

## *The Role of the Ten Commandments*

Joyce G. Baldwin

[p.7]

At the east end of the church in which I have worshipped for the last twenty-five years, on panels of oak and in letters of gold, stand written the Ten Commandments. Admittedly the Lord's Prayer and the Creed are also there, but visible only from the chancel. Central above the Communion table is a large painting of the embalming of the body of Jesus which fixes one's gaze on a dead Christ and on sorrowing disciples. The Sunday worshipper probably accepts without question the architecture and decoration of the familiar place of worship, but imagine the visitor who is a stranger to church, and yet who enters with some sense of need, and is confronted with this powerful message of commandments and death. How is such a person to appreciate that the church building stands for the good news of life?

There are, of course, historical reasons why in many of our churches the Ten Commandments are prominently displayed. When at the time of the Reformation the crucifixes and other ornaments of the pre-Reformation period were removed, the space thus created was filled by the words of the Decalogue. 'The orders of 1560 and 1561 as well as Canon LXXXII of 1604 enjoined that the Commandments should be set up at the east end of the chancel... The Commandments were valued as a reminder of the moral discipline of the Christian life; and when they were combined with the Belief and Our Father, all three together summarized the faith, conduct and prayer necessary for the Christian profession.'<sup>1</sup> To Christians of the sixteenth century it seemed that the role of the Ten Commandments was to sum up the essentials of Christian morality. Thus for four hundred years the Commandments have been learned by heart from the Catechism in preparation for Confirmation, rehearsed in church Sunday schools and day schools, and week by week memories have been refreshed by reading the words placarded on the walls of church buildings.

Nor was England the only country in which the Ten Commandments became an important influence at the Reformation. Both Martin Luther and John Calvin, concerned that society as a whole should learn to live by biblical standards, laid great stress on the Decalogue. Martin Luther, for example, wrote somewhat extravagantly in his preface to the *Catechism*: 'This much is certain, anyone who knows the Ten Commandments perfectly knows the entire scriptures. In all affairs and cir-

[p.8]

cumstances he can counsel, help, comfort, judge, make decisions in both spiritual and temporal matters. He is qualified to sit in judgment upon all doctrines, estates, persons, laws and everything else in the world.'<sup>2</sup> By promising the least qualified person such a store of wisdom Luther was doing his best to recommend use of the Catechism in home and church throughout the Germany of his day. Luther no doubt retained more than a trace of the medieval world-view, with theology the all-embracing queen of the sciences, unifying all

---

<sup>1</sup> G. W. O. Addleshaw and Frederick Etchells, *The Architectural Setting of Anglican Worship* (London 1948) 102-103.

<sup>2</sup> T. G. Tappert, *The Book of Concord* (Philadelphia 1925) 25, quoted by Paul Lehmann, *Interpretation* 34 (Oct. 1980) 343.

knowledge. Be that as it may, he regarded the Commandments, 'the mirror of sin', as the key to the Scriptures and to the Christian life. Similarly John Calvin asserted that 'the Ten Commandments... contain a complete rule of life'.<sup>3</sup> Thus Continental protestantism made much of the Ten Commandments, which were prominent in the various catechisms, learned by rote and made the basis of teaching both in the home and in the church. To quote Luther again, 'Although I am a doctor, I have to do just as a child and say word for word every morning and whenever I have time the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments, the Creed and the Psalms.'<sup>4</sup> Here he is counting upon the power of example to enlist support for his cause.

That cause was a conscious endeavour to extend schooling to all the population with a view to shaping young lives so that Christian truth would take root and develop to produce a Christian society that would live by Christian values. In this profoundly human and topical endeavour men and women continue to be engaged, as parents, teachers, social workers, pastors and preachers. The way in which this aim was pursued in church, family and state has been the subject of a recent study, the results of which have been published by Gerald Strauss in his book, *Luther's House of Learning: Indoctrination of the Young in the German Reformation*.<sup>5</sup> High in the priorities intended to achieve the transformation of society was the publication of his catechisms, and when individuals did not respond in sufficiently high numbers to voluntary study an obligatory system of instruction and examination was imposed. Prominent in all the catechisms were the Ten Commandments, intended to confront the reader with the inadequacy of his efforts to please God, and also to combat a tendency to antinomianism. The Decalogue enabled the Christian to know what he should do and not do. It diagnosed the disease so that the sick person looked for a physician. 'Explanations of the fourth and seventh commandments became the favourite vehicle for making social and political comments in the catechism.'<sup>6</sup> Faith in the catechism as a teaching method was strong, as is evidenced by the large number of versions, published by individual teachers, and despite the tendency to mindless repetition the hope remained that sooner or later the truth would take root and produce inner comprehension.

