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## The Biblical Leader: What They Teach

One of Ken's childhood memories, from the days of the *good ol' Westerns* was the seemingly ageless acting portrayed by Walter Brennan. Even in the latter years of his film career, he was fond of saying, "There aint no easy answers to hard questions!"

That is true. Even in an age where scientific facts and philosophic formulas are reduced to milliseconds or brief paradigms of logic, facts are facts. Tough questions demand tough answers.

After suggesting a biblical model that requires elders to both pastor and teach, the flock, the question remains: what do these men teach? The simple solution might be to respond: "Why, the Scriptures, of course." And that is true. But elders are not just ministers of the Word. They are the ministers of the Word of grace. They are the recipients — personally — and the stewards — corporately — along with the Church, of the results of the whole of revelation from both Testaments. They are, now, to be strengthened by grace (Heb 13:9) along with the saints, and teachers who, along with the brotherhood, grow in that selfsame grace and knowledge (2 Pet 3:18). As such, it is helpful to understand the Testaments in a way that lifts up grace,

and the Author of mercy — our Lord Jesus Christ — as the frontispiece of all that the Kingdom of God represents.

### **ISRAEL: HOW ODD OF GOD TO CHOOSE THE JEW**

In some respects, the study of Scripture is a study in opposites. Certainly, we have already noted that a leader who has ambitions (in the best sense) to be first is to be last. The one who stays at the feet ends up *closest* to the Head. Further, from the example of the cross, it takes death to produce life. By the death of one Man, life is secured for the many. Now, we come to the Old Testament, and Israel.

It is noted, even by the casual reader of the Old Testament narratives, that God consistently chose men who often tried their best to break all the rules He laid down. Noah went into a tailspin in the last years of his life. Abraham used his wife for physical survival, and political alliances — as a bargaining chip. And Moses dared to insist on his inabilities to speak eloquently to the Pharaoh — despite the statements of Scripture declaring the opposite about this adopted son of the Pharaoh (cf. Gen 9, 12, 20; Ex 3-4; Acts 7).

So, we are not entirely surprised God chose Israel — for His own purposes — as the nation intended to give physical demonstration of His grace. But, what were His purposes for Israel? How were they to illustrate the truths of salvation, life, and fellowship?

### **ONE NATION, UNDER GOD**

It has been appropriately noted that the Law, like a white elephant gift, brings mixed feelings. You can hardly throw it out. Yet, what should you do with it?<sup>1</sup> Closet corners, and attic spaces, collect white elephants with discreet ignominy. What should the Christian leader — responsible for the teaching of the Scriptures — think about the Law? What should he do with it?

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Israel was, in the truest sense, one nation under God. She was to demonstrate the nature of a relationship—between man and God. But, in the greatest sense, the question of *what was the nature of this relationship* forms the greatest interpretational distinction for the proper understanding of the Law, and the Old Testament.<sup>2</sup>

One step back will give additional perspective. After reviewing world history (Gen 1-11) which identifies Israel as originating from the generations of man as the offspring of Adam, Moses records (Gen 12-50) the divine origination of Israel from the will of God. This will sovereignly, and unconditionally, established a covenant—actually, in terms of biblical history, *the covenant*—with man. Abraham, and his descendents, were promised, in a binding and obligatory manner, a certain land, a numerous seed, and special blessings (Gen 12:1-3, 15, cf. 22). Despite the shenanigans of Isaac and Jacob, God's promises remained true.

Therefore, when the remarkable facts of Exodus begin, the covenant is still in effect:

*During that long period, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God. God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them (Ex 2:23-25).*

This was further illustrated by the events of the Passover (Ex 12), which, based upon the provision of sacrificial blood, provide grace—salvation or preservation—for the nation. Thus, Israel's faith during her last days in Egypt, coupled with God's faithfulness to his own promises to the generations of Abraham, established the redeemed *relationship* between God and Israel—which fills the rest of the Old Testament, and prepares the reader for the Person and Work of Jesus.

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This brings us to Exodus 19, and the Law. Ultimately, the Law reveals the character of God—as seen in hundreds of moral commands or imperatives. Given that Israel, based on the promises to Abraham, and the grace-provisions of the blood (or sacrifices), is a redeemed people—or that one nation under God—by the time of the giving of the Law, then the principle aspect the Law reveals is that of *fellowship*.

This point is all-important. If the Law was the means of regeneration or salvation, then salvation would be by works. This is not the case for either the Old or New Testaments (cf Rom 4:4-5, Eph 2:8-9). The Law was for a people already redeemed, though it had specific application to only the remnant within Israel (cf Rom 9:6-30). The Law was the means of fellowship—the continuance of relationship necessary for spiritual maturity and growth.

