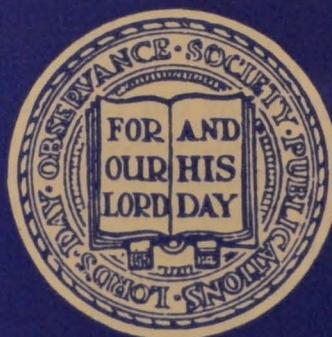


Imposition of Christian Standards on Others



by Murray A. Nash

A Sacred Duty

A question which is frequently asked of workers with the Lord's Day Observance Society goes something like this: "*What right have we to enforce our views on the majority who don't believe as we do?*" Those who ask such questions sometimes become quite heated when discussing such problems as moral issues in the community, and matters relating to the protection of the Lord's Day and the liberty of all to observe it properly.

The writer's comment on this question is to remind the questioner that the Word of God, and the Christian's understanding of it, concern the Will of the Creator; and that revealed truth is not just a matter of our opinion. Nevertheless there are certain doctrinal implications involved in this matter of the imposition of Christian standards upon others.

It is with the desire to explain some of these implications that the following study has been prepared. Many Christian people, even some of maturity and experience as well as the new convert, find this matter a very serious moral problem. As it affects much of our witness and public testimony concerning our Lord, the writer has tried to show how this subject, especially in relation to the Lord's Day, has an important association with a number of Bible truths. The study will seek to define what is meant by "Christian Standards"; and will then go on to show that subjects such as the Lord's Day and the sanctity of the Family represent the gracious and loving provision of the Creator for all men at all times; not just for the Jew of the Old Testament, nor even just for the Christian of the New Testament. God is a loving Creator, Who has made provision for the lives of His creatures which we reject at our peril, and it is part of the Christian's sacred duty to tell others of this provision, and of this peril, within the context of our preaching Christ, Who is the Father's most wonderful and glorious provision.

From the outset of such an enquiry as this, we must be careful to distinguish those standards, which we, as Christians, are authorised in the Scripture to hold up as a standard of life for the community at large, from those which apply specifically to the Church. "Christian Standards", we must always remember, are those traits of character and behaviour peculiar to those who are born again. In this connection one refers to the love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, and temperance mentioned in Galatians, chapter five, under the general heading of the fruits of the Spirit, or the signs of the crucifying of the flesh in those who are In Christ. Similarly, the Apostle John in his first Epistle, tells us that belief that Jesus is Christ, overcoming the world, abstinence from sin, freedom from the touch of the evil one, incapacity to continue in sin, doing righteousness, and love of God and one's neighbour, are also the fruits of the indwelling Holy Spirit, and therefore peculiar to the Regenerate. It must be clear that these qualities belong alone to the applied work of the Sovereign Spirit in the lives of the regenerate Elect. Apart from its being impossible to enforce such qualities on the unregenerate, it must be seen that even the thought of doing so is blasphemous — for man must not take upon himself that work which belongs alone to the Holy Ghost.

God's Moral Law

However, this is not to say that God the Creator has no concern or interest in the behaviour of those who are not regenerate, both those who will ultimately be regenerate by virtue of their being elect in the Grace of God, and also those who are not elect, a point important to this present enquiry. All mankind, so far as behaviour in the world is concerned, is answerable to a divine Law, or expression of the Creator's Will.

Being answerable to the Creator's will or Law applies to the Christian in his daily life, of course. For the Believer, the Law is the law of freedom, but this is not to say that we may do as we please. The Christian enjoys a freedom from the bondage of evil, and is ushered into a freedom

of good, but this implies the rightful use of such a liberty. Believers need the Law as a rule because of the reality of their freedom, for true freedom is freedom to do right. Forgiveness does not set men at liberty to commit more or worse sins. If we compare the lot of man after the Fall — at which he found his “superior” knowledge brought only degradation and bondage to evil — with that state he enjoyed in innocence, we find that freedom from sin involved him in the glorious possibility to obey perfectly the revealed will of God. Redemption, and the subsequent deliverance from bondage to Satan, restores in the Regenerate the possibility of obedience. Yet when obedience is spoken of, it must be asked, obedience to what? To self? To desire? To the accepted standards of an unregenerate, evil society? No; surely to the perfect will of God, revealed to us in His Moral Law, which is, of course, set out and described for us in the Ten Commandments.

The matter goes beyond this point, however. If God is concerned for the daily lives of His chosen and redeemed people, He is also concerned for the general state of man — even if man as a generality is not in the least concerned for God. “Our Puritan forbears could never insist too much on the fact that God is the Sovereign of all He has made, with the right to govern all things according to His will. This right to command resides in the majesty of His person and is expressed in the absoluteness of His will”¹. “He that said what we should Be, to Him it certainly belongeth to say what we should Do”².