The Reformers failed to take into account the strength of popular resistance to the imposed teaching, and were in the long run disappointed that their zealous efforts produced so little response. Thus their worst

[p.9]

fears were confirmed that the wicked last days were upon them. The experiment had been bold and thorough. Its failure could no doubt be accounted for by many factors. Strauss highlights lack of comprehension on the part of the protestant clerics together with their unquestioning self-righteousness. There was 'the urban academic's ingrained contempt for peasantry and rural life', and a careless indifference to the sufferings the peasants had to endure. Nevertheless a question is raised as to the effectiveness of imposing a code of morality by whatever means. Admittedly a certain outward conformity to the rules of external piety could be brought about by coercion, 'But to record reformed conduct is not to prove informed hearts. Indeed, the evidence argues strongly against making this false connection.'<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 2:7.1

<sup>4</sup> *Weimar Ausgabe* 30. 126-127.

<sup>5</sup> Baltimore and London 1978.

<sup>6</sup> Strauss, op. cit. 163.

<sup>7</sup> Strauss, op. cit. 293.

Perhaps this comes as no surprise. We ought not to expect that by education even in Christian things all people will be imbued with a Christian mind and motivation, and, if there is behind the teaching some hidden intention to bring about conformity to authority, reaction against such an intention will in the long run cause it to fail.

Calvin does not set such great store by catechetical teaching of the Decalogue and the other texts as did Luther. 'In regard to the Ten Commandments, we must... attend to the statement of Paul, that "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth" (Romans 10:4); and, again, that ministers of the New Testament were "not of the letter, but of the spirit: for the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life" (2 Corinthians 3:6). The former passage intimates, that it is vain to teach righteousness by precept, until Christ bestow it by free imputation, and the regeneration of the Spirit.'<sup>8</sup> In view of Calvin's clear conviction that regeneration is necessary before there can be any moral transformation it is important to discover the role which he considers the Decalogue to fulfil. Though he writes about the law and seems to be encompassing far more than the Ten Commandments, yet he uses in parallel with the word 'law' from time to time 'the Two Tables', and speaks of the whole law being delivered 'more fully and explicitly in the Ten Commandments'.<sup>9</sup> Evidently it is permissible to conclude that Calvin often used 'law' as a shorthand for his longer phrase 'the Ten Commandments of the law'.

So far as the Jews were concerned Calvin summed up the role of the law thus: 'the Jews not only learned from the law wherein true piety consisted, but from feeling their inability to observe it were overawed by the fear of judgment, and so drawn, even against their will, towards the Mediator'.<sup>10</sup> But the question arises whether the law, in his opinion, had any application to the nations in general. He speaks, for instance, in the same paragraph, of the very things contained in the two tables as being 'in a manner written and stamped on every heart', but they have become obscured, and the written law, 'by its sure attestations, removes the obscurity of the law of nature, and also, by shaking off our lethargy,

[p.10]

makes a more lively and permanent impression on our minds'. Similarly in the previous chapter he argues that the moral law exhibits the righteousness of God and admonishes and condemns every one. 'This is necessary, in order that man, who is blind and intoxicated with self-love, may be brought at once to know and to confess his weakness and impurity.'<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, in expounding 1 Timothy 1:9-10, Calvin sees the law as 'a restraint on unruly lusts that would otherwise burst all bonds'. But the principal use more closely connected with its proper end he relates to 'believers in whose hearts the Spirit of God already flourishes and reigns'. 'Because we need not doctrine merely, but exhortation also, the servant of God will derive this further advantage from the law: by frequently meditating upon it, he will be excited to obedience, and confirmed in it, and so drawn away from the slippery paths of sin.'<sup>12</sup>

