

# **FOLLOWING GOD WITHOUT TURNING TO THE RIGHT OR TO THE LEFT**

by Patrick Swayne

## **INTRODUCTION**

Before the Israelites entered into the promised land under the guidance of Joshua, God saw fit to bring them one last inspired message from their great lawgiver, Moses. The words that Moses delivered to them have been recorded for our benefit in a book we identify as Deuteronomy. The title as we have it has been borrowed from the Septuagint, an ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament. The title is a compound word comprised of the Greek words for "second" and "law"; thus, to the ancient Greeks, Deuteronomy was the second law, or, as the title is defined by Smith, "the repetition of the law" (Smith, E-Sword). However, whether we think of Deuteronomy as the Second Law or as the Repetition of the Law, we are selling both the book and its inspired author short.

Deuteronomy is not a mere repetition of the Law. In fact, the book of Deuteronomy is the written record of a series of public addresses (sermons) given by Moses. It is true that Moses reminds them of some of the truths and history given in Exodus-Numbers. However, it is also true that there is a wealth of additional information that is unique to Deuteronomy.

One of the unique teachings found only in Deuteronomy is this instruction: "Ye shall observe to do therefore as the LORD your God hath commanded you: ye shall not turn aside to the right hand or to the left" (Deuteronomy 5:32). While today we are not under the Law of Moses (Romans 10:4; Galatians 3:23-29; 5:1-4; et al), the principle Moses laid down in this passage is an eternal one. What does it mean to "turn aside to the right hand or to the left," and how does doing so affect one's ability to do what the Lord has commanded? This essay will focus on answering these questions as well as providing some practical advice for making application of Moses' command.

## **EXAMINING THE TERMS "RIGHT" AND "LEFT"**

It is important to enter into any discussion of God's word with a good understanding of the terms involved. A lot of people who discuss the Bible end up arguing over the Bible simply because of the way terms are used. These arguments are called "verbal disputes" (as opposed to real disputes) because they stem from a disagreement in definitions. In a study such as this one, it is even more important to have clear definitions because most of the terms involved have multiple meanings and some of the terms contain the potential to be emotionally charged. I hope to examine several terms before settling on some precisely defined terms which we will use for the remainder of our study.

To begin, let us reconsider the words of Moses and in particular the phrase, "to the right hand or to the left" (Deuteronomy 5:32). If you are familiar with modern world politics, the terms right and left probably mean something to you; the right is associated with conservative politics and the left is associated with progressive politics. If these terms already carry meaning to you, it can be tempting to apply that meaning immediately to the text. It is important though to always view the Bible with ancient glasses – to view the Bible as its original audience would have viewed it.

So, if we were standing on the eastern side of the river Jordan about 3500 years ago to hear the words of Moses in person, what would this phrase have meant to us? Probably, "to the right hand or the left" would not have carried the same meaning for ancient Israelites as it does for modern politics. According to Chayim Cohen, "Perhaps the most common usage of right and left in the Bible is as a merism [a figure of speech in which two opposite words are combined to refer to the entire thing – PWS] meaning 'everywhere, in any direction'" (Encyclopaedia Judaica). Basically, if you were listening to Moses deliver the words in person,

you would have simply understood, "I must keep the commandments of my God and not turn aside to anything else."

Even though "right" and "left" would not have meant the same thing to the original audience as it may mean to today's audience, today's meanings are not useless for people trying to apply the principle of what Moses said today. As I mentioned before, in politics, the right refers to those who have a **conservative** tendency. The term conservative is defined as "tending or disposed to maintain existing views, conditions, or institutions" (Merriam-Webster). On the other hand, those on the political left are said to be **progressive**. Progressive can be understood as "favoring or advocating progress, change, improvement, or reform, as opposed to wishing to maintain things as they are, especially in political matters" (Dicionary.com). I would suggest that these two tendencies, conservation and progression, could potentially pull us away from the commandments of the Lord and thus could be among the dangers Moses was warning against.

On the surface, the term conservative might sound like a good thing for Christians. Christians are called to withdraw themselves from those "that walketh disorderly, and not after the tradition" received in Scripture (2 Thessalonians 3:6). Indeed, the need to maintain existing views is demanded by the need to preach the Gospel without alteration – to preach a message unknown to the Gospel is to be declared accursed by the Gospel (Galatians 1:6-9).

However, what if aspects of the gospel were uncovered through a careful study of Scripture that were not currently believed or practiced by the brotherhood? We must not be so prideful as to assume that this could not happen, for after a careful study of the Law of Moses the Israelites discovered that a command from the Law of Moses had been neglected for hundreds of years (Nehemiah 8:13-17). Further, what if a tendency towards conservation was applied to human traditions? Traditions in of themselves are not a bad thing, but sometimes a tendency towards conservation can see certain traditions exalted to the level of God's Law. This is exactly what happened in the case of the Pharisees in the first century (Mark 7:1-13).

On the other side of the coin, progressive sounds dangerous for the very same reasons that conservative sounds good. However, sometimes change is needed. Would Paul have been as effective among the Gentiles as he was if he had not changed his approach and become "all things to all men" (1 Corinthians 9:20-22)? Does a church do well when it insists on avoiding "modern innovations," such as the use of PowerPoint in sermons and Bible classes, simply because the ancient church would not have had access to such innovations? Is it inconceivable to imagine Jesus pointing to lilies as He sat outdoors and said, "Consider the lilies of the field" (Matthew 6:28)? Is PowerPoint fundamentally different?

Clearly following God is not always about categorically avoiding the right (conservation) or the left (progression). When does going right become dangerous? What about going left? More terms and more definitions are needed.

