

INTERNAL RESTRAINTS

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on March 3, 1968 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P. M.

In the March 1, 1968 issue of the FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, J. Edgar Hoover writes, "The publication and sale of obscene material is BIG Business in America today. Degenerate sex pictures and pornographic literature, overtly peddled and sold in most cities and communities, net greedy smut merchants millions of dollars annually. It is impossible to estimate the amount of harm to impressionable teenagers and to assess the volume of sex crimes attributable to pornography, but its influence is extensive...Pornography, in all its forms, is one major cause of sex crimes, sexual aberrations, and perversions...In the publishing, theatrical, and entertainment fields, are the good, enlightening, and educational qualities of their products being overshadowed by too much emphasis on obscenity, vulgarity, incest, and homosexuality? Many people believe this to be true...(Then Mr. Hoover spoke of "hard-core" pornography)...Such filth in the hands of young people and curious adolescents does untold damage and leads to disastrous consequences...Lewd and obscene material plays a motivating role in sexual violence...Forcible rape in 1966 increased ten per cent over the 1965 total...Since 1960, forcible rape has increased fifty per cent...Sound and workable laws are needed, and, where they do exist, they should be vigorously enforced...When obscene material is discovered, it should be exposed and citizens should complain to proper authorities. When pornography is received in the mails, postal authorities should be advised. Citizens should come forward and cooperate in prosecution of offenders. Obscene material is indeed evil, but it is not a necessary evil."

Recently I received a questionnaire from a graduate student at Peabody College who asked a series of questions concerning censorship for a term project. All of the questions added up to the one general question, "What do you think about censorship?" My answer was that I believe that there are certain areas in which censorship is needed, but that I do not feel it is likely to be forthcoming in our modern American scene. I further indicated that I do not know by what means it can be achieved.

Some Kind of Censorship

It seems quite obvious to me that some kind of censorship is needed in America today. We are grateful for the Federal Communications Commission which has long regulated the use of profanity and vulgarity on the air, both on radio and on television. We shudder to think of what might be the case if we did not have such a regulative body. We are grateful for the fact that each of the major radio and television networks provides censors to make sure that the individual programs conform to the FCC code.

We are also grateful for work such as that done by Eric Johnston, one-time president of the National Association of Manufacturers, who was responsible for many years for the enforcement of the Motion Picture Code of Ethics. Although at the time we did not feel that he was doing as especially good job, in looking back and realizing how much more liberal are the movie policies of today, we are grateful for the restraint which Mr. Johnston exercised more than a score of years ago. It seems that the movies become ever freer and freer in the use of profanity, vulgarity and sex.

The Roman Catholics have long had their "Legion of Decency" which conveys to their members the names of books which they are not to read and movies which

they are not to see. We do not know with what success these negative recommendations are made, but it is heartening to know that a religious body has standards and enough conviction to try to enlist their people to live by those standards.

When I was a student many years ago in Abilene Christian College, in Abilene Texas, there was a committee of citizens who served as a censor board for the movies. This was a college town, having three religious colleges. It was a religious town, having an unusual number of churches. The censor board viewed every movie before it came to town, suggesting certain cuts to be made in some of the movies, and preventing others from coming at all. This kind of censorship is far away and long ago. It is not feasible in our land today to hope for such control over indecent movies. We are grateful for the fact that our own colleague, Jim Bill McInteer, has served on a local committee in Nashville to try to control pornographic literature here. All of these efforts are encouraging, though more rather than less activity in this area is needed.

Two Major Problems

In this whole matter of censorship we face two major problems. The first is the simple fact that publishers immediately claim that censorship violates their right of freedom of speech as provided in the First Amendment to the Constitution. The second problem is seen in the difficulty of finding a generally accepted code of ethics to serve as a universal standard throughout the land. You and I would immediately accept the Bible as our basic code of ethics, but not all of our citizens would do so. Even if the Bible were accepted, there would still be a problem in knowing exactly how to relate its principles to certain specific decisions of the moment. The best that can be hoped for is a somewhat general code, outlawing only the worst of indecent, obscene and immoral material.

For many years the trend in court cases on the local, state, and national level was toward more and more license. It seemed that each case was decided against those who would enforce moral and ethical restrictions. However, there was a decision by the Supreme Court in March 1966, which reversed this trend and gave some encouragement toward decency. The National Observer, of March 28, 1966, reports, "The U. S. Supreme Court, in a frank attack on the nation's growing army of smut merchants, handed down a decision last week that gives state and local officials a powerful new weapon in the battle against obscenity. The Court, in voting five to four to uphold the conviction of New York publisher-promoter Ralph Ginzberg, broadened the test by which material may be found to be obscene under the law. (Note: Previously only what could be demonstrated to "appeal exclusively to prurient interests" was considered obscene.) Beyond the content of the material itself, said the Court, determination of obscenity can be made on the basis of the seller's motives. Publications can be found obscene if the seller made 'a business of pandering to the widespread weakness of titillation by pornography.' From now on, when obscenity is in doubt, the prosecutor has only to show the defender pandered to human lusts--a far easier assignment., This does not mean that the battle has been won even to a small degree, but it does mean some encouragement to those who would enforce laws against offensive films, books, and other publications.

