

# ChalcedonReport

MINISTRY NEWS FROM THE CHALCEDON FOUNDATION JUNE 2018

## The Power of Limits

by Martin G. Selbrede



I've borrowed my title from an important article by Christian architect James Elliott Bryant (those interested in seeing how a Biblical

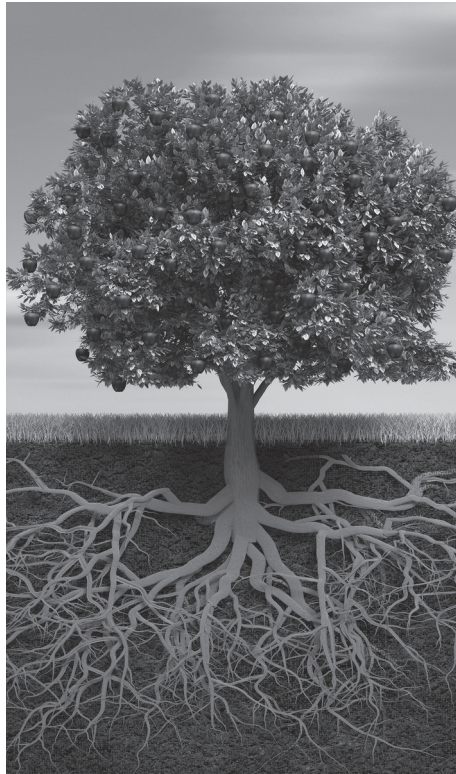
worldview directly affects the field of architecture should look up and study his one-of-a-kind presentation).<sup>1</sup> We'll be looking at this concept from several additional angles.

So, let us consider limits.

Humanistic man hates limits, defying them at every opportunity. Limits are seen as oppressive, as restrictions imposed from elsewhere, that cramp modern man's style and impede his potential. Just as rules were made to be broken, limits were made to be exceeded. A world without limits is the ostensible goal, where "everything is permissible."

Of course, there's no appeal in violating a boundary unless there's a boundary to violate. It isn't enough to lift all restrictions, or abolish all boundaries, if those limits were fictitious in the first place. It is the *repudiation* of authority, the assault on the Creator, which motivates such freedom fighters. There is a *personal dimension* to their rebellion: it's not a rebellion against mere neutral conventions that are easily revised or amended. Stolen fruit simply tastes sweeter. If you're going to spit in someone's eye, make it count: spit in God's eye.

Concerning the Father and the Son, the kings of the earth posit a counsel of personal rebellion: "Let us break their



bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us" (Ps. 2:3).

In *Noble Savages*, Dr. Rushdoony highlights the hatred of limits lying at the heart of modern thought, particularly in the moral domain. Lawlessness—the absence of limits—is applauded and celebrated. The Lawgiver is excoriated as a killjoy. It is not enough to just move the ancient landmarks: they need to be abolished entirely.

But only if the ancient landmarks were put there by God! For antinomian man is the consummate hypocrite, whose policies introduce new limits of their own. The new liberties humanists proclaim entail the return of the old

slavery and tyranny. When men then "limit the Holy One of Israel" (Ps. 78:41), their motivation is to supplant His counsel with their own (on the grounds that He is impotent or irrelevant or both).

### The Bands of Wickedness

Isaiah 58:6 refers to "the bands of wickedness." These are the various ways in which the wicked bind and limit and restrict the people they seek to control. When the kings of the earth attempt to break asunder the bands of God (Ps. 2:3), it is to replace His bands with their own. God's restrictions must be burst and cast away: this is the kings' joint mission. They resent the fact that God's bands restrict them from imposing their own bands upon people.

Scholars have nominated many candidates for these "bands of wickedness": judicial oppression, impositions on conscience, human domination in the church, etc.<sup>2</sup> J. A. Alexander points out that Isaiah's term is "descriptive of oppression generally," which is why the prophet adds the explicit command, "Ye shall break *every* yoke." This is our task: the liberation of the world from the oppressive yoke of man, that the peoples may take upon themselves the easy, light yoke of Christ.

Dr. Rushdoony fills in the details when God's yoke, "the gentle waters of Siloam,"<sup>3</sup> are renounced by man:

Tyranny is man's rule without God, and it is obviously very popular because it is so common.

What God's law offers is freedom

from man ... God's law requires holiness whereas man's law requires conformity.

There is freedom under God because we know the limits He Himself has set: His law is unchanging and His law does not encroach on us because its limits are fixed. Man's law, and statist law, have no limits.

The state that abandons God will also steadily abandon all restraints on its power. Tyranny is then the result.

Men who rule without God and His law are tyrants because they rule without restraints. God's law is a restraint upon man.<sup>4</sup>

Rushdoony concludes that humanism can only achieve conformity by coercion. Coercion is the only tool in the toolkit once men try to cast away God's limits, His cords, His bands. The choice is not between bands or no bands, but rather *whose bands* will prevail.

