

## SITUATION ETHICS

Dave Miller, Ph.D.

**H**uman beings throughout history have been susceptible to a desire to be freed from the dictates of higher authority. Most people wish to be free to do whatever they desire to do. This attitude runs rampant among the baby boomers whose formative years occurred during the 1960s. Expressions that were commonplace at the time included, “Do your own thing” and “Let it all hang out.” These simple slogans offer profound insight into what really was driving the countercultural forces at that time. Underneath the stated objectives of love, peace, and brotherhood were the actual motives of self-indulgence and freedom from restrictions. This ethical, moral, and spiritual perspective has proliferated, and now dominates the American moral landscape.

Despite all of their high and holy insistence that their actions are divinely approved, and the result of a deep desire to do Christ’s will and save souls, could it possibly be that those within Christendom who seek to relax doctrinal rigidity are, in reality, implementing their own agenda of change simply to **relieve themselves of biblical restrictions**? Is it purely coincidental that the permissive preachers have been both willing and eager to accommodate the clamor for “no negative, all positive” preaching? Is it completely accidental and unrelated that many voices are minimizing strict obedience under the guise of “legalism,” “we’re under grace, not law,” “we’re in the grip of grace” (Lucado, 1996), and that we are “free to change” (e.g., Hook, 1990)?

No, these circumstances are neither coincidental nor unrelated. They are calculated and conspiratorial. Those who have aversion to law have breathed in the same spirit that has led secular society’s psychological profession to view guilt as destructive, while unselfish, personal responsibility is labeled “co-dependency.” They have embraced the same subjective, self-centered rationale that secular society offers for rejecting the plain requirements of Scripture in order to do whatever they desire to do: “God wants me to be happy!” and “It meets my needs!” The spirit of liberalism has indeed taken deep root, both in the country and in the Christian religion (see Chesser, 2001).

### SITUATIONISM DEFINED

**I**n the mid-1960s, Joseph Fletcher published the book, *Situation Ethics*, thereby securing for himself the dubious distinction, “the Father of Situation Ethics” (1966). Of course, Fletcher was by no means the first to advance the ideals of situationism. Men like Emil Brunner (*The Divine Imperative*), Reinhold Niebuhr (*Moral Man and Immoral Society*), Harvey Cox (*The Secular City*), Dietrich Bonhoeffer (*Ethics*), and John A.T. Robinson (*Honest to God*) promoted ethical relativism before Fletcher’s popular expression of the same. Existentialist philosophers like Sartre, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger promulgated this same subjectivism. Though Fletcher at first attempted to deny this tie to existential philosophy (1967, p. 75), he eventually ended up admitting it (pp. 77,234). However, we need

not think that situation ethics is a twenty-first-century phenomenon that was invented by modern theologians and social scientists. Situationism goes all the way back to Eden when Satan posed to Eve circumstances that he alleged would justify setting aside God’s law (Genesis 3:4-6).

Fletcher summarized his ideas in terms of six propositions that he came to identify as “the fundamentals of Christian conscience” (1967, pp. 13-27). This ethical theory stresses “freedom from prefabricated decisions and prescriptive rules” in exchange for “the relative or nonabsolute and vari-

## CONTENTS

### ARTICLES

<i>Situation Ethics</i> Dave Miller . . . . .	97
--	----

### DEPARTMENTS

Speaking Schedules . . . . .	102
Note from the Editor <i>Apologetics Press Announces Its</i> <i>\$2,500,000 Fund-raising Campaign</i> Bert Thompson . . . . .	104

### RESOURCES

<i>Atheism and Liberal, Missouri</i> . . . . .	41-R
<i>Bat “Vision”</i> . . . . .	44-R
In the News . . . . .	44-R

ant or nonuniversal nature of the situational approach” (p. 7). “Right and wrong depend upon the situation” (p. 14). The “situation” is defined as “the relative weight of the ends and means and motives and consequences all taken together, as weighed by love” (p. 23). The situation ethicist feels free to “tinker with Scripture” and to form “a coalition with the utilitarian principle of the ‘greatest good of the greatest number’ ” (pp. 18-19; cf. p. 56).

Situationism is simply ethical relativism, in that it moves “away from code ethics, from stern and ironbound do’s and don’ts, from prescribed conduct and legalistic morality” (p. 24). Situationism bears close affinity with existentialism (pp. 26, 77,234). “Imitative practice,” uniformity and conformity, and “metaphysical morals” are all disdained (pp. 26,106,240). Objective principles and abstract rules are repudiated, in exchange for “freedom and openness” (pp. 72,76,233,235). Concrete absolutes are viewed unfavorably as “authoritarianism” and “rules-bound thinking” (p. 240).

Situationism calls for “creative” moral conduct, accommodation to “pluralism,” “freedom,” and “openness,” as well as “spontaneity and variety in moral decision-making” (pp. 78,123-124,235,241). Constant emphasis is placed on “love” as the only intrinsic good, with the loving thing to do depending on each situation that arises. Since “love” is the only inherent, intrinsic value, the moral quality or value of ev-

ery thing or action is extrinsic and contingent—depending upon the situation (pp. 14,26,34,38,55,76,123-124).

Though Fletcher offered formal expression to these concepts several decades ago, it would not be an exaggeration to state that situationism has “gone to seed” in American society, and now constitutes the prevailing approach to making ethical decisions. As pollster guru George Barna remarked in a 2003 survey of American moral behavior:

This is reflective of a nation where **morality is generally defined according to one’s feelings**. In a postmodern society, where **people do not acknowledge any moral absolutes**, if a person feels justified in engaging in a specific behavior, then they do not make a connection with the immoral nature of that action.... Until people recognize that there are moral absolutes and attempt to live in harmony with them, we are likely to see a **continued decay of our moral foundations** (2003, emp. added).

