

No. 4
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THE CHURCH, ITS REGULATIONS, AND THE
INDIVIDUAL MEMBER

The first local Mennonite Brethren Church probably had few "rules," by which we mean the specific application of New Testament principles which go beyond New Testament specifics. The practice of our early brethren probably also followed the biblical pattern where local congregations had a minimum of stated requirements for membership, other than acceptance of Christ as Lord and the subsequent baptism.

Our forefathers in 1860 had several statements that might be interpreted as rules, dealing particularly with the ordinances and the ban, but rules began in our churches not so much as stated or written documents or treatises, but as precedents arising out of practice and experience. They were hammered out on the anvil of experience as local groups of disciples grappled with the contrast between the rigid requirements of Christian morality and the inevitable weaknesses and sins of redeemed but still faulty children of God.

The unwritten rules that resulted were then reinforced by conference resolutions passed at district, provincial and general conferences. The compilation of General Conference resolutions reveals the time and energy spent on convention floors in an attempt to state more precisely the "rules" under which congregations ought to operate. The modern generation may be a bit shocked to discover statements such as the following: ". . . members are not permitted to hold government office or take any part at the polls . . . the cutting of hair by our sisters is in direct contradiction with the Word of God as found in

I Cor. 11:6 . . . sisters, both single and married, should not be permitted to appear in church meetings nor in family worship without the proper head covering . . . decided unanimously that our members should not carry life insurance policies . . . that the Conference does not permit its members to have weapons in the house . . . that our members stay away from circuses, theaters, and such other places." (Resolutions, compiled by A. E. Janzen, pp. 52, 53, 171, 172)

It should not be inferred from the foregoing historical information that stated lists of rules or principles came simply by chance or even through precedence or experience in local congregations without some deep underlying theological foundations. Our earliest churches were born and nurtured in a strongly homogeneous culture. As a result of this tightly knit form of living, economic, social and religious principles were not the choice of the individual but of the corporate body. Corporate or group action governed most of the ethical and spiritual practices of Mennonite Brethren at the time of our denomination's founding. Using the scriptures in which the church body regulated the ethical life of its individual members (Acts 11, 13, 15 and I Cor. 12), the early brethren stressed the fact that individual norms should be subordinate to the corporate judgment of the brotherhood. The emphasis on living under the corporate judgment of the church, when social, economic and religious life was much less individualistic than today, can be seen in our history both in the movements of our members in the 1870's and later from 1922 to 1932 when larger numbers came to Canada and the United States.

We live in an age when authority in almost any form is challenged. The rising tide of discontent with the "establishment" or status quo and the questioning spirit we have created in a highly scientific age leave almost nothing unchallenged. Rules are unpopular. Moreover, it is only honest to say that in most of our congregations there are rules or principles clearly stated but blatantly disobeyed. Some rules have lost their effectiveness by simple disuse; others are being sincerely questioned. Among us are those who react only by recalling the days when discipline was still practiced in the church and wishing we could call the brotherhood back to the regulations of another age. Others insist that our rules and principles simply need updating, while still others question the validity of any rules whatsoever.

It is not the writer's intention to formulate a highly theological basis on which rules and regulations can be justified, nor is this an effort to provide the various biblical principles on which such regulations might be justified. The primary purpose of the paper is to give the writer's answer, not necessarily that of the conference, to the questions: are church rules designed to be the requirement for church membership or are they intended to be goals toward which the disciple of Christ strives as a part of the brotherhood? And what is the responsibility of the individual believer to those regulations if and when they are determined by the congregation?

I. The Demand of the New Testament for a Disciplined Life

The Bible leaves no question about the desire in God's heart for His children to regulate their lives so that both motives and actions are

clean. Peter reminds his readers that "as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of living; because it is written, Ye shall be holy; for I am holy." (I Peter 1:15-16) Moreover, the New Testament indisputably contains a number of "rules." The admonitions to "forsake not the assembling of yourselves together" and "pay ye taxes" and "be not drunk with wine" are rather specific and direct orders from the Holy Spirit.

