

ARE FUNDAMENTALISTS LEGALISTS?

by

Ernest D. Pickering, Th. D.

Copyright © 2004 by Baptist World Mission

All rights reserved. Written permission must be secured from the publisher to use or reproduce any part of this book, except for brief quotations in critical reviews or articles.

Published in Decatur, Alabama, by Baptist World Mission.

ARE FUNDAMENTALISTS LEGALISTS?

A Reply to Charles Swindoll

Are fundamentalists legalists? Have they been engaged for years in a conspiracy to rob believers of their liberty in Christ? Do they equate spirituality with a certain kind of hairstyle or the absence of makeup? Do they believe adherence to a man-made list of “do’s” and “don’ts” is a mark of the Spirit-controlled life? Is it time for born-again Christians to celebrate their deliverance from outmoded, ridiculous, unbiblical, man-made rules? In his book *Grace Awakening* (Word Publishing, 1990), Charles (Chuck) Swindoll has delivered a broadside against those whom he calls “legalists.” Coming from such a well-known author and evangelical leader, the book has considerably more impact than might otherwise be the case. Few contemporary evangelical writers command as large a following as Swindoll. His books seem to sprout like dandelions, and his style appeals to a large segment of the evangelical reading public. Added to that, he has been named to the presidency of Dallas Theological Seminary, and one must recognize that whatever he writes has considerable clout. Furthermore, the viewpoint espoused in his book finds a sympathetic audience with some fundamentalists who have become “bent out of shape” with what they view as the pettiness of certain segments of fundamentalist thinking. We are afraid, given impetus by the writing of Swindoll, that some are about to “throw the baby out with the bath water.”

WHAT IS THE ISSUE?

At least four major points are made in *Grace Awakening*. These are as follows:

1. Bible-believing churches have overemphasized the “negatives” in Christian conduct.
2. The New Testament teaching on grace gives wider latitude in Christian living than has historically been accepted by evangelical Christians.
3. Under grace we are not to be judgmental of the conduct of other believers, but allow them to establish their own standards of life.
4. Grace, properly understood, frees us from man-made strictures and enables us to truly enjoy a life of spiritual freedom.

As mentioned above, this strain of reasoning strikes a responsive chord in the minds of many contemporary Christians. The response of many could be, “Let’s be done with all these silly rules and regulations. Good riddance!” Before accepting the above postulates, some mature and scriptural thinking needs to be done: “Prove all things [test everything]; hold fast that which is good” (1 Thess. 5:21). Everything must be tested by the infallible standard, the Word of God.

The complaint is made that many churches have become pharisaical in their outlook and that they major on the minutiae of life rather than upon the great life-building truths of Scripture. Too many Christians are fussing about the length of one’s skirts or the size of one’s bathing suit to the neglect of “the weightier matters of the law.” The book on grace is chock full of inflammatory phrases, which are not so gracious. Such phrases are calculated to prejudice the reader against these who may not accept the general line of thought found in the book. “Grace-destroyers” engage in “guilt trips, shame techniques, and sneaky manipulation” (p. 62). They produce many “lists of do’s and don’ts” (p. 63). They are “suspicious” and “negative” (p. 60), as well as “self-righteous and “rigid” (p. 45). These “grim, joyless, frowning saints” (p. 103) specialize in “dogmatism and Bible-bashing” (pp. 227, 229).

But the writer is not done. Churches today are full of “squint-eyed legalists spying out and attacking another’s liberty” (p. 94) and exerting “rigid controls” (p. 127). They are “grace-killers” (p. 129) who “bully their way” (p. 157) by means of “religious rigidity” (p. 156).

The above is only a sample of language that fills the book. It is amazing that the current heralded “awakening of grace” has not evidenced itself in somewhat more temperate language. Fundamental, Bible-believing churches (Swindoll uses the term “evangelical”) that have endeavored to take a stand for righteous living take a beating with the bludgeon of the doctrine of grace.

As one who has been associated with the fundamentalist movement for about 50 years, I believe Swindoll’s analysis is skewed, biased, and inaccurate. While there are certainly blemishes and warts on the face of fundamentalism, I do not believe the movement as a whole can be characterized as he has done in this work.

There are certainly points with which we would agree in Swindoll’s book. Salvation is by grace apart from any human merit or works. This is a point beyond dispute if one accepts the plain testimony of the New Testament.

Swindoll articulates this, and to it we would say a hearty “amen.” He also upholds sanctification as an on-going work of grace and personal holiness, which is not produced by obedience to human regulations. There is also a good chapter on “Grace Giving,” which reminds us of the true source of responsible Christian stewardship.

However, the major thrust of the book is an effort to dethrone what Swindoll calls “legalism.” While we have no personal animosity toward its author, we believe the book to be very dangerous to the cause of Christ.

WHAT FACTORS HAVE SPAWNED THE EMPHASIS UPON “AWAKENING GRACE”?

Books are generally born out of a matrix of ideas or circumstances. What are some factors contributing to the rise in popularity of the positions espoused by Swindoll?

FACTORS FROM WITHIN FUNDAMENTALISM

There has certainly been a lack of proper balance with some fundamentalists. Human beings have a hard time developing a balanced approach to life, and fundamentalists are no exception. Some people “major on the minors and minor on the majors.” They make a “mountain out of a molehill.” This has confused and angered people. Proper employment of the Word of God will render its readers “complete” (KJV - “perfect”). That is, they will be “well-fitted” for their duties; they will be balanced, having all the spiritual qualities in proper relationship. Failure to demonstrate a balance between the negatives and the positives of the Christian life has caused a backlash on the part of some.

To our shame, we must admit in some quarters of fundamentalism there has been a dearth of consistent, theological, and contextual biblical exposition. There has been a great deal of loud and dogmatic proclamation without the necessary exegesis to back it up. Many fundamentalist preachers have specialized in catchy themes and pungent exhortations but have failed to teach their people the great truths of Scripture in a cohesive and practical fashion. There needs to be more attention to the art of doctrinal preaching.

Perhaps there has also been an overreaction to the moral looseness of our day. One hesitates to venture into this area for fear of being misunderstood. Certainly all who revere the Word of God should stand unalterably opposed to all aspects of the moral filth pervading our society. We cannot become professional “garbage removers.” While attempting to rid ourselves of the garbage, we must also spread a bountiful table of delectable spiritual

morsels for the people of God. Some, perhaps, have specialized in denouncing all the evils of the day without feeding the flock of God.

While endeavoring to be true to God’s holy standards in enforcing certain codes of conduct and dress, we have often failed to show how our standards are based upon principles found in the Bible. We have told our youth what they are not to do without telling them why they are not to do it. We ought not to forsake our efforts to maintain standards of Christian conduct, but we should, in the process, be certain the standards are based upon a proper application of truths set forth in Scripture. Not all current sins are specifically mentioned in Scripture, but it is perfectly legitimate to make an application of guidelines found in Scripture to specific situations in modern society.

Finally, we need to always guard against a harsh spirit that is void of Christian grace and kindness. Since fundamentalists have had to do battle with the forces of darkness since the inception of the movement, it is easy for them to develop bitter and abrasive attitudes. We are to be “speaking the truth in love” (Eph. 4:15). Because of the caustic attitude displayed by some, there are fundamentalists who have turned to the approach of Swindoll as a refuge from what they feel are unreasonable and unkind leaders. Unfortunately, their reaction is not based upon a mature consideration of all factors, particularly scriptural teachings, but upon personal and emotional considerations.

FACTORS FROM OUTSIDE FUNDAMENTALISM

Those who are making any effort at all to uphold biblical standards of godliness are having a hard go of it because of the incessant pull of the world. So the hymn writer was correct when he wrote:

“This vile world’s no friend to grace to help us on to God.”

The world, with its siren call to evil, is all around us every day. Worldlings “think it strange that ye run not with them to the same excess of riot, speaking evil of you” (1 Pet. 4:4). It is much easier to accommodate to a looser lifestyle in the name of grace than to battle constantly against the encroachments of the powers of darkness.

More expansive views of grace are encouraged in our current climate because of the looseness and laxness of evangelicalism as a whole. We use the term “evangelicalism” as it is popularly employed to refer to all those who claim adherence to the evangelical truths taught in the Scriptures. As some have pointed out in recent years, evangelicalism is about to lose its

soul. It has sold its heritage for a mess of pottage. As if the older “new evangelicalism” were not a sufficient compromise, we are now faced with the “church growth movement” with its concepts of “church marketing” and its efforts to make the church popular with the world. This looseness of doctrinal conviction fits in with a trend toward a broader stance with regard to issues of Christian conduct. The person who sees nothing wrong with jettisoning a scriptural doctrine for the sake of ecumenical fellowship will not be troubled by allowing a bit of “social drinking” within the church, allowable under the umbrella of “grace.”

