

Walking By His Rule

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INTRODUCTION

From the Garden of Eden, Satan has promised that there is great freedom and blessing in humanity's autonomy. In his lie to Eve, the serpent led her to believe that she could be like God—in custody of great knowledge and in position to rule. In their sin, Adam and Eve opened a Pandora's Box of sin. Were people to view the human existence from a heavenly perspective, they would see the tremendous limits that rest with human finitude. They would also see the terrible consequences for overstating humanity's abilities.

On the other hand, one who saw the Christian life as heaven does would see order, eternal prosperity, stability and an abounding joy in existence. But this is predicated upon the individual's willingness to follow Jehovah's lead in life. The very term "disciple" has at its root the notion of discipline—a shaping of self to a desired image, the pursuit of an end established by a master. Christians are disciples of Jesus the Christ, meaning that to wear this term authentically a Christian must be one willing to follow the rule and direction of the Lord. It is here that true and permanent blessings are to be found.

The purpose of this essay is to examine Paul's usage of "rule" in the context of Philippians 3:16, in order to reveal the true avenue of successful discipleship. This intention will be accomplished, first, by investigating the

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claims laid upon humans with reference to this rule, and then documenting instances, means and consequences of failure to follow this rule. Attention then turns to the necessity and beatitude of giving whole-hearted allegiance to the commands of heaven as Paul enjoins in Philippians.

A HUMAN RULE

In Philippians 3:15-19, Paul wrote,

Let us therefore, as many as be perfect, be thus minded: and if in any thing ye be otherwise minded, God shall reveal even this unto you. Nevertheless, whereto we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us mind the same thing. Brethren, be followers together of me, and mark them which walk so as ye have us for an ensample. (For many walk, of whom I have told you often, and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of Christ: Whose end is destruction, whose God is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame, who mind earthly things.)

[All Scripture references are taken from the King James Version unless otherwise noted.] Earlier in this chapter he had discussed those “dogs” that preyed upon Christians, emphasizing physical matters like circumcision (3:1-3). Instead, he had stressed the importance of the “excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord” (3:8), compared to which all other matters paled. Without looking back to those things of his Jewish heritage in which he formerly placed such great stock, he continued his own pursuit of Christ and all things associated with Him (3:13-14). It is in this interest that he advocates a mature and consistent walk within the rule that typified faithful discipleship.

This “rule” is *kanōn*, the root of the English word “canon,” and it means a standard or rule by which measurements are made (BDAG 507). There is variety in the Greek manuscript tradition concerning this word; some manuscripts have *kanōn* in their text while others omit it (see the *Textus Receptus* which includes the wording, but the Nestle-Aland 27th edition has relegated it to a textual variant listed in the critical apparatus). However, even if the word were not in the best manuscripts, the intent of the passage matches the word’s meaning, and Galatians 6:16 uses *very* similar wording, “And as many as walk according to this rule [*kanōn*]” (Weaver 188-189; Hendriksen 176-177). So Paul is affirming that there is a standard by which the Christian must walk, with himself and others as an example.

Sadly, there were those in his day who claimed the name of God and Christ, but who had their own agenda; these he calls “the enemies of the cross of Christ” (3:18). He gives several characterizations of these enemies, but the common theme in all of them is that these enemies are selfishly focused upon things of their own preference. They are the very opposite of those who walk after the rule of verse 16 and are to be imitated. Such a pursuit of selfish and self-directed desires has a long and terrible history among humanity, with all the consequences that befall such an approach to life. It is our aim to display some of these efforts, and especially the ones that are so prevalent and insidious in our own era.

In the words of Judges 17:6, the Lord gave an assessment of the subjective nature of the Israelites’ religious and moral behavior, “In those days there was no king in Israel, but every man did that which was right in his own eyes” (cf. Judg. 18:1; 19:1; 21:25). The agonizing epilogue to this book of failures prominently reveals the

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decadence and barbarism into which a people can fall when the absolute law of God is lost and subjectivity becomes the rule. The ethical and social failings were a consequence of their religious failings; they had ceased to live as God's people. Consequently, they had fulfilled and endured that of which Solomon would write so accurately, "Righteousness exalteth a nation: but sin is a reproach to any people" (Prov. 14:34). This has been and will continue to be true of humanity – the further removed they are from God's law and service, the worse the estate into which they move.

It should not be overlooked that those suffering in this way are often religious, even professing the names of God and Christ; nevertheless, their departure from divine law betrays the name worn. The Israelites did not cease their religious activity or cease to associate themselves with the name of Jehovah. They simply substituted their own worship and life practices for that which God had mandated. Jesus charged some Jews with the same in His day, "This people draweth nigh unto me with their mouth, and honoureth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men" (Matt. 15:8-9). This was a quotation based upon Isaiah 29:13, so it seems there was another, earlier episode about which that prophet had had to write. And then Paul faced those opponents who, in the name of Christ, continued to teach adherence to elements of the Mosaical law, as we see in Philippians 3.

