

Freedom and the Law: Christian Values

Introduction

Many Christians today are very confused as to where they stand, or where they think they should stand, in regard to pressing moral and ethical issues. They know that the Christian church has traditionally taught that, as a general rule, abortion, euthanasia, suicide, homosexual intercourse, human cloning, and stem cell therapy — to name but a handful of contentious issues — are contrary to the basic teachings of Scripture and therefore are wrong. However, there are growing numbers in the churches today who are challenging the traditional teaching of the church by reading Scripture in new ways under the influence of postmodern hermeneutics and critical theory.

Postmodernism's sustained attack on modernity has brought about the death of foundationalism, the death of the meta-narrative, and the death of certain and reliable knowledge. This is an attack that is shaking the church at its foundations because postmodernity rejects the normativity and objectivity of the church's moral teaching and its ethical tradition. It says that it is impossible to judge between competing truth claims and behaviour patterns because all our values are determined by specific contexts, communities, and traditions. There are no universal values that are objectively true for all people, for all places, and for all times. This naturally leads to moral relativism.

The church today is losing its moral authority and people are simply making up their own minds on moral and ethical issues. Given postmodernism's ability to embrace diversity and difference, it's not uncommon for some people to be conservative in some issues and liberal in others. The church has always lived with the tension of truth and love and has attempted to follow the biblical practice of speaking the truth in love. Today, however, the whole idea of truth is under attack.

Postmodernism declares that there is no such thing as absolute truth but only various truths or various perspectives on the truth which depend on your community and your context. Therefore, full-blooded postmodernists say that there can never be any universal truth only local truth, where something is true for a particular community or linguistic tradition. Hence, the tendency for people to say: that may be true for you but it's not true for me. This worldview is promoting a new form of individualism, and at the same time it is a major factor in denying the church a voice in the public square and relegating it to the realm of private opinion.

How do we chart our course in this sea of moral diversity and ethical confusion? All Christians supposedly use God's word as their compass and yet many end up with opposing positions. How do we explain this? My aim in this paper is not to enter into a discussion of hermeneutics or to do a detailed study of particular biblical passages. Rather, I want to lift up the main emphases in Luther's theology of the law which he develops in his Lectures on Genesis and his Lectures on Galatians (1531/1535). My purpose is to show that for Luther there is no disjunction, no opposition between the freedom of the gospel and God's law (or commandment) in the Christian life.

Summary of the argument

Anyone familiar with present-day theological debate will realise that I have in my sights modern Protestant antinomianism which holds that the law's main task is to prepare us for the gospel and that the gospel in turn spells the end of the law. Antinomianism is the false belief that the law has no validity for Christians since we are guided by the gospel and the Spirit. While not denying that, I want to argue that it is not the law's only task to prepare us for faith by exposing our sin and accusing us. In fact, it is not even the law's main task (contrary to the dominant teaching of the

Lutheran tradition). True, the law always accuses us because we are not only saints (ie holy) but also sinners. The law continues to remind us that we are sinners so that we don't become big-headed and think that our good deeds merit favour before God. But the law also has a positive role to play. It outlines the shape of the Christian life; it describes the path of faith, the road of freedom, which the Spirit empowers us to walk through faith in the gospel.

In brief, my argument is that Christian freedom – the freedom of the gospel – and God's law are normally inseparable and that together they form the twofold centre of Christian ethics. However, I must add a qualification. In the pastoral care of people whose conscience has been alarmed by the law, freedom and the law, like faith and works, must be carefully distinguished for the sake of the gospel. I will come back to this distinction later. But I want to begin by talking about the unity of freedom and the law.

The problem of Protestant ethics

For Lutherans, freedom is one of the great hallmarks of Christian ethics. In response to the gospel, Christians act freely and spontaneously in love, for love is the fulfilling of the law — and faith is active in love (Gal 5:6). Furthermore, love does not need to be told what to do — it already knows what to do through the indwelling of Christ and the illumination of the Spirit. And yet even though we know what we should do, we so often fail to do it.

In the thinking of many modern Protestants, freedom and the law do not make good bed-fellows! Hence, they see a problem with speaking about the unity of freedom and the law. They see the demands of God's law (such as the Ten Commandments, the Sermon on the Mount, and double command to love God and neighbour) as being an alien intrusion that threatens the freedom of the conscience. For the conscience has been set free from the law by Christ, set free from any form of external compulsion. The only 'law' that this brand of Protestantism will acknowledge is the law internal to the autonomous self, the law of the Spirit or the internal guidance of the Spirit. It refuses to acknowledge any other form of law, and therefore it rejects the moral teaching of the Scriptures as normative for the Christian life. It rejects it because it claims that the conscience has been set free from the burden of all external authority and is now directed entirely by Christ through the Spirit.

