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FOREWORD

Throughout the history of the Christian movement there has been an almost irreconcilable tension between law and grace. Even today this remains a fundamental issue for Christians. At a practical level the course between an austere legalism and a sentimentally cheap grace has too often been steered by correcting the one abuse with a measure of the other. Legalism and license, however, are both mutations of the faithful and responsible Christian life. The solution to this long-standing problem is not to be found in crowding the boundaries or reacting to the abuses. Rather, it is to be found in grasping the proper relationship between the Gift of God and the Divine Command.

These essays are presented in an attempt to encourage Christian reflection upon the shape of the faithful Christian life: to exhort those who have life in the Spirit and freedom in Christ to fulfill the “law of Christ.”

Michael R. Weed, Editor

PAUL, THE LAW, AND LEGALISM

By James W. Thompson

If the words of Paul have been “hard to understand” (2 Pet. 3:16) throughout the history of Christianity, his words about law and grace have perhaps given the most difficulty. The church has faced the continuing problem of steering between “Scylla of legalism and the Charybdis of antinomianism.”¹ The vocabulary for this discussion and the sensitivity to the problem of law and legalism have been inherited primarily from Paul.

Although the term “legalism” does not appear in most English translations and has no Greek equivalent, Paul’s comments about the law and justification apart from the law have contributed to our antipathy to legalism in all of its forms. Paul’s negative comments about the law, which appear primarily in Galatians and Romans, have always been shocking to anyone who recalls the positive appreciation of the law in Judaism. The Christian, according to Paul, is not under the law, but under grace (Rom. 6:14, 15). The

law is presented as such an extraordinary burden that its only effect is to produce sin (7:7; cf. 4:15). Those who are justified before God are not those who are righteous according to the law's standards, but are those who have no righteousness of their own.

Paul's emphatic rejection of the law as the determining factor and his emphasis on the justification of the ungodly has led to the claim that Paul rejects ethical norms. According to William Doty, "One of the most important reclamation projects in the history of biblical research was the reclaiming of Paul as a situation or contextualist theologian and ethicist rather than as a dogmatic moralist." Concrete moral advice, according to Doty, is pieced together by Paul "in each situation."² Paul has been the court of appeal in many cases where ethical rules have been rejected. In current discussions regarding homosexuality, divorce, and other moral issues, Paul's statements about the law are commonly understood to mean that Paul dispenses with rules in the Christian life. Thus the imposition of any rules is viewed as a rejection of the central Pauline view.

John Knox once argued forcefully that Paul unintentionally undermined moral conduct with his emphasis on justification and reconciliation rather than forgiveness of sins. The forgiveness of sins, according to Knox, implies repentance and contrition on the part of the one who has been forgiven. Where there is forgiveness, the wrongdoer and the wronged can remember the wrong together as a shared experience.³ Where there is genuine forgiveness, the wrongdoer must, like the prodigal son, acknowledge his guilt and change his life.

According to John Knox, Paul never really answered the question, “Shall we continue in sin that grace may abound?”⁴ Paul’s answer in Romans 6:1-11 takes the form of a demonstration that the believer will be righteous, not of an explanation of why he ought to be: since the believer is in Christ, he will fulfill the law of Christ; since he has the spirit, he will manifest the fruit of the Spirit. Thus it is commonly argued that, while Paul called for a new life in the Spirit, his doctrine of justification by faith undermined the structured life of obedience.

Paul, the Commandments, and the Law

A perspective from Paul, which often goes unnoticed, is his use of such terms as “law” and “commandment” in a very positive way. Thus while Paul emphatically claims that justification is not based on the keeping of the law, other statements indicate that he sees the Christian life within the framework of commandments and rules. The paradox in Paul’s teaching about the law comes into clear focus in 1 Corinthians 7:19. This passage appears in a context where Paul insists that Christians should remain as they were when they were called. After Paul has said that neither the circumcised nor the uncircumcised should change their status (7:17-18), the statement in 7:19 is formulated as a two part slogan. In the first part, Paul cites an oft-repeated dictum: neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything. The same formula, which appears in Galatians 5:6; 6:15, is a good summary of Paul’s

teaching on circumcision. A practice which has been enjoined in the law for the people of God does not, according to Paul, “count for anything.”

