

July - September 2017

The Link

NORTH ROAD CHAPEL

BIDEFORD

THE LORD'S DAY

Part 4

“And God spake all these words, saying, I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no other gods before Me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the Lord thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate Me; And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love Me, and keep My commandments. Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh His name in vain. Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates: For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the Lord blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it.” (Exodus 20:1-11)

We come now to consider the position that the Sabbath held during the ‘Mosaic’ era. This term does not denote a strictly defined period of time, but rather the season during which a particular form of government and authority was appointed by God, for the gradual and progressive revelation of His truth – namely the giving of the Law by Moses, and the period when the Ceremonial Law was in force. It is impossible to make a statement like this without coming into conflict with **Dispensationalism** – the line of teaching set out by G. H. Pember, C. I. Schofield, J. N. Darby, and a host of others, with numerous variations and modifications – which carves human history into separate sections, and divides the Word of God between them.

Certain portions of Scripture are said to have reference to one company of people, while different portions apply to other parts of humanity; some is described as 'kingdom truth', and some as 'church teaching'. For example, it is claimed that Matthew's Gospel is Jewish in its application, and not intended for the New Testament Church; and that only the Gospel of John is specifically relevant for Christians in this age (despite the fact that John makes no reference to the Lord's Supper, which ordinance is quite evidently 'church teaching'). This method of interpretation is a very subtle and dangerous error, sadly still widespread in the present day. 'Dispensationalism' deserves its name – for its adherents effectively 'dispense with' large parts of Holy Scripture, to their own spiritual detriment.

Some years ago, when a previous series on the topic of the Sabbath was published in this magazine (seven articles between January 1978 and September 1979) several pages of correspondence were received from one irate reader, endeavouring to prove that the Sabbath commenced only with the Law as given to Moses on Sinai, subsequently ended at Pentecost, but will come into force again in a future so-called 'millennium'. He wrote further to say that there was no warrant for Sabbath observance at the present time, and that so far as the Church is concerned, the idea of a 'day of rest' was a misnomer, since Sunday is the busiest day of the Christian's week! Such are the follies into which this erroneous teaching leads. No more time will be wasted in examining the objections which Dispensationalists bring against the Sabbath. Suffice it to say that, beginning wrongly in Genesis, they continue to be wrong all the way through Scripture.

The Sabbath did not commence with the Ceremonial Law. In fact, it does not even belong to that part of the Law. Exodus chapter 20 shows its incorporation into the **Moral** Law of God, enshrined in the Decalogue. Here is a very important distinction that many fail to register. There are those who consider all 'Law' to be the same, all of it done away with, and thus would discard even the Ten Commandments.

This is a frightful error in which to become entangled, and one to be eschewed at all costs. The Ten Commandments, representing the **Moral** Law, stand supreme; being inscribed on tables of stone by the very finger of God. On the same occasion upon Sinai, Moses also received the content of ‘the Book of the Law’ (cf Deuteronomy 31:24-26) which incorporated the **Ceremonial** Law – the detail of the offerings, the sacrifices, the duties of the priests, the rituals of worship, all wonderful in their meaning – and also the **Judicial** Law – describing how the people were to be governed, the punishment of crime, transfer of property, boundaries, landmarks, and much more. Everything contained therein was of utmost importance, and binding upon the people under that administration. However, in the process of time, and in God’s sovereign will, that system would run its course and give place to something infinitely better. These ceremonies and procedures were only ‘types’, foreshadowing the antitype who is **Christ**. The Hebrew Epistle describes how the Lord has ‘taken away the first, that He may establish the second’ (cf Hebrews 10:9).

Christ did not destroy the Law, saying Himself: “*Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil. For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled*” (Matthew 5:17-18). He ‘fulfilled’ the Ceremonial and Judicial Law in the sense of ‘completing’ and ‘concluding’ them. He was the ultimate end to which they, like signposts, pointed (cf Galatians 3:24). But He fulfilled the Moral Law in the sense of ‘compliance’ – wholly adhering to its every precept. This included His faithful observance of the Sabbath Day (cf Luke 4:16). For like the pieces of rock into which it was engraved, the Moral Law of God is imperishable, and does not pass away. “*For ever, O Lord, Thy word is settled in heaven*” (Psalm 119:89) says the Psalmist, and doubtless the Ten Commandments will be evident before the great white throne of Judgment at the last day. There cannot be an assize without a statute book; justice cannot be administered without a yardstick; and God’s

divine standard is the Decalogue. Here, in ten brief statements, is constituted the perfect law. If any do not accept that this is so, read again the interview between Christ, and the rich young ruler: “*And, behold, one came and said unto Him, Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life? And He said unto him, Why callest thou Me good? there is none good but one, that is, God: but **if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments**. He saith unto Him, Which? Jesus said, Thou shalt do no murder, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Honour thy father and thy mother: and, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. The young man saith unto Him, All these things have I kept from my youth up: what lack I yet? Jesus said unto him, **If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow Me**” (Matthew 19:16-21). Holy perfection lies within that Law.*