A sympathetic climate for the so-called “awakening of grace” has been created through the weakening influence of evangelical ecumenism. This is the day of “togetherness.” Divisions, particularly those caused by doctrine, are “shameful” and “fleshly.” Those churches that once held strong views about personal separation from the world have been corrupted by their continuing associations with churches of weaker convictions. These associations are retained in the name of “Christian love” and as a result of the abhorrence of anything which smacks of divisiveness. The attitude of “live and let live” has permeated the thinking of many; they say Christian fellowship can bridge enormous doctrinal gaps. This has promoted the feeling of tolerant acceptance toward widely-variant points of view, an attitude prevalent in the “grace awakening” philosophy.

In our society today, there is a general rebellion against authoritarian standards of any kind. For instance, secular colleges and universities endeavoring to maintain higher academic standards for entrance are accused of being “elitist.” There is a common feeling that people should be allowed to choose their own lifestyles, “do their own thing” without anyone questioning what they are doing or passing judgment on whether their actions are right or wrong. Views of the Christian life under grace tend to promote this same idea. In fact, one of the chapters in Swindoll’s book is entitled “Grace To Let People Be.”

It is repeatedly asserted by some that fundamentalists are legalists. The question of the nature of legalism lies at the very heart of the debate over living under grace. There is a tremendous misunderstanding over the nature of legalism, which will be discussed a little later. Connected with this is a current infatuation among some evangelicals with the subject of Christian liberty. To some, Christian liberty prohibits the application of biblical principles to specific areas of life, rather allowing the believer to embrace questionable practices without fear of rebuke from other believers. For instance, this principle is applied to the area of music. We are told various kinds of so-called “Christian” music should be tolerated in the name of Christian liberty.

An emphasis on grace allowing more freedom to adopt worldly lifestyles seems advantageous to some because they see it as an opportunity to improve the success of evangelism by making Christians seem less “scary” to the average worldly person. According to this viewpoint, believers who are able to participate in some of the same things the worldlings participate in will be more likely to win them to Christ. The emphasis upon personal separation tends to repulse outsiders and render it more difficult to win them. The unsaved will be more attracted to a church that is similar to what they are accustomed to rather than a church that stands opposed to things they like.

Finally, the claim is made that many “rules and regulations” regarding personal Christian living simply represent human opinions and not scriptural teachings. This argument carries particular weight within evangelical circles because evangelicals historically have been committed to the authority of Scripture. If what is advocated is not supported by Scripture, it should not be followed. If it can be proved that churches and Christian leaders are requiring a standard of life not taught in the Bible, their teachings should be repudiated.

WHAT EFFECT HAS THE “GRACE AWAKENING” TEACHING HAD UPON BIBLE-BELIEVING CHURCHES?

Principles found in *Grace Awakening* have had a strong impact upon pastors and laymen. Many younger pastors (though not exclusively so) have embraced the concept with enthusiasm. Some of these men have been hurt by interaction with strong fundamentalist leaders and are caught on the rebound. Some are upset over various divisions within the ranks of fundamentalism and attribute these divisions to a “legalistic” spirit, which they feel can be corrected by a new reemphasis upon grace. Some simply feel a softer and more accepting view of Christian living will make living the Christian life more “fun” and less a burden.

As a result of the acceptance of this viewpoint on the part of many pastors, there has been a noticeable decrease in specific preaching on personal separation from the world. Such preaching is rejected by some as being “prophetic” in nature, whereas what is needed today is affirmative, positive preaching. To specify particular actions as sin and therefore out of bounds for a Christian is viewed as “legalistic” preaching.

An absence of strong preaching on individual holiness is tending toward the acceptance of looser lifestyles among professing Christians. Movie attendance and social drinking are examples of those things once

objectionable to separated Christians that are now tolerated by many churches. The idea is we are all under grace and must make these individual decisions for ourselves. The Bible does not speak directly on such matters, so it should be “every man for himself.” Years ago sound churches tended to discipline members more frequently. Today a more lackadaisical attitude prevails. People whose lives are disobedient to Scripture and a disgrace to the church are allowed to continue as active members while pursuing their wicked ways. Ministers who have fallen into immorality are welcomed back into places of leadership. Grace should be tolerant and forgiving, and believers should be “nonjudgmental.” Thus the leaven continues to permeate.

One of the alarming results of the current misunderstanding of grace is the abandonment of specific standards for leaders and workers in local churches. Years ago it was common for fundamental churches to have “Leaders’ Standards.” Under such standards, persons could not occupy positions of leadership in the church if they engaged in certain practices such as drinking, smoking, lodge participation, etc. Many churches today have thrown out such restrictions, replacing them with innocuous and general references. In their view, they have cast off the burdensome bonds of “legalism” and have progressed into the freshly-found sphere of God’s grace. However, the long-range effects of such broadness will prove to be harmful rather than helpful.

Pastors who are holding the line in the face of ungodliness are made to feel uncomfortable because they speak against specific sins. For instance, are the following guilty of legalism?

1. The church that prohibits smokers from being Sunday school teachers.
2. The pastor who requires female musical participants in the public worship services to wear dresses and not pants suits.
3. The youth pastor who prohibits the church youth from bringing “boom boxes” to camp.
4. The Christian college that will not allow students to post pictures of rock stars in their rooms.
5. The Christian high school that has dress standards for students.

These, and many other questions, immediately come to mind when one starts talking about “legalism” and “rules.”

EXAMINING THE LEADING ARGUMENTS

ARGUMENT #1: Evangelical Christianity is widely characterized by joylessness brought about by excessive “rules-making.”

Typical of the content of the book are these statements:

“If you want to find a group of cramped, somber, dull and listless individuals, just visit many (I’m trying hard not to write most) evangelical churches today” (p. 77).

“. . . victimized by a system that has stolen your joy . . .” (p. 53).

General observations. As one who has had wide ministry among fundamental, Bible-preaching churches, I would like to make a few comments.

1. The book contains many exaggerations and “catchy phrases” for sake of effect. To state the vast majority of Bible-preaching churches are joyless and forbidding is an unfair and unsupported exaggeration. Happy and blessed times of fellowship in many hundreds of churches have been this writer’s portion over the years.
2. There are “kooks” and unbalanced persons in any movement. Christianity is not the exception. There are monkish types, narrow and unreasonable individuals who stalk the land, but these are on the fringes and do not represent the mainstream.
3. The evaluations of some churches are spread by unspiritual or disgruntled people who have had unhappy experiences. Many of these have been in fundamental churches. Their scary stories of rampant “legalism” (as they call it) are not always supported by the facts. Often they (or their children) have rebelled against biblical standards of godliness, which have been emphasized in the local church they have left. New evangelical churches are filled with such people. They blame fundamental churches for “legalism” as an excuse for their lax views on Christian living.

Do restrictions rob us of joy? We are told that man-made rules and restrictions passed off as biblical become “joy-killers.” Those who defend standards of living which they believe to be based upon scriptural principles are guilty of “petty concerns and critical suspicions” (p. 5). They are “stern, rigid, and cold-hearted” (p. 12). They are the proponents of a “legalistic style of strong-arm teaching” (p. 45).

Romans Chapter Six is cited as definitive in the discussion. Swindoll continually mentions that those who have “lists” of “rules” are in “bondage” and must be freed. Swindoll says that in Romans six Paul presents a glorious doctrine of freedom and declares believers are emancipated from all human “rules.” However, is this the main thrust of Romans six?

In this passage, Paul is not dealing with “rules” but with “sin.” We are not to yield to the desires of the flesh simply because we are now living under grace and not under law. Through Christ’s death, we have been given the power to live victoriously over the constant tug of our old nature (v. 6). Since we died to our old sin nature in Christ, we are to “reckon” (count upon, accept by faith) ourselves to be “dead indeed unto sin” (v. 11).

It is apparent by a study of the passage that Paul is not teaching that believers are free from all restrictions upon their lives. The very fact that we are “dead unto sin” means there are some things we ought not to do. Our “members” (parts of our body) are to be yielded to God as “instruments of righteousness” (v. 13). “Righteousness” is an inhibiting word, a narrowing, restrictive word. While Paul teaches us that we are freed from the power of sin, he also reminds us we are “servants [slaves] to righteousness” (v. 18). As Christ’s slaves, we are restricted by the wishes of our Master. We are “servants [slaves] to God” (v. 22), and as such, we are to aim toward “holiness” (vv. 19, 22).

It is this element of “holiness” which is conspicuously absent in Swindoll’s work. Holiness is (or should be) the outgrowth of grace. The impression is received by a perusal of Swindoll’s book that grace is an exciting liberation from all (or most) restrictions which have normally been associated with the practice of the Christian faith. If we are to have our “fruit unto holiness” (v. 22), as Paul commands, we will be liberated from the power of sin but restricted to the requirements for holiness.

Practical holiness of life involves separation from evil. It means there are some things a believer cannot do. Godly pastors and churches through the centuries have tried earnestly (though not perfectly) to warn believers of some things they cannot do if they would be holy. To say such warnings are a violation of the principle of grace seems unwarranted by Scripture.

Swindoll also appropriates I Corinthians 10:25-30 for his cause. He says Paul, in this passage, is “setting believers free” (p. 130). We are free from the evangelical “taboos” such as prohibitions against movies, dancing, or card-playing. Such applications appeal to many contemporary Christians

because they want to be free to indulge in various pleasures and practices common to the world. To be told they can do so under grace is comforting.

