

Contemporary Issues :

THE LAW OF LOVE AND THE GOD OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

Dear Martin,

I want to tell you how delighted I am that you want to correspond with me concerning some of the really difficult issues in the Christian faith. I will try to answer your questions the best I can.

In this first letter let me tackle the seeming contradiction between the law of love as spelled out in the New Testament and the wholesale slaughter of people described in the Old Testament.

Many people become confused on the point of the reliability of the Scriptures and fail to understand exactly what that reliability guarantees. In particular respect to the Old Testament writings — and especially the mainly historical books, e.g., Genesis through Esther — that reliability extends to warrant that the opinions and deeds recorded were in fact held and done. But notice, what so many fail to, that those writings *do not* guarantee that the opinions were correct or the deeds right. The question of correctness or rightness must ultimately be settled in the light of the truth brought by Jesus Christ concerning God and man. Jesus claimed to be the full revelation of God and backed up His claim by the resurrection. I think one of the most liberating truths to get a hold of is the *Christ-likeness of God!*

But what if in the light of Jesus Christ and the law of love we see things attributed to God and to the right in the Old Testament which we know could not be God's way of doing things? We must remember that the written Scriptures do not guarantee that the things attributed to the Lord are *rightly* attributed to Him. It is simply an *error* to think that it does. There is no place in the sacred writings that it says that it does and no independent reason to suppose that it does. Hence, there is no real conflict between the law of love and the Old Testament writings; there is only a contradiction between the law of love and certain opinions and deeds attributed to God. Jesus himself taught concerning this — for example, Matthew 5:33-48 — and we are under obligation to follow Him in this as in all things.

On the other hand we must never forget that God continues to work with people who misunderstand and even misrepresent Him. In His grace He did so with Israel throughout her history, and He does the same with us. How thankful I am that we do not have to have everything straight before God

will work with us. But this does not mean that he condones and endorses the misrepresentations as true or right!

In regard to the bloody way in which the Canaanites and others were treated when Israel invaded Palestine, I believe that God was misrepresented and that He stayed with and blessed the children of Israel in spite of this. Remember that the Herem (i.e. complete destruction) was the commonly accepted way to wage war in those days; and when God commanded Israel to possess the land, they did it in the only way they knew. In some important sense those people who were wiped out deserved exactly what they got, but no less than Israel deserved the same. But wiping out is not God's way, and He allows it in His people only in the process of redeeming them from ways that are not His way.

Perhaps one of the most horrible cases of misery from the "will of God" is found in Ezra 9 and 10, when you realize what this must have meant to the people, especially the women and children. In order to maintain a people who would remain true in their faith in Him, God had long ago commanded Israel not to intermarry with the polytheistic peoples surrounding her. But as usual Israel failed to obey. In a desire to bring about religious reform, Ezra and the other religious leaders decided that the best way to handle this situation was for all male Israelites involved in mixed marriages to "put away" their wives and children. When we realize that in a patriarchal culture like this the women and children were utterly helpless without a father or a husband, we begin to see the awful misery this command must have brought. Certainly this should teach us always to test contemporary convictions about "the will of God" by the light of Jesus Christ and the law of love.

Well, these are a few thoughts on a very large and difficult subject. Remember, the adversary will use even religious "orthodox" ways to get you to believe that God is not good, that I John 1:5 is false. Never, never forsake the God Jesus brought to light!

Faithfully, Q
Robert J. Catalyst

Editor's note: The author of this new feature "Contemporary Issues" wishes to remain anonymous. However, we hope the ideas presented will arouse reader response, and any letters will be sent to the author, who will reply either via this column or by a personal letter.