

3. Restrictive Practices

by K.G. Hyland

Diotrephes and Barnabas were Christians of very different types. John, the apostle, had to write: 'Diotrephes receiveth us not.'

Barnabas was sent to investigate a new movement. It seems likely that the church at Jerusalem mistrusted sundry unaccustomed features of the work. They could not have sent a better man. He possessed the spiritual capacity for recognising the grace of God when he saw it, and was of the large-hearted company who are glad when they detect it. The Holy Spirit provides the explanation - 'For he was a good man.' What a name, Barnabas (Son of Consolation), and what a nature!

One Sunday morning a believer of another communion came to a Gospel Hall. Not knowing their ways she was without a head covering. A chair was moved for her, and set aside from the rest of the company, apart. At the end of the service she dissolved into tears at being so treated.

A graduate teacher, appointed to a school in a small market town had difficulty in finding true evangelical fellowship. She had, of course, been used to Christian fellowship in the Christian Union of her college, unrestricted by denominational considerations. She found her way, one Sunday morning, to the local Gospel Hall, and on her sole confession of faith received the Lord's Supper. During the ensuing week it was discovered that she had not received believer's baptism, and was required to abstain in future from the receiving of the Supper. A sensitive type, and unused to restrictive practices, she suffered a period of spiritual anguish, and nervous breakdown.

A group of tough teenagers had become really interested, and probably converted. They asked to come to the Sunday morning service and sit with their class-leader. A man in the company who realised that the offertory box would soon reach them, intervened to avoid the truly dreadful possibility that they might contribute something! Not long after youth work in that church ceased completely

A boy, congenitally deaf, spent from eight years of age to eighteen as a boarder in a special school. The recent unhappy events among our more restricted brethren, caused a major change in the management of a family business. The boy's father withdrew from the firm. As the boy was unable to hold down any normal job he chose to stay on in the firm. For this decision he lives, eats and sleeps in his own room in the family house. His former teacher comments: 'He desperately NEEDS normal communication.'

Would Barnabas have handled these cases thus? The writer doubts it. The list of restrictive practices could be greatly extended.

The problem is aggravated because people who act thus do so in all good faith, and because their conscience will not allow them to do otherwise. Conscience, however, is not an infallible guide, needing constantly to be adjusted by the whole of what the Bible teaches on any matter.

Does the Bible, therefore, provide guidance by which such issues may be decided? It is clear that detailed instructions for every conceivable situation cannot be found therein. A book of such rules would be an easy solution, but the method would involve no spiritual concern. God has chosen for us a more exacting task, by giving in Holy Scripture, principles to be applied rather than a pattern to be followed.

The thesis here developed, for examination and discussion, is that in the moral law of God are to be found the guiding principles for our relationships as Christians with one another, not only as individuals, but in church matters as well.

The Place of the Moral Law.

In the Old Testament. After the promulgation of the Decalogue in the Pentateuch, the former prophets - Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings, recount God's ACTS relating to the obedience or disobedience of His people. Their disobedience ultimately led to the exile, first of the ten tribes, and later that of Judah.

The latter prophets, Isaiah, Jeremiah and the rest, record God's WORDS through inspired messengers. These men sought to recall the people to obedience, relating the abiding principles of God's Holy Law to the moral and spiritual conditions of the times in which they ministered.

This aspect of their ministry was the prophetic message (1 Cor. 14:3). The predictive element in their writings falls roughly into three categories:

1. Prediction concerning Messiah.
2. Prediction concerning the Day of the Lord.
3. Prediction concerning the New Covenant.

It is to this last that attention must briefly be drawn.

The main references are two: Jer.31:31 ff. and Ezekiel 36:25 ff.

The Jeremiah passage is quoted twice in the epistle to the Hebrews, and concentrates attention upon a radical change of heart, whereby an

altered disposition towards God's law is implanted deeply within man's being.

The second quotation in Hebrews 10 draws attention to the sequence, first a change of heart; second the forgiveness of sins. Heb. 10:15-17 RV. v.15 'after that'. v.16 'then saith He'. The importance of this in practical terms is, that God not only forgives the man, but regenerates him. Many would probably be only too relieved to receive forgiveness of sins, who are not willing to be changed people. Here lies the point of the Baptist's words: 'Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance.'

