

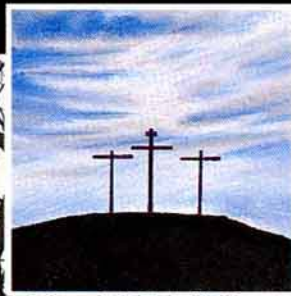
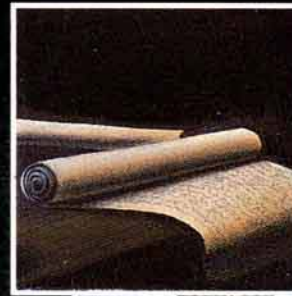
*Sweeter than Honey,
More Precious than Gold*

- Why is it that some are almost delirious with delight over God's law?
- Why is it that some have a deep dislike for God's law, thinking it outmoded?
- Out of 10, how many people would think that God's grace has superseded His law?
- Is there any difference between God and His law? Since the law is the very way of God, how can it not also be the way of Man?
- Why is God's law called 'the royal law' and 'the law of liberty'?

These and many more such questions are answered by an author who not only knows his subject, but also has helped many come to freedom of life out of the bondage of guilt. This same writer sees beauty and joy in God's law. He sees no tyranny whatever. A new kind of book about a lovely way of life.



New Creation Publications Inc.



*Sweeter than Honey,
More Precious than Gold*
Geoffrey C Bingham

*Sweeter than Honey,
More Precious than Gold*

The Law of Love and the Love of Law

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

The Things We Firmly Believe
The Day of the Spirit
For Pastors and the People
The Splendour of Holiness
The Way and Wonder of Worship
The Wisdom of God and the Healing of Man
Great and Glorious Grace
Oh, Father! Our Father!
The Everlasting Presence
Angry Heart or Tranquil Mind?
Ah, Strong, Strong Love!
Where Conies Dwell
The Profound Mystery

Geoffrey C Bingham

New Creation Publications Inc.
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1995

The Artist's Interpretation

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With many forms of art, questions of meaning come to nought; and not only these questions, but also those of compositional significance. Existentialism rules modern art. Significance can be assigned with no reference to subject matter at all; or it can even be assigned to a lack of significance (an obvious absurdity). Alternatively the subject can refer to an experience that confers significance without ever needing or wanting to be interpreted.

I can claim none of these for my picture, as it is simply an illustration. I have taken five elements, the scroll, the cross, honey, gold and the fountain, that represent ideas from both Psalm 19 and broader biblical concepts.

The scrolls of the law, 'the statutes of the Lord' that 'are trustworthy', point towards God and give glory to Him as does all of the creation. This is the same law that is 'sweeter than honey' and 'more precious than gold' and is fulfilled at the Cross, to which we all look as we give glory to God, and at which we are saved from the law and the condemnation that it brings.

What of the fountain? What does this symbolise? The fountain is both an image of 'the fountain of the God-head' and of 'the fountain of life'. I have pictured the fountain as the source of a river (the river being of life and the Father being its source).

There are no other elements in my picture that need explanation. I hope that in some way my small contribution to this work will give glory to God and be a service to you all.

Geoffrey Mitchell

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Foreword

In the way of thy testimonies I delight
 as much as in all riches.
 I will meditate on thy precepts,
 and fix my eyes on thy ways.
 I will delight in thy statutes;
 I will not forget thy word.

My soul is consumed with longing
 for thy ordinances at all times.
 Thy testimonies are my delight,
 they are my counselors.

. . . let me not be put to shame!
 I will run in the way of thy commandments
 when thou enlargest my understanding!
 Teach me, O LORD, the way of thy statutes;
 and I will keep it to the end.

I will keep thy law continually,
 for ever and ever;
 and I shall walk at liberty,
 for I have sought thy precepts.
 I will also speak of thy testimonies before kings,
 and shall not be put to shame;
 for I find my delight in thy commandments,
 which I love.

(Ps. 119:14–16, 20, 24, 31b–33, 44–47)

Who is this man whom we find quite ecstatic about the law of God? He is a psalmist and has written what we call a considered psalm, for it is set out in the Hebrew so that each section commences with consecutive letters of

that alphabet. In one sense he has confined himself to a structured literary work, and it might be thought that such a poem could express little ecstasy. However, some of the most ecstatic poems we know have been written as sonnets, and sonnets have a demanding literary form.

More to the point is the question, ‘Who of us expresses ecstasy over the matter of law, especially of God’s law?’. One of those who did was Jesus. He came not to abolish the law but to confirm and establish it. Indeed he was the very end, or goal, of the law. It was not only about him, but it was also from him and for him, and the final meaning of history lies in his fulfilling its goal. The phrase ‘the law and the prophets’ was often on his lips because he saw these two elements as one entity. He delighted to do this will or law of his Father and wished to pass on that delight to others, to us all!

Psalm 19 has passed on to us a beautiful Song of the Law in the words:

The law of the LORD is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the testimony of the LORD is sure,
making wise the simple;
the precepts of the LORD are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is pure,
enlightening the eyes;
the fear of the LORD is clean,
enduring for ever;
the ordinances of the LORD are true,
and righteous altogether.
More to be desired are they than gold,
even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey
and drippings of the honeycomb.

The Song shows the dynamic nature of the law in what it is, in what it causes to happen and in the almost indescribable pleasure that it gives. All its elements are ‘more to be desired than gold, even much fine gold’, and they are ‘sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb’. Can this, then, be true of the law of God, for human beings often find it harsh, demanding and even forbidding? In some New Testament passages the same law is set before us as a dark, lethal *lex* which hounds us to death and perdition. Yet again, the New Testament sets out the law as beautiful, the new law of the new heart as though it were delectable, honey indeed to the spirit.

