

FREEDOM'S RING

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"Proclaim liberty throughout the land" (Lev.25:10).

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Definite Laws And General Principles

The interpretation of God's message in the Scriptures is not an exact science. In view of the countless variations in convictions which have divided us, that point seems evident. Devoted students throughout history have searched for the simple route to proper understanding. Has their quest been in vain?

I can only hope to pick up some of the pieces they have left behind and fit them together in my search. Unless I find a practical application of the message, I am still short of my goal. This writing will deal with one problem which has beset us in our quest.

The most obvious hindrance to my understanding has been my orientation concerning "the law of Christ." I was schooled to think that a code of law given by Jesus and inspired writers replaced the fulfilled code given through Moses. So I looked for laws to be detected in commands, examples, and necessary inferences. However, the writers pointed us to principles to govern our actions rather than legal specifics to follow.

You are invited to consider this matter with me as I illustrate it by asking questions about elders. A similar method of questioning may be used in exploring various other topics. So, let me propose some inquiries to see if our answers come from law or principle.

When should a group appoint elders? Who is to determine when? Must a group select elders in order to please God? What if they do not? How are all in the group affected if they mistakenly appoint an unqualified man? *Where is the law that specifies these details?*

How are men to be chosen? Should it be by evangelists like Paul, Barnabas, and Timothy of Biblical precedent? Is the paid minister an evangelist with that responsibility? May a committee select them? If the congregation is to do it, what method is to be followed, and must there be 100% approval, a simple majority, or something in between? Should it be by nomination with lack of valid objections? Who would nominate them and who would rule upon the objections? Are they selected by an open vote or a secret ballot by all men, women, and youthful disciples? *Quote me the law pertaining to these questions.*

What method of initiation must be followed? Are they presented in ceremony after fasting, prayer, and laying on of hands, or by a simple announcement?

Are they appointed for open-ended, lifetime tenure, or for specified terms, perhaps with staggered terms of service. Who has authority to rule on this?

How many should be selected? Who determines how many? Is a plurality of them necessary?

The bishop must not be a recent convert, but how recent is recent? As *elder* signifies, he is older, but how old? Is age relevant, or is that just terminology? *Where's the determining law?*

How many people must he invite into his home in order to be judged hospitable? In being apt to teach, able to give instruction in sound doctrine, and able to confute those who contradict it, how much ability must he demonstrate? Who is to grade him?

What is the capacity of their service? Are they chosen as teachers and spiritual counselors? Are they authoritative as enforcers of conformity? Do they determine who is or is not in fellowship? Are they supervisors of all congregational activities? Do they control all resources? May they make rules about such things as dress, versions of the Bible to use, and frequency of assembling? Does each elder exercise those prerogatives individually, or only corporately?

Surely, if we are following laws, there must be clauses that clarify these questions so we will not have to depend upon human wisdom.

Will having only one child disqualify a man? Suppose he has two, and one or both die after his appointment? If he has two believing children and one disbelieving child, does he qualify? If a man's children are adults, do they still count as children under his subjection? If his children are daughters who are married and submissive to their husbands, are they in subjection to their father also? If so, then would their reprobate children disqualify him? If a man's unbelieving children were married before his own conversion, could he ever qualify? If his children were believers serving devotedly in another religious group, could he qualify? Who is to determine how submissive his children must be? *Surely, the fine print of a legal code will explain all these things.*

An elder must be the husband of one wife. If he is divorced and remarried, he has only one wife. Is he qualified? After his appointment, would the death of the elder's wife disqualify him? Or what if she became mentally incapable or had to be put in a care facility?

He is to be blameless, without reproach. Who judges this---the congregation, the general public, his business associates, or his wife's kinfolk? Do rumors of misconduct disqualify him? Would a traffic violation, kicking his dog, drinking a beer with his dinner, or employing no women in his business be sufficient to keep him from being without blame?

In view of the above, surely we can agree that any effort to measure elders by a code of law raises endless questions. Sincere effort to find definitive regulations has led to inconsistency in emphasizing some qualities while ignoring others, and it lends itself to political manipulations.