The Ezekiel passage adds the feature that, in regeneration, not only cleansing from sin and a change of heart result, but that there is available an enduement of the Spirit (v.27) which makes possible walking in God's statutes, keeping His judgments and doing them. Here is the germ, in the Old Testament, from which springs the New Testament use of the term 'fulfil'. Matt.5:17-18; Rom.8:4, 13; 8, 10.

The Place of the moral Law in the New Testament. To pass to the New Testament: our Lord early in His ministry made quite clear how He stood, and how His disciples ought to stand in relation to the moral law. Matt.5:17-20.

In the gospels moreover, the law is summarised in two commandments: love to God, and love to one's neighbour. Quite clearly the implications of these two commands need to be apprehended, and then applied to the circumstances of all aspects of life.

Paul further reduces the number to one, Rom.13:9, and supplies the implication in verse 10.

It seems, therefore, that the Law of God lies at the base of the developing revelation in the Scriptures, and that the end in view is expressed in these words: 'that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the spirit.' Rom.8:4.

The two main features of moral law. All would agree that God's law was designed to inculcate a life of righteousness. There is however another element, namely 'mercy' or kindness.

God requires kindness to be shown to - foreigners, widows, orphans, debtors, mortgagors, enemies, employees and slaves. Ex.22:21-27; 23:4; 23:12.

God declares Himself to be 'merciful and gracious', and this facet of His nature is referred to more than eighty times in the Psalms.

The Prophets take up the same theme: 'The Lord hath a controversy with the inhabitants of the land, because there is no truth, nor mercy, nor knowledge of God.' Hos.4:1. 'For I desired mercy and not sacrifice.' Hos. 6:6. 'Sow to yourselves in righteousness, reap in mercy.' Hos.10:12. 'Therefore turn thou to thy God; keep mercy and judgment.' Hos.12:6. 'What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God.' Mic.6:8.

Our Lord says 'Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.' Matt.5:7, see also 18:32-33. He informs us that our Heavenly Father is kind to the unthankful and evil; 'Be ye therefore merciful, even as your Father is merciful.'

It is here suggested that the law of mercy is infringed by the sort of case instanced at the commencement of this paper. This brings us to the central issue under discussion - which has precedency? the moral law; or the law of God's house? To be illustrative - which must be regarded as of primary importance - the insistence upon what is conceived to be 'church truth', or the shewing of kindness and mercy?

To begin with a Psalm. In the space of only four verses David seems flatly to contradict himself. In Psa.51:16 he says 'For Thou delightest not in sacrifice, else would I give it; Thou hast no pleasure in burnt offering' yet in v.19 he adds 'Then shalt Thou delight in the sacrifices of righteousness, in offering and whole burnt offering.'

The operative word is, of course, the 'then' of v.19. The ritual and sacrifices are acceptable only, when conditions are right. From David in his backslidden and unrepentant state (Psa.32:3-4) no sacrifice was acceptable. When, however, the sacrifice springs from a righteous life v.19, then all is well.

Here then the moral law of righteousness takes precedence.

The prophets are insistent about this, Isa.1:10-17. In v.16 Judah is charged with unrighteousness, and with unmercifulness. Dr. G. Adam Smith renders v.13 'I cannot away with iniquity AND the solemn meeting.' All their religious observance was obnoxious to the Most High under those conditions. Isaiah provides another instance: 58:1-10. Jeremiah 6:13-15 describes the moral state of Judah, and v.20 speaks of their offerings being 'not acceptable'. In v.16 he bids them ask for the old paths. What did he mean? The context compels us to conclude that he means paths of righteousness and mercy, and this conclusion is confirmed by ch.7:1-15 and 21-24. The first section 1-15 teaches that the temple ceases to be God's house v.4, when they presume, as God's people, to condone sin. v.10. The clue to the 'old paths' is found in v.22 where the prophet reminds them that at the Exodus God laid down moral commandments before He turned to the details of tabernacle and sacrifice, v.23. It is only after the covenant has been ratified, Ex.24:1-8, that we

gradually hear details of the tabernacle, priesthood, and sacrifice. In the most literal sense Jeremiah's words are true: 'In the day that I brought thee out of the land of Egypt,' God had literally spoken of obedience, not cultic matters. Jeremiah is clearly indicating that the order of revelation is indicative of its relative value.' (H.L.Ellison, Evang. Quart. Jan-March 1962, p.23). The scathing words of 7:1-15 indicate that God's primary concern is with the moral values of life, and that where these are missing in sufficient degree, He is prepared to sweep away His house. v.12. (Heb.3:6; John 8:33-36).

