

“Every ordinance of man”

Nicholas White

We know that it is our duty to keep the laws of the land if they do not conflict with God’s laws, but how careful are we about keeping them? Scripture shows that we must always act consistently with our calling, knowing that we are being watched by those amongst whom we move, and that in doing so we are honouring the One Whose Name we bear.

THE STRUGGLE to find a parking space has been rewarded; but why is this driver stopping? “Here”, she says, “have this”; a ticket for the rest of the day. Here was a kind gesture to another driver. And yet, across the bottom of the ticket were the words, “Not Transferable”. Well, who’s to know?

Here is but one of many choices we make every day. In each, we have opportunity to exercise our faith. In this article, we will consider the principles which should guide these choices, and why this matters.

It will be obvious to every disciple of the Lord that we are to obey his commands. Indeed, “We love Him, because He first loved us” (1 Jno. 4:19), and this love will move us to obey him. But Peter takes the thought beyond the direct commands of the Lord himself: “Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man” (1 Pet. 2:13).

In the context, there is nothing to suggest there is anything unusual in the word translated “ordinance” here. Yet this translation is unique; all other uses of this word in the New Testament are to do with the idea of creation. Although the Almighty rules in the kingdom of men, He has allowed humanity a degree of freedom. Mankind creates his own ‘cosmos’ or arrangement of things within the overriding will of God. And part of this order is the system of government, laws and rules he imposes; his ‘ordinances’.

The disciple cannot absolve himself from these ‘ordinances’ with the excuse he is under the Almighty’s rulership. Rather, as Paul reminds

us, “there is no power but of God . . . Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God” (Rom. 13:1,2).

“Every ordinance”?

The phrase does not appear to leave much out of account. Romans 13, following the words of the Lord, deals

with the payment of taxes. But what of other matters? What about using a non-transferable ticket? Or pointing out when we have been given too much change? Or exceeding the speed limit by a marginal amount on a clear road?

And here is the challenge. We know the reality of the human heart, for our Creator has told us it is “deceitful above all things” (Jer. 17:9). We have a remarkable ability to justify a wide range of activities to ourselves. But “Happy is he that condemneth not himself in that thing which he alloweth” (Rom. 14:22). As so often, we need to look beyond the words for the *reasons* behind the command. We must understand the *principles* behind the *precepts*.

The clue is in the next part of Peter’s command: “for the Lord’s sake” (1 Pet. 2:13). Literally, this is “because of the Lord”. The Almighty is far above our thoughts and our ways. It might be argued that He has no interest in the minutiae of our lives. Not so. In Christ we have taken on the Father’s Name. There is an inescapable connection between ourselves and the Name we bear; indeed, between us and our Creator: “ye are not your own . . . For ye are bought with a price” (1 Cor. 6:19,20).

This point is powerfully demonstrated in the context in 1 Peter 2. Peter has been explaining the new disciple’s status in Christ. He uses phrases from the covenant at Sinai describing the position of natural Israel, and gives them a new application to the new creation in Christ (see the table below).

Exodus 19:5,6	1 Peter 2:9
Now therefore, if ye will obey My voice indeed, and keep My covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto Me above all people . . . and ye shall be unto Me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation.	But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people.

Speed limits continue to multiply in our towns and villages, but are we scrupulous about keeping to them?

Picture: Tony Benson



Natural Israel will have a unique role in the age to come. But, as the Lord said, for a period “The kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation [Tyndale, the Gentiles] bringing forth the fruits thereof” (Mt. 21:43).

Peter also describes the purpose of this new nation drawn out from among the nations: “that ye should shew forth the praises of Him Who hath called you out of darkness into His marvellous light” (1 Pet. 2:9). We are to have our “conversation [literally, good behaviour] honest among the Gentiles” (v. 12). And the reason? That when those Gentiles, recognising the “peculiar people” among them, accuse us of evil, these accusations may be shown to be groundless. By observing our manner of life, they may thus “glorify God in the day of visitation”; when called to account, the Christian should be able to demonstrate unswerving loyalty to his Lord which will cause the ignorant Gentile to recognise that our actions are “for the Lord’s sake”. And thus, Peter argues, we should submit to every ordinance of man, because of the Lord: “For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men” (v. 15).

