

# The Flight from



**Weakness**

To

**Legalism**



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To: Our School's Board of Education and Administration

From: John Hitchcock

Re: The Flight from Weakness to Legalism

Recently, the issue of divorce and employment at our school has been the basis of faculty room discussion. Not being one to sit and complain behind closed doors but to openly voice my opinion, I've struggled with analyzing the motivation leading to the Board's radical entrance into legalism.

This adoption of **standards** which supersede scriptural principles has created a dichotomy of philosophy not historically present in our school. As we attended the Fall Banquet last weekend, the viability of my thoughts was reaffirmed. From the podium, former board members and even the founder of the school spoke of their original understanding that "weakness gave opportunity for God's power" to be illustrated.

Those original founding members knew what weakness was, and where legalism led.

Realizing that recent meetings between the board and faculty about this issue resulted in semi-reprimanding of some teachers about open dialogue and criticism, I admit to some degree of hesitancy in writing. In a fit of self-pity I had determined to keep silent on future non-personal issues.

Though the divorce issue pales in comparison to Alexander Solzhenitsyn's accounting of his arrest and imprisonment in Soviet Russia, there is a fundamental issue which compels me to discard self-pity (or is it protection) and shout loudly my "further reflections" on this issue.

In his book, *The Gulag Archipelago*, Solzhenitsyn continually analyzes the question of *why* he and his similarly arrested countrymen acquiesced so easily and willingly as they were led to captivity.

"Why didn't you resist?" shouted those in Russia who "continued to live on in comfort (and) scold those who suffered." (Solzhenitsyn, p. 15). Solzhenitsyn ponders in depth the psychological, emotional and spiritual environment in which VERY LOYAL RUSSIANS allowed an unmerciful government to banish freedom from their lives...and never cried out in dissent or anguish!

I must not surrender to silence on this divorce issue and forever regret that acquiescence.

Founder's Day chapel speakers keep reminding us that those who started our school did so with a vision of hope and the reality of weakness. Even the daily existence of our school revealed "God's strength being made perfect in (their) weakness."

A philosophical identity of wisdom and grace positioned our school uniquely in the family of Christian schools. Interpreting INDEPENDENT literally, the formative boards of education recognized the wisdom of denominational integration in staff and students, yet dared to accept the grace that covers not only personal sin, but denominational differences.

In their weakness, God's sufficiency provided the strength for both spiritual and educational growth.

As television reports so vividly showed, the "Smart Bombs" of the Persian Gulf conflict reveal human power in their accuracy and killing efficiency. Conversely, and from a strategic stance of human weakness, David's "Smart Stones" represented his human weakness, thus allowing God's strength to be obvious in killing the harassing giant.

Saul's bronzed armor was discarded as too encumbering. With the sword laid aside, the name of the Lord Almighty elevated a puny weapon of shepherds to exceed the intimidating presence of Goliath. As the giant's head rolled, the pathetically cowed foot soldiers of the Israelites gained strength to continue the battle.

So, too, God's name invoked in the frailty of human resources has given strength to the struggling Christian parent and the income-lessened teacher to pursue the battle of Christian education. The rewarded weakness of those who went before us impales other giants' heads on the victory spear.

The natural man perceives success within the context of strength.

"I am strong, therefore I will succeed."

This strength-success syndrome is simply a manifestation of PRIDE, the tentacles of which produce the inevitable degradation of one man by another.

David ultimately attained a position of power, power permeated by PRIDE. His original position of power coupled with the wisdom of mercy became replaced by a new law of selfishness. This selfishness became apparent when David's body cried out for Bathsheba, and Uriah fell victim to David's selfish pride.

From the vulnerability of a sling that somehow slew giants, David rose in power to become a quivering adulterer and murder. A man who lived and grew on the grace and mercy inherent in the name of the Lord Almighty had elevated his own perception of power even to creating a new set of conduct rules, and those new rules stole another man's wife, and ultimately his life.

Immediately upon entering the front hall of our school, we see iconoclastic reminders celebrating measurable standards of performance set by athletes and scholars from our school's past. Trophies and records exist in anticipation of being replaced by a new, higher standard of performance.

In this case, the standard is constantly changing.

Scriptural standards of moral conduct, however, are addressed differently. Murder in the Old Testament is enlarged to the New Testament standard of hate; adultery expands to include lust. Those "standards" represent scripturally defensible activities, written clearly for us to maintain.

We must be careful to differentiate between secular standards of attainment and scriptural standards of moral living. In the secular world, standards can be anything we want. Our rationale for their existence need only be, "That's the way we want it." Speed limits, track times or dress code standards can be arbitrary and constantly changing. Stock boys wearing a tie to work in the supermarket is neither good nor bad, but simply represent the chosen standard.

Issues addressed by scripture carry a heavier burden of compliance, however. Not meeting any given scriptural standard is obviously dangerous, but not necessarily openly apparent. Murder is rather definitive, but only I know when my hate has "murdered" another.

The ramification of establishing a *higher standard* than indicated by scripture are equally ominous. Choosing to live by "standards" higher than those established scripturally is very likely PRIDE manifesting itself in the cloak of legalism.

If to hate is to murder, perhaps a "better" standard would elevate irritation to murder also. Is it not obvious that expanding moral issues addressed by scripture to implement extrascriptural standards is really saying, "We can do BETTER than God?"

Now to the matter at hand. If God's grace doesn't penalize the innocent spouse in the type of divorce situation currently under discussion, then we err in making OUR standard tougher yet.

Like David to Uriah, the world can take his wife and we can punish him further. Thus we have expanded the scriptural melding of justice and grace into a *higher standard* that smacks of extreme legalism.

Legalism really does simplify life. This is the rule... this is the punishment. Sporting events have rules, governments have laws, and Christians have, in your words, *standards*. The Law of Moses was pretty clear. Eyes and teeth could be counted.

But then this thing called Calvary happened.

Grace superseded Law, and wisdom once again became a necessity. Once imprisoned, Solzhenitsyn begins discussing the lingering hope of amnesty to political prisoners. After much analysis and observation, he dismisses that possibility by realizing that "...for mercy one must have wisdom." (Solzhenitsyn, p. 271)

Our legalistic bent to do something "better" than God cries loudly that we have abandoned weakness for pride. Similarly, forsaking unanimity, the board of education appears to have been victimized into adopting a strongly denominational issue as definitive policy.

This action is remarkably similar to David's pride turning into adultery, which ultimately resulted in murder. These were terrible and deliberate sins, yet look at how God's grace overwhelmed the awfulness of these actions.

David said, "I have sinned against the Lord." (2 Samuel 12:13) As his life nudged eternity David shouted, "The LORD lives!... Exalted be God, the Rock, my Savior!... He shows unfailing kindness to His anointed. To David..." (2 Samuel 22: 47 - 51)

God's grace triumphs!

My distress is thus identified.

The divergence of grace and legalism cutting through an institution I support and a friend I love leaves me feeling bewildered and perplexed. The catharsis of solidifying the concept within the context of scripture becomes complete only as I verbalize my thoughts.

What do I expect to happen as a result of my communication?

Nothing, really, except the internal knowledge that my broken silence lifts the burden of a conscience crying out for justice and grace... and a plea to return to the powerful weakness that allows God's strength to confound the world.

Sources cited:

1. All scripture quotations from The New International Version.
2. The Gulag Archipelago, by Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Harper & Row, 1974

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