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The Link

NORTH ROAD CHAPEL

BIDEFORD

MERCY NOT SACRIFICE

The following article is taken from a sermon originally preached at
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“O Ephraim, what shall I do unto thee? O Judah, what shall I do unto thee? for your goodness is as a morning cloud, and as the early dew it goeth away. Therefore have I hewed them by the prophets; I have slain them by the words of My mouth: and thy judgments are as the light that goeth forth. For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings. But they like men have transgressed the covenant: there have they dealt treacherously against Me. Gilead is a city of them that work iniquity, and is polluted with blood. And as troops of robbers wait for a man, so the company of priests murder in the way by consent: for they commit lewdness. I have seen an horrible thing in the house of Israel: there is the whoredom of Ephraim, Israel is defiled. Also, O Judah, he hath set an harvest for thee, when I returned the captivity of My people.” (Hosea 6:4-11)

“*What shall I do unto thee?*” To the unenlightened reader, this verse could be seen as the Almighty being faced with a problem; the situation was such that He was now in a dilemma. This, of course, is never the case. We who, through grace, know something of our God – albeit but a little – have sufficient to know that He is omnipotent and sovereign. It is He who controls and orders all things, at all times, and in all places. Never is He faced with a situation which is problematical; neither has He ever to take emergency measures, for the simple reason that He worketh all things after the counsel of His own will, and always in the ultimate for His glory. Nevertheless, in Holy Scripture the Supreme Being is on occasions presented in such a way as to resemble mortal man. For example, “*It repenteth Me that I have made them*” (Genesis 6:7). From such a statement we must not conclude that God felt He had made a mistake, or that He now was altering course. Can you not see how vital it is to hold Scripture in its entirety? Never base a belief upon a verse in

isolation, for by so doing one can turn the truth of God into a lie. We know that the God of heaven is immutable. He never changes course. How reads Acts 15:18? *“Known unto God are all His works from the beginning of the world.”*

In Isaiah chapter 1 God pours out His complaint against Judah and says they ‘wearied Him’ (cf Isaiah 1:14). Again, we are not to conclude that these people had worn out their Maker. No, no! These are figures of speech used by the Holy Spirit to assist us in understanding the mind of Jehovah; and although they are a very effective means, we must never misconstrue such verses so as to bring Deity down to our level.

Having said this, we return to our verse: *“O Ephraim, what shall I do unto thee? O Judah, what shall I do unto thee? For your goodness is as a morning cloud, and as the early dew it goeth away”* (Hosea 6:4). Both the Northern Kingdom and Judah had apostatised. They all had the divine mandate. Remember, God’s law had been given them, but they had so diluted its truth and introduced their own devices, that the true worship of God was well-nigh extinct; and in life they were no better than the idolaters. In fact, oft-times they were worse, as we have seen from other studies. Did not God at times even raise up heathen kings to rebuke the moral conduct of His people? Now He says “Ephraim! Judah! What shall I do?” This is no dilemma. “Ye fleshly sons of Abraham, I am contending no more. You have completely forgotten the terms of the covenant. I have not. Now what shall I do? My covenant shall stand”.

We must remember that this is a controversy (cf Hosea 4:1, 12:2), or a lawsuit, which God is conducting, and we are now on to the second charge: ‘no mercy’, as it is rendered in chapter 4 verse 1. The underlying thought is, ‘the absence of regard and love which God demanded’. So in this charge Jehovah goes on to prove His case: “Your goodness is as a morning cloud, and as the early dew it goeth away. Israel, you are so unreliable. This has been typical of you right throughout your history. There have been times when you did repent,

when you put away the strange gods, when you turned your faces toward Me, and true love and praise flowed out; but it does not last. It is like the early morning mist. It disappears when the sun gets up. This is not in keeping with My covenant made with you. Your love is to be patterned after My love”.

How reads the Psalm: “*Thy mercy [margin ‘lovingkindness’] O Lord, is in the heavens; and Thy faithfulness reacheth unto the clouds ... How excellent is Thy lovingkindness, O God!*” (Psalm 36:5, 7). “My mercy, My love to you, has been ongoing and unchanging; but you have not returned that love. Your history is one of backsliding and unfaithfulness. Until now you have forsaken Me and become a harlot, committing spiritual adultery, and that continually.”

