



# THE Reflector

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## Love, Law and Mercy

By Edward O. Bragwell, Sr.

Frequently, we hear from brethren seemed bent on freeing us from the shackles of "legalism" or "phariseism," as they perceive it. To these people, viewing the New Testament as a *rigid* standard for moral and religious conduct makes one a "legalist" the chief of sinners, a pharisee of pharisees, without love and having no mercy in the world. So, these folks are trying to restructure brethren's thinking on how to view and apply the New Testament so as avoid "legalism."

Frankly, if one wants to charge me with "legalism" ("strict, literal adherence to law"<sup>1</sup>), then I will plead guilty as charged. I unashamedly take the "legal" ("authorized or permitted by law"<sup>2</sup>) approach to religion. Contrary to what some think, the New Testament is a system of law with ordinances (or commandments) to obey or rules to be followed. No, I do not believe one can *earn* his salvation by law or any other means. Even if one were to do all things commanded, he still would not have a right to boast of having earned his salvation. (Luke 10:17). Still, the Bible does teach strict and literal adherence to God's law.

Freedom from *the law* (of Moses) enjoyed in Christ is not freedom from *all law*, contrary to what some would have us believe. The New Testament clearly teaches that Christians are not "without law

toward God, but under law toward Christ" (1 Cor. 9:21). While we are not justified by the law "of works," we are justified by "the law of faith" (Rom. 3:27 with context). Christians are subject to the "law of liberty" (James 1:25). They are expected to be doers of it. They will be judged by it (James 2:12), to the point that if they offend in one point, they are guilty of all (James 2:10). It was the "law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" that freed us from "the law of sin and death" (Rom. 8:2).

Since the early days of Christianity, there have been heretics, assuming for themselves a superiority in spirituality. They believe that they experience a degree of fellowship, knowledge, and love that lifts them above a system that burdens one with commandment or rules keeping. The gnostic influence upon some in the early church produced such heretics. First John was likely written to counter this heresy. It is evident, from reading First John, that these folks considered their superior (?) knowledge of God (Gnostic means "knowing one") and love for Him and His children as lifting them above a system that burdened people down with commandments and rules. John has to remind

them of what is required of true fellowship, knowledge, and love. "If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But, if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. . . If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1:6-9) "Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep his commandments. He who says, 'I know Him', and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him." (2:3-5). "By this we know that we

### REGULAR SERVICES

#### Sundays:

Bibles Classes ..... 9:45 A.M.

Worship ..... 10:45 A.M.

Worship ..... 6:00 P.M.

#### Wednesdays:

Bible Class ..... 10:00 A.M.

Bible Classes ..... 7:30 P.M.

love the children of God, when we love God and **keep His commandments**. For this is the love of God, that we **keep His commandments**. And His commandments are not burdensome." (5:2,3).

A more recent device for relieving the burden of strict commandment keeping is the "love and mercy" rule. While professing respect for divine law, some would set it aside by their method of applying law to life. We are told that since God's law is really based on "love and mercy" (who among us would deny this) that we can know that our application of law is wrong if it does not show proper love for God and mercy toward our fellowman **despite what the law may say**. Sounds good, so far, doesn't it? Who can be against love and mercy? So, as we are told, the Pharisees really had a great respect the law and wanted to do what the law said about the Sabbath? The law said, "Do no work." The Pharisees, being the conservatives that they were, really wanted to do God's will. Why, then, were they wrong in condemning those who "worked" on the Sabbath in the New Testament? Of course! It was because they did not apply the "love and mercy" rule. Unlike the man killed in the Old Testament for picking up sticks on the Sabbath, those condemned by the Pharisees were acting out of love for God and mercy toward their fellowman rather than rebellion. You see, according to the "love and mercy" folks, they could work if they did it out of a heart of love and mercy, even though the law said "do no work."

By applying this rule, we can solve (?) other pressing problems. What if a couple has been married several times without having divorced for fornication? The Bible seems to say that they are committing adultery (Matt. 19:9) and that Christians must quit committing adultery. (1 Cor. 6:9-11). Applying the law strictly would create an undue hardship. It would mean that this couple would have to separate and then live celibate. Their children would be without both a father and mother. Would not "love and mercy" demand that we have compassion upon them? Then our application of Matt. 19:9 and 1 Cor.

6:9-11 that says they must dissolve the adulterous relationship must be wrong. Why? Because it would be unloving and uncompassionate to break up that "home." After all, the law rests upon love for God and mercy toward our fellowman. Still sounds good, doesn't it? So, the conclusion to the whole matter is that love and mercy are the overriding considerations in applying God's commandments regardless to what the text of the commands may plainly say.

Now that we have our rule of application firmly established (?), let get on with applying other points.

God's law plainly says, "You shall not murder" (Mt. 5:21). A dogmatically conservative legalist might read that and think that murder is wrong under any circumstances. However, the "love and mercy" rule puts it in a different light if one kills out of love for God and mercy toward man. After all, is that not the underlying principle upon which divine law rests? So, euthanasia or "mercy killing" must be ok. If not, why not?