About twelve months ago, because of a certain incident, I was faced with old theological views of the law of God and set about trying to get into the heart and mind of the songsters who wrote Psalms 1, 19 and 119—to say nothing of the others who professed to find delight in the law. I think I could always have said, with St Paul, ‘I delight in the law of God in the inmost part of my person’, but I was not prepared for what came out of my reading, meditation, experience and application of the law. In all this I also discovered the multitude of law-lovers who have walked, or walk, this way of the Triune God. It set me about writing a book of some size and substance. I knew, that even when published, it would get into comparatively few hands and that thought concerned me so much that I decided to write a smaller volume in which the essence of the larger work could be read easily. It had to be a work with an absolute minimum of references, documentation and footnotes. I hope I have succeeded in this. I trust the present book may find its way into the hands of people who are puzzled by the

law, who dread it and are repelled by it, but who are prepared to be shown the glory of it which is found on the other side of God's marvellous work of grace, the work of human redemption.

The early church seemed to have a simple faith which was not entangled in argumentation regarding ethics. It had about it an atmosphere of personal freedom, of delight in God's word, and a spontaneity of obedience to the clear injunctions and exhortations which came its way. No wonder, for it had climbed out of the dark abyss sinful human beings find themselves to be in when law is, to them, an oppressive and threatening tyrant. I am sure that the early Christian community knew the sweetness of the law of God; not as a cloying thing, but also as intensely satisfying. If once law had been vinegary to them, now it was otherwise. It was healing, health-giving, life sustaining and life enriching. I hope some of this good honey and its heady mead will reach those who choose to read this present volume.

1

Sweeter than Honey

TASTE AND SEE THAT THE LAW IS GOOD

What is sweeter than honey, sweeter than honeycomb itself? One of the Psalmists asked this question and gave the answer that it was the law of the Lord. God's law to him was the sweetest thing he had tasted and known. Not all would agree with him. Down through the millenniums of our history, millions have wrestled with the matter of law, and some have found it quite distasteful—far from the satisfying sensation of rolling honey over the tongue and sensing it on the palate. The apostle Paul yielded to no one in his dread of the law: he spoke of it as slaying him! Yet the same Paul said he delighted in the law in his inmost being. There is here—as in our human history—some kind of a contradiction, or perhaps a paradox.

One thing is certain: every human being lives by law each moment of every day, whether he or she is conscious of the fact or not. Law is as important as any other ruling factor of our lives. We wonder, then, how it can be called 'sweet', and 'a thing of delight', and yet, at the same time, be something we dislike, resent and even fight against. On the one hand we seem to be rebels in regard to the law, and on the other we look to law for a sensible

way of life, for protection and for justice. So mixed, then, are our ideas.

Generally theologians write for theologians, and I have spent a year in trying to do this sensibly with regard to the subject of law. I have been deeply gripped by the idea of God's law and, of course, by what we might call 'human law'. Whether my fellow theologians will think my theology of law is of value will be known when the book is published and read; and there I must leave the matter. After making my way through the forests, jungles, plains and veldts of human research into the principles of law, it struck me that it is the commonality of society which needs to hear about law. We, who live in urban and rural places and face problems of law and lawlessness every day, need to have some understanding about the law of God and Man.¹ For this reason, I believe, there is a place for the kind of book which would make law intelligible to the mind, and especially to the conscience. Conscience is a powerful factor in human living—as both theology and the social sciences would show.

So then we set out on the endeavour of understanding law—the law of God and Man. I believe it could be one of the most profitable ventures we could undertake. If law is formidable, we need to understand why. If it is 'sweeter than much fine honeycomb', then we need to know how it can be this for us. We also need to solve the seeming contradiction of both these aspects, or sides, of law.

¹ For 'Man' read 'humanity', 'humankind' and 'the man-woman entity'. For 'man', read the male human person; and for 'woman', the female human person. When in conjunction with 'Man' I use the pronoun 'he', it is not meant gender-wise but generically to cover 'humanity', 'humankind' and 'the man-woman entity'.

THE LAW OF GOD

I believe the key to understanding God's law is to see it first as the law of God Himself. By this I mean that God is not a legislator who simply decided what should be the behaviour of Man, and accordingly made a block of laws, but is that Being who, by nature, lives by law Himself. So His law is the law of Himself. This should not be difficult to understand since every one of us lives by his or her own personal law. We might call it 'the law of myself'. I characteristically live in my way. Paul knew that when he said, 'No person knows the things of a person except the spirit of that person'. Sometimes we say with exasperation, 'Oh, that person is a law unto himself!'. What we mean is that there is a general law by which all live, but this particular person rejects the general principle in favour of his or her peculiar way of living.

Whatever the case, I think the point is made. Each lives with the law of himself or herself, and that law is fairly recognisable. So God lives with His own law. From the Christian point of view God is not a monad, that is, a single, individual unit. He is a trinity of persons. He has plurality in His nature and is therefore a social being. He is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Orthodox Christian thinking has always been that the Trinity is not composed of three Gods, but three Persons constituting one God or Godhead.

The question is, 'How do these three Persons live as one?'. The answer is, 'Their law of living together is what we call "the law of God"'. In other words it is their way of life, their living as a unitary whole. We may say the Three are a society. We can even call them a family.

They are wholly one. The way in which they live is what we call their law, the law of God.

WHERE DOES GOD'S LAW COME FROM?

When we think of having a law, we naturally conclude it has been given to us. It has been formed, and we are expected to live by it. This is the case with government legislation. It is even the case with the law of any family. In some sense it is imposed from 'above'. We are 'under' the law. What would be above God that would legislate the way of the Trinity? The answer must be 'Nothing'. That is, the law does not come from some place beyond God, but arises from Him, from His nature, from His plural being.

We speak of human beings 'existing' or 'living', knowing that they are limited and mortal. God does not 'exist' or 'live'. He is life, and He gives life. Of course, roughly speaking, we can say He lives or exists, but the proper word is 'subsists'. His active being is Himself subsisting. So the three Persons subsist as one God and the principles by which they do this are not given *to* them, but arise *from* them. The way they go about things is what we call 'the law of God'.

CAN WE KNOW THE LAW OF GOD?

