

Scylla and Charybdis

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Can you imagine yourself in the peril of the ancient mariner who had to slip his ship through the narrow channel that squeezed between the sea monster Scylla on one side and the whirlpool Charybdis on the other? Or, in a more contemporary daydream, can you picture yourself in the shoes of Tiger Woods, trying to hit the narrow isthmus between the sand trap on the left and the water hazard on the right? Do you ever feel the tension of the tightrope walker—a lean to the left or a slip to the right could lead to a quick death?

If you're a pastor you can answer "yes" to all those questions because every day you steer between the Scylla of legalism on the one side and the Charybdis of antinomianism on the other. Every person by nature flits back and forth between legalism and antinomianism. Whether a person is a legalist or an antinomian at any given moment depends on which approach best justifies his own conduct at that moment. Is it more advantageous for him to excuse his conduct by erasing God's law or to force others into his mold by harsh enforcement of the law? Will he be more popular if he overlooks sin or if he comes down hard on those who are offending the congregation? It is generally not principle that makes a person an antinomian or legalist in any given situation, but self-centered convenience.

If keeping a balance between these hazards is an issue for every Christian every day, the problem is even greater for the pastor because he is responsible not only for his own course, but also for leading the flock that Christ has entrusted to his care on the right path and for leading those outside the fold into their Savior's arms. His actions and attitudes have an effect not only on his own happiness but on the eternal welfare of many others.

Though every person (and every era) is both legalistic and antinomian at the same time, the pendulum does seem to swing back and forth between the two extremes. In the earlier epistles of the New Testament, as a result of confrontation with the Judaizers, the problem of legalism is in the foreground (Romans, Galatians) though antinomianism too was threatening (James, 1 Corinthians). As the apostolic era drew to a close, antinomianism seems to have come to the fore (2 Peter, Jude, Revelation). Before Luther came on the scene, legalism dominated the church, but how quickly after the emergence of the gospel antinomianism reared its head.

So where is the pendulum today? Though the factors which pull a person one way or the other vary with every individual, which hazard is the greater danger for the church today? More, specifically, what are some of the most prevalent temptations in either direction for WELS pastors today? These questions were subjects for discussion during the Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary summer quarter class, "The Christian and the Law," during the 2005 session. Some of the insights and suggestions of the class are incorporated into this article. Though legalism is the natural religion of every person, antinomianism is the predominant philosophy of our time and our society. People want to be free from any restraints on their personal freedom, whether in regard to sexual mores, the use of possessions, or faithfulness to their commitments. The Lutheran church is being drowned in a flood of antinomianism. In the Lutheran state churches of Europe virtually every standard of doctrine and morality has been cast aside. Live-in relationships are overtaking marriage as the preferred lifestyle. The sanctity of life is being set aside. The acceptance of abortion and women pastors and the standoff over gay marriage/unions and homosexual pastors in the ELCA show that American Lutheranism is not that far behind.

The Dangers of Antinomianism

Antinomianism is any view that sets aside any stipulation of God's law. There are two main forms of antinomianism: the kind that grants license for gross immorality and the kind that claims that the Christian does not need the law since he is guided by the Spirit or by the gospel. It is this second brand of antinomianism that is the greatest threat to the evangelical Christian. Among the various forms of relative ethics, the most dangerous form of antinomianism for Christians is "situation ethics" which substitutes love for the law as a

standard of conduct. The motto sounds so appealing—“let love be your guide.”

We could, in fact, use love as our standard for what is right if we had no sinful nature. If we had no sinful nature, we would understand that there is no difference between what love requires and what God’s law requires. The content is identical. God’s law requires us to warn against error or sin. Love requires us to warn against error and sin. God’s law requires us to separate from persistent errorists. Love requires us to separate from persistent errorists. God’s law warns the homosexual or immoral person against his or her sin. Love warns the homosexual or immoral person against his or her sin. But because the sinful nature is so clever at disguising its selfish desires as love, the Christian person still needs God’s law to tell him what real love is (Romans 13:10).

Though the Christian no longer lives *under* the law with its curses and threat, he does not live *without* God’s law but he lives *in* Christ’s law: 1 Corinthians 9:20,21, “To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law, though I myself am *not under* the law (μη ὄν ὑπὸ νόμου), so as to win those under the law. To those not having the law I became like one not having the law (though I am not *without* God’s law (μη ὄν ἄνομος θεοῦ) but am *in* Christ’s law (ἐννομος Χριστοῦ), so as to win those not having the law.”

