

Miall on Sabbath Enforcement

For many, this chapter will be the odd man out in my book. It deals with a non-issue. So they will think. In Victorian Britain, yes, it was a red-hot topic; but not nowadays. And, of course, to a certain extent, I have to agree. But...

Miall was prepared to press the reddest of all red buttons (even more so in his own times in Victorian Britain than nowadays) when he raised the question of sabbath observance. Specifically, Miall dealt with the eagerness – which he saw as grievous – with which the British (especially Scottish) churches were trying to impose sabbath observance upon all the citizens of the country. While this is not the issue that it was in Miall’s day, not a few among the Reformed, or their sympathisers, even now hanker after it. If only they could get Parliament to ban the opening of shops, sporting arenas and theatres, the running of ferries, flights, buses and trains on what they call the sabbath...! Moreover, the principle must be extended. Some evangelicals are very keen on badgering Parliament to pass laws to enforce biblical norms of behaviour on pagans. While, no doubt, this is well-intentioned, it is misguided, and quite contrary to the spirit of the new covenant. Under the old covenant, of course, the law of Moses was used to govern and attempt to change the behaviour of the Jews. But law (whatever law) never changes hearts, and it is a man’s heart that counts. Paul was explicit. Because of the sinner’s bias, law incites rebellion against itself, and the law of Moses was no exception (Rom. 7:8,11). This is part of its weakness (Rom. 8:3). See also 1 Corinthians 15:56. As Lloyd-Jones said, the law is part of the problem; not the solution.¹

But, as in the chapter ‘Miall on Motive’, care is needed here. Israel was under the law of Moses (Deut. 4:1 – 5:33; 7:8-12; Ps. 147:19-20; Rom. 2:12-14; 9:4; 1 Cor. 9:20-21). Pagans are under their own law (Rom. 2:12-15). Believers are under

¹ See my ‘Lloyd-Jones for Law Men’.

the law of Christ.² And whereas the Mosaic and pagan laws incite rebellion by the natural man, the law of Christ does not incite rebellion in believers. They, being under the law of Christ, have a new heart (Ezek. 11:19-20; 36:25-27), with that law written on their heart so that they love it (Jer. 31:33; Heb. 8:10; 10:16); that is to say, in regenerating the elect, the Spirit gives them a new heart to appreciate, love and obey the law of Christ.³ I am not trying to argue that believers never sin, but the facts are as stated. Believers are under a radically different law, and they have the indwelling Spirit of holiness. Consequently, the law of Christ does not incite believers to sin. This is one of the great contrasts between the law of Christ and the law of Moses (and pagan law).

‘Wait a moment! You were wrong to say that law cannot change men’s hearts. Take the king of Nineveh in the time of Jonah. Did the pagan king not pass an edict proclaiming a fast, which all his people obeyed, and so God stayed his hand of judgment (Jonah 3:7-11)?’

Yes, indeed, though how deep the repentance went as a result of that edict is unknown. In any case, was it not Jonah’s preaching which God used to effect the work before the law was passed (Jonah 3:4-6)? Was it the king’s law or Jonah’s preaching which was the means of blessing? Was the king not merely ratifying what was already taking place under Jonah’s preaching? Whatever the rights and wrongs of that, I remain convinced that unless God changes a man’s heart by his Spirit, no amount of law will do it.

But – and this is why I have included this chapter in this present book – I am saddened by the growing clamour among evangelicals for the use of law to try to enforce ‘religion’ or, as they would see it, the ‘gospel’, today. And I am talking about the law of the land (although some mistakenly think that a good dose of the Mosaic law is what is needed). This clamour, however, represents a return to the mistakes made by the Fathers. The Fathers returned to the old covenant and drew

² See my *Believers*.