Consider for a moment the doctrine of the Atonement, in its **preceptive** aspect: the blessed Saviour obeying its minutest dictates. His unswerving allegiance and absolute obedience to that Law **is** the spotless righteousness of Christ, which is imputed to His believing people. The Moral Law has not passed away; it is not a temporary thing; indeed, it is His keeping of those very commandments that gives His people access unto life eternal. No-one will enter the gates of the Heavenly City who does not measure up to this standard of holy perfection (cf Revelation 22:14). It is only by virtue of their standing in Christ’s perfect righteousness that the saints are granted entry.

The Moral Law of God is supreme, and imperishable, and all-important. It was in being long before it was given to Moses on tables of stone. It was written upon the very heart of Adam before the Fall (cf Romans 2:14-15). For here is the essence of purity; here is the absolute standard; here is perfection. “*Jesus said... Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment*” (Matthew 22:37-38). Was not this the very thing

required of Adam at the first? Here is that which is fundamental to man's approach unto, and relationship with God. This Law is unchanging and eternal. The rules of right and wrong emanate from the mind of a holy, immutable God. This divine ruling directs essential relationships between man and God, and man with his fellows. It is the standard of obedience required by the Almighty. It is the transcript of holiness. It is the mind of God.

The Moral Law of God is of unchanging authority; for these precepts are the basis of all true spirituality and the sincere worship of the God of Heaven. They form the pattern for life within the domestic circle. They are the only sure foundation for civil government, and the sole guideline that can give security to human society. For these reasons, the Moral Law was impressed upon the mind of man, long before it was codified and transcribed in the Decalogue. In Eden, perfect man, put in charge of a perfect world, must have perfect guidance by which to live. Subsequent to those events, surely none can doubt but that this Law was known in its substance by the patriarchs? From whence did Abel obtain his instruction? What was the source of Enoch's godliness? How can Noah's righteous living amidst universal corruption be accounted for? What prompted Abraham to take the proper course, and make the right decisions? How can the piety of Joseph be explained? These men all had a grasp and knowledge of their duty to God and man. It was the pattern by which their lives were shaped. Of course, these characters were not saved by works – all the elect of all ages are saved through faith, by the grace of God, and by virtue of the blood of Christ – but nothing in their day, nor in ours, cancels out the holy Law of God. This is the standard by which life is to be lived, before God and men.

Man was made in the image of God, and is a morally conscious creature. There is something inbuilt and innate in man's being which will be provoked, and respond, when duly informed by each of the Ten Commandments. Man has a conscience, and it is this Law that awakens the conscience, "*for by the law is the knowledge of sin*" (Romans 3:20).

Although the central theme of ‘the Sabbath’ has been only indirectly referenced in this article, there are certain ancillary matters pertaining to the subject that are very important and must be established. One of these has now been addressed, namely: the vital difference between the Moral Law and the Ceremonial Law. The Ceremonial component was symbolic in its nature, and therefore temporary and passing. Whilst it included the numerous feasts and festivals of the Jews, the weekly Sabbath was **not** among them. The Sabbath took its place as the fourth of the Ten Commandments, within the Moral Law of God, which does not pass away, and will find its glorious consummation only in the eternal Sabbath – that rest which remains for the people of God (cf Hebrews 4:9).

W. H. Molland (1920 – 2012)

“The Law is threefold: Ceremonial, Judicial, Moral. The use of the Ceremonial Law is repealed ... The Judicial or Political Law was peculiar to the Jews, and has been set aside. [But] that universal justice which is described in the Moral Law remains ... the object of which is to cherish and maintain godliness and righteousness, is perpetual, and is incumbent on all ... We must attend to [this] well known division ... and we must attend to each of these parts, in order to understand how far they do, or do not, pertain to us...

