

BALANCED PREACHING: AVOIDING THE EXTREMES OF LEGALISM AND LICENTIOUSNESS

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When a man in a crowded bus vigorously scratched his head, a fellow passenger, disturbed by his vigor, asked what he was doing. The man answered, "My foot is itching, but I can't get my shoe and sock off to scratch it, so I'm scratching my head instead."

This man's problem was not with methodology, because scratching is a most appropriate response to an itch. But the way in which he went about dealing with his condition did not adequately reflect the reality of the situation. Is it possible that Seventh-day Adventist preachers sometimes, like the man in the bus, "scratch where it doesn't itch"?

The recent commemoration of the 1888 General Conference served to focus attention on the problem of legalism faced by the Seventh-day Adventist Church in 1888. But legalism is not our major problem today. Our major problem today is licentiousness. It seems that some of us have come to the place where we think we can sin with impunity and still consider ourselves justified and redeemed.

Francis Schaefer identifies the contemporary view that all restraints and limits are intrinsically evil as cutting out the moral foundation from human society.¹ If we still believe in the Bible as God's Word, we must acknowledge that Christ sets us free from the forces that would hinder us from living in harmony with God's law. To believe this is one thing, of course; to preach it is another.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once sighed, "How difficult it is to draw

the line with certainty between spiritual wisdom and worldly astuteness!"² As a professor of preaching, I am forced to ask myself whether I am teaching ministers-in-training worldly astuteness and homiletical cleverness rather than how to preach a balanced message of law and grace.

I believe that Seventh-day Adventists don't want preaching to produce dead legalists, people who, resting on their own self-righteousness, cause no end of difficulty for those who seek to move the church to fulfill its mission. On the other hand, we don't want preaching that produces licentious church members who, in their spiritual illiteracy and undisciplined life-style, distort the Biblical model of the Christian disciple.

One way to seek the balance we desire is to pay attention to the homiletical implications of Romans 7 and 8. What follows is a brief comparative summary of these two chapters, intended to demonstrate the necessity of balanced preaching that avoids both legalism and licentiousness.

Romans 7

Romans 7 is basic to the doctrine of man.³ It teaches that human beings are sinners, an insight that has serious implications for preaching. Spiritual awareness of our fallen human condition is lacking unless God reveals our sin. And how does He reveal our sin? Through His law. Paul says,

I would not have known what sin was except through the law. I would not have known what it was to covet if the law had not said, 'Do not covet' (Rom 7:7 NIV).⁴

Was the law the cause of Paul's coveting? Of course not. Instead, "sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment," "produced in me every kind of covetous desire. For apart from law, sin is dead" (vs. 8). Paul explains that "when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died" (vs. 9). "Sin, seizing the opportunity afforded by the commandment, deceived me, and through the commandment put me to death" (vs. 11).

Paul continues, talking about the law, "Did that which is good, then, become death to me? By no means! But in order that sin might be recognized as sin, it [the law] produced death in me through what was good, so that through the commandment sin might become

utterly sinful" (vs. 13). The "law is spiritual" Paul observes (vs. 14). When it exposes a person's true condition it does its spiritual work. Sin is a killer, so sin needs to be exposed if there is to be hope of salvation and a new life.

The law makes sinners aware of their true condition for the purpose of persuading them to seek the divine solution. Commenting on Romans 7, Ellen G. White says that after the law did its spiritual work in Paul, Paul's "self-esteem was gone."⁵

Once the law revealed to Paul his true condition, the spiritual warfare began that's described in Romans 7:14-23. Paul realized at last that in his natural condition he was "unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin" (vs. 14), and that because he was what he was, he actually did the very things he hated (see vs. 15). But Paul didn't blame the law. He agreed that it had exposed his sin. He took the position that the recreative spiritual work of the law is "good" (vss. 16, 22).

Furthermore, Paul now understood the devastating truth that by himself he could do nothing to improve his condition: "For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing" (vs. 19). And the force behind his contrary behavior was "sin living in me" (vss. 17, 20). He described his inner struggle: "I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members" (vs. 23).

