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CHRIST AND THE LAW

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Recent events at Southwark Cathedral have demonstrated that the Church of England has surrendered its doctrine and practice to moral relativism. It is the tired theology of the 1960s, epitomised in the words of the Beatles' song, "All you need is love." The Church of England, following the lead of the Episcopal Church in the United States of America, is now effectively in a state of moral confusion. Paul Johnson, a Roman Catholic, writing in *The Spectator*¹, calls the Church of England, the 'church of Sodom', and makes the plea that all sincere Christians should now join the Roman Church which he describes as broad enough to receive them.

Needless to say we demur from that prospect. In fact, the Roman Church has as many moral problems as the Church of England and therefore cannot point a finger at the English Church without the rejoinder that their own house should be put in order. There is a serious moral case in Ireland and the former Bishop of Argyll can hardly be recommended for moral probity. Be that as it may, it does not alter the problem facing the Church of England.

What is the response of the House of Bishops to this disregard of the moral law of God? In the main silence! Dr Carey was reported in *The Daily Telegraph* as saying that the Synod resolution of 1987 and *Issues in Human Sexuality* of 1991 were still regarded as being the final word on this subject. However, in a published sermon of the Archbishop delivered in Great St Mary's, Cambridge, Dr Carey referred to those who had objected as, 'bullying, loud-mouthed controversialists.'²

The Archbishop, to be fair, is making the point that we cannot just have a set of rules without succumbing to self-righteousness. Nevertheless there is some very strange exegesis which sets the Summary of the Law against the Ten Commandments as if this were a higher standard.

The fact is that the Church of Jesus Christ must follow the teachings of the Lord Jesus as they are recorded in the New Testament and his interpretation of the Old Testament as being authoritative in all matters of faith and practice. That is where we differ from Paul Johnson's proposed Roman remedy though we have to admit with shame that much of what Mr Johnson has written is true even if couched in immoderate language.

Christ the Fulfilment

The principal teaching of the Old Testament focuses upon the Law of God given to Moses on Mount Sinai. This teaching was amplified in the witness of the prophets who pointed to the necessity of meeting God's standards according to that Law and pointed to One who was coming.

In Matthew's Gospel, in the Sermon on the Mount, Christ himself settles once and for all, for the people of faith, as to how he relates to that Law and to the prophets who expounded the Law and prophesied the coming of the Messiah (see 1 Peter 1:10-12). He makes a very strong statement that he had come to fulfil the Law and the prophets.

In simple terms, the Beatitudes had set out the blessings which belonged to the kingdom of God and no doubt his Jewish hearers were beginning to ask whether or not this meant an end to the Law. This was quite natural given the circumstances of the teaching that they had received all their lives. It was therefore necessary for the Lord Jesus to make a clear statement as to how he related to the Law of Moses and to the prophets.

Jesus denies very strongly that any part of the Law will pass away (v 18). To believe that the Law of God can simply fall away demonstrates a very imperfect knowledge of the function of the Law and how it reveals both the character and glory of God. However, where the interpretations and traditions had gone wrong, they had to be corrected.

There is a very clear warning given to teachers who play down the place of the Law. They are called least in the kingdom of heaven (v 19). But guarding against an external formalism the Lord Jesus warns his hearers that the righteousness which they must attain to enter the kingdom of heaven has to exceed that of the scribes and the Pharisees who were punctilious in the outward performance but failed in the proper application in their lives (v 20).

The Teaching Illustrated

This teaching concerning the Scribes and the Pharisees was very strong and it was necessary to show why this was not just prejudice. It is not the Mosaic Law which was at fault but its interpretation which had gone wrong. The Lord Jesus illustrates his teaching by giving five examples.

The first is from the Sixth Commandment, murder (vv 21-27); the second, the Seventh Commandment, adultery (vv 27-32); the Third Commandment refers to the prohibition of taking the Lord's Name in vain by swearing false oaths (vv 33-37); the fourth example comes from Exodus 21:24 in which the outworking of the moral law is set out (vv 38-42) and the fifth is from Leviticus 19:18 which prohibits vengeance and the maintaining of grudges.

Those examples show us that there is an inward and spiritual interpretation which, for example, sees murder as primarily an attitude of hatred from the heart and not just the outward act. The act consummates the attitude but the attitude is equally guilty before God. The same principle applies to adultery and taking the Name of the Lord God in vain.

It can be seen that the Lord Jesus is not relegating the Law of God set out in the Old Testament to some inferior code of practice designed for a primitive people. He is not formulating a new law, of a more gentle aspect as if the Law of God was designed by a barbaric deity. Rather, he is establishing the Law by giving to it its correct interpretation.

Of course, the Law can be summed up by the words that we are to love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength and our neighbour as our self. But the fact is that unless that is couched in concrete form it is mere verbiage. It leaves it wide open to the antinomianism of the Sixties that committing adultery might be the more loving thing to do! And that can never be so. The Seventh Commandment commands purity of life in thought, word and deed.

Practical Application

Christ did not abolish the Law of God, he fulfilled it. It was his obedience to the Law which demonstrated his love for the Father and his desire to perform all the Heavenly Father's will. This constituted him as the perfect Lamb of God without spot or blemish and therefore the perfect sacrifice upon Calvary to redeem his people. As Toplady wrote long ago, 'My Saviour's obedience and blood hide all my transgressions from view.' So for the Christian justified by faith alone, the Law no longer condemns but it still convicts where he goes astray, and it still guides as to how he may please his Heavenly Father.

Here is the problem which is afflicting the Church of England. The word 'Gospel' may be used freely but unless it has a reference point back to the Law of God and the concept of sin and, of course, to Christ's work on the cross, it is only a buzz word used to cover a vacuum in theological thinking. There is a good theological word for this and it is 'antinomianism' which is the denial of the legitimate place of the Law of God. The result is that all manner of unrighteousness can be condoned and collegiate silence maintained because of the moral confusion. Until such time as this is properly addressed the charges levelled against the Church of England have sufficient weight to be taken very seriously.

Rev'd David Streater, at time of writing, was Director of Church Society

Endnotes:

- 1) Paul Johnson, Anglicanism, Organic Sin and the Church of Sodom, *The Spectator*, 23.11.96.
- 2) Dr George Carey, Sermon at Great St Mary's, Cambridge, 25.11.96, Lambeth Palace Press.