

PAUL AND THE LAW OF MOSES¹

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I

ONLY once in his surviving letters does Paul use the actual phrase "the law of Moses". That is in 1 Corinthians ix. 9 where, to support his argument that those who preach the gospel are entitled to get their living by the gospel, he appeals to the scriptures: "it is written in the law of Moses, 'You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain'" (Deut. xxv. 4).² Although this quotation is in fact a command, it is quite likely that by "the law of Moses" here Paul means little more than the Pentateuch. Elsewhere he speaks of the Hebrew scriptures as "the law and the prophets" (Rom. iii. 21) and once or twice he refers to them comprehensively, or to any part of them by itself, as "the law" (Rom. iii. 19; 1 Cor. xiv. 21).

There are times, again, when he uses the word "law" (*νόμος*) with the general meaning of "principle". For example, he says that, whereas a man might claim credit for his ethical achievements, any claiming of credit is excluded when a man is justified by divine grace—not "by the law of works" but "by the law of faith" (Rom. iii. 27). Plainly the usual sense of law is out of the question in this last phrase; hence the Revised Standard Version renders appropriately, "On what principle? On the principle of works? No, but on the principle of faith."³ Or the word may be used, as we frequently use it, of an observed regularity: "I find it to be a law", says Paul, "that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand" (Rom. vii. 21).

But in the vast majority of places where the word "law" appears in Paul, the reference is to the Jewish law—the law of

¹ A lecture delivered in the John Rylands University Library on Wednesday, the 13th of November, 1974.

² See BULLETIN, lvi (1973-4), 328 f.

³ Similarly in the New English Bible.

God given to Israel through Moses, recorded in the first five books of the Bible and transmitted from generation to generation. Paul frequently uses the Greek word (*νόμος*) without the definite article where we might have expected the article to be present, and this may reflect the rabbinical usage of the Hebrew word (*torah*) without the article, almost as if it were a proper noun. The possession of this law gave Jews a sense of high privilege, for in it they had "the embodiment of knowledge and truth" (Rom. ii. 20), by contrast with the Gentiles "who have not the law" (Rom. ii. 14). The Gentiles might have their own civil and criminal codes, but these do not come into Paul's purview when he speaks of "the law". If anything in the life of Gentiles corresponds to the Jewish law, it is the voice of conscience, which shows that "what the law requires is written on their hearts" (Rom. ii. 15).

To gain a clear understanding of Paul's attitude to the law is notoriously difficult, and the difficulty arises in some measure from the ambivalence in his thinking and language on this subject.

II

Paul, on his own testimony, was brought up as a Pharisee, with all the zeal for the law that such an upbringing implies (Phil. iii. 5 f.). In his early days, he says, "I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people, so extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers" (Gal. i. 14). His own account is perfectly consistent with the claim ascribed to him in Acts xxii. 3, that he was "educated at the feet of Gamaliel according to the strict manner of the law of our fathers, being zealous for God."

Paul's younger contemporary, Josephus, likewise claims to have espoused the Pharisaic way. The Pharisees, he says, have "the reputation of excelling the rest of their nation in the observances of religion, and as exact exponents of the laws".¹ He describes them as "priding themselves on their adherence to ancestral custom and claiming to observe the laws of which the Deity approves".²

¹ *BJ*, i. 110.

² *Ant.*, xvii. 41.

To keep the whole law was no easy task, but it was not impossible. The rich man who assured Jesus that he had kept all the commandments of the decalogue from his youth¹ was no hypocrite, and no more was Paul when, looking back on his earlier life from the perspective of twenty to thirty years' Christian experience, he says that "as to righteousness under the law" he was "blameless" (Phil. iii. 6).

The law was God's law; it was the revelation of his will. To keep the law was to do the will of God. To be born under the law was an immense privilege. Unlike Gentiles, who lacked this privilege, a Jew who was "instructed in the law" could know God's will "and approve what is excellent"; he was qualified to be "a guide to the blind, a light to those who are in darkness, a corrector of the foolish, a teacher of children" (Rom. ii. 18-20). The words are Paul's, and he spoke from experience. Yet at the time when he wrote he had embraced another way. No longer did he rely upon the law and boast of his relation to God as one who had been born a Jew; no longer did he make his aim the attainment of that righteousness before God which was based on keeping the law. He had found a new way of righteousness, based on faith in Christ.² Allegiance to a person had displaced devotion to a code—which was, indeed, not merely a code but more a way of life.

There were many disciples of Jesus in the early church who thought it quite possible—and indeed eminently desirable—to combine faith in Christ with the pursuit of righteousness through keeping the law, but Paul regarded this attitude as an impossible compromise. No one had kept the law with greater devotion than Paul, and the law, far from securing his righteousness before God, actually led him into sin. It was his devotion to the law that made him such a zealous persecutor of the church: his persecuting zeal was but one aspect of his zeal for the law. He persecuted the church with a good conscience: right up to the moment of his confrontation with the risen Christ no shadow of doubt appears to have entered his mind that what he was doing brought pleasure to God. But with the revelation on the

¹ Mark x. 20 and parallels.

