

# SPIRITUAL DEVIATIONS

## From Reformation to Regression

Recently, some books by leading proponents of modern Reformation theology have stressed the prominence that law-keeping purportedly holds in the believers' spiritual progress and relationship with God. On one hand, much of what these books espouse regarding the gospel is both biblically sound and beneficial to the believer. They correctly stress that salvation is according to faith, not according to law-keeping works. This scriptural view of judicial justification by faith warrants an affirmation. However, these same books deviate from the New Testament revelation of God's complete salvation by teaching that believers, having been invigorated by their second birth, should pursue a life of law-keeping.

This teaching errs in presenting law-keeping as the focus and goal of the believers' spiritual pursuit. Such a distorted focus causes believers to regress, rather than progress, in their spiritual walk. While the law initially brings unbelievers to Christ for salvation, returning to law-keeping after regeneration through faith in Christ is a spiritual *regression* and deviation. R. C. Sproul's *The Soul's Quest for God* and D. James Kennedy's *How Do I Live for God?* illustrate this tendency to regress to law-keeping. This error can be traced to an oversimplified subdivision of the Bible into two sections—law and gospel—and to an overreliance on primitive Reformation confessions and writings. These tendencies have produced a systematic but deviant theology in regard to spiritual progress which wrongly asserts that the believer can find God's will in the law, please God by keeping the law, and advance spiritually by means of the law.

During the early days of the Reformation, the theological battle lines were drawn between Rome's justification by works (law-keeping) and the Reformers' justification by faith. This polarizing rift encouraged a tidy but incomplete view of the Bible as being a dichotomy between law and gospel. This narrow notion is still maintained in books by modern Reformation theologians like Sproul and Kennedy. Since the time of the Reformation, however, the Scriptures have been opened continually and progressively to reveal more accurately God's eternal purpose, which is centered in and accomplished through the organic operation of the life of the Triune God in the believers (not through a return to law-keeping), all of which is made possible by the all-inclusive person and work of

Christ. This narrow "law and gospel" dichotomy elevates the law to a status it does not merit and excludes such vital scriptural themes as God's organic salvation and Christ as life for the building of God's habitation. The overmagnified law thus occludes from the believers' view the life matters most crucial to their spiritual progress.

Reformation theology's unwarranted elevation of the law's status in the believers' lives is based on its overreliance on the embryonic Reformation teachings emerging during the dawn following the Dark Ages. In *Live for God* Kennedy says, "Our guidebook for this tour of transforming Bible precepts will be the *Westminster Confession of Faith* and the *Westminster Larger* and *Shorter* catechisms...written in the midst of national spiritual crisis, the English Civil War of the 1640s" (9). In *Quest* Sproul relies heavily on John Calvin's writings about the law: "One of the most important contributions John Calvin made to the Protestant Reformation was his explanation of the role the Law plays in the life of a Christian" (109). It seems incongruous that Bible scholars, embracing a theology which has *sola scriptura* as one of its maxims, should rely so heavily for enlightenment on the confessions and writings of those who had barely emerged from the Dark Ages.

### The Law Not Conveying God's Purpose and Will to Us

In *Live for God* Kennedy says, "The law informs Christians of the will of God" (21). He also quotes the *Westminster Confession of Faith*: "...yet is it [the law] of great use to them [believers], as well as to others; in that, as a rule of life, informing them of the will of God and their duty, it directs and binds them to walk accordingly" (37). Kennedy interprets the *Westminster Confession* to mean that the Spirit of God is "helping us freely and cheerfully to do the will of God that is revealed in the law" (34). Similarly, *Quest* emphasizes that the law is our source of "spiritual light and guidance" and "revelation of what is pleasing to God" (101, 107). It advises the earnest Christian that "the easiest and best way to learn the will of God is by studying his Law" (113). The book's overstatement of the law's revelatory function misdirects the seeking believer from God's will as revealed through His apostles in the New Testament. In effect, it signals a conscious retreat from the hard-fought advancement of truth accomplished through