Having reached a critical level of spiritual awareness, Paul became alarmed and cried out, "What a wretched man I am!" (vs. 24). He now understood that "the wages of sin is death" (Rom 6:23). Because God's holy and righteous law had accomplished its spiritual work, Paul's desperate need had become apparent to him. Paul the sinner recognized the need for grace and sought it. Then, and only then, was he in a position to hear and understand the gospel, the message of righteousness by grace through faith.

What was the nature of this sin that "killed" Paul, awareness of which made him feel so wretched? It was not lack of self-esteem or a failure to live up to his full human potential. Lack of self-esteem and failure to achieve one's potential are misleading humanistic definitions of sin. God's definition is, "Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness [transgression of the law]" (1 Jn 3:4).

Sin is not merely a decision not to love God. It is defiance of God's holy and righteous will. Sin is the cause as well as the result of a break in our relationship with God (Is 59:2). When God's law is broken, the relationship is broken. Because of our sinful, selfish human nature, we are prone to commit sin. And apart from the grace of God, nothing can be done about our condition.

It is true that "God is love" (1 Jn 4:8) and that love is the essence of His character. Yet, because of its holy and just nature, God's love makes demands of Him. It demands, first, that He tell us, supreme objects of His love as we are, the truth about our spiritual lostness and hopelessness. Second, His love demands that He be willing to make the sacrifice required to redeem us from our hopeless lostness. Yet, powerful as His love and grace are, He does not exercise their power to the point of converting us against our will. God does not force His love on anyone.

"God's kindness leads you toward repentance" (Rom 2:4); but who is it that His kindness, operating in the spiritual use of the law, leads to repentance? Is it not those who have received the knowledge of being hopeless sinners? Jesus said, "I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Matt 9:13 KJV). Thus, is it not a supreme act of God's kindness to help the sinner realize his hopeless condition, repent, and reach out for grace?

Only when sinners want and seek salvation can the love and grace of God save and transform them. God hears those who cry out, "Who will rescue me from this body of death?" (Rom 7:24). When the law exposed to Paul his sinful condition, guilt, and heartache, Paul didn't ignore what the law told him but faced it squarely and allowed it to bring him to Christ. In his extreme moment of desperation and surrender he turned for rescue to the substitutionary Lamb of God and exclaimed, "Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (Rom 7:25). Through the law he was enabled to recognize his need of grace and to turn to the Lord who alone could supply his need.

In discussing the crucial role of God's law in both conversion and sanctification, Ellen G. White has observed that

it is only as the law of God is restored to its rightful position that there can be a revival of primitive faith and godliness among His professed people.⁶

Without the preaching of God's law, she said elsewhere, the gospel

loses its value and importance in the minds of men, and soon they are ready practically to cast aside the Bible itself.⁷

Romans 8

Romans 8 is basic to the doctrine of grace and like chapter 7 has serious implications for preaching.

Not only did Paul receive knowledge of sin through the law (Rom 7), but he also received knowledge of God's love and grace through the gospel (Rom 8). He states:

There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death (Rom 8:1, 2).

Jesus is the "sin offering" pointed to in verse 3. "The law reveals to man his sins, but it provides no remedy. . . . The gospel of Christ alone can free [the sinner] from the condemnation or the defilement of sin."⁸ Spiritual knowledge of the divine solution is lacking unless God reveals it, and God reveals it by means of the gospel.

Paul makes it clear that "those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God" (vs. 8). But at the same time there is no question that the redeemed sinner is to live a life that is pleasing to God. Jesus Himself said that it is not enough even to call Him 'Lord'; we must actually obey what He taught.⁹ Just how we are to obey is the thrust of verses 5 through 39. In the same way that the gospel is the antidote for legalism, obedience is the antidote for licentiousness. Salvation results from knowing Jesus Christ as both Saviour and Lord.

Redeemed people have a mind "set on what the Spirit desires" (vs. 5). Sinners who have been saved by grace are no longer controlled "by the sinful nature but by the Spirit" (vs. 9), and "the Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children" (vs. 16). Notice that the redeemed are controlled not by themselves but by the Spirit. The redeemed *are* controlled; they are not independent of divine instruction. Newborn Christians have "an obligation . . . by the Spirit" to "put to death the misdeeds of the body" (vss. 12, 13).