#### FLAWS IN SITUATIONAL THINKING

At least two foundational errors cause Fletcher’s theory of situationism to be irreparably flawed. The first is the failure to grasp the Bible’s identification of the **central** concern of human beings: to love, honor, glorify, and obey God (Ecclesiastes 12:13; Micah 6:8; Matthew 22:37; 1 Corinthians 6:20; 2 Corinthians 5:9; 10:5; 1 Peter 4:11). Fletcher is virtually silent on this di-

mension of human responsibility. Instead, he focuses his entire theory on love for fellow man. While love for fellow man is certainly crucial to Christian ethics, and is absolutely mandatory for the Christian (e.g., Luke 10:25-37), it must be viewed in its rightful position, subsumed beneath the greater, higher responsibility of loving God. One cannot love God without loving one’s neighbor (e.g., 1 John 4:20-21). But, theoretically, one could love another person without loving God. Consequently, love for fellow man must be viewed in the larger framework of focusing one’s life on pleasing God first and foremost.

Since this must be the singular all-consuming passion of human beings, God’s Word must be consulted in order to determine **how** to love God and fellow man. In other words, to comply with the number one responsibility in life, one must consult the absolute, prefabricated, prescriptive, ironbound do’s and don’ts of Scripture! This, by definition, is love for God (1 John 5:3; John 14:15). It follows, then, that Fletcher is incorrect in identifying the **only intrinsic good** as “love” for fellow man (1967, p. 14). According to the Bible, intrinsic good **includes** fraternal love. But superceding even this love is **filial** love, i.e., love for God (Matthew 22:36-37; cf. Warren, 1972, pp. 87ff.). Consequently, God defines what love entails in man’s treatment of both God and fellow man. But those definitions are found in the Bible in the form of prescriptive rules, regulations, and ironclad do’s and don’ts.

The second fundamental flaw of Fletcher’s brand of situationism is the subtle redefinition of “love.” While Fletcher was correct when he identified love as an active determination of the will rather than an emotion (pp. 20-21), his idea of “love” is materialistic and secular, rather than scriptural and spiritual. “Love,” to Fletcher, is what **human beings** decide is “good” or “best” in a given situation. This humanistic approach allows man and his circumstances to become the criteria for defining morality, rather than allowing God to define the parameters of moral behavior: “The metaphysical moralist with his intrinsic values and laws says, ‘Do what is right and let the chips fall where they may.’ The situational moralist says, ‘Whether what you do is right or not depends precisely upon where the chips fall!’ ” (p. 26).

But the Bible simply does not place law and love in contradistinction to each other. In fact, according to the Bible, one cannot love either God or fellow man **without** law. The only way for an individual to know how

**Reason & Revelation** is published monthly by Apologetics Press, Inc., a non-profit, tax-exempt work dedicated to the defense of New Testament Christianity. Copyright © 2004. All rights reserved.

#### Editor:

Bert Thompson, Ph.D.\*  
(\*Microbiology, Texas A&M University)

#### Associate Editor:

Brad Harrub, Ph.D.\*  
(\*Neurobiology, University of Tennessee)

#### ISSN:

1542-0922

#### Annual Subscription Rates:

\$10.00 Domestic  
\$ 7.50 Domestic Bulk  
(5+ to same address)  
\$16.00 Canada & Overseas Airmail

#### Mailing Address:

Apologetics Press, Inc.  
230 Landmark Drive  
Montgomery, AL 36117-2752

#### General inquiries, changes of address, or international callers:

Phone: (334) 272-8558  
Fax: (334) 270-2002

#### Orders:

Phone: (800) 234-8558  
Fax: (800) 234-2882

**On-line** Web store/catalog, subscription order/renewal form, current issues, archives, and other information (all orders processed on a secure server):

URL: [www.ApologeticsPress.org](http://www.ApologeticsPress.org)  
E-mail: [mail@ApologeticsPress.org](mailto:mail@ApologeticsPress.org)

#### Discovery—Scripture & Science

for Kids is a sister publication for children. For more information, please contact our offices or visit the *Discovery* Web site at:

URL: [www.DiscoveryMagazine.com](http://www.DiscoveryMagazine.com)

to love is to go to the Bible and discern there the specifics of a loving behavior. When Paul declared, “love is the fulfilling of the law” (Romans 13:19), he did not mean that it is possible to love one’s neighbor while dispensing with the law (cf. Fletcher, 1967, p. 70; Hook, 1984, p. 31). Rather, he meant that when you conduct yourself in a genuinely loving manner, you are automatically acting in harmony with the law (i.e., you are not killing, stealing, coveting, bearing false witness, etc.). God, in His laws, **defined and pinpointed how to love**. To treat any of God’s laws as optional, flexible, or occasional is to undermine the very foundations of **love**.

In situationism, human beings become the standard of morality. The human mind, with its subjective perceptions of the surrounding moral environment, becomes the authority, in direct conflict with the words of an inspired prophet: “O Lord, I know the way of man is not in himself; it is not in man who walks to direct his own steps” (Jeremiah 10:23). The psalmist certainly could be accused of being a “metaphysical moralist with his intrinsic values and laws.” In his great psalm on the law of the Lord (Psalm 119), the writer conveyed his conviction that objective, prescriptive rules and prefabricated principles were indispensable to his survival. Observe carefully a small portion of his unrelenting extolment of divine laws: “You have commanded us to keep Your precepts diligently” (vs. 4); “I would not be ashamed, when I look into all Your commandments” (vs. 6); “Behold, I long for Your precepts” (vs. 40); “I will delight myself in Your commandments, which I love” (vs. 47); “I will never forget Your precepts, for by them You have given me life” (vs. 93); “Through Your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way” (vs. 104); “The entirety of Your word is truth, and every one of Your righteous judgments endures forever” (vs. 160); “My soul keeps Your testimonies, and I love them exceedingly. I keep Your precepts and Your testimonies, for all my ways are before You” (vss. 167-168).

