

# Antinomianism and Legalism vs. the Gospel: Is it Legalistic and Ungraceful for Saint Paul's to Leave the ELCA?

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This blog post is a response to a variety of questions and statements regarding Saint Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church's open criticism with the Evangelical Lutheran Church's (ELCA) decision in August. In case you're unfamiliar with the decision here is the denomination's official statement:

Resolution 1: "RESOLVED, that the ELCA commit itself to finding ways to allow congregations that choose to do so to recognize, support, and hold publicly accountable life-long, monogamous, same-gender relationships"

Resolution 2: "RESOLVED, that the ELCA commit itself to finding a way for people in such publicly accountable, lifelong, monogamous, same-gender relationships to serve as rostered leaders of this church."

Saint Paul's, the church in which I serve, does not support this decision given its implications on Scripture and the Gospel (some of which I've outlined in a previous post: "No Law, No Gospel: Some Thoughts on the ELCA's decision" [www.shawn-thoughts.blogspot.com](http://www.shawn-thoughts.blogspot.com)). Along with this, she has also been openly critical with this decision even going so far as requesting to withdraw from the ELCA.

Throughout this whole process Saint Paul's has remained as transparent as possible and has also offered numerous avenues for open dialogue and disagreement. From these discussions there have been several reoccurring themes of criticism that have surfaced concerning Saint Paul's response to the ELCA's decision. The two that I wish to discuss here are:

"Saint Paul's in choosing to leave the ELCA is not exhibiting the grace of Christ. Jesus showed acceptance and grace to everyone who crossed his path. Why are we focusing on this issue? Remember, 'let him who is without sin cast the first stone...'"

"Saint Paul's in disagreeing with the ELCA's stance on homosexuality is being legalistic..."

These are two serious and legitimate charges that need to be answered if Saint Paul's desires to have a clear conscience in its decisions over the next several months. This said, I would like to address these two criticisms by looking at antinomianism; legalism; and how a church rooted in the Gospel of Jesus Christ transcends them both.

From its outset Orthodox Christianity has always been accused of antinomianism. Antinomianism (lit. Anti-*law*-ism), which simply means any teaching that is critical; overturns; undermines; or is against the rule of law, was a branding that even followed Jesus Christ and Saint Paul around. I myself have even been accused of it from time to time. The charge almost seems appropriate for a religion that proclaims, "**Romans 10:4** Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes..." or "**Romans 5:20** <sup>20</sup> Now the law came in to increase the trespass."

Although on the surface it appears that Orthodox Christianity is antinomian, the truth is that Christianity is the polar opposite of this concept. In fact, Christianity tightens the law to its fullest extent. This is true of its founder Jesus Christ who says:

**“Matthew 5:17-18** <sup>17</sup> “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. <sup>18</sup> For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished.”

**“Matthew 5:48** <sup>48</sup> You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

It is also true of Christianity’s great interpreter Saint Paul who exclaims, **“Romans 7:12** the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good.” It is in line with the Great Reformer Martin Luther who says, “We should understand ‘Law’ to mean nothing else than God’s word and command, in which he directs us what to do and what not to do, and demands from us our obedience and ‘work’” (Pless 115). Lastly, it is proclaimed up to the present in Orthodox Christianity (see Barth, Forde, Stott, Packer, Zahl, etc).

For Christianity the problem is not with the law, but rather with us. As Saint Paul says:

**Romans 7:10-14** <sup>10</sup> The very commandment that promised life proved to be death to me. <sup>11</sup> For sin, seizing an opportunity through the commandment, deceived me and through it killed me. <sup>12</sup> So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good. <sup>13</sup> Did that which is good, then, bring death to me? By no means! It was sin, producing death in me through what is good, in order that sin might be shown to be sin, and through the commandment might become sinful beyond measure. <sup>14</sup> For we know that the law is spiritual, but I am of the flesh, sold under sin.

In other words, because of my sinful condition the law cannot engender what it demands. If the law says, “jump,” I sit. If it says, “Run,” I walk. And in the words of my old Professor Paul Zahl, “If it says ‘Honor your father and mother,’ I move... to Portland. If it says, ‘do not covet’ (Romans 7:7-8), I spend all day on the home shopping channel” (35).

