CHAPTER XIX
HOW DO WE DECIDE?

What is the rule in this case? Do we presume a rule or do we presume freedom? What does the Bible say?

(Gal. 3:25) Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law.

Why do we insist on replacing the law that Christ died to free us from with a new, equally strict law? Can you tell any difference between our debates over whether a man must resign as elder if his wife dies or if his only child (or one of his two children) dies or is divorced and the debates the Pharisees had as to whether it is right to heal on the Sabbath? I can’t. They thought they were honoring God by strictly construing His commands to be “safe.” They built fences around the law to be doubly safe. They are burning in hell. Let’s not follow their example.

In fact, I well remember attending many a Sunday School class where we were advised that the Pharisees were condemned because they built fences around the laws of God, imposing rules that God did not. And yet I also have attended many a class where I was taught that we need to be safe, and that to be safe, we need to impose rules that aren’t necessarily in the Bible. These rules would be imposed by the church to protect us from what violating these rules “might lead to.” These rules would also protect us from any accusation by other congregations or the most traditional members of our own congregations. I’ve even been in classes that described this process of being doubly safe as “building fences.” I can be very dense at times, but I eventually concluded that there is a very serious problem with this kind of thinking.

(2 Cor. 3:3-6,17) You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts. Such confidence as this is ours through Christ before God. Not that we are competent in ourselves to claim anything for ourselves, but our competence comes from God. He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant—not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. ... Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

(Rom. 7:6) But now, by dying to what once bound us, we have been released from the law so that we serve in the new way of the Spirit, and not in the old way of the written code.

If we turn the freedom that is in Christ into a new Law of Moses, replacing one law with another, we will receive our reward—death. Law brings death. The Spirit gives
life. The New Testament is not a new Deuteronomy. Paul doesn’t replace the old letters with better letters. The Law of Moses is not replaced. It is abolished. We don’t have better, more modern rules—we have salvation and an indwelling, and we have freedom.

(Col. 2:8) See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.

Recall that the “basic principles of this world” are the results of God’s curse on Creation—man’s sinfulness, the reign of death, and the domination of women by men. Galatians 4:6-9. Hebrews says much the same thing, drawing a contrast between the new order and the old:

(Heb. 9:1,10) Now the first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary. ... They are only a matter of food and drink and various external washings—external regulations applying until the time of the new order.

The writer’s point is not that the new order will have new regulations. Rather, he is saying that external regulations for worship are characteristic of the Old Covenant, but in the new order, God will regulate us, not through rules, but internally, through His Spirit.

(Heb 8:10-13) “This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord.

I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.”

By calling this covenant “new,” he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and aging will soon disappear.

The Hebrews writer quotes from Jeremiah’s prophecy of the Messiah to make his point. In the Christian Dispensation, God’s relationship to His people will be fundamentally different. We will not be saved through better scholarship, but because God Himself will write His laws on our hearts through His Spirit. See also Romans 8:1-15.188

(Rom. 4:14-16) For if those who live by law are heirs, faith has no value and the promise is worthless, because law brings

188 The author’s The Holy Spirit and Revolutionary Grace explains these ideas in much greater detail.
Paul says that the only way that we can be sin-free is to be law-free. Our salvation is by faith because making our salvation by works—even a little bit—will make us sinners and we will be damned. To allow us to be saved, God had to put into place a system where “there is no law.”

Thus, those who find arbitrary, external rules in the New Testament must be misunderstanding the scriptures. In the new order, the “rules” will come from our relationship with the Spirit. We are to become Spirit-filled people who are ruled from the heart, not from a “written code” or “external regulations,” which can only bring spiritual death. Thus, the “gifts” or “talents” view of church order makes perfect sense and is exactly what the writers say is the new nature of things. The idea that we are bound by a host of elaborate rules regarding how many children deacons and elders must have and whether a man must be married to lock the building or whether a woman can head the primary department is, pure and simple, Old Testament thinking. If we instead look at each person’s God-given talents, we are thinking spiritually and relying on God’s internal regulations.

Despite knowing that we are Christians freed from law and regulations, we think we are under very strict regulations on which our very salvation depends but which we frankly cannot interpret with any consistency! I don’t doubt for a moment the inspiration of these passages. I seriously doubt that we’ve understood why the passages were written.

Because we don’t really know what role is exclusively the role of deacons, we try to structure our works and programs in whatever way will work, and then we put the best face on it so that our more traditional members don’t protest too vigorously about the expanded role of women. Thus, we are glad for the Ladies Bible Class to take on providing food for the sick, but we’d never name the woman in charge of this very vital program a “deacon.” We are glad for our youth minister to run the program for the teenagers, even if he has no children. But because he is (1) male and (2) has a title (“minister,” which is from the Latin word that translates “deacon”) we invite him to our elders and deacons meetings and give him a voice and authority equal if not superior to any deacon.

We cannot effectively run a church and simultaneously limit every job that carries any authority at all to married men with children. Therefore, we rationalize our way around the rules while simultaneously insisting that we are obeying the rules and that all who disagree with us are going to hell. The solution is not stricter or even more consistent legalism. It is an end to legalism and an acceptance of the work of God’s Holy Spirit.
The Bible plainly teaches that it is the Creator of the Universe who works in us to give us the gifts and talents needed to serve Him. We need to honor God’s work in us. We need to put aside our assumption that the New Testament is a law book. We need to admit that we’ve always ignored passages such as 1 Timothy 5:11 that is as much a list of qualifications as those dealing with elders and deacons and confess that we only try to enforce those passages that happen to be consistent with our own biases and presuppositions. And we need to read the Bible with spiritual eyes.

(1 Cor. 2:14-16) The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned. The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment: “For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?” But we have the mind of Christ.

I don’t have all the answers, and certainly don’t pretend to be able to plumb all the depths of these passages. But neither am I willing to ignore their plain teachings. Over and over again, the Bible tells us that we are freed from laws, rules, regulations, and written codes, and over and over again my brothers insist on imposing laws, rules, regulations, and written codes. Is it safer to take a doubtful passage and assume that there is a rule? Or is it wiser and more Christ-like to interpret passages to be consistent with the plain teachings of the Bible regarding the Spirit’s gifts?