

The clumsiness of laws

By Dean Merrill

When we get frustrated with today's culture — the sleaze, the hostility toward religion, the broken promises, the disrespect for human life — we're prone to say, in the words of the old cartoon strip title, "There oughta be a law." If we could get a legislature somewhere to pass a statute against such behavior, we could improve this mess.

Maybe. Maybe not.

Suppose we wanted to pass a law against impatience. Nearly everyone, Christian or not, would agree that forbearance is sorely needed.

How should this law be worded?

Honking one's horn should be prohibited unless the driver in front of you has ignored the green light for at least seven seconds. Honking the horn to get one's spouse or teen-ager out of the house and into the car would be prohibited. Complaints to a restaurant maitre d' about slow seating should be permitted only in accordance with a mathematical formula based on total occupancy of the building, divided by

the number of customers waiting, moderated by the number of servers available to work that particular evening, divided by the square root of the number of dishwashers in the back.

Penalties should be set according to a scale of fines, starting at \$50 and ranging upward

to \$500, depending upon the flagrancy of the infraction — for example, whether the victim of the impatient outburst was a family member; whether the accused was a repeat offender; whether the expression of impatience was further intensified by rude language or gestures.

Do you see where this is leading?

Laws fail to get to the motives of the heart. The most brilliant legislative minds simply cannot think up smart enough laws to make all 270 million of us behave ourselves all the time.

If anyone should understand this, it should be New Testament Christians. We have a big Book that educates us in great detail, with multiple illustrations, about "what the law could not do, in that it was weak" (Romans 8:3). In this case, the apostle Paul was referring to laws even written with the finger of God himself.

A major point of both Romans and Galatians is: Writing down rules and regulations in the hope of containing human behavior is a wearisome and, in the end, futile exercise. The whole Old Testament bears witness.

In fact, Galatians 3:21,22 (NIV) explains, "If a law had been given that could impart life, then righteousness would certainly have come by the law. But the Scripture declares that the whole world is a prisoner of sin." The truly effective cure for societal wickedness is not more federal mandates but rather the life-altering, addiction-breaking, heart-cleansing work of Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit.

Then why do we think we can clean

up people's deeds by external edicts? In the search for good behavior, why do we keep trying to tape oranges onto dead telephone poles and then wonder why they don't grow? The pole may be roughly the same shape as a live tree trunk, but if there's no

protoplasm moving up through the internal xylem and phloem, no fruit will be forthcoming.

Granted, public law is something of a teacher about what is right, and it can make things uncomfortable for those who transgress. But the law's weakness is

painfully evident to anyone who has looked at a court docket recently.

And sometimes, good-sounding laws can even backfire. Zoning rules, for example, have been used to shut down home Bible studies because of "too many parked cars on the street." Political edicts are often like boxing gloves on a half-trained gorilla. The animal tries to aim accurately, but he ends up hitting a lot of unintended targets and causing a lot of hubbub.

In contrast, "the word of God is ... sharper than any double-edged sword. It penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.... Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account" (Hebrews 4:12,13).

In pursuing God's purpose in a modern world, His supernatural sword is considerably more effective than our homemade boxing gloves. ■

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