To Fletcher, “love” directed toward one’s fellow man is a materialistically defined love that he calls “personalism.” “Personalism” is “the ethical view that the highest good, the *summum bonum* or first-order value, is human welfare and happiness” (1967, p. 33). Fletcher’s ethical humanism is “a personalist devotion to people, not to things or abstractions such as ‘laws’ or general principles. **Personal interests come first**, before the natural or **Scriptural** or theoretical or general or logical or anything else”

(p. 34, emp. added). What such assertions really mean in practical, behavioral terms is that, ultimately, human beings may do whatever they deem “good” or “best.” A glance at Fletcher’s illustrations shows that the most “loving” decisions are those that ease physical pain, alleviate hardship, lessen emotional suffering, or accommodate human desire and personal preference. For Fletcher, “evil” is physical imprisonment, separation from family, the hardship of unjust labor, an unpleasant marriage, or lack of commitment to a person (e.g., pp. 32,39). “Human happiness” is, by definition, **what human beings think** will make them happy—not what God says actually will bring **true** happiness—even in the midst of, and while enduring, unjust or unpleasant circumstances.

Sin, in situationism, is not “transgression of God’s law” (1 John 3:4). Rather, “sin is the exploitation or use of persons” (p. 37). It is withholding what a person perceives to be the means to personal happiness. But this understanding of sin is a radical redefinition of love and happiness in comparison to the Bible. In contrast, the Scriptures make clear that “intrinsic evil on the purely physical level does not exist” and “neither pain nor suffering is intrinsically evil” (Warren, 1972, pp. 93,40). Since sin (i.e., violation of God’s law) is the only intrinsic evil, “evil” and “good” exist only in relation to the ultimate will of God (pp. 39,41).

By Fletcher’s definitions, many people in Bible history were not sinners as previously supposed, but were, in fact, mature, responsible individuals who acted lovingly: Eve (Genesis 3:1-6); Cain (Genesis 4:3); Lot and Lot’s wife (Genesis 13:12; 19:16,26); Nadab and Abihu (Leviticus 10:1-3); the Israelites (Numbers 21:4-6); Balaam (Numbers 22-24); Saul (1 Samuel 13:9; 15:9,21); and Uzzah (2 Samuel 6:6ff.). On the other hand, if situationism is correct, many persons in the Bible were not righteous, as is claimed, but were slaves to abstract rules and principles, and were unloving in their conduct toward their fellow man, including: Noah (Genesis 6; 2 Peter 2:5); Joseph (Genesis 39:7-12); Joshua and Caleb (Numbers 14:6-9); Phinehas (Numbers 25:6-9); Joshua (Joshua 7:24-25); and John the baptizer (Mark 6:18-19). Here were people who set aside the preferences of their fellow man, ignored their contemporaries’ desire for “happiness” and “self-fulfillment,” and instead followed divine prescriptions—even though those precepts were considered to be contrary to the consensus view.

Taking into account the components of “the situation” as Fletcher recommends —“the end, means, motive, and foreseeable consequences” (1967, p. 25)—Uzzah would have to receive Fletcher’s sanction as a loving, moral person (2 Samuel 6:1-7). His **motive** was unquestionably good, since he wanted to avoid the unpleasant **end** and **foreseeable consequences** of the Ark of the Covenant toppling from its precarious resting place. The **means** that Uzzah used were the only ones available to him at that particular instant in time. His only mistake, which resulted in his immediate execution by God, was his failure to give heed to the prefabricated, prescriptive, abstract, legalistic, absolute, metaphysical, **ironbound “don’t”** of Numbers 4:15, —i.e., “don’t touch!” [For a useful treatment of situation ethics, especially for young people, see Ridenour, 1969].

### SITUATIONISM ILLUSTRATED

**T**he true nature of any false philosophy or ethical system is often apparent in the concrete examples that advocates set forth as illustrative of their position. Fletcher is no exception in this regard. He approves of divorce “if the emotional and spiritual welfare of both parents and children in a **particular** family can be served best” (1967, p. 23, emp. in orig.). He would approve of the suicide of a captured soldier under torture to avoid betraying comrades to the enemy (p. 15). Two additional instances are seen in the following comments. Fletcher said that he knew of

a case, in which committing adultery foreseeably brought about the release of a whole family from a very unjust but entirely legal exploitation of their labor on a small farm which was both their pride and their prison. Still another situation could be cited in which a German mother gained her release from a Soviet prison farm and reunion with her family by means of an adulterous pregnancy. These actions would have the situationist’s solemn but ready approval (p. 32).

Additional examples of situation ethics at work are seen in the statements: “Lying could be more Christian than telling the truth. Stealing could be better than respecting private property” (p. 34). Fletcher asks: “Is the girl who gives her chastity for her country’s sake any less approvable than the boy who gives his leg or his life? No!” (p. 39). Further,

a couple who cannot marry legally or permanently but live together faithfully and honorably and responsibly, are living in virtue—in Christian love.

In this kind of Christian sex ethic, the essential ingredients are caring and commitment.... There is nothing against extramarital sex as such, in this ethic, and in **some** cases it is good (pp. 39-40, emp. in orig.).

Consider also the situation ethicist's view of abortion:

When anybody "sticks to the rules," even though people suffer as a consequence, that is immoral. Even if we grant, for example, that generally or commonly it is wrong or bad or undesirable to interrupt a pregnancy, it would nevertheless be right to do so to a conceptus following rape or incest, at least if the victim wanted an abortion (p. 36; cf. Hook, 1984, p. 34).