Our Understanding of Sin and the Law

It should be pointed out that, at the root of the whole question facing us, is that of the nature of sin — lack of conformity to God’s will or Law³—and the Christian’s understanding of what sin is with reference to the nature of God. Sin is the “downright opposition to God and His Law” in which “the whole authority of God, and therein God Himself, is despised”⁴. One of the tragedies of the Church in our time is that while so many Christians are well versed in the affairs of the world (and properly so)

our knowledge of God's Word is often failing. From such ignorance stem the confusion and irrelevance which are the marks of institutional Christianity today.

Mention would not be out of place here of the timeless nature of the Moral Law, or Ten Commandments.⁵ There are those who say that the Decalogue applied only to the Hebrews, prior to the birth of the Christian Church on the Day of Pentecost. Against such a view there are many cogent arguments. Dr. J. I. Packer points out, 'the law of God is the permanent, unchanging expression of God's eternal and unchangeable holiness and justice. God could not change this Law, or set it aside, in His dealings with men, without denying Himself'.⁶ A careful perusal of the relevant Scriptures will show that, although in His atoning work Christ delivers man from the curse of the Law, from the duty of keeping the Ceremonial Law, and from the necessity of keeping the Law as the ground of his Justification, there is no hint that man has ever been delivered from the duty of serving the Lord with all his heart, mind and strength, and similarly loving Him.⁷ As the late Principal Kevan put it, quoting from John Barret the Puritan, 'An obligation to obey our Creator, is a natural resultancy from our condition, as we are creatures. If God's commands, as they are His commands, do not constitute and determine man's duty, and lay a necessary tie upon man to obedience, then God has lost His authority over man. Man, therefore, is subject to the Law by nature, for the Moral Law binds the consciences of all men at all times, even of blind and ignorant persons, that neither know the most of it nor care to know it. To bind, in this moral sense, is to have such an authority, as the conscience ought to submit itself unto. The duty of obedience is based on a Law, whose obligation arises from our very nature and being, and is founded in the relation between God and man. To deny perfect obedience to be due from man, is to deny him to be man. Whatever incapacities may have come about through the entry of sin into human life, man's obligation to God is indelible and the Decalogue obliges all, to the world's end'.⁸

Within the Creation narrative of the first two chapters of Genesis, we find three principles; first, that the creation is for the glory of God — “Behold, it was very good”; second, that a day is sanctified for the special service of God, to interchange with man’s work and use of the created environment — “God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it”; and, third, that the family was ordained as the God-given unit of society in which man was to live — “A man shall cleave unto his wife.” These three principles are enshrined within the Decalogue, in that same order; the Commandments merely ratify and enlarge upon these creation laws. The Ceremonial Law, by which the Jew approached the Moral Law, came after Sinai and must not be confused with the Decalogue, and is fulfilled and superseded in Christ. Compare Paul’s argument in Galatians 3, about the same Ceremonial Law not affecting the principle of justification by faith, which was revealed to Abraham years before the Ceremonial Law was given.

One of the clearest evidences of the obligatory nature of the Moral Law is found in fallen man’s resentment against it; sinful man resists the Law because, by its holy obligations, the Law first resists him, for without the Law, sin is dead.⁹ If we analyse just a little further, we shall see that, bound up in the question of God’s revealed will in Law-giving, are three of the most abused doctrines of the Christian faith — doctrines nevertheless which are absolutely central to our proper understanding of God and ourselves. We refer to the Bible’s teaching on the Creatorship of God; abused by so-called “science” and the evolutionary hypothesis and even, it would appear, by an increasing number of professing Christians who have blindly imbibed the doctrines of science. Secondly, there is the question of the Authority, or Sovereignty, of God. Misunderstanding of this doctrine has rent the Church into two camps for centuries, a misunderstanding which gives rise to a completely false conception both of the nature of the Church and the work of its Saviour, and of the very duties of that Church — the question now being examined. Thirdly, there is the matter of the duty of man and his morality, issues receiving more and

more abuse from the ungodly until the situation is reached where immorality is legalised in the life of a nation, the very denial of the ability of God to say what is best for man. These matters are mentioned here because they have a direct bearing upon the subject of the Sabbath, which refers to God's Creatorship, Authority or Sovereignty, and His moral demands upon man. How rich and extensive is the teaching of the Lord's Day, and how we should treasure this provision of God's Grace, for it points us to Him!