Because of this the law functions not as a rule of life for Christians, but rather, **“Romans 3:19-20** <sup>19</sup> ... that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. <sup>20</sup> For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.” In short, the law does not save; but rather exposes us and leaves us without excuse silent before the just judgment of God’s wrath. We would be damned, if God had not made another way, but thankfully he has:

**Romans 3:21-25** <sup>21</sup> But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it- <sup>22</sup> the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup> and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, <sup>25</sup> whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith.

Through the law we see the grotesque and infinite ways we’ve fallen short and are brought to a point of complete exasperation we’re like Saint Paul we scream, **“Romans 7:24** <sup>24</sup> Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?” In this sense the law condemns, or order that I may take refuge in Christ (Augustine 218).

So rather than being antinomian, Christianity upholds the law to its fullest extent and in doing so forces us to look outside ourselves for deliverance/salvation (Zahl 35). On the other hand, Christianity that deserves to be called antinomian is that which lessens the severity of or does away with the law. To this kind of religion God says:

**Jeremiah 6:14-15** <sup>14</sup> They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace. <sup>15</sup> Were they ashamed when they committed abomination? No, they were not at all ashamed; they did not know how to blush. Therefore they shall fall among those who fall; at the time that I punish them, they shall be overthrown," says the LORD.

More than this, when one abolishes the law, one eradicates our need Jesus Christ. Martin Luther writes:

Whoever abolishes the law simultaneously abolishes sin... For according to Romans 5:13, where there is no law there is no sin. And if there is no sin, then Christ died for nothing. Why should he die if there were no sin or law for which he must die? It is apparent from this that ***the devil's purpose in this fanaticism is not to remove the law but to remove Christ, the fulfiller of the law.*** (204 emphasis added)

In holding up the law to its fullest extent and offering the righteousness that comes through faith in Christ, orthodox Christianity avoids this. In eradicating God's clearly spoken law, the ELCA falls into this antinomianism.

Now that we've defined antinomianism, we shall look at legalism. In its most basic sense legalism is this: a belief that one earns God's favor or salvation through various good deeds. In legalism one makes and/or keeps oneself righteous through their own efforts. This belief then begets contempt for those who do not labor in the same way. Lastly, this then births lovelessness in that its self-advancing purposes squeeze out humility and compassion (Packer 175-176). Sadly, there have been countless examples of this throughout church history.

The great example of legalism in the Bible is the Pharisees. This religious sect was focused entirely on the externals of their actions; disregarding motives and purposes, and reducing life to mechanical rule-keeping (176). They believed that through their external adherence to the law, they would achieve God's favor. They believed that through their own efforts they would make themselves righteous. For this Jesus had no patience. In the gospel of Matthew he exclaims:

**Matthew 23:27-28** <sup>27</sup> "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs, which outwardly appear beautiful, but within are full of dead people's bones and all uncleanness. <sup>28</sup> So you also outwardly appear righteous to others, but within you are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.

The ironic thing is that although legalists think they are fulfilling the law, in fact they are one in the same with antinomianism. This is because in order to create the illusion of adherence to the law, they must lessen the severity of the law. This, as we have seen, is at its heart antinomianism and that's why Jesus calls Pharisaical legalism "lawlessness."

One last note on legalism is that Christianity always falls into it when she loses sight of the cross of Christ. This is because as human beings our default setting is legalism and self-righteousness. We want to make ourselves right on our own terms without God, which is the essence of our sinful condition. The cross declares this an impossibility. As Luther says:

He who has not been brought low, reduced to nothing through the cross and suffering, takes credit for works and wisdom and does not give credit to God. (59)

*Thus, when Christianity loses sight of the cross she falls into the illusion that she is righteous on her own terms and like the antinomians nullifies the cross of Christ (Galatians 2:20).*

Along with falling into antinomianism, the ELCA has also drifted into legalism. ***In invalidating the law to make themselves right apart from God's judgment and justification*** they are like the Pharisees and countless legalists since. Because that is legalism in its simplest form: trying to make themselves right on their own terms apart from God.

