

The Reflector

THE REFLECTOR

The Letter and The Spirit

Edward O. Bragwell, Sr.

Earl Irvin West, in Volume 2 of his *The Search For The Ancient Order* (p. 250), introduces a chapter called "Prophets of Liberalism", with an astute observation about what he calls "seeds of liberalism":

Whether in the halcyon days of the restoration there could be found the seeds of the later liberalism that swept the brotherhood, may be doubted. Certainly, however, it can never be questioned that these seeds are discovered buried deep in human nature. There are always those who believe they sense something in the 'spirit' of a thing contrary to what may be found in its 'letter'; or, who, reacting against what they consider a radical extreme of isolationism devote their energies to popularizing a movement. The restoration period came to know these individuals following the war between the states. The church appeared to them to be too narrow and restricted, and their ambition therefore was to lift the brotherhood to a 'dignified church' in a world of denominationalism, commanding at least some respect from these religious bodies.

I believe West correctly assesses the beginnings of liberalism. It is thinking that interpreting and/or applying law to the "letter" is unnecessarily restrictive, exclusive, or even harsh. So, the liberal thinker turns to something called the "spirit of the law" to relax the restrictions and harshness imposed by the "letter". He may freely admit that the actual wording of the sacred text, strictly applied, would demand a certain thing. However, he appeals to a higher(?) court called "the spirit of the law" for a broader application than the actual wording would permit. Having dismissed the objective "letter", in favor of the more subjective "spirit", he can now freely adjust to the situation at hand. In reality, his so called "spirit of the law" is nothing more than his subjective view of what the law should be.

If God's word does not mean exactly what it says; and if we do not need to follow it exactly, then we are free to believe and do as we jolly well please, which is what a true liberal does, convincing himself that he is justified because he is within the flexible boundaries of the "spirit of the law" — which boundaries he and his liberal cohorts define and redefine as the situation warrants.

It is not unusual for these, "Prophets of Liberalism" to appeal to the Lord and His word to defend their stance. They see our Lord as one more interested in the "spirit" while the Pharisees insisted on the "letter". They are not at all bashful about comparing modern day "conservatives", who insist on

doing exactly what the text says on every subject, to the Pharisees.

Too me, it the height of absurdity to suggest, as I recently heard one preacher do, that the Pharisees were the "conservative church" of that day who really wanted to do just what the law said. They were no such thing. They demanded that others do exactly what *their traditions* said, while they themselves would not take their own medicine. (Cf. Matt. 23:4). Where is the passage where Jesus ever criticized a Pharisee for being hung up on "the letter of the law"? He criticized their hypocrisy, their inconsistency, (Matt. 23) and their making void the commandment of God by their tradition (Matt. 15:1-7), but never their strict application of the law itself.

Jesus' rejections of the Pharisees' Sabbath traditions is freely used to illustrate Jesus' rejection of the "letter" in favor of the "spirit". The truth is that the "letter" of the Old Testament did not forbid the kind of things that Jesus and His apostles did on the Sabbath. It was the "traditions of the elders" (which were often inconsistently and hypocritically applied) that forbade such things.

Jesus expresses his attitude toward keeping the law to his disciples in the Sermon On The Mount. He not only insisted on personally fulfilling the law down to the smallest letter (jot) and the smallest marking (tittle). (Matt. 5:18), He warned his disciples that by breaking the "least of these commandments" and teaching men so, they would forfeit their entrance into the

kingdom of God. (Matt. 5:19).

The Bible really says nothing about obeying either the "spirit of law" or "letter of the law". It simply speaks of obedience. Some think they have found a distinction between the "letter of the law" and the "spirit of the law" in 2 Cor. 3. However, a close look at the chapter should make it clear that two laws are being contrasted rather than two methods of interpreting and/or applying law. Notice verses 6,7 and 8:

Who also made us sufficient ministers of the new covenant; not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter kills, but the spirit gives life. But if the ministry of death, written and engraved in stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not look steadily at the face of Moses because of the glory of his countenance, which glory was passing away, how will the ministry of the Spirit not be more glorious?

The contrast is between the two Testaments -- the Old (v. 14)

which was written on stones (the letter) and the New written by the Spirit on the hearts of the apostles. The Old Testament (letter) was ushered in by the letters written and engraved on tablets of stone. The New Testament (spirit) was ushered in by the outpouring of the Spirit, engraving the New Testament on the apostles' hearts.

The "ministry of the new covenant" (v. 6) or "ministry of the Spirit" (v. 8) or "ministry of righteousness" (v. 9) is con-

trasted to "the ministry of death" (v. 7) or "ministry of condemnation" (v. 9) or "Old Testament" (v. 14). "The letter" that kills is the same as the "ministry of death" (vs. 6-17), while "the spirit" that gives life is the same as "ministry of the new covenant (testament)".

