Is Near Enough Good Enough?

Some people have trouble with parts of the Bible such as God’s command to exterminate the Canaanites. God had given reasons for that in Deuteronomy: “When you enter the land that the LORD, your God, is giving you, you shall not learn to imitate the detestable practices of those nations. No one shall be found among you who sacrifices his son or his daughter in the fire, who makes predictions by casting lots, who conjures up spirits, who observes omens, who practices sorcery, who casts spells, who is a medium, who possesses a familiar spirit, or who consults the dead. For the LORD detests all who do these things. Because of these detestable practices the LORD, your God, is driving those nations out before you. You shall be blameless before the LORD, your God.”

Today many people are inspired by ideals of what they regard as sweet reasonableness. Many are affected by humanistic ideals, with human beings serving as the sole measures of everything. Lutherans are told that they should make it easier for those who do not hold the pure gospel to commune at their altars. The notion is advocated that, as long as God’s grace and the crucified Christ are proclaimed, other issues are peripheral, even when God’s Word has decided them. In ecumenical circles, doctrinal compromise is the name of the game. Near enough is regarded as good enough.

When the Israelites entered Canaan, some cities were declared “chērem”. That Hebrew word meant that some things were so holy that only God could deal with them, or that some things were so wicked that total destruction was the only possible action. Before the Israelites attacked Jericho, they were told: “The city and all that is in it shall be devoted to the LORD for destruction. You yourselves must keep yourselves from what is devoted to destruction, so that you may not devote any of the banned goods and then, by taking them, make the camp of Israel liable to destruction and make it taboo.” The city was declared “chērem”. Achan and his family found to their cost that the LORD meant what he said.

However, there were exceptions. Rahab the prostitute and all her family were to be spared. Rahab became an ancestor of Jesus! All the silver, gold, and vessels of bronze and iron were holy to the LORD. They had to go into the treasury of the LORD.

The word “chērem” has a related word in Arabic that we know in English. The “harem” was the part of the house that was banned to any adult male other than the man of the house. There were several Hebrew place names related to the word. “Hermon” seems to have meant “a sacred mountain.” “Hormah” had the negative meaning of the word: “A place totally banned.”

The experience of Saul seems to some modern readers to cross the bounds of sweet reasonableness. The Philistines invaded Israel with thirty thousand chariots, six thousand horsemen and soldiers as numerous as the sand on the seashore. The soldiers of Israel, whom Saul had called up, began to leak away. Some hid in caves, thorn-bushes, rocks, cellars, and in cisterns. Some fled across the Jordan to the land of Gad and Gilead. The soldiers who remained with Saul at Gilgal were trembling with fear. Saul had been told to wait for seven days for Samuel to come and offer sacrifice. However, Samuel was late! Many would see these as extenuating circumstances. Saul proceeded to offer the burnt offering and the peace offerings himself. Samuel told Saul that, because of that disobedience, the royal family line of Saul would not continue. Saul had not kept the commandment of the LORD, his God. Near enough had not been good enough.

God has a long memory. The first enemies to give Israel trouble after they crossed the Red Sea were the Amalekites. Saul was given the message: “I have called to account what the Amalekites did to Israel when they stood in their way while they were coming up from Egypt. Now go and strike down the Amalekites and totally destroy everything that they have. You shall not spare them, but you shall kill men, women, young children, infants, oxen, sheep, camels, and donkeys.” The soldiers led by Saul had an outstanding victory. They totally destroyed animals that were of little value and weak. However, Saul spared the Amalekite king, Agag, and the best of the sheep, the cattle, the more valuable calves and young rams, and everything else that was good.

The LORD told Samuel: “I have come to regret that I made Saul king. For he has turned away from following Me and has not carried out My instructions.” Earlier Samuel had strongly resisted the people’s desire to have their own king. However, during Saul’s kingship Israel had been victorious against their enemies on all sides. Samuel thought that the LORD’s action was extreme. He became indignant, and cried out to the LORD all that night.

Like it or not, Samuel had a duty to attend to. When Samuel caught up with Saul at Gilgal, his reply was that he had spared the best to sacrifice to the LORD. Perhaps he remembered that at Jericho there had been exceptions to that “chērem.” He excused himself also by saying that he was afraid of what his soldiers might do if he insisted on destroying everything. Near enough was not good enough. Samuel replied: “Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obedience to the what the LORD says? Look, obedience is better than sacrifice, and paying attention is better than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as sinful as divination, and obstinacy is like false worship and idols. Because you have rejected what the LORD has said, He has also rejected you from being king.”

The history of “chērem” continued. The Greek translation of it was “anathema.” When Paul wrote to the Galatians, he omitted the usual references to praise and prayer in his letters. He dealt immediately with the problem that people, often called “Judaizers”, were causing. They insisted that Gentile converts had to observe Old Testament customs like circumcision, laws of cleanliness, and special days. They were not unchristian. They believed in the crucified Christ and had been baptised. They were like the believing Pharisees (Acts 15:5), who insisted that it was necessary to circumcise Gentile converts and command them to keep the Law of Moses. An important meeting of the church in Jerusalem had dealt with the problem. Certainly, if they took their position to the logical conclusion, in trying to be justified by the Law, they had been estranged from Christ; had had fallen away from grace (Galatians 5:4). For Paul, the freedom of the Gospel was at stake. He
wrote: “I am astonished that you are so quickly turning away from Him who has called you by the grace of Christ to a different gospel, which is not another gospel. Rather, there are some men who are troubling you and wanting to pervert the Gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven preach any other gospel to you than the one that we have preached to you, let him be anathema! As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching any other gospel to you than the one that you have received, let him be anathema! For am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I should not be a slave of Christ.” Twice over he used the word “anathema.” Both God’s commands and God’s Gospel are holy!

Throughout Christian history councils and synods defended the truth of the Gospel by anathematising people who contradicted it. The Council at Nicea in 325 did in the case of Arius. In the Council of Trent, which rejected the central doctrine of the Scriptures, justification through faith, various propositions began with Si quis dixerit, (“If anyone says”) and ended with “A.S.” That meant, in Latin, “Anathema sit!” “Let him be anathema!” We disagree with what Trent did because it went against Scripture, but not with the need to condemn error and those who teach it. Doctrine is God’s. The Scriptures never have a kind word to say for false teaching. Near enough is not good enough. Dr Hamann, in commenting on Galatians 1:8-9 wrote: “He who cannot curse cannot bless, either… A true church must be able to repeat the apostolic anathema” (Chi-Rho Commentary, page 17).