### **EXAMINING THE TERMS CONNECTED WITH THE RIGHT**

While the tendency toward the right (conservation) is probably the more Biblical tendency, the terms associated with the right are often used negatively today, particularly by those in the media. Take for an example the words **extremist** and **radical**. These terms are often used interchangeably by the media in reference to terrorists, those who use violence and fear to promote their beliefs and ideologies. They are used interchangeably because the definition they are using for these terms is something like one of Merriam-Webster's definitions for radical: "very different from the usual or the traditional." Ideologically, a person who is radical is a person who is seeking great change from what is normal; adding the term extremist describes both the fact that they are seeking change and the lengths that they will go to ensure that the change they seek will be brought about.

Though these terms are used to describe terrorists regardless of their motivation, I would argue that they need to be thought of separately whenever terrorism is motivated by religion. Most religious terrorists are not truly seeking change. It is hard to imagine that any of them genuinely believes that killing someone is a good way to convert him (or others). Instead, religious terrorists take their faith very seriously and very literally; they believe their religion calls them to defeat their enemy (non-believers, including even those who may share the same faith but understand it differently) using any means possible. Their approach to their scripture is radical, and in relation to that approach they are extremists.

Using the terms as I have used them in the last sentence above, extremist would better be understood using Google's second definition for the word "extreme": "furthest from the centre of a given point"; radical would be better defined as "of or relating to the origin" (Merriam-Webster). This definition of the word radical relates to the word "fundamental." Have you ever heard the term **fundamentalist**? A fundamentalist is "a movement or attitude stressing strict and literal adherence to a set of basic principles" (Merriam-Webster). It is from this we can gain a new understanding of religious radicals – they are people who are extremely concerned with strictly and literally adhering to the origin of their faith.

Upon seeing those definitions, some Christians would gladly say, "I am both a radical and a fundamentalist!" Before you say this and in so doing alienate yourself from a world that has built up an aversion to both of these terms, **think**. Remember that these terms with the given definitions are rightfully applied to religious terrorists. That in of itself is not a reason to avoid either term – the beauty of Christianity is that there is almost no way to extract from the pages of the New Testament unauthorized violence of any kind, let alone terrorism. However, as you reflect on these terms, do you stress strict, literal adherence in the same way as terrorists do to their religious texts?

Terrorists look at their texts and from those texts draw a literal application that involves violence. However, the majority of people from any religion that has spawned terrorism do not draw that same application. Further, terrorists are not content to practice their religion as they please and allow others to practice as they please. Instead, they use whatever force is available to them (including the violence extracted from their literal interpretation of their scripture) to force their understanding upon others.

As we reflect on what terrorists do with their religious texts, it may seem as though it has nothing to do with Christianity. Yet, there are some ways in which the New Testament could produce literal understandings that the majority of Christians do not hold. Have you ever heard of people claiming to be New Testament Christians who insist on: washing feet as a practice of religion, wearing a head covering, greeting Christians with obligatory kisses, drinking out of one cup on Sunday during the Lord's Supper, limiting benevolence only to those who are Christians, and/or avoiding eating in a building used for worship? All of these understandings are based on a very literal reading of the New Testament, and yet the majority of brethren either do not hold these understandings or hold them, but do not bind them upon others (and with good reason!).

As I said above, the New Testament could never be validly used to promote violence. It could further be said that Christians have no authority from Scripture to force their understanding of religious truths on those outside of the Christian community (1 Corinthians 5:9-10). However, the New Testament does provide the means for faithful brethren to promote proper understanding/practice among erring or unfaithful brethren: 1) the practice of withholding fellowship (Matthew 18:15-20; 1 Corinthians 5:11; 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14-15; 2 John 1:9-11) and 2) the public marking of those who teach falsehoods (Romans 16:17; Titus 3:10-11). As you think about the above paragraph, have you ever known brethren who hold the understandings mentioned to use these tools to force their literal understandings on the rest of the brotherhood?

Members of the Lord's church who hold these beliefs are often labeled by the rest of the brotherhood as being "**anti**." The term simply means "against," which accurately describes

these brethren as being against certain practices; however, for many who hold these practices as religious convictions, the term "anti" is offensive. A less offensive and more specific term for these brethren would be **non-institutional**, as many of these brethren do not believe church funds should be used to promote non-church entities, such as universities, preaching schools, or apologetics organizations (though most believe individual Christians can support these entities). Still, this term alone cannot unify the diversity of beliefs held by these conscientious brethren and is really only useful in referring to them in discussion with those who do not hold their beliefs. I would suggest referring to these brethren as non-institutional rather than "anti's" to others but referring to them personally as you would any other brother or sister in Christ.

Another emotionally charged term that is sometimes leveled at these brethren is the term is **legalist**. The term legalist refers to "strict adherence, or the principle of strict adherence, to law or prescription, especially to the letter rather than the spirit" (Dictionary.com). The term "letter" in this definition refers to what is written in the law and the term "spirit" refers to the reason or purpose for which it was written. This term is in line with the term fundamentalist as well as the latter definition of the term radical I gave. This term (as well as the other two) can accurately be applied to our non-institutional brethren; however, I would never recommend calling these brethren any of these terms due to the emotions attached to the word.

Combining all of these terms, we now have a framework from which to think about and discuss the right, the tendency towards conservatism. When conservatism is taken to the extreme, people become radicals, fundamentalists, and/or legalists, with the last term perhaps being the clearest of the three. An example of extreme conservatism can be found in our non-institutional brethren. However, it is important that we understand that they are not the only example and the tendency seen in them can be seen in us as well.

### **EXAMINING THE TERMS CONNECTED WITH THE LEFT**

The western world as well as the media (which often serves as the blind guide of the western world – Matthew 5:14) typically view ideological progression as being a good thing, whether that progression is found in politics or it is found in religion. They rarely seek to identify it using special terms. Thus, as you look for the counterpart of terms like radical, fundamentalist, and legalist, your mind is probably drawing a blank.