The rest of 2 Cor. 3 is given to a contrast between the two covenants or testaments. The contrast is not between two methods or manners of inter-

what he should have done with the former without leaving the latter undone. We, under the new system, must "observe all things" commanded (Matt. 28:18), down to the last letter (cf. Matt. 5:19), that apply to both our inward and outward behavior.

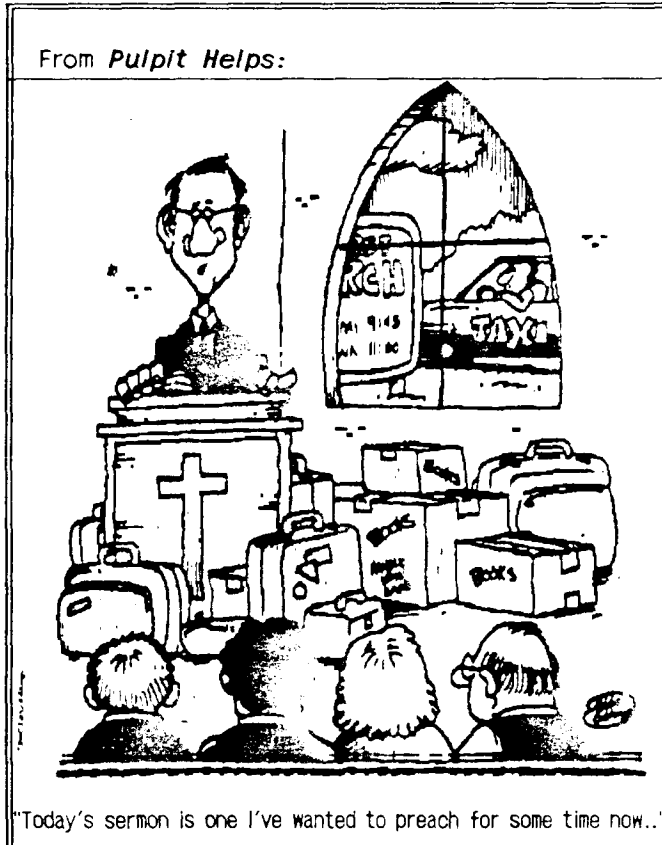
That there are times when we will "miss the mark" (a meaning of the word translated "sin") and have to ask forgiveness, is admitted by all. We may even at times have to be patient and gentle with others who miss the mark. But that is a far cry from blurring the mark by invoking something called "the spirit of the law" that assumes that we have the liberty to loosely apply what the Book actually says.

Again, I maintain that the idea of "the spirit of the law" is not only not found in the New Testament, it is nothing more than a device to set aside what the Bible really says in favor of each man subjectively deciding what the law should say.

The liberal mind may even convince himself he has as much respect for God's law as anyone, but it is just that he emphasizes the "spirit" rather than the "letter". But, the New Testament is given in words taught by the Holy Spirit. (1 Cor.

2:12,13). We are to live by "EVERY word of God". (Luke 4:4). If we are not to live by the very wording of the Bible, the "letter of the law", if you please, then why not just toss the whole thing aside? Then we could decide, from scratch, for ourselves what God's will should be, without having to search through the "letter of the law" and then dismissing what we find in favor of the "spirit of the law" as we see it.

From *Pulpit Helps*:



preting and/or applying either testament, but a contrast between the two testaments themselves.

The Jew under the old system had to obey its requirements -- those that applied both to his outward and inward conduct. The Pharisee often meticulously, to "the letter", if you please, applied those commands that affected outward conduct without doing the same with those commands that governed his inward conduct. Jesus said that he did

SONG OF THE LAWLESS

Don Givens

There is a new "spirit of ANTI-ism" around.

It is the spirit of the LAWLESS. Many are "anti-law."

This is a poem that I have composed; It is a song that the anti-lawist can sing. It expresses his attitude toward the Lord of the Lord God, and the authority of Jesus Christ, and the divine work of the N.T. church:

*Free! FREE from God's Law.
O blessed condition,
I can sin all I want,
And still have remission!*

*OUT with rules and regulations!
OUT with laws and stipulations!
We want NO NEGATIVES, let us make clear,
Unless it be the ones WE like to hear.*

*Give us thrills, chills, and scratch our itching ears,
Watch us become more sectarian all through the years.
No more long and hard Bible study,
We think that is much to fuddy-duddy.*

*Give us fun, food, and frolic; over that we'll drool,
But give us Book, Chapter, Verse, and we'll call you a fool.
Give us church dinners, and over them we'll slobber,
But give us sound doctrine, and on it we'll clobber.*

*Give us emotional services, and we'll shout HALLELUJAH!
Ask for our Bible authority, and we'll say, "What's it to ya?"
We are full of love, and of sweetness we boast,
But tell us we're wrong, and YOU we will ROAST!*

*Shame, shame on those strict Christians,
Who follow God's commandments right through.
We want NONE of those old restrictions,
OUR HEROES ARE NADAB AND ABIHU!*

Copied from GUARDIAN OF TRUTH

OUR NEXT MEETING

MAY 7-12, 1989

H. E. PHILLIPS

Favoritism

Edward O. Bragwell, Sr.

