over your wife's head.

But these quasi-legalists have a point, too. I can well sympathize with their protest against the sabbath desecrating, God robbing, loose living, worldly conformed libertines which pollute the household of God today. What godly person can attend a church

service and not be in some degree outraged by a number of seductive looking females flaunting themselves in form-fitting stretch pants and T-shirts which conceal nothing but the color of their skins? In some churches where I am not acquainted with the membership I am often compelled to ask a child whether it is a boy or a girl, especially if it has not yet developed distinctly female configuration. Nothing in the garments or hair will give a clue to the sex. One particular church family in a northern city where I was a guest, all had their hair cut exactly alike and wore the same kind of clothes. In this case, it was even difficult to distinguish the mother from the father, let alone the sex of the children. Confusion!

And what shall we say to the present day hue and cry to abolish the seventh day rest, the increasing permissive attitude toward "social drinking" and, at a time when even the worldly crowd is attempting to check tobacco use, more and more professing Christians are displaying the tell-tale round flat bulge in the hip pocket, the rectangular pack in the shirt pocket or the lop-sided jaw?

Some admirers of the Reformers and their theology will point to the fact that Spurgeon smoked cigars and that Luther was a beer guzzler. To such I would remind that Ulrich Zwingli never denied that he was a fornicator and a whoremonger. Should we, then, to assert our Christian liberty, also do a little whoring around to prove that we are not legalists? Does Calvin's part in the burning of Servitus give us license to go on religious witch hunts with the Ku-Klux-Klan, or to engage in the tactics of left or right wing terrorists?

Some will say that the law's relevance to gentile Christians is limited to those four issues spelled out in Acts 15:20. How utterly absurd! Then the Christian is free to murder, steal, lie, cheat, and generally blaspheme the name of God in every other way, since these are not specifically forbidden in that letter from the church at Jerusalem to the church at Antioch.

Then what shall we say? If we shall be neither legalists nor libertines, by what guide shall we walk? Is the moral law abrogated for us or not? If Christ is our guide and standard, then in what practical way can we experience or live the life of Christ?

A clue to the answer to our dilemma lies in the seeming contradiction set forth in the title of Samuel Bolton's classic book, The True Bounds of Christian Freedom. Is that not an antimony? How can freedom have bounds and yet be freedom? Is not the very essence of freedom the absence of bounds? That is certainly the way we think. But is it defective thinking. Nothing is boundless. Everything has limits. The existence of borders gives identity and locality to anything. Without such defining lines, all matter would blend into one meaningless blob. A picture needs a frame within which its message is confined. A house has walls, foundation and roof. Land has boundaries. A yard without fence or borders of any kind cannot be found. Political entities have borders within which their powers are valid. Laws have spheres and apply to specific people. Only one person in the universe has absolute and boundless freedom. That is God. (The old Satanic rebellion appears again: "ye shall be as gods, having absolute freedom"). No freedom, political, religious, moral or otherwise among Christians is ever boundless. Let us rid ourselves of that idea once and for all. Christian liberty has true bounds that *can be* defined.

Another fact that will help us to think clearly in this area is the meaning of law itself. All too often we get bogged down in different *kinds* of law. Mosaic law, moral law, ceremonial law, social law, civil law, ceremonial law, on and on we go. Then we try to figure out which applies to us by category, the legalist embracing all but the ceremonial and the libertine rejecting all. There is a better way.

Law, in its simplest and most broad definition, is any manifestation of the will of God. In whatever way God reveals His will for me, that becomes a law to me. Is God sovereign? Is Christ my King? Am I His subject? Is He my Lord? If the answer to these be yes, then He must certainly govern me. He must let me know with what He is and is not pleased. He must communicate with me and let me know what His will for me is. And when I know that (and I will know it), then I am responsible to obey His law.

This principle is established in the first communication between God and man: "The Lord God commanded the man" (Genesis 2:16). Now hear this carefully: *Man has never had more freedom than he had then*. Yet the bounds of his freedom were unmistakably established as the manifested will of God.

Before Lucifer's rebellion there was only one will in the universe: the will of God. After Satan's fall there were two wills in the universe: the will of God and the will of the devil. With the creation of man with free will, there were three wills in the universe: the will of God, the will of the devil, and the will of man. God's will is perfectly good and wise and is irresistible. Satan's will is intractably confirmed in evil. Only man's will is vulnerable. It will ultimately yield to and be dominated by either the will of God or the will of the devil. The only safeguard against the will of the devil is the will of God. Man is a free agent, even in his fallen state; but free agency is an empty term in this respect, for he will be ruled by either God or the devil. He will be slave to evil or the servant of God. Hence: God commands the man. He always does. It will never be any different.