By this question we mean, 'Can we somehow look inside God and see how the three Persons work as one?'. The answer, surprisingly enough, is, 'Yes! Yes, we can do that'. How, then, can we do that? The further answer is,

'God has designed human history so that He can disclose who He is and how He works. He has desired to show us how the law of Himself operates'. Much of this book will be an endeavour to show what God has shown.

God's Law of His Being

KNOWING GOD: THE ULTIMATE IN RELATIONSHIPS

Some of the finest of human minds have concentrated upon the mystery of God. I say 'mystery' because to be human is not to have a hold on God. Someone said, 'You cannot get round the back of God. Only God can know God', and that must be true if God is God and Man is Man. Even so, God may not only be prepared to open up Himself to Man, but Man being Man may mean that he has to know God and that he cannot be truly Man without really knowing God.

When God said, 'Let us make man in our own image and likeness', He must have meant to say—at the least—that He as God, and Man as Man, would, because of this creative act, have an intimate affinity. That is, they would have a lot in common, and this would ensure their full relationship. Since no other creature is wholly like God, then a *special* relationship must have existed. Surely this relationship presupposed *communion*. Now communion, when total, is a very rich relationship and experience. Being one together is communion, as we well know on the human level. Even if we rarely achieve it, we can visualise what it would mean.

GOD'S REVELATION OF HIMSELF BY COMMUNION

We used the term 'mystery' above. 'Mystery', in this case, does not mean something mysterious or something hidden beyond human knowledge, or something sussed out by human research, but that which comes to us when it is revealed. That God reveals Himself is an axiom of biblical truth. For the moment we do not need to consider the media He uses to communicate Himself. Let us say that He desires to reveal Himself to humanity. When He does that He inevitably reveals His law also—the law of His being, by which He subsists.

God does not reveal Himself to us in order to satisfy our curiosity about Him. He wants us to know Him so that we might also know ourselves. When two people love one another intensely, something of the one is communicated to the other. When their union is communion, then their knowledge is relational. This is the way God wants us to know Him. This is the unveiling of the 'mystery' of God and of Man.

The opposite to all this is rejection of communion; that is, rejection of what we might call 'inter-living'. In this case we establish ourselves as monads, as self-contained, self-sufficient units. Whilst this is strictly against what it means to be persons, many people try to exist this way. In so doing they fail to obtain knowledge of one another.

In the beginning, when God and Man were one in communion, the knowledge of God was simple, natural and total. We can say the life of God flowed into Man, filling out his humanity. There was also a responsive up-flow of the life of Man to God. This was communion.

**THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD MEANS
THE KNOWLEDGE OF HIS LAW**

When God, by nature of the case, opened Himself to Man, and Man opened himself to God, then the way in which God subsisted as a divine community of three Persons was the way Man, as the human race, was also to live and operate. When we ask, ‘What, then, was this internal law of God?’, the answer is obvious. It was the law of communion, the law of the inter-living of the three Persons. When we ask, ‘What was communion?’, then we use the word theologians use, ‘coinherence’; that is, living as one, within one another. A more difficult term is ‘intrasubjectivity’, which means the three Subjects or Persons are as one: in fact they *are* one.

The theologians have worked hard down through a couple of millenniums to get terms to fit this unity of the three Persons. One term they have come up with is *perichoresis*, a Greek word which carries the idea of ‘dancing around as one’, but theologically it means ‘the interpenetration of the Persons and the circularity of their giving, one to another’. What they give as distinct Persons are the gifts or the differentiations they have. All human persons are different and so, also, have differentiations. In the *perichoresis*—called in Latin ‘the *circumincessio*’—the differentiations effect complementarity; that is, fullness of the actions of the divine Being. On the human level we help to fill out one another and the human race as a whole when we develop (human) *perichoresis*.

The law of God, then, is the law of the life of the three Persons—the way they subsist, and all that they do in this action of subsisting. On the human level the law we live by should be a kind of parallel to what happens on

the divine plane. This will become apparent the moment we say, ‘The law of God is the law of love’. When we say that, then most human beings would nod in recognition and say, ‘Of course’; but there is a little problem when we say, ‘Of course’. It is the problem of the meaning of the word ‘love’.

TRUE COMMUNION IS LOVE

The word ‘love’ is common to a large part of the human race, although it is not found in all languages. It is certainly common to cultures with a Judaic or Christian history. The trouble with the word ‘love’ is that it can mean many things to many people. Whenever we take a human term and apply it to God, then we are seeing His quality or attribute—in this case, love—as though it were an extended quality such as we have. This is not how it is. I do not wish to argue this here, but simply to say, ‘God’s love is unique’. It is not only ‘higher’ and ‘better’ than ours: it is God *Himself*. In this case it is not so much a quality as a *being*. We humans are beings who love: God is *the* being who *is* love.

If love kept the three Persons together as one, then it would really be a fourth element relating to the three Persons. The theologians speak of the three Persons as three hypostases, meaning each subsists as a distinct being or person. If the three hypostases were kept together by love, then you would have a fourth hypostasis—love—and you would not have a Trinity but a Quaternity. We have to see, if possible, how the three Persons can be one in love without love being a fourth hypostasis.

GOD IS LOVE

The apostle John probably speaks directly about God as love more than other writers of his time. Twice he says, ‘God is love’, but when we look at the context of him saying this, we find that what he is really saying is, ‘Within the Godhead, the Father is love’. He shows that the Father so loved the world that He sent His Son to do it good. Theologians have called the Father *fons divinitatis*—‘the fountain of Godhead’. This is understandable, especially when the same theologians speak of Jesus being ‘eternally generated’ by the Father. Undoubtedly ‘eternally generated’ is something we have to ponder, but it means, in practice, that the Son is always dependent upon the Father for his Sonship, and that he is Son with the Father *in communion*. The apostle Paul therefore called the second Person of the Trinity, ‘the Son of his love’; that is, the Son issues from the Father’s love and so would love out of that Father-love. The Holy Spirit is said to proceed from the Father and the Son, and in the New Testament he is known as ‘the Spirit of the Father and the Son’, and also as ‘the Spirit of love’. That is, he is the one who unveils the ‘mystery’ of the Father and the Son and brings the love of the Father and the Son to humanity. We can only truly know love by a revelation.