There is thus a power in limits in respect to affording man the freedom to fulfill his potential under God: God limits men who would limit you and your family.

### The Hypocrisy of Humanism

Ironically, philosophers have sensed the need for limits, and have smuggled God in through the backdoor to prop up their rebellious worldviews. Whereas God is unwelcome as a limit on human power, He is tolerated as a backstop to make philosophy a coherent enterprise. As Rushdoony explains,

In its Greek form, rationalism posited a god as the First Cause because its thinking was hostile to an infinite regress of causes, and hence a god as the first cause was required. Beyond that, he had little function. As the First Cause, this god was the ultimate idea in that he made unnecessary a blind regression from one cause to another in search of an ever-elusive beginning. This god was impersonal; he was simply a logical necessity as a First Cause, not an object of worship nor investigation, but a limiting concept.<sup>5</sup>

There it is: philosophy needs a limiting concept, and can't find one outside of God. God is suitably muzzled and neutered before being put in harness like this, but the fact that man needs Him at all is a remarkable concession that *modern thought is impotent without limits*.

Yet humanism tries to have its cake and eat it, decrying limits at all costs. Rushdoony identifies this gambit in his critique of Michel Foucault:

But if we deny God and His law-word, then *our* word becomes law to us, and we drift into madness and death. Not surprisingly, Foucault, who has proclaimed the death of man, began an earlier work with these words: "we must renounce the convenience of terminal truths." There is then nothing to *bind* man to man, nor anything to *bind* man to life. Foucault is logical: without the structure of God's truth, man cannot live, and the only conclusion which remains for man is suicide.<sup>6</sup>

Rootlessness, the nirvana of modern humanism, the renunciation of terminal truths, mutates into a death wish where meaning is unbound from reality. There is no power in this abyss, in what Van Til called the shoreless ocean of humanism.

### The Power of Limits

While the kings of the earth in Psalm 2 *set themselves* as they seek to burst God's bands asunder, God informs them, "Yet have *I set* My King on My holy hill of Zion." The Father anoints the Son, to Whom all power and authority are given. Consequently, humanism's rebellion is on shaky ground when the test of strength inevitably comes. But where do *we* stand on this question? What is *our* attitude to God's limits upon His creation? Humanists defy them. Do we embrace them? Rejoice in them?

We must recognize that limits serve as anchors, a place to tether things so they don't float free. The imagery of architecture, of construction, of building, dominates the scriptures that depict the Kingdom of God. You sink foundations to fix the building to the underlying rock

(rather than building on sand).

The growth of God's Kingdom in Isaiah 54:2 requires something stable to drive the tent stakes into, that the dwelling place for the incoming Gentiles be fully secured: "Enlarge the place of thy tent, and let them stretch forth the curtains of thine habitations: spare not, lengthen thy cords, and strengthen thy stakes." It is *because* the rock doesn't yield, presenting a limit to our tools, that it is fit to build upon. A hillside sliding into the ocean is of no value, nor is sand suitable to build upon, precisely because these things are free to move.

Limits, of course, are part and parcel of the created order as well as the charter for liberty established by His law. A world without limits is a world of chaos. A world without limits is a world without meaning.

When the shovel blade resists being driven into the ground, *this is a good thing*. It requires *work* to operate within limits, and sweat to shape His creation as His stewards, to rejoice in the fact that "their rock is not like our Rock" (Deut. 32:31), which even God's enemies acknowledge to be so. We can build (physically and metaphorically) knowing that those limits insure that our labor is not in vain in the Lord, who embedded those limits into the world He has provided for us to exercise stewardship over (under His law).

Limits provide freedom in other areas<sup>7</sup> as well: when God limits debts, He prevents us from enslaving ourselves for ten, twenty, or thirty years or more. His Sabbath puts a limit to working ourselves into an early grave.<sup>8</sup> And we'd be wise to recognize the limits upon technology and our interactions with it and through it. Facebook, for example, is rife with limits that not enough Christians recognize. As Francis Ford Coppola pointed out, "Believe me, social media is not lasting content."<sup>9</sup> Like any tool, it has limits, and to know its limits is to avoid misuse and abuse of the tool.

Those who delight in God's law are likened to trees that are planted in a fixed location. The chaff blown by the wind knows no such limits such as mark God's



man in Psalm 1:3: "And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that bringeth forth his fruit in his season; his leaf also shall not wither; and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper."

Yes, the righteous man is limited in where God plants him, because He has appointed us to bear much fruit and to prosper where the waters flow. Jeremiah 17:8 underscores the true power residing in Psalm One's limits: that God in turn prevents heat or drought from harming the trees of righteousness, so that they shall never "cease from yielding fruit." The righteous will rejoice that "their works do follow them" (Rev. 14:13) in the Lamb.