The case continues, verse 5: “*Therefore have I hewed them by the prophets; I have slain them by the words of My mouth: and thy judgments are as the light that goeth forth.*” Israel is now reminded of all the efforts which God had made to train His people. “I have hewed them,” He says. The picture is that of a stonemason hewing the rock, preparing it for building stone. We catch the imagery from such Scriptures as: “*And David commanded to gather together the strangers that were in the land of Israel; and he set masons to hew wrought stones to build the house of God*” (1 Chronicles 22:2); and “*Wisdom hath builded her house, she hath hewn out her seven pillars*” (Proverbs 9:1).

You see, the picture is quarrying, hammering, chiselling, sanding, until fitted for its ordained use and purpose. “I have done this with Israel by My prophets”, says Jehovah. We think of that noble race – Moses, David, yes, they were prophets. Our minds turn to such great reformers as Elijah and Elisha – what hammering God wrought by them! “*I have slain them by the words of My mouth*”. Just take Ahab as an example of this (cf 1 Kings 21:22-25). This is but one case, but again and again did God act in this way.

Verse 5 concludes: *“Thy judgments are as the light that goeth forth.”* These judgments which are now upon you overwhelmingly prove that God is but carrying out His part in the terms. What were those terms? *“But if ye will not hearken unto Me, and will not do all these commandments; And if ye shall despise My statutes, or if your soul abhor My judgments, so that ye will not do all My commandments, but that ye break My covenant: I also will do this unto you; I will even appoint over you terror, consumption, and the burning ague, that shall consume the eyes, and cause sorrow of heart: and ye shall sow your seed in vain, for your enemies shall eat it. And I will set My face against you, and ye shall be slain before your enemies: they that hate you shall reign over you; and ye shall flee when none pursueth you”* (Leviticus 26:14-17); *“But it shall come to pass, if thou wilt not hearken unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to observe to do all His commandments and His statutes which I command thee this day; that all these curses shall come upon thee, and overtake thee”* (Deuteronomy 28:15).

“For hundreds of years, Israel and Judah, I have been patient. Prophet after prophet have I sent unto you, warning upon warning has been given. Now it is coming to light that My judgments are at length going forth. Israel! My covenant shall stand. It can be no other”.

The God of heaven is immutable. He never scraps a document, or fails to implement a single clause. Look at a word in Amos: *“The Lord God hath sworn by his holiness, that, lo, the days shall come upon you, that He will take you away with hooks, and your posterity with fishhooks”* (Amos 4:2). All this is legal; this is pertaining to law; hence such words as ‘covenant’, ‘The Lord hath sworn’, ‘The Lord hath a lawsuit against thee’.

We see the prosecution stepping up the evidence as we come to Hosea 6:6: *“For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.”* God knew what was in their minds, and that they would allege that they sacrificed regularly, and offered their burnt

offerings without fail. Yes, Israel kept up all the ceremonies. But what is that to the Lord if the heart is not right? Are we not on the Beatitudes again – heart purity (cf Matthew 5:8)? External ceremony is worthless to God. It is the offering of a heart which is pure before Him, and observed according to His law, which alone is acceptable.

This lesson was set out at the very beginning of the race. The first sacrifices ever offered – Cain and Abel in Genesis chapter 4. God must be worshipped in the manner which He has appointed, and as the product of inward faith (cf Hebrews 11:4). Even the slaying of animals and the shedding of blood is not necessarily acceptable. Indeed, it can be an abomination unto the Lord. Sacrifices can be carried out by the heathen. In fact, sacrifices are even likened unto murder if not observed aright! Look for a moment at Isaiah 66:3 *“He that killeth an ox is as if he slew a man; he that sacrificeth a lamb, as if he cut off a dog’s neck; he that offereth an oblation, as if he offered swine’s blood; he that burneth incense, as if he blessed an idol. Yea, they have chosen their own ways, and their soul delighteth in their abominations.”* To sacrifice if the heart is not right is to abuse the ordinance. It is shedding blood in vain; indeed it is as murder.

“To bring your lambs as a sacrifice when your lives are so far from Me is as if you sacrificed a dog, or offered Me swine’s blood – animals which were an abomination: dogs and swine. This is how I view all your assembling”, saith Jehovah. “You have chosen your own ways. That which your soul delighteth in – your abomination – you prefer your own ideas, and have brought all these extras into your worship, which I never sanctioned.”

“This is proof positive of two things. First: you rejected knowledge – set aside My mandate. Second: no true love for Me, or else you would not do it. So now, please don’t waste your time sacrificing. I may have ordained offerings and shedding of blood, but not after this manner. Why – I ordained sacrifices to portray and to typify the one great sacrifice of My only begotten Son, and you have so corrupted these

ordinances that you link them with golden calves, sacred prostitution, high places and groves. No – please do not bring My Name into this any longer, for I am not your God.”