**CONCLUSION: GOD IS LOVE;
LOVE IS COMMUNION;
THE LAW OF GOD IS LOVE**

On the basis of the material set out above, we may draw the conclusion that the law of God is the law of the three

Persons subsisting in total unity. This would not be so if the Father Himself were not love. He is love, and the Son is eternally generated from Him and therefore is the Son of His love. The Holy Spirit proceeds from these two Persons and is the Spirit of love. Thus they are one in unity whilst still being three Persons or hypostases. They are in utter communion which is their love. The ways in which they subsist together is their law. It is not imposed on them from a source other than themselves, but arises from themselves as the divine Community.

The Law of God and Man

MAN HAS A LAW

We will not argue at this point that Man needs to have a law: the fact is self-evident through the varieties of laws we see in the many races and cultures which exist. Man has laws. We will proceed from what we have said previously; namely, the law of God, God's own law, the law of the divine Community.

When God created Man in His image, it is obvious that God would expect Man on the human level to live in line with the way He—God—subsisted on the divine level. Put simply, this would mean that the human race would live in love, by love, as that love flowed from God to humanity. Since Man was made in the entire image of God, it would mean he would reflect the nature and action of God. In no sense would he be God, so that in no sense could he produce the action of God *of himself*. To be Man would not be to be God, but would be to reflect God. In this sense his action would be godly.

MAN WAS NOT OVERTLY GIVEN A LAW

The accounts of the creation of Man in Genesis chapters 1 and 2 do speak of God giving certain commands. One

was about what Man was to do in the world, such as being fruitful—producing families—and exercising benign control over the earth. Another was to look after the garden in which he was living. The third command was to abstain from eating of a tree known as 'the tree of the knowledge of good and evil'. It was not 'the tree of good and evil', but of *the knowledge* of those two things.

We have reason to believe that Man—the man and the woman together—did not react to these guidelines for life—since that is what the commands were. The trust of the primal couple would have been in the One who created them. So, in the way that we think of 'law' as something demanding, they would not even have questioned the guidelines as they lived in innocence.

What we must keep in mind is that the primal couple—as we are calling them—were in communion with God. We note that it was a natural but untested communion: it had not yet been put to the test. Because of their communion with God they would have known God at least to that degree, and in that quality which was necessary for them. Without perhaps even contemplating the matter of 'law', they would have known the law of God, the law of love. After all, they had been created. The creation was theirs to enjoy and use, as much as it was a responsibility to have leadership over it. They had the gift of vocation.

In none of this was there a contract, or an implied contract, such as, 'If you do this and that, then I—God—will do this and that'. No, it was a gift, wholly a gift. So, in that sense, they would have been benefiting from the *perichoresis* of God. That which flowed *within* the God-head was also *flowing out* to them. God had breathed into them the breath of life. They were living beings, true human persons.

In all of this they would have known the law of God, and that would have been the law or principle by which they lived, not as creators, but creatures. In other words, what we call ‘the soft copy of the law’ was there with them, inscribed—so to speak—in their beings. It was the law by which they lived with one another, before God. From this point onwards—throughout our discussion—we will refer to the law in their hearts as ‘primal law’—the law given to the primal couple.

THE UNITY OF THE PRIMAL COUPLE

The Genesis accounts found in chapters 1 and 2 speak of the creation of Man. In the first narrative Man was made in the image of God, and he was made ‘male and female’. The two as one represented the image of God, whatever ‘image’ may have meant in that context. The second narrative shows that God made a special creation of woman from the side of the man, who had been known as ‘Man’. Thus the woman was derived from him and the man spoke of her as ‘bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh’. Later both Jesus and Paul pointed back to this event when it was said of the two, ‘Therefore a man leaves his father and mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh’. It is this ‘one-flesh’ union or unity we need to discuss.

‘Man’ is constituted to be a man–woman or male–female entity. Only as such is he the image of God. Therefore there must be a unity between the two which is indissoluble: without that unity they are not truly Man. Gender, far from dividing the two, contributes powerfully to the unity. What is more, the unity which makes

Man—the male–female entity—indissolubly one, is the very unity of the Triune Godhead from which, and in whose image, they were made. Only in this way can they reflect God as His image: they can only reflect Him as *one*. When Jesus said, ‘What therefore God has joined together let not man put asunder’, he meant that the breaking of the two who were one was a disastrous and terrible thing. There is a question, of course, as to whether this is *essentially* possible.

THE LAW OF UNION IS THE LAW OF LOVE; AND LOVE, THE LAW OF UNION

The point we have reached is that the very unity of God constituted the primal couple as the image or reflection of God. We take it that to have looked at them would have been to see God reflected, though in a human way. I believe we can assume that the ‘one-flesh’ union was genuine communion. So to speak, they had their own *perichoresis*, their interpenetration of each other and their giving to each other out of their differentiations, thus forming a complementarity of being—a wholeness as two in one. This would have been the law by which they lived without them thinking in terms of ‘a code’, ‘legislation’, ‘do this—or else!’. It would have been the natural way of life.

I think we have a right to conceive that their communion with God meant that the flow of the divine *perichoresis* was from God into the human relationship, keeping it fresh, and so enabling it to be its true self. In this sense the law of God was the law of Man and there was little or no consciousness of it as an entity apart from their humanity, certainly no awareness of it as a *legal* entity.

Confusion About Law

THE FALL OF MAN

I am aware that the biblical teaching of a ‘fall’ of Man is strongly opposed by some theologians and by many people. The reasons for this opposition we need not here discuss. The term ‘fall of Man’ is certainly not found explicitly in Scripture. The closest we come to it is the apostle Paul’s statement, ‘Therefore as sin came into the world by one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned’ (Rom. 5:12). Paul says, in this context, that Man sinned originally in Adam; that is, when Adam sinned all mankind sinned in him. Whatever we make of this, it is clear that a distinct change took place in the relationships between God and Man, and between the man and the woman; and that these changes have had their effects upon the human race. All of this is, of course, biblical reasoning, and not at all the result of scientific anthropological research.