² Phil. iii. 9.

Damascus road came the recognition that Jesus was the Messiah ; the crucified Jesus was the risen Lord. Then the followers of Jesus had been right after all, and Paul had been terribly wrong. Instead of pursuing the path of righteousness, as he thought, he had been persistently, albeit unwittingly, committing the sin of sins—attacking the witnesses of the Messiah and, through them, attacking the Messiah himself. But he had relied on the law ! Given the law and Paul's passionate resolution to keep it, what other course could he have followed? His disillusionment with the law when he understood where his devotion to it had led him is reflected in his words : " I through the law died to the law, that I might live to God " (Gal. ii. 19).¹ When it is pointed out that Paul's attitude to the law is so completely out of step with the general rabbinic attitude as to be unique, we cannot but agree ; but his experience was unique.

III

It is plain that Paul believed and taught that the law had been in a major sense abrogated by Christ. " Christ is the end of the law ", he wrote, " that every one who has faith may be justified " (Rom. x. 4). The age of law, which was never designed to be other than a parenthesis in God's dealings with mankind (Gal. iii. 19 ; Rom. v. 20a), had been superseded by the new age, which might be variously called " the age of Christ ", with reference to Christ's reigning at the right hand of God (1 Cor. xv. 25, quoting Ps. cx. 1), or " the age of the Spirit ", with reference to the Spirit's presence with the people of Christ on earth as the pledge of their eternal inheritance in the resurrection life (Rom. viii. 10 f.). Was it purely the impact of the Damascus-road event that forced this conclusion on Paul, or had he been in some degree prepared for it in his earlier training?

There are some scholars who have argued for such a preparation. In particular, Rabbi Leo Baeck maintained in an influential essay on " The Faith of Paul " that the Jewish

¹ It would be a mistake, however, to see only the reflection of Paul's personal experience here ; see the exposition of the context in R. C. Tannehill, *Dying and Rising with Christ* (Berlin, 1967), pp. 55 ff.

teaching about the three epochs of world-history—2,000 years of chaos ; 2,000 years of law (beginning with the revelation on Sinai) ; 2,000 years of the messianic age¹—which would be followed by the eternal sabbath-rest,² implied that the validity of the law was temporary, lasting only to the dawn of the messianic age. " If the ' Days of the Messiah ' have commenced, those of the Torah came to their close. On the other hand, if the Law, the Torah, still retained its validity, it was proclaimed thereby that the Messiah has not yet appeared."³ Hence the severity with which Paul anathematizes those who tried to impose a certain measure of law-keeping (circumcision, for example, or the obligatory observance of special days) on his Galatian converts.⁴ Their action implied that the law was still in force, therefore that the Messiah had not come, therefore that Jesus was not the Messiah.

The doctrine of the three epochs is said to be a teaching of the school of Elijah—an expression which, according to W. Bacher, has a similar meaning in relation to *haggadah* to that of " a commandment of Moses from Sinai " in relation to *halakhah* : both expressions denote great antiquity.⁵ The doctrine, in that case, was current long before Paul's time.

But in fact we cannot be sure if Paul had been brought up to accept this doctrine. If he had, then the logic of the situation was plain : the epoch of the Messiah had set in, and therefore the epoch of the law was past. But even if he had not, his personal situation involved a logic of its own : Jesus was shown to be the Messiah, and he had accomplished for Paul and in Paul something beyond what the law had accomplished. Whereas the law had led him, all unconsciously, along a path contrary to God's will, his new faith in Jesus as Messiah and Lord brought him consciously into a state of righteousness before God and peace with God. His former zeal for God had

¹ TB *Sanhedrin* 97a.

² M *Tamid* 7 : 4.

³ L. Baeck, " The Faith of Paul ", *Journal of Jewish Studies*, iii (1952), 106 ; cf. H. J. Schoeps, *Paul*, E.T. (London, 1961), pp. 171 ff.

⁴ Gal. i. 8 f.

⁵ Baeck, *JJS*, iii (1952), 105 f., quoting W. Bacher, *Tradition und Tradenten* (Frankfurt, 1914), pp. 25 ff., 233 f.

been an unenlightened zeal. So long as he was ignorant of the "righteousness that comes from God" and sought to establish his own, he could not submit to God's way of setting men right with himself. But now, as he learned, "Christ is the end of the law, that every one who has faith may be justified" (Rom. x. 2-4).

IV

The affirmation that "Christ is the end of the law" has been variously understood. The word "end" (*τέλος*) can mean "goal" or "terminus", and here it probably means both. Christ, for Paul, was the goal of the law in the sense that the law was a temporary provision introduced by God until the coming of Abraham's offspring in whom the promise made to Abraham was consummated; the law, in other words, "was our custodian until Christ came, that we might be justified by faith" (Gal. iii. 19, 24). But Christ was also, for that reason, the terminus of the law: if, as Paul says, the law was a temporary provision, the coming of Christ meant that the period of its validity was now at an end.

