St. Paul's Conception of Law

I. THE LAW AND THE CHRISTIAN

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In recent years the question of law has been a matter of especial concern to Christians, particularly to Christians on the continent. Of all the New Testament writers, St. Paul is the one for whom the theme of law is of the most acute significance. The purpose of this study therefore, is to review the comparatively well-trodden ground of St. Paul's conception of law, with a view to discovering what teaching his writings provide about the rightful operation of law in the lives of Christians to-day and in modern society at large.

This first article is concerned to assess the place of law in the life of the Christian, and I take as my starting point for this part of our enquiry the apparently simple words of Rom. x. 4, " For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth ". If those words τέλος γὰρ νόμου Χριστός could be taken simply at their face value this article might have been much shorter; but both terms of the phrase do in fact need careful consideration. It is possible to understand τέλος in the sense of " fulfilment " or in the sense of " termination ". There are two factors which make the first rendering attractive. In the first place we are at once reminded of Christ's words in St. Matt. v. 17, " I am not come to destroy the law, but to fulfil ". But the word used in St. Matthew is not τέλεσαι or even τελειῶσαι but πληρῶσαι; and when St. Paul does clearly wish to speak of the fulfilment of the law in our analogous sense, he uses the word πλήρωμα, as in Rom. xiii. 10, πλήρωμα οὖν νόμου ἡ ἀγάπη. Then, secondly, the basic meaning of the word τέλος in classical usage is fulfilment rather than cessation; but in the New Testament its meaning is nearer to the idea of termination, though normally a termination which is the natural outworking of the thing coming to an end, rather than a termination arbitrarily imposed upon it from outside. The only other use of the word in the same epistle (apart from its use in ch. xiii. 7, to mean " tribute ") is in ch. 6, when the τέλος of a life of sin is said to be death, and the τέλος of a life of service to God is said to be eternal life. Death and eternal life are the end terms of such lives, but they are also the natural outcome of them. This should warn us not to draw too rigid a distinction between the two senses of " fulfilment " and " termination". " Christ is the end of the law" should be understood to mean primarily that Christ brings the law to a close, but with the implication that that close is one which in some sense at least comes out of the nature of the law itself. Christ is the end of the law, as the butterfly is the end of the chrysalis.

But in what sense of νόμος is this to be understood? Here the context is of help. "Brethren my heart's desire and prayer for Israel is that they may be saved. I bear them witness that they have a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened. For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness, to every one that believeth" (Rom. x. 1-4). The issue at stake is clearly the way of salvation, the way by which men are to be established as righteous before God. In fact the words εἰς δικαιοσύνην are probably best understood as a purposive use of εἰς, limiting the range of the concept νόμος.[1] "Christ is the end of the law in so far as its use as a means of obtaining righteousness is concerned." It is, therefore, at least primarily in the sense of the Mosaic law, interpreted legalistically as the basis of men's relationship with God that St. Paul is here using the word νόμος. Whether he is thinking also in wider terms, we shall have to consider in a moment. But this at least would seem to be the basic notion that he is concerned to express.

Τέλος γὰρ νόμου Χριστὸς εἰς δικαιοσύνην παντὶ τῷ πιστεύοντι might then be paraphrased as follows. "Christ marks the termination of the law as the basis of a man's justification before God, with the possible additional implication that He is at the same time the consummation of the law in some wider sense of the word." But before we try to define this positive aspect of fulfilment more carefully, there is more to be said as to St. Paul's conception of the part played by the law in the divine economy of man's salvation. It is common knowledge that St. Paul's attitude to the law, even in this respect, is not entirely negative. The law considered objectively is holy, and the commandment holy, righteous and good (Rom. vii. 12). It is in its effect upon men that it has such a dire effect. In the first place, it brings to men a consciousness of sin (Rom. iii. 20). But more than that it actually increases the sinfulness of man, and that in two ways; wrong-doing can in the full sense of the word be regarded as sin only when it is known to be disobedience against God—thus the law serves to transform wrong-doing into sin in the fullest sense of the word (Rom. v. 13); and also the mere existence of a prohibition tends to foster a desire in the human soul for the thing forbidden, as St. Paul illustrates from the commandment against covetousness (Rom. vii. 7). But these apparently unfortunate results of the law play a purposive role in the economy of God. They are the drawing out of the festering sore into the open, where the poison can the more effectively be dealt with. It is this second role, of actually dealing with the poison, which St. Paul continually insists the law was entirely unable to achieve.