We would expect a system of law to specify all details so that no explanations would be needed. That, however, is not true of any code of law, else we would need no lawyers or courts. It was not true of the Law of Moses. In the generations following Moses, spiritual leaders made judgments on how the law applied in current situations. The accumulation of those decisions came to be known as the *Traditions of the Fathers*; these had authenticity equal to law. In like manner rulings of the Catholic hierarchy compiled as Canon Law are considered to be God's laws. In the Churches of Christ, we have no official spokespersons, but we have our unwritten judgments based mostly on precedents inherited from generations before us. While we declare that our clarifications do not have the weight of law, we insist that they are the intent of the written directives, and they almost become unchangeable.

We must redirect our thinking to look for general principles

instead of definite laws. As an example, we are told to honor the king. In a definite manner, that can be done only in one way, that is, by living under a king and honoring him. But fulfilling the intent of the general principle, we will not make Christianity revolutionary against civil government.

Whether it be a Scriptural directive, teaching, warning, correction, or exhortation, we should look for the intent of the message. The general principle to be implemented is wider in its application than a definite law would be.

Let's apply this to matters about elders. What was Paul's intent? Was he giving a definite check list? No, for the men are described differently to Timothy and Titus. However, both Titus in Crete and Timothy in Ephesus could discern the kind of person Paul was calling for. Since a bishop would be seen by the public as a representative of the group, he would need to be an honorable man. His role as a spiritual leader would demand that he be judged as having qualities of spiritual leadership. In their culture, a woman would not ordinarily fill the role of a public teacher and leader, so the bishop is spoken of in masculine terms. When mention is made of a man, there is a general assumption that he has a family. The defining of required relationships seems not to be Paul's intent so much as how he relates to others.

As long as we try to define laws to follow in choosing elders, we will continue to disagree over our interpretations. But in applying the principles, I think even the teenagers in the congregation could point out the kind of men that Paul was writing about.

Although I have used the selection of elders to illustrate my point, I am convinced that it is only when we look for general principles instead of definite laws that we will ever be at ease with conclusions about the purpose of assemblies, the role of women, marriage and divorce questions, and most all of the issues over which we have divided.

We will give further application. "Thou shalt not kill" was not always violated by one who caused a death. *Love for our fellowman* was the underlying principle of this legal tenet. That law was broken only when its intent was violated by loveless action. The prohibition of taking God's name in vain did not forbid certain vocabulary, but its principle was violated by any attitude of disrespect for God. The Sabbath regulation called for a sense of holiness and dedication more than a defining of certain forbidden acts. In matters relating to marriage and divorce, even though men never agree on definitive stipulations, we can more generally discern the principles which uphold the sanctity of marriage and the security of the home.

One mindset looks for arbitrary specifics of law; the other discerns the principle of action which best fulfills the intent of the message. The former is based on the concept of law; the latter accepts grace whose principle of action is love. All principles are applied through individual judgment, and they cannot be fulfilled through rote obedience. []

HOOK'S POINTS

"The best-laid plans of mice and men..." We canceled our trip to the Pepperdine Lectures. Lingering effects of Lea's stroke made it unwise for me to leave her for so long, and I don't like to go places without her anyway. We were both eager to meet the people there. Maybe another time!

Lea is able to be up and about but she is having much problem with depression. Some adjustments in medication are being made. Full recovery will take months according to the doctors. We thank God for his healing, and thank you for your prayers.

Recent distractions have diminished creativity. Being online has added work. Learning to operate Windows95 has not been sooth-

ing! Your calls, mail, and orders for books spur us on. Your donations and distribution of books make you true partners. You are supportive of Lea and me. Your prayers are a strength to us.

Most all my free time is spent in printing and folding brochures and enclosures, answering letters, dubbing tapes, and packaging books. Some of it is boring---like folding papers. Since beginning this ministry, I have folded 16,787,213 sheets of paper (plus or minus 3%☺). Maybe working in the cotton patch helped teach me patience. But I have become lazy and now hire FR folded.

I can better understand why others' books cost so much, for they charge for their labor. If I charged for my labor, as slowly as I work, you could not afford my books!