Part of the reason for this is that those who are extremely progressive tend to value **tolerance** and, even more so, **acceptance**. Tolerance can be defined as the "willingness to accept feelings, habits, or beliefs that are different from your own" (Merriam-Webster). Acceptance takes tolerance to another level; it can be defined as "favorable reception; approval; favor" (Dictionary.com).

Those who are extremely progressive claim to be satisfied if you tolerate others, but typically they are only satisfied when that toleration becomes a favorable reception. Further, they are often inconsistent – they claim to value tolerance and acceptance, but rarely practice what they preach. Once, when I was in high school, a group of us were having a discussion about the morality of homosexuality. I can't remember what I said to prompt it, but I still remember what a fellow classmate said to me: "You need to be more tolerant!" I remember at the time seeing the hypocrisy of what she said, and so I responded, "You need to be more tolerant of my intolerance!" While I would not recommend my response as a way to win friends and influence people, the exchange my classmate and I had that day illustrates the hypocritical demands progressives often place on conservatives.

While it is not as often heard in the popular media, there is a word that adequately describes those who have taken progression to extremes. The word is **liberal**. This word too needs a proper and careful definition. It should be noted that in the KJV of the Bible, the words "liberal" and "liberality" are typically good and mean something like generous/generosity. Keeping this older meaning of the word in mind can be helpful – a

generous person is a person who would rather give than keep. Apply that to the Bible, and you have gotten close to the word as it relates to the further reaches of progressiveness.

It is assumed that intellectual liberality is a good thing – you may have heard of “liberal arts” degrees. There’s even a political party in Australia called the Liberals (interestingly, they are the conservative majority party there – like the Republicans in the USA). Consequently, many of the definitions provided of this term take on a positive slant; for example, Dictionary.com’s first definition is, “favorable to progress or reform, as in political or religious affairs.” The term we have used up until this point – progressive – contains the term in that definition – “progress.” Progress is moving forward – that’s a good thing, right?

It is hard not to see a bias toward the left in most modern dictionaries; the definitions for liberal provided by Google and Dictionary.com all carried a positive tone. One can only assume the definitions were written by those who were favorable to the concept. This bias is mirrored in the very fact that these – liberal and progressive – were the terms chosen to describe this way of thinking. The western world highly values change, and thus the words it has chosen to describe that change are typically positive.

Thankfully, Merriam-Webster’s 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> definitions provide us with a more neutral look at the term: “not literal or strict: loose” and “broad-minded; especially: not bound by authoritarianism, orthodoxy, or traditional forms.” It is here that we finally find both a term and a definition for that term to serve as an antonym to radical, fundamentalist, and legalist. A liberal is a person who accepts everything but authority and authoritative standards, orthodoxy (ways of thinking or believing traditionally held to be right), and tradition. Perhaps this way of thinking was on Paul’s mind when he spoke of those who were “ever learning, and never able to come to the knowledge of the truth” (2 Timothy 3:7).

Earlier, we spoke of extremism as it related to radicals. Remember, extreme means “furthest from the center,” and if there is an extreme right it stands to reason there is an extreme left. What does extreme liberalism look like? Extreme liberalism would describe those who have a totally permissive attitude, allowing anything and everything as it relates to belief, doctrine, and practice. As liberalism demands tolerance and acceptance, extreme liberals cannot be seen to do the things that legalists do – withhold fellowship or publicly mark those who disagree with them. They still often end up doing both by presenting all who tend towards conservatism as spiritually immature or intellectually inferior and by refusing to give them any serious attention.

Not surprisingly, extreme liberalism often ends up in a rejection of the faith. Once one begins to accept that one aspect of the Bible is negotiable, eventually all of it becomes a matter of opinion. At that point, Christianity simply becomes an unwanted, restrictive obligation. The internet abounds with stories of “deconversion,” a term atheists/agnostics have coined to describe the process by which one loses his faith. Many from the Lord’s church have gone down this path, particularly those of the millennial generation (born after 1980).

Many liberals do not lose their faith though, and some make it their life’s work to try either to bring legalistic brethren into line with their thinking or to promote unity between conservatives and progressives. Their work, combined with the work of the media and the academic world, can see liberalistic tendencies work even among congregations whose leaders are conservative. As is the case with legalistic tendencies, we must not ignore the danger of liberalistic tendencies amongst ourselves.

### **LIBERTY – ANOTHER IMPORTANT CONCEPT**

Before we can give a more thorough examination, to the terms right and left, one more important Biblical term needs to be identified and defined. That term is **liberty**. Liberty is a term found throughout the Bible – in the KJV, the term is found 9 times in the Old Testament and 18 times in the New. Though it probably shares some etymological root with the term “liberal,” the two terms need to be thought of as separate and apart rather than together. Liberty is something that every Christian enjoys, or at least should enjoy. A person

who has become a liberal, just like a person who has become a legalist, has abused and therefore lost his or her liberty.

In the Old Testament, the term typically refers to freedom, plain and simple, whether the freedom enjoyed in the Jubilee year (Leviticus 25:10; Ezekiel 46:17) or the false freedom promised by Zedekiah which prompted God's promise to remove it (Jeremiah 34:15-17). The term gets closer to its New Testament usage when the Psalmist reflects on the freedom he experiences by seeking God's commands (Psalm 119:45; this is a different term, and is translated "wide place" in the ESV), and closer still when Isaiah prophesies the preaching of liberty to the captives (Isaiah 61:1), a prophecy which finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ (Luke 4:16-21). Jesus came to fulfill Isaiah's prophecy and to provide total spiritual freedom – a broader freedom than Isaiah could have imagined, and a greater freedom than the freedom experienced by the Psalmist, which seems to have been plagued by doubt and a great desire for vindication (Psalm 119:5-6, 22, 28, 31, 36-37, 39-40, 81-88, 107, 116-117, 132-134, 145-149, 153-154, 173-176).