THE MODE OF THE FALL OF MAN

God had taught Man in the context of communion with him. Man had received all things in communion, not

questioning them. The word God spoke to Man was His own word, and in fact was inseparable from Himself. A new factor entered into the garden in which the primal couple lived in accordance with the word spoken in communion. This factor was a creature named ‘the serpent’. The story in Genesis chapter 3 is understood by some to be literal—an historical happening—and by others to be a myth. By ‘myth’ is not meant something that never happened, but something that did not happen in this literal way. We will not here argue these two cases. The principle of what happened was clear, so we will use the language of the description to get at the principle.

We have said that the primal couple lived in communion with God and each other. They had only one word by which to live; namely, the word God had spoken to them, and which they trusted because of their communion with the Creator. Now another word came into view. It was the word of the serpent. The serpent was said to be ‘more subtle than any other wild creature’. His method was to question what God had said.

‘Did God say, “You shall not eat of any tree of the garden”?’ he asked. The way in which he reasoned with the woman, who seems to have been apart from her man, was such as to make her doubt the word God had spoken to her. Man had been made in the image of God and so was already ‘like God’, but he was not, of course, ‘*as* God’. The serpent’s temptation was that Man would become ‘*as* God’ and not just ‘*like* God’. In this new state, it was said, the couple would know good and evil—whatever that may have appeared to them to mean. They were told that their eyes would be opened, as though, to that point, their eyes had been closed to

something, and this had put them within some limit, and to some disadvantage.

THE RESULTS OF THE FALL OF MAN

The outcome was that they went against the word of God in favour of the word of the serpent, and they ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil with certain discernible results. The immediate outcome was that ‘their eyes were opened’ and they became conscious that they were naked, and they manufactured covers for themselves.

They heard ‘the sound of God walking in the garden in the cool of the day’ and they ‘hid themselves from the presence of the Lord’. It seems that the communion was broken in some degree. God had said they would die if ever they ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and that it would happen in the day they did it. Certainly we can see there was what we might call ‘a relational death’. They had ‘come alive’ to themselves and, in a relational sense, had ‘died to God’. A different set of relationships now ensued between God and the primal couple, and between the man and the woman. There was an interruption in the free-flowing *perichoresis*.

NEW ELEMENTS OF LAW APPEAR AS A RESULT OF THE FALL

When God asked the woman what she had done, she simply described what had happened. She said the serpent had beguiled her, with all that the word ‘beguiled’ might mean. She did not claim that what he said was

truth, that is, ‘things as they really are’. She knew she had been deceived. The man also described what had happened, ‘The woman whom thou gavest *to be with me*, she gave me fruit of the tree, and I did eat’. In saying this, the man virtually blamed the woman and, seemingly, God.

Whatever the case, the serpent was told of punishment that would come to him. The woman, because she had listened to the voice or word of the serpent, would suffer pain in giving birth to her children. The man would now rule over her, something which did not seem previously to have been the case. The man, because he had listened to the voice, or ‘word’, of his wife, would have to work on ground that had received a curse, and so his task would now be difficult. Certainly elements had come into force which would make it difficult for humanity to have communion with God, and with one another. The communion they had known in innocence would now be difficult to achieve in the new, strange state of guilt. Innocence is not a form of ignorance, but really a state of genuine knowing, and in some sense there had been a loss of knowledge of God. That their relational knowledge had changed was shown by their fear of God, and by the division which in some measure had come between them.

The ruling of the man over the woman spoke of some kind of authority. Where there is authority, there is always law, whether it be so rightly or wrongly.

A CHANGE FROM THE LAW OF LOVE

We will see, I am sure, that the essence of true law—law received and exercised in communion—has as its prime element what we call an ‘other-person regarding’ nature.

To love genuinely is to regard others before one's self. We will not attempt to prove this here, but keep it in mind for future reference. It seems so high-minded that we may think of it only as an ideal, but most impracticable.

What we need to see is that the primal couple had become self-regarding in seeking to get what they could from the God who seemed to have withheld something wonderful from them. They did not trust Him as being 'Man-regarding'. Their view of God had altered, and so their view of the life of the Godhead. The inner law of God was now not known as before—in an innocent, relational communion. It seemed that in the place of this, some form of punishment or retribution was now imposed. Their view of God was changed: they wanted to cover themselves from Him and from one another.

They were now to live by some overt form of law. This was not stated explicitly, but the rule of the man over the woman would certainly introduce the idea. In any case the whole of creation already had its functional law, and this even before Man was to cap it as its lord–steward. In Genesis 1:16 this law of creation was described:

And God made the two great lights, the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night; he made the stars also. And God set them in the firmament of the heavens to give light upon the earth, to rule over the day and over the night and to separate the light from the darkness.

Man was to cap such ruling when he was told:

Be fruitful, and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion [lordship] over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth (Gen. 1:28).

How beautiful it would all have been—this rule of Man—had it been done in communion with God and with the integrity of a guiltless primal couple, all rich with the creative *perichoresis* of their God.

Law in the Human Scene

MAN ALWAYS UNDER LAW

The idea of our book is not to draw out the various facets of human living under law. We have already recognised that all human beings live under law, and even the anarchist may be said to have a law of no law, and doubtless feels some guilt when he does not exploit the law of no law. This is, of course, a mere playing with words, but the principle is rock-solid. Man lives by law, and his conscience makes sure he is aware of the reality of law—whatever form it may take in anyone’s particular culture.

Biblically, law exists from creation to the end of time. Paul may seem to have said at one point that there was no law before the one given to Moses, ‘Sin indeed was in the world before the law was given, but sin is not counted where there is no law’. Of course there can be no sin without law, but Cain knew his act of murder was against the law, and feared for his life should he fall into the hands of others. God judged the world at the time of the Flood because of its moral corruption, and the idea of such corruption cannot exist apart from the idea of law. ‘The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of

his heart were only evil continually.’ On this state, and its actions, God brought the judgment of the Flood.