Isaiah comes in here with a forceful word: *“To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices unto me? saith the Lord: I am full of the burnt offerings of rams, and the fat of fed beasts; and I delight not in the blood of bullocks, or of lambs, or of he goats. 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”* (Isaiah 1:11-13). What a word is this to the church today, with all its paraphernalia, her trappings, her gimmickry, side-shows, and carnival!

“But they like men have transgressed the covenant: there have they dealt treacherously against Me” (Hosea 6:7). If you have a margin in your Authorised Version you will find the alternate rendering: “like Adam”. We are right back on the covenants here – the first covenant. Did not that first covenant demand implicit obedience? And by his disobedience did not Adam deal treacherously against his Creator? Treachery means disloyal, to ‘turn traitor’. Just like Adam in that first covenant, so Israel had turned disloyal under God’s covenant with them.

“Gilead is a city of them that work iniquity, and is polluted with blood” (Hosea 6:8). Gilead – not really a city; it is a large area of the northern kingdom east of Jordan. Merrill Unger suggests that Hosea terms it a city because: “it was a rendezvous for evil men. The whole land was as full of evildoers as a city is full of men” – is his interpretation.

“And as troops of robbers wait for a man, so the company of priests murder in the way by consent; for they commit lewdness” (Hosea 6:9). What a verse! Just as troops of robbers lie in wait for their captures, so do the priests, states Hosea. The religious leaders were lewd, immoral men,

promoting the practices of the groves and high places, mixing elements of God's worship with the practice of Baalism. Murderers! How reads Hosea 5:2: "*profound to make slaughter*" – literally destroying the testimony, whilst appearing genuine; and they do it by consent. They concur. There is agreement. They are united. Brethren and sisters, I tell you, it is a tragedy when apostates unite. Ecumenism? Yes, they appear profound, but the devil is behind it. It is geared to destroy the testimony – to slaughter, to lay waste, yea, to kill-off the true witness of the church of Jesus Christ.

"I have seen an horrible thing in the house of Israel: there is the whoredom of Ephraim, Israel is defiled" (Hosea 6:10). "It is a horrible thing" says Jehovah. "I see it; I have witnessed it right throughout their history. It is whoredom. Israel is an adulteress. She is not faithful. Yes, the case is being proved. No mercy. No true love." Yet these were the seed of Abraham. They were also the offspring of that man who clung to God until he received the blessing (Genesis 32:28-29). There it was that his name was changed from Jacob to Israel, which meant 'a prince with God'. Now that name had become defiled.

Then the chapter closes: "*Also, O Judah, He hath set an harvest for thee, when I returned the captivity of My people*" (Hosea 6:11). A warning to Judah to examine themselves whether they were still God's people or not. If they followed the same road as the northern kingdom, then they must return, lest they too harvest the fruits of apostasy. There are the children of Abraham by natural generation, and the children of Abraham by faith: two companies within the one nation, one apostate, the other the true. The prophets of God had to deal with both. Invariably they addressed the whole body – all the nation – yet knowing of the remnant within. Hence there are still exhortations, promises and words of comfort inserted among the threats and judgments. What a message this is! How its relevance stands out as a beacon today. May it be heeded by us all.

W. H. Molland (1920 – 2012)

LONG SHADOWS

6. Times and Seasons

Anyone who has regularly attended a church or denomination where the worship is prescribed by a book or other directory, and where a regular itinerary of special events forms an ecclesiastical calendar, will be acquainted with the annual cycle that develops. In Anglicanism, for example, there is Ash Wednesday early in the year, followed by Lent, building towards 'Passiontide' – Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday and Easter Day. Thereafter comes Ascension, Pentecost and Trinity Sunday. As the summer progresses into autumn, Lammas, Michaelmas and Harvest Festivals might be observed, and All Saints' Day, before December ushers in Advent season. Then 'Christmas', St Stephen's Day, and with the new year, Epiphany. Thus another circuit commences. It has a comfortable familiarity, and perhaps feels essentially 'Christian'. In fact, the Book of Common Prayer is sufficiently detailed that the Scripture readings, Psalms and prayers for every Sunday in the year are all defined in advance. The systems of the Roman Catholic and Orthodox churches (from which it was derived) are even more thorough and prescriptive.