From what is Paul “setting us free” in I Corinthians 10? We must study the context to answer that question. Paul’s concern was, Should a believer eat meat that had been offered on the altar to pagan gods and was then sold to the public in the marketplace? Did the fact that it had been offered in a pagan temple render the meat unholy for believer’s consumption? If such meat were served to me as a guest, should I eat it? This was the question. Paul states that such meat was not unholy and it could and should be eaten without precipitating a theological discussion (“asking no question for conscience sake” [v. 25]).

Please note that the eating of meat sacrificed to idols was not immoral nor in violation of any applicable principle of Scripture. But let us not make unjustified applications from this passage. Because a believer is freed to eat meat sacrificed to idols does not mean he is freed to watch a pornographic movie. The issues are not the same. Because a believer is freed to eat meat sacrificed to idols does not mean he is equally free to listen to rock music. Both pornography and rock music would be prohibited to the believer on the basis of the biblical teaching regarding holiness of life.

The impression is left to the reader of *Grace Awakening* that the establishment of rules or restrictions upon the believer steals from him the exuberance and joy of the Christian life, relegating him to a morbid and dreary existence. **Holiness** (separation from evil) and **joy** are not mutually exclusive. When the Israelites, under the leadership of Ezra, celebrated the completion of the temple construction, they “separated themselves . . . from the filthiness of the heathen of the land, to seek the Lord God of Israel” (Ezra 6:21). In other words, there was a moving of the Spirit of God among them causing them to turn from wicked practices and to repudiate specific things which displeased God. There was a revival of holiness among them. Some “rules” were reinstated which had perhaps been neglected for some time. But did this produce a melancholy, dreary people? No, on the contrary, it produced happy people. In the very next verse after the description of personal separation, we are told they “kept the feast of unleavened bread seven days with joy: for the Lord had made them joyful” (Ezra 6:22). “Taboos” (as Swindoll calls them) may be man-made and ridiculous—that is true. However, not all rules fall into that category. For instance, when a church covenant states the members will refrain from the consumption of alcohol, that is a rule. Its purpose is not to rob the church member of joy, but to remind him of his obligation to live a holy life. It is based upon scriptural teaching.

ARGUMENT #2: Christians ought not to judge one another since this is a violation of the principle of grace.

If there is one concept gaining great popularity among twentieth-century Christians, it is this one: “We have no right to judge other believers.” This retort is heard frequently when a pastor or other Christian leader attempts to analyze and evaluate the position or teachings of some other person: “We ought not to judge.”

Swindoll repeatedly sounds this note. He condemns a “judgmental attitude” (p. 45). He is hoping “to stop any person from judging another” (p. 164). He warns that both “parents and pastors can be judgmental” (p. 132). He explains “grace means I will not . . . judge . . . you” (p. 146). “To let go is not to judge” (p. 147). His aim is to produce believers who are “more tolerant and less judgmental” (p. 13).

One is amazed at the gullibility of many believers who accept such statements with no effort to ascertain whether or not they are really accurate. Why are such statements so appealing? They project a kind of “human warmth” over against “rules-makers,” who are perceived as stern and exacting. They remove a sense of accountability to others and thus make people feel more “comfortable.” Modern American evangelicalism specializes in making people feel comfortable, so the appeal to be less “judgmental” is in tune with this emphasis. This attitude of “live and let live” is also prominent in secular society, where it is considered improper to have strong convictions or fixed rules of life. One is to be adaptable, pliable, and accepting of various viewpoints. This approach to life has permeated the Christian world and has weakened it greatly.

IS IT WRONG TO JUDGE OTHERS?

Few subjects have produced more confused thinking than this one. By misinterpreting a few verses of Scripture, many have adopted the notion that all judgment of others is forbidden by God. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Misunderstood Scriptures. “Judge not, that ye be not judged” (Matt. 7:1). This verse is often cited as a blanket prohibition against all judgment. An examination of the passage will reveal that this is a prohibition against **hypocritical judgment**, not **all judgment**. The point is some people are judging others while there are larger problems in their own lives (the “beam” and the “mote,” vv. 3-5). In order to pass correct judgment, one must be living a godly life (but not a sinless life since no human can achieve

this). Verse five does indicate that following the personal cleansing of one’s own life (“cast the beam out of thine own eye”), one can more legitimately pass judgment on a fault of another (“then thou shalt see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother’s eye”). In the remainder of the chapter, there are commands for believers to pass judgment on certain things, so verse one could not possibly be a prohibition against all judgment. We are to distinguish between false prophets and true prophets (v. 15). We are to judge between good fruit and bad fruit (vv. 17-20). Paul declares we are to “judge nothing before the time” (1 Cor. 4:5). Again, this must be understood in its context. He is saying we are **not to judge things of which we are not capable of judging**. What things would these be? Paul explains. We are not to judge the “hidden things” nor the “counsels of the hearts.” The word *counsels* refers to “motives.” We are not to attempt to judge people’s motives, those things which we cannot see and understand. Only God knows men’s hearts. There is a difference between judging men’s **motives** and judging their **actions**. Using God’s Word as a standard, we do have the right and responsibility to judge men’s actions. Just one chapter later in this epistle Paul commands the church at Corinth to “judge” one of its members (5:11-12) and excommunicate him from the fellowship.

But, what about Romans 14:13: “Let us not therefore judge one another any more . . .”? Doesn’t this prohibit judging? The theme of Romans 14 is found in the first verse. “Him that is weak in the faith, receive ye, but not to doubtful disputations.” “Doubtful disputations” refer to “disputable matters,” or as someone has rendered it, “quarrels about opinions.” One is to have charity in dealing with other believers who may differ in points of minor importance. The question that confronts us in the light of the “grace awakening” teaching is, What points are disputable and what points are not disputable? For instance, if a girl wishes to wear a bikini swim suit to the church youth activity, should that be viewed as a “disputable” action, thus free from any adverse judgment on the part of the youth leaders? Since no Scripture specifically condemns bikini bathing suits, are we free under grace to allow them? Many, on the basis of scriptural teaching regarding holiness of life and sanctity of body, would seek to prohibit the wearing of such attire. Are they therefore “grace killers”?

We are not to judge our brother **when we have no correct and scriptural principle by which to judge him**. We are not to judge others simply on the basis of our own opinions or preferences. Is the banning of bikini bathing suits merely an exercise of personal preference? We believe there is more to it than that. The exposure of the human body while in such attire is not commensurate with the scriptural teaching of I Corinthians 6:19-20:

“What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit which are God’s.” The practical question is this: Would the Holy Spirit feel comfortable in a bikini? The answer to this question is obvious. Is then the church that bans such wearing apparel guilty of wrongly judging another believer and repudiating the principle of grace? We think not.

BIBLICAL COMMANDS TO JUDGE

Believers are commanded to exercise spiritual discernment and to make judgments in a number of areas:

Identify false teachers. Many times Scripture speaks of false teachers and tells God’s people they are to both identify and repudiate them. This requires judgment: “Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world” (1 Jn. 4:1). To do this it is necessary to pass judgment on individuals and their teaching. This is appropriate. It is a responsibility given to us by the Lord Himself.

Confront born-again people who are not teaching the truth. Some Christians can abide the concept of confronting apostate false teachers but have difficulty accepting that fellow believers must also be confronted if they are teaching error. They associate this with being “judgmental.” It is difficult for some believers to face the fact that other believers may be wrong and need to be corrected.

It is a good thing Paul did not have a “hang-up” about this. When Peter came to Antioch, he sided with the Judaizers, who were requiring people to keep the Mosaic law, as well as accepting Christ. “But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed” (Gal. 2:11). Paul made a judgment, based on Bible truth, that Peter had done wrong and was countenancing a form of teaching subversive to the Gospel. “I saw that they walked not uprightly according to the truth of the gospel” (Gal. 2:14). Because of this, Paul challenged Peter publicly and pointed out his error. If he had not done so, great damage would have come to the infant church and the cause of Christ would have been hindered.

Discern whether people are living godly lives or not. “To let go is not to judge” (p. 147). Does this mean that no matter what kind of lifestyle a believer adopts we are to “affirm” him or her and refrain from any confrontation? This could hardly be true in the light of Paul’s instruction to

the church at Thessalonica: “Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye withdraw yourselves from every brother that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition which he received of us” (2 Thess. 3:6). In order to obey this command, one must make a judgment regarding an individual: Is this person walking disorderly? Is he not obeying apostolic, biblical teaching (“the tradition which he received of us”)? Such a judgment requires an examination of the person’s life in the light of apostolic teaching, which has been inscripturated in the New Testament. If he is not so walking, then appropriate action must be taken. His disobedience cannot be dismissed as allowable under grace. He needs help—confrontation and rebuke.