This passage summarizes the argument which Paul makes else-where. The physical act of circumcision, which was the sign of membership in the covenant community, is no longer binding (Rom. 2:25-28; Gal. 2:3). Insistence on circumcision is a rejection of the gospel of grace (Gal. 5:1-6) and a futile attempt to be saved by works of the law (Gal. 3:1-5). Thus an Old Testament injunction is no longer valid for Christians.

In view of the affirmation in I Corinthians 7:19a, we are surprised in 1 Corinthians 7:19b to discover that what matters for the Christian is the “keeping of the commandments.” While circumcision no longer matters, the Christian is not set free from obligations. The Christians at Corinth were to understand that there are norms and rules in the Christian life. Apparently the Christian was not left to discover his obligations intuitively. He was aware of certain fixed criteria for Christian conduct.

The phrase, “keep the commandments,” is a common expression in Judaism for observing the requirements of the Torah (Tob. 14:9; Sir. 29:1; Matt. 19:17; cf. John 9:16). Thus one must ask what “keeping the commandments” means for Paul. Is he introducing a new set of regulations to replace the Torah? Or does he, despite his statements about the unimportance of circumcision, assume that Christians recognize the validity of the Old Testament commands?

While “keeping the commandments” involves the various commandments which Paul himself gives (cf. 1 Cor. 7:17), there is reason to believe that the Christian possesses more of a standard for the Christian life than that provided solely in Paul’s instructions to the churches. Paul’s isolated comments were scarcely a thorough description of the Christian life. His regulations were addressed to specific situations, and thus were not comprehensive in scope. The commandments which were valid for Christians undoubtedly included the words of Jesus, as 1 Corinthians makes abundantly clear. Paul appeals to words of the Lord on the subject of marriage in 1 Corinthians 7:10, citing these words as a binding authority (cf. 1 Cor. 7:25). A command of the Lord is recalled also in 1 Corinthians 9:14 (cf. Luke 10:7). Probably other moral commands from Paul are also derived from the commands of Jesus, although Jesus is not specifically cited. Thus “keeping the commandments” undoubtedly refers, at least partially, to the commands of Paul and the words from the earthly Jesus.

Although circumcision is no longer binding for believers, to “keep the commandments” still includes the demands which are given in the Torah. Indeed, while Paul says that he is “not under law,” he sometimes cites the law in a favorable way. In 1 Corinthians 14:34, for example, he instructs women to be submissive and silent in the church, “as the law says.” In this instance he is apparently referring to popular interpretations of the law, and not to a specific verse. Nevertheless the law is cited as a source of authority for Christians.

The continuing authority of the Torah for the Christian is also indicated in those passages where Paul's commands are paraphrases of the injunctions of the Old Testament (Rom. 12:16, 17, 19, 20). In many instances the commands are prefaced by such phrases as, "It is written," which suggests that the demands of the Old Testament retain their authority (cf. Rom. 12:19) for Christians. There are also significant points where Paul's argument on serious moral questions, even in letters to Gentile churches, is based on the Old Testament (cf. 1 Cor. 6:16). Thus the Old Testament is not only useful because it is the book of promises; it has commandments which are to be kept.

Paul's positive appreciation of the law in the Christian life is also suggested in the two books where he most emphatically contends that the law does not save. In Romans 8:4 he says that "the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit." Similarly, in Romans 13:8, he says that one who loves his neighbor "has fulfilled the law." In Galatians 5:13, after Paul has condemned those who have sought to find justification in the law (5:4), he introduces the moral requirements which are binding on Christians with the words, "The whole law is fulfilled in one word, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" Thus the law, or the "requirements" of the law, are to be fulfilled in the Christian life.

Overcoming the Dilemma

A survey of Paul's statements about the place of the Old Testament commandments in the Christian life leaves us with a dilemma to resolve for ourselves. We have seen that Paul neither demands that all commandments from the Old Testament be kept (i.e., circumcision) nor releases the Christian from the "just requirement" of the law (Rom. 8:4). Thus we must ask how this paradox can be resolved into a consistent point of view.

