

Sanctification, Standards, and Slippery Slopes

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Introduction:

1. Why this workshop?
 - a. Progressive development of my thinking on matters like: (1) the priority and practice of discernment; (2) the role of the Law vis-à-vis the Spirit in sanctification; (3) the proper response of believers toward one another when they disagree about matters of personal conviction; and (4) the various debates over standards (high vs. low? does change mean compromise? Personal vs. congregational?).
 - b. I believe it is a necessary component in our thinking regarding the matter of culture and contextualization. What we believe about sanctification affects how we respond to culture. Standards are an expression of how we believe the Bible should be applied to life. Fear of slippery slopes factors into our decision making.
2. The goal for this workshop is to walk through these three areas making observations that, hopefully, reflect biblically sound thinking and will serve to provoke your thinking on these matters also.

I. Sanctification

- A. Progressive sanctification is the "gracious operation of the Holy Spirit, involving our responsible participation, by which He delivers us from the pollution of sin, renews our entire nature according to the image of God, and enables us to live lives that are pleasing to Him" (A. Hoekema).
- B. There are some important differences related to sanctification in terms of Israel vis-à-vis Church saints. Most germane to our topic is the replacement of the Mosaic Law by the Holy Spirit (cf. Gal 5:16-18). The NT establishes the Spirit's work as the rule of life for the NT believer, specifically the work of the Spirit to transform the believer through the Word (2 Cor 3:18).
 1. The NT does not set out to create a culture in the way that the Mosaic Law did for Israel, but it equips believers for life in diverse cultures by the application of biblical truth under the direction of God's Spirit (cf. Gal 3, 5).
 2. The NT leaves room for disagreement among believers regarding personal convictions (cf. Rom 14).
 3. NT missions aims to spread the gospel without cultural baggage which is not essential to genuine conversion (cf. Acts 15; Eph 4-6).

II. Standards

A. Definition

1. Although many definitions for “standards” probably abound, one that might find widespread agreement comes from the *New American Heritage Dictionary*: “A requirement of moral conduct” (p. 1256).
2. Two other ways of looking at this: (a) standard connotes a measurement of excellence (e.g., reach a high standard) and (b) standard reflects the normal way of handling things (e.g., standard operating procedure).
3. Basically, when we talk about standards, we’re talking about a requirement or expectation that we have for the kind of moral behavior we desire for ourselves or others.

B. Benefits

1. Done properly, they are the fruit of biblical discernment that helps with moral choices (cf. Eph 5:10; Phil 1:9-11; Heb 5:13-14).
2. They can be a helpful expression of our effort to not make provision for the flesh (cf. Rom 13:14).

C. Dangers

1. There is a real possibility of allowing standards to undermine the supremacy and sufficiency of Scripture.
2. There is a real possibility of allowing standards to become a means of measuring spirituality.

III. Slippery Slopes

A. The Concept: You should not take position A because it might/could lead to position B (and beyond).

B. The Problem

1. The concept of “slippery slope” is much broader than we’ll examine, and it may play a helpful role in some policy decisions. (I’m going to ignore the issue of whether it is a logical fallacy or not simply because it can be, but isn’t necessarily so.)

2. By definition, the position which is said to be on the slippery slope is not an unbiblical position. The concern is that it could lead to an unbiblical position. This means, at the least, that the discussion relates to positions which must be evaluated on a wisdom scale rather than as a violation of biblical commands.
 3. Positions established due to concern about slippery slopes have often been treated as if they are actually biblical positions with a few unhealthy consequences:
 - a. Spiritual pride over having the safest position (“high standards”).
 - b. Judgment of those who differ regarding the proper place to build the fence. Within the assembly results in damage to the fellowship; outside of the assembly usually results in limitations on fellowship.
 - c. The authority and sufficiency of Scripture can be undermined by elevating man-made positions over biblical requirements.
 4. Personally, I think we have used the slippery slope argument has often been unhelpful because it has been joined to the misuse of 1 Ths 5:22 (“the appearance of evil” KJV) and too often controlled by the fear of man (i.e., what others will think of us, cf. Gal 2:11-14).
- C. The Solution: Principle-driven versus Application-driven Approach to Progressive Sanctification within the Local Church
1. What does this mean?
 - a. Principle-governed approach views biblical truth as setting the norm or guideline that must be applied in varying times and places. Principles never change, but applications may and probably should change as the context changes.
 - b. Application-governed approach tends to view applications as a permanent standard which should be maintained regardless of context changes, and tends not to distinguish between the principles and their applications.
 2. What does this look like?
 - a. Constant communication of biblical truth regarding godly living.
 - b. Equip people for discerning application of biblical truth.
 - c. Where unity is at stake, establish applications which are acceptable to all whenever possible.
 - 1) That is, an application does not challenge anyone’s conscience.
 - 2) Leadership will have to make a determination whether anyone is being unreasonable in their objection, i.e., assess the difference between a conscience issue and a stubborn preference.
 - d. Call for agreement on principle and allow room for differing applications.

3. Test Cases

a. Movies

- 1) Clarify biblical principles.
- 2) Point toward wise standards for application.
- 3) Let believers become fully convinced for themselves regarding specific applications.
- 4) Help believers relate to each other with acceptance and admonition (Rom 15:7, 14).
- 5) No organized involvement (e.g., youth group or ABF to the movies).

b. Music

- 1) Clarify biblical principles.
- 2) Point toward wise standards for application.
- 3) Let believers become fully convinced for themselves regarding specific applications.
- 4) Help believers relate to each other with acceptance and admonition (Rom 15:7, 14).
- 5) Conservative applications for the assembly.

c. Ecclesiastical Separation

- 1) Clarify biblical principles.
- 2) Since this is a matter of relationships between congregations (vs. believers within the congregation), outline broad applications that will guide our congregation and our reasons for a conservative approach.
- 3) Recognize differences of application.
- 4) If agreed on principles, then accept and admonish as appropriate.