It is wonderful that you supply resources so that I never have to be concerned about stamps for my letters, postage for mailing out books, whether I can afford to send free books to whomever I see fit, buy a case of paper, or operate my equipment. You bear those expenses, and I would be paralyzed without your help. Book sales are sufficient to supply personal needs, but we could not have the outreach in distribution without you. And I still cannot print this mailout without Mira's help!

Going online on the World Wide Web is an added expense which I hope to lessen by changing servers, which will change our E-mail address. Already we have heard from persons whose lives have been touched and changed by contact through our Web site.

I am always cost-conscious (stingy is the word!). We have spent well over \$2000 getting set up for going online and receiving e-mail. Is it worth it? How much do you spend in your congregation to have a week-long meeting, or even a three-day seminar? And how many lives are actually changed by them? From my experience with those efforts, I am very comfortable with the amount spent on this ministry.

Currently, there are 104 subscribers to *Freedom's Ring* by e-mail at a saving of about 28 cents postage each. 92 have registered to receive notification when the Web page changes. People all over the world have access to read or copy from FR or my books. Essays by Edward Fudge and Bob Rowland's book, *I Permit Not A Woman To Remain Shackled* will be added to the Web site soon.

"When I have time to read it, I will"---how many times have I repeated that with good intent. But I have had *The Fool of God* since 1974 and it is still unread. The stack of reading material continues to grow. Good folk continue to send me books and other material to read. I appreciate that. But I am almost hopelessly behind. I still have good intentions---maybe when I retire! I am a slow reader with short attention span.

Hats off to Vic Phares!! *Freedom's Ring* has won an award as being one of the top 5% of all Christian sites on the World Wide Web! He was notified that "Your site: <http://www.softdisk.com/comp/freedom/> has been selected to receive the 'Best of the Christian Web' award." Also, it ranks tenth in popularity among the 69 sites of Softdisk, with 1342 hits in April. Look up the site, and see the award logo. Vic, operating out of Shreveport, LA, works untiringly to make the site attractive, useful, and easy to use. This brother, whom I have not met, has greatly expanded our ministry through this far-reaching work. Visit *Phares Wheel*: <http://www.softdisk.com/comp/vic> to see a picture of him and his family.

Vic's heart is in this kind of work and he would consider being our first *Cyberspace Missionary*. There is world-wide opportuni-

ty which he could grasp from his own home. Where is the far-sighted congregation that will accept this challenge of the Twenty-first Century?

We sent out 314 copies of FIC in April ! A big month! Some exciting things are happening. From you, 258 were sent free of charge. \$817.65 remains in our working fund.

Now that we are on the Web, when I include your name, it is there for the world to see. So I am more sensitive about giving out your names. I don't want to cause a problem for anyone.

Freedom's Ring is free for the asking. But you must let us know if you want it mailed to you. You can also subscribe at our Web site for Internet delivery.

From E-mail and "Snail Mail"

Email: FQMC31A@prodigy.com

Web Site: <http://www.softdisk.com/comp/freedom>

☺ I have just read some of your newsletter and the first chapter of *Free in Christ* on internet. WOW! How refreshing! I'm a thirty-eight year old woman who grew up in the church of Christ. ...

I have pondered many of the same things that you have written about but the one thing that I needed to hear right now was Number 18 of the list of things you've learned (*Free To Change*): *One may be in a sect without being sectarian. A person may be in a church which rejects others who are in Christ while he himself is non-judgmental and accepting of all who are in Christ. He does not allow himself to be limited by the exclusive attitude of the group. He has a non-sectarian spirit.*

This is something that I and others in my congregation are struggling with right now. -Angie, CA.

☺ Thank you for sending a set of your books. I can hardly wait to start reading. Just knowing there are people out there like you and your wife is a great comfort to me.- Anne, AL.