So for Calvin the law is a means of urging the righteous towards achieving that inward obedience which it was intended to evoke. Far from being a hard taskmaster, it is for the believer a perfect pattern of righteousness at which it is our duty and our joy to aim. The law

---

<sup>8</sup> *Institutes* 2:7.1

<sup>9</sup> *Institutes* 2:8.12

<sup>10</sup> *Institutes* 2:8.1

<sup>11</sup> *Institutes* 2:7.6

<sup>12</sup> *Institutes* 2:7.12

serves a more general purpose in relation to mankind as a whole, but its effectiveness is most clearly seen in the lives of those whose wills are set to please their Redeemer God.

The inclusion of the Ten Commandments in the service of Holy Communion in the 1552 Book of Common Prayer and carried over into that of 1662 assumes their suitability as a tool for self-examination, and this liturgical use has undoubtedly played an influential part in establishing the Decalogue as the accepted summary and crown of the divine law. In practice it has often been replaced by the two great commandments (Matthew 22:37-40) or omitted altogether, till in the Alternative Service Book of 1980 each Commandment is supplemented with relevant New Testament additions, so providing a reminder that the Old Testament was not God's last word on the subject. But there is some evidence that the use of the Decalogue in liturgy goes back to synagogue worship of the first century AD. 'It is very likely, perhaps certain, that the liturgy of the Synagogue influenced that of the Christian Church. In the synagogues and Temple the Shema and the Decalogue had been used, and the Decalogue was dropped because it had been overemphasised by the Christians.'<sup>13</sup> Why Christians should have laid undue stress on the Ten Commandments is not clear. Phylacteries and *mezuzoth* always contained the Shema but sometimes also contained the Decalogue. A comparison of the various copies which have been discovered proves that there were variations in order and text, so suggesting that the wording was not considered sacrosanct. Indeed variants are to be found in the New Testament itself: in Matthew 19:18 Jesus quotes the Commandments in the order 6,7,8,9,10 (in the form 'Do not defraud'), 5, and adds 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself', while Romans 13:9 has the order

[p.11]

7,6,8,10 and Luke 18:20 has 7,6,8,9,5. This variation is especially surprising if the Ten Commandments were part of the Jewish liturgy, which would have been known by heart from constant usage. Evidence from the Jerusalem and Babylonian Talmuds is also quoted by F. E. Vokes to the effect that the Decalogue was dropped from the liturgy because of 'the heretics... who said that the Commandments only, and not the Shema, were given to Moses by God on Sinai. Two Rabbis who tried to reintroduce the Commandments into the liturgy were unsuccessful.'<sup>14</sup> Though the evidence is conflicting as to detail, there seems to be no doubt about the use of the Decalogue at some period in the liturgy of synagogues and Temple, and that fact may well have had its influence on Christian liturgy, though hard evidence is scarce.

In short, though it would not be true to say that the Reformers were innovators in making much of the Ten Commandments, and though there is evidence for their use in the instruction of catechumens from the time of Augustine, yet never before the fifteenth century had they been taught so systematically or used so deliberately with a view to the transformation of morals in society as a whole, and kept before the worshipper in the liturgy as well as on the walls of the church building. To this day in England the Ten Commandments seem to be in a class apart from the rest of the Old Testament, immutable, sacrosanct and largely unquestioned. Even to raise a question must be a delicate matter because to do so may be interpreted as an attack on the foundations of morality, and attributed to ulterior motives! There is a widespread opinion, especially among earnest Christian people, that what our country needs more than anything else is a new emphasis on the Decalogue if it is to be

---

<sup>13</sup> F. E. Vokes, 'The Ten Commandments' in F. L. Cross (ed.) *Studia Evangelica* V (Berlin 1968) 148. He refers to C. W. Dugmore, *The Influence of the Synagogue upon the Divine Office* (London 19642) 20, 21, 29, 64 etc.