The Crux of the Matter

As has been said, all three of these facets of Bible truth are denied in some measure or other — but the denial of any truth does not invalidate that truth, and we are concerned here with truth as it is revealed in Scripture. The Christian's attitude to sin is the crux of the matter, and upon this depends our testimony to men. Sin is either condemned or condoned; we cannot be neutral.

Sin is condemned by the Christian in two ways; first in the realm of Moral Influence — which is, of course, taken by the Modernist as the beginning and end of his "message"; and secondly in preaching the Gospel, in which sin (law-breaking) and repentance and the finished work of Christ are the elements.

These two strands of teaching may be seen in the light of the gracious purposes of God towards man. Preaching the Gospel has to do with the Particular, or Saving, Grace of God, while moral influence or restraining influence on sin has to do with the General, or Common, Grace of God. Just as God is concerned regarding the behaviour of the unregenerate, and acts towards them in a particular way, so the Church plays its part in both the saving economy of God and in the realm of His "Common Grace".

Common Grace

Berkhof, in his Systematic Theology,¹⁰ defines this Common or Communal Grace very clearly. "Calvin

developed", he says, "alongside the doctrine of Particular Grace the doctrine of Common Grace. This is a grace which is communal, does not pardon nor purify human nature, and does not effect the salvation of sinners. It curbs the destructive power of sin, maintains in a measure the moral order of the universe, thus making an orderly life possible, distributes in varying degrees gifts and talents among men, promotes the development of science and art, and showers untold blessings upon the children of men". It should not be thought that there are two kinds of Grace; rather does God manifest His grace in a variety of ways. The highest expression of the grace of God is that which results in the removal of guilt and the bestowal of salvation. But God also bestows natural blessings, and restrains the devastating influence and development of sin in the world. This restraint is sometimes withdrawn in part or in whole, such as in the giving up of individuals to the wages of their own lust and sin, as mentioned in Romans, chapter one; also in the affairs of nations, when those nations persistently rebel against the law of God and pass from the scene of time; or even in the affairs of the entire Universe at the time of the Great Tribulation prophesied for the Latter Days. Berkhof speaks of "those general operations of the Holy Spirit whereby, without renewing the heart, He exercises such a moral influence on man through His general or special revelation, that sin is restrained, order is maintained in social life, and civil righteousness is promoted; and also those general blessings, such as rain and sunshine, food and drink, clothing and shelter, which God imparts to all men indiscriminately where and in what measure it seems good to Him".¹¹ The evidences of God's provision of material goodness serve to prove His provision in the former, moral, sphere, that is of provision of order and propriety within the community.

While it must be understood that "Common Grace" is in no way a factor directly concerned with the salvation of the individual, it nevertheless operates in favour of the work of the Church — for instance it is by the Grace of God that in this nation there are laws which protect freedom of religion and religious worship. The purposes

of God in Time are concerned with the calling out of a body of people for His service and glory, i.e. the Church. Therefore it could be said that God deals with Society at large in order to facilitate His Effectual Calling of sinners to salvation.

It is this fact that Common Grace has no direct bearing (albeit an indirect one) upon salvation, which confuses some Christians. They forget that salvation is not the *only* purpose of God — although the highest and most wonderful. He nevertheless has an intimate concern with the affairs of His creation, no matter how rebellious that creation may be. His exercise of Grace in a common or communal way is a factor both in the exercise of God's authority, and also in His taking pleasure in the work of His hands.

Its Application

Now it may be asked just how, in a practical way, does God operate graciously in this communal way? We understand something of how He operates in a saving way, through the testimony of the Church and the preaching of the Word — His methods from all time and still the only ones in spite of what many would like us to think! In the exercise of Common Grace, the Church again must play a prominent part. First, there is the revelation of the will of God with regard to life and its conduct through the light of revelation in the Bible. Certain standards are laid down, such as family discipline and respect, and the sanctity of life and property. In the exposition of Scripture, the Church has the primary duty.

Attention should be drawn to the often overlooked connection between God's Common Grace, and God's Moral Law as we have it in the Ten Commandments. As has been shown, the New Testament clarifies the fact that the works of the Law can never be the ground of the sinner's justification. It is upon the foundation of the oblationary, or sacrificial, obedience of Christ that the sinner is both declared and constituted righteous in the eyes of God and His just demands revealed in the Law.