The modern world is not untouched by this subjective approach to religion and life, and these self-directed influences are justified and perpetuated in intellectually sophisticated ways. It has been observed that the transition to the modern view of self begins with the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855). He

addressed the matter of meaning and values by positing a divide between the reasoning and the non-reasoning areas of human thought. Reason could be used on matters that pertain to scientific enquiry, but in the area of values and meaning, reason is unavailable. This dichotomy is the hallmark of the modern man (Schaeffer 163-164). This erroneous representation of reality becomes the portal for the modern man to claim and accept absolutes in such fields as mathematics and science, while regarding themes of valuation and meaning as subjective and without absolutes. By this shift, religion and morality have become topics solely under the purview of personal judgment and decision-making. It is this very paradigm which gives rise to the phrase "leap in the dark," since any religious belief could not possibly be addressed with the faculty of reason; likewise, one could not use reason with the Bible or to speak of God.

It is the marriage of this model with religious interests that characterizes theology and church life in the post-Enlightenment era. By no means does modern man cease to be religious or concerned with ethics and morality; interest in eastern religions, New Age systems and even nominal Christianity remains robust. But whether realized or not, this bifurcated philosophical outlook serves as the means for the subjectivity and personalization of religious expression and spirituality. There are the sloganized expressions that articulate this philosophy, e.g., "Attend the church of your choice." There are also the more formal expressions which show the broad acceptance of this program, e.g., the Roman Catholic declarations of the Second Vatican Council. In the *Decree on Ecumenism: Unitatis Redintegratio* (1964), the third chapter addresses the matter of the "separated brethren," viz., those adherents of churches outside of the Roman Catholic

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Church (*Decree on Ecumenism*, chs. 1 and 3; *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, ch. 3, sections 14-16). The document refers to other church communities as defective for their failure to recognize and accept the authority of the Roman Pontiff and the Roman Catholic Church, but the phrase “separated brethren” indicates at least a slight move away from the previous position of Christian salvation and fellowship within Catholicism only. This shift is a reflection of the acceptance of the post-modern subjectivity in religion.

Within Evangelical and certain Protestant circles, this shift toward subjective views of religion and Christianity continues in full force. One prominent contemporary manifestation is the Emerging Church movement. Its adherents reject any notion of absolute or fixed truth within the Bible. Instead, the truth existing within a community will be the truth that is right for that community. The Bible, the truth and the church must change to match contemporary culture. Consequently, Emerging Church figures reject propositional truth, refusing to be dogmatic about any position or teaching. “[I]n the Emerging Church movement, *truth* (to whatever degree such a concept is even recognized) is assumed to be inherently hazy, indistinct, and uncertain—perhaps even ultimately unknowable” (MacArthur x). One of the Emerging Church leaders is Brian McLaren, whom MacArthur notes “has written or coauthored about a dozen books, and his utter contempt for certainty is a motif he returns to again and again” (MacArthur x-xi). McLaren, a long-time denominational pastor in addition to his role in the Emerging Church movement, was one of three Featured Speakers at the 2008 Abilene Christian University Lectureship Summit (Sept. 21-24) (“Featured Guest Speakers”). It is alarming to know that this type of post-

modern subjectivism is now making itself felt within the Lord's church. Undoubtedly these same influences are at work in congregations and other schools associated with the church.

Of course, the pluralism that is now extant is the result of the human limitations about which there is seemingly popular ambivalence. Religious progressives are often uncomfortable with notions of orthodoxy, decrying the possibility of knowing truth. However, there is a certainty of humanity's ability to navigate the matters of religion and life on its own. In truth, the consequences of turmoil and strife, the decadence and rejection of God and His Word, are at least partially the result of subjectivism in religion. As in the days of the Judges, humanity cannot rise to sublime heights of righteousness when bound to the earth by its own limitations. Jeremiah was certainly correct when he wrote to a wicked nation, Judah, and said, "O Lord, I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps" (Jer. 10:23). Until humanity is ready to embrace the Lord's rule and enact it personally, such confusion and vanity will persist.

A DIVINE RULE

The *kanōn* which Paul advocates in Philippians 3:16 is the divinely inspired standard for all humanity that is rooted within the Christian system. Yet never has the Lord left the world without a standard that is appropriate for its proper dispensation. The term *kanōn* "is probably a derivative of the Hebrew *kaneh* (reed), an Old Testament term meaning measuring rod (Ezek. 40:3; 42:16). This literal concept provided the basis for a later extended use of the word *kanon* [sic], meaning 'standard,' 'norm'" (Geisler and Nix 203-204). Both Old and New Testament

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writers promote adherence to such a divinely given standard.

The gift that such a standard represents must be recognized; without such, humans would be unprepared to live life successfully in the sight of the Creator. David wrote:

The law of the Lord is perfect, converting the soul: the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. The statutes of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart: the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes. The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring for ever: the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether. (Psa. 19:7-9)

While some may consider the positive and negative statements of the Bible to be restrictive of human freedom, in actuality, as David goes on to note in Psalm 19, mankind prospers when listening to divine guidance. It is God's intention to protect humanity from sin and error, while providing the direction needed to achieve, not only blessedness on earth, but eternal blessedness as well. Those who reject the possibility of divine rule fail to grasp these intentions and their significance. When Jesus began the Sermon on the Mount, He did so with the "beatitudes," or "blessed" statements. While many seek the "good life," they typically look in all the wrong places. It is only with Jesus and His gospel that this blessedness can be found. Not surprisingly, with its emphasis on following God's rule, the letter of Philippians has joy as one of its major motifs.