The New Testament is explicit in its insistence upon standards and the discipline necessary to live by those standards. While not stated as rules, the Bible very obviously insists that certain things are wrong and others are right, and the Christian is asked to abide by the "regulations" enunciated so clearly in passages such as Colossians 3:5ff.

"Put to death therefore what is earthly in you: immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry . . . But now put them all away: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and foul talk from your mouth. Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old nature with its practices and have put on the new nature, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator."

There is little indifference or relativity about such directions. The new nature implanted in a child of God demands a life corresponding in a measure with the holiness of God.

The Pauline list of pagan vices makes it plain that some actions are simply not admissable to the regenerate life. And he boldly asserts: "Now the works of the flesh are these . . ." and he proceeds to list a frightening number of sins ranging from adultery and fornication to drunkenness and revellings. (Gal. 5:19-21) The New Testament demands a holy, disciplined life. Adultery is never an option for the disciplined

man or woman, in spite of all that the situationists have to say to the contrary. There is a place for law and regulations and rules in the Christian life and in the church.

The early Church, while not setting up regulations as such, certainly had rather stringent requirements. The "moderator" of the "conference" to which the church at Corinth belonged gave some very pointed advice when the congregation struggled or failed to struggle with a moral issue. The Apostle Paul wrote in a straightforward fashion, instructing and virtually demanding that the church excommunicate a brother who was guilty of gross sin. There were standards in the Early Church and the leaders of the Church took the pains to set down the requirements that would help them maintain the standards.

It needs to be said, however, that a legalism based on the observance of rules and regulations was condemned just as severely by Jesus as was the absence of discipline. His most vigorous protests were launched against those Pharisees who sought to expand what they knew of the character and will of God into a book of rules that outwardly tried to regulate every hour of the day and every situation that might present itself. Jesus objected vigorously to such legalism. Our Lord saw that a kind of negativism that reduces the ethical system to an index of legalistic "don'ts" may actually conceal (as it did for the Pharisees) the fact that one who refrains from the proscribed indulgences may in fact be as carnal as the one who indulges.

The Apostle Paul wrote in the same spirit when he repeatedly urged his readers to be careful about a kind of legalism that required physical

circumcision but omitted circumcision of the heart. Likewise he warned against the observance of rules regarding meat and drink and holydays, all of which he called but a "shadow" of the more important things to come (Col. 2). James reminded his readers of the same danger when he dealt rather firmly with those who claimed to obey the rules or commandments but failed to fulfill the law of love, the perfect commandment. (James 2) Carl F. H. Henry has sensed the spirit of the New Testament when he reminds us that . . .

"The believer's life is one of Christian liberty in grace. He is not bound to the Law as a means of salvation. He is not burdened with a legalistic conscience. His conscience is to be guarded from unnecessary and unspiritual obligations. The Law no longer whips him.

"This Christian liberty extends to the whole of life. 'All things are lawful' (I Cor. 6:12, 10:23) is the primary principle of Christian ethics . . . Nothing God has created is unclean in itself. Nor does it become unclean when it is used in accord with the design of the Creator. Since God created all things, all things can be properly used. The only limitations are ones God, the Creator, himself sets. . . The believer . . . is uniquely related to the Divine purpose of creation. The conscience of the regenerated person rejoices in that purpose. What God has created is to be 'received with thanksgiving of them which believe, and know the truth. For every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer.' (Tim. 4:3-5)

"This view strikes out against negativism in Christian ethics. Christian ethics is not blind to the corrupting leaven of sin in every area of life. But neither is it world-denying. It must be world-affirming because it is an ethics that presupposes creation and redemption.

"The requirements of the Law have been fulfilled in the Christian's behalf by Christ. Therefore, the believer must resist any effort to impose the Law in whole or in part as a means of salvation." (Henry: Christian Personal Ethics, p. 420)

If, then, the New Testament demands a disciplined life but forbids both antinomianism and legalism, where is the directive in the scriptures for living the life of discipleship?