If there had been a law given, he says, which could make alive, then certainly righteousness would have been by the law (Gal. iii. 21), but in fact this making alive was the one thing the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, and therefore God had done it through the sending of Christ (Rom. viii. 3). The attribution of the

[1] cf. C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek*, p. 70.

law's failure at this point to its being weak through the flesh, is a way of saying that it is not due to the law's being inherently evil, but simply to its being inadequately equipped to control and rectify frail human nature. In so far as the Jew looked to the law for the fulfilment of this basic need, he was looking to it for something which it was neither able nor intended to provide. It was not able to provide it, because the only conceivable condition on which it could have done so would be the impossible condition of complete obedience to the totality of its commands. But, at a deeper level, it was not even intended to fulfil this role; even if, *per impossibile*, perfect obedience were to have been achieved, then a man would have succeeded in establishing his own righteousness, which would contradict the fundamental purpose of God that man's life should depend entirely upon the one-sided promise, upon the pure grace of God.

This then, at the least, is the meaning of St. Paul, when he says τέλος γὰρ νόμου Χριστός. The law is no longer to be conceived as the basis for a man's justification before God. But is this the whole meaning of the words? Does the phrase εἰς δικαιοσύνην limit the meaning entirely to a salvation context or do the words admit also of a wider meaning? There are three wider senses in which the words might be understood, and we must consider whether these wider senses are also true to the mind of St. Paul.

The first meaning is this. When St. Paul says, "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" does he mean that the Old Testament law is finished with for the Christian, not merely as the basis of his justification before God, but absolutely? This seems to have been how he was interpreted by Marcion, but it is so clearly false, that not much time need be spent in its refutation. As evidence that such is not the meaning of St. Paul, it will suffice to make two points. First, in the very passage in which the phrase "Christ is the end of the law" occurs, St. Paul goes on in Rom. x. 6ff. to describe the "righteousness which is of faith" and draws his description of it from one of the law books of the Old Testament—to wit the thirtieth chapter of Deuteronomy. If he did not regard the law books as still having some validity for Christians, this would be a strange procedure to say the least. Secondly, such an extreme interpretation of St. Paul's attitude to the law can give no satisfactory account of St. Paul's meaning when he affirms that his teaching does not destroy, but establishes the law (Rom. iii. 31).

The second possible meaning of the words is this. When St. Paul says, "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one who believes," does he mean that the Old Testament law is finished with for the Christian, not merely as the basis of his justification before God, but altogether as law, in the sense of a series of specific binding statutes? This is a far more reasonable interpretation of St. Paul, and must be considered with some care. In seeking to answer it, we need to consider both St. Paul's teaching and his own practice. It is clear that he did not require observance of the law on the part of Gentile Christians; but it is maintained by Wilfrid Knox, and following

him by W. D. Davies, that he did expect Jewish converts to do so, and that he himself continued throughout his life to practise Judaism, and to keep the law (even at great inconvenience to himself) with all the rigour of a Pharisee. 1 Cor. vii. 18 (" Is anyone called being circumcised, let him not become uncircumcised ") is interpreted as teaching obedience to the law to be a duty for the Christian Jew ; but the words are surely more naturally understood to mean that the Christian Jew ought not to make a dramatic repudiation of his Jewish origins, such as to remove the physical marks of circumcision. (The use of the term μὴ ἐπισπάσθω would clearly seem to imply this.) 1 Cor. ix. 20, 21 (" To the Jews, I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews : to those under the law, I became as one under the law, though not being myself under the law—that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law, I became as one outside the law—not being without law to God, but under the law of Christ—that I might win those under the law "), with its clear implication that St. Paul did not regard himself as bound by the law in his dealings with Gentiles has to be played down as due to " the rhetorical tone of the passage ". " St. Paul," says Wilfrid Knox " could not both behave as a Jew when dealing with Jews and as free from the law when dealing with Gentiles, since apart from the moral dishonesty of pretending to observe the law when in Jewish society and neglecting it in Gentile society, it would be impossible for him to conceal from Jews, whom he hoped to convert, the fact that he disregarded the law when not in Jewish company. Obviously no Jew would be in the smallest degree influenced by the fact that he observed the law when it suited his purpose to do so ; obedience to the law was a life-long matter ".[1] None the less this seems to be the clear meaning of the words, whether the passage be rhetorical or not, and it seems also to conform to what we know from elsewhere of St. Paul's practice. Thus Paul's rebuke to Peter in Gal. ii. 14 (" If you, though a Jew live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews ? ") must surely mean " Until recently you and I have been eating with Gentile Christians, despite the fact that this involves a breach of normal Jewish practice," and cannot possibly involve (as Knox has to understand it[2]) Paul the Pharisee's scorn for the non-Pharisaic Peter's less exact observance of the law, which he can describe as being no better than living as a Gentile. Yet Knox is no doubt right in asserting that this attitude of expediency on the part of St. Paul would not cut much ice with Jews ; that they were thoroughly hostile to him in spite of it is evident enough.

