

Liberty not Licence:

A SUBJECT OF THE LAW OF CHRIST

1 Cor. ix. 21.

BY

R. J. MAHONY.

“FULFIL THE LAW OF CHRIST.”—*Gal. vi. 2.*

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WHEREVER God reigns, there is a sphere of law.

The revelation of His will towards each sphere, howsoever manifested, is its law. Rebellion against or rejection of that will is *ἀνομία*, lawlessness.

Introduction of the distinctive law of one sphere into another is confusion, and God is not the author of confusion. Neither can two jurisdictions co-exist within the same administrative limits.

Thus, when it is contended in these days that the code given through Moses to Israel is not now to be imposed on believers as the condition of salvation,

or as the rule of life, there is no intention thereby to deny the great binding principles which underlie all law as sustaining righteousness and condemning evil; but there is a desire to acknowledge the distinction which God Himself has drawn between the trust confided to a servant, however faithful and honoured, and that confided to His own Son, who is the last and full revelation of Himself.

In that dispensation God was revealed by the terrors of His holiness. (Heb. xii. 18–20.)

In the present dispensation He is revealed by the boundlessness of His grace. (Rom. v. 21.)

In that age the Spirit of God taught Israel to worship afar off in fear. In the present He teaches believers in Christ to enter with boldness into the holiest.

In the one case we see before us the

subjects of a great and righteous King. In the other, the children of a holy and gracious Father; children, yet none the less subjects, for He, though Father, is none the less King.

But in this dispensation of grace God has revealed no other sphere of acceptance or favour except that of His family. He must be Father or Judge. As Father, He rejoices over the very weakest, who trusts in the blood of the Lamb; as Judge, He has condemned already all who reject His Fatherhood in Christ.

Thus law is not* for a righteous man, but for the lawless and disobedient, and such like. (1 Tim. i. 9–11.) But within the family law reigns also, and so when Paul claims the right of addressing himself to the heathen (who had not known the law of the old dispensation) from the

* *οὐ κεῖται*—is not imposed upon or enforced against.

new standpoint of the liberty of the gospel, he yet maintains that he is not lawless towards God, but within the law of Christ. He has not ceased to be a subject because he has become a child, but he has become a prince of the blood royal, and thus is united with the source and head of law, and has inherited a nature which is above all penal enactment—a nature whose very instincts and impulses would be violated by the thought of disobedience. “I delight in the law of God,” he says, “after the inward man.” In this divine instinct he condemns and loathes the presence of the flesh within him—that which is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. He would be ever delivering his powers and his members from its yoke, and bringing them into subjection to the mind of Christ.

In spiritual things he would know no commandments save His. “For this is

the love of God, that we keep His commandments, and His commandments are not grievous." Paul would acknowledge no commandments of men superadded to these. Far less would he be guilty of adding any of himself. Much of his life was occupied in contending against human additions to the "perfect law of liberty." He would allow neither the penal statutes of a past dispensation nor the vain fancies of contemporary leaders of opinion to stain that spotless mirror of God's mind.

The need of that vigilance has been amply proved in the subsequent history of Christianity.

The revelation of God was gradually overlaid with the traditions of men until its divine origin became but a tradition itself, to be sustained and authenticated by human authority. Catholicity was maintained inviolable, at least outward Catholicity, for men recognised the power

of so great a principle, and used it without scruple and without mercy for their own ends, till it became little less than Catholicity in evil ; and, but for God's few hidden ones, Satan would have succeeded in making the very traces of Christianity perish under the weight of abominations that overspread it through the course of centuries.

The Reformation was the great revolt from this oppression ; but it was a revolt from man to God. Honest and reverent minds sought back to the source of truth. Many inestimable blessings were recovered, but Catholicity was lost. It could not be otherwise, for it became henceforth the banner of error. And while believing men rejoiced in their emancipation from its apostate yoke, they were not careful to see that, though betrayed to the purposes of ambition and tyranny, *unity* was a truth so important that the Lord Himself had

left it as a special trust to His disciples. (John xv. xvii.)

“Hear, O Israel, the Lord thy God is one Lord,” was the old watchword of the tribes. “One body, one spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all,” told of new and closer ties, and a higher organization. There is no place for independence in any sphere where God reigns. Every planet in heaven, however vast its orbit, retraces its course on its appointed curve. This physical order is the shadow of that which binds the moral and spiritual spheres alike to the same eternal throne.

The farthest perspective picture of happiness given us in Scripture is that of perfect obedience to perfect rule. (1 Cor. xv. 28.)