<sup>14</sup> op. cit. 147.

rescued from moral ruin. They may well be right, and yet the experience of the Continental Reformers in the sixteenth century seems to tell against it. Moreover, it could be that the Reformers have so indoctrinated us even today that we have accepted an emphasis on this particular part of scripture which it was never intended to have. The second part of this paper will examine the biblical evidence.

### **THE DECALOGUE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT**

There are, of course, two versions of the Decalogue in the Old Testament, that of Exodus 20 and its revised version in Deuteronomy 5. For the sake of simplicity we shall omit reference to Exodus 34, which differs considerably and mixes ceremonial with moral precepts to a greater extent than does the Decalogue. The fact that there are even minor modifications of Exodus 20 in the Deuteronomic version indicates that the former was not final and immutable.

The setting of both versions is the establishing, or in the case of Deuteronomy the renewing, of the covenant between Yahweh and his people, but whereas the Deuteronomic version is self-contained ('and he added no more' Deuteronomy 5:22), in Exodus other words are added

[p.12]

concerning worship, together with case laws on all manner of subjects, all of which are usually referred to as 'the law of the covenant'. We are not to think that these were totally new laws, never heard before by any people; indeed the various collections of law from the ancient Near East exemplify the same understanding of right and wrong as is contained in the Pentateuch, though some of these collections predate Moses. Where the Decalogue breaks new ground is in its insistence that 'God spoke all these words'. No longer was it merely the case that society dictated the way in which it could best order its affairs for the greatest good of the greatest number; from the time of Moses onwards the God of Israel ('Yahweh your God' comes five times over in Exodus 20:4-12) was unequivocally associated with moral righteousness, and anyone who claimed to belong to him was by association committed to a righteousness like his. The fullest revelation of God's character had to await the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but to Israel was entrusted some understanding of God's majesty, his unapproachable holiness being symbolized by the fire and thunder on the quaking mountain, which had to be fenced off lest anyone should approach unbidden. The laws we think of as cultic kept before Israel the essential need to approach only according to the way set out by God himself. The whole of life had to be lived in the sight of the Lord their God and therefore every aspect of human activity was covered by Pentateuchal law, not only those aspects which fall easily into the categories of moral, civil and ceremonial. All were important, and it does not appear that one was considered to take precedence over any other.

Influenced as we are in the West by Greek philosophical thought, we have become accustomed to think of the Ten Commandments as embodying principles. By reducing each command to a basic principle the particularity of the Decalogue can be dealt with, and its applicability to life in every generation established. We need to consider this methodology, for within the Old Testament the emphasis is on the specific historical setting for the giving of the law, namely the deliverance from Egypt and the establishment of the covenant on Mount Sinai, to secure the distinctiveness of God's people, and to be a constant reminder that wilful disobedience involved cutting themselves off from covenant blessings. It has been argued with some cogency that the Ten Commandments were the basis of the criminal law of Israel,

every transgression of which was punishable by the death penalty.<sup>15</sup> The implication is that the law could be kept and judgment could be avoided, though in practice judgment fell and a way of forgiveness and grace was sought, though it could not be found within the terms of the law. Important though the legal material is in the Pentateuch, it is never divorced from the personal will of the Lord their God. His character determines his law, and because he is gracious and merciful he also forgives and provides a way of escape from judgment for those who repent and turn to him. Thus God did not

[p.13]

deal with his people by giving them principles but by giving specific commands which by their very nature had to be related to the circumstances of life and culture at the time. As situations changed so laws needed to be modified. Nevertheless as an expression of God's will the Decalogue reflected his unchanging nature. 'The Old Testament never recognized a hiatus between his revealed and actual nature. The commands were best understood when kept in closest relation to the God of the covenant who laid claim upon a people and pointed them to a new life as the people of God.'<sup>16</sup> There is, however, a profound difference between loving obedience to a personal God and observance of ethical norms or legal codes, and the New Testament brings to the fore the truth that personal commitment to God is utterly essential to pleasing him.