Note what the context of the giving of the Law says about this:

*Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation....The people all responded together, 'We will do everything the Lord has said.' So Moses brought their answer back to the Lord (Ex 19:5-6, 8).*

The purpose of the Law was to provide a test for Israel (cf Ex 20:20a). The result was to be that, in this environment of obligated obedience, Israel would understand more deeply who she was, and who God was.

This is further demonstrated. Israel was, as believers of today are, a spiritually fragile people. Just as James say, “For we all stumble in many ways” (Jam 3:2), so, similarly, did Israel. Consequently, the Law served the attendant purpose of a test which revealed failures and inabilities.

This proved true for Israel. The Law was to keep Israel from

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sinning (cf Ex 20:20b). It was to provide forgiveness necessary for maintaining fellowship (cf. Lev 1:2, 2:1, 3:1, 4:2-3, 5:15). Within her sin and failure, Israel was to be constantly reminded of the need of grace to sustain a maturing relationship—even as grace had started the covenant-relationship with Abraham.

The second provision of the Law, similarly, promoted the theme of fellowship:

*If you fully obey the Lord your God and carefully follow all his commands I give you today, the Lord your God will set you high above all the nations on earth. All these blessings will come upon you and accompany you if you obey the Lord your God (Deut 28:1-2).*

In other words, the Law was to provide the basis for enjoyment of the benefits of the Abrahamic covenant. Just as obedience led to blessing, so the Mosaic covenant (the Law) made provision for the Abrahamic covenant.

Because of the righteous standard of God (cf Matt 5:48), obedience to the Law could not establish Israel's righteousness with God (cf Matt 5:17-20, Rom 4:2-5, Rom 10:2-10, Gal 3:11-22, Phil 3:4-11, Jam 2:10). The question is not relationships established through righteous behavior (what we normally call *salvation*), but relationships continued through obedience (what we normally call *sanctification*, or fellowship).

The New Testament sequel: the purposes of the Law, as we have seen, are reaffirmed in the progress of revelation. The Law was designed to expose sin, and it did this well:

*For if those who live by law are heirs, faith has no value and the promise is worthless, because law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression. So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good (Rom 4:14-15, 7:12).*

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The Law exposed the holy and righteous and good standard of God in a way that proved the facts of sin, and, correspondingly, pointed to the necessity of the Messiah:

*So the law was put in charge to lead us to Christ that we might be justified by faith. Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law (Gal 3:24-25).*

This, as the Pharisee Saul realized (Rom 7:7-9), establishing the Law as a tutor—a signpost—which gave the eternal answer to the condemnation realized by the exposure of sin.

To sum, then: the purposes of the Law were twofold:

1. *To, through the revelation of the character of God, reveal sin.* For the Old Testament saint—illustrated by Israel—this was necessary for *maintaining fellowship and blessing*. For the unbeliever—illustrated by the Gentiles—it revealed the need for Jesus as Messiah.
2. *To point to the Messiah Jesus, in whom is justification by faith—and grace.*

Two purposes: *exposure and disclosure*. Both give God ultimate glory, and show off (in the best sense) Christ as the One worthy of honor, and praise, and obedience.

### OF MYTHS AND MEN: NAKED KING EXPOSED

Moving toward to goal of understanding the message of the Bible as a message of grace—from salvation to sanctification—we are ready to debunk some common assumptions, or myths, about the Old Testament, and expose the naked king—to follow the fable of the dishonest tailors who were paid for making a *beautiful* though invisible garment for a vain potentate.

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Three myths follow closely from misunderstanding the focus and purposes of the covenants and Law of the Old Testament:

1. Typically, the Law is understood as bad. Whether it is because of its high and righteous standard, or its good function of exposure and condemnation, Christian leaders almost take an adversarial relationship to it.
2. Typically, Christian leaders understand the Law as giving the Old Testament requirements for salvation. This is equally disastrous. This is as possible, as a purpose, as swimming from California to Hawaii!

To illustrate, ask a believer in your church what was the purpose of the Levitical offerings. In our research, at least three times out of five they will say, “It was the way the Old Testament Israelite was saved.” A myriad of New Testament passages, given earlier in this chapter, expose the error of this thinking.

3. Correspondingly, typically, too many Christian leaders associate legalism with obeying the Law, or portions of the Old Testament. While a thinking believer must be discriminating about what, and how, Old Testament texts are applied today,<sup>3</sup> obeying the Law is not legalism! Legalism is an external obedience to religious commands or standards for the purpose of exalting self.<sup>4</sup> It is theological suicide to equate sincere obedience of Scriptural commands with the Pharisaic patterns of legalism.

Moving from myths to men, the conversation at lunch was the result of a discussion during the last elders’ meeting. Ken had mentioned that women were not to teach men, as taught in 1 Timothy 3<sup>5</sup>. The senior pastor, however, felt that that view was an extreme position—labeling it legalism. During further discussion the

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pastor illustrated his own position with a *stay-off-the-grass* concept. Basically, he held that a stay-off-the-grass sign on a university campus would apply only to the student population, while the facility would be exempt. The only logical conclusion was that God's desires do not apply to every believer equally. And how would one know if he or she would have to obey which command, unless someone inform them. Whom might that be?

