

The following is an excerpt from my book, *That They All May Be One: Studies on Unity, Freedom and Authority in the Body of Christ*, pp. 90-93. I offer this piece as an attempt to further the study on the subject introduced by Jack Holt that "principle" is another way to establish authority. My concern in this posting is how he used the example of David in Luke 6 to make his point. I am responding to Cecil Hook's argument from Matthew 12 that love may override law. Is brother Holt making essentially the same point, and, if so, is his use of David from this passage and its parallel in Luke 6 a proper use of this passage? Others may wish to post their comments on this subject as well. I am especially interested in your comments on McGarvey's thoughts on this subject. Perhaps we can take up the other two examples Jack uses at another time. --- Walton Weaver

Jesus and the Sabbath Law

Those who adopt this way of handling the word of God believe that the law of love gives them the "right" to exalt love above God's law and to act on their own feelings on what would be appropriate at a given moment. Some think Jesus' rejection of the Pharisees' interpretation of the Sabbath law is an example in point. They affirm that what Jesus teaches in response to the Pharisees on this subject shows that he denied "the arbitrary nature of law, declaring that there is something greater than law," that is, love or mercy.

The arguments advanced from Jesus on this subject usually run parallel with those made by the advocates of situation ethics. By employing the situation ethics argument in exalting love above law in given situations some of these brethren have been found trying to justify even lying and murder, including suicide and abortion. This approach to the interpretation of Scripture will lead one to set aside clear declarations of God's word on any number of things.

At this point in our study of this subject a very important question arises: Does Jesus deny "the arbitrary nature of law" by exalting love above law? Those who would affirm that commands in the New Testament are "directives of love" and not "lawful requirements" contend that this is what Jesus did when he condemned the Pharisees for their objection to his disciples plucking grain on the Sabbath (Matt. 12:1 ff.). It is somewhat strange, however, that these advocates would use an example from the life and teachings of Jesus to make their point. Keep in mind that these are those who affirm that no example in Scripture is a binding example in itself. In other words, they affirm that there is no authoritative quality in an example per se. Yet, one should not forget that they are relying upon this example as their authority to make the point that love is greater than law.

No need to say that this example is only being used as an illustration of the command to love, and that the authority is in the command and not in the example itself. For if that is the case, where is the command that lies behind this example that establishes this point? The command to love says nothing about love being greater than law. If we are taught that in the New Testament, it is taught somewhere else, not in the command to love. So where is it? The fact is, these brethren are drawing this conclusion from this example of Jesus. They are using it to teach that there is something greater than law, which is love. Which, by the way, in their way of thinking comes out to mean: if something is done in love, one may even change what the law says, because love is greater than law.

If one feels compelled to reject this conclusion, then that only puts us back where we started. If the point that is being made does not mean that man, as long as what he does is done in love, is free to change the details of a command, a teaching, an example, or a principle in the word of God, then the commands, examples, etc. must be "lawful requirements" and no change is permitted. Yet, this is what is being rejected by the very argument being made. This is precisely how these advocates of "love above law" are using the example of Jesus and the Pharisees in Matthew 12:1 ff.

The idea that in this example Jesus is teaching that love may override law, or permit one to set law aside in order to do the loving thing, is preposterous. It is totally against all reason. Why would not one concede that if this is not the point being made, then there is no problem in calling commands, examples, etc. "lawful requirements."

The issue between Jesus and the Pharisees over the Sabbath law was not one that had to do with which was greater, law or love. This is nowhere brought up in the exchange. Jesus does teach that he is Lord of the Sabbath (Matt. 12:8), and in this way he asserts his authority over the Sabbath law. He also teaches that the service rendered to him by his disciples was greater than the temple (Matt. 12:6). On this latter point, McGarvey observes, "It was their duty to serve him which was greater than the temple; that is, greater than the obligation of the temple service on the priests. If, then, the priests were justifiable, much more the disciples" (Matthew 104).

Jesus had justified the action of the priests in rendering certain acts of service in the temple on the Sabbath, thus showing that the Sabbath law permitted some work on the Sabbath day. It is noteworthy that in this example Jesus does not justify the conduct of his disciples' act of plucking and eating grain on the Sabbath on the basis of "the law of love." Mercy shown toward the disciples in this matter would have been more acceptable to God than sacrifice, but we must not overlook the fact that Jesus says that in condemning the disciples for their action they "condemned the guiltless" (v. 7). In other words, they were not violating the Sabbath law when they plucked the grain and ate some of it. If some work is permitted on the Sabbath day, as Jesus clearly shows that it was, then to do some work on that day was within the scope of that law, not above it or outside of it.

The main fault Jesus found with the Pharisees was their hypocrisy and the inconsistency he saw in their teaching and practice. He does not in any way teach that some violation of God's law is permissible and justifiable on the basis of the examples he cites. We do learn from the examples he uses that man is charged with the task of coming to understand the meaning of a command of God, and that he is to be held responsible for consistently applying his word in particular situations. The example of David in vv. 3-4 is not used to teach that some violation of God's law is permissible, and, that when this happens, the violator will be held blameless if it has been broken out of necessity. J.W. McGarvey was acquainted with this particular interpretation, and his insightful response to this position which we offer below is worthy of study:

"Jesus expressly admits that what David did was unlawful; and some have supposed that he here intends to justify it on the ground of necessity, and then to argue that his disciples, though guilty of violating the law of the Sabbath, are justifiable on the same ground. There is no doubt that on this ground David excused himself for eating the show-bread, and that the Pharisees did the same for him. But it cannot be that he who refused to turn stones into bread when tortured by the forty days' fast, and who said, "Whosoever shall break one of these least commandments, and teach men so, shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven," would approve such a violation of law as David was guilty of. Neither can it be that he allowed his own disciples while under the law to break the Sabbath. If Christians may violate law when its observance would involve hardship or suffering, then there is an end of suffering in the name of Christ, and an end ever of self-denial. But it is clear that by the Pharisees David's act was thought excusable; otherwise they would have retorted on Jesus thus: Out of your own mouth we condemn you: you class your act with David's; but David sinned, and so do you. Now the real argument of Jesus is this: David, when hungry, ate the show-bread, which it was confessedly unlawful for him to eat, yet you justify him: my disciples pluck grain and eat it on the Sabbath, an act which the law does not forbid, and yet you condemn them" (*Matthew 104*).