The scarcity of references to the Decalogue in the Old Testament outside the Pentateuch has often been commented upon. Hosea seems to be quoting some of the Commandments in referring to 'swearing, lying, killing, stealing and committing adultery (Hosea 4:2), though the order is different from that of Jeremiah when he asks, 'Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely...?' (Jeremiah 7:8). Both prophets list sins against society, but both are fully aware of the broken first two commandments and both accuse Israel of forsaking the Lord (Jeremiah 2:13; Hosea 1:2). Ubiquitous invective against idolatry presupposes the second commandment, but such references are not specifically to the Decalogue and there is no shortage of reference to other parts of the law: oppression of the poor, perversion of justice, the taking of bribes, the appropriation of garments given in pledge, to mention a few. Similarly in Psalms and Proverbs references to law and commandments are not limited to the Decalogue, and Torah came to designate the five books of Moses as a whole.

### **THE DECALOGUE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT**

Nothing in the history of Israel supports the view that knowledge of the Decalogue preserved civilization or was even necessary to it, for, even given that knowledge, the kingdoms of Israel and Judah were swept away by nations whose justice left much to be desired. Those who returned to rebuild Jerusalem took the law seriously, and by the time of Jesus there was among earnest Jews a devotion to the Torah, which nevertheless failed to fulfil its purpose. Covetousness was hidden under a cloak of religious casuistry (Matthew 15:5); a bland exterior covered all kinds of evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander (Matthew 15:19); adultery was a sin of which others were guilty (John 8:1-11). Jesus was crucified by people who were devoted to the law.

---

<sup>15</sup> A. C. J. Phillips, *Ancient Israel's Criminal Law* (Oxford 1970 New York 1971).

<sup>16</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *Exodus* (London 1974) 400-401.

In his teaching Jesus addressed himself to the vexed question of the law. His contemporaries had little problem with it. They knew the commandments and to their own satisfaction kept them. In particular they

[p.14]

were meticulous in observing the first four of the Ten Commandments to such an extent that Jesus was in their eyes the law-breaker, who seemed to have come to destroy the law and the prophets. 'He not only broke the sabbath but called God his Father, making himself equal with God' (John 5:18). The experts in the law had learned the book but they did not know its Author. When Jesus came to demonstrate in a human life what the Commandments were all about these experts were the last to recognize his identity. They knew the Decalogue but they did not know the Father. They honoured him with their lips but their hearts were far from him.

Jesus on the other hand was one with the Father, co-author of the Commandments. When he came to 'fulfil' them the word 'fulfil' (*pleroō*) itself took on fuller meaning. First he did them, then he taught them. But more than that, he drew upon himself all the resentment and murderous hatred of his accusers, and in his death accomplished the way of salvation which the holiest of laws could never provide. Thus 'not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished' (Matthew 5:18) has to be understood as one way of looking at the life and ministry of Jesus. He not only completely lived out the Commandments within his own circumstances and culture, but prepared the way by which we can begin to do the same within our very different circumstances and culture.

Of the six precepts of the law chosen by Jesus for exposition in the Sermon on the Mount the first two are the sixth and seventh Commandments. In each case Jesus cut through all the accumulated casuistry to expose the heart of the Commandment. His 'I say to you' was sufficient authority, and the ideal he set before the disciples was no longer the Commandments but the perfection of their heavenly Father (Matthew 5:48). Indeed the ninefold repetition of the *lego humin* 'I say to you' in Matthew 5:17-48 fastened every eye on Jesus as the interpreter of the law and the living example of its outworking. He was the culmination of the moral teaching of the Old Testament, perfect as his heavenly Father is perfect. The Commandments had been surpassed as surely as the sun surpasses the oil lamp. The lamp is all right as far as it goes, and might still be necessary in certain circumstances; it even has some of the characteristics of the sun, but it is feeble by comparison.

The other examples taken by Jesus and included in Matthew 5 came not from the Decalogue but from other parts of the law, mainly Deuteronomy, but also Leviticus. The Jew was committed to fulfilling the whole law and therefore it was not permissible to select some parts and neglect others. When the rich young man asked which commandment he was to keep (Matthew 19:18) he was voicing the most pressing ethical question of the time. The lawyer who came to test out the teacher was commended by Jesus for citing as the sum of the law the two great commandments, as we have come to call them (Luke 10:25-27). He did not quote the Decalogue. Yet he was not satisfied because the law that he

[p.15]

should love his neighbour caused him problems. The difficulty was not so much a matter of knowing the right answers as of overcoming natural inclinations to avoid becoming involved.