Following the Flood we find the idea of law amongst the patriarchs. Of Abraham it was said by God, ‘Abraham obeyed my voice, and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes and my laws’. Nothing could be clearer. Abraham’s contemporaries, such as a king named Abimelech and a Pharaoh of Egypt, reproached Abraham for letting his wife be regarded as a legitimate candidate for their harems. They told him they could have suffered judgment for such acts. Morality was well known to them.

THE COMING OF THE LAW OF MOSES

John the apostle said simply, ‘The law came by Moses’. Students of the Old Testament know that all nations had laws, but until Israel had been liberated from Egypt by God, it did not have a body of law: certainly not as it had when it was about to enter the promised land of Canaan. Scholars argue strongly over the formation of this law, some saying it was not given as a body of precepts and commandments to Moses, but developed partly during the journeying through the wilderness and partly over the years that Israel occupied Canaan.

This point does not here concern us. What does concern us is that the law was a gift to Israel as well as being a binding power upon them. When Abraham was said to have ‘obeyed my voice, and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes and my laws’, then we need to notice the ‘my voice’; that is, God *spoke* to Abraham personally. Notice also the other four mentions of ‘my’.

Law was something intimately given in God's relationship with Abraham and known intimately by Abraham in his communion with God. Abraham is called 'the friend of God' more than once. Law, then, was not hard legislation, but was understood and obeyed in divine-human fellowship.

It was the same in Israel. God was the covenant Father of Israel: Israel was his 'first-born son'. Law was for a filial and familial way of life. It is unfortunate, in a way, that the heart of that law has come down to us as 'the ten commandments'. Moses described how it all happened:

Then the LORD spoke to you out of the midst of the fire; you heard *the sound of words*, but saw no form; *there was only a voice*. And he declared to you his covenant, which he commanded you to perform, that is, the ten commandments [the ten words]; and he wrote them upon two tables of stone. And the LORD commanded me at that time to teach you statutes and ordinances, that you might do them in the land which you are going over to possess [emphasis mine] (Deut. 4:12–14).

Notice that God spoke directly to the people—by 'a voice'. The law was given in the context of a covenant which was itself gracious. The statement 'the ten commandments' should strictly be 'the ten words' (*dabar*). God spoke words, and, even though they were commandments, the emphasis is on 'words'. God spoke words to the primal couple. The serpent spoke words to the woman. The woman spoke words to the man—and so on. A person is as his or her words. In one sense we are our words and they are us. God spoke intimately to His people; they listened to their God.

The introduction to 'the ten words' was, 'I am the LORD your God'. This is intimate, this is personal, this is direct. This is God communicating Person to persons.

Direct address is wholly relational. So the words did not come through just as 'law'. We must keep in mind all the time that because of the Fall, and since that time, the word 'law' has always seemed to have a hardness about it. It is the way we hear it, of course, especially as we are guilty persons. Properly speaking, those of Israel who were under what we call 'the grace of covenant' should have heard the words with great joy, even if the occasion was an *aweful* one. The honey should have been sweet to the palate. The heart should have rejoiced in having fellowship with God.

ISRAEL'S LAW UNIQUE IN HISTORY

We say Israel's law was unique in history—yet only comparatively speaking. The primal law implanted in Man's heart by creation, and his affinity with God, is the unique law, but the shape of the law as given to Moses is of exceptional beauty, as it is of exceptional functionality. Moses gave his own commentary upon it, showing that other nations would admire both it and the God who gave it:

Behold, I have taught you statutes and ordinances, as the LORD my God commanded me, that you should do them in the land which you are entering to take possession of it. Keep them and do them; for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' For what great nation is there that has a god so near to it as the LORD our God is to us, whenever we call upon him? And what great nation is there, that has statutes and ordinances so righteous as all this law which I set before you this day? (Deut. 4:5–8).

The law given at Sinai spreads out to cover all aspects of Israel's life, not only in the wilderness, but also in Canaan, where they would become a settled people. It included health and sanitation regulations. It had what we call a 'worship cultus', and, in this, a 'sacrificial cultus', for sacrifice is for the relief of people who have guilt by reason of what they are or are not, and by reason of the wrong things they do and the right things they do not do. There were other things also, but the laws of the law must not be seen as harsh and restrictive regulations, and high demands impossible to fulfil by human beings. The pride in the law, and the expressions—especially by the Psalmists—of the law's beauty, tell us the law was indeed a gift and not an imposition. Of course law will always seem to be restrictive, to be an imposition and impossible of fulfilment, if we approach it in the rebellion that human guilt induces in us. The fault does not lie in the law, but in us.

6

Jesus, the Law and the Prophets

JESUS AND THE LAW AND THE PROPHETS

John said, 'For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ'. Some have taken this to be a deliberate contrast on John's part, but it seems it is simply a matter of one event following the other, and both essential to Man's history. Moses would have been the last one to say that 'grace and truth' were absent from the law, and Jesus would have been the last to say that the law was outmoded by 'grace and truth'.

Sometimes Jesus was accused of breaking the law and opposing Moses, but none could ever convince him of sin, which would have been the breaking of the law. His demand, 'Which of you convinces me of sin?', was never taken up by any person. He kept the law in perfection, though it was not always the way his enemies saw it.

He did not come to supersede law. This he made clear in the Sermon on the Mount, and we shall have reason to look at his statement regarding the law, and the obedience which was required to keep it. First, however, we need to have a little discursus which compares primal law and the law of Moses.

Primal Law and the Law of Moses—a Discursus

A commentator speaking in an article entitled ‘Law, Biblical Concept of’ has made the following statement, ‘Man is the living, personal image of God; the law is the written, preceptual image of God’.¹ By ‘written, preceptual’ the commentator, J. A. Motyer, means ‘the law of Moses’. Well, it was written, but as we have seen it was primarily spoken. It was only written because spoken, but the speaking of it into the heart of the listener meant it was living life—from the life of God to the life of Man. In fact that was really how it was at creation, as primal law, and so the law of Sinai was really the primal law ‘writ large’. With all its expanded permutations and ramifications, it was, at heart, the primal law. It was the law of the Triune God, the law of the holy Society, the law of the three Persons. It was the law given to Man in his created affinity with God, in the Divine–human communion.

