Dominion, Episcopal Authority, and Legalism

There is episcopal authority or governing structure within Christianity with its deacons, presbyters, and bishops; and there are Christ's gifts of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, and for the edifying of the Body of Christ. All are parts of the Body, with Christ as the Head of the Body who coordinates all of its functions. The parts need to individually communicate with the Head in order for the Body to work in harmony and to spiritually grow.[1] This is why our attention needs to always be directed toward Christ; and not toward each other or elsewhere.

No one except God can provide us with control over our human weakness, which is the law of sin. A church does not have the power to strengthen us over sinning because we can only experience this strength by our direct closeness to God. Unfortunately, this understanding is not present in Christian organizations that impose religious law on their members for attempting to control their sinning; and neglect faith in Christ and repentance which bring the strength to avoid sinning. Regardless of how much governing authority that a church may have, it does not have dominion over a person's freedom in Christ and faith.[2] Christians need this freedom to live out their individual functions in the Body of Christ, and to live out true holiness. A church becomes an idol when obedience is directed only to a church organization and its rubrics.

Obeying religious law for righteousness cannot strengthen us from the law of sin. It didn't under the Law of Moses, and it doesn't in Christianity. This is why people confess the same sins over and over again. There is nothing to confess to God or anyone else for disobeying religious law; or to receive forgiveness or absolution for it, because it doesn't exist. We are not under law but under grace. This is why we are fallen from grace and remain in sin if we place ourselves under legalism. This includes the leaders of whole denominations who have imposed legalism on their members; and have abandoned the teaching of simple grace and strength from the Holy Spirit for living and walking in the Spirit.[3]

A Church that adds legal sin as a penalty for breaking its own laws, as well as Christ's commands, imposes a burden on its members that is not part of Christianity. Christ frees us from this. The Law of Moses had legal sin penalties for sinning; but Christ nailed that to His cross so that we are not under legal sin. The Law had dominion over a person; but it no longer has.[4] The Christian motivation for not sinning is that we do not want to revert back to being slaves to sin; and not because we would be legally sinning for breaking religious laws.[5]

Mindless adherence to a church's culture is the usual default position for most Christians; and many do not question what they are told by their clergy; but there is no need for this today because Bibles and other reading materials are readily available for verifying what we are told. If we are misled, what we are told by our pastors may not work when we appear before Christ.

In my religious upbringing, I was told to obey lots of religious laws so that I would not offend God by disobeying them, and lose my salvation by committing mortal sin for disobeying them; and then going to Confession for getting absolved from mortal sin. This legalism caused me a great deal of distress; but during this time I got my first glimpse of Biblical spirituality while I was reading Matthew 6:25-34 where Christ tells us that if we worry, we are of little faith. I had never heard that worry distances us from God. I didn't follow through with this at that time: but I never forgot it. After that, I stopped practicing my Catholicism for a period of time.

Later, I was curious as to whether Christianity had any teaching for arriving at inner peace. I went to the Bible to see if there was any teaching on this. There was lots of it; but I hadn't been taught any of it. My search for inner peace ended when I found the instructions for getting God's peace by having humility toward Him and casting all of my care on Him.[6] They were in the Bible all along. In the beginning, I didn't know that the only way to get His peace was to get God Himself in my life, because His Spirit contains His peace. The instructions for getting both were the same; but when we get God in our lives, we also get the strength to walk in the Spirit and yield to God.[7] I tried it and it worked.

We have a great advantage today because Bibles are easily accessible; but it was not this way before the printing press when Bibles were handwritten, and few people had direct access to them. Those who did, gave their own interpretations of what they read and taught to others. Now, we can personally verify what we are told.

When there were no New Testament books written, the earliest Christians were verbally taught by the apostles and others. Eventually, the teachings were written down, and later compiled into the New Testament in the fourth century AD. We can now more easily "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good."[8]

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[1] Cf. Colossians 2:19
[2] Cf. 2Corinthians 1:24; 1Peter 5:3
[3] Cf. Romans 8:1-13; Galatians 5:1-6, 16-25
[4] Cf. Romans 7:1, 6
[5] Cf. Romans 6:14-23
[6] Cf. 1Peter 5:5-7; James 4:5-10 Philippians 4:6-7; Proverbs 3:5-6; Isaiah 26:3; 55:6-9; 2Corinthians 10:5; Psalms 112:7-8; 118:8-9; 138:6
[7] Cf. Romans 6:13
[8] 1Thessalonians 5:21