"My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism... But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers." (James 2:1,9 - NIV)

Favoritism is "the showing of more kindness and indulgence to some person or persons than to others; being unfairly partial." (Webster's New World Dictionary Of The American Language). Vine says, "the fault of one who, when responsible to give judgment, has respect to the position, rank, popularity, or circumstances of men, instead of their intrinsic conditions, referring the rich and powerful to those who are not so..."

Since God shows no favoritism (partiality - NKJV, respect of persons - KJV), he expects the same of His children. Peter had a hard time accepting this when it came to the Gentiles. It took the miraculous intervention of God (Acts 10) and, later, the sharp rebuke of Paul (Gal. 2:14) to remind him of this fact. James reminds us of this and rebukes those who are partial as lawbreakers.

Perhaps evangelists (or preachers) have to watch this as much, if not more than anyone. Paul urges the young evangelist, Timothy, to be careful along these lines: "Those who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all, that the rest also may fear. I charge you before God and the Lord Jesus Christ and the elect angels that you observe these things without prejudice, doing nothing with partiality (favoritism - NIV)". (1 Tim. 5:20,21).

There are two heavy responsibilities in these verses. 1. He must publicly rebuke some who sin for the good of the offender and the good of the rest of

the brethren. 2. He must do it without showing favoritism.

It is awfully easy to ignore these responsibilities. It is much easier to limit ourselves to explaining the text without making applications that would "get on the toes" of those present. You lose less friends that way. Then if you must rebuke, it is much easier either to do it privately or be so vague that one would have to be extremely alert to know the specific persons or situations you are talking about. Of course, there are times when a private rebuke will suffice. There are times when those sinning are doing it so openly and are influencing so many that one must do it "in the presence of all, that the rest also may fear." Granted that public rebuking may not always require calling the offender(s) by name (though it is sometimes needed), we should leave no doubt about the specific kind of thing we are talking about so that both those present who are guilty of that kind of thing can hardly fail to get the point of the rebuke and those not guilty to be alerted to avoid it.

To do it without showing favoritism is even harder. (Of course some are completely impartial - they simply do not rebuke anyone at all.) It is harder to openly rebuke our close friends or relatives when they need it than it is others. It is much harder to rebuke our be-

loved brethren when needed than it is our denominational neighbors. It is harder to rebuke one that we find very likeable, than it is one not so likeable. It is harder to rebuke those who generously support us morally and financially in our work of preaching than those who do not. It is much harder to rebuke one who "amens" our preaching most of the time than it is to rebuke one who is constantly critical of us. It is harder to rebuke brethren who have a powerful influence over many of the brethren that it is to rebuke one whom hardly influences anyone.

However, if we are going to be faithful to the Lord we will faithfully rebuke openly as needed regardless of who may be guilty. We can hope and pray that the rebuke will get the desired results and appeal to them "am I become your enemy because I tell you the truth." (Gal. 4:16).

Brethren, what kind of preacher had you rather regularly hear and support? One who thinks you are openly making grievous mistakes, but looks the other way because he likes you and appreciates your support and friendship. Or one who will kindly but openly and frankly rebuke when he feels it is needed for your good and for the good of the brethren in general? Think about it.

MODERNISTIC VERSION OF PSALM 23

(Suggested after reading much of the present-day jargon of life and morals, by those who have forsaken God as their Good Shepherd, and now darken counsel by words without knowledge.)

The unseen Infinite is the source of my motivation, and I shall not want personality. He maketh me to experience true self-expression and to attempt new projects in the psychology of adolescence. He restoreth the right complex to my introvert soul. He leadeth me into a preface to morals for goodness' sake! Yea, though I peregrinate through the present depression, exuberant health gives me a stiff upper lip. I grin and bear my fate. Good luck is always with me. Its creative impulse and the pep of my *elan vital* comfort me. Surely normal behaviorism and carefully controlled altruism will follow me until the jig is up, and then (properly cremated) I shall dwell in a marble urn forever.

Dr. Samuel M. Zwemer
Via THE SPEAKER'S SOURCEBOOK

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SERVICES

Sundays:

Bible 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.

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