the apostles' ministry. Paul clearly states that the revelation of God's will was a mystery to the generations under the law: "The mystery of Christ...in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in spirit" (Eph. 3:4-5). Concerning the will of God, Paul also says, "Making known to us the mystery of His will according to His good pleasure, which He purposed in Himself...to head up all things in Christ" (1:9-10). No mention is made here of the law—rather, God's will is centralized in Christ and made known to the apostles, who have faithfully communicated it to us. Furthermore, this New Testament revelation conveyed through the apostles' teaching is the foundation for the edification of God's household: "Being built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets" (2:20). Therefore, believers should be helped to know God's will not by regressing to the law but by pursuing the most advanced revelation of God's will as communicated through the New Testament ministry of the apostles.

### Christ Rather Than the Law Pleasing God

In *Live for God* Kennedy says, "Only after being redeemed from the penalty for lawbreaking...do we find that the commandments of God show a lifestyle that pleases God and that works" (51). In *Quest* Sproul says of the law, "It is not impotent to teach us righteousness and to reveal what is pleasing to God" (108), and, "The Law...reveals what pleases God" (113). Such advice leads astray any serious but unlearned Christian pursuing a life faithful to his Master by admonishing him not only to seek God's will in the law but even the more to seek to please Him by keeping the law. The New Testament, however, was given to replace the law as God's revelation of what pleases Him. The impact of such a supersession is vividly portrayed in the scene on the Mount of Transfiguration, where two key Old Testament figures appeared to the disciples alongside the Lord: Moses representing the law, and Elijah representing the prophets (Matt. 17:3). Initially, the three must have seemed coequals, but following the Father's endorsement of Christ, "This is My Son, the Beloved, in whom I have found My delight. Hear Him!" (v. 5), the disciples "saw no one except Jesus Himself alone" (v. 8). Christ has both fulfilled and replaced the law—not only for our salvation but also for our progress after salvation. Therefore, the Father's pleasure lies not in the law but in the Son! At His baptism the Father

declared, "This is My Son, the Beloved, in whom I have found My delight" (3:17). What delights the Father is the Son, and what pleases Him is, as Paul says, to "reveal His Son in me" (Gal. 1:15-16).

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Reformation theologians such as Sproul and Kennedy do well in turning unbelievers from the law to Christ for salvation but err in pointing them back to the law after they have believed. Scripture, however, points us ever to Christ: "It is for freedom that Christ has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not be entangled with a yoke of slavery again" (Gal. 5:1), because "Christ is the end of the law unto righteousness to everyone who believes" (Rom. 10:4). Regressing to the

law and attempting to please God by law-keeping (even with the Spirit's assistance, Kennedy 34) are a substantial deviation from the centrality and universality of Christ in God's plan and in the believer's life.

### Christ Rather Than Ethics Being in God's Plan

In *Live for God* Kennedy says,

*We have an ethical system that works.* No way of living ever devised by the human mind can fulfil God's purpose for humanity. That wasn't why these ethical systems came into being, so they simply cannot meet the need. Ours was designed by the Designer of all things. He revealed it to us in the Bible. It is compatible with how we are made....Only Christian ethics has the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit in our hearts to work obedience and purity and holiness within us." (19, 33)

These statements reveal a pervasive notion that the purpose of "the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit" is to enable believers to live according to an ethical standard superior to that of unbelievers, and that a life of law-keeping corresponds to "how we are made." His book asserts that every other religion puts the "cart" (ethical living) before the "horse" (God) and that only "Christianity sets the horse before the cart" (52). In actuality, the New Testament puts the "cart" away entirely and leaves us simply with the "horse." The New Testament plainly discloses God's intention for the law: It should lead us to Christ in order for us to remain with Him (Law ⇒ Christ). Conversely, the proponents of law-keeping portray God's intention as follows: After receiving Christ, we should return to the law in order to please God with our newfound law-keeping ability, which has been fortified by the power of the indwelling Spirit (Law ⇒ Christ ⇒ Law).