In the New Testament, liberty occasionally retains the definition of freedom, particularly in the book of Acts (Acts 24:23, 32; 27:3; Hebrews 13:23). The term is applied to freedom in marriage (1 Corinthians 7:39) and the freedom our bodies will experience when they are resurrected (Romans 8:21). However, rather than simply referring to physical freedom or a sense of release from bondage, the term comes to apply to the Spiritual standing of Christians.

Christians have been called to liberty and stand in liberty (Galatians 5:1, 13) by virtue of their relationship with the Lord (2 Corinthians 3:17). Those who are outside of Christ or who are not faithful to Christ do not enjoy this liberty (Galatians 2:4) even though they believe they do (2 Peter 2:19). Christians are called not to allow anything to rob them of liberty, whether it be the bondage of another religious system (even the Law of Moses – Galatians 5:1) or the bondage imposed by human opinions (1 Corinthians 10:29). The Law of Christ (Galatians 6:2) is a Law of Liberty (James 1:25).

A proper understanding of liberty would see Christians understanding they have one Lord and one Law to judge them (James 2:12). Therefore, as a Christian, I am not subject to the opinions of men, societal customs, or the laws of the land. This does not mean I can simply do as I please – my liberty must not be used "for an occasion to the flesh" (Galatians 5:13). Rather, it must be used to serve (1 Peter 2:16). The Law of Liberty calls me to limit my liberty – it calls me to submit to governmental laws (Romans 13:1-7), observe societal customs (e.g. 1 Corinthians 11:1-16), and generally behave in a way that preserves the consciences of others and keeps them from stumbling (1 Corinthians 8:9; 10:29). When any of these things conflict with the Law of Liberty, liberty allows me to set them aside: "We ought to obey God rather than men" (Acts 5:29).

Liberty without liberty is not liberty. Though that statement might sound redundant, think about it: if God had micromanaged our lives, giving us commands for every minute of every day, that would not be freedom at all – it would be slavery. The beauty of the Law of Liberty is not just in the blessings it provides – freedom from sin and the bondage of death – but in the abundant life it allows.

We have to walk a fine line with this point. In a sense, we are servants of Jesus Christ and of God – unprofitable servants who must do all that our Lord commands us, out of duty and not out of an attempt to merit or earn what God freely gives us (Luke 17:10). However, God did not send His Son to create servants – He sent His Son to create more sons and daughters (John 1:12). Paul certainly viewed himself as a servant, but as it related to his blessings he found it inappropriate to refer to himself as one: "Being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness. I speak after the manner of men because of the infirmity of your flesh" (Romans 6:18-19a). Later, he said more accurately, "The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: and if children, then heirs;

heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together” (Romans 8:16-17).

As is the case in any functional earthly home, in the house of God there are both roles and expectations for those roles. However, as is also the case in any functional earthly home, there is a certain degree of freedom. This freedom can be referred to as liberty.

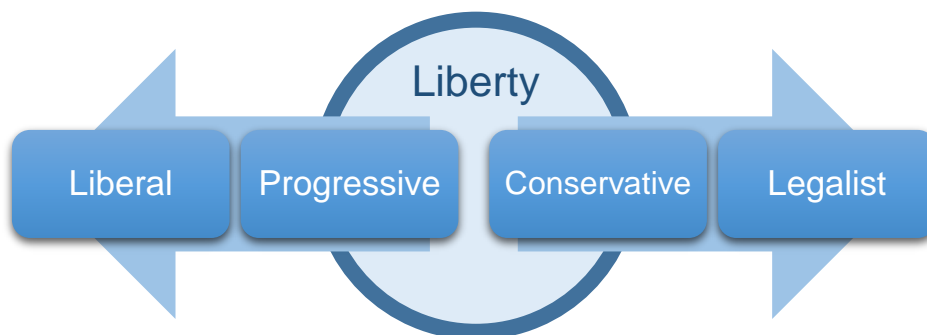
It is incredibly important to understand this concept as relates to our study. The reason for this is that a fundamental understanding of the concept of liberty is at the root of both legalism and liberalism. Legalism assumes that Christianity has no liberty or at the very least very little, and so creates laws where God has not created them, binding what God has not bound. Liberalism on the other hand assumes that Christianity is essentially nothing but liberty or at the very least contains very little by way of command, and so eliminates God’s commands, loosing what God has not loosed.

Before leaving this section behind, there is one more term that will be helpful for the remainder of our study. Brethren typically associate the term **expediency** with the term liberty. Expediency simply refers to the fact that whenever God has given liberty in an area, we as Christians have the right and ability to select any one of a number of different behaviors, provided that it truly is an area of liberty and not one governed by Christ’s Law. Expediency implies what is meant to happen – Christians are to choose whatever course of action expedites, or moves them quickly towards, their desired result. Paul said that while things may be lawful (not against God’s Law, a part of the Law’s liberty), they may not be expedient. Things are identified as inexpedient when 1) they promote addiction or cause one to lose self-control and 2) they fail to promote edification in others (1 Corinthians 6:12; 10:23)

### **EXAMINING THE LEFT AND THE RIGHT**

With all of our terms now in place, we can now discuss the concept introduced in the last paragraph more thoroughly. In order to do so, we will be examining a couple of illustrations. First, let us visualize what we have studied so far by using diagram 1.