The divine prayer that suffers so many vain repetitions from the lips of men, “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done in earth,

as it is in heaven," surely breathes the desire that His people should set forth here the dependence and the unity which exist in heaven now, and shall yet, but not in this age, exist on earth.

Corruption has killed Catholicity, but it need slay no other principle. And if Catholicity died under the operation that aimed at separating the living from the dead, the sense of responsibility towards God revived in the struggle, and shook Europe with its awakening cry.

The Spirit of the living God had long brooded over those dark waters of Christendom, and now He was causing life to spring forth abundantly, through the voice of His own word.

Men recognised and bowed before the divine and only Giver of life in the new creation, but they did not go on to look up to Him as the only Sustainer and Guide of that life, during the whole

course of earthly witness on which it had entered.

They chose kings and rulers to be the nursing fathers of His church; yielding to Caesar claims which pertain to the Divine Head alone. Then expediency and worldly politics were admitted to share importance with divine principles. The vigour of human thought, so long repressed, overmastered the sense of obedience in all things to God's word, and leaving the true course of humble dependence on Him, which would have preserved union among His people, it broke into the scattered channels of national divisions, and sectarian denominations, sweeping with it the church of the new profession into the confusion and disintegration which so weakens and almost nullifies the testimony of Protestantism.

Let us in no wise underrate the great struggle for the truth that has made

those days of the Reformation illustrious.

Let us remember, with honour and affection, that cloud of witnesses, men, women, and even children of the family of faith, who loved not their own lives to the death, and many of whom glorified God in the fires, counting the gain of all things loss for the sake of Christ.

Let us cherish and hold fast with our lives the great doctrines recovered and confessed by them, according to the grace given them.

Let us confess humbly, as we rejoice in the liberty wherein we meet to worship God, no man making us afraid, that "other men have laboured, and we have entered into their labours."

But while endeavouring to render honour to whom honour is due, let us take heed that we reverence not the creature

more than the Creator, who is blessed for ever. Amen.

God was pleased to give teachers to His church in that day, to lead them back from man's errors to the source of truth.

And if their lives and testimony have left any tradition behind them, it is surely a charge to turn still from man to God.

This is always the path of true liberty, for it is well said that "His service is perfect freedom."

The course then on which they entered was progressive. It was the "path of the just, shining more and more unto the perfect day." Holding boldly this onward way, they would, as they advanced, have shaken off the errors and false principles that still hampered them, like the mixed multitude that clung to the skirts of Israel as he came forth out of Egypt.

But it was not to be so. They saw, with

the sagacious eyes of earthly politicians, that human licence was the special temptation that beset the steps of those who trod the high road of divine liberty, and they halted that they might raise human fences to keep the danger out, and to secure that which they had gained already.

And the halting-place became a camp, and the camp became a city.

The truths that had been restored were embanked within creeds, articles, confessions, and liturgies. Imperfections and errors were enclosed with them. As time passed on, the imperfections and the errors found their exponents as well as the truths found theirs, and the factions that followed them have distracted Christendom with their controversies and appeals, sometimes to divine truth, generally to human formula.

It is only natural that those who take the latter course should feel drawn towards

that formula which is the oldest and most self-asserting. And so many have openly fled back to Rome for shelter. Others, closing alike the book of divine revelation, and the written codes of men's devising, have struck out boldly into the pathless desert of scepticism, having but one community of purpose or direction among them; viz., that their backs shall always be turned towards the "true light, that has come into the world to lighten every man."

Here, then, is a special danger which besets these days in which we live.

It is time to take a fresh departure. Expediency has run its course. Formula, article, and confession do not satisfy, and cannot control the speculative mind.

The confusion of dispensations, the misappropriation to Christendom of promises that were given to Israel, the contradictory doctrines that range themselves against

one another in the same page, transferred from Scripture, most probably in reverence, but certainly at random, cannot meet the keen investigation of logical minds.

Surely the time has come to say, "Take away these battlements, for they are not the Lord's." If the enemy is coming in like a flood, let him find a rampart of living men gathered round the standard raised by the Spirit of the Lord, not scattered here and there in vain efforts to defend human outposts that have proved untenable.

Thus, and thus alone, shall unity be regained, so far as it is God's will to restore it; unity, not circumscribed within the limits of a denomination, and bound to the articles of a confession, not a league of sects which agree to differ, but a union of heart and loyal purpose to know no name on earth but Christ the Lord, to acknowledge no allegiance which could

compromise simple obedience to Him in all things.

But let us remember that sect and division were not the cause but the result of unfaithfulness, and that, therefore, unity must not be regarded as the first object of attainment.

