

## May 2002: By Grace

by Aaron Greenway

In his book “The Grace Awakening” Dr. Charles Swindoll writes about new missionaries who had recently arrived to the field. Being a missionary requires a lot of sacrifice, but this couple with their children held on to at least one American tradition by having friends and relatives send them care-packages of the George Washington Carver invention: peanut butter. However, this did not go over well with the neighboring missionaries. They told the newcomers that to be truly spiritual required that they give up any American convenience. But the couple paid no attention. As a result the couple were excluded from ministry activities and eventually were driven from the field, never to return.

More recently, I spoke with a friend of mine, a Mexican missionary to Peru. She told me about how she was the head of a growing youth group in a nearby church. It just so happened, however, that a jealous couple in the church went to the Pastor and convinced him to cut the youth program. The pastor’s response to my broken-hearted friend was this, “A missionary cannot put down roots in any one church. He/she has to be willing to move on.”

We have heard (and lived) the stories of the insults, the gossip, the mockery, the lack of sensitivity to brothers and sisters in need. People have been rejected for being from another ethnic group. People have been rejected because of something in that person’s past (that had long been forgiven by God!). Some have limited their involvement in the life of another but pass judgment on that person when given the opportunity. Others still have used doctrinal “side issues” to determine the spirituality of another. I have seen this very issue divide a family of sisters. Because of these kinds of things people have walked away from the Church, disillusioned and crippled emotionally and spiritually.

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While the Church has always had its problems, we see a distinctly different scenario in its infancy. A man named Barnabas accepted and cared for the recently-converted, Saul, who had given shivers to the rest of the Church because of his murderous acts on the Christians (Acts 9). Saul, who became Paul, also spent large amounts of time with other believers (Acts 20). And when He was being taken to Rome, others concerned for his welfare, went to where he was to support him (Acts 27). The Apostle also wrote many letters to those he loved. He called the Philippian believers his “joy and crown” (Phil 4:1).

Legalism is a problem in the Church today because it takes love-extracted truth and applies it to whomever whenever. Legalism is putting up a standard for others to meet and when they don't meet those expectations, they are immediately frowned upon, rejected and cast out. Most of the time, the standard has little or no Biblical basis. And if it does, it is usually based on a doctrinal, side issue. The problem is that many legalists think that if they “love” too much or give too much “grace”, then they will be compromising truth, leading to sappy or “seeker sensitive” Christianity. As a reaction they then choose the extreme alternative by putting everyone else in a spiritual, straight jacket.

The only thing that has truly changed people has been the work of God's grace in people's lives, not a set of rules and regulations. The scowl or disapproval of someone has never done anything except to drive people further from the Truth and divide people. Let us remember that if we are setting up impossible standards for others, then we ought to be prepared for the same kind of treatment. Paul said to the Galatians that those who put themselves under the Law are under a curse. The standard by which you apply to another will be the same standard that others will apply to you. And you will be the one cast out. The truth is that Jesus met every standard at the Cross. When the Father says that standard has been met, who are we to say that it hasn't. We have just nullified the Grace of God in the lives of others.

On the other hand, the Devil has his plants everywhere and no matter what we do, we will never win the approval of a legalist. The only way to react to these people is to love them, to bless them, and to be an example. And if necessary, we may have to “move on” and go to where we can nurture and be nurtured. But only God can melt their coldness. What they don't realize is

that only grace can save, and only grace can drive one onto perfection, not human expectation.

While I believe in pure doctrine and adherence to that doctrine, I do not believe the Bible teaches an “out-of-balance” theology that makes mountains out of molehills, making issues out of side-doctrines (Romans 14). As a friend of mine once told me, “All ground is level at the cross”.

When we realize the grace we’ve been shown and the great price of the cross, only then will we be able to show that to others. Perhaps, we can ask God to give us eyes of compassion, willing to accept and support fellow servants of God in the Church. At times, this will mean incredible humility on our part. But isn’t that what being a Christian is all about?