☺ My wife and I and all but one of our eight children became members of a Church of Christ assembly which is opposed to fellowship with any one not fully in accord with their doctrine and are very judgmental. We all have become disillusioned with the teachings of the COC here. There are three assemblies here and neither fellowship with the other. Each of them believe theirs has the only correct doctrine. Their rigid doctrine and judgmental attitude has caused distress and uncertainty. One of my daughters and her husband approached one of the elders to receive assurance concerning the salvation of her husband's mother who had died recently. You see the mother had attended an assembly where instrumental music was a part of the service. The elder, with no hesitation said, "Your mother is in hell." Needless to say, neither my daughter or her husband now attend any assembly. - James, IN.

☺ I have heard a report about the recent Promise Keepers Clergy Conference in Atlanta from one who attended. At the risk of repeating something that has already been discussed---

My friend rode a bus from the Detroit area to Atlanta with ministers from a number of churches. When he told his busmates he was a preacher for a Church of Christ, they were either surprised he was there with them, or didn't know much about his little church. The conversation was warm and friendly, but perhaps a little reserved on the subject of CofC.

At the conference, one speaker was Max Lucado. (Stay with

me now, those who have misgivings about Max.) This is how his speech was reported:

Max: "At the count of three, shout out, as loudly as you can, the name of your denomination. One---two---three."

Promise Keepers: A cacaphony of sounds---a babel of voices. "Baphodan!" "Lutherists!" (faintly) "Church of Christ" "Etc, etc, etc."

Max: "Now at the count of three, shout out as loudly as you can, the name of your savior. One---two---three"

PK: "JESUS CHRIST!!!!!!!" Twenty minutes of standing ovation followed.

Max then went on to talk about breaking down denominational barriers and seeking together to find out what God wants us to know. I can't imagine a more powerful message for non-denominational Christianity. What better forum than a gathering of people who want to do what God wants them to do?

Needless to say, on the way home, my friend's busmates were asking with enthusiasm, "You're from the same church as Max?" and wanting to know more about a group that would have such a powerful message.

Of course, some of them will be surprised when they encounter the next COC person who soundly condemns them for singing with an instrument or saying the wrong things while baptizing someone. It grieves me to know that our fellowship has become better at building walls than "breaking down the walls of hostility". -Adapted from a note by Deb Shepherd, Troy, MI.

☺ Thank you so much for writing *Free In Christ*. I am so grateful to my sister, Sharon, for requesting it for me. You know, I never knew that I could feel so good being a Christian. Since we have been in Colorado, I feel that I am being "de-programmed" from what I was taught for so many years. My God today is bigger than He ever has been in my life! What a tremendous feeling it is! -Amy, CO.

☺ I have re-read your book---it's so good and I have already given 5 away to friends and family. I'm so sorry that your old congregation did not think you "good enough" to lead a prayer in their service. God alone knows what's in your heart. They don't, and they are still trying to police the world. It hurts me for them and for those they turn away from the church. You have put in a book what I have believed all my life. -Sandi, TX.

Does God "Forgive And Forget"?

Will God, under any circumstance, charge us again with the sin He forgave previously? Perhaps in unison, you are all answering negatively, thinking that God does not put us in double jeopardy by convicting us twice for a sin. We have been taught all our lives that when God forgives, he forgets, and that the record is wiped clean. But please read on!

I know the point I am raising will not be received readily by any who believe in the eternal security of the believer---whether the person is a *one-time believer* as some propose, or a lifetime believer.

Will you please read the words of Jesus recorded in *Matthew* 18:25-34 to find a startling and troubling truth? A recent use of this passage by Tim Woodroof stirred my thinking about this matter.

After pleading for mercy, the servant who owed the overwhelming debt of ten thousand talents was forgiven his debt. He was *released and forgiven*, not *supposedly* released and forgiven. That servant then refused to forgive a paltry debt of a fellow-servant and had

him put in prison till he should pay the debt.

“Then his lord summoned him and said to him, ‘You wicked servant! I *forgave you all that debt* because you besought me; and should not you have had mercy on your fellow servant, as I had mercy on you?’ And in anger his lord delivered him to the jailers, *till he should pay all his debt*. So also my heavenly *Father will do to every one of you*, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart” (Italics mine).