May your works do the same. 🙏

1. James Elliott Bryant, "The Power of Limits: A Created Order for Architecture," presented at Chalcedon's *Second Annual Conference on the Media and the Arts* in 1984. The text of Bryant's exceptional presentation is posted online here: <http://www.jamesbryantarch.com/beta/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/created-order-jb.pdf>
2. Joseph Addison Alexander, *Commentary on the Prophecies of Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, n.d.), 2:357–8.
3. See Isaiah 8:5–8, where the people refuse the gentle governance of God, preferring to align with impressive power states, which in turn overflow their banks and consume the people entirely.
4. Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law, Vol. 3, The Intent of the Law* (Vallecito, CA: Ross House Books, 1999), p. 169–170.
5. <https://chalcedon.edu/magazine/rationalism-and-tyranny>
6. Rousas John Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (Cherry Hill, NJ: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1973), p. 444.
7. e.g., Western music, though limited to twelve pitches of the chromatic scale, nonetheless permits generation of an incredible variety of music. Remove the limitation and music soon loses its power to communicate. The power of limits can likewise be seen across thousands of other disciplines.
8. Rushdoony observed how Soviet rejection of a Sabbath rest actually reduced productivity in their nation.
9. *Time*, May 21, 2018, p. 56.

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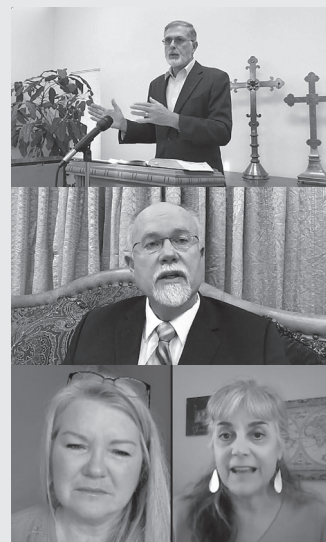
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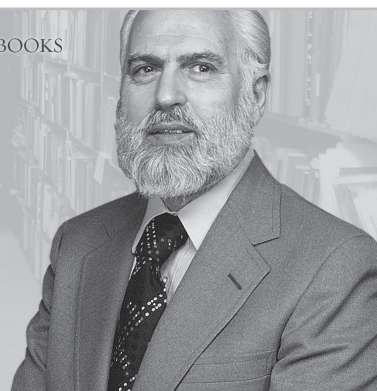
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**October 8th** – *Intellectual Schizophrenia* (Peter Allison)

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## My Auto University

Andrea Schwartz



**T**hirty-three years ago, when my husband and I began supporting Chalcedon, our appetite for

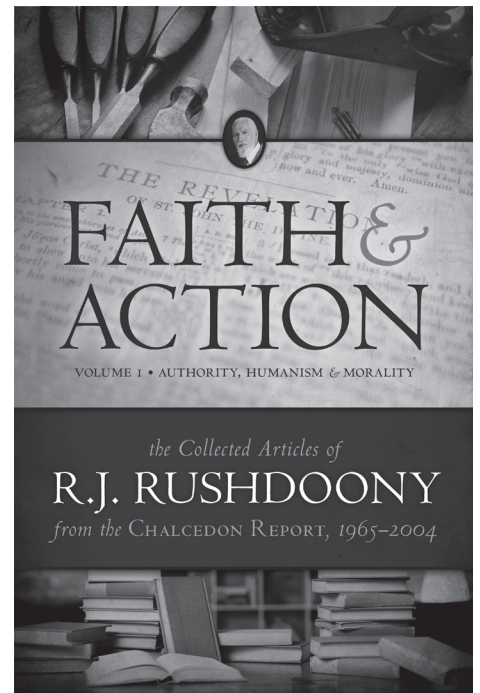
Rushdoony's materials was voracious. A good amount of our budget went to purchasing his many books and acquiring cassette tapes of his sermons and lectures. His daughter, who used to run the tape ministry, was surprised when she finally met us in person. She was convinced that only old people were interested in listening to her dad. From then on, she jokingly called me "Old Lady Schwartz."

When I was homeschooling my three children, our car was equipped to play cassette tapes. Many trips included listening to Rushdoony's *A Christian Survey of World History, or American History to 1865*. We also heard his many *Easy Chair* conversations. When CDs became the standard in cars and it was time to purchase a new one, I told my husband that I needed a car that could play both cassettes and CDs, since I had too many tapes I still intended to hear. Today, the car I drive



does not have a CD player (let alone a cassette player), but because of the ability to listen online, I can connect my smartphone via Bluetooth and listen to the lectures straight from Chalcedon's website, or download them to a USB drive. In other words, after over the thirty-three years of sitting under the teaching of Rush, I am still matriculating at my "auto-university."

Even though it has been seventeen years since Rush went to his reward, there is a comfort in listening to his voice and hearing his unswerving commitment to the fact that the Christian faith is a faith for all of life. Running errands, trips to the gym, and extended rides to see family and friends become opportunities for me to continue to learn on the go. I am grateful that I can be a forever student! 📱



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