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The "Women's Issue" and the Letter and Spirit of the Law

IRA J. JOLIVET

In 1981, while I was working on my undergraduate degree in biblical studies at the Institute for Christian Studies in Austin, Texas, a minister from the Christian church came to speak with us, and he predicted that Churches of Christ would be struggling with the *women's issue* in 20 years. I became rather indignant at the suggestion, protesting that we would never engage in such a struggle because, unlike the Christian church, we obeyed such commands as those found in 1 Tim 2:11-15 in which Paul states:

Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent. For Adam was formed first, then Eve; and Adam was not deceived, but the woman was deceived and became a transgressor. Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty.

The Christian minister, of course, was right, and I was wrong. Many of our congregations have been struggling with the roles of women in worship and other areas of church life for some time now. Some have seemingly defied the scriptures by allowing women to pray or actively participate in the public assembly. Others have adamantly resisted these kinds of changes, seeing themselves as holding the line against heresy and apostasy. Still others have—for the sake of unity or in the naïve hope that the issue will simply go away if they ignore it—refused to even discuss the role of women in the church.

But nearly everyone recognizes that the issue presents one of the greatest challenges to Churches of Christ today. The challenge arises because people want to be obedient to the will of God as expressed in his Word, but they also sense that talented and bright women—feeling frustration because they are treated as equals everywhere but in the church—are seeking out fellowships where their voices are not marginalized and where they can cultivate and make use of their unique spiritual gifts. Indeed, the future of the Church of Christ may very well depend on how we deal with the issue of women's roles in the church.

Our church scholars have on many occasions attempted to shed light on the issue but have not, as far as I am aware, produced any consensus-building exegetical resolutions. The reason for this is that the problem that the issue generates is one of *hermeneutics*, or how we interpret Scripture, rather than *exegesis*. More specifically, we have great difficulties dealing with the women's issue and other doctrinal matters because our guiding hermeneutical principle of focusing on the commands, examples, and necessary inferences of the New Testament has caused us to strive to follow the letter of the law rather than its intent or spirit.

And as Paul states in 2 Cor 3:6: "the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." The resolution, therefore, lies in interpreting the New Testament the way Jesus and Paul interpreted their authoritative Scriptures, the Hebrew Bible—that is, according to the intent or spirit of the law rather than according to the letter.

ROOTS OF DILEMMA

The roots of our hermeneutical dilemma may be seen in two excerpts from one of the foundational documents of the Restoration Movement, Thomas Campbell's *Declaration and Address*. The first excerpt reads as follows:

Thus have we briefly endeavored to shew our brethren, what evidently appears to us to be the heinous nature and dreadful consequences of the truly latitudinarian principle and practice, which is the bitter root of almost all our divisions; namely, the imposing of our private opinions upon each other, as articles of faith or duty; introducing them into the public profession and practice of the church, and acting upon them, as if they were the express law of Christ, by judging and rejecting our brethren that differ with us in those things; or, at least, by so retaining them in our public profession and practice, that our brethren cannot join with us, or we with them, without becoming actually partakers in those things, which they, or we, cannot, in conscience approve; and which the word of God no where expressly enjoins us. To cease from all such things, by simply returning to the original standard of Christianity—the profession and practice of the primitive church, as expressly exhibited upon the sacred page of New Testament scripture, is the only possible way, that we can perceive, to get rid of those evils. And we humbly think that a uniform agreement in *that* for the preservation of charity would be infinitely preferable to our contentions and divisions: nay, that such a uniformity is the very thing that the Lord requires, if the New Testament be a perfect model—a sufficient formula for the worship discipline and government of the Christian church. Let us do, as we are there expressly told *they* did, say as *they* said: that is, profess and practise as therein expressly enjoined by precept and precedent, in every possible instance, after *their* approved example; and in so doing we shall realize, and exhibit, all that unity and uniformity, that the primitive church possessed, or that the law of Christ requires.

Here we see that Campbell attributed divisions in Christianity to the imposition by some church leaders of *private opinions*, or, interpretations, as matters of faith and duty upon other Christians. Here we also see that Campbell himself sought to bring about unity through adherence to the “law of Christ” which consists of those things that are “expressly enjoined by precept and precedent and by approved example” in the New Testament which he views as a “perfect model, a sufficient formula for the worship, discipline, and government” of the church.

What Campbell means by the key term *expressly* here may be understood in light of the second excerpt in which he elaborates further on the causes of divisions within Christianity.

We say, let them profess what they will, their difference in religious profession and practice originates in their departure from what is expressly revealed and enjoined; and not in their strict and faithful conformity to it—which is the thing we humbly advise for putting an end to those differences. But you may say, do they not already all agree in the letter, though differing so far in the sentiment? However this may be, have they all agreed to make the letter their rule; or rather to make it the subject matter of their profession and practice? Surely no; or else they would all profess and practise the same thing. Is it not as evident as the shining light, that the scriptures exhibit but one and the self same subject matter of profession and practice; at all times, and in all places;—and, that therefore, to say as it declares, and do as it prescribes, in all its holy precepts, its approved and imitable examples, would unite the Christian church in a holy sameness of profession and practice, throughout the whole world?