This recurring pattern of 'high days and holy days', this liturgical calendar, might seem to convey a sense of Christian-ness. But we must look back to an earlier era, and the religious practice of the Jews. In the book of Exodus, ahead of the tenth plague and the escape from Egypt of the Hebrews, God directed the keeping of the Passover on the fourteenth day of the month Abib saying: "*This month shall be unto you the beginning of months: it shall be the first month of the year to you*" (Exodus 12:2). And so it became. The first, also, of many more appointed days and times. After the giving of the Law at Sinai, a much fuller schedule of religious occasions appeared. Leviticus 23 gives a useful summary, but the principal events were these:

New Moons: the commencement of each month, thus denoted, was to be marked with the blowing of a trumpet, and sacrifices (cf Numbers 10:10, 28:11-15).

Passover: on the fourteenth day of the first month, with associated observances, to commemorate deliverance (cf Exodus 12). A second Passover was kept by any disqualified or unable on the first occasion (cf Numbers 9:10-14).

Feast of Unleavened Bread: from fifteenth to twenty-first day of the first month, following on from the Passover, including an additional ‘extraordinary’ sabbath (cf Exodus 13:3-10).

Offering of the Firstfruits: “*on the morrow after the sabbath*” of the Unleavened Bread feast, when the earliest examples of the harvest were presented before the Lord (cf Leviticus 23:10-14).

Feast of Weeks: observed a full seven weeks later, to mark the completion of wheat and grape harvest (cf Deuteronomy 16:9-12), by virtue of that length of time (50 days) afterwards known as Pentecost.

Feast of Trumpets: “*in the seventh month, on the first day of the month, ye shall have an holy convocation; ye shall do no servile work: it is a day of blowing the trumpets unto you*” (Numbers 29) with ten days of appointed sacrifices.

Day of Atonement: following the feast of trumpets, on the tenth day of the seventh month, the one occasion in the year that the High Priest entered the Most Holy Place to make atonement for the people (cf Leviticus 16:1-34)

Feast of Tabernacles: from fifteenth to twenty-first day of the seventh month, at the end of harvest ingathering, when the people dwelt symbolically in ‘booths’ (cf Leviticus 23:33–43).

The Solemn Assembly: A concluding holy convocation on the twenty-second day of the seventh month (Numbers 29:35-38).

Pilgrimages: of the occasions already described, three were associated with assembly of the available population in Jerusalem. These were the Feasts of Unleavened Bread, Weeks and Tabernacles (cf Deuteronomy 16:16-17).

Sabbatical Years: in addition to the annual cycle, there were other periodic ceremonies. Every seventh year, the land was to lie fallow and debts were cancelled (cf Leviticus 25:1-7). After seven repetitions of this pattern, the fiftieth year was **the Jubilee**, in which slaves were emancipated and land returned to original tribal ownership (cf Leviticus 25:8-55).

Post-Exilic Feasts: by the end of the Old Testament era, the observance of other dates due to association with the events of the exile is evident. Fasts were marked in the fourth, fifth, seventh and tenth months (cf Zechariah 8:19), though apparently at the instigation of the people. After the deliverance effected through Esther, the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the twelfth month were marked (cf Esther 9:20-23). Another new ceremony, the Feast of Dedication had been introduced during the inter-testamental period (cf John 10:22).

If this constant round of mandatory festivals sounds unremitting or burdensome – it was! Their very repetitiveness was intended to demonstrate their weakness (cf Hebrews 10:1-3). In practice, for long periods of Israel's history, the Passover was neglected (cf 2 Chronicles 30:5), and the principle of a Sabbatic Year went unobserved for the entire duration of the kings (2 Chronicles 36:21). Those feasts that were maintained quickly became a hollow formality, resented by the people: *“When will the new moon be gone, that we may sell corn? and the sabbath, that we may set forth wheat?”* (Amos 8:5); *“ye have profaned it, in that ye say, The table of the Lord is polluted; and the fruit thereof, even His meat, is contemptible. Ye said also, Behold, what a weariness is it! and ye have snuffed at it, saith the Lord of hosts; and ye brought that which was torn, and the lame, and the sick; thus ye brought an offering: should I accept this of your hand? saith the Lord . . . Ye have said, It is vain to serve God: and what profit*

is it that we have kept His ordinance, and that we have walked mournfully before the Lord of hosts?” (Malachi 1:12-13, 3:14). Festal seasons were also subject to all manner of abuses, from the early days of the Tabernacle (cf 1 Samuel 2:12-17, 22-25) to the end of the Temple era (cf Mark 11:15-17).