God's law plainly says, "And the man that commits adultery with another man's wife, he that commits adultery with his neighbor's wife, the adulterer and the adulteress, shall surely be put to death" (Lev. 20:10). The New Testament also forbids adultery. A legalist would probably think that such fooling around with the neighbor's wife is always be wrong because he takes the text for what it says. Being fallible in his application, and unwilling to invoke the "love and mercy" principle, he would likely be too harsh.

For example, a brother's wife becomes permanently ill and must be put into a nursing home. His neighbor, about the same time loses his mind and must be institutionalized. The couples have been good friends for years. Both the good brother and his neighbor's wife are still young with needs to be fulfilled. So, since their partners can no longer fulfill those needs, they turn to each other. Now, remember, they are only doing it out of love and compassion for the other. Do you think that would work?

God's law says. "You shall not steal" (Rom. 13:9; cf. Eph. 4:25).

Hurricane Hugo recently did much damage in South Carolina. Suppose a brother, envisioning himself as a modern "Robin Hood," had looted the damaged stores and homes of the rich and given it to the poor and needy. Remember, he knows what the Bible says about stealing, but he has also heard about the "love and mercy" rule of application. Should he be held accountable for his stealing?

Brethren, seriously now, we should take a long look at the consequences of adopting a rule of application that allows us to set aside plain Bible statements in the name of love and mercy. The results are staggering. It is just situation ethics in a different garb.

Oh, yes, what about those who did certain things on the Sabbath day and were defended by Jesus, but criticized by the Pharisees? "Do no work" did not forbid *all activity* on the Sabbath. Even the Pharisee recognized this fact (Matt. 12:11-13). The things Jesus and His disciples did the was not the "work" prohibited on the Sabbath or they would have sinned. The "work" was what we call working for a living or occupational work. It is much like the word as used by Paul. He accused some of "working not at all," yet they were busy-bodies. (2 Thess. 3:11) They were not inactive, yet they were "working not at all." He defended the right of preachers to "forbear working" (1 Cor. 9:6) even while they were very busy preaching the gospel. None of those defended by Jesus violated either the "spirit" nor the "letter" of the law. Not once did Jesus, say, "I know they may have worked on the Sabbath, but. . . ." They were guiltless because they **did no work** on the Sabbath, despite what the Pharisees said.

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<sup>1</sup> *Websters New Reference Library and Encyclopedia*

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

# Indecent Dress

By Edward O. Bragwell, Sr.

Since the fall of man in the garden, men and women have needed to be adequately and decently clothed. When Adam and Eve sinned they became conscious of their nakedness and were ashamed - a consciousness and sense of shame needed in a world invaded by sin. They tried to cloth themselves with aprons of fig leaves, but God clothed them more adequately and decently. (Gen. 2:25-3:21). It is interesting that the sacred text does not say that the aprons clothed them, but rather the coats or tunics that God made for them.

I heard a brother say that if he could find some of the fruit that Adam and Eve ate, he would pass it out to the sisters by the bushel - so that they would open their eyes and know that they were naked (Gen. 3:7). I might add to that many are still sewing together less than fig leaves and calling themselves clothed.

## Adornment: Inside and Out

Misinterpretations of Peter's teaching about outward adorning (1 Peter 3:1-4), have led to several extremes. Some conclude that all outward adorning such as wearing gold, braiding the hair, and the like is forbidden. It should be obvious that this is not what Peter meant, or else one could wear *no clothes* because another example given of outward adorning is that of "putting on of apparel." While some versions other than the King James and American Standard say *fine* apparel, *fine* is obviously an interpolation supplied by the translators and is so indicated by italics in the New King James.

This is one of those "not...but..." passages where the "not" portion of the passage may indeed be important, but is not nearly as important as the "but" portion. (John 6:27 is another example of such a passage). Having correctly understood that the inward adorning is *far more important* than any outward adorning, one

must not conclude that outward adorning is of *no* importance. Whoever said that "clothes do not make the man" may have been right, but it is also true that clothes may be a reflection of the man (or woman). The way that we dress sends certain signals about ourselves. This is why godly women should dress *as women professing godliness* (1 Tim. 2:10). They want to signal their true character before all.

One's dress may reflect one's socio-economic standing (Jas. 2:1-4). Since, among saints, no partiality should be shown based on this factor, we should not show favoritism toward one whose clothing may reflect either prosperity or poverty. However, the fact still remains that the way one dresses does say something about the person.

One's dress may reflect one's attitude toward an occasion. Joseph was about to appear before the Pharaoh, so he "he shaved, changed his clothing, and came to Pharaoh" (Gen. 41:14). Queen Esther wanted an audience with the king, so she "put on her royal apparel" (Esther 5:1). A wedding guest was expelled from a king's wedding feast for his son for not wearing the wedding garment (which, I am told, was customarily supplied by the host) (Matt. 22:11,12). All of this points to the fact that special occasions call for special attention being paid to one's dress. How one dresses for the occasion reflects his attitude toward the occasion.