Belief and behaviour

Paradoxically, of course, this general obedience to human laws can become the justification for

occasional specific diversions from them. In the last century, the state recognised there was a connection between our brethren’s professed allegiance to Christ and their way of life. They were looking for a correspondence between belief and behaviour.¹

Whilst we do not know what lies ahead for the follower of Christ today, there is a more immediate jury. Every day we are watched by many work colleagues, friends and acquaintances, who will know varying amounts about our calling. Every day they will make judgements about the Name we bear. Where is glory to God if we endure persecution because of our own misdemeanour? Peter is even more direct later in his letter: “let none of you suffer as a murderer, or as a thief, or as an evildoer, or as a busybody in other men’s matters” (4:15). To bear the Name, but not to live in accord with it, is to bring that Name into disrepute, and give others an excuse for rejecting its owner’s offer of salvation: “by reason of whom the

1. Consider this from a Second World War tribunal judge: “We have to ascertain what is in the minds of the applicants, to appraise the genuineness and sincerity of their views, to plumb the depths of their convictions... by getting to understand the background of the lives of each of those who come before us” (*The Captive Conscience*, John Botten, The Christadelphian, p. 57).

way of truth shall be evil spoken of" (2 Pet. 2:2). The whole thrust of Peter's exhortation is rather that we should honour Christ in all things and thus lead others to him too (1 Pet. 3:15).

This perspective helps to account for matters which may appear trifling on one level, yet which touch on greater aspects of our lives as followers of Christ. The core of discipleship is being one with our Lord and attempting to demonstrate our oneness with him in whatever circumstances we find ourselves. Just as there was only one Lord Jesus, so we should behave consistently; we should not be one person at the meeting and a different one at the workplace, the kitchen sink, or in the car. Remember, the old man, Adam, has died with Christ in baptism. Now our lives are hid with Christ in God.

From what we have considered so far, it is clear we must be careful to avoid occasion for the Name of God to be brought into disrepute through our behaviour. But clearly there are also important principles which apply to matters between us and our Creator.

"For conscience sake"

Whilst we must consider the effect of our behaviour on others, in one sense this is a secondary matter. Although we must love our neighbours as ourselves, and seek to lead them to salvation, this is the second commandment. The first, of course, is that we must "love the Lord [our] God with all [our] heart, and with all [our] soul, and with all [our] mind" (Mt. 22:37-39). In his defence before Felix, Paul expresses it like this: "And herein do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offence toward God, and toward men" (Acts 24:16).

Here is the ultimate guide for all our actions. Here is the objective we should seek to fulfil. Even if the transfer of the parking ticket were never discovered, even if the cashier didn't realise they had given us too much money, even if it could be established that a choice affected no one else (although, in truth, few decisions actually fall into this category), Paul is explicit: "ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also *for conscience sake*" (Rom. 13:5). We are to *subject* ourselves (the same word as "submit" in 1 Peter 2:13) to human law not only to avoid bringing the name of Christ into disrepute through "wrath", that is, human punishment. Going against what we know to be right has a profound effect on us spiritually; "whatsoever is not of faith is sin", says Paul (Rom. 14:23).

The man acting out of line with what he knows to be right is committing a sin regardless of its seriousness. Indeed, the point is even more fundamental; even if not actually breaking the law, to the one who does something believing it to be sin, the words of James apply: "to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, *to him it is sin*" (Jas. 4:17).

Paul recognises an important effect on our conscience, the mental ability to weigh up choices and determine right from wrong. If we continually act against our Scripturally enlightened conscience, like any other unused muscle, that mental muscle will eventually cease to function (1 Tim. 4:2). Rather, we should actively "approve things that are excellent" (Phil. 1:10). By continually educating our conscience in spiritual things, we will be "transformed by the renewing of [our] mind, that [we] may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God" (Rom. 12:2).

Conclusions

So let us draw our thoughts together. Although, by and large, modern human government does not appear to follow God's commands, it is to be respected as being overruled by the Almighty. Its laws, and even its smaller precepts, must not be treated lightly, not least because of the Name we bear before others. And what is true of human government also applies to any other man-made authority to which we are subject.