Obedience to God's law does not come merely from a sense of duty but as the consequence of being indwelt by Christ and controlled by the Holy Spirit. The demands of the law are inward demands that call for an inward obedience that the unconverted are incapable of. True inward obedience can come only from the Spirit. It involves participation in spiritual struggle and sharing in the sufferings of Christ in order that "we may also share in his glory" (vs. 17). Thank God, "the Spirit helps us in our weakness" (vs. 26).

Paul's assurance of victory rested on the victory of Christ, on the assistance of the Holy Spirit, and on the heavenly intercession of Christ at the right hand of God (see vss. 32-34). All the resources of heaven are at the disposal of those who have been convicted of sin and have surrendered to the grace of God in Christ.

Paul bore witness not only to a change in his relationship with God but also to the fact that he had been changed inwardly by the power of the gospel. The same person whom the law first revealed as wretched and hopeless was now able to testify that "we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (vs. 37) and that nothing is "able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord" (vs. 39).

Speaking about God's law and the sinner's response to that law, Ellen G. White has written:

All who comprehend the spirituality of the law, all who realize its power as a detector of sin, are in just as helpless a condition as is Satan himself, unless they accept the atonement provided for them in the remedial sacrifice of Jesus Christ, who is our atonement—at-one-ment with God.¹⁰

In writing of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the sinner's response to that grace, she says:

When He gives us a bitter draught to drink, He also holds a cup of blessing to our lips. He fills the heart with submission, with joy and peace in believing, and enables us to say submissively, Not my will, but Thy will, O Lord, be done.¹¹

Conclusions Thus Far

The problem with preaching today is less with homiletical method and more with Biblical content. Preachers must be accountable to the teachings of Scripture. If what Paul describes in Romans

7 and 8 is what must happen in order for a sinner to experience salvation, both Romans 7 and 8 need to be preached today.

Because people who don't realize they are sick feel no need for a physician, there can be no spiritual victory without spiritual warfare and no healing without first knowing pain. Such observations should seem axiomatic and self-evident on the basis of our knowledge of the Word of God and of life itself.

Preachers who love God and the hearers of their message will be constrained to tell the truth about the truth—the truth about man and God, about sin and grace, and about the human predicament and the divine solution.

Preaching God's love to those who have not been convicted of sin distorts the Biblical message of salvation. Such preaching can produce a religious experience that is not in harmony with the Scriptures. It ordinarily results in a one-sided relationship, which is a contradiction in terms. There can be no relationship, with God or with anyone else, that is not mutual. God loves us and we are to love Him, demonstrating that love by obeying His Word. Lack of obedience indicates lack of love for Him. Jesus said: "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. He who does not love me will not obey my teaching. These words you hear are not my own; they belong to the Father who sent me" (John 14:23-24).

On Heaven's side of the relationship, God reveals His love by His willingness to give His Son for our redemption. On the sinner's side of the relationship, love is revealed by willingness to surrender our will completely in obedience to God's will. Contemporary preaching often distorts the Biblical message by one-sidedly saying too little about the way redeemed sinners should express their love for God.

Of course, the law must not be preached in a way that misleads unconverted people to believe that they can be saved by keeping the law merely as a religious duty. Such preaching produces self-satisfied legalists. Rather, the law must be preached as the test of human hearts, exercising its spiritual function to bring sinners to conviction of sin and repentance. When repentance is deep and sincere the result will not be legalism, for the way will have been opened

for the gospel of grace to do its spiritual work and convert the sinner to faith in Christ, thus providing assurance of forgiveness.

Conversely, the love of God must not be preached in a way that misleads people to believe there is no judgment and that obedience is not required. Such preaching will produce licentious church members. Faith, assurance, and *obedience* are the goals of preaching God's love and grace. When faith in Christ is deep and genuine, when sinners recognize the depths of degradation from which they have been rescued by Christ, licentiousness is far less likely to result. The Holy Spirit gives the redeemed sinner an inner yearning to become like Christ, who was obedient to His Father.

