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CENSORSHIP

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THE PROTESTANT FAITH

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Censorship has been in the news lately. A Swedish film has been banned and a New York musicale has just managed to get through. Predictably enough there have been protests by some at the very idea of censorship; by others at the point at which the line is drawn; but the majority of citizens, though doubtless making up their own minds, have not expressed them. It is worthwhile reflecting on the whole matter. What should be the Christian's attitude and actions? The area is a very wide one. How should a Christian behave when a conversation in which he has been joining takes a turn which he regards as dishonouring to God; how should he select the literature he reads, the films or plays he goes to, or the programmes he views on TV?

The Christian seeks to please his Saviour, to win from the lips of his Master the praise, "Well done, good and faithful servant, enter thou into the joy of thy Lord". As St Paul puts it, the Christian is compared to a soldier whose object is to please him who enrolled him (2 Tim. 2:4). Our first duty then, is to immerse ourselves in the mind of God so that we may understand the thing that God commands and love the thing which He approves. God has revealed His mind to us in the life of Jesus, in the preaching of the prophets and indeed in the whole of Holy Scripture. We should know what the Scriptures say; the standards they set before us; the

values they commend; and we should regulate all our actions by the rule of God's mind revealed in Scripture. God is love, God is righteous, God is holy and pure. These are the things of which we should approve. We should assimilate ourselves to these. We should not find our entertainment in reading or seeing things which cannot be classified under these headings, but which contradict them, because we can be assured that such things do not have God's approval. As St Paul writes to the Philippians, "Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things" (Phil. 4:8). This is the principle which should control the Christian in his choice of what he reads or what he views. There are, however, a lot of people who do not accept Christ as their teacher, or Scripture as the revelation of God. They see no reason why they should submit themselves to God's will. Although they do not know it they are led by the devil (Eph. 2:2, 4:17; 2 Cor. 4:4; 2 Tim. 2:26). This is the Bible's testimony and is the explanation of why there is a constant acceleration towards evil in those who give themselves to it. The Christian finds himself in a world in which Christ was crucified, a world under the influence of the evil one, a world still awaiting its redemption and its judgment at the coming of Christ. Jesus said of His

disciples and He says to us "Ye are the light of the world" (Mt. 5:14) and we have the commission to show in our lives and actions His character of love, sympathy, understanding, on the one hand, and yet on the other hand His character of light in which there is no darkness at all. We must bear witness to the light and in our actions discriminate, setting aside in our reading and in our viewing things which contradict God's character and which would dishonour His name in us were we to participate in them or to take our entertainment from them.

God gives Christians His Spirit, His own presence. This is our great privilege, and it carries obligations. We are not to grieve the Spirit. If we amuse ourselves, in our thoughts or in our conversation, with unkind criticism or impure situations, we grieve God's Holy Spirit and dishonour the name by which we are called. On the contrary we are to be positive, to think and to say things which are true, honourable, just, kind, lovely, worthy of praise.

There is a further question beyond the fact that Christians will be their own censors for their own lives: What is our obligation as members of the community? and in particular, a democratically governed community? The community, just like an individual has obligation to honour God, and we as Christians ought to use our influence by our words and our

lives in this direction, though I do not think we should use the instrument of censorship at this point for this is not the way the Gospel prevails. There are, however, two clear areas where it seems to me censorship must always remain. We cannot make a community obey God by censorship, and we should not attempt to do so. This is the area for Christian witness and example and by positive values to raise community standards. But quite apart from Christian considerations, every community has a right to maintain community standards. Individuals who are members of the community and who are not under any obligation to remain members, have no right to use their membership in a way that is offensive to others. I give you a simple illustration. No-one objects to a person taking off his clothes in his own home, but do we not rightly object if he were to undress in the street? Has he a right to do this? The present law forbids him and is this unbearable censorship? I never heard it suggested. Yet he is doing no harm to anyone except being offensive. The principle underlying our present laws is that you and I have a right to walk in the public street or sit in the public park without having offensive behaviour by individual members of the community thrust under our notice. Public areas have to be shared, and so there has to be a restraint on unfettered libertinism - this is the principle of life in community. The same principle applies

equally to broadcasts, the public press, the public bookstand and public billboards, and advertisements designed for the public to read. Why should individuals who wish to make money make use of their membership of the community when they have no intention of keeping within community standards. The community has the right to ensure that the offensive word, or scene, or poster is not peddled through community facilities. These considerations show that there will always be a place for censorship; how that censorship is exercised is another question. I think our present method is not a bad one, where a responsible minister of the crown has the final decision, which he takes doubtless with advisers. He is not an arbitrary dictator, as a committee or commission might well be, for he has to justify his actions to his colleagues in the Cabinet and ultimately he depends for his continuation in office on keeping within the opinion of the community as represented by the electorate.

There is another ground for censorship which will always be with us, and this arises from consideration of our obligation to the developing personalities of young people within the community. Every parent recognises that obligations to the children in the home may impose requirements and perhaps restrictions on his time and activities; and the community as a whole has obligations to young people growing up and forming their personal-

ities and their habits. Thus we restrict the sale of alcohol to young persons under the age of 18, lest they become addicts before they learn to discriminate; we restrict the right of entering into binding contracts, lest their immaturity might betray them into being held to actions which they might later regret. And this responsibility which the community has to protect its members from exploitation is not restricted merely to the young. We prohibit, for example, drug pedlars from peddling drugs of addiction to anyone in the community. This is done in the interests of all, lest either ignorance or weakness entice some to take drugs, and so find themselves hooked on a habit which they then cannot break. Hence drugs are prohibited. Lesser prohibitions, but nevertheless based on the same justification, apply to the sale of cigarettes. All such prohibitions are a form of censorship and the right to act in this way is hardly deniable, though there may be arguments as to where the line should be drawn. We all have a serious duty to help young people form their minds and characters in a way that will bring them joy and happiness. A criminal character or a depraved taste will not do this.

The question then with regard to censorship of films and literature is whether these things can have a deleterious effect, and if so, it would seem to follow that the community has a duty to control them, and not to allow those who wish to make money out of the weak-

ness of any particular section to have untrammelled liberty. It is generally accepted that salacious literature or literature which turns up topsy turvey moral standards does have a harmful effect on the minds and characters of those whose minds are in the process of being formed. A distorted character is a terrible curse to take through life. Thus there will be continuing duty on the community to see to it that harmful products of whatever variety they are, whether drugs or evil ideas, for these are also habit forming, are restricted from free course through the community.

We should all support and encourage those cabinet ministers who are acting responsibly in this matter.

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