

Philosophy, the Culture War, and Hanukkah - Part One

In case anyone has missed it: we are in the midst of a culture war. It isn't really new, but we have seen what amounts to an escalation of hostilities in the last fifty years. Imagine, we have four major "Christian" denominations struggling with homosexual clergy and approval of homosexual unions. The average Evangelical Christian assumes that these so-called Christians must be ignorant of the Bible. Not so, beloved. It is not the absence of Scripture in those churches, it is the absence of a correct way of reading and then obeying Scripture. The problem is, the very same approach to Scripture is present in even the most conservative church in America.

The Battlefield in Conservative Congregations

I have observed the following in congregations I have been a part of:

- Theft committed by congregational leaders.
- Youth involved in varying kinds of sexual sin.
- Violence against a spouse – with no rebuke from congregational leaders.
- Lawsuits between congregants.
- A public stand against abortion, and then a pastor counseling for exceptions in the privacy of his study; leading to a church couple having an abortion – after which the church leadership then took pains to publicly lie about it.
- The private (secret) dismissal of church leaders because of sexual sin.
- A married woman employed by the church, dating other men, with the approval of the senior pastor – all because, in the pastor's mind, she was separated from her husband.
- Numerous known adulterous relationships that ended marriages – with no official challenge.
- A pastor who preyed on congregant women; and who had been hired with the knowledge of past immoral behavior.

All of these things I have observed were in conservative congregations. Don't misunderstand, it is not unusual that sin is present in among G-d's people – it is that in every one of these cases, the church leadership permitted such things to go unchallenged.

How is it possible, that the Redeemed Community looks just like the world? It used to be said, "Observe what the world is doing today, and the church will be doing it in the next generation." That is no longer true. It does not take a generation. Sin is rampant, and unchecked in the Evangelical church today.

If G-d's Word is immutable, and His standards absolute, how can it be that the people who call themselves "the people of the Book" have become irrelevant in the culture war by their silence about the sin in their midst? One word: **Philosophy**. That is, the philosophical or rational approach to G-d's Word.

Beloved, philosophy begins with the question, "What is truth?" and ends with the answer, "This is truth *to me*." G-d's Word was not given to be subjected to the exercise of philosophical

argument. The Evangelical church is only slightly behind the decaying mainstream denominations, because it stopped treating G-d's Word as the absolute authority. Maybe it never did. In short, we have too many people talking theology; and too few practicing and teaching G-d's commands.

Now, if you do not like history, let me encourage you to stick with me on this one – I promise, this relates very much to each one of us. I will try to make it as painless as can be. So get a comfy chair, or sit by the fire and let me tell you a story.

Oh, and there is a test at the end.

It began in a Garden. A Serpent, and a Woman...

"And he [the Serpent] said to the woman, 'Has G-d indeed said, "You shall not eat of every tree of the garden"?' (Genesis 3:1b)

That is a logical question. Think about it. G-d had said in verse 16 and 17, "Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat." So the Serpent's query was logically correct. Ah, but was it truth? No, it wasn't. G-d's instruction to the Man and the Woman was to ***eat of any tree*** except the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The difference seems subtle, but it is not. The instruction is mostly a positive instruction to eat of *any* tree, with *one* exception. The negative instruction against the eating of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil was an instruction with a reason: "for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." G-d does not often offer such a motivating reason for His instructions.

In the next few verses, the Serpent takes the Woman for a ride on the philosophy train, and railroads her right into the most logical answer to his first question: "Has G-d indeed said?". The logical answer of course (to Eve), "Why no, He didn't *really* mean what He said when He said don't eat" – after all, misread 1Cor 6:13; 8:8; Rom 14:17, and this error filled logic seems to make sense. You see, beloved, the Serpent's first question, "Had G-d indeed said?" was really meant to cause the Woman to ask the question, "What did G-d *really* mean?" Cue the organ music. The very simple instructions of G-d had been turned into a logical exercise – and we all know the outcome, which continues to this day.

Written Down, Literal

G-d's instructions began to be written down beginning with Moses, and then the human reaction to them became a little more stark. It seemed that many of G-d's instructions were completely illogical from a human perspective. Who has ever read the instructions regarding a leper from Leviticus 14 and thought to themselves, "Yeah, this makes complete sense"? Either one accepted the instructions at face value, or one discarded them outright. For many, there was either an acceptance of G-d's instructions, or an abandonment of following G-d altogether. A brief look into the book of Judges shows the chaos of the outright abandonment of G-d's instructions. Selective compliance seemed to work better.