When one abandons the **objective** standard conveyed by the eternal God from Whom flows infinite goodness, the means for assessing human behavior is then "up for grabs," and is pitched into the subjective realm of **human opinion** in which "everyone does what is right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25). Such a person will inevitably begin misrepresenting the **biblical** treatment of Christian liberty and freedom, and will maintain that "freedom in Christ" means being relieved of the "burden" of a "legal code."

The Bible certainly speaks of the wonderful freedom that one may enjoy in Christ. But biblical freedom is a far cry from the **release from restriction, restraint, and deserved guilt** touted by the antinomian agents of change (cf. Hook, 1984, pp. 43ff.). The Bible does not speak of the "flexibility and elasticity" of God's laws (pp. 29-31). Rather, with sweeping and precise terminology, Jesus articulated the sum and substance of exactly what it means to be "free in Christ." In a specific context in which He defended the validity of His own testimony (John 8:12-59), He declared the only basis upon which an individual may be His disciple. To be Christ's disciple, one must "continue" in His word (vs. 31). That is, one must live a life of obedience to the will of Christ (Warren, 1986, pp. 33-37). Genuine discipleship is gauged by one's persistent and meticulous compliance with the words of Jesus.

The freedom that Jesus offers through obedience to His truth is noted in His interchange with the Jews over slavery. Those who sin (i.e., transgress God's will—1 John 3:4) are slaves who may be set free only by permitting Christ's teachings to have free course within them (vs. 34-37). This kind of freedom is the only true freedom. Genuine freedom is achieved by means of "obedience to righteousness" (Romans 6:16). Freedom from sin and spiritual death is possible only by **obedience** to God (vs. 51).

## SITUATIONIST PROOF TEXTS: THE ADULTEROUS WOMAN

**A**nother way to grasp the substance of a false philosophy is to assess the way in which the Scriptures are given treatment to support the philosophy. The remainder of this article will confine itself to examining two favorite proof texts frequently marshaled in an effort to defend situationism. [Additional proof texts (e.g., 2 Chronicles 30:18-20; Matthew 12:1-8; 1 Corinthians 6:12; 10:23, the notion of "legalism") are examined in a lengthier, unabridged version of this article, which can be found on-line at [www.apologeticspress.org/rr/rr2004/r&r0411b.htm](http://www.apologeticspress.org/rr/rr2004/r&r0411b.htm).]

"What about the woman taken in adultery? Didn't Jesus **free her** from the rigid restrictions of the Law?" One of the most misused, mishandled, and misapplied passages in the Bible is the narrative of the woman caught in adultery, recorded in John 8:1-11. [For a discussion of the technical aspects of this passage as a textual variant, see Metzger, 1968, pp. 223-224; 1971, pp. 219-222; McGarvey, 1974, p. 16; Woods, 1989, p. 162.] This passage has been used by situation ethicists (e.g., Fletcher, 1967, pp. 83, 133), libertines, and liberals to insist that God is not "technical" when it comes to requiring close adherence to His laws. The bulk of Christendom has abetted this notion by decontextualizing and applying indiscriminately the remark of Jesus: "He who is without sin among you, let him cast a stone at her first" (vs. 7). The average individual, therefore, has come to think that Jesus was tolerant and forgiving to the extent that He released the woman from the strictures of God's law that called for her execution. They believe that Jesus simply "waved aside" her sin, and thereby granted her unconditional freedom and forgiveness—though the Law called for her death (Leviticus 20:10). After all, isn't it true that Jesus places people "in the grip of grace" (Lucado, 1996)?

Those who challenge conclusions such as these are derided as "traditionalists" who lack "compassion," and who are just like the "legalistic" scribes and Pharisees who cruelly accused the woman and wanted her handled in strict accordance with Mosaic Law. Did Jesus set aside the clear requirements of Mosaic legislation in order to demonstrate mercy, grace, and forgiveness? A careful study of John 8:1-11 yields at least three insights that clarify the confusion and misconception inherent in the popular imagination.

First, Mosaic regulations stated that a person could be executed only if there were two or more witnesses to the crime (Deuteronomy 19:15). **One** witness was insufficient to invoke the death penalty (Deuteronomy 17:6). The woman in question was reportedly caught in the "very act" (vs. 4), but nothing is said about the identity of the witness or witnesses. **There may have been only one**, thereby making execution **illegal**.

Second, even if there were two or more witnesses present to verify the woman's sin, the Old Testament was equally explicit concerning the fact that **both** the woman **and the man** were to be executed (Deuteronomy 22:22). Where was the **man**? The accusing mob completely sidestepped this critical feature of God's Law, demonstrating that this trumped-up situation obviously did not fit the Mosaic preconditions for invoking capital punishment. **Obedience to the Law of Moses in this instance actually meant letting the woman go!**

A third consideration that often is overlooked concerning this passage is the precise meaning of the phrase "He who is without sin among you..." (vs. 7). If this statement were to be taken as a blanket prohibition against accusing, disciplining, or punishing the erring, impenitent Christian, then this passage flatly contradicts a host of other passages (e.g., Romans 16:17; 1 Corinthians 5; Galatians 6:1; 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14; Titus 3:10; 2 John 9-11). Jesus not only **frequently** passed judgment on a variety of individuals during His tenure on Earth (e.g., Matthew 15:14; 23; John 8:44, 55; 9:41; et al.), but He also enjoined upon His followers the necessity of doing the same thing (e.g., John 7:24). Peter could be very direct in assessing people's spiritual status (e.g., Acts 8:23). Paul rebuked the Corinthians' inaction concerning their fornicating brother: "Do you not **judge** those who are inside?...Therefore put away from yourselves **that wicked person**" (1 Corinthians 5:12-13, emp. added). Obviously, Paul demanded that Christians must **judge** (i.e., make an accurate evaluation of) a fellow Christian's moral condition. Even the familiar proof text so often marshaled to promote laxity (i.e., "Judge not, that you be not judged"—Matthew 7:1) records Jesus admonishing disciples: "...then you will see clearly to remove the speck out of your brother's eye" (vs. 5). The current culture-wide celebration of being **nonjudgmental** (cf. "I'm OK—You're OK") is clearly out of harmony with Bible teaching.