Here the law was powerless to help. Though the original invitation of Jesus, 'Follow me', must have sounded simplistic it was from that point on to be the key to the good life, surpassing in both content and efficacy the Ten Commandments.

Paul learnt the law from his mother's knee, growing up to keep it so that he could say as he looked back that regarding righteousness under the law he had been blameless (Philippians 3:6). As F. F. Bruce comments, 'To keep the whole law was no easy task, but it was not impossible.' Paul was 'blameless' and he was no hypocrite.<sup>17</sup> Full weight must be given to this claim, for it does not seem that Paul was any more convicted of sin and driven by the law to Christ than was the young man who told Jesus 'all these have I kept from my youth up'.

Within a family and community where a strict code was accepted without question and the whole of life was regulated by a desire to be pleasing to God there were impressive advantages over other nations which had no such religious and moral commitment. Admittedly this had not been so, according to the prophets, in the period up to and including the exile. Ezekiel could think of no period in Israel's history when the law of God had been kept, but after the Lord's sword of judgment, 'sharpened for slaughter, polished to flash like lightning' (Ezekiel 21:10) had done its work, and the post-exilic community in Jerusalem had organized itself by the Commandments of the Lord and his statutes for Israel, there is evidence in the New Testament of devotion to the law beyond anything to be seen in the comments on the nation and its society in Old Testament times. Archbishop Stuart Blanch, commending the Decalogue for today, says, 'The moral tone of the Jewish communities... was widely admired, as indeed it is to this day...'.<sup>18</sup>

True as this is, the fact remains that something was missing from Paul's righteousness and once he experienced on the Damascus road a confrontation with the risen Christ and recognized his claims, Paul no longer preached the law as the way of blessedness and peace, even if he had done so as a Pharisee. Though he continued to live as a practising Jew his message was Christ-centred, and even when he was writing mainly to Gentiles he nowhere urged upon his readers the importance of knowing and keeping the Ten Commandments. One occasion when such an injunction would have been very appropriate had he wished to issue it would have been at the Council of Jerusalem, when the question was faced whether circumcision and law-keeping were essential to salvation. Instead, a strange mixture of moral and ceremonial requirements were laid down, 'For from early generations Moses has had in every city those who preach him, for he is read every sabbath in the synagogues' (Acts 15:21). James seems to be saying, in effect, that Moses had had his day and now a new day had dawned. The decision was a compromise one,

[p.16]

but in the end all was well, for the list of requirements died a natural death and circumcision also. The significant factor, and the one best guaranteed to ensure the highest standards of morality, was that a person was 'in Christ'.

Paul made surprisingly sparse reference to the Decalogue, considering the importance which has since been attached to it by the church. There are two passages which undoubtedly deal with the Ten Commandments as opposed to references to the commandments in general. In 2 Corinthians 3, Paul contrasts the writing on tablets of stone, clearly a reference to the

---

<sup>17</sup> F. F. Bruce, *Paul, Apostle of the Free Spirit* (Exeter 1978) 188.

<sup>18</sup> Stuart Blanch, *The Trumpet in the Morning* (London 1979) 112.



Decalogue, with the testimonial written with the Spirit of the living God on human hearts at Corinth. He goes on to say that the written code kills and is a dispensation of death, whereas the Spirit gives life, and freedom of access to behold the glory of the Lord (vv 17-18). It is the efficacy of the Holy Spirit to change the believer into the likeness of the Lord that enables Paul to relegate the Ten Commandments to the old dispensation of death. He is not afraid of antinomianism. And even when his converts fail to see that their way of life is incompatible with their faith it is not to the Decalogue that he points them but to the work of Christ; to God's grace in Christ, to spiritual gifts, to the believer's status in Christ and to God's Holy Spirit within. The point is amply illustrated in the Corinthian correspondence as a whole, where Paul has to rebuke the grossest of moral transgressions and an arrogant rejection of his right to correct the attitudes and behaviour of the church members. His emphasis is on the faithfulness of God, 'by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord' (1 Corinthians 1:9; cf. 2 Corinthians 1:18-19). All the promises of God find their 'Yes' in the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom Paul preached, and the seal of his Spirit in their hearts guaranteed to whom they belonged.