Christian Discrimination

When we have done all that we can possibly do in protesting obscene material we still come back to the fact that it is not possible to clean up our society completely. The only ultimate answer is internal restraint, or Christian discrimination in what we do, what we see, and what we read. We are all aware that in early life children must be provided extensive external restraints. A child is not allowed to play wherever he wishes to play, but is confined to a safe area. He is led by the hand when he crosses the street. Limits are placed upon his freedom. Certain

eating habits are insisted upon. There are bedtime requirements. When the child grows older, there are dating rules. There are rules for the use of the car. There are restrictions on the spending of money.

In every well-regulated Christian home there should also be some limitation upon what young people may read and upon what young people may see on television. Parents Magazine provides a valuable "Movie Guide," which rates all current films either Excellent, Good, Fair, or Poor. They also indicate whether the films are suitable for Children, High-School Age, Adults, or Family. This provides parents a great deal of help in knowing which movies their children ought to be allowed to see. TV Guide is another source which can guide thoughtful parents in knowing at least something of the worthiness of the programs that are to come each week. By the use of such devices parents ought to be able to screen out the worst programs and allow their children to see only that which is decent and wholesome.

External restraints are necessary in the earlier years of life, but ultimately all these limitations must be transferred into internal restraints. This is essentially what is meant by "growing up." A young person is grown, not when he is tall, or big, nor when he has had a certain number of birthdays. He is grown when he has matured to the point that he has certain internal restraints which take over in place of the external restraints which have to be left behind with childhood and adolescence. Only when a person has matured to the point that he does what is right because he himself wants to do it has he come to adulthood.

God's Word

God's word teaches us to distinguish good from evil. It is here that we find our absolute standard of right and wrong. We like the way the apostle Paul wrote to the Romans, in speaking of one who "approveth the things that are excellent," (Rom. 2:18). Conversely, this means that such a person disapproves of the things that are not excellent. In Paul's letter to the Philippians, he spoke of those who "distinguish the things that differ." An alternate translation says, "I want you always to be able to recognize the highest and the best." (Phil. 1:10). In Heb. 5:14, the writer spoke of "those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern good and evil." An alternate translation says, "those who have their faculties trained by practice to distinguish good from evil." The Bible is designed in large measure to create in us a sense of values which will guide us away from evil and toward the good.

In the Old Testament book of Isaiah, we read, "Woe unto them that call evil good, and good evil; that put darkness for light, and light for darkness; that put bitter for sweet, and sweet for bitter!" (Isa. 5:20). In the New Testament no passage is more complete than that found in Phil. 4:8, "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honorable, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things." These passages suggest the area within which we Christians must stay if we follow the Lord's standards of right and wrong.

Suggestions

In developing internal restraints, we might well follow these suggestions:

1. In which direction does it lead? Does this activity, or this book, or this film, lead us toward spiritual things or away from spiritual things? Does it lead us toward God or away from God?
2. What kind of people enjoy it? We can learn something of the worthiness of an activity by carefully examining those who habitually engage in it. As we look at these people, we ask, "Are these the people like whom we would wish to become?"

3. Would I want my most respected friends to know? If the book, the movie, or the activity is something that we would be embarrassed for our most respected friends to see us engaging in, it is a good indication that it is out of bounds. If we would be embarrassed for them to know, then we ought not to engage in it.
4. Would I want to do it, or see it, or read it, if I knew that today was my last day on earth? Of course, we do not know but that any day might be our last day. The only wise course is to live each day as though it were our last day. This again helps us to make our decision between right and wrong.
5. Would Christ do it, or see it, or read it, if he were here? If we cannot visualize Christ participating in this activity, then it is a good sign that we who wear his name ought not to participate either.

Conclusion

In our modern world there is a great deal of evil. It is the Christian's responsibility to speak out against that evil. When he finds pornographic literature on the news stand, it is his obligation not only not to buy, but also to protest to the owner of the establishment. If he finds hurtful pornographic literature circulating in the neighborhood, especially in the hands of young people, it is his responsibility to report it to the District Attorney's office. If he receives pornographic materials through the mails, it is his responsibility to protest to the Post Office Department. In our homes and in our own lives it is also our Christian responsibility to limit our television viewing, our magazine subscribing, our book reading, and our movie going, to those that are wholesome and worthwhile.

Even when we have done all that we can do to clean up our environment, we still will not have succeeded fully. There comes then the responsibility of having our own internal restraints which prevent our doing, or seeing, or reading the wrong kind of thing. This is a self-imposed censorship, because we believe Christian principles. It is only through reading the scriptures that we know what is right and what is wrong.

In the Old Testament there is the tragic story of Esau who sold his birthright for a mess of pottage. We Christians, surrounded by a world in which there is a great deal of evil, are constantly in danger of selling our birthright of heaven for a mess of earthly pottage. The lustful, obscene, pornographic materials of this kind do not add to our happiness and well-being in this life. The happiest people are not those who feast on this kind of rottenness, but rather those whose lives are wholesome and clean. Pornography has nothing of value to offer; it has only the capacity to destroy.