J. A. Motyer gives an example of how the Divine law works out on the human level and takes the example of one chapter of the Mosaic law:

... we find in Lev. 19 that God has provided another image of himself on earth. Every aspect of human experience is gathered into this rich review of man’s life under God’s law: filial duty (vs. 3), religious commitment (vs. 4), ritual exactness (vs. 5), care of the needy (vs. 9), honesty in deed and word (vv. 11–12), and many more, touching on relationships and even on dress, hygiene, and horticulture. Yet all this variety suspends from one central truth: “I am the Lord.” Lord is the divine name, the “I am what I am” (Exod. 3:14), so that the significance of the recurring claim is not “You must do what I tell you” (i.e., ‘Lord’ as an authority word) but “you must do this or that because I am what I am”;

every precept of the law is a reflection of “what I am.” Man is the living, personal image of God; the law is the written preceptual image of God. The intention of Lev. 19 is declared at the outset: “You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy” (vs. 2). The Lord longs for his people to live in his image, and to that end he has given them his law.²

This means that Mosaic law is but the outworking of the primal law as related to Israel being the covenant people of God—first moving towards, and then living in, the land God had given them. The context of their living, as also the society they were, demanded that the primal law work out in these various ways. At the heart of it all was the law of God. In practice it was the divine–human law in Israel’s society.

JESUS AND THE LAW AND THE PROPHETS (CONT.)

We have indicated that Jesus lived the law out in his life. He walked according to its prescriptions, not seeing it as a hard code to be kept, but as the living way of God. This is how the writers of Psalms 1, 19 and 119 had seen it and loved it. The honey of the law came to them, sweetening them against the depravity of the fallen human heart which would rise up against law in rebellion. Rebel they certainly did, but their sorrow for law-infracture was the sorrow of sinning against the being of God, and the forgiveness and mercy inherent in the law restored them to true and glad obedience.

Jesus had no rebellion against the law. Nor would he let those who sought to have relief—so called—from the law be allowed to soften its demands. Certainly he never

¹ J. A. Motyer, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, edited by W. A. Elwell, Baker Book House, 1990, p. 624.

² Motyer, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, p. 624.

thought the law would come into demise. His Sermon on the Mount is wholly about the law. In some aspects it is a commentary on the law. In other aspects it is an interpretation; but in all aspects it is an insistence that the law be followed and lived in gladly. The law had suffered much at the hands of past commentators, interpreters, scribes and law-people. He set about remedying all that. The portion of Matthew 5:17–20 needs to be heard clearly and examined closely:

Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfil them. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

Jesus was saying that he had not come to abolish the law and the prophets but to fulfil them. ‘To fulfil them’ is best understood as ‘to establish and confirm them’. It must not be thought to mean, ‘To obey the law to the utmost, and thereby to show it is no longer needed or relevant because I have brought a new law or a way of life which supersedes it’. Certainly it cannot mean, ‘Law is no longer God’s way of life’.

**THE MEANING OF THE TERM:
‘THE LAW AND THE PROPHETS’**

We must notice that Jesus did not say, ‘I have not come to abolish the law’, but ‘I have not come to abolish the law and the prophets’. He had come to fulfil ‘the law and the

prophets’. This requires explanation. Later in the Sermon on the Mount he summed up what we call ‘the Golden Rule’ by saying, ‘For this is the law and the prophets’. Regarding John the Baptist, Jesus said, ‘For all the law and the prophets prophesied until John’. We do not usually think of the law prophesying, but Jesus couples the law and the prophets as though they are in the same task, the one bundle of truth. Again, when speaking of the two commandments to love God and the neighbour, Jesus said, ‘On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets’. We conclude that ‘the law and the prophets’ which, in essence, constitute the whole of the Old Testament, are so much of the one piece as to be inseparable. They can be seen as one when we realise that the law was the law of the community; the priest was the teacher of the law; and the prophet was the one who was God’s voice continually seeking to draw the people back to the law when they had contravened and departed from it.

This last sentence really needs full amplification to show that the whole life of Israel was to be centred in the law—the way of God. Paul’s statement that with the gift of the law went also ‘the sonship, the glory, the covenants, the worship, and the promises’ puts ‘the law and the prophets’ into full perspective. It was no wonder that Jesus said he had not come to abolish this set of precious elements.

Later we will have more occasion to see Jesus as the man of law.

Law, the Terror of Fallen Man

VINEGAR OR HONEY?

We will need to come back to certain elements described in the Gospels, such as the death and resurrection of Christ, particularly linked with Christ's fulfilling the demands of the law in what the theologians call 'the active and passive obedience of Christ', but now we proceed to look at Paul's depiction of the law as the object of terror to the sinner, and the cause of his death.

If we start at the apostle John's reportage, 'For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ', then we can proceed to speak of law, knowing that the New Testament provides that background of grace by which we can better understand the purpose and function of law in the plan of God for Man's redemption from its curse and punishment. Sometimes the law seems to be vinegar, and far from the honey to which the Psalmists likened it.

PAUL'S VIEW OF THE LAW AS HEAVY UPON THE SINNER

We can preface this investigation by quoting Paul from his first recorded sermon. Speaking of Jesus he said:

Let it be known to you therefore, brethren, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him every one that believes is freed [justified] from everything from which you could not be freed [justified] by the law of Moses (Acts 13:38–39).

He had, then, a message of hope for all under the law. In speaking of law he was not seeking to drive listeners or readers to despair without bringing them to hope of redemption from the curse and judgment of that law.

Paul wrote once to Timothy, saying:

Now we know that the law is good, if any one uses it lawfully, understanding this, that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, immoral persons, sodomites, kidnappers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine, in accordance with the glorious gospel of the blessed God with which I have been entrusted (I Tim. 1:8–11).