But we have also seen that this is not merely about a Pharisaical observance of jots and tittles. It is to recognise we serve the Almighty in all aspects of our lives, and in all elements of our thinking. The choices we make, the behaviour we demonstrate, all show whether we really believe the things we profess. These are profoundly personal questions, and they are personal choices for which we are individually responsible. But here is positive direction for every circumstance of our lives. The disciple does not wander through life "as other Gentiles walk, in the vanity of their mind, having the understanding darkened, being alienated from the life of God through the ignorance that is in them" (Eph.4:17,18). We have been called out of that darkness into the marvellous light of the gospel.

The reality of our lives, of course, is that we will all fail from time to time. Often we lack the spiritual perception to recognise the truth of the choices we face, and also the strength of will to make the right choice. Let us use the decisions we make every day to remind us of our allegiance

to Christ, and that our life is bound up with his. He is the perfect example. He is the one who in all things demonstrated spiritual perceptiveness in identifying the right path. And he had the strength of purpose, drawn from an overflowing love of his Father, to act always in line with what he knew to be right. But he knows the weakness of our nature, and he is a merciful High Priest to those who recognise their failings and their need for forgiveness.

May we take every opportunity to strengthen our faith, sharpen our spiritual perception, and seek forgiveness for our continual failings. And in our walk, may we demonstrate our faith and lead others to the same hope we share. When our Lord returns, may we be found with him, and in him. Then human government will be replaced by the righteous rule of the righteous Judge. It will be administered by those who have learned to govern themselves by his law of love now.

Paul's epic journey to Rome

10. Despair and hope*

Tom Barling

As the storm-stricken ship was driven by the wind towards Malta, the Apostle Paul took control of the situation, telling his despairing shipmates that he had received an angelic message that they would all be saved, pre-empting an attempt by the sailors to abandon ship and encouraging them all to take food in preparation for landfall.

IN ACTS 27:20 we read how Paul's fellow passengers (with the important exception of Luke, presumably) had abandoned all hope of survival, because the storm showed no sign of abating. In view of the appalling conditions, there must have been literally little stomach for food; cooking was out of the question, and there would have been much seasickness. (It is probable that this in many cases had been the consequence when attempts had been made to take some nourishment.)

All around him the apostle saw drawn and gloomy faces. In his intervention, he started, very humanly, by reminding those who could hear him of the advice he had given at Fair Havens: "Sirs, ye should have hearkened unto me, and not have set sail from Crete" (v. 21). All those in the midst of whom Paul stood knew he had been right, unwilling as they had originally been to listen to him. They had come to realise too late that this was so. No one knew this better than Julius, the centurion responsible for Paul, and those responsible for the ship's safety. Unquestionably they were now prepared to give Paul a sympathetic hearing. Ironically, this 'landlubber' became for the time being as it were the captain of the vessel.

Encouraging words

His words started with a message of encouragement that appeared to defy all probability: "And now I exhort you to be of good cheer: for there shall be no loss of life among you, but only of the ship" (v. 22). What was the ground of this extraordinary optimism? Paul claimed that an angel of the God to

Whom he belonged had stood by him the previous night (v. 23). The sceptics would be disposed to take this claim with a grain of salt; however, there would certainly be some on board who would believe him, not because they had faith in the apostle's God, but because of their superstition. In an earlier episode in Paul's career, at Lystra, the apostle had been taken for Mercury, and the silent Barnabas for Jupiter (14:12). There is abundant evidence of contemporary superstitions in the book of Acts (for example, see 8:9,10; 19:18,19).

Briefly, then, those who were listening to Paul would not be unduly sceptical. What we may term the physical appearance of an angel is not without parallel; Luke in his Gospel records how Zacharias saw the Angel Gabriel "standing on the right side of the altar of incense" (1:11). The apostles as they followed with their eyes Jesus ascending into heaven were addressed by two angels who stood by them (Acts 1:10). A more dramatic parallel is furnished in Acts 12:7, when an angel stood by Peter as he slept, and released him from his chains.

* All quotations from the RV.