

Article for the Atlantic Baptist

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Public Witness and Social Concerns

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Legalism, License and Grace: Charting a New Course for Public Witness

Being a witness of God's Kingdom and living according to Kingdom ethics within our blatantly secular society is becoming increasingly challenging for many Canadian Christians. Subtle hints of persecution (and some not so subtle!) and possible restrictions on our cherished (but often taken-for-granted) religious freedoms and freedom of expression have outraged many and produced a retaliatory mood in some quarters. Battle cries have been issued as some hasten to rally a somewhat disorganized and sloppy Christian army for front line duty in the culture wars of the day.

It's not just gay rights, but on every side – from reproductive technology to various addictions to sanctity of life issues – we are hard pressed and apparently fighting losing battles in the arenas of public policy, judicial decision-making and public opinion. How will the church respond to the challenges thrust upon us by a post-modern mindset and its propensity for deconstructing all traditional norms and values?

Abraham Lincoln observed that:

In this age, in this country, public sentiment is everything. With it, nothing can fail; against it, nothing can succeed. Whoever molds public sentiment goes deeper than he who enacts statutes, or pronounces judicial decisions.

How is the church positioned to influence public sentiment? If we find ourselves on the wrong side of public sentiment on a particular issue, do we just give up or give in? Is it time to dig trenches and stockpile ammunition for a last stand against immorality? How are we to go about making disciples when the world seems to have marginalized us and our convictions?

In his book entitled Authentic Christianity, Ray Stedman makes the point that Christians ought to keep track, not only of the numbers of people they win to the Kingdom, but also of those they turn away. Brian McLaren and Tony Campolo have co-authored a book entitled Adventures in Missing the Point in which they look at the mainstream evangelical church response to a series of current social and moral issues, providing illustrations and examples of our failure to effectively engage our culture at these pressure points.

In a little article I found on the internet called "Doing What Comes Unnaturally" (www.pbc.org/dp/stedman/misc/0004.html), Ray Stedman contrasts three approaches to sin and fallen humanity. I think these categories are very

helpful for those of us who are concerned with the current witness the Christian community has within the broader society. According to Stedman, **legalism** is the attempt to control outward actions by means of rules, enforced by penalty. **License** is synonymous with lawlessness – that is, anything goes without concern for consequences. Finally, **grace** is the control of inward attitudes and outward actions by means of love, without any penalty.

As I consider Jesus' ministry, it seems that he opposed both legalism and license. Did he not rebuke the religious authorities for their concern with outward appearances and their consistent lack of regard for the condition of the heart? And, though he was often accused of violating purity rules and practices, would any committed Christian today seriously argue that Jesus promoted lawlessness in the sense of unrestrained indulgence? No – Jesus came, not to abolish the law but to fulfill it. And, it was in offering Himself, a sacrifice for us, that He established a new covenant. It was through Jesus' death and resurrection that the door of grace was opened to all who confess their sin, repent and acknowledge Jesus as both Savior and Lord. For it is by grace that we have been saved, through faith!

Jesus Himself has commissioned us to be His ambassadors – to represent Him amongst our families, our friends, our neighbors, and even the politicians, the outcasts, the prisoners, the widows and orphans, the powerless, the sexually immoral, the drunkard, the thief, the rich and the poor. The whole world in fact! We have a message of good news and of reconciliation. We have a message of grace and forgiveness. We can't deliver the message from the trenches. We must stop digging and get out of our fox holes. We must clean up the message, ridding it of any bits of legalism or license which compromise and tarnish the pearl of great price – that is, the grace of God.

One final word. Grace is not cheap and accepting God's grace is not easy. As Jesus walked boldly between legalism and license, marking out a path for us to follow, the people He encountered were not all healed and were not all saved. And those who were healed and those who were saved did not walk away from their encounters with Jesus unchanged.

One day, a rich young ruler approached Jesus with a question: "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Luke 18:18). I can imagine the earnestness with which he might have asked the question and the profound disappointment he experienced when he heard Jesus' answer: Here was a man who claimed to have obeyed all of the commandments. Perhaps he thought that Jesus would publicly commend him for his obedience and assure him that he had already qualified for the Kingdom of God. But Jesus says to him, "Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." The Scripture says that "When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was a man of great wealth."

As we proclaim the message of God's grace, we can be confident of this: Jesus does not reject anyone but not all who encounter Jesus through us will accept Jesus' terms and the invitation to follow Him. Some will go away sad because they are unwilling to deny themselves in order to receive God's grace. But for those who do, even the angels in heaven rejoice and public sentiment raises an eyebrow!