Distinguish between good and bad. There is a hue and cry among Christians today to be more “loving.” When some courageous soul points out an action or position contradicting the truths of God’s Word, he or she is immediately labeled “unloving.” This reflects a misconception of the nature of biblical love. Some think it is the mark of love to accept everything uncritically. Listen to the apostle Paul’s desire: “And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment, that you may approve things that are excellent” (Phil. 1:9-10). Someone has translated the word “judgment” as “depth of insight” and the word “approve” as “discern.” Both words indicate that genuine Christian love is not gullible, accepting everything and everyone coming down the pike at face value, but rather love exercises spiritual discernment, separating the bad from the good and the mediocre from the best.

This same principle is found in Hebrews 5:13-14. The writer says there are some believers who are still in spiritual infancy. They are capable only of taking milk. Others are of “full age” (mature). They have learned to feed on “strong meat” (solid food, i.e., good doctrine), have utilized what they have learned (“their senses exercised”), and are capable, therefore, of making good judgments (“discern both good and evil”). The mature believer who can make better judgments is able, by virtue of this ability, to instruct the less-mature believer. A pastor, having the ability to discern evil, is able to say to his people, “Such and such a thing is wrong, and you should not do it.” He is not being legalistic. He is exercising his proper authority as a God-called shepherd of the sheep.

Observe when believers are following the world and not the Lord. Paul had an associate accompanying him in missionary work. His name was Demas. Alas, he failed the Lord and Paul, and the great apostle wrote, no doubt with a broken heart, “For Demas hath forsaken me, having loved this present world” (2 Tim. 4:10). A judgment was made. Here is a man who,

though a believer, is a worldly believer. Was that not “judgmental”? Yes, it was, but within the bounds of Christian grace and truth. If a believer in the 20th century shows signs of loving the world and following its patterns, we do him no great service by looking the other way and comforting ourselves with the thought he is under grace therefore we should not seek to “control” him. He needs to be helped in a spiritual and Spirit-filled manner.

GUIDELINES FOR PASSING JUDGMENT

It is certainly true that we can sin in passing judgment upon others. We need to follow carefully the directions God has given us in His Word.

Be right with God. We cannot pass righteous judgment upon another when we ourselves are walking outside the will and control of God. This principle was mentioned when we discussed Matthew 7:1-5. We are to first remove the “beam” (big board) from our own eye before we try to remove the “mote” (speck) from our brother’s eye. This principle, if adhered to, should deliver us from hasty, carnal judgments.

Judge ourselves. Human nature being what it is, we are often quick to judge others but reluctant to judge ourselves. We must always remember that there are many things wrong with our lives and ample reason for us to pass judgment on ourselves before attempting to do so with others. In discussing the proper approach to the Lord’s table, Paul says, “For if we would judge ourselves, we should not be judged” (1 Cor. 11:31). He is equating the act of being judged with the chastening of the Lord (v. 32). In coming to the Lord’s table, we should be hard on ourselves, searching our hearts and lives for that which is displeasing to God and confessing it.

Judge according to scriptural standards. Our judgments cannot be made upon the basis of our personal desires, experiences, preferences, or opinions. We must “judge righteously” (Deut. 1:16). To judge righteously would be to judge by the righteous standards of God’s Word. It is there we find “instruction in righteousness” (2 Tim. 3:16). This inspired Book, this standard of righteousness, is the medium for “reproof” and “correction” (2 Tim. 3:16).

In order to judge by scriptural standards, we must know what the Scripture teaches. Many believers are ill-equipped to make proper judgments because they lack a good knowledge of the Bible. Some judgments are made by believers in contradiction to the clear teaching of the Bible. There is misappropriation of scriptural passages, faulty hermeneutics, and the resultant failure to properly apply the Divine Truth.

Be controlled by the Spirit in making judgments. “But he that is spiritual judgeth all things, yet he himself is judged of no man” (1 Cor. 2:15). A “spiritual” believer is one who is filled with (controlled by) the Holy Spirit. Such an experience is not automatic but is a result of obedience to various admonitions found in Scripture. Carnal believers (those controlled by the flesh) are unable to make good judgments. It is the Spirit of God, when not stifled, Who is able to give us proper discernment and help us make sound judgments.

Various considerations lead us to the conclusion that a Christian must be involved in acts of judgment. The believer cannot shirk his responsibility for this by arguing it is a violation of grace.

ARGUMENT #3: It is a violation of the grace principle for believers to impose lifestyle standards upon one another.

Swindoll seems obsessed with what he calls “lists”—collections of pleasures or activities which are said to be prohibited to believers. He is upset with those whom he sees as deriving their guidelines for living from other people rather than Scripture. “You will never grow up so long as you must get your lists and form most of your opinions from me or some other Christian leader” (p. 49).

The fear of “lists.” The fear of lists seems to center on prohibitions viewed as man-made and lacking the authority of God. Two statements may illustrate:

More and more Christians are realizing that the man-made restrictions and legalistic regulations under which they have been living have not come from the God of grace, but have been enforced by people who do not want others to be free (p. xiii).

It becomes my responsibility to tell you what to do or not to do and why. I then set up conditions by which you can begin to earn God’s acceptance through me. You do what I tell you to do . . . you don’t do what I tell you not to do, and you’re “in.” You fail to keep the list, you’re “out.” This legalistic style of strong-arm teaching is one of the most prevalent methods employed in evangelical circles. Grace is strangled in such a context (pp. 44-45).

Here is a caricature of those seeking to maintain standards of godly living. They are stated to be conspirators who want to enslave others, who do not want them to be free. This is an unfair and untrue evaluation of the vast majority of good, fundamental pastors and leaders, who through the years have sought to hold the line in matters of personal separation. As we have mentioned before, while there are individuals with twisted concepts about personal separation, it is not accurate to depict the majority of godly pastors and Christian leaders in this fashion.

Swindoll also declares that Christian leaders formulate rules of conduct so persons obeying them can “earn God’s acceptance.” After many years of ministry among thousands of churches both in this country and abroad, I believe I can say with confidence, I have never met a pastor or Christian leader who believed this. God’s acceptance is gained by grace not through the observance of rules (even biblical ones!). This is an exaggeration, which we believe does great disservice to many Christian leaders.

Swindoll uses Galatians Chapter Two to characterize modern church leaders who, in his view, try to restrict and control other believers by imposing standards of conduct upon them. They are “false brethren . . . who . . . spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage: to whom we gave place by subjection, no, not for an hour . . .” (Gal. 2:4-5).

What is the point of this passage? Does it refer to “squint-eyed legalists” of modern fundamental churches, who are going about as spies to keep people from enjoying the Lord? We do not see it as such. The “bondage” spoken of here was the bondage of the Mosaic law, which the Judaizers were seeking to impose upon believers of the day, not regulations regarding attendance at rock concerts. The implication is that restrictions of any kind form a “bondage” for the believer. This is not true. To be a slave to Christ and to the principles of His Word is not bondage but true freedom.

THE KEY ISSUE

The key issue at this point seems to be, Is it a violation of the grace principle to make applications of scriptural principles to specific life-situations in an authoritative manner? In other words, is it right to tell a believer he ought not to use marijuana because the Bible teaches our body is God’s temple? Swindoll declares, “restraint is an individual matter. It is not to be legislated, not something to be forced on someone else. Limitations are appropriate and necessary, but I fail to find in Scripture any place where one is to require such restraint from another. To do so is legalism” (pp. 127-128).

The only “lists” to be followed are scriptural lists. “Now you say, ‘Well, what if we find a list in Scripture?’ This is a very different issue! Any specified list in Scripture is to be obeyed . . . But when questionable things aren’t specified in Scripture, it then becomes a matter of one’s own personal preference or convictions” (p. 132).

At first glance, this seems like an acceptable position. Given our loyalty to the authority of God’s Word, it would seem such a position would honor the Book. But what is wrong with this position?

1. It relegates important moral decisions to the realm of individual judgment without the informed and Spirit-taught directives coming through God’s messengers.
2. It denies the validity of the appropriate application of scriptural principles to everyday life.
3. It will tend to provide a defense for worldly lifestyles under the cover of grace. One is reminded of Paul’s warning, “For brethren, ye have been called unto liberty; only use not liberty for an occasion to the flesh . . .” (Gal. 5:13).

APPLYING SCRIPTURAL PRINCIPLES TO LIFE

Scripture does not list many specific sins that should be avoided. There are lists of objectionable pursuits given in Scripture. One example would be found in Ephesians 4:17-32. Notice the items mentioned:

1. Unbiblical thought patterns (v. 17)
2. Sensuality and impurity (v. 22)
3. Wicked desires (v. 32)
4. Lying (v. 25)
5. Anger (v. 26)
6. Stealing (v. 28)
7. Unwholesome talk (v. 29)
8. Bitterness (v. 31)
9. Rage (v. 31)
10. Brawling (v. 31)
11. Slander (v. 31)
12. Malice (v. 31)

This list certainly covers a large spectrum of sins.