The New Testament standard for our living is Christ Himself. While correcting the “foolish” and “bewitched” Galatians (Gal. 3:1) who were reverting to law-keeping as a way of life, Paul repeatedly redirects them to the indwelling Christ, who should be revealed in us (1:16) and formed in us (4:19) to the extent that “it is Christ who lives” in the believers (2:20). Paul further identifies the believers’ living as Christ Himself, not the law, in Philippians 1:21, “For to me, to live is Christ,” and in Colossians 3:4, where he declares that Christ is our very life. Contrast this with the teaching of *Quest* concerning the law: “It is the Christian’s life!” (114). No. *Christ* is the Christian’s life. When reading regressive teachings such as these, one can almost hear Paul lamenting before the Corinthians, “Do you not realize about yourselves that Jesus Christ is in you?” (2 Cor. 13:5).

#### Law-keeping Not Being the God-ordained Way for Spiritual Advancement

Finally, Kennedy’s book says that the law “encourages a closer walk with God” and that its “purposes are God’s grace to us...It helps us live our new life” (21). Where does the New Testament even hint at this? John 1:17 distinguishes unmistakably between the law which was given through Moses and grace which came through Jesus Christ. It is unscriptural to assert that God’s grace somehow visits us through the law rather than through Christ. The book goes on to say that “the law *directs* and...*binds* the child of God” (41). Again, this is antithetical and antagonistic to the New Testament revelation which says that we are directed (led) by the Spirit of God (Rom. 8:14), not by the law, and are bound to Christ by God Himself (2 Cor. 1:21), not by the law.

*Quest* correctly points out “that the Law is a schoolmaster to bring us to Christ” (109). However, it undermines this truth by directing believers to regress to law-keeping for spiritual growth. Sproul says, “One cannot become spiritual by the Law, but we can learn the way of spiritual obedience from the Law” (109). This teaching distracts believers from experiencing the Christ who enjoins us, “Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me” (Matt. 11:29). Astonishingly, *Quest* also affirms that “the incitement of the Law to obedience is a means of grace for the believer. The Law now excites our souls to please our Savior”; and earlier it states that the law “propels us along the pathway of obedience” (114). Comments such as these

reveal a serious deficiency in Reformed theology, namely, the relegating of the gracious and dynamic work of the indwelling Spirit to the demanding yet impotent medium of the law. While Reformation theology has been greatly used by God to clearly enunciate the judicial aspect of God’s salvation, tragically it has not completed its works (Rev. 3:2) by going on to accord equal stress to the organic side of God’s salvation. It has commendably proven that we “were reconciled to God through the death of His Son” (Rom. 5:10a) but it is lacking in giving sufficient heed to the goal of this judicial reconciliation, that of being “saved in His life” (v. 10b). It has, in effect, replaced the “life” in this verse with “law” in regard to the believer’s progress after reconciliation.

Reformation theology, while enunciating the judicial aspect of God’s salvation, has not completed its works by according equal stress to the organic side of God’s salvation.

**W**hat then is God’s ordained way for us to reach the goal of our salvation, “to be conformed to the image of His Son” (Rom. 8:29)? It is found in the revelation of a *new* law, the organic law of the Spirit of life described in Romans 8, which replaces the law of God and the law of good evident in the law-keeper’s struggle in Romans 7. In fact, in the most final and irreversible of terms, Paul burns the bridge linking the believer to the law by invoking the ultimate legal separation: death. He boldly declares to the believers their legal release from the law: “But now we have been discharged from the law, having died to that in which we were held” (7:6). Such a release clears the way for real spiritual advancement to be made, progressing from the hopelessly doomed effort at law-keeping in Romans 7 to a walk according to the spirit in Romans 8, culminating in glorification (v. 30). We are being perfected by the law of the Spirit of life into a life of freedom in the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:17). This is not an anti-nomian declaration whereby license is given to the flesh. Rather, it is a rich entrance into God’s organic salvation whereby we walk according to the spirit, not the law, and thus spontaneously, often unconsciously fulfill “the righteous requirement of the law” (Rom. 8:4).

by Gary Evans

#### Works Cited

- Kennedy, D. James. *How Do I Live for God?* Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1995.
- Sproul, R. C. *The Soul’s Quest for God.* Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1992.