Some of Paul's interpreters have tried to modify the starkness of this statement; others have tried to sharpen it, or at least to extend its scope. To be sure, if Jewish Christians continued to observe various customs prescribed by the law as part of their inherited way of life, Paul raised no objection: he himself conformed to those customs from time to time when he judged it appropriate to do so.¹ But what he is concerned with in his statement that "Christ is the end of the law" is the place of law in man's approach to God; the *prima facie* meaning of the statement is: now that Christ has come, there is no more place for law in man's approach to God. To the thinking of many, this is a hard saying, which lies open to the charge of anti-nomianism—a charge which Paul met and rebutted in his own day.²

The traditional Lutheran doctrine of the threefold use of the law envisages it (i) as a means of preservation, (ii) as a

¹ I Cor. ix. 20; cf. Acts xvi. 3; xxi. 20-26.

² Cf. Rom. iii. 8; vi. 1 ff.

summons to repentance, (iii) as guidance for the church.¹ In so far as the first use involves the administration of law by magistrates for the restraint of evil and the maintenance of good order, this is not an aspect of the gospel; what Paul has to say about this subject may be seen in Romans xiii. 1-7. The second use is recognized by Paul as a fact of experience—"through law comes knowledge of sin" (Rom. iii. 20)—but not, it appears, as an aid to gospel preaching. It may be held, as a principle of pastoral theology, that confrontation with the law is a salutary means of leading the sinner to acknowledge his inability and cast himself on the mercy of God. But there is no evidence that Paul ever used the law in this way in his apostolic preaching.² His hearers, whether Jews or Gentiles, were in bondage, as he saw it, and his message was one of liberation. In fact, when he urges his Gentile converts in the churches of Galatia not to "submit again to a yoke of slavery" (Gal. v. 1), he implies that by placing themselves under the yoke of the law they would be reverting to the same kind of bondage as they had endured in their pagan past. It appears, indeed, that the angels through whom the law was ordained (Gal. iii. 19)³ are equated with the "elemental spirits of the world" (Gal. iv. 3, 8) which impose their yoke on the minds of men outside of Christ, whether they be Jews or Gentiles.⁴

As for the third use of the law, Paul's thoughts on the guidance of the church may sometimes be expressed by means of the term "law", but when he speaks of "the law of the Spirit" or "the law of Christ" he uses "law", as we shall see, in a non-legal sense.⁵

¹ Cf. Formula of Concord (1576), article 6, *ap.* P. Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, iii: *The Evangelical Protestant Churches* (New York, 1878), pp. 130-5. Professor James Atkinson of the University of Sheffield reminds me that Luther himself (in contrast to his followers) taught only two uses of the law: the *usus theologicus* (sometimes called *usus spiritualis*) and the *usus politicus* (sometimes called the *usus civilis*).

² Not even in the reports of his preaching in Acts.

³ For these angelic intermediaries in the giving of the law, cf. Acts vii. 53; Heb. ii. 2 (also Jubilees i. 29; *Sifre* on Num. xii. 5; *Mekhilta* on Exod. xx. 18; *Pesiqta Rabbati* 21).

⁴ Cf. Col. ii. 8, 20; see BULLETIN, xlviii (1965-6), 275.

⁵ See p. 277.

In the Reformed tradition derived from Geneva, it has frequently been said that, while the man in Christ is not under law as a means of salvation, he remains under it as a rule of life.¹ In its own right, this distinction may be cogently maintained as a principle of Christian theology and ethics, but it should not be imagined that it has Pauline authority. According to Paul, the believer is *not* under law as a rule of life—unless one thinks of the law of love, and that is a completely different kind of law, fulfilled not by obedience to a code but by the outworking of an inward power. When Paul says, “sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace” (Rom. vi. 14), it is the on-going course of Christian life that he has in view, not simply the initial justification by faith—as is plain from the point of the antinomian retort which Paul immediately quotes: “What then? Are we to sin because we are not under law but under grace?” (Rom. vi. 15).

Again, it is sometimes said that Christ is the end of the ceremonial law (including not only the sacrificial cultus but circumcision and the observance of the sacred calendar) but not of the moral law.² Once more, this is a perfectly valid, and to some extent an obvious, theological and ethical distinction; but it has no place in Pauline exegesis. It has to be read into Paul, for it is not a distinction that Paul himself makes.

As for the sharpening of Paul's assertion that Christ is the end of the law, we may think of Karl Barth's insistence that Christ is the end of *religion*³ (which may be accepted or refused according to our understanding of the amorphous word “religion”), or of Ernst Fuchs's paraphrase “Christ the end of *history*”—by which he means that Christ, as the *eschaton* in

¹ Cf. J. Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1559), ii. 7. 12-15.