³ See my *Believers*; *Ezekiel*.

on many old-covenant principles, applying them to the *ekklēsia*.⁴ The result was disastrous. One consequence, one which still exacts a heavy toll upon millions of pagans, was the way this morphed into the dominance of Rome, leading to the curse of the medieval Church. The Reformers, alas, though they threw off the Roman way of justification, clung to many other corruptions that had been taught and practiced in the medieval Church; not least, the idea that the magistrate should enforce uniform religion by law. Hence the term ‘magisterial Reformers’. The Anabaptists resisted this, and paid a heavy price in blood. Thankfully, in England, the Anabaptists (and their ilk), the secret churches and, above all, Robert Browne and Robert Harrison, drove further back to the new covenant.⁵ Sadly, some contemporary evangelicals either do not know or have forgotten this history, and would rather like the State to impose Scripture (or what they see as Scripture) on pagans.

It was this ethos in Victorian Britain that Miall responded to. And he saw sabbath enforcement as top of the list. Of course, he was touching a very sore spot when he accused Victorian evangelicals of enforcing sabbath observance on the unregenerate. As they were. The novelists of the time, not least Anthony Trollope, captured it. Witness the way the bishop of Barchester and, more particularly, the bishop’s wife (Mrs Proudie), using her cat’s paw, the oily Mr Obadiah Slope, tried to enforce sabbath observance, closure of the railways on the holy day, and so on, in Trollope’s *Barchester Towers*. Alas, in our day, not a few of the Reformed, making a last-ditch stand, still have a yen for such a step. They should listen to Miall. He asked some pertinent questions, questions which must be faced by all who would impose sabbath observance on pagans:

Suppose all the means and opportunities of openly violating the sabbath were cut off – every tavern and tea-garden shut – every vehicle prohibited – every avenue to pleasure barred –

⁴ See my *Pastor; Infant*.

⁵ See my *Battle*; ‘A People Not To Be Forgotten’; ‘Robert Browne: Thinking the Unthinkable’.

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and every act expressive of contempt for the institution [that is, sabbath observance] rendered impossible. What then? There would not be more religion – if by religion is meant sympathy with God in the gospel of Jesus Christ – in consequence of the arrangement, than there was before – not one single additional element of the social state upon which the eye of God⁶ could rest with approval. There would be nothing more [accomplished by this strategy] than an imposing show without any corresponding reality – towards God a mockery, to the churches a blind [that is, a smokescreen, a facade], concealing from them the actual spiritual condition of the world, and operating upon the ungodly themselves as a delusion and a snare.⁷

In other words, while enforced sabbatarianism would produce the appearance of sabbath observance, it would, in fact, merely produce external conformity. And that would be a disaster. For, even during the days of the old covenant – when Israel was under the Mosaic law to conform to sabbath observance – mere external conformity was highly objectionable to God. He always demanded the heart:

If you turn back your foot from the sabbath, from doing your pleasure on my holy day, and call the sabbath a delight and the holy day of the LORD honourable; if you honour it, not going your own ways, or seeking your own pleasure, or talking idly; then you shall take delight in the LORD, and I will make you ride on the heights of the earth; I will feed you with the heritage of Jacob your father, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken (Isa. 58:13-14).

The dire consequences of enforced sabbatarianism are many. It would blind the churches to the real state of the people. The churches would be congratulating themselves on the appearance of religion all around them, while all the time that coerced conformity would be masking the reality beneath the surface. And as for the pagans themselves, enforced sabbath observance would prove nothing but a snare. A snare? Yes, indeed. For a start, resentment. Then again, the pagans might

⁶ Miall had ‘the eye of the Supreme’.

⁷ Miall p168.

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well think – the evidence, I submit, is there for all to see – that their external conformity equates to genuine spiritual experience. They wear the right ‘uniform’, they carry the regulation Bible, they attend the prescribed meetings, they ‘keep the sabbath’. I know of a case where a pastor assured a believer that she could not be backsliding since she was still present at the meetings. She was conforming. Where her heart and mind were, he had no idea, but since she was externally in the right place at the right time, in his eyes all was well. Again, I am reminded of the boy who stood up to sing hymns because his father commanded him, but was heard to say that he was still sitting down inside.

Do not miss Miall’s point that external conformity hides the real inward condition. The gospel exposes the evil heart of man, whereas external conformity to rules disguises it. Calamitous! What a condemnation of a system if ever there was one!

