

I may as well kneel down, and worship gods of stone,
Than offer to the living God, a prayer of words alone."

WHAT SHALL WE ASK?

"And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God.

Now unto Him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us.

Unto Him be glory in the Church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen." (Ephesians 3:19-21).

Leonard Morgan.



Conducted by
Alf Marsden

"Could you please explain Nehemiah 9:13,14. I was always under the impression that precepts, statutes, and laws were different names for the same thing. Is this correct?"

Neh.9:14 reads, "And thou madest known unto them thy holy sabbath, and commandest them precepts, statutes, and laws, by the hand of Moses thy servant". Isn't it amazing how, when we read something, we arbitrarily form a mental definition of what we have read. We may, of course, be right or wrong. How many times have we heard speakers say, "I've looked at that part of the scripture over a long period of time, and I've only now come to understand it". But it's been there all the time, you see; we just haven't probed it with the mind. Whenever I read **anything**, I always have a dictionary to hand, because I know that unless I understand the **precise** meaning of the words I am reading that there is a good chance that I **shall not** understand the importance of what the words say. It is true that the words precepts, laws, and statutes have a basic inter-connection as regards meaning, but they also have precise meanings. Anyway, let's take a closer look at our question.

PRECEPTS

Precepts may be defined as, "rules for action or conduct, exhortations". It ought to be quite obvious to any student of the Bible that both God and Christ gave more than enough of these. The O.T. abounds with exhortations and rules from God to the nation of Israel. Similarly the N.T. from Jesus to the people of **His** day. There is not the slightest doubt in my mind that the Christian community should act according to the rules laid down, and saying this in no way refers to the Bible as being a **rule-book**, the obedience to which supersedes faith in God and His Christ. Any intelligent person will know that a community functions best when it lives according to its own rules, and the Christian community is no exception; indeed, people who are **truly** faithful will **want** to live according to the rules especially if such rules have God's approval.

The precepts of God are fundamental in this respect. Let me give you an example. In Isa. 28 God speaks against the spiritual immaturity of Ephraim and Jerusalem. In 28:9,10 we read, "**Whom shall he teach knowledge? and whom shall he make to understand doctrine? them that are weaned from the milk, and drawn from the breast. For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept; line upon line, line upon line; here a little and there a little**". Now every parent knows that an infant must be brought up to conform to rules of conduct; many parents lay down the **principles** but fail to insist on the **practice**. God gave His principles in precepts, and **did** insist on Israel

putting them into practice; when the people **didn't**, He punished them.

So what do we learn from this? When God chose the nation of Israel to be His peculiar people, the nation was like a new-born babe relative to what God expected of them. The people had to learn the rules, and God gave these in precepts designed for staged growth. Precept upon precept; here a little, there a little. He loved them, and He wanted a reciprocal love. He also wanted faithfulness and trust. He wanted them to grow to maturity under His benign care. Instead, their wayward and perfidious practices proved that **they** did not want to be guided by God. His precepts were good; **they** ignored them and consequently wrought their own destruction. The N.T. Church is similarly exhorted to be **"like new-born babes, desiring the sincere milk of the word, that we might grow thereby"**. The growth of the saints to spiritual maturity should be no accident, but rather a recognition that such growth should be looked upon as a prime function of the Church, with responsibility devolving on the leadership in its several localities. Such development should be ensured by staged and structured teaching, a desirable state of affairs which, in my experience, has never been adequately achieved.

LAWS

A law may be defined as, "A rule established among a community, and enjoining or prohibiting certain action"; it may be further defined as, "an invariable sequence between certain conditions and phenomena". Therefore, I can become 'a law unto myself', i.e., I can take my own line and disregard the rules. In Rom. 2:14 we read, **"For when the Gentiles, which have not the law (Mosaic), do by nature the things contained in the law (Mosaic), these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves."** When their actions coincided with the Mosaic Law, that was good; when their actions didn't, then they had become a law unto themselves in the wrong sense.