Antinomianism substitutes some other standard for God’s law as the rule for life. This error is illustrated by Robert Schuller in his manifesto *Self-Esteem: the New Reformation*:

Whereas the sixteenth century Reformation returned our focus to sacred Scriptures as the only infallible rule for faith and practice, the new reformation will return our focus to the sacred right of every person to self-esteem! (p 38) Sin is “any human condition or act that robs God of glory by stripping one of this children of their divine right to dignity” (p.14). The most serious sin is the one that causes me to say “I am unworthy. I may have no claim to divine sonship if you examine me at my worst” (p 98).

Closer to home this error is illustrated by the first bishop of the ELCA, Herbert Chilstrom:

The prescriptive method [of using Scripture] is based on the assumption that Scripture is used to discover final answers to questions. Thus, when confronted with a particularly thorny issue, one could go to Scripture, study carefully every text that addresses the issue and come up with a conclusive response. Scripture as “norm” means Scripture as answer book. I suspect that most of us in the LCA come at these matters from the descriptive method. We see Scripture as no less important....But for us “norm” means “guide” rather than “rule.” Having informed ourselves of what Scripture has to say, we go on to ask questions about other ways in which God may be trying to enlighten us (*The Lutheran*, March 21, 1984).

Is it any wonder that the ELCA is in the mess it is in trying to resolve internal tensions concerning homosexuality and other moral and doctrinal issues. When there are no more rules but only guides or suggestions, the ship has no rudder.

A more subtle form of antinomianism is presented by evangelical feminism in an argument that has sometimes been heard among us:

I submit that Galatians 3:28 is not only restricted to our relationship with God, but is in fact to be our model for every relationship on this earth. We are to reflect and model God’s relationship to us to every other person in this world. This should be especially true among those in the faith, in the church, in the Lord.

This form of antinomianism is especially insidious because it makes the gospel into a law for conduct. This is, in fact, the ultimate outcome of every form of antinomianism among Christians. Because people cannot live without some standard, where the law has been discarded, the gospel inevitably becomes law. This principle was demonstrated in the LCMS by the “gospel reductionism” of Seminex and the so-called Valparaiso theology, in which the denial of the third use of the law (the law as a rule) led to a redefinition of the gospel to include legal concepts. The gospel was no longer the purely gratuitous promise of God to the anxious sinner. In the absence of law, the gospel is forced to take on a foreign work which it cannot do. When the law cannot be

used to show Christians what love and good works God wills, the gospel takes over this “parenthetic” (exhortatory or admonitory) purpose. (See Scott Murray, *Law, Life, and the Living God: The Third Use of the Law in Modern American Lutheranism*).

This same error is repeated in many of the contemporary arguments against the application of the biblical principles of fellowship or the roles of men and women in the church. “Love” is proposed as a substitute for God’s law as a guide to conduct. The antinomian temptation is to ignore principles of God’s law that seem to stand in the way of gaining new members because they are counter-intuitive to most people outside the church. Examples occur most often in the area of sexual morality, marriage and divorce, roles of men and women, and the doctrine of fellowship.

Perhaps the form of antinomianism most dangerous to confessional Lutherans is not explicit or open antinomianism but practical or virtual antinomianism. Christians fail to admonish one another in the course of daily life. The pastor keeps silent about unscriptural divorce or living together without marriage to avoid losing members or to avoid offending family members of those who should be disciplined. The congregation may neglect church discipline for the same reason, ignoring the fact that if people are living impenitently in sin, they have already been lost to the church, and the need now is to regain them. Practical antinomianism is present when preaching of the law becomes vague and non-specific, or it focuses on sins prevalent in the world outside rather than in the church. Practical antinomianism is present when the preaching and teaching of the church fail to project a zeal for sanctification.

The gospel does not provide the guide for Christian conduct. It provides the motive and the power. The law does not provide the motive for Christian conduct. It provides a guide. There is no sanctifying power in the law, but it does provide steady, sure direction. The law is like a set of railroad tracks, rigidly leading to the right place. But railroad tracks, like the law, have no power in them to produce movement. The power that propels the “engine” of faith is the gospel of Christ. Trying to promote Christian sanctification without the law is like racing a train where the tracks have been ripped up. Trying to promote sanctification without the gospel is like trying to push the train down the tracks by your own power without an engine.

The Dangers of Legalism

Because the term is so often misused, we must begin by defining “legalism.” The use of the law is not legalism. Legalism is the misuse of the law, for example:

- Using the law as a way of salvation
- Elevating human tradition to divine law
- Using the law to motivate sanctification
- Using the law to coerce behavior
- Using the law with a self-righteous spirit
- Using the law with an unevangelical spirit.

Living in the law is not legalism. Jesus never condemned scrupulous attention to doctrine and life. “Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cummin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. *You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.* You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel” (Matthew 23:23-24). The Pharisees’ problem was two-fold: like all legalists they majored in minors and minored in majors. Jesus stressed the opposite: putting the greatest emphasis on the chief points of law and gospel, but not neglecting any point of doctrine or Christian living.