[We] give this name [‘moral’] specially to the first class, without which, true holiness of life and an immutable rule of conduct cannot exist. The **moral** law then (to begin with it), being contained under two heads, the one of which simply enjoins us to worship God with pure faith and piety, the other to embrace men with sincere affection, is the true and eternal rule of righteousness prescribed to the men of all nations and of all times, who would frame their life agreeably to the will of God. For His eternal and immutable will is, that we are all to worship Him, and mutually love one another.

The use of the moral law is threefold. The first use shows our weakness, unrighteousness, and condemnation; not that we may despair, but that we may flee to Christ. The second is, that those who are not moved by promises, may be urged by the terror of threatenings. The third is, that we may know what is the will of God; that we may consider it in order to learn obedience; that our minds may be strengthened for that purpose; and that we may be kept from falling.

The **ceremonial** law of the Jews was a tutelage by which the Lord was pleased to exercise, as it were, the childhood of that people, until the fulness of the time should come when He was fully to manifest His wisdom to the world, and exhibit the reality of those things which were then adumbrated by figures (cf Galatians 3:24, 4:4).

The **judicial** law, given them as a kind of polity, delivered certain forms of equity and justice, by which they might live together innocently and quietly. And as that exercise in ceremonies properly pertained to the doctrine of piety, inasmuch as it kept the Jewish Church in the worship and religion of God, yet was still distinguishable from piety itself, so the judicial form, though it looked only to the best method of preserving that charity which is enjoined by the eternal Law of God, was still something distinct from the precept of love itself. Therefore, as ceremonies might be abrogated without at all interfering with piety, so also, when these judicial arrangements are removed, the duties and precepts of charity can still remain perpetual...

Now, as it is evident that the Law of God which we call **moral** is nothing else than the testimony of natural law, and of that conscience which God has engraven on the minds of men, the whole of this equity of which we now speak is prescribed in it. Hence it alone ought to be the aim, the rule, and the end, of all laws."

J. Calvin (1509 – 1564)

The Institutes of the Christian Religion 1559 (excerpts)

VAIN RELIGION

The Book of Ecclesiastes is not only one of wisdom and poetry; it is principally an autobiography. It provides a distressing account of one whose course began in the sunlit uplands of spiritual and material prosperity, before plumbing extreme depths of moral darkness and obscurity, relieved only by a brief, bright sunset at the last. The human penman of the inspired script is Solomon, who originally rejoiced in such exalted titles as “*son of David*” and “*king in Jerusalem*” (Ecclesiastes 1:1); but at the time of writing this unsparing retrospective would describe himself only as “*the Preacher*”, and spoke of monarchy and greatness in the past tense (ch. 1:1, 12, 2:9). Better had been the lot of the poor, wise child, than that of the old, foolish and unadmonishable king which he afterward became (ch. 4:13).

Days of peace and plenty became the breeding-ground of presumption and decadence on Solomon’s part. Though blessed with a super-human degree of wisdom already, he was perhaps tempted with the prospect of obtaining more, and set himself in pursuit of ‘the meaning of life’ – albeit ‘life’ in an atheistical sense, as though there were no other existence save that which is lived ‘under the sun’. He was uniquely situated to make this investigation: wealthy beyond imagination; king in an absolute monarchy; unrestrained by any of the circumstantial or legal strictures imposed upon the common man. Thus he began a dangerous and destructive experiment with his own life, attempting in rapid succession works, riches, wisdom, folly, pleasure and carnal relationships as potential routes to fulfilment. Not for want of ability, effort or expenditure, he proved each in turn to be unsuccessful: “*Then I looked on all the works that my hands had wrought, and on the labour that I had laboured to do: and, behold, all was vanity and vexation of spirit, and there was no profit under the sun*” (ch. 2:11). Whatever the method, the results were always the same; every test failed, exacerbated by oppression and inequity in the world around, and the remorseless passage of the years.

The fifth chapter of Ecclesiastes appears to show Solomon going in a better direction, and heading toward the house of God, the temple. But this was no personal revival, or act of repentance; rather, a further attempt at finding meaning and purpose in life, this time, through the practice of ‘religion’. Whilst this course might seem to have more to commend it, here he also found “*diverse vanities*” (ch. 5:7). It might well be asked how that which is good, and commanded in Scripture, can prove to be empty, or at worst, evil? This may occur in many ways:

False Religion. Solomon’s experiments in religion were as profligate and extreme as his other worldly ventures. He ‘worshipped’ every new ‘deity’ that he encountered (cf 1 Kings 11:4-8), and had almost as many gods as he did wives (though neither were deserving of those titles). The errors and sinfulness of these idolatrous systems is plain to see. But at the same time, Solomon continued to maintain the worship of God at the temple. Was this any more commendable or meritorious? No – not at all. To hold simultaneously two conflicting beliefs gives the lie to both; to give credence to truth and error at the same time reduces both to the same level. To praise Jehovah on the Sabbath, and adhere to Chemosh or Molech the day following, made a mockery of them all. And that professing Christian who serves God on the Lord’s Day, and mammon the rest of the week demonstrates their faith to be vain.