² Cf. Calvin, *Institutes*, ii. 7. 17.

³ K. Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, E.T. (Oxford, 1933), pp. 37 (“the perception which moves outwards from God cannot have free course until the arrogance of religion be done away”), 238 (“But religion must die. In God we are rid of it”), 374: “All human religion is directed towards an *end* beyond itself (iii. 21); and that *end* is Christ”. Barth, however, insists elsewhere that *τέλος* in Rom. x. 4 means “the ‘aim’, the contents, the substance, the sum total of the Law, its meaning and at the same time the way to its fulfilment”; he compares Matt. v. 17 (*A Shorter Commentary on Romans*, E.T., London, 1959, p. 126).

person, achieves for faith the cessation of history (including especially salvation-history) and the beginning of real life.¹ But this is the expression of an existentialist interpretation of the gospel which, however well founded it may be, goes beyond what Paul meant.²

V

We have quoted Romans vi. 14: “sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.” The implication of these words is as astounding for traditional theological ethics today as in the first century. To be under law—not only the law of Moses but the law of God—means to be under the dominion of sin. To be under grace—the grace of God brought near in Christ—is to be liberated simultaneously from the rule of law and the dominion of sin. So Paul had proved in his own life.

The close association in Paul's mind between sin and the law is illustrated by the parallel analogies of the slave-market (Rom. vi. 12-23) and the marriage bond (Rom. vii. 1-6). In the former analogy a slave is bound to obey his master; but if the slave dies, or passes by purchase into the ownership of another master, the will of his former master is no longer binding on him. In the latter analogy a woman is bound by law to her husband so long as he lives; but when he dies she is no longer so bound and can legally marry another husband. The second master in the former analogy, like the new husband in the latter analogy, is Christ; but in the former analogy the old master is sin (personified), whereas in the latter analogy the old husband is the law (also personified). One and the same transition liberates the soul from slavery to sin and from the yoke of the law. No wonder that Paul goes on to picture an objector as asking if “the law is sin” (Rom. vii. 7). Paul cannot agree: the law is God's law; every one of its commandments is “holy

¹ E. Fuchs, “Christus das Ende der Geschichte”, *Evangelische Theologie*, viii (1948/9), 447 ff. = *Gesammelte Aufsätze*, ii (Tübingen, 1960), pp. 79 ff.; cf. his *Studies of the Historical Jesus*, E.T. (London, 1964), pp. 40, 176 ff.; R. Bultmann, *History and Eschatology* (Edinburgh, 1957), p. 43 (“history has reached its end, since Christ is the end of the law”).

² Cf. O. Cullmann, *Salvation in History*, E.T. (London, 1967), pp. 40-63.

and just and good" (Rom. vii. 12). Yet we can see how the objector thinks he is carrying Paul's argument to its logical conclusion. According to Paul, the law not only brings sin to light; it forbids sin, indeed, but it stimulates the very thing it forbids. In fact, says Paul, "the power of sin is the law" (1 Cor. xv. 56).

VI

The analogy of the marriage bond in Romans vii. 1-6 is followed by one of the most controversial exegetical problems in the Pauline corpus. In Romans vii. 7-25 Paul describes the bearing of the law on the life of a man, or on the life of man generically, and uses the first person singular throughout. This use of the first person singular makes the passage ostensibly autobiographical, but is it really autobiographical? Does Paul use "I" dramatically in order to make the experience of the man described more vivid, or does he use "I" representatively, portraying the experience of mankind in terms of his own experience? The latter view was favoured by T. W. Manson: "We may call it autobiography if we like, but here Paul's autobiography is the biography of Everyman."¹

The passage falls into two sections: (a) verses 7-13, in which the first-personal experience is related in the past tense; (b) verses 14-25, where it is related in the present tense.

It is more particularly in the former of these two sections that Paul's autobiography is the biography of Everyman. "Everyman" in this sense is equivalent to the Old Testament "Adam", and Paul, in effect, is re-telling the Genesis fall story in the first person singular. "I was once alive apart from the law", he says, "but when the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died. . . . Sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, beguiled me and by it killed me" (Rom. vii. 9, 11). Adam and his wife lived a carefree life until they were tested by the commandment banning the fruit of the tree of knowledge: that very commandment, brought to their remembrance by the tempter, directed their attention to the forbidden fruit and made

¹ T. W. Manson, *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*, ed. M. Black and H. H. Rowley (London and Edinburgh, 1962), p. 945.

it so irresistibly attractive that they ate it. Sin, which is personified in Paul's account, is given the concrete form of the serpent in the Genesis narrative: as Eve complains "the serpent beguiled (LXX *ἠπάτησεν*) me" (Gen. iii. 13), so Paul says "sin beguiled (*ἐξῆπάτησεν*) me". The sentence pronounced in advance on the taking of the forbidden fruit was death—"in the day that you eat of it you shall die" (Gen. ii. 17)—and Paul says that he "died" when sin sprang to life: "sin . . . killed me". Again, the particular form of sin that Paul specifies in this section is covetousness—"sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, wrought in me all kinds of covetousness" (Rom. vii. 8), the "commandment" in question being the last commandment of the decalogue: "Thou shalt not covet" (Exod. xx. 17; Deut. v. 21). Although the prohibition of the forbidden fruit in the fall narrative is not part of the law of Moses, it could well be regarded as an anticipatory instance of the commandment against covetousness. And it could be argued that covetousness (*ἐπιθυμία*) is the quintessential sin.