So Jesus **could not** have been offering a blanket prohibition against taking appropriate action with regard to the sins of our fellows. Then what did His words mean? What else could possibly be going on in this setting so as to completely deflate, undermine, and terminate the boisterous determination of the woman's accusers to attack Him, by using the woman as a pretext? What was it in Christ's words that had such power to stop them in their tracks—so much so that their clamor faded to silence and they departed "one by one, beginning with the oldest" (vs. 9)?

Most commentators suggest that Jesus shamed them by forcing them to realize that "nobody is perfect and we all sin." But this motley crew—with their notorious and repeatedly documented hard-heartedness—would not have been deterred if Jesus simply had conveyed the idea that, "Hey, give the poor woman a break, none of us is perfect," or "We've all done things we're not proud of." The heartless scribes and Pharisees were brazen enough to divert her case from the proper judicial proceedings, and to humiliate her by forcibly hauling her into the presence of Jesus, thereby making a public spectacle of her. Apparently accompanied by a group of complicit supporters, they cruelly subjected her to the wider audience of "all the people" (vs. 2) who had come to hear Jesus' teaching. They hardly would have been discouraged from their objective by such a simple utterance from Jesus that "nobody's perfect."

So what is the answer to this puzzling circumstance? Consider two possibilities. First, it may be that Jesus was calling attention to their failure to follow legal protocol in dealing with the woman. He was challenging them for violating the law with regard to treatment of the woman, essentially condemning them as being incapable of making a solid legal case against her.

A second possibility is that Christ was striking at precisely the same point that Paul drove home to hard-hearted, hypocritical Jews in Rome: "Therefore you are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who judge, for in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who judge **practice the same things**" (Romans 2:1, emp. added). Paul was especially specific on the very point with which Jesus dealt: "You who say, 'Do not commit adultery,' do you commit adultery?" (vs. 22). In other words, no person is qualified to call attention to another's sin when that individual is in the **ongoing practice of the same sin**. Again, as Jesus previously declared, "Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the

speck out of your brother's eye" (Matthew 7:5). After all, it is the "**spiritual**" brother or sister who is in the proper position to restore the wayward (Galatians 6:1).

Consequently, in the context under consideration, it may well be that Jesus knew that the woman's accusers were **guilty of the very thing** for which they were willing to condemn her. (It is not beyond the realm of possibility that the fellow with whom the woman had committed adultery was in league with the accusers.) Jesus was able to prick them with their guilt by causing them to realize that **He knew** that they, too, were guilty. The old law made it clear that the witnesses to the crime were to cast the **firststones** (Deuteronomy 17:7). The death penalty could not be invoked legally if the eyewitnesses were unavailable or ineligible. Jesus was striking directly at the fact that these witnesses were unqualified to fulfill this role since they were guilty of the same sin, and thus deserved to be brought up on similar charges. They were intimidated into silence and retreat by their realization that Jesus was privy to their own indiscretions—and possibly on the verge of divulging them publicly.

Observe carefully that, at the withdrawal of the accusers, Jesus put forth a **technical legal question** when He asked: "Woman, where are they? Did no man condemn thee?" (ASV), or "Woman, where are those thine accusers? Hath no man condemned thee?" (vs. 10, KJV). The reason for Jesus to verify the absence of the accusers who had brought the charges against the woman was that the Law of Moses mandated the presence of eyewitnesses to the crime before guilt could be established and sentence passed. The woman confirmed, "No man, Lord" (vs. 11). Jesus then affirmed: "Neither do I condemn you...." The meaning of this pronouncement was that if two or more witnesses to her sin were not able or willing to document the crime, then she could not be held legally liable, since neither was Jesus, Himself, qualified to serve as an eyewitness to her action. The usual interpretation of "neither do I condemn you" is that Jesus was flexible, tolerant, and unwilling to be judgmental toward others or to condemn their sinful actions. Ridiculous! The Bible repudiates such thinking on nearly every page. Jesus was declaring the fact that the woman managed to slip out from under judicial condemnation on the basis of one or more legal technicalities. But, He said (to use modern-day vernacular), "You had better stop it! You were fortunate this time, but you must cease your sinful behavior!"

Incredible! These scribes and Pharisees were trying to catch Jesus in a trap. Yet Jesus, as was so often the case (e.g., Matthew 21:23-27), "turned the tables" on His accusers and caught **them** in a trap instead! At the same time, He demonstrated a deep and abiding respect for the governing beauty and power of law—the law that He and His Father had authored. Jesus was the only Person Who ever complied with Mosaic legislation perfectly (2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 4:15). He never sought to excuse human violation of law, nor to minimize the binding and authoritative application of law to people. Any interpretation of any passage that depicts Jesus as **violating** the law of God in order to forgive or accommodate man is a false interpretation, as is any interpretation that relegates law to a status of secondary importance (cf. Deuteronomy 6:24; 10:13; Psalms 19:7-11; Romans 7:12). Jesus was not in sympathy with the permissive mindset of today's doctrinally lax thinkers who soften doctrine and the binding nature of law in the name of "grace," "freedom," or "compassion."

#### SITUATIONIST PROOF TEXTS: THE SPIRIT AND LETTER OF THE LAW

**B**ut doesn't the Bible make a legitimate distinction between the 'letter of the law' and the 'spirit of the law'?" It is argued that sometimes it is necessary, even mandatory, to violate the "letter of the law" in order to act in harmony with the "spirit of the law." According to this line of thinking, those who insist that obedience to the law of God is **always** required without exception are "hung up on the letter of the law" instead of being led by the "spirit of the law" (cf. Hook, 1984, p. 42).