Yet, as has also been shown, the Law is nevertheless an eternal standard, universally binding. It is not only that standard by which sin is judged; it is the declaration, from the lips of the Creator Himself, of those standards of behaviour not only demanded of all men, but necessary for all men for the proper maintenance of life. In other words, the standards of the Moral Law represent, in legislative form, the provisions for life of God's Common Grace. By way of illustration, the form of the Decalogue shall speak for itself.

As mentioned earlier within the context of the Creation Ordinances of Genesis, the Decalogue takes the form, in analysis, of a triad; the first section proclaims the principle that life is for the glory of God; next come the Sabbath and Family principles. God has so constituted mankind that we need the Sabbath rest, not only to remind us of the spiritual realities of life, such as our duties towards God as Creator and Redeemer—which are of greatest importance—but also to provide for our need of one day's rest in seven for physical and mental health. The writer once heard a Christian gentleman say that he was not in the least interested in the medical or physical aspects of Sabbath observance; but this attitude fails to take into account the Lord's gracious provision for our physical health, with which, after all, we are enabled to serve Him best, and to demonstrate the wonders of His creative power. Therefore we may say that this Creation Ordinance of the Sabbath or Lord's Day, protected and ratified in the Moral Law, is one of the highest expressions of the provisions of God's Common Grace. We cannot say that a man is saved just because he keeps the Sabbath. Yet his desecration of the Day is a sign of his depravity, and need for the Particular or Saving Grace of God.

Inextricably bound up with the Sabbath, both in the Creation narrative and in the Law, is the Family; and the relationship sustained by the Sabbath to the Creation Ordinance, the Moral Law and the provisions of Common Grace, is shared by the Family unit. In modern times it is fashionable to question the need for the family. A series of lectures has been given on the Radio to this

end; everyone is familiar with the efforts of political systems such as Communism to break up the family. It is a tragedy to see the current decline in parental discipline and its companion decline of respect for parents. These things go hand in hand with a falling away from Church and Sunday School attendance, i.e. desecration of the Lord's Day. The Sabbath protects the family just as much as it proclaims the glory of God; so full and perfect is the provision of Common Grace. Equally, the family unit protects the Sabbath and its proper observance, yet we are building for ourselves a society in which it is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain either.

It is no wonder that the devil, in his many disguises of humanism, atheism and idolatry, attacks these institutions, as he is doing so effectively in the present time. The Sabbath speaks of the Creator, while the family, in the New Testament, is shown to be a type of the Church, the Bride of Christ — God's New Creation.

Although there are many contemporary attacks on the Sabbath and the family, it is important to remember the numerous records of such events in the Old Testament Scriptures, for only God's Word is a sufficient basis upon which to build doctrine that will lead to correct practice. The history of Israel is given to us as an example of how God deals with nations; it was His divine plan to reveal Himself to man through the Children of Israel, and the fact that they sinned so consistently and lamentably does not alter the fact that this purpose is fulfilled.

Time and again the nation was recalled to the Moral Law by the Prophets' demands that it should sanctify the Sabbath — see, for example, Jeremiah 17, and Isaiah 58. At the same time, the very pagan religion with which the Hebrews became contaminated was a system of ceremonial prostitution, both spiritual and physical, the only result of which could be the ruin of family and marital harmony, as well as calling down the wrath of God. Are we surprised at the drastic punishments meted out by the Lord upon this nation? If so, it is because there is lack in understanding the nature of sin. It is fearful to recall how the British nation is just as guilty of immorality,

idolatry and sabbath-desecration; how long will the Lord suffer this people?

The Sabbath, therefore, together with the Family, is the first example of the provision of God's Common Grace towards man, and is also the first illustration of it, explaining the nature of God's gracious action towards mankind in general. The Christian's testimony regarding the Lord's Day is, then, an essential part of his witness for the Master, for it is only when sin is defined and explained, that the Saviour can be set forth.

On the matter of the Church's testimony in the realm of Common Grace, an important subject is that of civil government. The Belgic Confession states "We believe that our gracious God, because of the depravity of mankind, hath appointed kings, princes and magistrates, willing that the world should be governed by certain laws and policies; to the end that the dissoluteness of men might be restrained, and all things carried on among them with good order and decency".¹² The Westminster Confession¹³ appoints the Church to give "advice for satisfaction of conscience, if they be thereto required by the civil magistrate".

It must also be remembered that for some, the law of the land is the only law they know, being ignorant of God's Law which is the ultimate declaration of the nature of sin. If the law of the land is changed, the moral outlook of many changes with it, and often Christians are expected to accept such changes because of public opinion. This state of affairs did not apply in Canaan, nor does it apply now in the thinking of God. It is not the law that should be changed because of public opinion, but public opinion that must be changed as the Church of God speaks with authority, condemning sin in Scriptural terms.

