Articles by L. Nelson Bell

L. Nelson Bell

First published in Food for the Flock / Ministry in Focus (Food for the Flock, Inc., Ontario, Canada). Reprinted in Ministry in Focus from Christianity Today.

KEE Ministry Library · Faithful Men
kee-ministry-library.netlify.app

The Grace to Say No (September–October 1971)

From Ministry in Focus, September–October 1971. Text as published on plymouthbrethren.org.

The Grace To Say No

L. Nelson Bell

This timely article is Copyright by Christianity Today and is reprinted by permission. We appreciate this favor for we are sure that our readers will derive real benefit from reading it.

Many of the troubles and sorrows found in the world today are due to someone’s inability to say “no.” The Christian religion is a positive affirmation of faith in the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ as revealed in the Scriptures, and for that reason a true believer can never be accused of following a negative religion. Still, just as there are positive and negative poles to a magnet, so too there are positive and negative aspects to being a Christian.

The positive side has to do with faith in Jesus Christ and obedience to His Will. The negative calls for a rejecting of the blandishments and devices of Satan, which can only end in misery and defeat.

We are living in a permissive society, in a time when much that is evil goes unchallenged. It is not easy to go against current modes and to stand up and say no when one is convinced that something is contrary to the holy will of God. But exactly that is necessary.

The Bible offers many examples of men who were able to say no at a crucial time in their lives. Abraham said no to the natural desire to stay in his own home and with his own people when God had called him to go out, not knowing where he was going. He said no to the natural impulse to spare his son, Isaac, “accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure” (Heb. 11:19).

Moses said no to the impulse to stay in the affluence and security of Pharaoh’s household, “choosing rather to share ill-treatment with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin” (Heb. 11:25).

Joseph said no when tempted by a beautiful woman who offered her body and her companionship to a lonely young man. His response was, “How … can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?” (Gen. 39:9).

Daniel said no when confronted with a preferment that included turning from a Spartan way of life to eating food from the king’s table. With strong conviction he “resolved that he would not defile himself with the king’s rich food or with the wine which he drank” (Dan. 1:8).

Daniel’s three companions said no to the temptation to save their lives by bowing before the image Nebuchadnezzar had set up. They answered with the challenging affirmation, “We have no need to answer you in this matter. If it be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O King. But if not, be it known to you, O King, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image which you have set up” (Dan. 3:16-18).

Later Daniel again said no, confronted this time with the temptation to buy safety at the cost of compromise by obeying the king's decree against public worship. We read that "when Daniel knew that the document had been signed, he went to his house where he had windows in his upper chamber open towards Jerusalem; and he got down upon his knees three times a day and prayed and gave thanks before God, as he had done previously (Dan. 6:10).

Our Lord tells us, "If any man would come after Me, let him deny himself (say no to self) and take up his cross and follow Me" (Matt. 16:24)—and that is not easy! All of us face the seemingly overwhelming temptation to trim our sails in these days of permissive living. When temptation comes, it is so much easier to compromise a little to avoid criticism or even reprisals.

The pressures of this world are so pervasive and persistent that Paul warns against letting the "world around you squeeze you into its own mold" (Rom. 12:2, Phillips). The soul that succumbs to the pressures of the world, the flesh, and the devil is in a desperate state.

One problem today is that many parents have failed to say no to their children. The welfare of those children demanded a firm attitude in moral and spiritual matters that the parents were unprepared to exercise.

We are often inclined to forget that the Ten Commandments contain both "You shalls" and "You shall nots." We often fail in both directions. In a day when "anything goes," it is necessary for Christians to swim against the tide by saying no to evil and yes to what is good.

Parents must say no to their children at times, being careful not to “over-correct” them, but remembering the neglected truth that “foolishness is bound up in the heart of a child, but the rod of discipline drives it far from him” (Prov. 22:15).

Young people must learn the meaning of the injunction, “My son, if sinners entice you, do not consent” (Prov. 1:10). In this day of mobs and demonstrations, they should heed the warning, “You shall not follow a multitude to do evil” (Exod. 23:2).

Living in the shadow of God’s moral balances, we must learn not only the danger of compromise but also the blessing that comes from saying no to temptation. This is no one time decision, of course, we must keep making it all through life. However, as the old hymn says, “Each victory will help you some other to win.”

God does not call Christians to live as hermits in a sin-dominated social order. But He offers the means whereby they can act as salt in a putrefying society and lights in the midst of spiritual darkness. This requires the positive witness of a committed spirit and the equally positive witness of an unswerving rejection of any compromise with evil.

By what criteria shall we decide? How can we be confident that we are within the will of God in a particular circumstance? The answer must be found in the revelation God has given us in His written Word. I believe that there is no contingency of modern life that is not dealt with in the Bible and that the Christian who seeks the guidance of the Holy Spirit will know the course of action he should take if only he will wait for God to speak in His perfect timing.

Many years ago I came face to face with the claims of science and modern scholarship. I had to decide, either to accept the “assured findings” of men that went counter to the clearly stated truths of God’s Word, or to believe God’s revelation of truth regardless. A yes to faith and a no to unbelief brought peace of heart and later vindication of the decision. The same decision confronts each succeeding generation.

The grace to say no must be exercised with the assurance that God has not left His children to grope in the darkness. Rather, He has made plain a way of life that is alien to this world but just as real as the air we breathe and the food that sustains our bodies.

The grace to say no is one that must be cultivated, not with a hard, unyielding stubbornness but with the joy of knowing that God is a personal God, that He is deeply concerned with every detail of our lives, and that He will surely open up the way He wants us to take.