To a large degree, moreover, the fall narrative in Paul's eyes presents in encapsulated form the experience of mankind before and after the promulgation of the law of Moses, as he expounds that experience in Romans v. 12-21.¹ Although men were sinful by nature before the law was promulgated, says Paul, sin was not accounted to them in the absence of any law: *nulla poena sine lege* (there is no penalty apart from an explicit law, i.e. one can be punished only for the breach of an explicit law). The introduction of law not only brought with it the recognition of sin and the incitement to sin but also accountability for sin and consequent liability to the death-penalty passed on sin. "When the commandment came, sin sprang to life and I died" (Rom. vii. 9). Even apart from the law sinful man needed the grace of God, but it took the law to render him aware of that need.

In Romans vii. 7-13, then, Paul repeats in terms of individual experience both the fall narrative and the more general history

¹ Cf. also M. D. Hooker, "Adam in Romans i", *NTS*, vi (1959-60), 297 ff.

of mankind before the law and under the law. To understand him, we must forget all that we know of law-codes in the Ancient Near East antedating the Exodus; all the pre-Mosaic history accessible to Paul was contained in Genesis and the earlier part of Exodus. Before the time of Moses there was no law in the sense that no law is recorded in scripture. (If we bear in mind the place occupied in rabbinical thinking by the Noachian regulations of Genesis ix. 1-7, which were held to be binding on Gentiles as well as Jews, we may ask what part they played in Paul's scheme of things; from the fact that nowhere in his extant writings is there any reference to them, as indeed there is none to Noah himself, we may conclude that they played little or no part.)¹

But what element of purely personal reminiscence enters into Paul's account in Romans vii. 7-13? Does he recall what happened when, in his early teens, he became conscious of his personal obligation to keep the law? Is there any personal significance in the fact that the one commandment of the decalogue which he cites to illustrate his argument is that which forbids not an outward act or word but an inward attitude or appetite—covetousness? Even if an affirmative answer is to be given to these questions, we have no other record of Paul's early development which would give us anything approaching certainty. His emphatic assertions that throughout his pre-Christian career he maintained without fault the standard of righteousness demanded by the law² lead us to conclude that, whatever his first reaction may have been to the realization of his duty to keep the whole law, he quickly learned to live with that duty and preserve a blameless conscience before God.

This last consideration excludes one popular interpretation of Romans vii. 14-25, where Paul moves from the past into the present tense—the interpretation which envisages Paul as being

¹ Cf. C. K. Barrett, *From First Adam to Last* (London, 1962), pp. 23-26. In an early form of the tradition (Deut. Rabba 2. 198d; TB *Sanh.* 59b), six of these seven regulations had already been enjoined on Adam; only the seventh (the prohibition of eating flesh with the blood in it) was given for the first time to Noah. In Paul's eyes the ungodliness of the pagan world arose from disobedience to the creation ordinances (Rom. i. 18ff.).

² Phil. iii. 6 (cf. Acts xxiii. 1).

increasingly uneasy in conscience as his persecuting career went on. This section is often quoted as one of the classic descriptions in world literature of the divided mind¹—the mind of the man who finds himself impelled by a power greater than his own, the power of what Paul calls indwelling sin, to do not the good that he approves and wants to do but the evil that he hates and does not want to do. This is indeed a picture of man under the law, acknowledging that the law's requirements are good but deploring the powerlessness of the law to ensure that its requirements are translated into action. But it is not a picture of Paul's conscious mind while he himself lived under the law. There is no hint that Paul, before his conversion, was the victim of such an inward conflict as he describes here; on the contrary, all the evidence is against it. It may be that Augustine and Luther's discovery that Paul spoke so directly to their condition led to the assumption that, before his conversion, he must have endured the same kind of spiritual disturbance as they endured before theirs,² and to the ascribing to Paul of the "introspective conscience of the West", as Professor Krister Stendahl has put it.³ If Paul's conversion was preceded by a period of subconscious incubation, this has left no trace in our surviving records. The goads against which, as he was told on the Damascus road, it was fruitless for him to kick (Acts xxvi. 14) were not the prickings of an uneasy conscience over his persecuting energy but the new forces which were now driving him in the opposite direction to that which he had hitherto pursued. For Paul, in the words of E. K. Lee, "the true meaning of sin was not discovered at the feet of Gamaliel but at the foot of the cross".⁴

¹ Parallels have been adduced from Greek and Latin literature (e.g. Euripides, *Medea*, 1078-80; Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, vii. 20 f.; *Amores*, iii. 4. 17; Horace, *Epistles*, i. 8. 11; Epictetus; *Enchiridion*, ii. 26. 4), but however similar their wording may be, none of them means exactly what Paul does.