With antinomianism and legalism properly defined, we must now beg the question of whether Saint Paul's is being ungraceful and legalistic in openly criticizing the ELCA for their decision. Well, as I hopefully showed above, in their theology the ELCA has fallen into both antinomianism and legalism. This being the case, the question of whether Saint Paul's is being legalistic and ungraceful must be answered with several questions. Was Jesus Christ being ungraceful and legalistic when he lambasted the Pharisees for their lawlessness? Was Jesus Christ being too strict when he said, "**John 7:7** <sup>7</sup> The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify about it that its works are evil"? Was the Apostle Paul being too stringent when concerning the legalists in Galatia he wrote, "**Galatians 5:12** <sup>12</sup> I wish those who unsettle you would emasculate themselves!" or when regarding the antinomianism present in Corinth he exclaimed, "**1 Corinthians 6:9-10** ...neither the sexually immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor men who practice homosexuality, <sup>10</sup> nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God?" Lastly, was Martin Luther ungraceful and legalistic when he spoke up concerning the atrocities of the Catholic Church? Was he being narrow-minded when on trial he exclaimed:

I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—***my conscience is captive to the Word of God***. I cannot and I will not recant anything, for to go against conscience is neither right nor safe. God help me. Amen... Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise. (Bainton 144 emphasis added)

You see, if we accuse Saint Paul's of legalism concerning its open criticism of and dissent from the ELCA we must also by the same logic accuse Jesus; the Apostle Paul; Martin Luther; and countless others of the same crime. It is not legalism to openly oppose untruth, rather it's our bound duty to:

**1 Timothy 6:20-21** ...guard the deposit entrusted to you. Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called "knowledge," <sup>21</sup> for by professing it some have swerved from the faith.

Of course if when defending and guarding the truth Saint Paul's begins to believe that in doing this she is somehow making herself more inherently righteous than others then she must be accused of legalism. If in this crisis Saint Paul's begins to berate homosexuals then she must be called ungraceful. Lastly, if Saint Paul's begins to focus on this topic at the expense of the "the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness..." than it must hear the words of Jesus, "**Matthew 23:24** <sup>24</sup> You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!" Thus far by the grace of God Saint Paul's has avoided this and to continue she must evermore remain on her knees at the foot of the cross.

### ***The Proper Way Forward***

So what is the best way to navigate these troubled waters? How does Saint Paul's avoid the pitfalls of both antinomianism and legalism? The only way forward is the road to the cross. ***Christianity that is birthed in Golgotha is neither antinomian nor legalistic, but rather it proclaims the law to its deadliest and fullest extent; while at the same time offering the world her one and only hope.*** This is because of the great paradox found in the cross: it judges and redeems. On the cross when he who knew no sin became sin, we ultimately see the full wickedness of our ways (2 Corinthians 5:12). We stand judged. Luther says it this way:

The real and true work of Christ's Passion is to make man conformable to Christ, so that man's conscience is tormented by his sins in like measure as Christ was pitifully tormented in body and soul by our sins... You must get this through your head and not doubt that you are the one who is torturing Christ, for you sins have surely wrought this... (Forde 7, 8)

***By forgiving sins unilaterally and unconditionally for Christ sake, God at the same unmasks our sin and unfaith (Forde 31). Because of this any church that stands before the cross must proclaim the total weight of God's law and judgment against humanity. To do anything less is to diminish the power of the cross. This is why Saint Paul's must hold its ground against the antinomianism of the ELCA.***

Along with this the church must proclaim the redemptive element of the cross: i.e. the Gospel. The Gospel being that the God who is just and righteous in his judgment is also the one who loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son (Horton 81 & John 3:16). Saint Paul's must proclaim that, "**1 John 4:10** <sup>10</sup> In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." and, "**Romans 5:8** God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Again, this is why Saint Paul's must take a stand against the antinomianism of the ELCA, because in lessening the sting of the law they are reducing our understanding of the love of God. This is because ***in understanding just how condemned and judged we are under the law, will we ever even begin to fathom just how much God loves us through his Son Jesus Christ.*** As I've said in another post:

In taking away the law, the ELCA nullifies Justification by Grace and turns it into a hallmark card rather than salvation. They are robbing those in same-gendered relationships from ever truly experiencing the grace of Christ. (Smith)

In short, our experience and understanding of Grace (God's one-way love toward humanity), will only be as strong as our understanding of how much we've fallen short.

In the end, the proper way forward depends on the proper balance of law and gospel, judgment and love, and lastly death and life. Sure this ministry may at times make us feel the sting of the law and seem un-inclusive, but without this sting we will never truly know what it means to be saved by grace.

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