There seems to be confusion over what exactly we have been freed from. When Paul says in Galatians 5:1: 'For freedom Christ has set us free, do not submit again to a yoke of slavery', he is not suggesting that Christians should not submit to God's law. Rather, he is saying, do not use the law as a way of earning salvation, for God never intended it to be used that way — and if you do use it that way, it will only imprison you because you will never fulfil its demands. Paul is saying here, Christ has set us free — free of the need to try to keep the law to win God's favour and approval. He has freed us from the pressure of having to perform or to reach a certain standard before God will accept us. Christ has freed us *from* all of that — *to* serve the neighbour in love. Notice the logic: we are not just freed, full stop. We are freed from obeying the law out of fear, as if our life depended on it, so that we can now obey it freely as God's children in the service of the neighbour.

Notice what Paul says. Christ has freed us from slavery to the law, which means freed us from the judgment and condemnation of the law that comes about because we can't obey it. Christ frees us from the condemnation of the law (Rom 8:1), but he does not free us from the law as such. That's a point that is often overlooked.

Christian freedom is being back in paradise

Let's come back to the basic argument that Christian freedom and God's law are normally inseparable and that together they form the twofold centre of Christian ethics. The truth of this is borne out by Luther's comments on the way that Adam understood the law back in paradise. Now remember that he is righteous and without sin before the fall. Luther says he is intoxicated with joy towards God. Yet God gives him a command, telling him that he may eat from any tree in the garden except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. According to Luther, God's commandments are nothing else than the concrete guidance, the concrete social practices which allow us as believers to embody in concrete way our communion with God and the other creatures of his creation.

Luther says that Christians are also back in paradise through faith. Insofar as they are saints or true believers they are righteous, just like Adam before the fall; and just as God gave righteous Adam the command, so too he gives us — who are righteous by faith — his commandments. And that is precisely why for Luther the freedom of a Christian never contradicts God's commandments and never comes without them, but rather rejoices in them and welcomes them as ways of embodying our love of God and of neighbour.

After the fall: the law brings wrath

The situation with law all changes once sin comes into the picture. In Adam's case, the law ceased to be a delightful gift in which he rejoiced and became an external code that demanded an obedience that he could not fulfil and as a result brought on him God's wrath and judgment. And that's the experience of all human beings after the fall. Paul sums it up in one short sentence: The law brings wrath (Rom 4:15). Sin seriously distorts God's law. The law is now experienced as something alien, as something 'other' because we ourselves have become 'other' than we were created to be. But the good news of the gospel is that God's grace received in faith rectifies this distortion by restoring believers to what Adam was before the fall, making them 'drunk with joy towards God' (Reinhard Hütter, 'God's Law in *Veritatis Splendor*', *Ecumenical Ventures in Ethics*, ed Reinhard Hütter and Theodor Dieter, 1998, p109).

The struggle: knowing but not doing

So there are two sides to the law because there are two sides to the Christian as saint and sinner. On the one hand, insofar as we are saints, we experience God's law in our inner self as something delightful that we rejoice in doing, but on the other hand, insofar as we are still sinners, we also experience that same law as a burden which brings God's wrath and judgment. And we will often experience both of these feelings at the same time.

Furthermore, since we remain sinners, we remain radically divided within ourselves. We know what is right and pleasing to God from his word, yet we are incapable of doing it. This is Paul's experience also. He says in Romans 7 that he knows what he should do but is unable to do it: the good he wants to do he doesn't do, and the evil that he doesn't want to do is the very thing he ends up doing. And just when it seems he has reached the point of despair, Paul bursts out in a joyous note of praise: thanks be to God who has given us the victory through our Lord, Jesus Christ. Notice that Paul does not say that he has won the victory over sin, but he thanks God for having won the victory for him. God's victory becomes our victory through faith, even though we do not yet experience it in our own life.

Christ fulfils the law for us

Now there are two things here that we need to highlight. First, we cannot keep God's law ourselves. Some Christians who come out of the holiness tradition may believe that they do not sin, but that is not the teaching of scripture. The Bible clearly says

that we sin daily and that we cannot perfectly keep God's law. Even if our outward actions are in conformity to God's law, our motives are impure because we are full of hatred, pride, greed, jealousy, selfishness, lust, and the list goes on. Christ is the only one who has kept God the Father's law perfectly without sin. Because he kept it for us and in our place, we get the benefit of it; the Father credits Christ's perfect fulfilment of the law to us through faith (Gen 15:6; Rom 4:1-12).

The second thing we need to highlight is that Christ now invites us to enter into his fulfilment. We still have a duty to keep God's law but we no longer bear the brunt of failure. God wants us to try to keep it to be the best of our ability and with his help, but our failures and impure motives are no longer held against us in Christ, for he has fulfilled it for us and now his fulfilment becomes ours through faith. That's why Jesus says to us: Come to me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls; for my yoke is easy and my burden is light (Matt 11:28-30). Jesus is saying that keeping God's law no longer needs to be a burden. It will only become a burden if we try to keep it apart from faith.

God's law — our duty and delight

Keeping God's law is not only our duty; it is also our delight. As Christians we want to keep the commandments, we know it's the right thing to do, and the Spirit working through the gospel motivates and empowers us to keep them. However, without the power of the Spirit, we would not even get to first base — the Spirit helps us to keep our sinful desires under control and to make the love of God and the service of the neighbour our great desire. We don't have to worry about our sinful motives, desires, and thoughts. All these things are pardoned by God's mercy on account of Christ. We no longer have to live a lie and pretend that we are not sinners; the gospel allows us to freely confess it and to receive again his forgiveness. Being a Christian doesn't mean living a sin-free life; it means living a forgiven life, a life free of the power of sin, because our life is now under new management, and sin is no longer our master.