² Luther's interior conflict was spiritual, while Augustine's was moral, but Paul seems to have been troubled in neither respect before his conversion.

³ K. Stendahl, "The Apostle Paul and the Introspective Conscience of the West", *HTR*, lvi (1963), 199 ff. See also the critique of Stendahl in E. Käsemann, *Perspectives on Paul*, E.T. (London, 1969), pp. 60 ff.

⁴ E. K. Lee, *A Study in Romans* (London, 1962), p. 27.

VII

In my inmost being, says Paul (whether speaking personally or symbolically), I approve of the law of God—indeed, I delight in it, like the psalmist who sings “Oh, how I love thy law!” (Ps. cxix. 97)—“but”, he adds, “I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin which dwells in my members” (Rom. vii. 23). In this sentence the word “law” is used three times. The first two occurrences denote two opposed principles which wage war within Paul, comparable (we may say) to the evil and good inclination in Jewish anthropology. But what is “the law of sin” to which the former principle makes him captive? Perhaps it is the domination or dictate of sin, which in the previous chapter (as we have seen) is personified as a slave-master; this is rendered the more probable by the language in which Paul sums up the contents of Romans vii. 14 ff.: “So then, I of myself serve the law of God with my mind, but with my flesh I serve the law of sin” (verse 25b). There the law of sin and the law of God are set in sharp contrast.

And yet it may be asked if there is not a sense in which “the law of sin” could be an aspect of the law of God. Earlier in chapter vii Paul has spoken of the way of freedom from law, and he returns to this in viii. 2: “the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death”. Can the law of God, which is by definition holy, be described as “the law of sin and death”? Yes, in so far as it stimulates sin and passes sentence of death on the sinner. As Paul has said in an earlier letter, “the written code kills, but the Spirit gives life” (2 Cor. iii. 6). What is this but the antithesis of Romans viii. 2 between “the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus” and “the law of sin and death”? If Paul speaks of “the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus”, he does so as much for the sake of the verbal antithesis with “the law of sin and death” as for anything else: the law of the Spirit is the Spirit’s vitalizing principle or power.

What Paul is doing in Romans vii. 7-25, in so far as his

description is truly autobiographical,¹ is voicing a Christian perspective on his existence under the law, both in the earlier section where he uses the past tense and in the later section where he uses the present tense. Maurice Goguel is probably right in discerning in the exclamation of the later section, “Wretched man that I am!” (Rom. vii. 24a),² no “abstract argument but the echo of the personal experience of an anguished soul” and also in assigning the experience of this section to the period immediately following Paul’s conversion.³ We can readily believe that a man of Paul’s imperious zeal found it no easy matter to win the victory over a hasty tongue, a premature judgement, a resentment at the encroachment of others on the sphere of his own service. These things were not specifically forbidden by the law; it was by the standard of Christ that their sinfulness was revealed to Paul. He can entreat his friends “by the meekness and gentleness of Christ” (2 Cor. x. 1), but these qualities did not come to him naturally. The man who knew the importance of self-discipline, “lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified” (1 Cor. ix. 27), the man who pressed on to gain “the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. iii. 14), knew that that “immortal garland” was to be run for “not without dust and heat”.⁴ But the victory which eluded him who sought it under the law or by his own strength was quickly won when he learned to rely on the aid of the Spirit.

The tension which finds expression in Romans vii. 14-25 is the tension necessarily set up when one lives “between the

¹ The psychological-autobiographical interpretation of Rom. vii. 7-25 received a heavy (though not mortal) blow from W. G. Kümmel, *Römer 7 und die Bekehrung des Paulus* (Leipzig, 1929), to the point where it has been spoken of as “now relegated to the museum of exegetical absurdities” (P. Démann, “Moïse et la loi dans la pensée de saint Paul”, in *Moïse, l’homme de l’alliance*, Paris, 1954, p. 229). Kümmel treats the “I” as symbolical, referring to the condition of all Jews under the law.

² In the following words, “Who will deliver me from this body of death?” (verse 24b), the “body of death” is human nature in its frailty, existing *κατὰ σάρκα*.

³ M. Goguel, *The Birth of Christianity*, E.T. (London, 1953), pp. 213 f.; cf. C. H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (London, 1932), p. 107 (“A man is not moved like that by an ideal construction”).

⁴ J. Milton, *Areopagitica* (1644).

times"—in two aeons simultaneously.¹ How can one who exists temporally in "the present evil age" nevertheless enjoy deliverance from it and live here and now the life of the age to come? By the aid of the indwelling Spirit, who not only makes effective in the believer the saving benefits of Christ's passion but also secures to him in advance the blessings of the age to come.