Some general categories included in scriptural lists would need to be particularized. We mean the principles need to be applied to particular sins. As an example, the apostle mentions “lasciviousness” and “uncleanness,” which we have called “sensuality and impurity.” But what specific things would be considered sensual or impure? According to Swindoll’s thinking, we would be legalistic to attach a specific application to these words. We would be putting people under “bondage.” On his list of “taboos” he abhors is the “wearing of certain clothing.” Some Christian colleges prohibit their female students from wearing “see through” blouses. Why? Because God commands that “women adorn themselves in modest apparel, with shamefacedness [decency] and sobriety [discreetness]” (1 Tim. 2:9). School authorities must make a judgment. What kind of attire is decent and discreet? Are they legalistic in doing so, or is this prohibition a proper application of the warning against “sensuality” and indecencies? We believe it is a proper application. It is, however, an **application** and not something specifically mentioned in Scripture.

Scripture does not list every sin a Christian must avoid. Even though the Bible was written many centuries ago, it is a “timeless” book. There are sins plaguing believers today which were not known to biblical authors. For instance, rock music was not in existence when Paul authored his epistles. This does not mean, however, that a believer is permitted to participate in such music simply because it is not mentioned in the Bible.

Apart from lists, certain principles of life are set forth in Scripture which must be applied in daily living. The Bible is the Christian’s textbook for living. It is filled with exhortations, instructions, and prohibitions by which the believer is to be guided as he lives his life in this world. The principles were given to direct believers in every age and country.

An example would be the directive of Paul that a believer is to be “holy both in body and spirit” (1 Cor. 7:34). If this be true, should a Christian use marijuana? Is it wrong to tell a believer to refrain from such? Marijuana is nowhere specifically condemned in Scripture, but is it valid, applying Paul’s words, to condemn its use on the part of a believer? We believe it is a perfectly normal and valid application. It does not make one a legalist to tell a believer he should not use a drug. What is our goal? “Christ shall be magnified in my body” (Phil. 1:20). We cannot magnify Christ through the use of drugs.

ARGUMENT #4: Each believer should be able to determine his own lifestyle individually and creatively without fear of rebuke from other believers.

To Swindoll, grace means “I’m free to choose” (p. 139). One of his main theses is, “Throughout this book, I have emphasized the value of variety and the importance of individuality” (p. 176). He quotes approvingly from Eugene Peterson in his book, *Traveling Light*: “There are people who do not want us to be free They don’t want us to be free to express our faith originally and creatively in the world. They want to control us . . . find ways to control, restrict, and reduce the lives of free Christians” (p. 92). This expresses a stream of thought often found in Swindoll’s book, namely, that all who establish rules of any kind are mean-spirited conspirators, engaged in an evil plot to ensnare believers and take away the “fun” of being a Christian. Most Bible-loving pastors and leaders who seek to maintain standards of godliness do not do so out of a lust for power or because they wish to control people, but out of a genuine concern for the development of godliness.

In his chapter entitled “The Grace to Let Others Be,” Swindoll articulates his philosophy in this fashion: “If someone thinks differently or makes different choices than we do, prefers different entertainment, wears different clothing, has different tastes and opinions, or enjoys a different style of life, most Christians get nervous. We place far too much weight on externals and the importance of appearances and not nearly enough on individuality and variety” (p. 154).

The question needs to be asked, To what extent must individuality and variety be governed by scriptural principles? The touchstone of judgment is not whether someone else does or does not do a certain thing, but whether or not the Word of God gives direction about it. In other words, the issue is not whether something is **different** but whether it is **appropriate** in the light of scriptural teaching.

In commenting on Romans 12:9-17, Swindoll states, “In a nutshell those words represent the essence of authentic Christianity” (p. 153). He sees in the passage a refusal to “compare ourselves with others” and to “attempt to control” others (p. 156). He exhorts us to get rid of this “legalistic tendency to compare” (p. 156).

Again, it depends upon your standard of comparison. If we are merely using other people as our standard, we are in the wrong. In rebuking the false teachers at Corinth, Paul declared, “For we dare not make ourselves of the number, or compare ourselves with some that commend themselves: but they measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves with themselves are not wise” (2 Cor. 10:12). Neither are we wise in doing the same.

In *Grace Awakening* the point is made that we should accept other believers as they are without questioning what they do, without criticizing their practices or lifestyles, and without attempting to change them. This, it is stated, is the “life of grace.” An appeal is made to Romans 14:1-6 in support of this concept. Two particular “doubtful things” are mentioned in the context: (1) food and (2) the observance of special days. As has already been stated, some styles of living, types of music, or articles of clothing do not really fall under the category of “disputable things” but are clearly out of bounds for a believer who would obey God’s Word.

According to the advocates of “grace” teaching, we should refuse to dictate to others. This is supported with Romans 14:5: “Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind.” “Give people room to make up their own minds” (p. 163). According to Swindoll, all “rules” should be self-imposed, not imposed by others. To him “grace means I will not force or manipulate or judge or attempt to control you, nor should you do those things to me” (p. 146). “Being a person of grace requires letting go of others” (p. 146). In presenting his case, we believe Swindoll employs “catch phrases” and “loaded words” calculated to bias the reader against those whom he opposes, such as the words “manipulate” and “control.” The impression is received that those setting standards of service in a local church are seeking to “manipulate” or “control” others. In other words, they are doing so for fleshly reasons. It does not seem to occur to the author that some who believe in requiring high standards for leadership are seeking to honor God and to obey His Word. They are not seeking to “manipulate” or “control” people for selfish purposes.

In pursuing the argument that we should “let others be,” he asks, “Why can’t a person be spiritual and enjoy expressions of music or art totally different from those you like?” (p. 155). Some believers, he says, may appreciate “hymns and mellow songs” (p. 154), and others may prefer “jazz or rock” (p. 155). Why can’t we just let everyone follow their own tastes?

Our reply: It is true there are varying tastes in music, but there are also moral and biblical principles involved. Music must be judged by these biblical principles and not simply by human likes or dislikes. Rock music, for instance, has invaded the churches on the plea that “some people like it.” Well, suppose they do? Does that make it a fitting medium of praise to the Almighty? The Word of God must govern our use of music, not merely our human tastes. The doctrine of grace does not free us to employ music dishonoring to the God of grace. There are biblical principles that apply to the use of music. The investigation of these principles goes beyond the limits of this discussion, but others have dealt with the matter (Leonard

Seidel, *Face the Music*, Grace Unlimited Publications, Springfield, VA; Frank Garlock and Kurt Wetzell, *Music In the Balance*, Majesty Music, Greenville, SC.)

Is the disagreement between Paul and Barnabas in Acts 15:36-41 an illustration of “letting others be”? It is cited as such, but let us examine the story more closely. A difference of opinion arose between Paul and Barnabas over the use of Mark in missionary work. Barnabas wanted to take Mark with them, but Paul did not. Paul felt that since Mark had deserted them in Pamphylia on an earlier missionary trip, he was not stable and dependable and should not be included in the missionary party. There was a violent disagreement and Paul and Barnabas parted ways. Swindoll uses this as an illustration of his thesis that we ought to “disagree and press on.” In other words, we should not break fellowship over issues about which we disagree. Grace means we should accept each other.

In applying this point, Swindoll writes, “Here’s another grace-binding example: I’m not a charismatic. However, I don’t feel it is my calling to shoot great volleys of theological artillery at my charismatic brothers and sisters There was a time in my life when I would have done that. Thankfully, I’ve grown up a bit” (p. 188). Facing honestly the passage in Acts 15, we must state this loose theological position is not supported by what is found there. The issue faced by Paul and Barnabas was one of personal judgment regarding the potential usefulness of an individual in missionary work. The passage certainly does not support theological indifference toward serious error such as that represented in the charismatic movement.

A missing ingredient. In all of his discussions relative to grace and the Christian life, Swindoll gives no attention to the responsibility delegated to mature Christians and leaders of the church to guide others in godly living and steer them away from ungodliness by appropriate scriptural instruction. There is a vast difference between “manipulating” or “dictating” and teaching scriptural standards.

It should be emphasized again that scriptural principles must be applied to all areas of life. Principles are not helpful if they remain in the abstract. They must be made concrete through application to daily living. The Bible says, “Love not the world” (1 Jn. 2:15-16). It is an important principle, but what does it mean to the twentieth-century Christian? What is the world? How does it evidence itself? What are examples of the “lust of the flesh” and other sins mentioned? How would a believer know if he were loving the world? These are practical questions we must face. To delineate the

sins of the world and to call believers away from them is not a violation of grace. It is part of the ministry of grace. It is instructive to note that nowhere in his volume does Swindoll discuss the very important passage in Titus 2:11-14, which speaks of grace and holiness.

Do godly pastors “use the Bible as a hammer to pound folks into submission” (p. 132)? Not if they are **godly**. What do they do? They exercise their God-given responsibility to teach the Word of God **with authority**. Pastors are not merely to present truth. They are to urge obedience to that truth. Some strong language is used of the pastor’s ministry in 1 Timothy 4:11: “These things command and teach.” The same Greek word “command” is employed in 1 Timothy 5:7 and 6:13. It refers to a military order. It is used not only of the preacher’s proclamation of doctrine, but also of his responsibility to call the people to a godly life. To command people in an authoritative manner is required of God’s messenger, which is different from manipulation or “bullying.”