Idolatry does not require a stone-sculpted figure, nor a foreign god bearing a strange name. Solomon went to the temple, imagining God to be ignorant, apathetic, or indulgent of his sins; thinking that the Lord would tolerate his admixture of paganism. Though in the holy place at Jerusalem, using the language and forms of the Old Testament, Solomon was actually worshipping a false god of his own creation. There are many like him still today, toward whom: “*the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness . . . Because that, when they knew God, they glorified Him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened*” (Romans 1:18,21).

Ill-conceived Religion. In sombre reflection upon his past misdeeds, Solomon advises: “*Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God*” (ch. 5:1). The manner of, or reasons for going to worship are of great significance. He sought out the temple merely as another route to personal happiness and fulfilment, and those carnal motives undermined all his subsequent devotions. In the present age, many followers of religion do so only as a ‘lifestyle choice’, for personal betterment, social interaction, entertainment, or material benefit. Worse still, there are those within evangelicalism who advertise church-going, and ‘sell the truth’ on these terms, hopeful of attracting a bigger crowd. Both parties may achieve their objective – but they will have a vain religion altogether. Doubtless, God may sometimes graciously intervene and turn a wrong motive to a blessed outcome; but the divinely-wrought end cannot justify sinful, humanistic means.

Sensational Religion. The largest congregations are often found where the style of worship is most sensational – that is, appealing to the senses. Audio-visual spectacles, emotional extremes, alleged miracles, prophecies, visions and dreams are always popular with the masses. ‘Celebrity culture’ has also infected the church, and great oratory, or famous speakers have ever been an attraction, who deploy language to great effect. To this attitude Solomon was no stranger, and would have us remember: “*For a dream cometh through the multitude of business; and a fool’s voice is known by multitude of words . . . For in the multitude of dreams and many words there are also divers vanities*” (ch 5:3, 7). In every age, there have been those whose religion is all sensory and sentimental; who care not for doctrine, but crave that which will charm or tickle the ear (cf Isaiah 30:10, 2 Timothy 4:3). They decry as weak and contemptible those whose bodily presence and public speaking does not meet their expectations (cf 2 Corinthians 10:10); and faced with a choice between “*Jesus Christ and Him crucified*” delivered in weakness, fear and much trembling, or speech and preaching with “*enticing words of man’s wisdom*”, they would choose the latter every time (cf 1 Corinthians 2:2-4). Theirs is likewise a vain religion.

Ostentatious Religion. There are also those religious exercises that exist in appearance only, and have a form without substance (cf 2 Timothy 3:5). A man may wish to project such an image for a variety of reasons. Personal pride, and self-aggrandisement may be the motivation. Of the Queen of Sheba, it is recorded that when she had seen Solomon's "*ascent by which he went up unto the house of the Lord; there was no more spirit in her*" (1 Kings 10:5), suggesting that his visits to the temple were attended by an inordinate amount of pomp and ceremony. The keeping up of pious appearances may be done for the sake of other people, and maintenance of family relationships – even as Solomon showed devotion to numerous heathen gods for the sake of each of his successive wives. Or further, the incentive could be to win the favour of others; about which, Christ said: "*thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men*" (Matthew 6:5). Everyone may be deceived by this façade, including the individual who purveys it – but God is not mocked. "*For He knoweth vain men: He seeth wickedness also; will He not then consider it?*" (Job 11:11).