God’s divine opinion of this ongoing cycle of disingenuous observances was clear: *“I hate, I despise your feast days, and I will not smell in your solemn assemblies. Though ye offer Me burnt offerings and your meat offerings, I will not accept them: neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fat beasts. Take thou away from Me the noise of thy songs; for I will not hear the melody of thy viols”* (Amos 5:21-23, cf Isaiah 1:11-14). There was also a more telling prophecy: *“I will also cause all her mirth to cease, her feast days, her new moons, and her sabbaths, and all her solemn feasts”* (Hosea 2:11). Likewise, Daniel was told in a vision of the coming Messiah, who, *“shall cause the sacrifice and the oblation to cease, and for the overspreading of abominations He shall make it desolate”* (Daniel 9:27). That same Jesus would afterward confirm: *“the hour cometh, when ye shall neither in this mountain, nor yet at Jerusalem, worship the Father”* (John 4:21), and of the Temple, the epicentre of that perpetual itinerary of rituals: *“There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down”* (Mark 13:2). The end of all these things was at hand.

How wondrously liberating must the Christian Faith have appeared to those early believers, brought up under the strictures of Judaism! The Pharisees, those proponents and enforcers of the Levitical code and all their additions, ‘bound heavy burdens and grievous to be borne, and laid them on men’s shoulders’ (cf Matthew 23:4); but Christ said: *“Take My yoke upon you, and learn of Me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light”* (Matthew 11:29-30). And indeed it was. He instructed His disciples in only two ordinances: Believer’s Baptism, and the Lord’s Supper. Neither of these was in the least way bound by time or season, but were to be administered ‘often’, and as need and opportunity arose. Besides

these, there remained only the universal, pre-Sinaitic, Creation mandate of one-day-in-seven, kept as a day of rest, and sanctified to the Lord; which the early church began to hold upon the first day of the week, significant as it would ever afterwards be for the Saviour's resurrection from the dead.

And that was all. Henceforth, from one end of the year to the other, there were no more feast and formalities, no more rites and rituals to be observed, on a prescribed date, or in a defined month. The inspired Apostles ratified the situation. Of the whole volume of Jewish legislation, they wrote: "*it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things*"; they would not "*tempt ... God, to put a yoke upon the neck of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear*?" (Acts 15:28, 10).

There would, of necessity, be a transitionary period. Formerly Jewish believers were not told precisely when they should desist from their previous routines; but God sovereignly overruled in these affairs. Persecution and oppression drove them from Judea; distance and new-found duties weaned them away. By revelation and experience they were taught to relinquish Levitical definitions of holy or unholy, clean or unclean (cf Acts 10:28). "*There [was] made of necessity a change also of the law* (cf Hebrews 7:12); that which decayed and waxed old was ready to vanish away (cf Hebrews 8:13), as indeed it unmistakeably did, by the destruction in AD 70 of the Temple, the priesthood, the religious order, and the entire nation of the Jews. If any Hebrew believers found the transition difficult, or were reproached by their compatriots, there was this word of encouragement: "*Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days; which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ*" (Colossians 2:16-17). Those feasts and festivals, holy convocations and special high sabbaths, had run their course. Their purpose was symbolic: they served as a shadow of things to come, namely Christ, the substance and fulfilment of them.

In Galatia, there was a different problem. Here were believers, called by grace from heathendom, and subjection to other religious systems. Unsurprisingly, these also had a seasonal element. Secular history suggests that Phrygian deities were worshipped in first-century Anatolia, including Cybele and Attis, both of whom were associated with yearly cycles of spring, fertility and harvest. Astrology was widespread, and dependent upon the annual motions of planets and stars. Forsaking these long-established beliefs and practices was not easy for the Galatian converts. Then a Judaising faction arose within the New Testament church, seeking, under a pretence of orthodoxy, to maintain the former Levitical calendar amongst Christians – an attractive and seemingly legitimate substitute for those who were missing the familiar pattern of seasonal devotions.

God, by His servant Paul, spoke in no uncertain terms: “*Wherefore thou art no more a servant, but a son; and if a son, then an heir of God through Christ. Howbeit then, when ye knew not God, ye did service unto them which by nature are no gods. But now, after that ye have known God, or rather are known of God, how turn ye again to the weak and beggarly elements, whereunto ye desire again to be in bondage? Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years. I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain*” (Galatians 4:7-11). Why would those who are set at liberty by grace, wish to return to the servile observance of times and seasons? Why would those, delivered from the service of false gods, and their periodic festivals, turn again to such weak and beggarly things, albeit under a different guise? Who in their right mind would re-impose monthly and yearly rituals that were never commanded for Christians? Had the labours of the Apostles been for nothing? Had the Gospel been preached in vain? It was to be feared that those persons, who found such an attraction in these errors, were never truly converted.