Evangelicals have accused Seventh-day Adventists of preaching legalism for so long that we have begun to believe them. In our zeal to avoid the charge of legalism we have been tempted to cast aside God's law homiletically and theologically, preaching only God's love and consequently producing licentious members who know little, and care less, about being disciples of Christ. The preaching of godliness always has been and always will be resented by those who do not want to be godly. The inevitable consequence of preaching easy-believism is licentiousness.

The age in which we are called to preach is not a religious age. Most people today are irreligious and concerned more about present survival than future salvation. Yet, we continue to preach as though people are concerned enough about salvation to try to work their way into heaven. No wonder so few are listening to us, including the children of the church!

A preacher may be gifted with a charismatic personality and may be a master of pleasing words and yet be woefully inadequate as a spokesman for God, if the content of his preaching does not reflect the balance between law and gospel demonstrated in Romans 7 and 8.

Seventh-day Adventists learned from the 1888 experience that preaching God's law apart from righteousness by grace through faith produces legalists. Now we are learning that preaching grace without the law produces licentious church members. Balanced preaching of the law and gospel will produce born-again believers who have experienced freedom in Christ and whose greatest joy is to be His disciples, living obediently in harmony with His will. As

far as life on this side of the resurrection is concerned, salvation by grace constitutes the restoration of the ability to keep God's law without hindrance.

What Is God's Will?

How do we know what God's will is? Where can we find it? At this point our approach to the Bible becomes exceedingly important. In the Bible we find our Saviour presented not only as Redeemer but also as Lord. He exemplifies the nature of the redeemed by His obedient submission to the Father's will. In the Bible we find counsel from God as to how He wants His redeemed people to live and the example of Jesus that shows us how to live.

Society today has no fixed values and standards, but fortunately Seventh-day Adventists are not without fixed values and standards. We have faith in the inspired Word of God; unless, of course, some of us no longer believe the Bible and are individually willing to accommodate ourselves to the prevailing culture.

Inasmuch as culture is produced and shaped by sinful human beings, it is always changing and passing away. But the Word of God abides forever. Because we have what Ellen White refers to as the "unerring standard," the "authoritative, infallible revelation" of God's will, we do not have to surrender to the confusion and amorality that surround us.¹² "I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you," wrote the psalmist (Ps 119:11).

Ellen White counsels us,

Let the seeker for truth who accepts the Bible as the inspired Word of God, lay aside every previous idea, and take that Word in its simplicity. He should renounce every sinful practice, and enter the Holy of Holies with heart softened and subdued, ready to listen to what God says.¹³

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was right when he said, to a denomination which had preached justification by grace through faith for 400 years, that

The only man who has the right to say that he has been justified by grace alone is the man who has left all to follow Christ.¹⁴

The cost of discipleship has gone up since 1888 and will climb higher still before the return of the Lord. Contemporary culture has a way of setting the price for Christian believers who wants to

be faithful, and especially now as we prepare for the second coming of our Lord. But,

Amidst the deepening shadows of earth's last great crisis God's light will shine brightest, and the song of hope and trust will be heard in clearest and loftiest strains.¹⁵

If, as this paper assumes, licentiousness is a major problem facing Seventh-day Adventists today, we need to hear more than ever the clear trumpet tones of the law *and* the gospel ringing together from our pulpits. Law and gospel belong together. They must not be separated homiletically or theologically. Yet we must know the difference between them, not confusing them, if we would preach truth correctly. The sad state of preaching today may reflect confusion brought about by the introduction to our ministers of certain Lutheran ideas. Historically, Seventh-day Adventists have understood that justification not only changes the status of the sinner before God but also, when accepted by faith, inwardly transforms the sinner. God does not merely declare forgiveness; through the ministry of the Holy Spirit He also transforms the sinner into Christlikeness. Lutheran theology on the other hand, though it attempts to hold justification and sanctification together, nonetheless sees a strong tension between them. Adventist theology attempts to hold them together too, but in harmony not in tension. In our way of thinking, sinners are justified but sin is never justified.