VIII

It is, as we have seen, "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" that liberates a man from "the law of sin and death" (Rom. viii. 2). "For", Paul continues, God has done what the law could not do, because of the powerlessness of the human nature on which it operated; he has sent his Son to accomplish a work as man and for man that could not otherwise have been accomplished, "in order that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit" (Rom. viii. 3 f.). The law belongs to the old age, the age of man's spiritual powerlessness (which is expressed by Paul's characteristic use of the noun "flesh"); the Spirit is the earnest of the new age, in which man, liberated from the bondage which is inevitable under the old age, can "do the will of God from the heart" (Eph. vi. 6)² or, as Paul expresses it elsewhere, produce "the fruit of the Spirit" (Gal. v. 22).

The transition from the old age to the new—from the weakness of the "flesh" to the power of the Spirit—is brought about by the coming of Christ. The ineffectiveness of the law was due to the inadequacy of the "flesh"—weak human nature—to keep it. But in this human nature, "in the likeness of sinful flesh" (Rom. viii. 3), the Son of God entered our world. He came as true man of woman born, he lived "under law" (Gal. iv. 4), but triumphed where others failed. Not only did he himself do the will of God from the heart (thus embodying the new covenant) but on behalf of others he endured the curse

¹ Cf. A. Nygren, *Commentary on Romans*, E.T. (London, 1952), pp. 291 ff.

² To live "according to the flesh" means for Paul to live "under law" (i.e. in the old aeon of bondage); to live "according to the Spirit" means to live "under grace" (i.e. in the new aeon of freedom).

pronounced by the law on law-breakers (by accepting the form of death which, according to the law, incurred the divine curse)¹ and thus redeemed from that curse those who were under law, so that they might through faith receive the promised Spirit and adoption as sons in the family of God (Gal. iii. 10-14; iv. 4-6).

Thus by Christ's incarnation and his offering himself for the sin of others, God (says Paul) "condemned sin in the flesh" (Rom. viii. 3)—condemned it in human nature as a whole—and inaugurated the new age of spiritual freedom, the age, we may say, of the new covenant.

For in Romans viii. 1-4 Paul echoes the sense, if not the very language, of the new covenant oracle of Jeremiah xxxi. 31-34. In that oracle there is no substantial difference in content between the law which Israel failed to keep under the old covenant and the law which God undertakes hereafter to place within his people, writing it "upon their hearts". The difference lies between their once knowing the law as an external code and their knowing it henceforth as an inward principle. So for Paul there was no substantial difference in content between the "just requirement of the law" which cannot be kept by those who live "according to the flesh" and the just requirement fulfilled in those who live "according to the Spirit". The difference lay in the fact that a new inward power was now imparted, enabling the believer to fulfil what he could not fulfil before. The will of God had not changed; but whereas formerly it was recorded on tablets of stone it was now engraved on human hearts, and inward impulsion accomplished what external compulsion could not. So far as the written requirements of the law were concerned, Paul in his pre-Christian days had kept them punctiliously, but his keeping them all did not add up to doing the will of God from the heart. For the sum of the commandments was love, and this was something which became possible to him only when the divine love was poured into his heart by the Spirit (Rom. v. 5). The reference to the Spirit should remind us that Paul's teaching here points to the fulfilment not only of Jeremiah's "new covenant" oracle but also of the companion oracles in Ezekiel xi. 19 f. and xxxvi. 25-27, where

¹ Deut. xxi. 23.

God promises to implant within his people a new heart and a new spirit—his own spirit—enabling them to do his will effectively.

It is to this new heart, "a heart of flesh" (Ezek. xi. 19; xxxvi. 26), that Paul refers when he says that the message of the new age is written "with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets which are hearts of flesh" (2 Cor. iii. 3). A written law-code was an inadequate vehicle for communicating the will of God; the will of God was given that form only for a temporary purpose—to make quite clear to man the inability and sinfulness to which he was prone in the flesh—that is, in his creaturely weakness. Doing the will of God is not a matter of conformity to outward rules but of giving expression to inward love, such as the Spirit begets. Hence, says Paul, "the written code kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Cor. iii. 6). The written code kills, because it declares the will of God without imparting the power to do it, and pronounces the death-sentence on those who break it. The Spirit gives life, and with the life he imparts the inward power as well as the desire to do the will of God.

Because it is the promulgation of God's will, the law is "holy and just and good" (Rom. vii. 12); because of its effect on man, it might even be described as "the law of sin and death" (Rom. viii. 2). But the Spirit is holy in both respects—both as being the Spirit of God and as creating holiness in man. It is the Spirit who renews the minds of the people of God so that they not only approve but do his will—everything, that is, which is "good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom. xii. 2). The holiness which the Spirit creates is nothing less than transformation into the likeness of Christ, who is the image of God; and this cannot be effected by external constraint: "where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Cor. iii. 17 f.). The purpose of the law, that men should be holy as God is holy (Lev. xi. 44 f., etc.), is thus (according to Paul) realized in the gospel.