The Apostle Paul could write exactly the same words to practically every ‘Christian’ church of the twenty-first century. From Rome, through Anglicanism and Presbyterianism, to that which calls itself independent,

or evangelical, there is a slavish adherence still to religious calendars and liturgical cycles. Every year, the phases of the moon are consulted, and a 'Golden Number' calculated, in order to set the date of a spring festival. And whether it be called Easter (after the goddess Eostre), or the date of the Jewish Passover, both are equally illegitimate reasons for the Christian church to observe such things. And then there is the Winter Equinox, Saturnalia, thinly-veiled beneath the offensive, Popish name of 'Christ-Mass' – which it seems, scarcely a single Christian church is willing to repudiate and forsake.

Time was, when these were the only liturgical dates maintained by non-conformist congregations. But recent years have seen an ever-increasing adoption of feast days and dates by once-sound churches. The whole of December is given over to 'Advent' services; Easter is augmented with 'Palm Sunday', 'Ascension' and 'Pentecost'; Harvest Festivals to rival both the Jews and the Pagans are observed, and churches piled up with the 'offering of Cain' as though the days of sacrifices had been resumed. There are only fifty-two Lord's Days in a year. How many of these are going to be surrendered to the dictates of Judaism, Anglicanism, Catholicism and Paganism? How many will have their substance and content fashioned according to the agendas of false religions, and be filled with the weak and beggarly elements of the world?

We do not need to enquire of the opinion of Almighty God upon these things. He has made it clear: 'When ye come thus to appear before Me, who hath required this at your hand, to tread my courts? Bring no more vain oblations ... it is iniquity, even the solemn meeting. **Your** appointed feasts **My** soul hateth: they are a trouble unto Me; I am weary to bear them' (cf Isaiah 1:11-14).

God grant that His church might cease to dwell amongst these shadows, and begin to behave itself as the Body of Christ – showing by their conduct that He did not labour to purchase their liberty in vain.

R. J. Steward

CONCERNING LITURGIES

By degrees, the disciples of Christ were put into complete and actual possession of that liberty which He had preached to them and purchased for them. Being first delivered from any conscientious subjection to the institutions of men, and then from the temporary institutions of God which concerned them not, they were left in a dependence on, and subjection unto Himself alone, as to all things concerning worship. In which state He will assuredly continue and preserve [us] to the end of the world, under the guidance and direction of those rules for the use of [our] liberty, which He has left in His word.

But ... the [perverse] principle ... which is fixed in the minds of men by nature, did not die together with the controversy that mainly issued from it. We may trace it effectually exerting itself in succeeding ages. As ignorance of the righteousness of God, with a desire to establish their own, did in any take place, so also did endeavours after an outward, ceremonious worship. For these things do mutually further and strengthen each other; and commonly proportionable unto men's darkness in the mystery of the righteousness of God in Christ, is their zeal for a worldly sanctuary and carnal ordinances. And such hath been the force and efficacy of these combined principles in the minds of carnal men, that, under the profession of Christianity, they reduced things (in the Papacy) to the very state and condition wherein they were in Judaism ... the main principle in [both systems] being righteousness [by] an insupportable yoke of ceremonious observances in the worship of God.

And generally, in others, the same principles of legal righteousness and a ceremonious worship have prevalency in a just proportion, the latter being regulated by the former; and where, by any means, the former is averted, the latter for the most part falls of its own accord. Hence when the soul of a sinner is effectually wrought upon by the preaching of the gospel, to renounce himself and his own righteousness, and, being truly humbled for sin, to receive the Lord Christ by faith, as 'made unto him

of God, “*wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption*” (1 Corinthians 1:30) there needs, for the most part, little arguing to dissuade him from resting in, or laying weight upon, an outside, pompous worship. He is immediately sensible of a delivery from its yoke, which he freely embraceth. And the reason hereof is, because that good Spirit, by whom he is enabled to believe and receive the Lord Jesus Christ, gives him also an acquaintance with, and an experience of, the excellency, glory, and beauty of that spiritual communion with God in Christ whereunto believers are called in the gospel. [He] discovers the emptiness and uselessness of all which before, perhaps, he admired and delighted in; for “*where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty*” (2 Corinthians 3:17). And these things – of seeking a righteousness in Christ alone, and delighting in spiritual communion with God, exercising itself only in the ways of His own appointment – do inseparably proceed from the same Spirit of Christ [...]