It has further been argued that St. Paul as a Pharisee would not expect the Torah to be abrogated by the coming of the Messiah. But in answer to this, three points may be made. In the first place, our knowledge of contemporary Rabbinic expectation on this point is far from certain. Secondly Jesus was not the kind of Messiah that St. Paul as a Pharisee had expected, and it was the kind of Messiah that Jesus was that determined St. Paul's attitude to the law rather than

[1] *St. Paul and the Church of Jerusalem*, p. 122.
[2] op. cit., p. 192.

any pre-conversion expectations on the matter. Thirdly St. Paul deliberately repudiates the far more firmly established belief in the pre-existence of the Torah ; there is therefore no difficulty in believing that he could have abandoned any preconceived expectations about its continuation in the Messianic age.

It seems clear then that St. Paul did not regard the law as binding upon Christians. Traditional Christianity, in seeking to give expression to the authority of the Old Testament law for the Christian, normally draws at this point a distinction between moral and ceremonial law. Thus Article VII reads, " Although the law given from God by Moses, as touching ceremonies and rites, do not bind Christian men, nor the civil precepts thereof ought of necessity to be received in any commonwealth ; yet notwithstanding, no Christian man whatsoever is free from the obedience of the Commandments, which are called Moral ". This kind of distinction, in fact, has been basic to almost all Christian interpretation of this question right down the ages. Yet I do not believe that there can be found any trace of such a distinction in the mind or the writings of St. Paul. As Kirsopp Lake says categorically, " Paul knew nothing of any distinction between moral and ceremonial law",[1] or in the words of G. F. Moore, " For Paul the dispensation of law had come to an end—the moral law as statutory law no less than the ceremonial ".[2] Nor does it appear that such a distinction was common to contemporary Judaism, and thereby rendered a priori likely to be found in St. Paul. It is the whole law which is abrogated for the Christian as statutory law, and the whole law which is in some other way established by Christ, the whole law which finds its fulfilment in ἀγάπη. The real distinction for St. Paul is not between moral and ceremonial law, but between law as statutory law and law as guiding principle. The Old Testament law is no longer *law* for the Christian, but it is still a part of the divine revelation, a part of the oracles of God. St. Paul never denies the divine authorship of the law, though he does seem to avoid deliberately any emphasis upon the fact. It is God who Himself gives the inheritance to Abraham by promise ; the law is ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator (Gal. iii. 18, 19). When we remember how the mediation of angels, and such semi-divine beings, was used in the Gnostic cosmologies to account for the existence of evil in a world, which must ultimately be said to emanate from God, it seems difficult to escape the conclusion that St. Paul's reference to the mediation of angels in Galatians is intended to make the divine authorship of the law as remote as possible, without actually denying it. Thus those who have later emphasized the writing of the Ten Commandments by the finger of God as evidence of the especial closeness of at least that part of the law to the perfect divine will are indulging in an argument which is the exact opposite of that employed by St. Paul. To say, as Bishop Gore said, that " from the first it was recognized, as indeed St. Paul . . . requires it to be recognized, that the Christian moral law is built upon the 10 words "[3] is just not true,

[1] *Beginnings of Christianity*, Vol. V, p. 217.
[2] *Judaism*, Vol. II, p. 10.
[3] *Dominant Ideas and Corrective Principles*, p. 120.

at least, as a statement about St. Paul. For St. Paul, the Christian cannot simply dismiss any of the Old Testament law, but nor can he regard any of it as precise statutory law. To sum up with some excellent words of Emil Brunner, "The moral and religious law is blended in one indissoluble unity with the liturgical law of priest, temple and purification on the one hand, and with the law of the State on the other . . . Hence we must always seek, behind the individual laws, injunctions and institutions, the principle underlying them, the divine imperative which is binding on us to-day; we can at no point take them over as the letter of the law".[1]