One of the most vivid treatments of this theme is found in Mic. 6:6-8.

In each of these instances the moral law takes precedence. Samuel's words put it thus: 'To obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams.'

But - is this same relative standard of values carried on into the New Testament? There are four clear instances within our Lord's ministry.

In Mark 12:28-34 our Lord is asked: 'which is the first commandment of all?' and when He answered, the scribe replied 'Master, Thou hast well said ... and to love Him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength, and to love his neighbour as himself, is more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.' Our Lord's response is striking: 'Thou art not far from the kingdom of God.' The moral law takes precedence.

In Matt.15:1-9 the Pharisees charge the Lord with breach of tradition. His reply is important. Their tradition relates to the upkeep of the service of God by monetary contributions, and probably gifts in kind, as in the Old Testament. He charges them however with breach of the commandments of God. He places the fifth commandment above the giving to the needs of His house. Care of needy parents comes before the need of the temple. Again moral law takes precedence over ecclesiastical law.

Perhaps the most striking instance occurs in Matt.12. The Pharisees charge the disciples with breaking the sabbath; our Lord refers them to an incident in David's life. David and his men are in need of food, and received bread taken from the Holy Table, which act our Lord regards as unlawful on ecclesiastical grounds, v.4. But our Lord, on the ground of physical human need places higher the moral law of mercy, 'I will have mercy and not sacrifice.' The ritual gives place to mercy. It is to be noted that our Lord here deals with two laws, one from the Decalogue, that of the sabbath; and one from the Levitical code, the law regarding the shewbread. He interprets the one in favour of mercy - the

sabbath was made for man (see E x.23:12) and not the reverse. He also interprets the second in the same sense. So astonishing must this have seemed to those who heard Him that He proceeds to deal with the question of His authority so to teach. In respect of Sabbath law He says: 'The Son of Man is Lord of the sabbath'; whilst in respect of ritual law He says 'One greater than the temple is here.'

There is no mistaking the last instance. In maintaining their fitness to proceed on temple service the priest and the Levite were not prepared to help a man in desperate need. In so acting they were in breach of the moral law: 'thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself'(Luke 10:25 ff.) Many would still feel it more important to be at the Lord's table than to meet the physical need of some sick neighbour.

It is to be noted that each instance is concerned with physical need. If in our Master's view ecclesiastical law gives place to the meeting of physical need, what can be said of withholding spiritual succour on ecclesiastical, and worse, denominational grounds?

Would it be improper to say that the ordering of a New Testament church was made for man, and not man for the church? It could easily be demonstrated that a church which is closest to the New Testament is the church which is best for the free spiritual development of all the members. And yet it is possible to try to cut men down to fit a Procrustean bed of so-called 'church truth'. If they do not fit, then, so much the worse for them! The sum total of unmercifulness that has been perpetrated for ecclesiastical reasons must be staggering. Part of the obligation to mercy is because not one of us knows anything yet as he ought to know. We are all growing to maturity within the one family of God. God has given to each differing capacities, and to each the power of self-determination, or free-will. For one to impose his will over the light yet given to another is not only unmerciful; it is also trespassing upon God's territory in the individual and private responsibility of each separate human personality. Even a Paul would not override this. In Phil.3:14-16 he is virtually saying 'My mind is this - but if in anything ye be otherwise minded, even this shall God reveal unto you.'

One last point remains. What kind of God do we worship? The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is one Who is merciful. He is one who is prepared to set aside the laws of His house for the sake of all varieties of human need. His moral law of righteousness and mercy takes precedence.

Do we worship Bethel rather than the God of Bethel? What image of God have we in our minds? Is He one who is more interested in ecclesiastical order, or 'church truth'? His law says 'Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image.' What mental image have we of Him? 'My little children guard yourselves from idols.' 'Ye shall have none other gods beside me.' - Not even the assembly.