It was [Christ’s] will and pleasure that the faith and love of His disciples should, in some few instances, be exercised in a willing, ready subjection to the impositions of His wisdom and authority. And their service herein He doth fully recompense, by rendering His institutions blessedly useful to their spiritual advantage. But He would not burden them with observances, either for nature or number, like or comparable unto those from which He purchased their liberty. And herein hath the practice of succeeding ages put an excellent lustre upon His love and tenderness.

[But while] He is the Lord of His church, (to whom the consciences of His disciples are in an unquestionable subjection, and who can give power and efficacy to His institutions to make them useful to their souls), yet some [began] to impose arbitrarily their [own] appointments. Bellarmine* tells us, indeed, that the laws and institutions of the church that absolutely bind all Christians ... are ... to observe the fasts of Lent

* Robert Bellarmine (1542-1621) a Jesuit and Roman Catholic cardinal, significant in the Counter-Reformation movement.

and Ember-weeks, to keep the holy days, confession once a year, and to communicate at Easter! ... They [multiply] the number of sacred ceremonies instituted by Christ, and every one of them has a great number of subservient observations attending on them. He must be a stranger to their councils, canon-laws, and practices, that can believe this [falsehood].

Again, as the institutions and ordinances of Christ in the outward worship of God, (whose sole foundation was in His will and pleasure), were few, and easy to be observed ... [they also] had an aptness to be serviceable [for the objective] whereunto they were appointed by Him – which nothing but infinite wisdom can judge of. And this eternally severs them from all things of men's invention ... For as whatever men shall appoint in the worship of God can have no significance at all, as unto any spiritual end, for want of a Christlike authority in their institution, (which alone can add that significance to them which in themselves, without such an appointment, they have not); so [those men] themselves [lack] wisdom to choose the things which have any fitness or aptitude to be used for that end.

Our Lord Jesus Christ, then, having delivered His disciples from the yoke of Mosaical institutions which lay upon them from of old; [has] also [freed them] from being entangled in their consciences by ... any inventions of men imposed on them; giving them rules for the practice of the liberty whereunto by Him they were vindicated, taking them for the future into His own sole disposal in all things concerning the worship of God. He appoints, in His sovereign authority, both the ordinances which He will have alone observed in His church, and the persons by whom they are to be administered; [and] furnishing them with spiritual abilities to that end and purpose, promises His presence with them to the end of the world, and commands them to set such, in His name and strength, in the way and unto the work that He hath allotted to them.

John Owen (1616 – 1683)

excerpts from A Discourse Concerning Liturgies, 1662. Lightly edited

AGAINST HUMAN CEREMONIES

“...it came to pass that heathenish (and Jewish) rites, whereto men had been long accustomed, could not easily be extirpated ... Mention was further made of the mischief that came in by those human observations. ... Now those first ceremonial observations, are guilty of opening that gate for all the human presumptions to enter into God’s house, which pressed in after them: which gate could never be shut from that day to this. Those very Feasts made a composition or mixture of human institutions with divine, and therefore did not preserve simplicity. They also were, from their first rise, not only equalled unto, but also extolled above the Lord’s Day. Easter brought in a superstitious Lent to attend upon it, made Baptism wait for her moon, and conformed our Lord’s Supper unto the Jewish Passover of unleavened bread, etc.”

William Ames (1576 – 1633)

“As we have touched on the subject, I deem it not unreasonable to say a few words concerning Easter. It appears to me that neither the ancients nor moderns who have affected to follow the Jews, have had any rational foundation for contending so obstinately about it. For they have not taken into consideration the fact that when Judaism was changed into Christianity, the obligation to observe the Mosaic law and the ceremonial types ceased. And the proof of the matter is plain; for no law of Christ permits Christians to imitate the Jews. On the contrary, the apostle expressly forbids it; not only rejecting circumcision, but also deprecating contention about festival days. In his epistle to the Galatians he writes, *“Tell me, ye that desire to be under the law, do ye not hear the law?”* (Galatians 4:21). And continuing his train of argument, he demonstrates that the Jews were in bondage as servants, but that those who have come to Christ are ‘called into the liberty of sons’ (cf Galatians 5:13). Moreover, he exhorts them in no way to regard ‘days, and months, and years’ (cf