Repetitive Religion. There must be repetition and persistence in the Christian faith; for whether the analogy used be bodily exercise (cf 1 Corinthians 9:24-27), eating of food (cf 1 Peter 2:2), making a journey (cf Philippians 3:13-17) or fighting a war (cf Ephesians 6:10-13), it is evident that the believer's life is one of: "*patient continuance in well doing*" (Romans 2:7). However, there is another sort of repetition that is simply a routine; a 'going through the motions'; a multiplying of words and practices without knowledge. In this behaviour lie diverse vanities (cf Job 35:16, Ecclesiastes 5:7) and it is condemned in Scripture. The Lord Himself cautions: "*use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking*" (Matthew 6:7). What examples of this persist in Christendom to the present day! The slavish observance of liturgical calendars, (conceived in heathenism, legitimised by Rome and adopted by Anglicanism); written litanies,

prayers and services recited week after week; songs and choruses in which the same vapid couplets are repeated over and over to the point of meaninglessness; or even amongst those who boast of soundness, a reliance in prayer and preaching on tired quotations, clichés and forms of words, for the sake of familiarity. When the Jews' worship became an empty ritual, God censured them by His prophet: "*To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto Me? saith the Lord: . . . When ye come to appear before Me, who hath required this at your hand, to tread My courts? Bring no more **vain oblations**; incense is an abomination unto Me; the new moons and sabbaths, the calling of assemblies, I cannot; away with; it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting. Your new moons and your appointed feasts My soul hateth: they are a trouble unto Me; I am weary to bear them*" (Isaiah 1:11-14).

Rash Religion. When a person's practice of Christianity is devoid of reality, another danger presents itself. Namely, that they will make verbal commitments, the force of which they do not comprehend, in the presence of a God whose existence they do not wholly accept. But God will hold them to account for their words, unbelief notwithstanding. "*Be not rash with thy mouth, and let not thine heart be hasty to utter any thing before God: for God is in heaven, and thou upon earth: therefore let thy words be few . . . When thou vowest a vow unto God, defer not to pay it; for He hath no pleasure in fools: pay that which thou hast vowed. Better is it that thou shouldest not vow, than that thou shouldest vow and not pay. Suffer not thy mouth to cause thy flesh to sin; neither say thou before the angel, that it was an error: wherefore should God be angry at thy voice, and destroy the work of thine hands?*" (Ecclesiastes 5:2-6). The making of officially-recognised, legally-binding vows in the presence of a priest was a feature of the Jewish economy. The people are here warned against doing so in haste, only to default upon their own words thereafter, thus creating new occasions for inconstancy and sin. How hollow did Solomon's earlier words of dedication and prayer begin to sound, in the context of his later hedonistic and ungodly existence?

There are parallels to be drawn in this also, for the Christian faith is one of verbal profession, and solemn commitments made before God (cf Romans 10:9-10). Alas, there are many who, in times of crisis or dire emergency have called upon God for relief, pledging to live upright lives in the event of deliverance; but reneged upon their words as soon as rescue came. Still more serious is the case of those who, in a state of heightened emotion respond to evangelistic altar-calls, and devote themselves to Christ, or subscribe their names to profound statements of faith, only to disclaim their actions the day following. Christian testimony, the ordinance of baptism, and church membership and communion all have the force of a 'vow' about them. How will it be to stand before Christ and His holy angels in the Last Day, and admit speaking those things in error? Let no man deceive himself, or others, with vain words.

Careless Religion. Even if the pitfalls described in previous sections should be avoided, there is another way in which religious observances may be denuded of their meaning, and rendered vain: that is, carelessness; and a lack of due preparation for the service that is wrought. The text says: "*Keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God, and be more **ready to hear** ... let not thine heart be hasty...*" (Ecclesiastes 5:1-2). A 'readiness' for worship is here instructed, without which the most significant of offerings could degenerate into 'the sacrifice of fools'. It was the habit of the ancients to remove the shoes from their feet when entering a holy place; a practical measure to eradicate the defilement of the world, and remove that which came into closest contact with the earth, before worship began. The spiritual equivalent of this practice is highly necessary. Preparation for a service is as much the duty of the hearer as the preacher; as needful in the pew as in the pulpit. 'Take heed how ye hear' is the instruction of the gospel (cf Luke 8:18). Those who rush unprepared into God's house, like Jacob into Bethel, full of worldly cares, may fail to recognise whence they are entered; the Lord could be in the place, and they themselves 'know it not' (cf Genesis 28:16) but for a gracious, divine intervention.

Pure Religion and Undefined. Faced with this catalogue of vanities inherent in religious observances, some might be inclined to think complete rejection is the best course of action, and dispense with these ordinances altogether. This is not Solomon's conclusion. Though he found and committed diverse vanities himself, his final instruction is: "*but **fear thou God***" (Ecclesiastes 5:7). The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. It is also the route to the true and proper worship of the Lord, as the saints on high can testify: "*Who shall not fear Thee, O Lord, and glorify Thy name? for Thou only art holy: for all nations shall come and worship before Thee*" (Revelation 15:4). Those who have a right regard and reverence for the Almighty will be constrained to worship Him, and defended from impropriety by their filial fear. These the Lord will hearken and hear (cf Malachi 3:16).