Miall went on:

Strange that Christianity should be supposed completely misunderstood! Stranger still that the misunderstanding should be exhibited in connection with the most general and strenuous advocacy of the doctrine of justification by faith! Strangest of all, that the zeal for ‘sabbath observance’ which seeks to impose it upon all, willing or unwilling, concerns itself only about special modes of desecration – those, namely, which run counter to national habits. I confess I have been amazed at the manner in which this question has been argued and enforced.⁸

In other words, those who want to enforce sabbath observance on pagans, generally focus on – pick on – what pagans would like to do. So if alcohol is the local issue, the ‘remedy’ is to close public houses (drinking places) and ban the sale of alcohol on the sabbath; if shopping, close the shops; if sport is the issue, close arenas; and so on. All to get ‘church attendance’. But this idea, of course, is nothing but the outworking of the principles of Christendom. It has nothing

⁸ Miall p168.

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whatever to do with the new covenant; it can call upon no New Testament passage to support it.

As Miall said, trying to enforce the gospel (or what is seen as the gospel) by law can only, at best, produce conformity to imposed rules. Moreover, it provokes unwillingness, even resentment leading to hatred, among pagans who are forced to give up their pleasures to go along with that which their evangelical ‘masters’ – kill-joy bigots, they would call them – have decreed for them. It deceives millions who think external religion justifies a sinner before God. And all this is produced by law, the law of the land, in the hands of believers – those who are supposed to be governed by new-covenant principles!

Although I have included the following extract in the previous chapter – ‘Miall on Motive’ – addressing believers for their progressive sanctification, I repeat it here, addressing believers in their misguided attempts to apply the law to unbelievers. Miall:

Churches should accustom themselves to consider nothing as done to God which is not done by them of their own affectionate choice. He has placed them upon that footing of relationship to himself, that whatever service they offer to him in the prosecution of his beneficent designs towards men, must be true volunteer service, presented as an expression, all unworthily as it is and must be, of heartfelt sympathy with him. They should learn to regard with feelings of humiliation and shame the doing of anything for their Master task-wise. They should habituate themselves to the idea that a grudging recognition of obligation is utterly unworthy of their own position, and a serious dishonour done to their Lord. And, as ministering the best and most powerful stimulus to cheerful activity and self-sacrifice, they may associate with their earnest study of the divine character the consideration that they are invoked by love rather than enjoined by law for whatever practical response their nature can yield. In respect of both the points just alluded to, it would be well if the pervading spirit of what is addressed to the churches, whether from the pulpit or the press, were of a

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more genial and persuasive⁹ character. Men cannot be driven into godliness, nor into any of its manifestations – and if they could, then godliness will be little worth. Reluctant wills cannot be subdued by law, however reasonable; they can only be subdued by love. On this account the gospel was given; with this in view, the gospel must be preached. Paul, ‘knowing the terror of the Lord, laboured’ all the more earnestly, not to terrify, but ‘to persuade men’. That which was a powerful motive to his benevolence, was not, however, the most influential one to [cure] their [that is, unbelievers’] unwillingness. The call of the church to the world ought to be still: ‘Come – whosoever will, let him take of the waters of life freely’. Yes! ‘Come’ best expresses the drift of the whole dispensation, whether the effort be to turn a sinner, or to draw out a saint. The tenor of all our ministrations should be such as may most fitly terminate in the exhortation: ‘Come’. The entire economy is framed upon a principle which addresses itself to immortal souls in that one word: ‘Come’. All that we feel, and all that we do, should constitute a response to that invitation: ‘Come’. Would that the churches thoroughly understood this! Would that they had drunk more deeply than as yet they seem to have done into the spirit of ‘the perfect law of liberty’. Till they do, their exercises will yield little gladness to themselves, will exert little power upon others, in comparison of what they might do.¹⁰

As for sabbatarianism by believers (allowing it to be part of the new covenant – which it is not),¹¹ Miall went on to make the point that the sabbatarian should be a practicing believer not only on Sunday (the ‘sabbath’, in his eyes) in the meeting house, but throughout the week in the home, at work, and so on.

⁹ Miall had ‘suasive’.

¹⁰ Miall pp413-415.

¹¹ See my *Sabbath Questions; Sabbath Notes; Essential*.