This may be what Paul means in Romans iii. 31 where, after presenting God's way of justifying sinners, Jews and Gentiles alike, on the same principle of faith, he asks "Do we then

overthrow the law by this faith?" and answers his own question: "By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law." In the immediate context, in which Paul goes on to expound the narrative of Abraham's faith which was reckoned to him for righteousness (Rom. iv. 1-25),¹ it might appear that the law which is upheld by the gospel of justification by faith is the Torah in the wider sense—the Pentateuch, and more particularly the Genesis account of Abraham. That is so, but Paul goes on farther to show that the law in its stricter sense, as the embodiment of God's will, is upheld and fulfilled more adequately in the age of faith than was possible "before faith came", when law kept the people of God "under restraint" (Gal. iii. 23). Only in an atmosphere of spiritual liberty can God's will be properly obeyed and his law upheld.

IX

If the law of the Spirit is the law of love, then it is identical with what Paul elsewhere calls "the law of Christ"—"Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ" (Gal. vi. 2). By "the law of Christ" he may mean "the law which Christ exemplified" or "the law which Christ laid down" when he said that the whole law and prophets depended on the twin commandments of love to God and love to one's neighbour (Matt. xxii. 40).² This reinterpretation of the law is echoed by Paul when he says that "the whole law is fulfilled in one word: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'" (Gal. v. 14) or that "love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law" (Rom. xiii. 10).

But the law of love is a different kind of law entirely from that which Paul describes as a yoke of slavery. Love is generated by an inner spontaneity and cannot be enforced by penal sanctions. Reference was made above to the "third use" of the law in Lutheran tradition—its use to provide guidance for the church.³ So far as Paul is concerned, guidance for the church is provided by the law of love, not by the "law of

¹ Gen. xv. 6.

² See BULLETIN, lv (1972-3), 282; lvi (1973-4), 332 ff.

³ See p. 265.

commandments and ordinances" (Eph. ii. 15). In his letters he himself lays down guidelines for his converts and others, often couched in the imperative mood, but these guidelines mostly concern personal relations. Food sacrificed to idols, for instance, is ethically and religiously indifferent; what does matter in this or in any other activity is the effect of my conduct and example on others. If I ignore their true interests, he says, then I am "no longer walking in love" (Rom. xiv. 15). The same principle may be discerned in his instructions about such diverse matters as sexual life or behaviour in church.¹

This insistence on the law of love, instead of prudential rules and regulations, was felt by many of Paul's Christian contemporaries to come unrealistically near to encouraging moral indifferentism; and many Christians since his day have shared their sentiments. But, unlike Paul's contemporary critics, Christian moralists since Paul's day have tended to hold that, in insisting on prudential rules and regulations, they are following the implications of his teaching, if not his express judgements. There are, for example, some Christians even today who will argue that, when Paul says, "let no one pass judgement on you . . . with regard to . . . a sabbath" (Col. ii. 16), or insists that every one should "be fully convinced in his own mind" whether or not he esteems one day as better than another (Rom. xiv. 5), he does not mean to treat the weekly rest-day of the fourth commandment as optional (be that day identified with Saturday, Sunday or any other). But if they are right then Paul expresses himself very carelessly, to say the least. It is better to appreciate that Paul conforms no more to the conventions of religious people today than he conformed to the conventions of religious people around A.D. 50; it is best to let Paul be Paul. And when we do that, we shall recognize in him the supreme libertarian, the great herald of Christian freedom, insisting that man in Christ has reached his spiritual majority and must no longer be confined to the leading-strings of infancy but enjoy the birthright of the freeborn sons of God. Here if anywhere Luther entered into the mind of Paul: "A Christian man is a most free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian man

¹ Cf. 1 Cor. vi. 12-20; xi. 17-22.

is a most dutiful servant of all, subject to all."¹ "Subject to none" in respect of his liberty; "subject to all" in respect of his charity. This, for Paul, is the law of Christ because this was the way of Christ. And in this way, for Paul, the divine purpose underlying Moses' law is vindicated and accomplished.²

¹ M. Luther, *On the Freedom of a Christian Man* (1520), *init.*

² The most recent treatment of this and related topics that I have seen at the time of delivering this lecture is E. P. Sanders, "Patterns of Religion in Paul and Rabbinic Judaism: A Holistic Method of Comparison", *HTR*, lxxvi (1973), 455 ff. Two earlier treatments which are specially helpful are T. W. Manson, "Jesus, Paul and the Law", in *Judaism and Christianity*, iii: *Law and Religion*, ed. E. I. J. Rosenthal (London, 1938), pp. 125 ff., and C. F. D. Moule, "Obligation in the Ethic of Paul", in *Christian History and Interpretation: Studies presented to John Knox*, ed. W. R. Farmer, C. F. D. Moule and R. R. Niebuhr (Cambridge, 1967), pp. 389 ff.