The first recorded instance of worship in Scripture is a case in point. Two men, with identical circumstances, opportunities and instruction are seen making sacrifices. One man – Cain – heedless of the example given, ignorant of the significance of what he did, and devoid of belief, offered the fruit of the ground. For he was a husbandman by trade, and thought this an opportunity to magnify himself and his achievements. His religion was an ill-conceived and ostentatious form, in which God had no pleasure. Yet Cain was not told to desist altogether, but instead encouraged to worship aright: "*If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted?*" (Genesis 4:7). By contrast, Abel stands as a lasting and positive example. Mindful of the divine pattern, he offered a blood-sacrifice; not for convenience or coincidence, but, "***By faith** Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts: and by it he being dead yet speaketh*" (Hebrews 11:4). Two men may go up to the temple to pray (cf Luke 18:9-14) but experience very different outcomes. May God evermore deliver us from vain religion, and keep us in that happy company who, by virtue of true worship, are sent on their way rejoicing.

R. J. Steward

THE SANCTUARY?

Vanity of vanities: human occupation, human existence is all fantastic and foolish. Verily, each man walketh in a vain show; surely they are disquieted in vain. Like the fly-plague of Egypt, every scene of mortal life is infested by frivolity and falsehood; and it is hard to tell which is the sorest vexation – the buzz and bewilderment of vanities still living, or the noisomeness of those that are dead. The cottage and the palace, the student's chamber and the prince's banquet-room all teem with them, and there is no secure retreat from those vanities which, on the wing are a weariness, and in the cup of enjoyment are the poison of pleasure. 'Nay, we have not tried the temple – we have not yet gone to the house of God. There, perhaps, we shall find a tranquil asylum. There, if anywhere, we should find a heaven on earth – a refuge from the insincerity and unsatisfactoriness which elsewhere abound'.

Ah, no; the temple itself is full of vacant worship. It resounds with rash vows and babbling voices. It is the house of God, but man has made it a nest of triflers, a fair of vanity, a den of thieves. Some come to it as reckless and irreverent as if they were stepping into a neighbour's house. Some come to it and feel as if they laid the Most High under an obligation because they bring a sheaf of corn or a pair of pigeons; whilst they never listen to the lessons of God's Word, nor strive after that obedience which is better than sacrifice. Some come and rattle over empty forms of devotion, as if they would be heard because of their much speaking. And some come, and in a fit of fervour utter vows which they forget to pay; and when reminded of their promise by the 'angel' of the church – the priest or his messenger – they protest that there must be some mistake; they repudiate the vow, and say 'it was an error'.

A thoughtless resorting to the sanctuary; inattentiveness and indevotion there; and precipitancy in religious vows and promises, are still as common as in the days of Solomon. And for these evils the only remedy

is that which he prescribes – a heartfelt and abiding reverence. “*Fear thou God*”; “*God is in heaven and thou upon earth*”; “*keep thy foot when thou goest to the house of God*” (Ecclesiastes 5:7, 2, 1)

J. Hamilton (1814-1867)

It is no wonder that our outward possessions and enjoyments should be vain and vexatious; when our depraved hearts so generally render even our religious worship useless to ourselves and dishonourable to God (cf Matthew 15:7-9). And if this only source of solid comfort be perverted to vanity, how great must be that vanity! Yet alas! Not only hypocrites or ostentatious Pharisees provoke God by their vain shew of piety; but we have all cause to be humbled and ashamed on this account. How often do our wandering imaginations; our want of reverence, faith, love, gratitude, and spirituality, and the incursions of pride and vanity, render our attendance on divine ordinances little better, than a mere lip-labour, or “*the sacrifice of fools*”! This should teach us to prepare diligently for the service of God, and to go with cheerful yet with solemn steps, into His more immediate presence; to be of a teachable spirit, and studious so to learn His will, that we may not inconsiderately do evil in His sacred worship; to recollect who and where we sinful creatures are, and who that God is, unto whom we speak: that the filial boldness, with which we come to His throne of grace, may not degenerate into an irreverent familiarity.

T. Scott (1747 – 1821)

“Religion ... is the only remedy, indeed, the only comfort we have against all the troubles to which we are subject in this world; but such is the vanity of mankind, they spoil their very remedy, and take away all the virtue of that which should be their support, turning it into mere ceremony, whilst their minds remain impure, and without any true sense of God.”