When we assemble around the Lord's table to commemorate the great sacrifice of our Savior and to otherwise worship Him, is this not a very special occasion? Is it a casual event? Yet, I sometimes see brethren who have good clothes, fitting for other special occasions, and who are careful to arrange their appearance for those occasions, attend the worship services looking like they had just come from or were heading to a hog-killing. Casual occasions may

call for casual and unkept appearance, but publicly worshipping the Lord is no such occasion.

## Dress and Character

One's dress may reflect one's personal character traits. For example, if one, with the means to do otherwise, habitually appears in public with unkept clothing, hair and general appearance; it is a pretty good indication of laziness and carelessness on his part.

Likewise, one may indicate either godliness or ungodliness by the way one dresses. Solomon speaks of seeing a young man devoid of understanding meeting a woman with the *attire of a harlot* (Prov. 7:6-9). Judah mistook Tamar for a harlot because of her outward appearance (Gen. 38:14,15). This did not justify Judah's action, but it does show that one's outward appearance can send out ungodly signals. How often have I heard it said of some sisters that they dress "like street walkers" and find it hard to disagree. A person who professes godliness should dress as a person professing godliness (1 Tim. 2:10). If Christians are not the wrong kind of people and do not want to be identified as such, then they should not signal by the way that they dress that they are.

The way Christians dress should indicate a sense of modesty, propriety and moderation because these traits should be a part of their very character. Three significant Greek words, referring to a Christian's character, are used relative to a Christian woman's apparel in 1 Tim. 2:9: *kosmios*, *aidos*, and *sophrosune*. The way one dresses is indicative of whether the person possesses these characteristics or not. *Kosmios* ("modest") means "orderly, well-arranged, decent, modest ... of good behavior (1 Tim. 3:2 KJV)" (Vine). *Aidos* ("propriety" - NKJ, "shamefacedness" - KJV, "shamefastness" - ASV, "decency" - NIV) is "that modesty which is 'fast'

rooted in the character" (Vine). *Sophrosune* ("moderation" - NKJ, "sobriety" - KJV, ASV) is a "habitual inner self-government, with its constant rein on the passion and desires..." (Vine).

Those professing godliness are to be governed by chastity or purity (Greek: *hagnos* - Phil 4:8; 1 Tim 5:22; Titus 2:5; James 3:17; 1 Pet 3:2; 1 John 3:3), rather than sensuality. They seek to conceal rather than shamefully (or shamelessly) revealing their nakedness (cf. Ex. 28:42; Rev. 3:18; 16:15). They should refrain from sexually provocative clothing or gestures (cf. Prov. 7:10,11,21-23). By doing this they can keep themselves pure and avoid being a stumbling block to others. (cf. Matt. 5:28; 18:6-9).

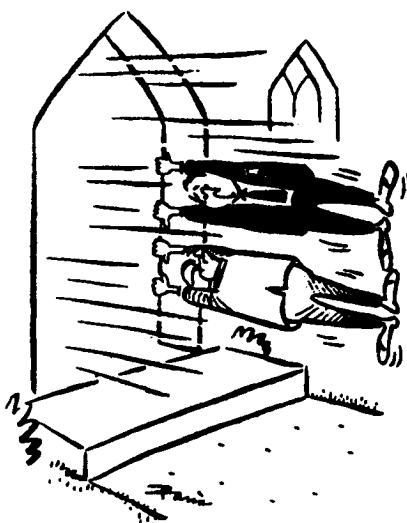
### What We Are Seeing

More and more Christians are dressing in a sexually provocative manner. In fact, Christians who have been taught that sexually provocative clothing is wrong and still want to wear such clothing to be "in style" are about the only ones who try to deny that such is provocative. Most people in the world freely admit that this is why they find such apparel appealing. Sex appeal is the name of the game with many of the fashion designers of this world.

Many wear clothing in public that barely stop short of complete nudity. The shame of their nakedness is revealed either by clothing that is too brief or too tight. I sometimes see sisters out in their yards, out shopping, around recreational areas, at beaches and pools or at sporting events (both fans and participants) that expose at least as much flesh as they would in their underwear. I also see brothers at the same places in very short shorts without a shirt. If all of this is decent or modest apparel - pray tell what could be immodest or indecent and still be called apparel. Remember there is such a thing as "modest apparel," necessarily implying the reality of "immodest apparel." Others wear clothing, even

to church services, that may not be as brief but is about as revealing. Skirts and dresses that are so short that make it impossible for one to stand or sit in a decent manner and revealing as much or more flesh than the shorts mentioned above. Dresses, skirts, pants, and tops that are near skin tight that reveal the very form of private parts are all too frequently worn. Dresses and skirts, though they may be nearly to the ankles, are sometimes slit so as to reveal the entire leg with every step. Dresses very low cut at the top are not uncommon. A person who defends the design of such clothing as decent and non-sensual is either woefully naive or shamefully dishonest.

Brothers and sisters, we need to be careful about how we dress; but, more importantly, we need to constantly examine our hearts so as to develop and protect that basic sense of decency and shamefastness that should characterize Christians - then dress accordingly.



"HE BELTS OUT A PRETTY GOOD SERMON DOESN'T HE?"

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