Gradually, the people learned to put aside G-d's instructions one at a time until they abandoned G-d's Word entirely. Of course, their abandonment of G-d's instructions – even the ones that made no sense like the year of *sh'mittah* (sabbatical rest for the land) – cost them

dearly. Specifically, the failure to keep G-d's command that the land rest every seven years led to the seventy years of captivity in Babylon (2Chr 36:21; Jer 25:1; Lev 26:34-35, 43). So much for selective compliance.

Along came King Josiah and later the Scribe Ezra – and the rediscovery of G-d's Word. The idea that the Torah was forgotten, and had to be found in the dust of *the Temple itself* seems prophetic for today's believers (2Kings 21:8). When the Torah was read to Josiah he immediately assumed that G-d's instructions were to be taken at face value, and not put through the rigors of logic and philosophy. 150 years later, Ezra would establish a place of reverence for G-d's Word among the people of Israel.

The people of Israel became the people of Torah. Their approach to the Word of G-d became literal – they had learned their lesson about selective compliance, and outright abandonment of G-d's instructions for living. No doubt, the Enemy twisted even that in a way to obscure G-d's clear instructions by add-on rules and regulations – of course, all man-made. G-d's Enemy is very adept to manipulating men, whether religious or not. Regardless, the avenue of a philosophical attack upon G-d's Word had largely failed with the Jewish people up until the 1st Century CE. There was one brief moment in the 2nd Century BCE, when the philosophical approach almost took hold, but failed – we will look at in Part Two.

Christianity, the Religion of Philosophy?

In the 1st Century CE, philosophy was seen as a way to make the Bible less offensive to the intellectuals of Rome and Greece. Philo (20 BCE - 50 CE), a Jew from Alexandria, Egypt, married Scripture with Plato and Aristotle. The result was to turn the "Old Testament" into one giant allegory.

When Christianity spread into the Gentile lands, there was more and more philosophy applied to their beliefs and practices. Philo was the one Jew that many of the Gentile Christians seemed to read. Most of the early Gentile church fathers were students of Plato and Aristotle. They were men like Justin Martyr (100-165 CE), who said that Plato was inspired by G-d:

"And let it not be this one man alone – Plato; but, O philosophy, hasten to produce many others also, who declare the only true G-d to be G-d, through His inspiration, if in any measure they have grasped the truth."

Justin Martyr thought philosophy, and Plato specifically, were G-d-given and inspired to reveal the true G-d.

To Plato, the idea or the thought, was the true reality – the physical was not reality. This is an idea that modern Christianity still adheres to. Such a concept is the antithesis of Scripture. Yeshua's teachings that pointed to the heart were the teachings of Torah; which implored men to incline their hearts toward G-d, and that outward actions were the evidence (the reality) of true faith.

No one can underestimate the influence of Origen (185-232 CE) upon the emerging Christian church of the 2nd Century. Origen was the one who truly brought Neo-Platonism to Christian theology. He was the master of the allegory and the philosophical approach to G-d's instructions.

Augustine (354-430 CE) was a disciple of Greek philosophy. He was influenced greatly by Plato; and considered the incarnation account of John 1 to have been foreshadowed in Plato's view of G-d.

Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274 CE) was greatly influenced by Aristotle and intellectualism. His philosophical approach to Scripture makes the mind and intellectual assent into a kind of "faith." He believed that there can be no opposition between faith and reason.

And of course, Martin Luther (1483-1546 CE) was greatly influenced by Augustine and Aquinas.

Beloved, where do you think all the thinkers of modern theology get their theories? It is not new. In a nutshell, let's just say, "It's all Greek thinking".

The Philosophical Approach To All Instruction

Let's look at how humans respond to authoritative instructions, and how we use them ourselves in the raising of children. It will help us understand effectiveness of annulling G-d's Word using the philosophical approach.

Most parents intend their young children to obey their instructions literally. An example is an instruction to a young child:

"Don't cross the street by yourself."