Believers are also to challenge one another to godly living. We are not simply to “let others be.” “But exhort one another daily, while it is called To day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin” (Heb. 3:13). Note the reason we should exhort is to guard one another from sin’s deceitfulness. This seems to imply other believers may see sin we do not see, and , if so, they should confront us with it in an effort to keep us holy. Again, this involves a Spirit-directed judgment: (1) We must decide whether a brother or sister is threatened by sin. (2) We must seek to bring correction to their lives. This is contrary to Swindoll’s advice: “Being a person of grace requires letting go of others” (p. 146). However, we believe it is in line with the teaching of Scripture. We cannot “let go of others” and leave them to do things which are not right. In love and grace they must be confronted, rebuked, and assisted to restoration.

ARGUMENT #5: To attempt to set lifestyle standards for other believers is legalism.

“Legalism” is a scare-word, putting fear in the hearts of some of the most staunch Christian leaders. No one wants to be characterized as “legalistic.” It is an undesirable image, one to be heartily rejected.

Swindoll’s definition of legalism. “Legalism is an attitude, a mentality based on pride. It is an obsessive conformity to an artificial standard for the purpose of exalting oneself. A legalist assumes the place of authority and pushes it to unwarranted extremes” (p. 81). “Legalism is rigid, grim, exacting, and law-like in nature It leads to an emphasis on what should

not be, and what one should not do. It flourishes in a drab context of negativism” (p. 82).

Certainly Swindoll is correct in stating legalism is an attitude. However, when one examines the Scriptures, one discovers legalism is not primarily the development of lists of “taboos.” Myron Houghton has made an astute observation: “A distinction must be made between lists and legalism. It is certainly true that believers differ on their lists, and we must evaluate each item on a list in light of relevant scriptural teaching. But disagreeing with fellow believers over whether or not Scripture supports their lists has nothing to do with legalism. Legalism is related to why one should obey a list rather than to the rightness or wrongness of the list” (“What is Legalism?”, *Faith Pulpit*, September-October, 1993).

An alleged example of legalism. In attempting to illustrate the failure of legalism and the success of grace, Swindoll uses two Old Testament prophets. Both prophets were seeking to motivate Israel to rebuild their house of worship, the temple. According to Swindoll, Haggai represents the legalistic approach, which failed, and Zechariah the approach of grace, which succeeded.

One is astounded at Swindoll’s treatment of the prophet Haggai, whom Swindoll says addressed the problem with a legalistic ministry. He was sharp, stinging, grim, and negative. He “tips his arrows with scorn” (p. 215). He was full of “sarcastic comments” and “severe admonitions” (p. 215). “So the temple remained unfinished in spite of Haggai’s persistent albeit wearisome harassment” (p. 216). This hardly seems to be a respectful and appropriate treatment of an inspired prophet of God.

“Wearisome harassment?” What kind of talk is this? Was not Haggai inspired by God’s Spirit? Zechariah accomplished the task because he was “easier to live with” (p. 216). The moral seems to be that a strong “denouncer” of sin will not accomplish as much for God as will a gracious and likeable “ministry of grace” (a term he uses to describe Zechariah). Actually, both elements are needed in good preaching. One must denounce sin and rebuke, as well as encourage. Both negative and positive notes must be sounded by the one who would be a true messenger of God.

Misconception of legalism. As already mentioned, Swindoll sees a legalist as one who endeavors to set standards of living for other believers. Such persons are “grim-faced” (p. xv), displaying “deep frowns” (p. xv), and are “religious kill-joys” (p. xv). “Be warned,” he says, “there are grace-killers on the loose! To make matters worse, they are a well-organized,

intimidating body of people who stop at nothing to keep you and me from enjoying the freedom that is rightfully ours to claim” (p. xiv).

Is this a biblical concept of legalism? We do not believe it is. Let us examine the matter more closely.

In Colossians 2:16-17, Paul warns believers against legalism: “Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: which are a shadow of things to come; but the body [the reality] is of Christ.” “Eating and drinking” referred to the efforts of Judaizers to impose Old Testament dietary restrictions upon believers (cf. Lev. 11). The “holydays” were Jewish festivals such as Passover, Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles. The Sabbath was the weekly Jewish day of rest. “The main purpose of placing such stress on all such regulations was to convince the Colossians that strict observance was absolutely indispensable to salvation, or if not to salvation as such, at least to fullness, perfection in salvation” (William Hendricksen, *New Testament Commentary: Colossians and Philemon*, pp. 123-24). In other words, **human effort to receive acceptance with God was prohibited**. Some have the notion that any requirement to fulfill certain standards is legalism. As Ryrie has observed, this is fallacious. “It cannot be emphasized too strongly that having to do something is not legalism, but the wrong attitude is Israelites had to bring their sacrifices, otherwise they would have suffered certain penalties. It was the attitude toward doing what they had to do that determined whether or not their action was legalistic Having to conform to a law is not of itself legalism” (Charles Ryrie, *The Grace of God*, pp. 117-18).

True definition of legalism. One theologian has defined legalism as “a keeping of the law, particularly in a formal sense, and a regarding of obedience as meritorious” (Millard Erickson, *Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology*, p. 95). While fundamental, Bible-believing leaders have many flaws, we have never met one who believed that conformity to lists of “taboos” was “meritorious,” that is, earned one acceptance with God. Despite Swindoll’s repeated suggestions of this, we believe it to be a caricature. It presents strong, godly men who are seeking to maintain God’s standards in the midst of a wicked world as scheming, bitter, and vengeful souls. This is absolutely false.

This is not to say that such men are perfect. There have been errors made, and some are guilty of unreasonable demands at times. The spirit with which even good rules can be administered can sometimes be offensive. But the broad characterization of so-called “grace-killers” given in this volume is, in our judgment, skewed and misleading.

Ryrie’s definition of legalism is helpful: “Legalism may be defined as ‘a fleshly attitude which conforms to a code for the purpose of exalting self.’ The code is whatever objective standard is applicable to the time; the motive is to exalt self and gain merit rather than to glorify God because of what He has done, and the power is the flesh, not the Holy Spirit” (Charles Ryrie, *The Grace of God*, p. 117). Here are two attitudes attributed to legalism: (1) the effort to exalt self, and (2) the effort to gain merit with God. We do not believe the requirement of many Christian colleges that young ladies wear skirts to class instead of jeans or that the young men have traditional haircuts instead of long hair exhibits either of these attitudes. Such rules are not made for the purpose of exalting self or gaining merit before God. They are made for the purpose of training young people in decent and upright ways of living and of teaching them self-discipline. When a local church prohibits its pastors and deacons from affiliation with the Masonic Lodge, this is not legalism. It is an earnest effort to keep the church of Christ pure and to keep out undesirable and unbiblical influences. To specify activities or pleasures Christians should avoid is not legalism. It is an application of biblical principles to life.

ARGUMENT #6: To cause people to feel shame is to be a grace-killer.

Is it a violation of a grace ministry to make people feel ashamed of their actions? Note Swindoll’s statements: “Grace releases people, not only from their sin but from shame” (p. 231); “Shame is a classic grace killer” (p. 231); We ought not to make people “ashamed of their wrongs” (p. 231).

Having positioned himself in this manner, Swindoll goes on to criticize what he calls a “shame-based spirituality” (p. 232). He includes a number of items under this; we only look at two examples:

He says shame-based spirituality believes that “having fun is sinful” (p. 232). In all of my years in the ministry, I do not recall any responsible Christian leader saying such a thing. I suspect the problem centers around the question, How would one define “having fun”? Many pursuits the world would classify as “fun” would (or should) be out-of-bounds for the believer. In line with the general thrust of his book, one gets the impression that even if a believer is engaged in the kind of “fun” contrary to God’s Word, other believers have no right to challenge that person and seek to “bring guilt upon them.” A wild party with lots of liquor would be fun to a worldling. Is it legitimate for a Christian?

On the list of items characterizing “shame-based spirituality” is “Sexuality = sin” (p. 231). Again, we know of no fundamental leader who would say

such a thing. Sexuality is a gift of God as is plainly taught in Scripture. However, we must ask the question, What is meant by the term “sexuality”? Skimpy attire is a prominent part of what is called “sexuality” today, but is it proper for a Christian? There is certain “body language” denominated by some as a display of “sexuality.” Should a child of God be involved in such? If “sexuality” means sexual intercourse, a believer is immediately driven to the Scriptures, where the act of sex is restricted to the marriage bond.

Frankly, there are some “fun” pursuits about which believers ought to feel a sense of shame. God sometimes causes people to feel shame in order to bring them back into fellowship with Himself. Preaching and teaching must be balanced. Some preachers probably spend too much effort trying to put people on “guilt trips.” They do not balance their ministry with encouragement and edification. In this area, as in all areas of spiritual truth, we should seek to be balanced as is God’s Word. God does shame people at times and, furthermore, **He uses human instruments to do it.** The prophet Ezekiel did not mince words when speaking to Israel: “Thou also . . . bear thine own shame for thy sins that thou hast committed . . . be thou confounded also, and bear thy shame . . .” (Ezek. 16:52). Paul, in seeking to correct certain wrong attitudes and practices in the church at Corinth, wrote, “Awake to righteousness and sin not [stop sinning]; for some have not the knowledge of God: I speak this to your shame” (1 Cor. 15:34).