II. The Demand of the New Testament for Inner Moral Integrity
Rather Than Arbitrary Legalistic Bondage

The New Testament makes no attempt to cover every possibility in life. As a conference and churches we may have been tempted to do just that in the past. Jesus knew that true morality always comes from the heart. ✓ External conformity to regulations and rules does not necessarily prove that a person is acting morally. A man may not want to do what is right even while he obeys the regulations. Many of our church members have probably kept the rules outwardly as they sinned inwardly. We often conform because of social pressure but do not please God in the conforming.

It is equally obvious that the Bible does not endeavor to specify rules for all of life. It would be completely impractical to have in the Bible a law corresponding to every situation that might occur. The Bible rather enunciates great principles that assuredly are to be applied in particular cases. These are to guide the Christian in the choices he makes. He must know what the New Testament principles are, where they apply in this and that situation, and why. Then he must make his decision and act. "Thus, by this terrifying and responsible process, he matures ethically. There is no other way." (Henry, Ibid., p. 419) ✓

There is a grave danger among those of us who have been nurtured on a kind of legalistic ethics that sanctification will be misunderstood as mere legal abstinence. We may thereby give the impression that the Christian life is one of staying out of trouble. By our catalog of

sins---commercial movies, card-playing, gambling, dancing, drinking beer or wine or liquor, and smoking---we too often give the impression (not deliberately in many instances) that goodness or Christlikeness consists in abstinence.

The New Testament ethics goes far beyond mere avoidance of gross pagan acts. The "higher righteousness" of which Jesus spoke in the Sermon on the Mount was in direct contrast to the legalistic interpretation of the Old Testament law as espoused by the scribes and Pharisees. The men Jesus condemned prided themselves on their abstinence from pagan excesses. It was not Jesus' opinion that the abstinences were wrong. He as much as told the Pharisees that these things were indeed harmful and should not be practiced by disciples, but abstinence without inner morality and character were despicable in His eyes.

Nowhere did Jesus suggest that Christian liberty meant license. He did not mean to give a free pass to conduct that is displeasing to God. In fact, the ethical standards and teachings of Jesus excluded much that the Pharisees were unwilling to exclude. He spoke out not only against adultery, but also the lustful look; not only at murder, but also the flush of anger that might never issue out in physical mayhem. Jesus demanded inner moral integrity rather than bondage to an arbitrary legalistic system.

In the New Testament worldliness is more than breaking taboos. Stanley C. Baldwin discusses this subject and illustrates our misconceived notions of worldliness by speaking of the girl who refused a string

of synthetic pearls offered as a birthday gift, because she considered them too worldly. She believed she had scripture on her side: "women should adorn themselves in modest apparel . . . not with . . . pearls." (I Tim. 2:9) (Christianity Today, Jan. 7, 1966, pp. 17-18)

Several observations can be made in regard to the above action. For one thing, it is true that the scriptures concern themselves with matters of dress and appearance. Peter also writes with similar concerns. However, it is plainly the intent of those passages to instruct women about the importance and necessity of the beauty of the inner being. There is undoubtedly here a teaching on modesty in appearance, but plain appearance does not guarantee inner beauty and integrity. Moreover, to have in the Word detailed explanations of what modesty demands in every age would necessitate an encyclopedia written with specific directions on dress, together with the knowledge in advance of all the fashions and styles practiced in the past, present and future. The Bible is not that kind of book.

But someone asks: are we, then, not to take the Bible literally? Are we to seek the spirit of the Bible in preference to its letter? Should we determine to live by what it says or by what is the meaning and intention of what it says, and realize that sometimes there is such a distinction? Stanley C. Baldwin says: "I dare to answer, Yes." Jesus talked about those people who twisted the meaning of his words by too literal an interpretation: "It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing: the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life." (John 6:63)

In the past we have been quick to quote passages such as I John 2:15-16 in defense of our rules: "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world." Someone has suggested that this passage has no more to do with attending motion pictures than with growing flowers. These words may tell us that we are not to love the bad or questionable things in the world, but this passage also forbids loving any of the things in the world even though they may be legitimate. "Lust," when used in this sense, does not necessarily have a bad connotation, but can be rendered simply "desire."

