

WHAT THE NEW COVENANT MEANS ⇒CHRISTIAN MORALITY⇐

As I have said many times, the Christian covenant is a promise of forgiveness for those who accept it. This assumes both a moral code and the expectation of failure to completely reach that standard.

In relation to the instruction in the Ten Commandments not to commit murder, Jesus said: “Anyone who is angry with his brother is worthy of judgement”. (Matthew 5:21-22). In relation to the instruction in the Ten Commandments not to commit adultery, Jesus said: “If a man looks at a woman with a lustful eye, he has already committed adultery with her in his heart”. (Matthew 5:27-28). And in a more positive direction, he said: “There must be no bounds to your goodness, as your heavenly Father’s goodness knows no bounds”. (Matthew 5:48). And: “Love your enemies and pray for your persecutors”. (Matthew 5:44). And: “Always treat others as you would like them to treat you”. (Matthew 7:12).

There is in this a clear and very demanding moral requirement, with inevitable failure to completely fulfil it.

Unfortunately we live our lives under a handicap. Paul called it “the sin living in me”. Modern psychologists analyse the mind in more detail, speaking of “ids”, “libidos”, “egos”, “superegos” and so on. To attempt a detailed identification between the perceptions of an ancient writer and the continually developing understanding of modern science is not the purpose here. What we do learn from Paul is his perception of these matters against a Christian background.

Paul wrote in his letter to the Christians in Rome: “I am unspiritual, the purchased slave of sin. I do not even recognise my own actions as mine, for what I do is not what I want to do, but what I detest..... It is no longer I who perform the action, but sin that lodges in me.” The whole of this passage is relevant. (Romans 7:14-25). So, for Paul, sin was not just an act of wrongdoing, it was a force within his own being putting pressure on him to do wrong. He even uses a different word for wrongdoing, which is sometimes “wrongdoing” or “transgression” in English. (Romans 5:15). Sin, like perhaps the “id” in modern psychology, is something more than wrongdoing. Those who have had a period of depression, or fallen into wrongdoing against their better judgement are perhaps more aware of this than others who have lived a less tempestuous inner life. Perhaps Jesus had the same inner “sin” in mind when he said: “If you then, bad as you are, know how to give your children what is good for them, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to those who ask him!”

This inner pressure to do wrong often catches us unawares and leads to impulsive action and responses. Its origin is considered by some to be hereditary, or genetic. Others prefer to put the blame on destructive and damaging circumstances and pressures of early life. In reality there is perhaps an element of both. The modern treatment is through “counselling” of various types, “self-awareness”, and sometimes the medical use of drugs.

Paul puts forward two additional, and I would say mutually-related, methods of treatment. Both of these are in his letter to the Christians in Rome. He takes as his starting point Christ’s death and resurrection. His death was a death for our sin. We, by accepting Christ, have undergone a similar process of death and resurrection. This is death to sin and a rising to a new life. Paul puts it this way: “By baptism we were buried with him, and lay dead, in order that, as Christ was raised from the dead in the splendour of the Father, so we might also set our feet upon the new path of life”. And: “The man we once were has been crucified with Christ for the destruction of the sinful self”. (See Romans 6:1-14).

Paul sees in the once and for all baptism a picture of this dying and rising. But it is more than once and for all. There needs to be a repeated recognition of the process. Paul puts it this way: “You must regard yourselves as dead to sin and alive to God, in union with Christ Jesus”.

Jesus too spoke of this dying and rising. He said: “A grain of wheat remains a solitary grain unless it falls into the ground and dies; but if it dies, it bears a rich harvest. The man who loves himself is lost, but he who hates himself in the world will be kept safe for eternal life.” (John 12:24-25). And: “If anyone wishes to be a follower of mine, he must leave self behind; he must take up his cross and come with me.” (Matthew 16:24).

The other part of Paul’s approach to the problem of the inner pressure to wrong is through the work of the Holy Spirit. At the end of the passage where he writes about the sin living in us, he asks “Who is there to rescue me out of this body doomed to death?” Then he answers the question: “God alone, through Jesus Christ our Lord!” He then goes on to talk about the Holy Spirit. (Romans 8). The sudden switch, from talking about the gloom of inner impulses leading to wrong, to talking about victory, comes through the Holy Spirit. Paul wrote: “If by the Spirit you put to death all the base pursuits of the body, then you will live”.

Christian counselling should primarily point to this work of Christ and the Holy Spirit and should take place in the context of prayer, the laying on of hands and communion. Christians often talk about the psychological healing they have received in prayer, either alone or with others.

Talking through a psychological problem may sometimes be helpful but carries with it the danger that the “counsellor” may “extract” too much from the “counselled”, leading to embarrassment in the relationship at a later stage. It can also lead to the division of a Christian community into the “counsellors” and the “counselled”. The “counsellors” start to see themselves as different from the others. They cease to contribute anything of their own experience and weakness in fellowship with others, and their privileged knowledge becomes a source of power over their fellow Christians. With it comes the unspoken or even spoken threat of exposure if their will is not implemented in all matters. Pointing to this work of Christ and the Holy Spirit, prayer, the laying on of hands and communion, carry with them none of these dangers.

Paul was of course writing of his own experience. This may not be the experience of everyone. Paul does not tell us that we must have the same experiences as himself! But he does, I believe, give us some indicators. It should perhaps be pointed out that he is not writing about the situation of those who may have suffered severe physical, chemical or biological brain damage.

To sum up, the aim is forgiveness and healing, not condemnation.

However this forgiveness and healing must be accepted. It is no good pretending that what is sin is not sin, and denying the need for forgiveness and healing. The Christian community is faced today with a very vocal attempt by some homosexuals and lesbians to persuade us that their tendencies and actions are not sin. Paul wrote about homosexuality like this: “Their women have exchanged natural intercourse for unnatural, and their men in turn, giving up natural relations with women, burn with lust for one another; males behave indecently with males, and are paid in their own persons the fitting wage of such perversion.” (Romans 1:27).

He went on in his letter, as we have seen, to write about forgiveness for acts of sin, or wrongdoing, and the problem of sinful tendencies, which he called “the sin living in me”. The response of Christian homosexuals and lesbians should be to seek forgiveness and healing, not to seek to justify themselves. We have recently seen determined homosexuals

working hard to expose some Christian leaders for such a tendency or act. But there is a great gulf between those Christian leaders and the determined homosexuals themselves. The former group recognise their tendencies and occasional acts as a form of sin, and in repentance seek forgiveness and healing. The latter obstinately vaunt their sin and try to persuade us that it is acceptable.

Worse than that, some have sought to influence the young and so increase their own number. Children pass through stages in their development. At a young age they play together with no preference for children of one sex or the other. Later on they prefer to play with children of their own sex. Boys regard girls as “sissy” and girls no doubt have shared views about boys. With the onset of puberty, however, boys start to find girls attractive and girls start to find boys attractive. There are sadly those who try to take advantage of these changes, and seek to persuade young people who have not fully developed into the last stage that they are innately homosexual and should therefore openly join the homosexual community.

While I have taken the issue of homosexuality, because it is topical, it should not be emphasised out of proportion. A far bigger problem is that of failure to show consideration, sympathy and love towards other people.

To summarise then, Christ and the apostles laid down a very high moral standard as a target. They accepted that failure to be perfect is inevitable. The New Covenant offers forgiveness, which has to be accepted, with the promise of God’s help for reform. As with everything in the New Covenant, the context is of those who choose to accept it, not a whole nation. Christians do not, or at least should not, claim to be better than others. They recognise their failure and seek to do better. They should not look at others who may have had a more or less helpful start in life!