To seek this would be to strive to grope our way back again to the site of that Babel of Catholicity which has broken up into the confusion of Christendom, and will be restored only under the crown of anti-Christian apostacy.

Obedience must be the first point now. It is surely time for each Christian to consider whether human convention, or human tradition, or any other human consideration, however venerable, however expedient, stands between him and any command of his Lord. "Let us go forth therefore unto Him without the camp, bearing His reproach."

It may well be that (in this age of speculation) impatience of rule, or scorn of the conventional profession of religion, drives many a one out of the denomination in which birth or circumstances placed him. And herein lies the danger of these times beyond those of the Reformation, to which reference has been made. It was the grasp of positive truth, the Spirit's hand laid on them, that led men then to give up all things, and to force their way through blood and flame to the side of Christ. But a creed of mere negation is born, not in persecution, but in liberty. It grasps no object, knows no enthusiasm, enrols no martyrs. It is a luxury of the fleshly mind, not an expression of the resolve of a chastened spirit. In its mildest form it is licence, in its ultimate development it is lawlessness—*ἀνομία*, a deliberate rejection of the authority of God.

We speak of this peril of the day,

generally, as not called upon to sit in judgment on the motives of individuals who hold loosely, or who abandon, the religious systems of this world. But if any, leaving such systems, seek to associate themselves with those who own no Head and know no name but the Lord Jesus Christ, to them we desire earnestly to extend the hand of fellowship, and to speak words of counsel as to this special danger.

The Holy Spirit has given us an illustration in the history of David, which may be of use to us in conveying teaching for the present time.

We read that when he was in the cave of Adullam there came to him his brethren and his father's house. These formed a staff or body guard. Then we continue to read of those who were in distress, discontented, and in debt, who gathered to him, and he became captain over them.

Whatsoever their previous history, whatsoever their motives, they soon learned to know his hand over them as a wise and able ruler; they accepted his discipline, they became bound up for life or death in his cause, they proved in many a field their attachment to his person, their confidence in his leadership, their willingness to lay down their lives in his defence.

Thus, though first despised, then feared and hated in the reign of Saul, they became trained into a corps of heroes, and their names were afterwards enrolled and their deeds registered in the chronicles of the kingdom.

Thus should it be with those who gather round the Lord Jesus Christ in these days of His rejection. They must not suppose that they are merely to form themselves into an association to escape from restraint; that they have delivered themselves from

the irksomeness of human ordinances to revel in freedom from all rule or all order; that they have lessened their responsibilities and enlarged their impunities.

This would indeed be "making provision for the flesh to fulfil the lusts thereof."

Our Lord Jesus Christ truly left a simple and intelligible command to His disciples throughout this dispensation: "Do this in remembrance of me." It is therefore the duty and the privilege of His people to assemble to obey it in breaking bread together on the first day of the week. But the responsibility of their association neither begins nor ends here. Neither because it can be explicitly complied with, at least in outward form, should it be concluded that this is the only bond of peace and the only expression of unity. The degeneracy of life and faith which attends all formalism must follow

so shallow an interpretation of the sublimest of mysteries.

To have unlearned reverence and submission for that which men have dared to add to the Lord's command is indeed a beginning in the right direction, but it is only the first step towards entering God's school. There we must take our place humbly, to learn the character and spirit of His government (Matt. xi. 29 ; Phil. ii. 5), and the order of His house. (1 Cor. xii.)

The former of these two lessons is the hardest to flesh and blood. But till it is learned the latter cannot be rightly administered. (1 Cor. xiii.)

When we take our place in the youngest class of that school, the first word of the first page of our first lesson is GRACE. And eternity will not fathom the full depth of meaning in that word.

But if we cannot arrive at all its mean-

ing now, we should learn to witness to that world over which God's grace lingers, that there is a sphere even on earth *in* which as well as *over* which "grace reigns."

In that spirit we may go reverently to learn the order of God's house. Without it rule will harden into tyranny, and order degenerate into machinery.

No earthly form of government, no human expedient, will help us in learning how God's house is to be administered. It is not despotism entrusted to an earthly delegate. It is not constitutionalism. It is not a republic. It is, or should be, God's will done on earth as it is in heaven. Each creature-will there waits only for command or revelation from Him, and rejoices to carry them out with every power that He has given. But these mighty beings minister to those who are charged with the higher duty of carrying out His will on earth. (Heb. i. 14.) The order, the

attitude, the advance of God's church on earth in this age is a higher trust, and should be a more wonderful expression of His grace and power than the bright array and perfect service of the angels in heaven.