The proper understanding of the relationship of law and gospel is foundational to homiletical theory and practice. Without it the pulpit is robbed of its power to convict and convert. Law exposes mankind's true condition, and gospel brings new life.

If we preach only grace we succeed in convincing the old nature that it can be comfortable unchanged in the kingdom of God. If we preach only law, we succeed in convincing the old nature that it can make itself acceptable for the kingdom by self-improvement. But as Carl Braaten (with many others) has warned:

Where the Law is not accusing us, there is no consciousness of sin; and where there is no consciousness of sin, there is no need for repentance; and where there is no need for repentance, there is no need for faith; and where there is no need for faith, what's the use of Christ and the gospel?¹⁶

While preaching law alone denies God's mercy, preaching grace alone denies God's justice and judgment. Sinners will always need to hear both the law and the gospel. If we really believe that the Seventh-day Adventist church and its mission stand or fall on the preaching of righteousness by grace through faith, we must preach the law and the gospel in such a way that our hearers can experience genuine salvation.¹⁷ We must "scratch where it itches."

The work the Lord has given to the Seventh-day Adventist church will never be finished if we manage only to increase the ranks of either legalistic or licentious church members. The Lord wants true disciples. We must therefore offer courageously balanced messages that give due stress to both law and gospel, to both Romans 7 and Romans 8.

Endnotes

1 Francis A. Schaeffer, *The Great Evangelical Disaster* (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway Books, 1984).

2 Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1959), p. 237.

3 This study is based on the premise that Romans 7 speaks of both the pre-conversion and the post-conversion experience.

4 Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are taken from the *New International Version*.

5 Quoted in *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 6:1076.

6 *The Great Controversy*, p. 472.

7 *Ibid.*, p. 461.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 463.

9 See Matt 7:21; cf. Paul Tournier, *Guilt and Grace* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), p. 58: "It is not enough to listen to God. We must obey Him."

10 Quoted in *The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 6:1077.

11 *Ibid.*, pp. 1076, 1077.

12 *The Great Controversy*, pp. v-vii. See also *The Ministry of Healing*, p. 462.

13 *Our High Calling*, p. 207.

14 Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, p. 45.

15 Ellen G. White, *Education*, p. 166.

16 Carl Braaten, "Whatever Happened to Law and Gospel?" *Currents In Theology and Mission*, 14 (1987): 116.

17 For an excellent discussion of salvation by grace through faith see John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The Gospel According to Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988). Although MacArthur is a Dispensationalist, much of what he says about salvation agrees with what is believed by conservative Seventh-day Adventists.

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CHRIST, THE KEY TO THEOLOGY

A Sermon by D. A. Delafield
Retired from the General Conference
and the Ellen G. White Estate

When Philip brought Nathanael to Jesus, the Saviour recognized Nathanael even though he had never seen him before. "Jesus saw Nathanael coming to him, and said of him, Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile! Nathanael saith unto him, Whence knowest thou me? Jesus answered and said unto him, Before that Philip called thee, when thou wast under the fig tree I saw thee" (John 1:47, 48 KJV). So Jesus first saw Nathanael with the eyes of a Seer rather than with physical eyesight.

Nathanael had listened with rapt attention as John the Baptist preached at the Jordan River. With amazement he had heard John identify the carpenter of Nazareth as "the Lamb of God." But apparently he was not impressed by his first glimpse of Jesus. Perplexed, disappointed, and doubtful, he resorted to the seclusion of a fig tree, and knelt down to pray for light on the matter. How could this humble carpenter from Nazareth be the Messiah?

Now with Philip by his side Nathanael listens as Christ describes accurately his prayer session "under the fig tree." He is startled at Jesus' disclosure. Here certainly is an answer to his prayer for light. He is seized with the conviction that the carpenter is the Messiah after all. "Rabbi," he exclaims, "thou art the Son of God, thou art the King of Israel" (vs. 49).

Jesus' foreknowledge and prophetic vision brought Nathanael to conviction. However, the Savior's disclosures had hardly begun. Because other remarkable revelations were in store for this guile-