This perspective naturally breeds and nurtures a relaxed attitude toward obedience. It militates against a desire to be precise and careful in conformity to biblical teaching. One individual explained how his feelings of devotion to Jesus made him feel that as long as he maintained a close "sense of nearness" to Christ, he did not have to fret over "nit picky" concerns, like whether Christians should be meticulous in their obedience to the laws of the land. Another person avowed that she did not "sweat the small stuff," since she was living her life in recognition of God's grace, and felt certain that Jesus would "cut her some slack." The "small stuff" to which she referred included such things as whether God will accept instrumental music in worship to Him, whether God will approve of unscriptural divorce and remarriage, and whether sprinkling may pass for New Testament baptism.

The primary passage in the New Testament marshaled in an effort to support the “spirit vs. letter” antithesis is Paul’s remarks to the church of Christ in Corinth (2 Corinthians 3:4-18). I urge the reader to pause and read the third chapter of Second Corinthians before reading the analysis that follows. Two phrases are typically excised from the context and used as proof texts to support a notion contrary to the chapter: “not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (vs. 6), and “where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty” (vs. 17). These phrases are set forth by some as proof that Christians ought not to be too meticulous in conforming strictly to various New Testament directives. Those who suggest such assume that “letter” refers to the commands of God—the written statements of Scripture that specify and regulate human behavior. They also assume that “spirit” refers to one’s attitude or feelings. Hence, if the individual **feels** devoted, concerned, and sincere, he or she is deemed in line with “the spirit of the law.” On the other hand, the individual who appears inflexible and rigid, or overly concerned with strict obedience, is perceived to lack “compassion” and “sensitivity,” and too concerned with “the letter of the law.”

However, if a person takes the time to study God’s Word, and refrain from mishandling its intended meaning (Acts 17:11; 2 Corinthians 4:2; 1 Timothy 4:13; 2 Timothy 2:15), he or she will see that neither Paul nor any other inspired writer agreed with such thinking. In a pericope dealing with his apostolic ministry, Paul crafted

2 CORINTHIANS 3	
Old Covenant	New Covenant
Of the letter (vs. 6)	Ministers of the new covenant (vs. 6)
The letter kills (vs. 6)	Of the Spirit (vs. 6)
Ministry of Death (vs. 7)	The Spirit gives life (vs. 6)
Written/Engraved on stones (vs. 7)	Ministry of Spirit (vs. 8)
Ministry of condemnation (vs. 9)	Ministry of righteousness (vs. 9)
Glorious (vss. 7,9,11)	Much more glorious (vss.8-9,11)
Passing away (vs. 7)	Remains (vs. 11)
Veil on Moses’s face (vs. 13)	Great boldness of speech (vs. 12)
Veil remains in reading O.T. (vs. 14)	Veil taken away in Christ (vs. 14)
Veil lies on their heart (vs. 15)	Veil taken away when one turns to the Lord (vs. 16)

Table 1: Comparison of “the letter” vs. “the spirit” of the law (O.T./N.T.)

a beautiful allegory—what D.R. Dungan once called “the most perfect antithesis to be found in the whole Bible” (1888, p. 349). By arranging the contrasting phrases of the antithesis into two columns, the Bible student is able more easily to grasp Paul’s intended meaning (Table 1).

It should be immediately evident to the unbiased observer that “the two legs of the antithesis are the New Covenant in contrast with the Old Covenant” (Dungan, p. 268). Precisely the same meaning is conveyed by the same terminology in Paul’s letter to the Romans (2:29; 7:6). The Old Testament legal system, though an excellent system for what God had in mind (Romans 7:12), was unable to provide ultimate forgiveness for violations of law and, in that sense, “kills.” It took Jesus’ death on the cross to make “life” possible—i.e., actual cleansing from sin.

When one recognizes the existing contextual meaning, it becomes apparent that these verses **have absolutely nothing to do** with the alleged “spirit vs. letter” contention! In fact, the Bible nowhere postulates such a thing. Like all liberal thinking, one must refrain from thinking too much about it if one does not wish to see the absurdity and nonsensical nature of it. The “spirit vs. letter” contrast is “better felt than told” gobbledygook that makes no sense. In an article titled “The Letter that Killeth,” written on April 3, 1897, J.W. McGarvey responded to this type of thinking:

Just once in the course of his writings Paul makes the declaration that “the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life” (2 Corinthians 3:7); and no remark that he ever made has been applied in a greater number of unlicensed ways. If a man insists upon preserving some ordinance in the very form of its original appointment, such an ordinance as baptism or the Lord’s Supper, for example, he is accused of contending for the letter that killeth, while the man who makes the charge, and who changes the ordinance, claims that he is following the spirit that giveth life. All of that large class of writers who make free with the Scriptures while claiming to reverence their authority, employ this device to excuse their departures from the word of God, while those who remonstrate with them for their license are denounced as literalists or sticklers for the letter that killeth. In all these instances, it seems to be claimed that if you stick close to the ordinance as Christ gave it, you will kill somebody. The last example that attracted my attention was in connection with the number of elders that should be appointed in a church. The writer says: “It has been thought to be a greater evil to have a congregation without a plurality of elders than to have an el-

## SPEAKING SCHEDULES

### Dr. Bert Thompson

November 12-14 LaVergne, TN (615) 793-6312  
 December 3-5 Monroe, GA (770) 267-9877

### Dr. Brad Harrub

November 5-7 Wilkesboro, NC (336) 838-5695  
 November 12-14 West Palm Beach, FL (561) 848-1111