True freedom in man is to be free to obey God fully, to fully conform to God's will revealed in His law. Whether that law is revealed in precept by the Decalogue, in precedent (the history of God's dealing with men), in principle (spiritual figures and types), or in Christ Himself, it is still God's law. Man is never without it.

If God's law has been abrogated, then we have nothing to teach or preach to Christians. This is exactly the conclusion which some must reach by their interpretation of the New Covenant. "For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, saith the Lord; I will put my laws into their mind and write them in their hearts: and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people: And they shall not teach every man his neighbour and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord; for all shall know me, from the least to the greatest." If every Christian's own law and standard of righteousness is his own heart, and there is no need that anyone be taught by men, then why has Christ set teachers and pastors in the church?

When the apostle commands husbands to love wives, wives to be subject to their own husbands, children to obey parents; when he enjoins us to put on the whole armour of God, is he being legalistic? Is he being redundant and unnecessary, since we already know in our hearts what we ought to do? He is most certainly setting forth the will of God and therefore, the law of God. And we know that these instructions for holy living are necessary, because we not only have the witness of the Holy Spirit in our hearts declaring God's will, but also the cry of selfish flesh and the lies of the Tempter. We certainly need God's holy standard set before our

eyes in every way possible. The cliché “Love God and do as you please” would be valid if there were not a great deal in the hearts of Christians that takes pleasure in unrighteousness.

But some will now say that Christ, not the law, is God’s holy standard. That statement, though true, needs some clarification. Are we to give the impression that we are talking about Christ’s Person, His Life, or His teachings? Are we addressing ourselves to justification or sanctification? Are we speaking about an object of faith or a rule of practice?

If we are addressing justification, our standing before God, then nothing less than absolute perfection. All *our* law-keeping, our best obedience to the will of God counts for nothing. It is all imperfect, and, at its best, full of sin in God’s sight. Only the Person of Jesus Christ and His sinless life will suffice for us to stand holy, blameless and without spot or blemish before Him Who is too holy to behold any imperfection. Christ alone is our object of faith, not His teachings or our obedience to them.

But when we come to address sanctification, our rule of practice, God’s will for our behaviour, that is another matter. In the former, works have no part. We look to Another Who is our Substitute. In the latter works are the whole object, and though we yet look to Christ, we look to Him as our Enabler, our Strength, our Sufficiency to perform the will or law of God.

Jesus did not come to abolish the Law of God but to fulfill it. That is, He came to fill it up fully. He came to satisfy, not only the letter, but the spirit. Not only must we not kill; we must not hate or harbour resentment. Not only must we not commit adultery; we must not even harbour the desire. Does that sound like He is abolishing God’s standard of holiness in the written moral code? The only sense in which we could consider it abolished is in the sense that it is swallowed in a code so far more stringent and demanding, that the former is lost in the performing of the latter. He is intensifying it. He is fulfilling all the righteousness of the spirit that is spelled out in the letter. How utterly unthinkable that God should demand a *less* holy standard under Christ than under the Old Covenant!

Christian liberty in behaviour comes, not in abolishing God’s law, but in enabling man through Christ to joyfully obey it. The liberty that is wrought in Christ is not liberty to loose more of the sensual nature, but a freeing of the spiritual man from such fleshy bondage. He is freed from his bondage to sin and his inability to obey God.

The principles calling forth the institution of the tithe and the seventh day rest both antedate and succeed the Mosaic law. They are based on the nature of man as he is and his relationship to God. These do not change with dispensations and covenants. Both are given to man by God for his *good*, to meet his *need*.

The tithe has two primary practical purposes: It is a token confession of God’s Sovereignty, of man’s submission to Him as absolute Lord. It is also a means of delivering us from the terrible bondage of greed and covetousness.

The Saviour plainly said that the Sabbath was made for man. Therefore man yet needs it.

If we no longer have any problem with rebellion, greed and covetousness, then certainly the tithe serves no practical purpose. If we are so full of God’s truth, and bursting with desire to walk justly and holily, then we no longer need a day set aside exclusively to pray, meditate, rest and give our hearts to instruction from the word of God. If we are honest, we must admit we yet need both the tithe and the seventh day rest. The difference under Christ is that we enjoy these things. They are not grievous burdens to us. And the tithe is only the beginning of our giving. The seventh day rest and worship is only the starting point, the base of our rest in Christ and worship of Him throughout the entire week.

Christ brings us more into the will of God, not less. We are being more and more conformed to His image. Who would dare to suggest that the man who drinks a little, smokes a little, chews and spits a little, curses a little, steals and cheats a little is more Christ-like than one who does not? Yet that is exactly what antinomians claim. Christ frees them to sin without shame to the glory of God’s grace.

