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RETURNING TO BASICS – Re-instating the Ten Commandments

By John Bournon

The call for return to basics is as applicable to the Church as it is to the government. The departure of the Bishop of Durham could well prove a watershed in the life of the Church of England. His motive to encourage people to think may well have suited the academics, but it has caused unfortunately confusion and consternation among those of a simpler nature, who are not cast in an intellectual mould. Unfortunately others hiding behind his declarations have also led others astray. We need to ask, however, as to how far he and others were formulators of these doubts or are in fact reflecting trends within the Church since the Second World War, which have been influenced by the philosophical teaching of the universities. How far, for instance, has existentialism – conditioned by its subjectivism – dominated and in some cases undermined the faith of the Church? Surely the Church needs to recapture the objective standards on which to base its faith? Has, then, the Archbishop of Canterbury set down a marker by emphasizing the importance of the Ten Commandments?

The Importance of the Ten Commandments

At the time of the Reformation, undoubtedly at first, to assist a fairly non-literate community, the Ten Commandments, the Lord's Prayer and the Creed were to be displayed over or in the vicinity of the Lord's Table. This would be a constant reminder to the worshippers of God's requirements and a basis for faith. Over the last century these have been dismantled and are rarely, if ever, erected in new churches. The replacement in the Communion Service by the Kyrie or the Lord's shortened form has meant that worshippers are no longer confronted by these important creation ordinances. Would it be too much to suggest that the decay of spiritual and moral standards among Christians has arisen from their not being reminded of what God has said to all mankind and which is valid for eternity?

Love is not a Substitute for Truth

It is not surprising that we hear from our pulpits that there are many paths to God, that Christ's uniqueness is one among many – a contradiction in terms. The demand of God for sole worship – 'none other gods but me' – does not mean that he is central in a pantheon of gods, but like his Son is the only answer to life. How often is John 14 used as a suitable alternative to 1 Corinthians 15 in the funeral service? So we find the occasional visitor to church as well as the regular communicant are confronted, not with the unique demands of God, but a charitable expression of hope or even, in the case of the funeral service, something explicitly intended only for those known to be believers trusting in Christ and his Resurrection.

If our liturgies as they are used can be misleading, what is the parish minister to do? Would it not be appropriate in the first instance to re-instate what Cranmer did at the Reformation and use regularly the Commandments in the Communion Service? After all the constant repetition is bound to have some effect on the hearers. It was, I believe, John Wesley's established practice to preach Law before Grace so that his hearers would face up to their state before God and recognize themselves as 'miserable sinners' needing his forgiveness and grace. Our modern 'chumminess', emphasized in so much of our modern liturgies, often fails to reflect what is true of scripture. Forgiveness has become a word with little meaning. We may sing *Majesty* but is there any real sense of awe? How often do we, like Peter say, 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord?' Surely the Lord's Supper would mean more if we realized like John Newton that it is God's amazing Grace that saves a wretch like me.

The re-instatement of the Ten Commandments in the liturgical and pastoral life of the Church would have implications far beyond the communicant membership of the Church. As believers began afresh to see the uniqueness of God's Grace, their lives could not fail to be transformed, so that others would take note that they have been with Jesus.

John Bournon (at the time of publication) was vice Chairman of Church Society.