### Dr. Dave Miller

November 5-7 Circleville, OH (740) 474-4380  
 November 1-3 Bolivar, MO (417) 326-4727

### Kyle Butt

November 1-3 San Marcos, TX (512) 396-2399  
 November 12-14 Birmingham, AL (205) 833-1400

### Eric Lyons

November 5-7 Clarksville, TN (931) 647-5264  
 November 14 Deatsville, AL (334) 285-5583

dership without the requisite qualifications;” and he adds: “This is to do violence to the spirit of the New Testament in an effort to be loyal to its letter.” But which, in this case, is the letter, and which is the spirit? To have a plurality of elders is certainly the letter of the New Testament; that is, it is the literal requirement; and the literal requirement also is to have elders of prescribed qualifications. Where, then, is the spirit as distinguished from the letter? Echo answers, Where? The writer was so in the habit of using this favorite expression where he wished to justify a departure from Scripture precedent that he evidently applied it in this instance from pure habit and without thought (1910, pp. 160-161).

Indeed, redefining the biblical expressions “spirit of the law” and “letter of the law” enables the situationist to promote his agenda under the cloak of Bible backing.

If one wishes to use the expression “the spirit of the law” to refer to a proper attitude, and “the letter of the law” to refer to compliance with the explicit dictates of Scripture, it certainly is true that a person can distort or disregard “the spirit of the law” while following carefully “the letter of the law.” A person may engage in external, rote compliance without heartfelt, genuine love for God and His will. But it is impossible to represent faithfully “the spirit of the law” (i.e., to have the right attitude) while acting out of harmony with the specific details of the law. When Jesus said, “If you love Me, you will keep My commands” (John 14:15), He pinpointed the fact that “love” for Him **includes** obedience. It is possible to obey and not love; but it is not possible to love and not obey. One may have good intentions in one’s religious pursuits, but if those religious actions are contrary to God’s specified will, the activity is unacceptable to God. The situationist’s claim that sincerity and feelings of “love” legitimize whatever action “love” takes, is in direct contradiction to Bible teaching.

Situationism, antinomianism (freedom from law), and liberalism (loosing where God has bound) share in common their mutual aversion to law keeping. Christians must not fall prey to these sinister forces that attempt to soften and obscure the clear call from God to render obedience to His directives. What He seeks from people is conformity to His laws out of hearts full of sincerity, earnestness, and love.

## CONCLUSION

Probably no greater threat to the stability of society exists in our day than the humanistic, antinomian philosophy of situationism and its multi-faceted pluralistic and/or post-modernistic manifes-

tations. It is part and parcel of the general rebellion against the authority of God’s Word that engulfs America. Vast numbers of people are living life and making decisions based upon their own subjective perceptions and personal feelings. For them, the concepts of right and wrong, truth and error are obscure, blurred, hazy, gray, and complex. What is wrong in one situation may be right and acceptable in another. Satan has done his job well. He has made great strides in American culture in the last half century in his effort to break down biblical values and moral absolutes. He has succeeded in replacing this framework with a tolerant, open, permissive attitude and outlook that refrains from passing judgment on anybody or anything. The “I’m OK, You’re OK” perspective has been embedded firmly into American civilization.

The mindset of today’s situationist is not new. We humans do not generally regard rules and regulations as positive phenomena. We usually perceive them as infringements on our freedom—deliberate attempts to restrict our behavior and interfere with our “happiness.” Like children, we may have a tendency to display resentment and a rebellious spirit when faced with spiritual requirements. We may feel that God is being arbitrary and merely burdening our lives with haphazard, insignificant strictures. But God would **never** do that. He **never** has placed upon **anyone** any requirement that was inappropriate, unnecessary, or unfair. During the Israelites’ final encampment on the plains of Moab prior to their entrance into Canaan, Moses articulated a most important principle: “The Lord commanded us to observe all these statutes...**for our good always**” (Deuteronomy 6:24, emp. added; cf. 10:13). God never would ask us to do anything that is harmful to us. He does not restrict us nor exert His authority over us in order to purposely make us unhappy. Quite the opposite! God knows exactly what will make us happy. **Compliance with His Word** will make a person happy (John 13:17; James 1:25), exalted (James 4:10), righteous (Romans 6:16; 1 John 3:7), and wise (Matthew 24:45-46; 7:24).

Those who wish to relieve themselves of restriction will continue to invent ways to circumvent the intent of Scripture. They will continue to “twist” (2 Peter 3:16) and “handle the word of God deceitfully” (2 Corinthians 4:2). They will exert pressure on everyone else to “back off,” “lighten up,” and embrace a more tolerant understanding of ethical conduct. But the “honest and good heart” (Luke 8:15) will “take heed how [he/she] hears” (vs. 18). The good

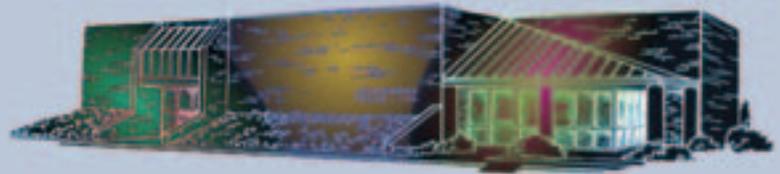
heart is the one who “reads...hears...and **keeps those things which are written therein**” (Revelation 1:3, emp. added). After all, no matter how negative they may appear to humans, no matter how difficult they may be to obey, they are given “for our good.”

The Bible simply does not countenance situation ethics. Jesus always admonished people to “keep the commandments” (e.g., Matthew 19:17). He kept God’s commands Himself—**perfectly** (2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 4:15; 7:26). And He is “the author of eternal salvation to all who **obey Him**” (Hebrews 5:9, emp. added).