But now the objection comes that some of the afore mentioned things are not infractions of the law, since nowhere in the Bible are they explicitly forbidden. This is quite true, but I do not think that we can let the matter rest there. It is impossible to prove total abstinence in the Bible. Tobacco use is not forbidden in the Scripture (it was not known then); but then, neither does the Bible forbid the use of marijuana or heroine. Would it, then, be seemly or advisable to smoke a little “pot” and shoot a little “horse” as well as puff a little Prince Albert, snort a little Skoal and sip a little Schlitz? Objections to the harder drugs would be that they are harmful to the body, addictively enslaving the man. They induce an emotional dependency that is idolatrous, destructive to the personality, are expensive, and would be utterly destructive to the Christian witness. But all of this can also be said about the milder narcotic. The difference is in the degree of harm, not the nature of it.

Of course, in the matter of Christian witness, some of these are not as offensive in some areas and to some people as to others. Social and cultural mores vary. What might be moral to some people is immoral to others. This is quite vividly demonstrated in a recent U.S. News and World Report comparing sales taxes in the various states. North Carolina and Kentucky tax cigarettes at the rate of 2 and 3 cents per pack respectively. Every other state taxes them from 7 to 18 cents per pack. People in the two leading tobacco producing states clearly have different moral standards, in that respect, from the rest of the country.

Beer guzzling is less immoral in brewery packed Germany, and wine bibbing is less offensive in France and Italy, where economies depend heavily upon winery exports. Opium smoking is quite acceptable in Turkey, where their poppy fields produce not only opium for the Turks, but Heroine for America’s addicts. There is no law against gambling in Los Vegas, where the corrupting practice pays the salaries of politicians and preachers alike. Our pocket books have more influence on our morals than we allow ourselves to think.

But the apostle Paul makes it clear what the Christian duty is in this respect: “It is good neither to eat flesh, nor to drink wine nor anything whereby thy brother stumbleth, or is offended, or is made weak” (Romans 14:21). “But if thy brother be grieved with thy meat, now walkest thou not charitably (in love. Destroy not him with thy meat, for whom Christ died” (Romans 14:15).

Hear this, you who claim Christ, not the law, as your rule of practice: Do you join the lying railers who accused the Lord Jesus of being a glutton and winebibber to exercise your own intemperance of appetite? Or can you deny the words of the apostle Paul

to be a revelation of the will of God for you and therefore God's holy law? Hear the law of Christ: Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. You cannot claim to believe Christ's lordship and disobey Him. You cannot claim to obey Christ and behave offensively and unlovingly toward your brother for no other reason than to please your petty childish cravings.

I do not deny that some of these things are lawful to you in themselves IF you were an island and stood alone. Your indulgence of such liberties does not offend me. But it troubles me that it does not trouble you that your fleshy indulgence troubles others.

The truly strong in the faith bears the infirmities of the weak. He attempts to please his neighbor to his good to edification. Love constrains him to please his neighbor rather than himself for the gospel's sake (Romans 15:1-2). The confession of a truly godly man, a sanctified heart, says, "If meat make my brother to offend, I will eat no flesh while the world standeth, lest I make my brother to offend" (1 Corinthians 8:13).

At the risk of being considered pietistic, I confess to believe that the gospel is better adorned by the display of some "old fashioned", if not "Victorian", exhibitions of modesty, temperance, charity and self denial. Whether modern day liberal thinkers realize it or not, the world *expects* real Christianity (not the modern status quo institutional kind) to be characterized by a behaviour markedly different from the world. Christian women appear more so when they are dressed modestly, distinctly feminine with hair long enough to testify that they are proud of womanhood, that God made them the crowning glory of man, not his competitor. Men deride their faith when they "womanize" manhood with feminine hairstyles. They demean the image of God when they dress and present themselves according to the world's sex-oriented pattern of a "mach man". It is better, too, that they dress manly, modestly, simply, and let their out man be adorned by a behaviour springing from the gracious well of the Holy Spirit in the inner man.

And we all give witness to the fulness of joy in the Lord when we demonstrate that we do not need the world's crutches of alcohol, tobacco, drugs, violent sports sensual entertainment and gluttonous excesses. The kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost (Romans 14:17).

The Lord Jesus Christ, the comfort and communion of the Holy Ghost, a church fellowship in purity of body and spirit, brings us into a life so abundant that the world's pale pleasures can do nothing but lessen and corrupt. Let those who need them have them. We have something and Someone infinitely better (Hebrews 11:16).

- C. M.