**DIAGRAM 1**



In this chart, we can see both the tendencies – progressive and conservative – and their destination points on the left and the right – liberal and legalist (we will use this term throughout to refer to those on the far right for the sake of easing discussion, even though it might not always seem to fit). You will also notice that both tendencies begin inside of the sphere of liberty – this placement is purposeful. Both the tendency to change – progression – and the tendency to stay the same – conservation – are tolerable within the sphere of God given liberty.

Allow me to illustrate, first by examining progression. Imagine a Sunday worship where something different happened during the Lord’s Supper. The unleavened bread was handed out as per normal, but the procedure for distributing the grape juice was entirely different. Rather than giving thanks and then passing around silver trays with plastic cups, ushers distributed some small paper cups to each Christian. Once everyone had a cup, a large cup

was brought to the front of the auditorium full of grape juice. The usher gave thanks for the grape juice in the cup, and then distributed a small amount into each person's cup for each person to drink.

Upon reflecting on this imaginary Sunday, how do you feel? Do you feel as though something wrong has been done? If so, what law of God has been broken? It may surprise you to learn that if anything doing this would be truer to the Biblical text containing the institution of the Lord's Supper than our current practice: "And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and said, Take this, and divide it among yourselves: For I say unto you, I will not drink of the fruit of the vine, until the kingdom of God shall come" (Luke 22:17-18). It is evident that the institution of the Lord's Supper involved one cup that was distributed amongst the disciples. However, the point is that by doing a thorough study of the Lord's Supper, you would come to the following conclusion: The Lord has commanded when (the time of partaking), what (the items to be partaken), and why (the reason for partaking), but precious little about how, other than that each item is to be received with thanksgiving.

Have you ever stopped to ask, "Why do we take the Lord's Supper using silver trays and tiny plastic cups?" There is no way that this is what they did in the first century, and yet basically every congregation of the churches of Christ does this (with the notable exception of those who only use one cup, which also does not seem to harmonize with Jesus command, "Divide it among yourselves"). The reason your congregation probably takes the Lord's Supper this way is because Christians somewhere along the way recognized that the "how" of partaking the Lord's Supper was a matter of liberty. An expedient practice was chosen (silver trays and tiny plastic cups) and the rest is history. However, if you feel as though the above imaginary example is sinful, there is a chance that a tendency to conserve has caused you to view this matter of liberty as a matter of law. If that's the case, at least in this regard, you are a legalist.

Let's consider another case, this time one from the left. You do not have to look hard to find examples of a tendency toward progression. Does your congregation have a dress code for the men who serve as leaders in worship? Godly leaders often enact a dress code for those to serve as a matter of expedience. They understand that worship services are solemn events: they are to be decent and orderly (1 Corinthians 14:40) and to present a clear message to non-believers (v. 16-17). For example, the Lord's Supper is not to appear as a common meal (1 Corinthians 11:20-30). It is true that the dress code that leaders enact is arbitrary – no one wore a tie in the first century. And yet, often leaders select a dress code based upon the formal wear of the society – it is not totally irrelevant or out of place, even though this dress code may have been in place for many years.

For the men who serve: Do you find yourself itching every time you put on a tie? Do you feel as though it is wrong for the leaders to have enacted this arbitrary rule? Do you feel as though no one should be able to judge you, regardless of what you wear, when you come to worship the Lord? If you feel this way, at the very least you have a tendency towards progression, and depending on how wrong you feel the actions of the leaders or elders who have enacted the dress code are, you may be liberal on this particular issue.

Liberal and Legalist are not as static as people sometimes assume they are. In one aspect of Christianity, a person can have a tendency towards progression or become a liberal, whereas in another aspect he may have a tendency towards conservation or become a legalist. The actions of Christians must be considered case by case to determine 1) what the Law of Christ is on that particular issue, 2) what liberty is on that issue, 3) whether or not Law has been made liberty, and 4) whether or not liberty has been made Law.

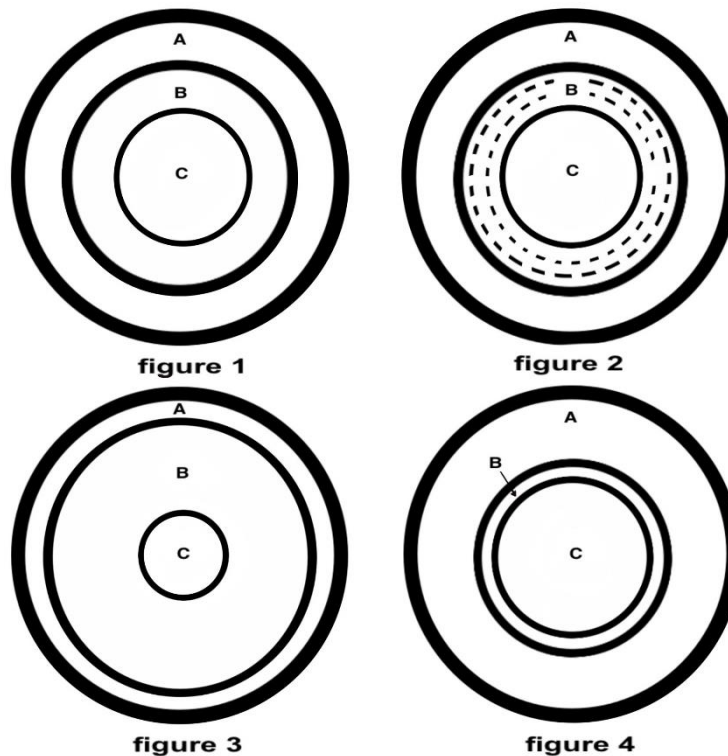
Please understand, the tendencies towards progression and conservation are not in and of themselves bad. To an extent, both belong in the realm of liberty provided by the Law of Christ. Progressives often drive the church forward and allow her to reach out more effectively to the non-Christian world; conservatives often ensure the church is not "tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine" (Ephesians 4:14). Progression and



conservation become bad when people begin to move beyond the perfect Law by infringing on the liberty it provides, either to add to it (Liberals) or to take away from it (Legalists).