## REFERENCES

- Barna, George (2003), “Morality Continues to Decay,” [On-line], URL: <http://www.barna.org/cgi-bin/PagePressRelease.asp?PressReleaseID=152&Reference=F>.
- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich (1955), *Ethics*, ed. Eberhard Bethge (London: SCM Press).
- Brunner, Emil (1947), *The Divine Imperative*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster).
- Chesser, Frank (2001), *The Spirit of Liberalism* (Huntsville, AL: Publishing Designs).
- Cox, Harvey (1965), *The Secular City* (New York: MacMillan).
- Dungan, D.R. (1888), *Hermeneutics* (Delight, AR: Gospel Light).
- Fletcher, Joseph (1966), *Situation Ethics* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster).
- Fletcher, Joseph (1967), *Moral Responsibility* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster).
- Hook, Cecil (1984), *Free in Christ* (New Braunfels, TX: Privately published by author).
- Hook, Cecil (1990), *Free to Change* (New Braunfels, TX: Privately published by author).
- Lucado, Max (1996), *In the Grip of Grace* (Dallas, TX: Word).
- McGarvey, J.W. (1910), *Biblical Criticism* (Cincinnati, OH: Standard).
- McGarvey, J.W. (1974 reprint), *Evidences of Christianity* (Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate).
- Metzger, Bruce M. (1968), *The Text of the New Testament* (New York: Oxford University Press), second edition.
- Metzger, Bruce M. (1971), *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (New York: United Bible Society).
- Niebuhr, Reinhold (1932), *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribner’s).
- Ridenour, Fritz (1969), *The Other Side of Morality* (Glendale, CA: Regal Books).
- Robinson, John A.T. (1963), *Honest to God* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster).
- Warren, Thomas B. (1972), *Have Atheists Proved There Is No God* (Jonesboro, AR: National Christian Press).
- Warren, Thomas B. (1986), *The Bible Only Makes Christians Only and the Only Christians* (Jonesboro, AR: National Christian Press).
- Woods, Guy N. (1989), *A Commentary on the Gospel According to John* (Nashville, TN: Gospel Advocate).

## NOTE FROM THE EDITOR



### APOLOGETICS PRESS ANNOUNCES ITS \$2,500,000 FUND-RAISING CAMPAIGN!

Today, November 1, 2004, Apologetics Press proudly announces its new “25—and 2.5” fund-raising campaign. The “25” refers to the fact that A.P. is celebrating its twenty-fifth anniversary. The “2.5” refers to the fact that we are embarking on a drive to raise **\$2.5 million**. A word of explanation is in order.

Over the past quarter of a century, Apologetics Press has moved from a small, little-known work, to one that is now a major player in the apologetics arena. We have five full-time professional staff members, all of whom speak around the country numerous weekends during the year. Plus, we have a support staff that is second to none. This year alone, I already have announced the hiring of four new young men—and a fifth will be announced shortly. Our journals (*Reason & Revelation* for adults; *Discovery* for children) circle the globe. Creationist groups worldwide look to us for cutting-edge articles on a variety of topics (the Big Bang, the evolution of consciousness, the origin of language, etc.). Our books, such as *Dinosaurs Unleashed*, *The Truth About Human Origins*, *The Anvil Rings*, *Investigating Christian Evidences*, and the *Rock-Solid Faith* trilogy, are now being carried in major bookstores and on-line outlets. Our *Christian Evidences Correspondence Courses* have been translated into various foreign languages by people working in the mission field. Our own in-house Spanish-language staff is working diligently to translate our materials into Spanish, and to produce a Spanish-language mirror image of our immensely popular Web site ([www.ApologeticsPress.org](http://www.ApologeticsPress.org)—which receives up to 250,000 page-hits per month!). We are training approximately a dozen interns every summer—young men who one day will return to Apologetics Press as professional staff members. And so on.

**But we can do more!** We want to produce professional, television-style videos for children that can air on stations nationwide. We want to produce and distribute one-minute-long spots on apologetics (for adults and children) that will run daily on radio stations from coast to coast. We want to produce science textbooks (which extol God as Creator and refute the false concept of organic evolution) for use by people who are home school-

ing their children. We want to hire additional foreign-language translators (as well as new interns who speak and write those languages) so that we can translate our materials into Mandarin Chinese, Russian, etc. I could continue this list of future projects almost endlessly.

But the point I want to make here is—this not merely a “wish list.” As of today, we are announcing the inner workings of a plan that will make it possible for us to do all of this and more—much, much more! **Our goal is to raise \$2,500,000**, every penny of which will be plowed directly back into the work in order to make these projects not merely a dream, but a reality. At Apologetics Press, we are well known for planning our work and working our plan. And never has that been truer than with this current endeavor—the most important effort in the distinguished tenure of our work.

At the same time that this issue of *Reason & Revelation* was mailed, we sent out the largest single mailing in the twenty-five-year history of Apologetics Press. Included in that mailing was a cover letter, outlining our “25—and 2.5” fund-raising campaign, and an extensive, full-color, 16-page proposal explaining in minute detail not only why we want to raise such a significant amount of money, but how we plan to spend every single dime of it. We have left no stone unturned in our attempts to communicate with friends and supporters of our work the steps we are about to take that eventually will allow us to “do more.”

**Now, I am asking for your help.** We realize that we cannot possibly accomplish so impressive an objective without the providential help of Heaven, and the generous support of those people who believe in our work. Some who are reading this have been with us for the entire twenty-five-year period of our existence. Others are newcomers to our work. We need the assistance of old friends, and new friends, if we expect to pull this off. All gifts, of course, are tax-deductible. If you could “dig deeply” to help us, we would appreciate it. We want to ensure that A.P. is around for another twenty-five years—and many, many more!

**Bert Thompson**