We would not want to leave the impression that the acceptance or rejection of this divinely given rule is left to the individual's discretion with impunity. To the contrary, adherence to this canon is obligatory; it is the

Creator's expectation for the life of the creature. After describing his various efforts and escapades in pursuit of happiness and meaning in life, the preacher Solomon concluded with the summary of the purpose of the human existence: "Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole *duty* of man" (Ecc. 12:13). It is intended that every person have a respectful fear of God and that they keep all His commandments—live by His rule. The reason that this is expected is that it is the "whole of man." The word "duty" has been left in italics in the above quote to draw attention to the fact that it is not in the Hebrew text; it has been supplied by the Bible editors who believed, mistakenly in my view, that it aids understanding of a seemingly stilted text. Rather, it should be removed since the word "duty" leads one to think of a particular activity, responsibility or vocation. The phrase "whole of man" seems to better capture the idea that the whole of human existence is to be God-centered. All of life is to be lived while mindful of the overarching relationship between the Lord and the individual.

How would this view of life couple with the description of Jesus in Philippians 2:8? In that verse, Paul says, "And being found in fashion as a man, he [Jesus] humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross." The participle that begins this verse in English, "being found," could arguably be translated "since He was found." This highlights the responsibility for obedient living that Jesus embraced precisely because He took to Himself the human existence. This is consonant with the words of the author of Hebrews, who states that Jesus knew temptation (2:17-18; 4:15), and that He learned obedience to God (5:8-9). Thus Jesus could be said to have lived by Solomon's summary.

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From the dual basis of the authority held by God and the example of Jesus Himself, people are without excuse for rejecting the Lord's standards for living. While He began the Sermon on the Mount by speaking of blessedness, Jesus closed the same sermon by speaking of the cost to be paid by those who did not submit to His words: "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven" (Matt. 7:21). With this simple statement He emphasizes the need for a faithful response to the gospel's call. The measure of one's love for the Savior is revealed by the response made to Him—"If ye love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15).

There has been a rule delivered, as Jesus' own half-brother stated: "[C]ontend earnestly for the faith once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). Per these words and the example of figures like Christ and Paul, it is not enough for an individual to commit to following this rule personally, while granting to all others the liberty to pursue any course in harmony with their own preferences; this is the error of post-modernity. Instead, the missional character of New Testament Christianity cannot be missed or ignored. Like Christ and Paul, the church is to promote adherence to the rule mentioned in Philippians 3:16, all the while respecting that individuals have the right of refusal, though not without penalty. The universal nature of this rule demands that it be universally advanced among all peoples; this is precisely the intent in Christ's "Great Commission" statements (Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-16; Luke 24:46-48; John 20:19-23). It is the church's responsibility to preserve and promote God's gospel, rather than diluting it, diminishing its content and power.

CONCLUSION

It may be tempting to think that the key to happiness is complete freedom—freedom from any obligation arising from outside ourselves. However, such an opinion has failed to take into account human limitations and frailty, the Creator’s mandate for His handiwork and the truly joyous state that comes to one who embraces the teachings of Christianity.

For the individual who is willing to walk by God’s rule, there awaits at least four tremendous blessings. First, there is the joy that comes from experiencing true “wisdom-living.” By this I mean that, rather than learning that “the way of the transgressor is hard” (Prov. 13:15), the righteous follower will know the blessed and joyous existence that comes from delighting in God (Psa. 1). The second blessing is the confidence that comes from knowing both what is expected and what is profitable. Rather than a trial-and-error approach to life, faithful disciples can know that they are living in such a way that they please God. John wrote, “These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God” (1 John 5:13). These words betray no arrogance on the apostle’s part, nor any claim upon self-justification. Instead, the confidence of which he speaks refers to the confidence one can possess in knowing that he is living as the Lord directs. A post-modern eviscerating of the word “rule” steals this blessing. Third, there is the blessing of consistency. Throughout the centuries of Israelitish/Jewish history, a faithful Israelite could know that they stood in the same tradition as their faithful forefathers. They also knew that they were passing these same divine directives to their children and

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grandchildren. This level of consistency means that every generation will not need to seek after a new revelation, or after a new garb for temporally-limited religious content. As N.B. Hardeman once stated, "The Bible...is ever fresh, like unto a mountain spring from which all our fathers, grandfathers, and great-grandfathers slaked their thirst in generations gone by; and still, to us, the same spring offers that drink afresh, and it will continue to offer it to those yet unborn" (Hardeman 19-20). Finally, this type of consistency is only possible because the Word of God, His rule, is eternal. Jesus unabashedly professed, "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away" (Matt. 24:35). By following this rule faithfully, every individual will walk through life here alongside Christ, and then live eternally with Him.

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