There are times when people should feel shame. Grace does not rid us of all legitimate feelings of shame. When we have grieved the Spirit and have sinned against the Lord, we should be shameful. This is not to say the **major ministry of a Bible-teacher** is to cause people to feel shame. However, it is part of their ministry. “Preach the word . . . reprove, rebuke [which may cause shame], exhort [which is the positive balance]” (2 Tim. 4:2).

We believe the “grace awakening” emphasis is warped and has omitted what might be called the “discipline of grace,” to which we now turn our attention.

THE DISCIPLINE OF GRACE

The impression given by Swindoll is that the sole function of grace is to **liberate**. He celebrates continually the believer’s “freedom,” “liberation,” and “deliverance” from restrictions either real or imagined. Grace gives us “permission to be free” (p. 5). We have “liberating grace” (p. 8). “All who embrace grace become ‘free indeed’” (p. 46). “You will be free” (p. 53).

You should be “enjoying your liberty” (p. 132). These are but a few examples. Many more could be listed.

In authoring his book, our brother seems to be obsessed with the great bondage under which believers seem to labor. After reading his book, I could not help but ask, “Why have you never felt this great burden of ‘bondage’ about which he writes?” I was raised in a strict “holiness” home. I attended a Christian college, which would be viewed as having restrictive rules. I have ministered in and been pastor of churches that maintained high standards of conduct for their members and leaders. In the years of my ministry, I have never felt I was in bondage to or misused by any human. I have never felt restive under rules or restrictions. It is interesting that in recent years this seems to have become a problem for some. Why? I believe it is because of the tremendous pressure of the wicked age in which we live. Holy, godly, and separated living is no longer “in style.” It is viewed as an anachronism and a “bother.” God’s grace is being used by some as a way by which to allow Christians to do things they have not done before with the idea that it is perfectly acceptable. Some Christian leaders and their followers are “caving in” to the spirit of the age.

While it is certainly true that **grace liberates us**, it is equally true that **grace enslaves us**. If this is not so, then James was terribly mistaken when he introduced himself as “James, a servant [slave] of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” (Ja. 1:1). The New Testament is not all about what we **can** do, but it is also about what we **cannot** do. The “grace awakening” emphasis neglects this aspect of grace.

Grace was fully revealed in Jesus Christ. The word “appeared” (Tit. 2:11) focuses on Christ’s incarnation. Paul is arguing in this book that godly living is mandated by God’s truth. He gives us an important lesson on grace that must not be forgotten: “For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath **appeared** to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world” (Tit. 2:11-12). This is what we might call the “restraint” or the “control” of grace. Grace does not merely allow us to “run wild,” to “do our own thing,” but rather it enables us to “say no” to the ungodliness around us and to live self-controlled lives. Grace, in other words, is not merely **liberating** but also **controlling**. A Christian walking in grace is liberated from the power of sin but is under the control and restrictions of the Master.

Notice that Paul’s concept of grace includes the negative, as well as the positive. As believers under grace, we are to repudiate “ungodliness” and “worldly lusts.” What is included in these? Certainly in order to obey such

a command, some specifics would have to be given. It is this that Swindoll resists. We are to avoid “ungodliness,” but let no one presume to instruct us as to what it is. This we must figure out for ourselves because we want no authoritarian intrusion into our personal choices. This approach is neither practical nor scriptural.

The Christian life is a balance between negative and positive elements. This seems evident in verse 14, where we are told that God intends to “purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works.”

It is interesting also that Paul instructs us as to how the truths of grace are to be communicated. “These things speak, and exhort, and rebuke with all authority. Let no man despise thee” (v. 15). This seems to conflict with the notion that no one has the right to “tell another believer what to do.”

Certainly there are some Christian leaders who have assumed more authority than they should. There are also some who employ their authority in repulsive and abrasive ways. However, we should not, on this account, draw back from the proper use of authority. Paul says, “these things,” these matters about life under grace, should be communicated by God-called leaders with “authority” not with reticence. In other words, we are not to leave choices regarding Christian living simply to the unguided and uninstructed decision of each believer, but are to actively, boldly, and authoritatively call God’s people to a life of holiness.

THE INSTRUCTIONS OF GRACE

What are some of the things God’s grace “teaches us”?

We are to be holy. Holiness comes from within. The essence of holiness is not obedience to outward rules, but purity of heart. “Who shall ascend into the hill of the Lord? or who shall stand in his holy place? [in order to worship]. He that hath clean hands, and a pure heart . . .” (Ps. 24:3-4). The mind of the believer should be fixed on holy things (Phil. 4:8).

In emphasizing a life of personal separation, Peter reminds his readers of God’s call to holiness: “As obedient children, not fashioning yourselves according to the former lusts in your ignorance: But as he which has called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; Because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy” (1 Pet. 1:14-16).

The same balance is seen here as elsewhere in Scripture. Holiness involves separation from evil (“the former lusts”) and the exhibition of positive

godliness (“be holy”). God’s grace motivates people toward holiness of life. In every pursuit of life we must ask ourselves the question, Is what I am doing holy? It may be “fun,” but is it holy? It may be acceptable to other fellow Christians, but is it holy?

Many admonitions for personal holiness are to be found in the New Testament. Examples are as follows:

I Peter 2:11—“Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul.”

James 1:21—“Wherefore, lay apart [put aside] all filthiness.”

Jude 23—“ . . . hating even the garment spotted [polluted] by the flesh.”

Romans 13:14—“But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provisions for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof.”

Every part of our inner and outer being should be holy to God. The Scripture is comprehensive in its call to holiness.

1. Purity of heart (Jer. 4:4-14; Joel 2:12; Ps. 19:14; 24:3-4; 51:10)
2. Purity of mind (Ps. 26:2; Jer. 4:14; Rom. 12:2; Col. 2:18)
3. Purity of worship (Gen. 35; Ex. 23:20-33)
4. Purity of body (Prov. 7; 1 Cor. 5:6)
5. Purity of ear (Rev. 2:7)
6. Purity of lip (Prov. 13:3; James 3; Eph. 4:25; 5:4)
7. Purity of music (Eph. 5:19-20)

We must respect our body as God’s temple. “Flee fornication. Every sin that a man doeth is without the body; but he that committeth fornication sinneth against his own body. What? Know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s” (1 Cor. 6:18-20).

Since the Holy Spirit dwells in the body of every believer, his body is a special place—it is where God lives on this earth. A question must be

constantly before us, Does this particular habit or action violate the sanctity of God's temple?

In his book, Swindoll argues for a greater display of grace toward believers who smoke. Other believers should not be so "intolerant" (p. 229). We should not lay "heavy expectations" on one another (p. 229). We don't provide sufficient "liberty" (p. 229). He wonders why we are more tolerant of smoking among unbelievers than we are among believers. There is a simple reason. The unbeliever is lost and blind and has no desire nor ability to live up to God's standards. However, when a person becomes a Christian, he acquires a different set of standards. We ought not to tolerate in the life of a believer the same sins we tolerate in the unbeliever. This is not to say we should ostracize a believer from the fellowship of the saints because he smokes. But neither should we allow him to continue without godly rebuke and instruction. It is not a demonstration of grace to allow a believer to continue doing something which is obviously contrary to Scripture. If the body is the temple of God, then smoking is wrong. This needs to be made clear but in love. Swindoll indicates smokers may not have been "dealt with yet by the spirit of God" (p. 229). Certainly we should be patient with weak believers, especially those who are new-born in the faith. The idea so prevalent in his book, that we are to refrain from rebuke of sin in their life, is simply not taught in the New Testament. The Holy Spirit "deals" with people through the godly instruction of other people.

We are to rid ourselves of bodily and spiritual defilement: "Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God" (2 Cor. 7:1). Here again is emphasized God's desire for purity of life. Believers are to rid themselves of all that would pollute, stain, contaminate, or defile. The word "filthiness" was used of sexual, ceremonial, or religious defilement. Sometimes in literature it referred to the defilement of paganism. Certainly it included all kinds of moral defilement. The word is used in the exhortation of Revelation 3:4, in which saints are commended "which have not defiled their garments," for, says the Lord, "they shall walk with me in white."

The pure and holy walk of the believer is a great and biblical concept, but what are its practical, everyday implications? I cannot "walk in white" unless I cleanse myself from "all filthiness of the flesh and spirit." What would be included under this? Advocates of "awakened grace" would hesitate to specify. To do so would be an incursion into the forbidden land of "legalism." We are not to tell people what they cannot do. Yet, if this be

so, how can teachers of God's Word ever hope to assist their listeners in knowing how to apply this Scripture?