S. Patrick (1626 – 1707)

MELODY IN THE HEART

“Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord” (Ephesians 5:19).

The master of the choir ... is the heart. We must look to the heart in singing, that it be purged by the Spirit, and that it be replete with spiritual affection. He plays the hypocrite who brings not the heart to this duty. One observes, “There is no tune without the heart”. Singing takes its proper rise from the heart; the voice is only the further progress. And, indeed, God is the Creator of the whole man; and therefore He will be praised not only with our tongues, but with our hearts. The apostle tells us he, “*will sing with the spirit*” (1 Corinthians 14:15). And David informs us, his heart was ready to, “*sing and give praise*” (Psalm 57:7, 8, 108:1). Augustine ¹ admonisheth us, “It is not a musical string, but a working heart that is harmonious”. The virgin Mary sang her Magnificat with her heart (cf Luke 1:46-47). And Bernard ² tells us in a tract of his that, “when we sing psalms let us take heed that we have the same thing in our mind that we warble forth in our tongue, and that our song and our heart do not run several ways”.

In the ordinance of singing, we must not make noise, but music; and the heart must make melody to the Lord ... Augustine complained of some in his time that: “they minded more the tune than the truth; more the manner than the matter; more the governing of the voice, than the raisedness of the mind”, and this was a great offence to him. Singing of psalms must only be the joyous breathing of a raised soul; and here the cleanness of the heart is more considerable than the clearness of the voice. In this service, we must study more to act the Christian than the musician. Many in singing of psalms are like the organs, whose pipes are filled only with wind. The apostle tells us we must: “*sing with our hearts*” (Colossians 3:16). We must sing David’s psalms with David’s spirit. One tells us: “*God is a Spirit*”, and He will be worshipped in spirit even in this duty (John 4:24) ...

We must sing with understanding. We must not be guided by the tune, but the words; we must mind the matter more than the music, and consider **what** we sing, as well as **how** we sing. The tune may affect the fancy; but it is the matter which affects the heart, and **that** God principally eyes. The Psalmist adviseth us in this particular (cf Psalm 47:7), and so doth the apostle (cf 1 Corinthians 14:15). Otherwise, this sweet duty would be more the work of a chorister than of a Christian; and we should be more delighted in an anthem of the musician's making, than in a song of the Spirit's making ... We must sing wisely, if we will sing gratefully; we must relish what we sing. In a word, we must sing as we must pray. Now the most rude petitioner will understand what he prays (cf 1 Corinthians 14:15). If we do not understand what we sing, it argues carelessness of spirit, or hardness of heart; and this makes the service impertinent ... God will not understand us in this service, which we understand not ourselves. One of the first pieces of the creation was light, and this must break out in every duty.

What Davenant³ suggests is very pertinent here: "In singing of psalms, our principal care must be of our hearts and to follow the wise man's counsel, to 'keep our hearts with all diligence' (cf Proverbs 4:23)". And this learned man gives us a good reason. "For they who neglect their hearts, may please men with the artificial suavity of their voice; but they will displease God with the odious impurity of their hearts." And we must watch our hearts; for vain and sinful thoughts will [pollute] this duty as well as others. Gorran⁴ well observes: "There are four conditions of right singing: there must be, (I) The alacrity of the voice; (II) The conformity of the work; (III) The attention of the heart; (IV) A rectitude towards God. And Bernard draws up an indictment against offenders in this kind: "Thou singest", saith he, "to please the people more than God; thou breakest thy voice musically, break thy will morally; thou keepest a consonancy in thy voice, keep a concord and harmony in thy manners". A holy heart and life make them that sing to chant melodiously. First purify, then thou wilt tune, thy heart ...

This likewise checks those who formalize in this duty; who act a part, not a duty. They make a noise and not music; and more provoke the eyes, than please the ears, of God. Jerome ⁵ pathetically exclaims against those formalists: “We must not”, saith he, “act as players who stretch their throats to accommodate their tongues to the matter in hand; but we must sing psalms as saints, praising God not only with our voice, but with our heart; not only with a sweet voice, but with a melting heart”. Bernard makes two conditions of grateful singing: “(I) We must sing purely, minding what we sing; nor must we act or think any thing besides; there must be no vain or vagrant thoughts; no dissonancy between the mind and the tongue. (II) We must sing strenuously, not idly, not sleepily, or perfunctorily; we must sing ... most heartily and energetically”.

