

GUILT

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"THE CHRISTIAN FAITH"

We are all fascinated by the subject of guilt and innocence, but our society is also very confused about it. For example, only recently the newspapers reported a judicial decision that the fact that a person was drunk was actually a defence against a charge arising from a motor accident case. It was held that a drunken man was not responsible for his actions. Many people were, rightly or not, disturbed by the implications of this news report, but it was only part of a general tendency to be more sympathetic to offenders, and to reduce the number of occasions when we call a person guilty of a crime. It also means that punishments are less severe than before.

Quite clearly there is much good in this tendency. Of course, many people are disquieted when they see reports of short sentences being passed for heinous offences. However, a recognition that individual cases depend to some extent on circumstances is demanded by justice, and may, in fact, be found in the Bible's own law code.

On the other hand, it is fair to raise the question whether the tendency to lessen responsibility has not gone too far. There are those in society whose chief business it is to study man himself; often they discover interesting and useful material about humanity. But their study of man can never come to final truth, for the simple reason that they intentionally leave God out of the picture. I do not blame them for this; every science has its limitations as well as its own proper methods and valid results. The danger comes when the results of these investigations

are taken as having the last word on matters to do with human existence. Then an emphatic protest must be lodged. Their results are too narrow.

One problem is that there is a school of thought within this science of man which leaves no room for human responsibility. They are called 'determinists', because they believe that a man's actions are virtually programmed. Naturally this implies that we are never really guilty for what we do, because we cannot help being what we are. If this were true it would be absolutely wrong to punish anyone; of course the only reason we do punish people is that we are programmed ourselves, and so we aren't even guilty for doing that. In fact, there is no real difference between right and wrong.

Do you see what I mean by describing this view as narrow? It is achieved by the omission of vital elements in the human situation, notably the fact that man is made in the image of God, and so responsible to God.

Most people would like to see the idea of guilt remain in use; we believe that there is a standard of right and wrong, and that when we offend it we are guilty. But beware of this common mistake: to agree that men can be guilty is to admit that we may be guilty. The judgment we pass on others, as Jesus said, will be passed on us. What are you going to do about your guilt?

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