Paul's gospel at Rome may be deduced to some extent from the caricature referred to in the letter, 'Why not do evil that good may come?' (Romans 3:8). The righteousness he proclaimed was 'apart from the law', manifested in Christ, 'the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe' (Romans 3:22). To the onlooker Paul's message of justification for the sinner seemed to encourage evil-doing, whereas the believer knew that the new life of the Spirit delivered him from weakness of will in keeping the law and from fear of judgment on failure to do it. Though Paul is probably using the term 'law' in a general way in Romans 1-8 the Decalogue is included. In chapter 13 he does make use of four Commandments of the ten, but in order to point out that Christian love surpasses them while at the same time fulfilling them.

There are, of course, many other contexts which could be examined if time allowed, but it is important to appreciate that Paul's message is not about commitment to law keeping. There had never been a law given, even by God, which could save. In his examination of law in scripture, Dr Blanch runs up against a problem in proving his thesis when it comes

[p.17]

to Paul: 'If we are to maintain the view that the Torah of God has permanent significance for the life of the world we shall have to be convinced that Paul's attitude does not give it the lie... The prevailing impression made on the mind, in the first instance, by a reading of the letters is that we are in the presence of a man who has abolished the law in favour of the gospel...' <sup>19</sup> This impression did not support the thesis of his book. He goes on, 'May I say to the reader that I have had my moments, largely produced by the studies I have conducted in preparation for this book, when I have doubted the thesis.' In the end he is driven to a weak negative conclusion with regard to Paul: 'My conclusion is that there is nothing in Paul's writings ... to forbid that the Torah should be regarded as a legitimate guide to human beings, Jew and Gentile, in the way of life.' <sup>20</sup> So negative a conclusion calls into question the whole argument concerning the role of the law in the witness of the Christian church. Is it a fact that the church should be more fully occupied with the teaching of the Ten Commandments and with reshaping society and its laws with a view to enforcing their precepts? Admittedly the Decalogue remains part of scripture, and as such has its place as a historical reminder of the

---

<sup>19</sup> *ibid.* 118.

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.* 130

standards of behaviour appropriate for the people of God, and indeed it provided 'ordinances, by whose observance man [in general] shall live' (Ezekiel 20:21). There was a sense in which Israel's law was known and read of all men, but it did not and could not effect salvation. Nor was Israel in any position to pass judgment on other nations or to recommend the Decalogue to them as a way of life because Israel did not exemplify its standards. Is the church any better placed to do so?

Our study has called attention to the failure of the law in the Old Testament period. Only because the Lord dealt with Israel 'for the sake of his name' was the nation saved from total extinction, and the desolated land reinhabited after the Exile. By the time of the ministry of Jesus the Jewish people had worked at law-keeping till it was the major preoccupation of the religious leaders, and yet the gospels reflect a society that was far from fulfilling the divine intention behind the law. Nearer to our own day the experience of the Reformers of the sixteenth century was no more encouraging. Moreover, a moralistic approach to those outside the church positively militates against the gospel, reinforcing a deeply held conviction in our land that salvation is by law-keeping, and that those who find themselves on the wrong side of that law are beyond the pale. Our commission is centred not on law but on good news of the One with whom the Father was 'well pleased', and whose kingdom is open to all who 'repent and believe in the gospel'. Only through Christ Jesus can the righteousness of the law be fulfilled and it is the task uniquely of those who walk by his Spirit to point to Christ as the great transformer of people and nations. Let us at this present time beware lest we sell people short by laying stress on the law to

[p.18]

the detriment of the gospel, and remember that as God's church in this land we are in our generation 'a letter from Christ..., written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts' (2 Corinthians 3:3). In the last analysis the role of the Ten Commandments, as of the rest of the law, is to serve the cause of the gospel.

---

© 1983 *London School of Theology* (<http://www.lst.ac.uk/>). Reproduced by permission.

Prepared for the Web in October 2007 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

---