Some Scriptures

Mention must be made of a few of the passages of Scripture where this restraining influence on sin is exercised by the Lord; where the element of corruption that entered the life of the human race is not permitted, for the present, to accomplish to the full its disintegrating

work. Calvin says,¹⁴ "We ought to consider that, notwithstanding the corruption of our nature, there is some room for divine grace, such grace as, without purfying it, may lay it under internal restraint. For, did the Lord let every mind loose to wanton in its lusts, doubtless there is not a man who would not show that his nature is capable of all the crimes with which Paul charges it. This restraint may be internal or external, but does not change the heart". The truth of Calvin's words may be seen in modern times as moral restraints are being more and more rejected, and we have the wave of drug addiction, illegitimate births, broken marriages and other evils sweeping over our nation, with all the attendant miseries and corrupting effects on society.

The Scripture speaks of a striving of the Spirit with men which does not lead to repentance. In Genesis 6:3 we read of those who rebelled, and vexed God's Holy Spirit; therefore He was turned to be their enemy and fought against them. Stephen, in his apology (Acts 7:51) accuses the Jews of his day of resisting the Holy Spirit, even as did their fathers of old. In 1 Samuel 16:14 it is described how God withdrew His Spirit from Saul; and in Hebrews 6:4-6 it is taught that it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, if they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put Him to an open shame.

Passages which show that God restrains sin in various ways include Genesis 20:6, where God tells Abimelech that He restrained him from touching Sarah and thereby sinning; and in Genesis 31:7 it is shown that it was God who suffered Laban not to hurt Jacob when he served for Rachel.

The revelation given in the book of Job of God's ultimate control over the evil doings of the prince of evil, Satan, is important. In 2 Kings 19:25 Isaiah demonstrates that Sennacherib, the wicked king, is controlled in his

military affairs by the Lord, who has a hook in the king's nose and a bridle in his lips with which God will turn him back.

Lastly, Romans 13:1-4 is most relevant: "Let every soul be subject to the higher powers. For there is no power but of God; the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? Do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same; for he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain; for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil."

Conclusion

This aspect of Bible teaching, known as Common Grace, then, is an essential constituent of the Christian's message. It has reference to God's creatorship and authority; to His will and demands upon His creatures. It is only when these things have been declared that there is the foundation upon which to build the structure of the Gospel of Free Grace, and salvation from sin. For what is sin but the breaking of God's express commands? The Lord knows what is best, not only for His children by Grace but for all mankind, and the message concerning Him has been committed to the Church: to all born-again believers. If life is to continue in an orderly way, sin must be restrained. If we are to be free to preach Christ crucified, we must protect the liberty to do so granted to us by God — often at the cost of the blood of His saints in an age now long past. A Godless society will tend to destroy itself by its own lusts, apart from the restraint of God's Law, and ultimately, of course, of God Himself.

Have we the right to "enforce" Biblical standards on others? Are we justified in insisting upon the family unit as essential to life? Are we correct, in our Christian

testimony, to protect the nature of the Lord's Day, and to insist that legalised Sabbath-desecration is national wickedness? Have we the right to see that the Day is properly available to all as a day of rest and worship?

We hold it is more than a right; it is a sacred duty to hold up God's perfect will and Law before men and do all within our power to see that the precepts given to us are respected, obeyed and loved.

If truth be not diffused, Error will be.
If God and His Word are not known and received,
The Devil and his works will gain the ascendancy;
If the evangelical volumes do not reach every hamlet,
The pages of a corrupt and licentious literature will;
If the power of the Gospel is not felt throughout the
length and breadth of the land
Anarchy and misrule, degradation and misery, corrup-
tion and darkness,
Will reign without mitigation, nor end.

(DANIEL WEBSTER)

Quotations

- ¹ The Grace of Law, Kevan, p. 47.
- ² Op. cit., p. 48.
- ³ I John 3:4.
- ⁴ The Grace of Law, p. 49.
- ⁵ See L.D.O.S. Publication "The Perpetuity of the Moral Law".
- ⁶ The Thought of Richard Baxter, J. I. Packer, pp. 303-5.
- ⁷ See "Redemption Accomplished and Applied", by Professor John Murray, pp. 43ff.
- ⁸ Grace of Law, p. 172.
- ⁹ Op. cit., p. 173.
- ¹⁰ Systematic Theology, p. 432 et seq.
- ¹¹ Op. cit.
- ¹² Article 36.
- ¹³ Article 31, para. 5.
- ¹⁴ Institutes, II 3, 3.

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