The Old Testament commandments are apparently binding only as they are interpreted within a Christian perspective.⁵ Paul speaks of fulfilling "the law of Christ" (Gal. 6:2; cf. 1 Cor. 9:21) and the "just requirement of the law" (Rom. 8:4). This "law of Christ" is apparently a code of precepts which a Christian is obliged to keep.⁶ C. H. Dodd has said that "it would perhaps not be going too far if we said that the ultimate law of God can be discerned in the Torah when it is interpreted by Christ."⁷ Thus under Christ the Christian fulfills the actual intention of the law when he obeys the words of Jesus and understands the intention of the law. The Christian has learned to distinguish the primacy of the love commandment (Rom. 13:8; Gal. 5:13) through the perspective given by Christ. Thus to "keep the commandments" is to obey the actual intention of the Old Testament.

C. F. D. Moule helped us understand the consistency in Paul's

statements about the law when he observed that there is no Greek equivalent for “legalism” or “legalist.”⁸ When Paul attacks the life under law, it is legalism that he attacks, according to Moule. Legalism is the attempt to use the law to establish one’s own righteousness.⁹ The legalists of Galatians had argued that trust in Christ was not enough; they compelled others to add the safeguard of Judaism. Such a resort to law-keeping was a denial of the work of Christ.

Paul’s argument for salvation by grace was by no means a plea for the unstructured life without the precepts of the law. The law remains a valid statement of the will of God. The Christian who has experienced the grace of God is not left to follow his intuition or the promptings of the Spirit to discover what God wants. Life under grace remains a life of obligation. The concrete demands of God are discovered in the words of Jesus and in the insight which Jesus brings to the precepts of the Old Testament.

One additional factor in the Christian’s fulfillment of the law is Paul’s insistence that the requirements of the law which could not be fulfilled without Christ are now fulfilled in Christ. The new situation is caused by the power of the Spirit (Rom. 8:4). Paul insists repeatedly that the Christian is not left alone to satisfy God’s requirements. The moral life is a “fruit of the Spirit” (Rom. 8:4, 5). Thus while God’s demand has not been relaxed, God has provided the continuing power which enables the Christians to “keep the commandments.”

The Christian Life Today

Jürgen Moltmann has commented that discipleship is not a favorite theme in Protestant circles.¹⁰ The subject has been taken over, according to Moltmann, by the “radicals” and “fanatics.” One may assume that a misunderstood view of grace is responsible for the widespread unpopularity of the themes of law, discipleship, and commitment. Those who have discovered grace have difficulty offering a word of judgment or a summons to “keep the commandments.” Any reluctance to challenge the church to rigorous discipleship, chastity, and the sacrifice of the self has resulted from a misunderstanding of grace. To insist on “keeping the commandments” is not legalism.

The challenge for the contemporary church is to discover the lifestyle in which one may have law without legalism, and grace without its being turned into cheap grace. The disciplined life, guided by the commandments and empowered by the Spirit, is the appropriate response to the grace of God.

In many circles, the word “law” needs to be reclaimed, complete with the positive associations which the word has had from the time of the psalmist until Paul. God’s law is not a burden; it is a gift to provide a guide for living. God’s law, rather than diminishing our freedom, makes us free to become what we were meant to be.

Notes

- ¹ Paul Schubert, "Paul and the New Testament Ethic in John Knox," in W. R. Farmer, C. F. D. Moule, and R. R. Niebuhr, Christian History and Interpretation: Studies Presented to John Knox (Cambridge: At the University, 1967) 388.
- ² W. Doty, Letters in Primitive Christianity (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973) 37.
- ³ John Knox, Chapters in a Life of Paul (New York: Abingdon, 1950) 147.
- ⁴ Knox, 154.
- ⁵ W. Schrage, Ethik des Neuen Testaments, NTD (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1982) 197.
- ⁶ C. H. Dodd, More New Testament Studies (Grand Rapids : Eerdmans, 1968) 137.
- ⁷ Dodd, 138.
- ⁸ C. F. D. Moule, "Obligation in the Ethic of Paul," in Farmer, Moule, and Niebuhr, 392.
- ⁹ Moule, 392.
- ¹⁰ J. Moltmann, in Folgen der Nachfolge; miteinander in Lebensraum Christ, ed. evang. Studentengemeinde Tübingen (Stuttgart: Steinkopf, 1979) 67.

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