Piety and zeal for piety are not legalism. Pietism is. When a pious person becomes frustrated at what he perceives as a lack of sanctification in himself or other Christians, pietism beckons. The temptation is to resort to legalistic rules and methods (cf. Methodism) to produce more satisfying levels of sanctification rather than relying on the power of the gospel.

Orthodoxy and zeal for orthodoxy are not legalism. Orthodoxy, however, may be, if it fails to speak the truth of the gospel in love with those who do not know it or are not following it.

Even the use of the law as a curb of evil conduct is not necessarily legalism. There are cases where strict rules and “a fence around the law” may be necessary. The Christian who has become addicted to alcohol or pornography may need to adhere to strict rules: no use of alcohol, no presence at parties where there is drinking going on, no hidden computer use, monitoring of all computer use by a Christian friend, etc. The purpose and nature of such regulations is not legalistic but evangelical, care for the weak.

Walther’s *Law and Gospel* gives a thorough catalog of the ways of legalism: moralizing, manipulating Christian conduct by playing on guilt or promising reward, motivating Christian conduct primarily by needs or by hoped for results rather than by love of God, and using harsh preaching of the law as a kind of purgatorial exorcising of guilt. An occasional re-reading is a good antidote to legalism.

Fraternal Twins

Antinomianism and legalism may seem like opposites, but antinomianism and legalism are simply sliding positions on a spectrum of lawlessness.

To be sure, looking at the matter superficially, we could draw up a list of contrasts between antinomianism and legalism. The antinomian seems to subtract from God’s law, and the legalist seems to add to it. The antinomian thinks he can accomplish his aims with no methods or guidelines. The legalist thinks that you can’t accomplish anything without a method or, worse yet, he imagines that if only you can come up with the right method, you can accomplish anything. The antinomian absolves the impenitent, and the legalist fails to absolve the penitent.

But all these contrasts are superficial and partial. The similarities of the legalist and antinomian are much greater than the differences. Most importantly, both the legalist and the antinomian destroy the law, and both the legalist and the antinomian destroy the gospel.

Every legalist is a selective antinomian. To come up with a law that he imagines he can keep, he must perform radical surgery on God’s law. He cuts off the top of God’s law which he cannot keep even in pretense (love the Lord with all your heart, do not covet, every unclean thought is sin). To the bottom of God’s law he adds all kinds of external rules that he thinks he can keep (do not use alcohol, do not play cards). His version of God’s law is a mutilation which retains none of the law’s bite and power.

Every antinomian is a selective legalist. His style of opposing legalism is every bit as legalistic as the legalist’s opposition to antinomianism is. The antinomian can close his eyes to abortion but will demonstrate violently on behalf of baby seals. He can be very accepting of every moral aberration, but vehement in his oppression of any claims of absolute truth.

The legalist and the antinomian are fraternal twins, or at least kissing cousins, because both of them are guided by their own desires rather than by God’s will. The journey from legalism to antinomianism and back again is like circling the earth from pole to pole. No matter what direction you set out from the North Pole, you are heading south. But travel far enough and you will have passed the other pole and be heading north again. So the legalist and the antinomian are traveling the same journey, fleeing God’s law, but circling endlessly and never able to escape it. The legalist tries to escape guilt by rewriting God’s law, the antinomian by erasing it. Both attempts are equally futile. The only escape from the curse of the law is through the gospel. But neither the legalist nor the antinomian can retain the gospel. The legalist has destroyed the gospel by using the law as a way of salvation. He makes the law part of the gospel. The antinomian nullifies the gospel by converting it into a law. He too makes the law part of the gospel. Neither retains the gospel as what it really is—the gracious declaration, not of what we are to do, but of what Christ has done.

Losing the law means losing the gospel. That is why the evangelical pastor dreads both the Scylla of legalism and the Charybdis of antinomianism. For the minister of the gospel his ministry of the law is a “strange work.” It is not an end in itself—it is subservient to the gospel. For him the bottom line is that his love for the gospel leads him to abhor anything that will obscure the gospel. Legalism and antinomianism both obscure the

gospel, therefore with the help of the Holy Spirit the evangelical pastor guards against them both.

Though the evangelical pastor never relaxes his guard against either pitfall, he is relaxed. Unlike the legalist or the antinomian, he is at peace with himself because he is at peace with God. His peace comes from the gospel, which has freed him from the curse of the law. He no longer sees the law as a burden, but he delights in the law of God as the perfect expression of this Father's will. Though not under the law, he lives in the perfect law of liberty, and he leads others to follow him on that path.