Here it is clear that Campbell equates speaking as the New Testament declares and doing as it prescribes in precepts and by example with adhering to the letter of the law. It is also obvious that he sincerely believed that the way to achieve Christian unity was to adhere strictly to this letter of the law.

As Campbell’s spiritual descendants, we in the Churches of Christ have inherited his well-intentioned goal of achieving Christian unity. Unfortunately, we have also inherited his likewise well-intentioned but highly problematic view of the New Testament as a legal document that must be followed to the letter. This view is problematic because it is the exact opposite of the way the New Testament figures and writers, including the apostle Paul and Jesus himself, interpreted their authoritative scriptures.

PAUL’S VIEW OF LAW

In Rom 2:28-29, for example, Paul writes:

For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a mat-

ter of the heart—it is spiritual and not literal. Such a person receives praise not from others but from God.

And in Rom 7:6 he goes on to write, “But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we are slaves not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit.” In both of these passages, Paul was sending loud and clear signals to his audience at Rome—who were certainly more rhetorically sensitive than modern readers of Romans—that he was arguing for following the spirit of the law rather than the letter.

In fact, when the whole argument of Romans is seen in this light, it becomes clear that Paul’s purpose in writing to the church at Rome was to heal the divisions which had arisen because the Jewish converts who continued to follow the letter of the Torah’s dietary and sacred calendar laws were judging and boasting over the Gentile members who did not do likewise. Paul sums up his argument succinctly in Rom 14:17-18 when he writes: “For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. The one who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and has human approval.”

The conclusion would have been obvious to Paul’s audience: God’s subjects in his new kingdom follow the Spirit and not the letter of the Torah.

JESUS’ VIEW OF LAW

Jesus’ teachings in the Sermon on the Mount lead to the same conclusion. For in Matt 5:31-32 he states:

It was also said, “Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.” But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

Those to whom Jesus spoke knew that he was interpreting Deut 24:1-4 which reads:

Suppose a man enters into marriage with a woman, but she does not please him because he finds something objectionable about her, and so he writes her a certificate of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house; she then leaves his house and goes off to become another man’s wife. Then suppose the second man dislikes her, writes her a bill of divorce, puts it in her hand, and sends her out of his house (or the second man who married her dies); her first husband, who sent her away, is not permitted to take her again to be his wife after she has been defiled; for that would be abhorrent to the Lord, and you shall not bring guilt on the land that the Lord your God is giving you as a possession.

In this letter of the law on divorce and remarriage, we see that the woman had no rights whatsoever. She was also completely vulnerable. Furthermore, the man bore no responsibility for guilt. Jesus’ interpretation rectifies this situation. The husband cannot divorce his wife for any frivolous reason, and if he does, he bears responsibility for causing her to sin. Jesus has found the true intent of God behind the letter of the law. And that intent is true justice.

As we see in Amos 5:21-24, God’s intent has always been justice:

I hate, I despise your festivals,
and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them;
and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals
I will not look upon.
Take away from me the noise of your songs;
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.

But let justice roll down like waters,
and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

In this passage, we see that the Israelites were following the letter of the law when it came to sacrifice and other cultic rituals. But God speaking through the prophet rebuked them and revealed that what he really requires from his people is that they treat others, especially the oppressed, justly.

God's intent was shown to be consistent over time when centuries later Jesus addressed those who strove to follow the letter of the law meticulously with these words:

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. (Matt 23:23)

In these words of Jesus, we see once again that justice is the intent of God behind the letter of the law. Since Jesus spoke these words, people like Thomas Campbell have attempted to interpret the New Testament as a new letter of the law. But God has worked in human history to show us that his intent has not changed.

We see this with the issue of slavery in America. For centuries enslaved African-American Christians prayed to God for deliverance from the oppression of one of the most brutal institutions ever devised by humans. While these Christians were praying, other Christians were justifying owning, buying, and selling their brothers and sisters in Christ by appealing to passages such as Eph 6:5-8 in which Paul states:

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ; not only while being watched, and in order to please them, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. Render service with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not to men and women, knowing that whatever good we do, we will receive again from the Lord, whether we are slaves or free.

Slave-owning Christians used this and similar passages to condone slavery as ordained by God and to perpetuate it in America. Eventually, God answered the prayers of his enslaved people and delivered them from bondage. In so doing, he also revealed that the letter of the law is sometimes at odds with his intent, which is always consistent with true justice for the oppressed.

Today we are treating women unjustly in our churches by following the letter rather than the intent of the law. We do this primarily by denying that they have a voice or any significant spiritual gifts. The injustice that we inflict upon them begins when we teach our young girls that their opinions do not really matter. We teach them this lesson explicitly when we command them to be silent in the church. We teach them this implicitly when we encourage young boys to participate in every aspect of the worship service as soon as they are baptized while girls who obey the gospel are basically encouraged to go back to their seats and sit quietly and submissively as men tell them what to think.

For the most part, those who learned from Thomas Campbell to adhere meticulously to the commands and examples of the New Testament sided with those who used the letter of the law to perpetuate slavery and therefore failed to live up to the true intent of God to treat the oppressed justly. With the women's issue, God is giving us another chance to understand and comply with his eternal intent, which perhaps he expressed through Paul's words in Gal 3:28: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."

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