The third possible extension of the meaning of the words "Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one who believes" is to suggest that the reference here is not exclusively to the Old Testament law, but that in the sense in which the law is abrogated by Christ, it is not simply the law of Moses, but the principle of law altogether. τέλος γὰρ νόμου Χριστός. It is tempting to say (with Origen and many others after him) that the absence of the article points to the generality of the statement. But the presence or absence of the article is a most uncertain guide, by which to seek to determine the exact meaning of the word νόμος (cf. the similar inconclusiveness about the use or non-use of the article with πνεῦμα or πνεῦμα ἅγιον). None the less what St. Paul is concerned to assert of the Old Testament law in particular is true of the Old Testament law, because it is true of the character of law in general. The inadequacies of the Old Testament law were due not to its being the wrong kind of law, but to the fact of its being law at all, to the fact of its being law and not grace, law and not promise, γράμμα and not πνεῦμα. "By law is the knowledge of sin" (Rom. iii. 20). "Law entered that sin might abound" (Rom. v. 20). "By works of law shall no flesh be justified before God" (Rom. iii. 20)—all these are statements in the first place about the law of Moses (although there is no article in any of the examples given), but they also imply assertions, which are true of law in general, of law as a principle. If therefore we ask of any particular statement of St. Paul, whether it refers to the Old Testament law or to law in general, we are asking the wrong kind of question. St. Paul by the very fact of his particular historical situation is concerned largely with the law of Moses, but it is legitimate to find in his immediate criticisms of the law of Moses, criticisms of a general kind which ought to be borne in mind in considering law in any context whatever. Thus we cannot be absolutely sure whether τέλος νόμου Χριστός *means* (in the simplest sense of the word "means") Christ is the end of the law of Moses or Christ is the end of law as a principle. The context seems fairly strongly to favour the former, yet the latter is implicit in the assertion of the former, and in a wider sense of the word "meaning", may be said to be a part of the meaning of the words.

[1] *Justice and the Social Order*, pp. 110, 112, 113.

If then it is true to say that St. Paul's opposition to the law of Moses is not due to its being " of Moses ", but rather to its being " law " at all, it is the more surprising to find him speaking of himself as ἔννομος Χριστοῦ (1 Cor. ix. 21), and calling on Christians to fulfil τὸν νόμον τοῦ Χριστοῦ (Gal. vi. 2). In what sense of the word " law " does Paul conceive that there is a " law of Christ "? Three interpretations ought to be considered.

In the first place it might be suggested that the words are deliberately paradoxical. This interpretation gains a certain plausibility if it is true that St. Paul does treat legal concepts in this way, and it seems pretty clear that he does. When he declares that in Christ God " justifies the ungodly ", he is not saying that in Christ a legal answer has been found to an apparent legal impasse, but rather that God has done something in Christ, which so transcends the bounds of legalism, that if you try and express it in legal terminology at all, you can only do so by means of a paradox. Does the same kind of thought underlie the passage (for there is only the one) which speaks explicitly of the law of Christ? " Brethren if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Look to yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ " (Gal. vi. 1, 2). It is true that this passage follows the discussion of spirit and law in Galatians v, with its emphatic, " If you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law," and this might give some antecedent expectation that any immediately ensuing reference to " the law of Christ " is likely to be some kind of deliberate paradox. But the actual reference to the law of Christ is so incidental, so subsidiary to its immediate context, that to understand it in *such* a context as a deliberate, pregnant paradox seems impossibly harsh.

The second interpretation asserts that ὁ νόμος τοῦ Χριστοῦ must be understood in the widest sense of the word νόμος, in which it might freey be translated the way of Christ, the principles of Christ or even thle spirit of Christ. This interpretation may point to the fact that only a little earlier in Galatians v, St. Paul has spoken of the whole law as being fulfilled in this one word, " Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself ". Love is at the same time the fulfilment of the law, the first fruit of the spirit, and the heart of the message of Jesus; it is not therefore difficult to understand this overruling concept of love being described as ὁ νόμος τοῦ Χριστοῦ.

The third interpretation, to which Professor Dodd has recently transferred his allegiance, takes the words in the most obvious sense of the word νόμος, as implying a law of Christ in some real sense analogous to the Torah. As there had been a law of Moses, so now there is a new law, a law of Christ. It is commonly agreed that something of this kind is implied by the whole structure of St. Matthew's gospel, and this interpretation claims that the same sort of thing is implied by " the law of Christ ", as it is here used by St. Paul. The teaching of Jesus is the new law for Christians. Professor Dodd concludes his discussion of this line of interpretation by saying " It appears therefore that to fulfil the law of Christ means a good deal more than simply to act in a Christian spirit (as we say). It connotes