The Common Law of England has been developed over many years, and has been formed by the study of individual cases which have been seen to have similar sequential events and conclusions; it is in fact 'Case Law'. Before any attempt at codification could take place, judges had to travel the length and breadth of the country studying individual cases as they came up. They then had to analyse their findings, and so develop laws which were 'common' to most people and localities. This type of law has developed up to the present time, and is still being added to.

Paul saw what can only be described as 'a law of the flesh' as distinct from the actions that he **wants** to do. He poses what is a problem to many people, i.e., that when they think to do good, their actions, dominated by the flesh, accomplish exactly the opposite. He sums up, **"I find then a law that, when I would do good, evil is present with me. For I delight in the law of God after the inward man: But I see another law in my members, warring against the law of my mind, and bringing me into captivity to the law of sin which is in my members"** (Rom. 7:21-23). Many Christians, to their shame and loss, have thought that this is a normal condition vis-a-vis the flesh and the Spirit, because did not Paul say, **"So then with the mind I myself serve the law of God; but with the flesh the law of sin"** (v25). It is a monstrous thought to think that with the mind we can have a passive faith, but that we can go on sinning in the flesh. What Paul is describing is the sinful condition of a person **before** coming to Christ. Read chapter 8 and you will understand, for as he says in 8:2 **"For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death."** It is 'the law of the Spirit of Life in Christ Jesus' to which the Christian should be conformed.

STATUTES

In English law, when a legislative enactment is made by Parliament, such an enactment becomes Statute Law; it is put into the Statute Book and is intended to be permanent. As regards God's statutes, The Legislative Enactor is God Himself, and the Statutes are written in His Book, The Bible. They are also intended to be of a

permanent nature unless they are abrogated by Divine fiat. Such statutes are to be found in Lev. 3:17, regarding the eating of fat or blood; in Lev. 16:34, regarding the Day of Atonement; in Num. 19:21, regarding ritual cleansing; and in Ps. 81, regarding the exclusive right of God to be the God of Israel. Moreover, the O.T. abounds with commands by God which He expects to be obeyed by the people.

It is quite evident from Jer. 31:31-34 that God intended that under a new covenant, which would embrace Jew and Gentile, His law should be of a spiritual nature after the 'inner man'. The One to bring this into being would be His Christ, Jesus of Nazareth. Paul tells us in his Ephesian letter, **"But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off (Gentiles) are made nigh by the blood of Christ"** (Eph. 2:13). He then goes on to say that the sacrifice of Jesus has abolished the enmity between Jew and Gentile, **"even the law of commandments contained in ordinances"** (v15). There are no nationalistic lines of demarcation in the Kingdom of God (v14). The introduction of the phrase **"the law of commandments contained in ordinances"** means that such ordinances were, in fact, Divine decrees, and such decrees were expressions of the authoritative Will of God and consequently having the effect of Statute Law. This effectively is the Gospel, and indicates to us that the Gospel is intended to be of a permanent nature, and that being so, then the **terms and conditions** of the Gospel must also be of a permanent nature; in fact, one of God's statutory pronouncements. Other things which I would take to be statutory requirements of God are; love, marriage, belief and faith in God and His Christ, and Breaking of Bread.

There are other meetings which are held in local churches such as Bible Schools, women's meetings, Bible studies, training classes, etc., but I look upon these as 'community rules', initiated and controlled by the Oversights in different communities of Christians: as such they are ancillary to the main requirements of Christ for His Church. I have mentioned above that Gospel promotion is a Divine decree, but some of the Gospel meetings which we hold are quite sterile, i.e., we preach to the converted. For the Gospel to be effective, we have either to get people **in** to listen, or we have to take the message **out** to them.

As I have thought about this question I have come to the conclusion that there is more to it than meets the eye. I have only scratched the surface: and perhaps more agile minds than mine could get more teaching out of it.

(All questions, please, to Alf Marsden, 20 Costessy Way
Winstanley, Wigan WN3 6ES).