God is not in the business of confusing people. In fact, His commands are obvious. The problem is not in understanding the implications of God's desires; rather, it is in obeying those desires. He never puts up a sign that says, "Stay off the grass" and then says, "Now, guess to whom this applies?" However, we find pragmatic leadership within the church who are willing to confuse and/or distort the truth, whether out of ignorance or deceit, for their advantage. They provide their own opinions—not God's. This is not only a modern-day phenomenon; the Pharisees and Sadducees did the same two thousand years ago.

The Pharisees and Sadducees were the epitome of hypocrisy. They were everything the Law spoke *against*, and every reason Christ came to save sinners. Yet, they played the game as if they were the very opposite! They paraded themselves through the opinions and judgments of men as the ones who were the keepers of the gates of the Kingdom. For who they were, and the lies they represented, our Lord saved no indictments in exposing their naked and phony words and lives.

In Matthew 23, the jig is up! Survey the following list from this chapter:

- do not do what they do
- they do not practice what they preach
- unwilling to lift heavy loads
- *everything they do is done for man to see*
- hypocrites
- blind guides
- blind fools
- blind men
- like whitewashed tombs
- full of wickedness
- descendents of those who murdered the prophets



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- shut the kingdom of heaven in men's faces
- not part of kingdom
- restrict those who want to enter kingdom
- sons of hell
- snakes
- brood of vipers
- upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on the earth

This condemnation by Christ shows these men for what they were. They were men who were committed to themselves rather than God, and committed to a religious show, not a righteous service.

Further, this list reveals the two errors of legalism, of which the Pharisees made a profession and vocation:

1. The legalist comes to God, and his Law, with a *wrong spirit*. That is, the Pharisees life-premise is one of bargaining or negotiation. He believes he can obligate God to bless him—by an external, or self-righteousness.
2. The legalist comes to God, and his Law, with a *wrong source of strength*. He determines that by self-determination—what Paul called a “confidence in the flesh” (Phil 3:3)—he can keep the commandments. Of course, he quickly realizes he cannot, and, so, he begins to whitewash the facts by pulling the mask of hypocrisy over the “dead men’s bones” of spiritual poverty.

The formula was lethal: a wrong spirit + a wrong confidence + a large measure of religious phony = one who is a son of hell, and who leads others into similar condemnation. No wonder Christ verbally took off the gloves—so-to-speak.

If that is the problem, then what is the solution? The *solution is radical heart surgery*. The Old Testament Law had three parts: moral, ceremonial, and civil. By the time of the New Testament, the ceremonial and civil are done away—only the moral is left. But to accomplish the moral standards of God—either from the Old or New Testament—requires an obedience toward God based upon

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gratitude for the relationship He has granted us. The Law shows the need, but it did not give the solution! God must reorient us so that we can act toward Him, then we must follow Him in obedience.

### THE LORDSHIP OF CHRIST: GOOD ANSWERS TO GOOD QUESTIONS

In the most tragic sense, the Pharisees were the blind leading the blind. It was tragic, because it didn't need to be. Christ challenged Nicodemus, "You are Israel's teacher, and do you not understand these things" (John 3:10)? But, because these rulers of the Sanhedrin chose to see God, and His Word, with spiritual blinders, they will represent an eternal standard of religious hypocrisy and death. They had their reward—in this life only.

If "there ain't no easy answers to hard questions," even so, there are good answers to good questions. The conclusion to the matter of properly understanding the Law and the Prophets is seen in the words and Person of Christ—in matters of love and Lordship:

*Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. One of them, an expert in the Law, tested him with this question: 'Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?' Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments' (Mt 22:34-40).*

The sum of the Law — as well as the whole of the Old Testament — was the need for loving God, and loving others. While the Law could not provide the means for loving others, Christ could. In providing a new heart, He changes men's motivation from self to others in gratitude for the work of God in their lives. As such, Christ became both the means and end of the Law, and of life! And that is grace!

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For that reason, the Scriptures could say two seemingly contradictory things that are both true—bound together by the grace of Christ:

*We know that the law is good if one uses it properly. We also know that law is made not for the righteous but for the law-breakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful....Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law (1 Tim 1:8-9, Rom 3:31).*

The Law was good, and was to expose and condemn. Seeing it properly affirms the value of it, and upholds it as a gift of grace which pointed to Christ. As such, the Law both condemned, and is confirmed.