“Strength made perfect in weakness” is more wonderful, more glorious than strength made perfect in power. Angels partake of their Lord's joy in the efforts of His feeble children on earth to learn and obey His will. Angels surely wonder with holy amazement that feeble beings on earth have learned so little of the power of the omnipotent arm within their reach at a moment's need—of the omniscient wisdom pledged to guide them when they turn to it.

In human records of human wars we have read of regiments surrounded by countless foes, torn by ceaseless fire, menaced by apparently inevitable destruction,

yet closing up their ranks with steady discipline, obeying their leaders' commands as calmly as if on the parade-ground, and by their majestic attitude and perfect order overawing their foes and clearing their way to victory.

How many victories are recorded of God's army against sin and Satan, against the hatred and scorn of the world, against the evil that dwells within!

And if it is not so, at whose door lies the blame? "To us, to us belongeth shame and confusion of face." We have a perfect leader, a perfect example, a perfect book of instructions, a certain promise of victory, if there be only obedience and discipline.

It does not fall within the scope of this paper, neither is it the desire of the writer to attempt to draw up any code of rules for assemblies of God's people, or to suggest the various cases of difficulty

which may arise, with a prescribed remedy for each. To do so would be to fall into one of the evils which have been deprecated.

It would be to substitute formula for the living men whom the Lord provides to minister His word and doctrine to His church. It is but vain jangling to debate about certain courses to be adopted in certain hypothetical emergencies. Questions of practical difficulty do indeed often arise among those who, rejecting various forms of error, and impressed with varied perceptions of truth, are seeking to know and to follow the Lord's commands concerning the church. But local characteristics and special circumstances cannot be anticipated by stereotyped codes of directions, while they form exactly the subjects for the care and ministry of that pastorship which is a gift of the Lord to His people.

These difficulties are often the lessons by which He trains and tests His people ; and it is wonderful to find how they yield when met in dependence on God, or acceptance of His rule. “No good thing will He withhold from them that walk uprightly.”

Assemblies acting in this spirit will not be found walking independently of God, or of one another. Neither will there be any claim to supremacy of rule because of priority of corporate existence. “One is your Master, even Christ, and all ye are brethren.”

Close adherence to His instructions, earnest endeavour to follow His example, will produce unity of action among assemblies—a unity which binds to Him first, and therefore to one another.

To endeavour to secure this by a confederacy acting on mutual compact, is to bring base metal into the sanctuary ; as

Rehoboam supposed that he could replace with brass the golden shields of Solomon.

As the sun stands unchanged in the heavens, so does God's model of His church remain in His word, untouched by human imitations.

As the sun is reflected in clear, calm waters, so should God's thoughts concerning His church be mirrored in the assemblies that gather on earth in the name of the Lord Jesus. Only when they are walking in faith, love, and obedience will they reflect any image of His glorious design. The currents of earthly motives, the rough breath of human impulses and passions, ripple the surface, and break the reflection into fragments, or darken it altogether. Nothing but the presence of the Lord can then restore. Let Him speak, and let His voice be heard in the hearts, and

again there will be a great calm ; and while they worship Him the light will shine upon them, and shine forth from them, according to the measure and extent of their loyalty to Him.

The propositions, then, which we have been endeavouring to work out are these : Catholicism ; *i.e.* complete and visible unity is not essential to the existence of God's church on earth, but it is essential to its corporate testimony. (John xvii. 21.)

This corporate testimony having failed, there is no intimation in Scripture, neither is it consistent with the character of this dispensation, that He should put forth His hand extra-dispensationally, or as men would say, miraculously, to restore this unity, before He comes in person to restore all things.

That though nothing short of His direct interference can restore complete corporate

testimony, yet there is no limit on the side of His grace to the blessings which follow the efforts of His people, who faithfully and humbly endeavour to return to His order of organization as revealed in His word.

That those who thus return find not (as human ignorance may tell them) a field for the indulgence of their own fancy, for the rejection of all authority, and the assertion of every individual privilege. On the contrary, they assume responsibilities towards God and towards man—higher, deeper, broader, tenderer than human traditions can teach them. They enter a sphere in which gift and pastorship are to be exercised and obeyed under the superintendence of the chief Shepherd Himself (Ephes. iv. ; 1 Peter v.), in which His care reaches every member, and provides service of importance and inter-relationship for the very youngest

and weakest (1 Cor. xii.);* in which there is no place for isolation ; but earnest consideration is taught, not only for the welfare of those who reciprocate it, but for the whole circle of God's family on earth. (Phil. ii. 4.)

* He gave the apostles verily, also the prophets, and the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers, for the outfitting of the saints towards work of service, towards building up of the body of Christ." (Eph. iv. 11, 12, Greek.)

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