the intention to carry out, in a different setting and in altered circumstances it is true, the precepts which Jesus Christ was believed to have given to his disciples, and which they handed down in the Church ".[1] This may well be so. We use the phrase " in a Christian spirit " in a notoriously lax fashion. If the law of Christ is dissolved into the Quaker concept of the inner light or the supremacy of conscience (as it is by some writers), the whole idea has been dangerously emasculated and some kind of protest is needed. You certainly could not fulfil the law of Christ without taking the known words of the historic Jesus as authoritative guidance. But this does not really justify speaking of the law of Christ as at all closely analogous to the Torah. The judgment of Dr. Alec Vidler is to be preferred, when he says, " The new law of Christ is not only new, it is also law in a different sense from the old law ".[2] The term is surely here being used in " a somewhat more enlarged sense ".[3] There are definite lines of guidance for Christian living, which for Paul were given partly by the words of Jesus, but much more by the action of Jesus in His incarnation and crucifixion ; but there is a *law* of Christ only in the sense that there is an authoritative pattern, which shows the quality and direction of the actions required of us and which is entirely binding upon Christians, and not in the sense that it consists of specific statutes ordering the performance of specific concrete actions.

In our attempt to understand the significance of God's law as revealed in the Old Testament for the life of the Christian, we have been thinking primarily in terms of the individual ; but what is true of the Christian individual, is true of the Christian society as a whole. The division between personal and social ethics is not a radical division, because to speak either of personal ethics outside a social context or of social ethics without a personal application is to deal in unreal abstractions. None the less it is worth underlining the fact that what we have seen to be true of the individual is true also of the wider Christian community. Just as the relation of the individual to God is not based upon law at all, so equally the existence of the Christian society is not constituted by law ; it too derives its existence from the redemptive acts of God. Further, as the individual's life is not in the ultimate analysis ruled by law as such (unless it be in the most enlarged sense of that word), no more is that of the church. This does not, of course, mean that nothing bearing any resemblance to a law is relevant to the church's life. The Old Testament law is still relevant, though St. Paul's use of it is somewhat surprising. In 1 Corinthians, where St. Paul is concerned to deal with practical problems in the life of of the Church particularly of a moral kind, his only citation of a specific injunction of the law is the command not to muzzle the ox when treading out the corn, which is cited as evidence of the Christian

[1] *Ennomos Christou* in Studia Paulina, p. 109.
[2] *Christ's Strange Work*, p. 62.
[3] cf. Hooker : *Eccles. Polity I, iii, I* : " They who are thus accustomed to speak apply the name of Law unto that only rule of working which superior authority imposeth ; whereas we, somewhat more enlarging the sense thereof, term any kind of rule or canon, whereby actions are framed, a law."

labourer's right to receive material assistance from those among whom he works (1 Cor. ix. 9). When he has to deal with the problem of πορνεία he makes no appeal to the Seventh Commandment. He starts his discussion of the issue with the words, " All things are lawful to me " (1 Cor. v. 12). It is probable that this is a catchword of his opponents rather than his own deliberate coining. None the less it remains true that he does not dispute their premise, and goes on to condemn unchastity, not on the ground that it breaks God's law, or any other law, but on the ground that it destroys that fellowship with Christ, which is the essence of Christian discipleship. Thus, while it would be false to say that the Old Testament law is of no concern to the Christian community, it is far less used by St. Paul in determining matters of morals than might antecedently have been expected. Where the matter is taken to first principles (as with St. Paul it normally is) the issue is determined by what is congruous with the fundamental character of Christian experience, as revealed in the whole life, teaching and redemptive acts of Christ. The Old Testament law may be employed as subsidiary guidance; but it is not the only kind of subsidiary authority to which St. Paul refers. There is also the specific word of the Lord (as in the matter of divorce : 1 Cor. vii. 10), or " the custom of the churches " and even " nature herself " (as in the matter of the veiling of women : 1 Cor. xi. 14-16). These, however, are not laws in an absolute sense, but accepted standards of reference in determining practical issues in the church's life.

Our study so far has been concerned with the giving of God's law within the Biblical revelation, and with its application to the Christian individual and to the new Israel, the end products as it were of that special revelation. We have seen that no element of the revealed law is to be ignored, but equally that no element of it is capable of immediate and direct application as statutory law. Before we are in a position to summarize the significance of this conception of law for us to-day, we need to consider what St. Paul has to say about the giving and the operation of law outside the narrower range of the specific Judaeo-Christian revelation. To that topic the second half of this study* will be devoted.

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