In other words, the emphasis is not upon avoiding certain things and practices so much as it is a teaching that the world and its things are for our use but not for our deepest love and devotion. Worldliness consists essentially in putting something other than the Lord in the first place in the heart. The spiritually mature person keeps "things" in their proper, subordinate place. The lust of which John speaks may be, for the housewife, her African violets. For the high school boy, it may be his car. For the adolescent girl, it may be her appearance. The businessman's lust or desire may be his business. And for the minister it might even be his church. Worldliness is not primarily the breaking of taboos; it is life centered on anything--- either unwholesome or even legitimate---other than God.

The New Testament demands inner moral integrity. It is never satisfied with adherence to strict legal codes, even when those codes are in keeping with New Testament principles. Let us use the movies as an illustration. The writer has no defense for movies as such or for the industry that produces them. Most of them are evil and demoralizing. But we have rarely opposed them on what seems to the writer to be a legitimate biblical basis. We have argued with the tragic and false idea that worldliness is friendship with sinners; consequently, movies are wrong because you are forced to associate with sinners. "Come out from among them and be ye separate, saith the Lord." (II Cor. 6:17) At the same time we launch a Decade of Enlargement program that calls for intense involvement in the lives of non-Christians so that they can be won to Christ. The young person who hears that kind of double-talk is confused.

Why not oppose the movies on the legitimate bases of verses like Philippians 4:8 "Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things." That passage will rule out ninety-nine per cent of all motion pictures, in the theater or in the living room. Incidentally, it is interesting to note that the Bible prefers our association with sinners to a like association with disobedient brethren. (Cf. I Cor. 5:9-11)

There is little doubt in the writer's mind that most of the practices against which we have legislated in the past with rules and regulations

are anti-scriptural. We have, however, too often been unscriptural in opposing them. Perhaps a good example is smoking. For a hundred years we have maintained that smoking is sin. Why is it sin? Any thoughtful man or woman should be able to discover ample reasons why smoking is unnecessary and harmful. He may not like the taste of the cigarette. The tobacco may rob him of his ability to taste better things. He may not be able to afford to smoke or possibly he should invest his money more wisely. He may be aware that others are sickened by the foulness of his wet cigar. He may feel that his habit does harm to his respiratory system or makes him prone to cancer. All of these are good reasons and would substantiate the biblical concept that anything harmful to the body, the temple of the Holy Spirit, is sin. For one or more of the foregoing reasons, a man may choose not to smoke, but that is far different from condemning smoking as sin because---well, it's sin. We have taken that kind of position too often and too long in respect to many things forbidden by rules and regulations in the church.

The young child in the home is taught, deliberately or unconsciously, that certain things are wrong because the church or the pastor has regulations or principles against them. Where are the parents and the churches who will take that young person aside, refuse to use scripture passages that are far-fetched and sometimes inapplicable, and confront the questioning youngster on the basis of great principles so consistently taught in the New Testament?

The writer is not in any way arguing for smoking, drinking, dancing, or even movie attendance. He is persuaded that living by principles

would probably exclude even more activities than church rules have in the past. We should not confuse ethical living with an arbitrary legalistic bondage. The New Testament demands an inner integrity that may be much more severe on the sinful acts of men than rigid church rules. That integrity extends not only to the easily seen habits of the so-called "worldly" but to the motivations and inward intentions as well. Living by principles will condemn those sins of the spirit against which we find it very difficult to legislate and even more impossible to convict.