As the child gets older, the parent usually believes that the child will grow into a consciousness of the dangers and learn appropriate safety steps to safely cross the street alone. No parent expects their child to follow those instructions all of their lives. In other words, over time, the instruction becomes essentially invalid as the child learns *what the parent means*. In many parents' minds, it requires experience and cognitive abilities for a child to outgrow the parental prohibition.

Here is another parental instruction:

"Don't use drugs."

No parent that gives such an instruction intends to have such an instruction to expire once a child reaches a greater level of cognitive maturity. They intend it to be a lifelong instruction.

These examples show the philosophical approach that many of us use regarding instructions. We evaluate every instruction, a rule, or a law with a logical approach – always by asking, "Does this instruction make sense?" We are constantly presented with the erroneous axiom, "G-d gave you a brain didn't He?"

There are several problems with the philosophical approach to instructions or warnings. It assumes that the one evaluating the warning or instruction, is in complete command of all the facts regarding why the warning or instruction exists.

For example, let's imagine the police driving through a neighborhood telling the residents to evacuate because of a overturned chemical train. One resident who naturally distrusts the police hears the warning and says to himself, "*That makes no sense – I don't know of any train tracks around. This is just an attempt to do some unlawful search of my house while I am gone.*" Little does he know that there are train tracks nearby, even though there are no roads that cross them. The person who chooses to logically process the warning does so because:

1. He distrusts the authority giving the instruction.
2. He is not familiar with all the reasons behind the instruction.

Go back to the Garden – the sin of Eve was in *not trusting the One Who instructed* – and she *reasoned* that she did not know what dying was, so it made *no sense* not to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

The problem with our modern theologies that approach G-d's Word with selective compliance is that they are all based upon two false assumptions:

1. G-d's instructions change as we (collectively) mature spiritually.
2. G-d's illogical (humanly speaking) instructions were only valid until we figured out that they were merely figurative instructions. In other words, they only existed until what they illustrated was obvious – or they were only metaphors (sound familiar?).

Actually there is a third and even bigger false assumption: We think we know it all, and know *what G-d really means*.

Selective Compliance Kills

I am an airline pilot. I am also an airline instructor. I teach airline pilots to the airliners that my airline operates. As you can imagine, **standard operating procedures** are not things to be treated lightly. The airline I work for expects its pilots to operate their aircraft precisely within the guidelines that the manufacturer and the airline dictates. A generation ago, many airline pilots treated such instructions with a grain of salt. They valued their own aviation experience and knowledge far more. As aircraft have become more complex, most pilots have learned to trust the **standard operating procedures** more closely. In today's modern aircraft it is even more pronounced because they are highly automated and very complex. Most of our pilots adhere to the **standard operating procedures** very literally. The reason?

1. They trust the authority that provided the procedures.
2. They know that they do not know every reason behind each procedure, because that is the job of thousands of engineers, not a single person.

Every once in a while, someone at the airline I work for needs some "attitude adjustment" because of non-compliance with some rule they think does not apply to them. An instructor friend of mine likes to asks them the question, "You think you know best in this instance. It seems minor, but it makes me ask, what other policies and procedures do you not comply with?" He is right. Selective compliance kills. It kills spiritually as well.

This is not a child-raising article; but just so that you know, the examples regarding how we often teach our children are the wrong approach. We should be very clear with the instructions

and warnings to our children. Make sure that they know if the instructions are valid for life – or only for a while. Make sure that they know that your instructions are not optional. This is the Bible way. Train a child as G-d trains us. That is, unless you approach G-d's instructions philosophically – in which case you can count on your children doing the same with your instructions and warnings. *"Surely mom and dad didn't really mean I shouldn't do this!"*

The Philosophy Test

Here is a quick test to see if the philosophical approach has affected you. If you think any of the following statements are true, you are using a philosophical approach to G-d's Word:

- Truth needs to be understood in order to be obeyed.
- What you believe is more important than what you do.
- Knowledge is worth pursuing for its own sake.
- We must separate the sacred from the secular.
- Mundane things in life interfere with our spiritual focus.
- The primary purpose of education is to understand the world around us and acquire correct ideas and right thinking.
- Knowledge and right thinking feed the soul.
- The primary source of religious teaching should be trained pastors or teachers.

Everyone of the above statements is absolutely false. The Bible teaches against each of them. How'd you do?