In one place Swindoll suggests that styles of music (including rock music) are matters of personal preference and should remain so. However, a question is in order. Does rock music "defile flesh and spirit"? Abundant evidence can be offered to prove that it does. It is therefore contradictory to the principle of life given us in II Corinthians 7:1: "Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God." Should not our young people be told that? Am I a legalist if I teach publicly that rock music is of the devil and is out-of-bounds for the Christian who desires to be godly? No. I am simply applying in a sane and proper way the principles of life which God has given to us.

We are to repudiate the works of the flesh. In Galatians 5, Paul announces that believers have "been called unto liberty" (Gal. 5:13). It is this note that Swindoll sounds with great gusto throughout his book. However, this truth needs to be placed in context. Paul goes on to warn that the doctrine of liberty should not be used "for an occasion to the flesh," that is, as an excuse to indulge in fleshly activities contrary to God's Word. The Spirit-controlled life is emphasized—"Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh" (Gal. 5:16). The believer has a supernatural Helper as he battles the evil influences of his old nature. We can live victoriously for Jesus.

Then, Paul "makes a list" (an "anathema" for those "awakened by grace"). Fifteen specific sins are on his list. Paul saw no violation of the principle of grace in specifying sins the believer should avoid. This, by the way, is done in the epistle which, perhaps more than any other, defends the great doctrine of grace (Gal. 5:19-21).

Several of the sins listed by Paul would require application to modern-day living. This has already been pointed out earlier when discussing another list given to us in Ephesians four. There is, for instance, the word "uncleanness" (impurity). What areas of life would be covered by this word? There is also the word "lasciviousness" (debauchery). The word carries the thought of "licentiousness, wantonness, or excess." There would, no doubt, be a number of areas in contemporary society to which this word could be applied. Is one a legalist for applying it and calling attention to the fact that participation in given activities would be "lascivious"? If one refuses to make proper applications, one emasculates the biblical teaching on personal separation from the world and greatly restricts the preaching power of God's servant.

There is another interesting matter to note in Paul's discussion in Galatians. After specifying many categories of sins, he employs the term "and such like" (Gal. 5:21). He is thereby telling us not all sins of the flesh are mentioned here. There are others of similar repulsive character. How are we to determine what they are? Swindoll says we should only obey scriptural lists and not human lists (p. 132). But here is a list inviting additions—"and such like." How are we to know what are "such like" sins? We must study the Scriptures and use godly judgment in such determinations. This is not legalism. It is Spirit-controlled discernment.

We are to repudiate the world. Under grace we are forbidden to love the world and "the things that are in the world" (1 Jn. 2:15). A summary of those "things" is given in verse 16: "the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life." One does not have to look far nor to be super-discerning in order to find quite a few things in modern society which are "of the world." Of course, worldliness should never be received as simply the pursuit of certain vices or pleasures. Worldliness is rooted in the heart—it is an attitude. Some who would never dream of listening to rock music or consuming alcohol may, nevertheless, be worldly in their hearts.

We are told not to be "conformed to this world" (Rom. 12:2). The real key to obedience to this command is found in the previous verse. It is a **positive** command—"present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God!" For those whose motivating desire is to please God and to be holy, the prohibitions to conformity to the world are not irksome. If we are given up to God, we want nothing to do with this foul world that is in enmity to Him. A desire for holiness causes us to repudiate the world.

ADMONITIONS FOR FUNDAMENTALISTS

No one is perfect, fundamentalists included. While we believe Charles Swindoll is skewed in his presentation of grace, we must also face the fact that fundamentalists have not always thought clearly in this area nor conducted themselves with Christian grace. Paul's words are appropriate for us: "Let a man examine himself" (1 Cor. 11:28).

What we should avoid. Fundamentalists often have been guilty of majoring on minors. This is not to say there is no place for minors, but they must be viewed in proper priority of importance. One must discern the relative importance of differing issues and react accordingly. Christ rebuked the Pharisees for paying undue attention to the matter of tithing while neglecting "the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith" (Matt. 23:23). The Lord did not suggest that tithing was unimportant

and should be abandoned, simply that some duties are more important than others. There must be a balance. "These [the paying of tithes] ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other [the development of judgment, mercy, and faith] undone." The nature of women's attire, for instance, can have important moral implications. Such an issue is governed by one's attitude of heart. We can aim at the hemline but miss the heart.

God says, "Pride goeth before destruction, and an haughty spirit before a fall" (Prov. 16:18). Those attempting to stand for standards of righteousness can sometimes develop a spirit of pride in their stand. "We are more holy than any other church in town." We had best be very careful of such attitudes. Since we have been talking about grace, we ought to remember the words of James: "God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble" (Ja. 4:6). Some fundamentalist leaders who have been very strong in their promotion of outward standards of personal separation have themselves fallen into sin and disgraced the ministry. They became proud of their large churches and Christian schools, impressed with their own accomplishments, and, while demanding righteous standards of others, did not follow such themselves. Their inconsistencies have caused other men, disillusioned by poor example, to reject a stricter view of the Christian life as hypocritical and embrace the "grace awakening" philosophy.

There are those among us who possess contentious spirits. While addressed to women in the context, Paul's warnings should not be lost on Christian leaders. There are an abundance of "tattlers" and "busybodies" abroad in fundamentalism, persons "speaking things which they ought not" (1 Tim. 5:13). Sometimes these contentions revolve around the outward standards of righteousness. Some are "doting about questions and strifes of words," or, as someone has rendered it, possessing "a morbid interest in controversial questions" (1 Tim. 6:4). We who battle for the faith and for righteousness must be exceedingly careful lest we love the battle more than we love the Lord.

What we should practice. There is a happy balance to be achieved. We must be **loving but not gullible**. Swindoll views those who hold stricter views of personal separation as unloving and overly critical. As we have already observed, some believe Christian love accepts everyone and everything without any critical assessments. Surely we cannot follow this approach. Love "rejoiceth not in [accept or approve of] iniquity" (1 Cor. 13:6). We are specifically instructed as to what we are to do: "Prove all things [examine everything carefully]; hold fast that which is good" (1 Thess. 5:21).

In *Grace Awakening* fundamentalists are seen as “inflexible.” We should be **flexible but not weak**. To be flexible is to be willing to bend or change with regard to matters that are not mandated by direct scriptural teaching or by valid application of such teaching. Some are far too lenient in relation to personal separation, allowing and condoning outlandish lifestyles which are clearly contrary to God’s pattern. On the other hand, some are far too rigid, dotting “i’s” and crossing “t’s” not warranted by sane biblical exegesis.

It is also important that fundamentalists be **discerning but not hypercritical**. It is sometimes a difficult balance to realize. Swindoll warns against people who “are determined to find any flaw, failure, or subtle weakness in your life” (p. 60). No doubt there are “snooping Toms.” However, that does not negate the necessity for spiritual discernment accompanied by godly instruction or rebuke. On the other hand, we must not become obsessed with finding fault.

Finally, we must strive to be **uncompromising but not unreasonable**. We cannot compromise things that ought not to be compromised. On the other hand, we must always evidence “forbearing [sweet reasonableness to] one another in love” (Eph. 4:2). We should be willing to discuss with earnest questioners and sincere believers the biblical reasons for our practices. If what we are practicing is right, we need not fear explaining it.

CONCLUSION

How wonderful it is to be recipients of God’s grace!

*“Twas grace that taught my heart to fear
And grace my fears relieved.
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed.”*

John Newton

As we have seen, grace not only liberates from sin and its consequences, it also enslaves us to Christ and produces holiness of life. As believers we must not only celebrate the **liberation** of grace, but also the **purification** of grace. The same grace which sets us free also challenges us with very high standards of living and, thankfully, enables us to reach them. “Brethren, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit” (Gal. 6:18).

SOME NEW TESTAMENT TEACHINGS ON GRACE

- Grace was fully manifested in Jesus Christ John 1:14-17
- Grace is the basis of our salvation Ephesians 2:8-9
- Grace is the basis of our sanctification Galatians 3:3
- Grace is at the heart of the gospel message Acts 20:24
- Grace forms the basis of our standing with God Romans 15:15-17
- Grace has made us what we are I Corinthians 15:10
- Grace helps us work for Christ I Corinthians 15:10
- Grace brought us to Christ Galatians 1:15
- Grace provides us a place of service Ephesians 3:7-8
- Grace enables us to use our spiritual abilities Ephesians 4:7
- Grace helps us express praise through music Colossians 3:16
- Grace helps us speak to others with wisdom Colossians 4:6
- Grace is always with us I Thessalonians 5:28
- Grace enables us to glorify Christ II Thessalonians 1:12
- Grace calls us to holiness II Timothy 1:9
- Grace gives us strength to live for Christ II Timothy 2:1
- Grace motivates us to reject ungodliness Titus 2:11
- Grace provides help for us when we need it Hebrews 4:16
- Grace is given in special measure to the humble James 4:6
- Grace is evidenced through the use of spiritual gifts I Peter 4:10
- Grace is specially evident in times of suffering I Peter 5:10
- Grace enables us to grow in the knowledge of Christ II Peter 3:18