Let it be said once more that an emphasis on inner moral integrity rather than arbitrary legalistic bondage ought not give a free pass to conduct that is displeasing to the will of God. John Calvin said that "being Christians under the law of grace consists not in unbounded license uncontrolled by any law, but in being ingrafted into Christ, by whose grace they are delivered from the curse of the law, but in being ingrafted into Christ, and by whose Spirit they have the law inscribed on their hearts." (Institutes, II, viii, lvii.) The Christian who is growing in his relationship with Christ finds that he is constantly seeing the world with new eyes. He senses dangers he never saw before. He discovers there are areas in his life that are not yet under the lordship of Christ. He yields more and more to the cleansing power of the Holy Spirit.

III. The Demand of Human Frailty for Rules

On the basis of the foregoing section, one might easily conclude that the writer opposes rules and regulations. Ideally speaking, the mature

Christian needs no rules. He lives by principles and makes value judgments on the basis of those standards. Practically speaking, however, no one is fully mature. No Christian has attained to such spiritual heights that he does not sometimes need a bit of law. Some rules are necessary because we are not mature enough to live correctly and ethically without them.

So long as we are in this flesh, we will need rules. The carnality that remains with us demands a certain amount of regulations. For example, all of us know that it is dangerous to travel by automobile on highways frequented by other motorists. All of us know we need to be very careful. And if all drove in keeping with the principles of safety and consideration for the next person, we would need no traffic regulations. Laws would be unnecessary. But people are not willing to live simply on the basis of principles. They are selfish and forgetful and egotistical and consequently drive without regard for others or sometimes even for themselves. As a result we have laws to protect motorists. Apparently even those of us who are Christians need speed limits and stop signs because we have not progressed to the point where we can voluntarily operate vehicles in keeping with the principles of safety and consideration for others.

It is similarly true that in the Christian life few people will be able to live strictly on the basis of principles. The most advanced and sanctified disciple will need to be regulated at points. Even Simon Peter had to be stopped by "Policeman Paul" one day when he forgot about the principle of "no respect of persons" that allowed Gentiles admittance into the church.

If it is true that experienced Christians will need the assistance of regulations to live the disciplined life demanded by the New Testament, how much more evident must it be that young Christians will need the aid of sane, biblically-based regulations. When children come into our fellowships at the age of ten, twelve, and even fifteen, they will not be prepared, emotionally or spiritually, to make decisions only on the basis of principles. They will need spiritual traffic laws. They will need spiritual crutches to assist them to walk in the ways of God. Even when they insist they are capable of making value judgments, the church will need to remind them that they are spiritually immature, along with all the rest of us who fall far short of likeness to Christ. They will sometimes ask us to allow them to learn from their own mistakes, but we will need to answer that they must profit from our failures in the past.

There were Christians in the Early Church who had known Christ for many years. Paul observed that they should already be eating "meat" but were capable of digesting only spiritual pabulum. If even the most mature disciple at times needs regulations to assist him in the disciplined walk, how much more will the immature need such rules prescribed for them. It is too idealistic to believe that spiritual infants or even more advanced believers, still struggling with the desires of the old nature, can choose wisely in respect to many of the issues that face us today. We will need some regulations.

CONCLUSIONS

Church rules can hardly be called requirements for membership. To use them as such would mean the dismissal of a good percentage of our present members. The answer to our present dilemma is not to discard the regulations. All of us need the restraint and guidance of the don'ts and do's that are based on principles enunciated by the New Testament. We must make our positions very clear, offer adequate reasons for those positions, admit readily when we have erred in the past and offered false or insignificant bases for our regulations, and instruct our members to look upon such regulations as helpful instruments to the life of discipleship.

Any church has the right to establish requirements for those who pledge themselves as its members. A congregation need not apologize for asking its members to live by the principles of the New Testament. But the church must give honest, adequate rationale for its convictions and be prepared, under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, to recognize new truths and make adaptations, while still remaining true to the great principles of the Bible. The church must make a greater effort to teach the rationale for whatever regulations are proposed. The following statement describes what so often happens when the rules still remain but the principles from which those rules evolved are forgotten:

"All laws and regulations are handy man-made inventions which are enormously useful shortcuts through the somewhat laborious task of asking (in each moment of behaving) 'What human relationships must I consider in this moment of action?' . . . Unfortunately for the whole human enterprise, we are a generation of people who learn the short-cuts and abbreviations but

fail to learn what is abbreviated. We memorize symbols but fail to grasp the reality which is symbolized. Over and over again we are drawn up short of understanding because we have not even learned that our symbols are symbols. We have confused our symbols with realities! It is not surprising, therefore, that our laws and regulations become yokes and burdens to be carried rather than the instruments of freedom they were designed to be." (An unpublished paper, Thoughts on Law, written by Walter S. Friesen, Kansas State University)

We have not been in error in the formulation of rules in the church. We may have erred in allowing the biblical principles behind the regulations to be forgotten and untaught.

The concept of one's relationship to the total brotherhood should mean that at times there will be submission and obedience to the regulations of the church even when the individual cannot personally find them in accord with his own beliefs. So long as we work with one another as fallible human beings, we shall find ourselves in disagreement at times in respect to the practices of the Christian disciple. There should exist, within the church, the kind of spirit that enables a person to obey, not only because it makes sense, but because he is a part of the brotherhood. We need a thorough-going nurture of the Anabaptist concept of the church as a covenant-people. There needs to be a consciousness that, upon receiving membership in the church, a believer comes under the discipline of a group---a discipline which he himself has the pleasure of making and enforcing.

Walter S. Friesen, who was quoted previously, speaking as a school administrator, says that

"There are certain laws, rules and regulations which mark the limits within which students must make decisions. Whereas all the rules and regulations are legitimately subject to debate by students, not all are subject to the decision

of students. Clearly one of our tasks is to enable students to discriminate between the two." (Ibid.)

If that is true on the campus of an educational institution, surely the responsibility of individuals within the corporate body of the brotherhood is even greater, both for making and enforcing the discipline, and for abiding by them as members of the body.

In our formulation of regulations in the church, we need to insist that they be positive as well as negative. We must be more careful that rules serve as redemptive agents, not only as stop-gap legislation once the sin has been committed. We must teach our congregations not to sit back with smug satisfaction when the rules are finally enforced and the erring member disciplined. We cannot afford to wrap the cloaks of our Pharisaism around us and rejoice in the fact that the church has been cleansed of its dross when the rules are disobeyed and the penalties exacted. Too often we have been guilty of the Corinthian fault of exercising the regulations but being too slow in recognizing the disciplinary effect upon the offender, thus allowing him to come back into the brotherhood for further growth and development. Paul encouraged such a congregation to take back a brother who had been guilty of gross immorality. He was insistent on sticking with principles, but his intention was always redemptive in nature.

The requirements of the New Testament are given not to make us uncomfortable and unhappy. The regulatory requirements found in the Bible are there to assist the Christian in his walk as a disciplined

follower of the Master. But such a walk will demand not only adherence to principles but the delineation of what those principles mean in particular instances. The Apostle Paul, in speaking to the Colossians, looked upon his task as that of proclaiming Christ, "warning every man, and teaching every man in all wisdom, that we may present every man complete in Christ." (Col. 1:28)

The aim of church rules and discipline ought to be to present every man perfect or mature or spiritually adult. That will demand a teaching ministry that does not exclude warning. Warning very often comes through regulations. It would be wonderful if the disciplined life could come to reality without rules. Our human frailty renders that almost impossible.

When Paul writes about the marks of a faithful church (Col. 2:2-7), he says he is glad to hear of the order and steadfastness of the faith of the Colossians. The two words used present a vivid picture and both are military words. The word which is translated "order" is one that means "rank" or "ordered arrangement." The word which is translated "steadfastness" means a solid "bulwark," an immovable phalanx. The church should be like an ordered army, rank upon rank, every man in his appointed place, ready and eager to obey the word of command. This spiritual army is to set out in an unbreakable phalanx, solidly immovable against the shock of the charge of the enemy. There is no way in the world that this can be accomplished unless there is a disciplined order, a personal integrity nurtured through adherence to principles and regulations, an allegiance of each soldier of Christ to the Master and the brotherhood.