But Christians will always struggle to do what God commands because we have to always fight the old sinful nature which is always pulling us in the opposite direction to that in which God wants us to go. Christians that come out of the holiness tradition tend to downplay sin and prefer to talk about their victory over sin and their victorious life. Lutherans and Reformed, on the other hand, are far more realistic and identify with St Paul who says that no matter what he does, he finds himself doing the very evil he wanted to avoid. Paul's advice is: don't put confidence in yourself or in your victory over sin, but in Christ who has won the victory for you and who shares his victory with you in faith. The real triumphal life celebrates not our triumphs but Christ's.

Christ for us and Christ in us

Luther stresses not only that Christ lives in us by faith and empowers us to live the new victorious life; he also stresses that Christ died and rose again for our sins, that he now intercedes for us before the Father, and that because he is for us nothing can be against us. *Christ for us* is the great theme of the gospel and the foundation of Christian ethics. Because Christ has kept the law for us, we do not have to answer for our failures and disobedience — provided of course that we acknowledge our sins and in faith ask Christ to forgive us.

We said before that the Christian life will always be a struggle. But what about the situation where a Christian knowingly and deliberately commits a grave sin? Is that person covered by God's forgiveness? Let's put the question in the language of Roman Catholic moral theology. Is there such a thing as an intrinsically evil act, and

does committing such an act mean that a person has turned their back on God? Does committing such an act put that person outside of God's grace? Here the theological traditions of the church divide.

What about grave sins?

Paul John Paul II, in his 1993 Encyclical 'The Beauty of Holiness' (*Veritatis Splendor*) says that human beings do not lose their salvation only by a fundamental choice against God. On the contrary, he says, we reject God with every deliberate and knowing choice of a grave evil. For the Catholic church, such intrinsically evil acts will include murder, adultery, suicide, and homosexual intercourse. Protestants, including Lutherans, will take a different view. We will begin with the biblical principle that Christians are simultaneously saints and sinners. If that is the case, we could never say categorically that a Christian who knowingly and deliberately chooses evil is not struggling against evil. In a moment of grave sin, there is likely to be an extraordinary conflict in a person's heart. And I believe that the struggle is a mark of faith; it shows that a person is still holding onto to God and his promises — indeed, is letting God hold on to him or her. But if there is no struggle in a person's heart against good and evil, if there is no acknowledgment that what God prohibits is evil, then that person may well have placed themselves outside of God's grace and forgiveness. But only God can judge that.

Besides all that, there is no such thing as an unforgivable sin. Even if a person does commit a grave sin without a struggle, and without faith, even if they turn their back on God and lose the Holy Spirit, the door of the Father's house is always open, and that person may still return home and receive the Father's welcome. The way back of course is always via repentance and faith, confessing one's sins and hearing those gracious words of pardon: your sins are forgiven.

The fact that we are always saints and sinners at the same time means that there will never be a perfect correspondence between person and works this side of heaven. To put it simply, this means that although faith produces—and ought to produce—good works (Augsburg Confession, VI; Gal 5:6), we cannot turn this round and argue that the absence of good works means an absence of faith. Again, James says faith without works is dead (James 2:17), but we cannot conclude with certainty that the absence of works in the baptised means that faith is dead.

It is precisely in situations such as these, where people deliberately risk sinning against conscience that the application of law and gospel are needed in pastoral care: the law for those who are smug and indifferent to God's commandment, and the gospel for those whose conscience is troubled.

It is therefore incumbent on us to construct a Christian ethic that makes it possible to always speak words of law as well as words of gospel, as the situation demands, to instruct and comfort the conscience of those for whom we are pastorally responsible. I agree with Gilbert Meilaender ('Grace, Justification through Faith, and Sin', in *Ecumenical Ventures in Ethics*, ed Reinhard Hütter and Theodor Dieter, 1998, p 80) that we 'cannot state — as a general rule, in advance of the care of any particular individual — that an objectively wrong deed, even a gravely wrong deed, cannot coexist with saving faith'.

Meilaender points to the story of the healing of Naaman by the prophet Elisha (2 Kings 5:17-19) as an illustration of how we must allow God's grace to cover the ambiguities of the Christian moral life. Naaman, the commander of the army of the king of Syria, who has been healed by the God of Israel, the only true God, knows that he should not accompany his master when he goes into the house of Rimmon to

worship, and prays in advance that God would pardon his sin. He does not have the fortitude to be a martyr, at least not yet, and perhaps he never will. He simply asks for forgiveness. I will let Meilaender have the last word: 'He stands therefore as an instance of the truth that, short of that eschatological perfection to which we are indeed called, judgment of the deed and judgment of the person cannot perfectly coincide. He reminds us that, even as we should not construct a theological ethic that is unable to call his deed wrong, so also we should not construct a theological ethic that makes it impossible for us to say with Elisha: "Go in peace"' (*Ecumenical Ventures*, 82).

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