When the *forgiven* fails to respond to the *grace received*, that is wicked rejection of grace. When one fails to appreciate the grace given, he will have to account for all his sins without it!

Grace can be received in vain (1 Cor. 15:1, 10; 2 Cor. 6:1). Those once in the grace of God can fall from it (Gal. 5:4). For the escapees from sin who become entangled in it again and are overcome, “the last state has become worse for them than the first” (1 Peter 2:20-22). In fleeing from works righteousness, we must not ignore the many exhortations and warnings against failure to appreciate and continue in God’s grace. []

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Jesus Obeyed God For You!

Edward Fudge

Did you ever stop to think that Jesus’ perfectly obedient life was lived for you? That when God views you, as one of Jesus’ people, he sees you as if your own life were 100% acceptable? That is the message of Hebrews 10:4-14.

Heb. 10:4 says it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin. “Why?” we might ask. Because animals, being amoral creatures, are incapable of offering God what he most desires from his human creatures---the obedient human life lived throughout in right relationship to the Creator.

If people had obeyed God, there would have been no need for sacrifices. Animal sacrifices were remedial---never God’s first choice (see 1 Sam. 15:22; Psa. 51:16f; Jer. 7:22f).

Jesus comes to give the Father his first choice, to provide what God had always wanted but had never received---a life of perfect human obedience, a life lived fully in right relationship with God himself. So vv. 5-7 quotes Psalm 40:6-8 as if from the mouth of Jesus. “You do not prefer animal sacrifices,” he says in effect to God, “but a BODY Thou hast prepared for me”---a human body in which to live a fully obedient human life in right relationship with God. “I have come,” says Jesus, “to DO THY WILL, O God.”

In verses 8-9, the author observes that the Psalm mentions TWO subjects: first, animal sacrifices, and second, human obedience (“come to do Thy will”). Jesus “takes away the first” (animal sacrifices) “in order to establish the second” (perfect human obedience, always God’s original choice).

Verse 10 is a gospel gem! Jesus’ obedience was for OUR benefit. “By this WILL”---this life of perfect human obedience, this life lived fully in right relationship with God---“WE have been sanctified (counted as holy, made presentable to a holy God), through the offering of the BODY of Jesus once for all.”

The word *will* in these verses is *thelema* which means *desire or*

pleasure. It is not *diatheke*, as in *will and testament*. The “first” and “second” here do not refer to an old and a new law, system or covenant, but to the two subjects being discussed: “first” - animal sacrifices; “second” - human obedience. Because Jesus OBEYED God perfectly in all his life, then OFFERED his BODY (in which he obeyed God) to God on the cross, God accepted Jesus’ perfect obedience as a present of what had always been the first choice, of what he had always wanted from humanity but never before received---a human life lived wholly in right relationship with God, and obedient life without sin.

But because Jesus represented us in all that he did---in his perfect *doing* and his perfect *dying*, God views his obedient life as if it had come from each one of Jesus’ people. He counts us “holy” by this “will” (now fully performed in Jesus’ human body).

This is the primary meaning and the essence of high priesthood in Hebrews (and the HB/OT)---to function as a representative of his people, and God views what the high priest does as if the whole people had done it. This is seen in the HB in the high priest’s vestments. He wears 12 stones engraved with the names of the tribes of Israel (Ex 18:9-12, 15-21, 28-29). He wears a golden plate on his turban with the inscription *Holy to the Lord* (Ex 28:36-38).

This is fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who (unlike those high priests) is holy in his own life and character, and whose holy life counts on behalf of his people (Heb 4:15; 7:26-18).

When we take Communion, we take two elements, not one, for Jesus offered both his BODY (representing his obedient life, his perfect *doing*) and also his BLOOD (representing his atonement/sin offering, his perfect *dying*). When we eat the bread, we may thank God that Jesus Christ lived a life of perfect obedience---in our stead and to our account---and by it God sees us as holy. When we drink the wine, we may thank God that Jesus Christ died the sinners’ death---in our stead and to our account---and by it God forgives all our sin and our sins.

By this ONE sacrifice, we are made perfect FOR ALL TIME (v. 14).

Hallelujah! What a Savior!