



But in vain do they worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men. -

Matthew 15:9

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Is Uniformity “Righteous?”

Last week I talked about how to fellowship with other believers without having to submit your spiritual judgment to their thinking and without being intolerably dishonest. I'd like to further point out the error of so many religious organization when it comes to the unity Christ prayed for just before his betrayal.

Most any church will tell you that that unity is based on uniformity of doctrine, and they'll find some obscure reference somewhere in those three chapters of John (14-16) as an excuse for this “follow-my-lead-or-else” mentality. But the overwhelming focus of those chapters is two things, brother love and the Holy Spirit. These, logically, are the basis for the unity Jesus requested.

Organizations crave uniformity. The limited partnership I worked for for eighteen years recently got sold to a publicly-traded conglomerate. Now we wear uniforms (and hard hats and safety shoes and sleeves and so on). The uniforms aren't mandatory, and I wear them to take advantage of the free laundry. But you see the nature of an organization to one-size-fits-all approaches to everything.

So when religion becomes an organization it will, before long, also crave uniformity. It will also see its own survival going hand-in-hand with the survival of other social institutions. This is most dangerous. When the book of Revelation describes its symbol for a religion that had lost its way, it drags out the symbol of a harlot, saying, “The kings of the earth committed adultery with her, and the merchants of the earth grew rich from her excessive luxuries.” (Revelation 18:3)

Karl Marx saw this tendency of organizations to support each other and saw that the church was often used by the privileged to keep the masses quiet and complacent while the privileged oppressed them. He called religion “the opiate

of the masses,” and he opposed it for that reason. Too bad he didn't have an example of true Christianity to compare. His rejection of the religion of his day is not a bad mark in the book God keeps on him, because God didn't like that religion either.

I was impressed by something I read from Matthew today. Jesus' disciples were walking through a grainfield one Sabbath. They were hungry, so they plucked some heads of grain, threshed them in their hands, and ate the resulting kernels whole. This was an allowed practice, one specified in the laws of Moses. The grainfield owners, however, hadn't understood nor engaged the spirit of the rule. They thought in terms of ownership, and resented the law's intrusion on their “rights.”

The Sabbath provided a one seventh protection of those rights, and the religious establishment helped the owners by enforcing the Sabbath restriction on the “work” of threshing grain. So when some Pharisees saw what Jesus' disciples were doing they called them out on it. They called on Jesus to enforce their addendum to the Sabbath law.

In his reply Jesus included these words: “If you had known what these words mean, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice,' you would not have condemned the innocent.” (Matthew 12:7) Jesus was calling his threshing-on-the-Sabbath disciples innocent, and accusing the Pharisees of unjust condemnation.

The next event in the narrative was apparently on the same day. There was a man who needed healing in the synagogue. The religious leaders didn't like Jesus' approach because it robbed them of power. So they were looking for a reason to accuse Jesus, and they thought if he healed someone on the Sabbath they could accuse him of breaking the Sabbath.

Before he healed the man Jesus pointed out their own hypocrisy. If an animal was threatened on the Sabbath, they would rescue it to preserve its economic value. But a human being like the man with a shriveled hand had no economic value to protect. But isn't any human being worth more than any animal? By giving such an answer publicly, Jesus defused the accusation the religious leaders were hoping to use against him. This so angered them that they decided Jesus had to die and they would have to see that it happened.

There are similar lessons throughout chapter 12. Later, in chapter 13, Jesus told the parable of the broadcast planter. The seed the planter scattered fell on many different types of soil. In good soil the seed produced a crop. On other soil different exigencies prevented the crop from maturing or even sprouting.

On the rocky soil the seed sprouted, but the new plants' roots couldn't reach deep, and the sun scorched the plants. Jesus said this was like people who received the word with joy right away. But they didn't develop a deep experience and, "when trouble or persecution comes because of the word," they quickly fall away. The disciples had just experienced an example of this "trouble or persecution."

So many churches have adopted standards which have the possibly unintended consequence of aiding the privileged in their exploitation of the less privileged. These standards aren't righteous, and the violation of such standards is not evil. Only religion that recognizes, honors, and protects the liberty of the followers of Jesus can be said to be pure, represented by the woman in Revelation clothed with the sun.

"[D]o not let anyone judge you by what you eat or drink, or with regard to a religious festival, a New Moon celebration or a Sabbath day." (Colossians 2:16) It would follow that you are not to judge anyone else on any such basis either. Later Paul would add, "Such regulations indeed have an appearance of wisdom, with their self-imposed worship, their false humility and their harsh treatment of the body, but they lack any value in restraining sensual indulgence." (Verse 23)

Your liberty as a Christian is not a license to sensual indulgence, but the rules others would impose to restrict your liberty won't stop sensual indulgence even though that's the stated reason for the rules. So ditch the rules, learn to love as Jesus loved, and the sensual indulgence won't be a problem any more.

May God richly bless you as you strive to come to know him better.

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