Let's explore these tendencies further by examining Diagram 2.

### DIAGRAM 2



In this diagram, **"A" refers to what God forbids, "B" refers to what God allows but does not command (also known as liberty), and "C" refers to what God commands.** While this is no doubt oversimplifying what it is to be a Christian, God calls us to fill out circle "C" with our behavior, allows us to do what we feel is best/expedient in the realm of circle "B," and calls us to avoid everything in circle A.

**Figure 1** presents A, B, and C as found in the Law of Liberty, the New Testament. This diagram is helpful in that it presents something that most Christians seem to fail to understand – sin (failing to keep God's commands or doing what God has forbidden) and success (keeping God's commands and avoiding what God has forbidden) is not as mysterious as some make it out to be. Christ's Law has clearly defined what is commanded and what is forbidden – sin is a transgression of the Law (1 John 3:4) and where there is no law, there is no transgression (Romans 4:15). We can know that know we know Christ by keeping His clearly revealed commandments, including avoiding those things He has forbidden (1 John 2:3). His commandments are not burdensome (5:3) or impossible to understand (Ephesians 5:17).

This figure is also helpful in that it clearly illustrates the fact that liberty exists – a clearly defined realm where Christians have freedom to choose what they believe to be expedient. In doing this, it also identifies that the exercise of liberty can either move us closer to doing what God has commanded or move us closer to doing what God has forbidden. This is exactly the potential Paul spoke of when he described the ability of the exercise of liberty to lead towards enslavement, being brought under the power of someone or something (1 Corinthians 6:12). He also described how liberty could provide an opportunity for worldly desires or behaviors to set in, as did Peter (Galatians 5:13; 1 Peter 2:16).

**Figure 2** presents a situation envisioned by the perfect Law of Liberty, namely, that there would be some who would not be able to convince their conscience of the fact that God had in fact given liberty in some areas. Notice the dotted lines inside of circle B? Those dotted lines are the additional restraints that can be placed on someone by their conscience. Even though God has given liberty, a person might feel conscientiously bound to do more than what God has commanded us to do and to avoid more than God has commanded us to avoid. An inability to understand liberty **can be** the first step towards radicalism, but it does not have to be. It is very important to understand that when the conscience is more restrictive than God is, we should 1) keep the restraints of our conscience and 2) train our minds to understand the difference between our conscience and the Law of Christ. The law of Christ actually commands us to keep our conscience in such situations.

While it is beyond the scope of our study to examine this in the detail it deserves, figure 2 is actually a figure of the "weak" brother of Romans 14:1-15:3. This text is one of the more misunderstood passages in the Bible. It is assumed that the term "strong" in this text relates to maturity and that the term "weak" relates to immaturity. However, a brief examination of the text will show that it has nothing to do with maturity and everything to do with an understanding of liberty:

- The strong are instructed to receive the weak, and not argue with them – such arguments are doubtful anyway (14:1)
- Weakness is illustrated not by a brother who sins, but by a brother who is a vegetarian and refuses to eat meat (14:2) and by differing views on the importance of days (14:4-5; Paul doesn't actually identify which view is the "weak" view in this illustration)
- The weak know that nothing is unclean, but can esteem ("accounteth" [ASV]; conclude after reasoning) things to be unclean anyway; to them and them alone these things become unclean (v. 14); their offended conscience makes the pure become impure (14:20)
- The weak: are received by God (14:3); stand by God (14:4); behave with God as their master (14:6)
- The strong are told: do not judge the weak (14:3-4, 10-13); do not cause the weak to stumble (14:13, 21); do not be the source of a weaker brother's downfall or gossip (14:15-16); pursue edification (14:19); bear the infirmities of the weak and to please and edify them (15:1-3)
- The example given – what a person eats – is not what the kingdom of heaven is about anyway (14:17); however, if a person eats with doubt (breaks his conscience) he sins, thus making it a kingdom issue (14:23)
- Both strong and weak can be acceptable to God and approved by others if they serve Christ before themselves (14:18)
- The term faith is clearly used in a different sense in this text – many people understand it is as the term "scruple" or conscientious belief; Paul encourages them to keep this faith to themselves and not to condemn themselves by what they allow (14:22)

Other texts which address these kind of situations include 1 Corinthians 8 and 10. The summary though is this: we need to keep our conscience when it is more restrictive than God's law is; we must not bind our conscience on others and restrict their liberty; we need to exercise our liberty in a way that will not damage other people's consciences.

Due to its relation to figure 2, we will now examine **figure 4**. What's happened in this figure? Notice how the lines defining the limits of B in figures 1 and 2 have been moved in keeping with the dotted lines in figure 2. The dotted lines are gone and have become clear, solid lines. This has the effect of reducing the area of B (liberty) and increasing the area of A (what God forbids) and C (what God commands). This is an illustration of legalism.

In legalism, liberty is decreased and sometimes reduced to almost nothing. Where once there was liberty, there are now more commands to keep and more sins to avoid. This is not what God wants. God's Law is called the perfect Law of Liberty for a reason (James

1:25). When men today begin to tamper with the boundaries of God's Will, like the Pharisees did before them, they invariably create burdens which are nearly impossible to be born (Matthew 23:4) and cause people to lose focus on what is spiritually more important (v. 23). The result is that they "shut up the kingdom of heaven against men" (v. 13), making the kingdom more inaccessible than it ought to be.

It is right to restrict your liberty if the exercise of liberty damages your conscience. It is also right to restrict your liberty to avoid damaging the conscience of others. However, it is not right to limit God's liberty to others.