Let us get an interest in Christ. If we are not in Christ, we are certainly out of tune. The singing of a sinner is natural, like the singing of a bird. But the singing of a saint is musical, like the singing of a child. Saints in singing perform a grateful duty; but sinners offer “*a vain oblation*” (cf Isaiah 1:13). It is Christ must put an acceptance upon this service, as well as others; here the altar must sanctify the gift. Christ perfumes the prayers of the saints (cf Revelation 5:8); and He must articulate the singing of the saints. Indeed, He alone can turn our tune into melody; and though in ourselves we have Esau’s garments, yet He can give us Jacob’s voice. We are accepted in Christ in this offer of love. Therefore, let us get into Christ: He can raise our voice in singing to a pleasing elevation. Let us be in Him, and then our steps shall be metrical; our pauses musical, and our very cadences shall be seraphical; our singing of psalms shall be the music of the spheres.

J. Wells (d. 1676)

[Other persons referenced are: 1. Augustine of Hippo (354 – 430), 2. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090 – 1153), 3. John Davenant (1572 – 1641), 4. Nicolas de Gorran (1232 – 1295), 5. Jerome Hieronymus (347 – 420)]

EDITORIAL

Human tragedy, and inhuman violence perpetrated between men, are as old as the Fall; and in every age, take on new and terrible forms. The challenge for Christians is knowing how to respond in a Biblical way. Given the recurrent nature of catastrophe, it is unsurprising to learn that, during the life and ministry of the Lord Jesus, incidents of this kind occurred, and dominated the public consciousness for a brief season. As is usual in these circumstances the people clamoured for answers, including from religious figureheads, as they perceived the Lord Jesus to be. His answer doubtless surprised them: *“There were present at that season some that told him of the Galilaeans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And Jesus answering said unto them, Suppose ye that these Galilaeans were sinners above all the Galilaeans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish. Or those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and slew them, think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish”* (Luke 13:1-5). Christ’s response is worthy of note and emulation.

1.) He was not drawn into political debate. To the disappointment of His patriotic Jewish audience, there was no blame or criticism levelled against the evident wickedness of the Roman regime, nor Pilate, the despotic procurator. Christ knew the source, and the end, of Pilate’s sovereignly-appointed power (cf John 19:11). That same Divine prerogative governs all the affairs of men to the present day. In measure that a Christian becomes **more** political, he is **less** Christ-like.

2.) He showed no ‘respect of persons’. The crowd laid great stress upon the fact that the victims of the first outrage were ‘Galilaeans’, who were generally derided as a remote and provincial sub-class of Jewry, intermixed with Gentiles (cf Mark 14:70, John 7:41, 52, Acts 2:7), and thus more worthy of punishment, and less deserving of sympathy. The

Lord did not join in their pejorative remarks, but emphasised that, regardless of background, the inhabitants of Galilee (from which He also came) ‘suffered these things’ equally.

3.) He refuted any ‘gradation’ in sin, or judgment. To claim that events of this kind are an extraordinary judgment upon some particular iniquity is commonplace, and also erroneous. Those who begin to rank sins and sinners are on dangerous ground. To magnify the severity of one transgression is to minimise the seriousness of another. It is to lose sight of the doctrine of total depravity, and God’s universal hatred of sin. He is angry with **all** of the wicked, **all** of the time (cf Psalm 7:11).

4.) He related temporal calamity to final judgment. The most distressing of human disasters is limited in its duration and scope. As such, it serves as a small token of the wrath of God that will ultimately be revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness (cf Romans 1:18). Christ solemnly cautions unbelievers: “*ye shall all likewise perish*”; not necessarily by a similar earthly catastrophe, but precipitated into the same lost eternity.

5.) He made the general call to repentance. Combined with the same dire warnings of condemnation is the blessed word: “*Except*”. To witness tragedies from a distance, and be exempted from them, should be a salutary lesson to the most hardened of observers, that they must use the time and opportunity granted to take steps for their preservation. Not merely in matters practical, for defence against attacks or unforeseen emergencies, but to seek spiritual deliverance by the only means possible: **repentance**. Anxieties over one’s personal security should be greatly surpassed by the fear of God, to whom judgment belongs (cf Matthew 10:28).

Sorrow in the face of such circumstances is a right response. ‘Worldly sorrow’ will, alas, achieve nothing; but “*godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation*” (cf 2 Corinthians 7:10).