Galatians 4:10). Again, in his epistle to the Colossians, he distinctly declares that such observances are merely shadows: wherefore he says, *“Let no man judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of any holy-day, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath-days; which are a shadow of things to come”* (Colossians 2:16-17). The same truths are also confirmed by him in the epistle to the Hebrews in these words: *“For the priesthood being changed, there is made of necessity a change also of the law”* (Hebrews 7:12). Neither the apostles, therefore, nor the Gospels, have anywhere imposed the ‘yoke of servitude’ (cf Galatians 5:1) on those who have embraced the truth ... They have justly regarded such things as savouring rather of Judaism: for the Jews are more solicitous about outward solemnities than the obedience of the heart; and therefore are they under the curse, because they do not discern the spiritual bearing of the Mosaic law, but rest in its types and shadows. Those who favour the Jews admit the allegorical meaning of these things; and yet they wage a deadly warfare [about] the observance of days and months, without applying to them a similar sense: thus do they necessarily involve themselves in a common condemnation with the Jews.”

Socrates of Constantinople (ca. 380 – 439AD)

“Seeing that Christ Jesus is He whom God the Father has commanded only to be heard, and followed of His sheep, we urge it necessary that His Gospel be truly and openly preached in every church and assembly of this realm; and that all doctrine repugning to the same be utterly suppressed as damnable to man’s salvation. Lest upon this our generality ungodly men take occasion to cavil, this we add for explication: by ‘preaching of the Gospel’, we understand not only the scriptures of the New Testament, but also of the Old: to wit, the law, prophets, and histories, in which Christ Jesus is no less contained in figure, than we have Him now expressed in verity. And, therefore, with the apostle, we affirm that: *“All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness”*

(2 Timothy 3:16). In which books of Old and New Testaments we affirm that all things necessary for the instruction of the church, and to make the man of God perfect, are contained and sufficiently expressed.

By the contrary doctrine, we understand whatsoever men, by laws, councils, or constitution, have imposed upon the consciences of men, without the expressed commandment of God's word: such as be vows of chastity, forswearing of marriage, binding of men and women to several and disguised apparels, to the superstitious observation of fasting days, difference of meat for conscience sake, prayer for the dead; and keeping of holy days of certain saints commanded by man, such as be all those that the Papists have invented, as the feasts (as they term them) of apostles, martyrs, virgins, of Christmas, Circumcision, Epiphany, Purification, and other fond feasts of our lady. Which things, because in God's scriptures they neither have commandment nor assurance, we judge them utterly to be abolished from this realm..."

John Knox (ca. 1514 – 1572)

"There is no day commanded in Scripture to be kept holy under the gospel but the Lord's Day, which is the Christian Sabbath. Festival days, vulgarly called Holy-days, having no warrant in the word of God, are not to be continued."

Westminster Directory for Public Worship, 1645

"For believing Gentiles, who never had been subject to the [Jewish] law, to engage in these services, had a very suspicious aspect indeed; and certainly seemed to say that they wanted something more than was to be found in Christ and in Christianity."

John Brown of Edinburgh (1784 – 1858)

EDITORIAL

For the New Testament Christian believer, there are no time limits set upon the practice of holiness and service of God. From its inception, the members of the early church ‘**continued daily** with one accord’ (cf Acts 2:46). The same description of frequency is used of the teaching and preaching of Christ, ministrations to needy saints, and the increase in the faith and number of believers (cf Acts 5:42, 6:1, 2:47, 16:5). In the words of the Apostle, the care of the churches, searching of the Scriptures, and mutual exhortation, were likewise to be a daily exercise (cf 2 Corinthians 11:28, Acts 17:11, Hebrews 3:13).

The Psalmist’s resolve was the same: “*every day will I bless Thee*” (Psalm 145:2); he would bless, and trust, and do righteousness, and long for God’s Word “*at all times*” (cf Psalm 34:1, 62:8, 106:3, 119:20). Christians who imagine their lives can be sharply divided into its ‘religious’ and ‘secular’ times, have missed the point. “*Whatsoever ye do*” is to be done heartily, in Jesus’ name, and to the glory of God (cf Colossians 3:17, 23, 1 Corinthians 10:31). We are instructed to: “*Rejoice evermore. Pray without ceasing. In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you*” (1 Thessalonians 5:16-18). Like the land that appeared to the prophet in his vision, so the life of the believer is to be “*holy in all the borders thereof round about*” (Ezekiel 45:1).

And since the Lord’s compassions fail not, but are new every morning, with each returning dawn the Christian can truly say: ‘**this** is a day which the Lord hath made – I will rejoice and be glad upon it!’ (cf Lamentations 3:23, Psalm 118:24). If this spirit be in us and abound, we may conclude with the hymnwriter:

“So shall no part of day or night
From sacredness be free;
But all my life, in every step,
Be fellowship with Thee