Notice that in discussing the need to protect the conscience of others, Paul very strongly defended his God-given liberty:

If any of them that believe not bid you to a feast, and ye be disposed to go; whatsoever is set before you, eat, asking no question for conscience sake. But if any man say unto you, This is offered in sacrifice unto idols, eat not for his sake that shewed it, and for conscience sake: for the earth is the Lord's, and the fulness thereof: Conscience, I say, not thine own, but of the other: for why is my liberty judged of another man's conscience? For if I by grace be a partaker, why am I evil spoken of for that for which I give thanks? Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God (1 Corinthians 10:27-31; emphasis added - PWS).

Paul knew that it was OK to eat what was offered in sacrifice to idols because idols represented gods that did not exist (1 Corinthians 8:4-6). He knew that what he ate did not bring him closer to God or move him further from God, because God had given liberty (v. 8-9; cf. Romans 14:14, 17, 20). However, Paul said that if someone pointed out that food had been offered to an idol, a Christian ought to refuse – not to protect his conscience, but the conscience of the one who had pointed it out. He then stated very clearly that his liberty could not be judged by the conscience of others – no one had the right to speak of evil of him when he did what he was allowed to do by God's grace.

Often Christians wonder why the law of God allows as much liberty as it does. As a man, I have often wished God had given a very clear definition of immodesty, telling my sisters exactly where a skirt needed to fall on their knees and exactly how far from the neck a neckline a blouse could go. If God did so and not only my sisters but the world obeyed Him, the world would be a lot less tempting place!

However, the fact is that Christianity is a counterculture, a minority, and it always will be: "few there be that find it" (Matthew 7:14). If God precisely defined modesty, what would happen when society imposed more rules on modesty than God did? This is exactly what happened in Corinth, where modest women were expected to keep long hair and wear veils on their heads and modest men were expected to keep their hair short. Would there be even more rebellion against societal norms from Christians than there was among the Corinthian congregation? Remember, Paul encouraged them to adapt to the standards of modesty as dictated by culture (encouraging a voluntarily limiting of their liberty), but had to add because of contention, "But if any man seem to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the churches of God" (1 Corinthians 11:16).

Further, what would happen during times when immodesty makes sense? I am not talking about swimming or sporting events, though a lot of Christians seem to think that immodesty makes sense in these situations. I am talking about situations that would seem to be governed by other principles, such as when a doctor needs to perform a lifesaving operation. Would a Christian male who is a doctor need to ensure that a woman patient was properly covered in order to operate? Could he do so in every case and not jeopardize a person's life? Didn't Jesus demonstrate the existence of a higher principle at work in healing and helping when he asked the Pharisees, "Is it lawful to do good on the Sabbath days, or to do evil? To save life, or to kill?" (Mark 3:4)?

God is wise enough to have been able to have 1) defined a standard of modesty and 2) identified every single cultural and logical exception to that standard. However, what would

that Bible look like, particularly if God did that for every single issue that comes up in life? As John said for another reason, "I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that should be written" (John 21:25). And what would have been man's response to such a document? Would man have said that Christ's "yoke is easy" and His "burden is light" (Matthew 11:30)?

The truth is that God has given us everything we need to live and to serve Him (2 Peter 1:3). As much as we might want black and white decrees instead of liberty, liberty is better for us. As relates to the subject of modesty, which would be better: a sister who dutifully dresses exactly to the letter of God's Law, or a sister who loves her brothers in Christ and her fellow man enough to dress in a way that will not cause anyone to stumble? The first situation would produce an external obedience, but the second situation – the situation we now enjoy under the Law of Liberty – produces obedience from the heart. Perhaps we need to reflect more on the words of Christ as He quoted Hosea: "Go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice" (Matthew 9:13).

Returning to diagram 2, **Figure 3** presents the opposite situation of Figure 4. Notice how the boundaries of B (liberty) have been moved outward. The expanse of liberty has come at the expense of A (what God forbids) and C (what God commands); both of these areas fall well short of God's boundaries as illustrated by figure 1. This is a visual representation of what happens in liberalism.

Liberalism in a nutshell can be summarized by the angry words of Naaman, captain of the Syrian host: "Behold, I thought" (2 Kings 5:11). On that occasion, Naaman had received clear instructions from Elisha, the prophet of the Lord, as to how he could rid himself of the disease of leprosy. However, Naaman didn't like how the prophet did what he did and he certainly didn't like what the prophet instructed him to do. He assumed he knew a better way for the prophet to behave and a better solution to his problem. In short, he allowed his thoughts to stand above the word of God – he spoke when he should have listened.

Paul and Apollos did their best to set a proper example for the brethren at Corinth. Paul was able to describe both him and Apollos using humble titles – ministers and stewards. Paul and Apollos hoped, as Paul wrote to the Corinthian brethren, "that ye might learn in us not to think *of men* above that which is written" (1 Corinthians 4:6). I have preserved the italics in the verse as found in the KJV; italics imply that the translators of the KJV have added something to the text. What did Paul want the Corinthians to learn? Literally, "not to think above that which is written."

Like Naaman, those who are liberal in their approach to Scripture think, when they should be listening. By doing so, they effectively ignore what Paul was trying to teach and place themselves above what is written. Effectively, rather than allowing God's Law to guide them, they become their own standard of law, setting aside whatever aspects of God's law they please and supplementing when they feel it is necessary to do so.

Liberals will often claim humility as an excuse to move God's boundaries. Statements like, "We're all just sinners trying to do our best," "We can only depend on the grace of God to cover our imperfections," and "No one can understand God's will, let alone keep it," are common. They sound humble enough.