John's family meets weekly with a brother who is a local veterinarian—and with his family. This friendship has occasionally taken the two men into the operating room of the local animal hospital. When the problem is an infected abscess, there are two alternatives: it can be covered over, and ignored. Or it can be opened up, lanced, drained, and properly bandaged. The proper solution is only the latter. Otherwise, the infection spreads. So it is with a proper understanding of the human condition in relation to the Law. Man can either cover up the obvious malady, or he can admit it for what it is—and pursue a spiritually medicinal solution that solves the problem, and moves the patient toward a real cure. The Pharisees tried a bandaid approach to a spiritual abscess. Saul of Tarsus, upon conviction and conversion, took the lance-drain approach, and got the cure!

The Lordship of Christ, then, is a message for one who has had this cure—this heart solution. It is the standard of loving God, and loving others “rather” than loving ourselves. It is the serving of others, as evidenced by the story of the good samaritan (cf Luke 10), as a measure of obedience to God.

In this sense, a disciple is known by his fruit. A believer is known by his life. A saint is known by his works. If the relation-

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ship is real, the life will issue into obedience. And this obedience will be measured by service. Loving God, then, is measured by obedience (cf. John 14:23). Loving others is measuring by serving them—rather than ourselves (John 15:12-17).

To the question, can Christ be Savior without being Lord?—there must be two answers: “yes” and “no.” “Yes” in the sense that grace is not what we offer to God—by way of works, commitment, self-righteousness, or even relative merit. It is what God, in Christ, has given us. But the answer is also “no” in the sense that we cannot simply *take* the eternal security of the relationship without an intent to progressively recognize Him as the Author of all of life as we know it.

This is easily illustrated in 1 Peter. In 1 Peter 1, the saints, twice, are called “given new birth” or “born again.” Yet, in 1 Peter 3:15, they are challenged to “set apart Christ as Lord.” The point, then, is that both are, at the same time, true. Christ is our Savior by grace. We can add nothing. But He also expects us to grow—to increasingly make him Ruler of each area of our life—because we love Him, and because we must obey Him.

This, then, draws the issue of lordship, grace, and a proper understanding of Scripture together. No wonder Paul wrote, by way of summary:

*For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision has any value. The only thing that counts is faith expressing itself through love (Gal 5:6).*

We are saved by grace through Christ, not by Christ plus obedience to Old Testament regulations—even the best of the regulations. We are saved through faith, and not by what we are, or can do. And our faith—being real and transforming—is to issue in love. It is to be seen in love for God, and love for others. That is *the only thing that counts*. That’s Jesus as the Christ—and Lord. That’s the Lord Jesus Christ.

## **CHURCH LEADERS: HOW ODD OF GOD TO CHOOSE US, TOO**

Now we have moved full-circle concerning who leaders in the church are, and what it is they represent and teach. In the New Testament, *elders were both spokesmen and showmen of the grace of Christ*. They were to pastor and teach—by their understanding of the Scriptures, and represent—by their lives and ministry—the grace of God. This included a proper understanding of the doctrines of the Scripture which were forerunners to Christ, and the basic truths that issued from His Person and work, and followed in the historic train of the first century church.

Consequently, it has significant bearing on the nature of the Church, and the relationship of leaders and believers to the Lord Jesus Christ, for us to understand who we are, and whom we are to serve. In our judgment, the plurality of elders as team leaders who, together, shepherd the flock of a local assembly best reflects the requirements of specific New Testament texts—as well as corporately defers ultimate authority for the Church to its Head, which is the life of the Body (cf. Col 3:4).

Misunderstanding these matters is something like choosing golf as a sport-of-recreation (we know we are going to be in trouble with the PGA over this one!). There is some exercise value to golf. It has been likened to the physical recreational value of canasta!<sup>5</sup> But there are a number of sports that offer better exercise—physically-speaking.<sup>6</sup> Given average abilities, choosing to stay with golf—instead of a real man's sport like racquetball(!)—is equivalent to, in our opinion, choosing tradition or confusion over the proper management of the church of the living God. There might be some value, but why settle for less than the better, or the best?

Before there is a run on cheap sets of golf clubs—or before we are run over by golf carts—let us repeat the point. God did not leave us guessing on matters of church leadership. This is not just a matter of everyone differing in their opinions—therefore, any practice is

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admissible. It is not a cultural issue to be determined differently in different lands, or economic strata.

It is the consistent message of the Scriptures that we are to be led in our churches by a plurality of elders who, with careful parity—shepherd *and* teach the flock, and look together to the One who is the Shepherd and Savior of our souls. As such, we are to be ministers of a New Covenant—giving praise to God the Father through Christ for the grace that has released us from the obligation of sin, and given us the ability to obey our Lord, and serve others as an expression of our love for Him.

Now, we know that is hard work! But, then, so is the Christian life. If we are right, then what is set before us, as leaders and believers alike, is both hard, and possible—by faith, and through love. That kind of spiritual exercise beats even racquetball!