

WHAT EACH ONE CHOOSES

Can we speak about standards at all where each person chooses for himself? The period of the Judges was a sad one. Frequently the Israelites turned away from the Lord, and the Lord allowed their enemies to occupy their country repeatedly until, each time, the people turned back to the Lord as their only Saviour. The writer of the Book of Judges twice puts his finger on a prominent cause of the trouble. "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone used to do what he thought was right" (Judges 17:6). The last verse in the book again reads: "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what he thought was right" (Judges 21:25).

We should not ignore the profound change in our society in the generation we have been through, which recalls that sad feature in the Book of Judges. For example, early in June 2002 a call was made for the dismissal of Mr Bill Beales, the headmaster of Cwmcaru High School, near Caerphilly, in South Wales. He had given a speech at his school in which he said that in the current climate of political correctness people who broke the rules for right living escaped criticism. He said, "Through the thin veneer of political correctness, the fundamental precepts, beliefs and value system of the Christian faith are being eroded by spin doctors and politicians. They are keener on gaining votes than standing firm on the principles of right and wrong." He also said, "When Christians voice concerns about divorce, unmarried mothers and homosexuality, genetic cloning and many other products of human weakness and desires, it is not those flouting God's laws for right living that are placed on trial, but those who apply the word of God to their lives."

The truth of what he said was confirmed by the reaction against him. Lindsay Whittle, the leader of Caerphilly Borough Council, criticised the speech as "entirely inappropriate." He said that Mr Beale should be suspended pending a full investigation. He asked, "How many pupils left the assembly feeling worthless because their parents are divorced, because they live with a single parent or may be homosexual?" He commented, "When children from certain backgrounds are singled out in this way there is a danger bullying could be encouraged." Geraint Davies, of the National Association of School Masters Union of Women Teachers, said, "We have to teach our children that no one in society should be discriminated against because of their background. Children are very impressionable and teachers have to be careful at all times. The wrong comment can cause untold damage." What will happen to the Principal for his speech will depend on the school's board of governors (This report was by Nicole Martin, of the Telegraph Group Limited, 04/06/2002).

In a splendid book, *Postmodern Times, A Christian Guide to Contemporary Thought and Culture*, (Crossway Books, 1994) Gene Edward Veith wrote about our current society: "Moral values, like other kinds of meaning, are created by the self. The best example of an existential ethic can be found in some of those who advocate abortion but call themselves "pro-choice." To them, it makes no difference what the woman decides, only that she makes an authentic choice whether or not to have the baby. Whatever she chooses is right — for her. "Pro-choice" advocates are not interested in *any* objective information that might have a bearing on the morality of abortion. Data about fetal development, facts about how abortions are performed, philosophical argumentation about the sanctity of life — all such objective evidence from the outside world is meaningless and can have no bearing on the woman's private choice.

We do not have to listen to the radio and television much or read the papers much to know how much the principle of individual choice is used to justify "alternative life-styles." Why was there so much difference in the way the media in Australia pursued Dr Hollingworth and are pursuing Dr Pell and the way they kept fairly quiet about Justice Kirby's admitted homosexuality? We should not forget that Dr Pell had the courage to exclude outspoken advocates of gay life-styles from communion not so long ago. Is the beat-up against Dr Pell driven by reporters in the media who want to see an example made of him for daring to be critical of gays?

What has changed? Thirty years ago we heard a good deal about "situational ethics." This lack of standards is now linked to fierce attack on anything that asserts God's standards, and the buzzword is "discrimination." It is the big bad word of each one who chooses to do "what he thinks is right". "Discrimination" is the defence of ethical weirdoes and unethical people who vaunt their immorality. It is politically incorrect to say that God, the Creator, has laid down His Ten Commandments as appropriate and good for the human beings whom He has created. It is politically incorrect to assert that He has a right to demand standards, that there are no alternative standards that He countenances, and that He will hold every human being to account for his self-chosen standards and immoral living on judgment day. Then how will those with self-chosen standards fare? In Luke 21:22-23 Jesus set God's wrath alongside vengeance when He spoke about the Jewish people who rejected Him. In Romans Paul did the same (12:19). In Romans 2:5 Paul wrote, "because you are stubborn and your heart is unrepentant, you are treasuring up wrath against yourself on the day of wrath, when God's righteous judgment is revealed." When we read Romans chapters one to three we should ask what God says about His wrath. It is God's displeasure against evil in impenitent people, and it is implacable and unavoidable. It works out its effects on people who live without the Law, so that God hands over people who ignore the vestige of the knowledge of Him in every person to stew in their own juice. He hands them over to awful vices because, "although they know God's just requirement, that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do them, but also approve of others who do them" (Romans 1:31). About the rebellious Israelites in the wilderness, the writer of Hebrews twice cites from the Old Testament: "As I swore in My wrath, 'They will not enter My rest.'"

God is merciful, but when ungodly people are determined to resist Him with unbelief or ingratitude, God's goodwill and love become wrath. Jesus taught this in His parable about the unmerciful servant, "His master was angry and handed him over to the torturers until he should pay back all that he owed" (Matthew 18:34). Light exposes what is dark. In Christ, mankind is divided into two, those who have been freed from God's wrath by His mercy, and those who remain under wrath because they have despised His mercy. Simeon declared this when he held the baby Jesus: "This Child is appointed for many in Israel to fall and to rise; and to be a Sign that is spoken against" (Luke 2:34). John the Baptist warned, about the Messiah who was soon to be revealed: "His winnowing shovel is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean up His threshing floor. He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn the chaff with a fire that cannot be put out." (Matthew 3:12). This is how

Jesus Himself regarded the different ways in which His word and work affected two groups of people. He said, when He aimed his parable about the wicked tenant farmers against the religious leaders, quoting the Old Testament with reference to Himself: “Everyone who falls on that Stone will be dashed in pieces, and if that Stone falls on anyone, It will scatter him like dust” (Luke 20:18).

God’s wrath is related to His mercy. Paul wrote, “What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with great patience the vessels of wrath, who had prepared themselves for destruction?” (Romans 9:22). “Wanting to show His wrath” could be causative or concessive: “since He wanted to show His wrath”, or “although He wanted to show His wrath. Probably both are true. However, He is both wrathful and patient.

It is a tragic myth that, because God is a God of love, He cannot be angry. People will not see the need for the Gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ unless they admit that God has standards, and will certainly judge those who ignore them. Nevertheless, when Christians discriminate, as they must, they must always do it as sinners to sinners. They admit that they themselves deserve nothing but God’s wrath, displeasure and eternal damnation. Their defence is not their own righteous lives, but Christ’s righteous life and His bearing of guilt and punishment in their place. Against the background of the wrath of God (Romans 1:18-20), Paul proclaimed the righteousness of God, which brings justification by God’s grace (Romans 3:21-4:25). Even Christ’s crucifixion demonstrates that sin and God’s wrath are serious. Jesus illustrated His divisive power by dying between two malefactors (Luke 23:39-43).