However, these statements are not humble at all – they represent an attack on God. They ascribe to humans a level of base imperfection not befitting beings who are made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27). They assume that God is not an efficient communicator because He is incapable of communicating His will in a way that humans can understand. They assume that the commandments of God are complex and tedious, when the Bible says they are not, making God a liar (1 John 5:3). They further make God a liar for saying that His will can be understood (Ephesians 3:4) and a cruel liar at that for commanding men to understand them when He knows they cannot (5:17).

Above all else, these kind of statements present the mission of the Son of God as a failure. The Son of God came to declare the Father to mankind, to reveal Him (Matthew 11:27;

John 1:18). Did He succeed, or was it silly for Him to even try? He came to leave “us an example” so that we “should follow His steps” (1 Peter 2:21). Was this a fruitless exercise, seeing as we can’t understand His example, and couldn’t follow it if we could? He came so that we could put to death our old man of sin and rise to walk in newness of life, freed from sin (Romans 6:3-7; cf. Ephesians 4:21-24; Colossians 3:9-10). Did He fail, and was that because He wasn’t strong enough to free us from sin? Or was it because mankind is so hopelessly mired in sin that men can never do anything but sin?

Denominational Christianity has been shaped by hundreds of years of both false teaching and allowance for such teaching. It makes sense for them to view both the Bible and themselves the way they do. However, it should not be so among those who have committed themselves to a restoration of New Testament Christianity and to “speak as the oracles of God” (1 Peter 4:11). Sadly, there is too often among God’s people a desire to “be like all the nations” (2 Samuel 8:20).

When the Bible says “Repent and be baptized” (Acts 2:38), it is not our sinfulness that prompts us to say, “Baptism is not necessary; all you need to do is say a prayer,” it is **desire**. When the Bible says to “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom” and to do so through “singing” it is not our utter inability to understand God’s commands that prompts us to say, “God doesn’t say we can’t have an instrument,” it is **desire**. When the Bible says “Whosoever shall put away his wife, except it be for fornication, and shall marry another, committeth adultery,” it is not our utter dependence on grace that makes us say, “Surely God would not deny people a second chance at love,” it is **desire**. It is desire that prompts us to speak, and it is a failure to listen that makes us think we have the right to do so.

God was aware of our shortcomings when He inspired the perfect Law of Liberty. If it were beyond us to understand His will as it is currently revealed, he would have found another way to reveal Himself. If it were beyond us to do His will, He would not have bothered to deliver us any commands in the first place. Remember, our Lord said, “Nothing shall be impossible unto you,” and, “With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible” (Matthew 17:20; 19:26; cf. Mark 10:27; Luke 18:27). Can’t the God who can make the impossible become possible help us to overcome our imperfections to understand His will and walk in the footsteps of His Son? God only can’t do so when progressive tendencies lead men to reject His will and replace it with their own.

### **HOW CAN I FOLLOW GOD WITHOUT TURNING TO THE RIGHT OR TO THE LEFT?**

There is a simple answer to the above question. Remember when we examined Moses words from the standpoint of his original audience? We can follow God without turning to the right and the left by keeping God’s commands – nothing more, nothing less, and nothing else.

However, keeping God’s commands is not as simple as we might want it to be. As good fathers do with their children, God has provided clear instructions regarding what his children must do and what they must avoid. However, at times he has done something else that good fathers do: He has provided His children with freedom – liberty. At times, God requires His children to extract from a principle the appropriate course of action for the place and time. At times, He expects nothing more of them than to do what they feel is best, provided they do not break their conscience.

Further, keeping God’s commands is not as simple as it should be. Our brotherhood is a sad reflection of the religious world at large. Some have swayed too far to the right, confusing tradition or conscientious beliefs with God’s commands. Some have swayed too far to the left, turning, making most of what God has commanded us to do or to avoid a matter of opinion. Both the right and the left have abused the liberty which God has given, and confused conscientious Christians who want to obey their heavenly Father.

Perhaps the thoughts we reflected on when we thought about liberalism could be helpful. God’s will can be understood (Ephesians 3:4; 5:17). It might be difficult sometimes – even Peter thought so (2 Peter 3:16) – but it can be done. The Bible was not written to the

wise, the mighty, and the noble alone – not many of those people even become Christians (1 Corinthians 1:26). It was written for those who would “be converted, and become as little children” (Matthew 18:3). God’s praise is perfected out of the mouths of infants and toddlers, not scholars and sages (Matthew 21:16).

If we truly want to follow God without turning to the right or the left, I would suggest that before we make decisions in life, we must ask and answer several questions:

- Relating to Law: Does God have a Law? If so, what is His law? What are the specific elements of the Law? What elements of the Law appear to have liberty, and what would be the most expedient way to exercise that liberty so as to keep the Law?
- Relating to Principles: If there is no law, are there any principles that might bear on my decision? Are there any examples from Bible history to guide me towards faithfulness and away from sin?
- Relating to Liberty: If this truly is a matter of liberty, what progression might be helpful and advance the cause of Christ? What conservation might do the same? How might progression or conservation go wrong on this issue, and how can I avoid that? How can I exercise my liberty in such a way so as to 1) keep my conscience, 2) remain as close to God as possible, 3) edify others, and 4) avoid placing a stumbling block in front of others?

Essentially, following God without turning God to the right or to the left is about humbly submitting to God’s instructions as they are revealed without adding or taking away from them, and arranging our lives as relates to liberty in a way that will neither see ourselves or others stumble. It may not be as simple as we would like it to be or as simple as it should be, but it is still simple.

### **CONCLUSION**

The major battle in avoiding the extremes of the right and the left is a battle of understanding: understanding what the right and the left of the religious world are; understanding what legalists do with the word of God as well as what liberals do with it; understanding what liberty is, what it is not, and why its boundaries must be protected. It is my hope and prayer that this essay has been of some assistance to you in understanding and that, armed with understanding, you will determine to follow God without departing to the right or to the left.