He wrote thus because some who thought of themselves as teachers of the law were using the law for unlawful teaching. He faced the disciples of these teachers with the blunt fact that the law is against sinners, and would not be needed in this seemingly harsh form unless it had to confront sinners deluded by special teaching which seemed to let the hearers off the judgments of the law.

In two of his Letters—Romans and Galatians—Paul goes to great lengths to show the deadly nature of law. Some of his statements warrant long and deep examination, but we will put them together in shortened form. In Romans he first shows that the knowledge of law is universal and it is linked with the working of the human conscience.¹ He agrees that those outside Israel do not

¹ In this regard see Appendix I, 'The Natural Law', for it will add to Paul's comment on the universal nature of law.

know the Mosaic law intimately, but they often seem to do so since they virtually follow its pattern. We assume Paul, for the most part, is speaking of the heart of the law, namely ‘the ten words’. In his third chapter Paul has a list of the sins of human beings which show they do not wish to know God; that is, they do not wish to know the law, for ‘all have turned aside, together they have gone wrong’ means they have turned from the way of God—the law. Again, ‘In their paths are ruin and misery, and the way of peace they have not known’, means the same thing. Paul then concludes:

Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For no human being will be justified in his sight by works of the law, since through the law comes knowledge of sin (Rom. 3:19–20).

In this he is saying that everyone is under the guilt of the law—‘every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God’. ‘The whole world’ is held accountable to God by the law. None is free of this. Then comes the terrible statement, ‘through the law comes knowledge of sin’. At first sight this simply seems to mean what Paul wrote to Timothy; namely, that the law picks out those things that human beings have done which are contrary to the law’s commands. This may well be so, but he is saying much more. ‘Knowledge of sin’ is a fearful thing. It means men and women have been through the gamut of their sins, the acts of their law-breaking, with the heavy guilts which attach to all their active sins. It catches up the pain; the

dislocation of the human spirit and psyche; the anguish of heart caused by sin; the deadly heaviness which comes with guilt; the being given up to the guilt of sin; the compounding of rebellion; the pollution experienced in the heart and conscience by one’s evil; the dread of the curse and judgment which is on sin by reason of the law—and further innumerable and indescribable elements which at last expose sin for the dreadful thing that it is. This is ‘the knowledge of sin’. Nothing less would hold a person in terror before God. All of this is by reason of the law.

Later in Romans he says, ‘For the law brings wrath, but where there is no law there is no transgression’. For the sinner, the law can only bring wrath. He repeats this idea in Galatians where he states, ‘For all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the law, and do them”’. He adds, ‘Why then the law? It was added because of transgressions’, and this appears to mean that the law increased the transgressions by nature of the case, for in Romans 7:5 he says, ‘While we were living in the flesh, our sinful passions, *aroused by the law*, were at work in our members *to bear fruit for death* [emphasis mine]’. He then adds:

Apart from the law sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came sin revived and I died; the very commandment which promised life proved to be death to me. For sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and by it killed me (Rom. 7:8–11).

These are terrifying words and mean that sin has power by means of the law. Paul had obviously thought himself ‘alive apart from the law’ when that could never

have been so, for it has never been for any mortal, but was probably a delusion of Paul's when he once thought of himself 'as to righteousness under the law blameless'. In any case he said the law came, sin had a revival of power and he was slain. Possibly this was what happened when he met Christ on the road to Damascus; we cannot say for sure, but Paul knew how lethal was the law. All his religious righteousness as a Jew and a Pharisee was of no avail. He had to speak of himself as 'the foremost of sinners'. He knew that 'by works of the law shall no one be justified'. Thus, if human beings deliberately oppose the law, they will know the end that Paul describes to Timothy, and if they try to use 'works of the law' to justify themselves, they will only find themselves under the curse of the law.

Paul is aware that all this must seem confusing and terrible to the Jew who had so trusted he was keeping the law and was thus right before God, and so he does not leave any reader—Jew or Gentile—at this point of despair and bewilderment. He shows that the law is not simply trying to bring people under condemnation and judgment—although it certainly does that—but that the law is telling the listener he cannot accomplish justification by works, but only by faith. In shutting the reader up to faith he is—so to speak—crowding him to Christ. The law is saying, 'You cannot escape my curse by trying to keep my precepts. I am the law which is unable to redeem you. I am weakened in any endeavour to do so by your fleshly-self actions, but showing you I cannot, and will not, do anything to redeem you, I shut you up to the way, not of law but of faith. I crowd you to Christ. I am but a schoolmaster to take you to him. He is the only one who can accomplish what is required to get you out of my

death and doom'. Behind the bitter vinegar of the law there are intimations of pure honey.

Paul's actual words are:

Is the law then against the promises of God? Certainly not; for if a law had been given which could make alive, then righteousness would indeed be by the law. But the scripture consigned all things to sin, that what was promised to faith in Jesus Christ might be given to those who believe. Now before faith came, we were confined under the law, kept under restraint until faith should be revealed. So that the law was our custodian until Christ came, that we might be justified by faith (Gal. 3:21–24).

What all this means, and how it works out, we are yet to see; but the deadliness of the law is relieved by none other than Christ. Through him death loses its sting and the law's guilt is relieved. Even so, we must not hurry through the matter of law's dread and lethal power, for if we do so we will never understand grace. If we need a revelation and an experience to see the terror of law, we also need a revelation to see and experience the rich grace of God.

The Law and the Cross

THE LAW WORKS WRATH BECAUSE SIN VIOLATES GOD'S HOLINESS

Paul told us there was no escape from the law. No race or culture finally escapes it. By it is the knowledge of sin, and the knowledge of sin comes as a fearsome revelation: no human being can escape the curse of the law. The law works wrath. The objections some of us make, that since God is love He cannot be wrathful, are without foundation. They miss the holiness of God. Of course God is not wrath, but He is rightly wrathful in His holiness. Wrath is the action of God on those who violate His holiness. In a moment we shall see how this wrath works, but let us first look at the holiness we violate by our sinning.

P. T. Forsyth has said it so powerfully:

But God's holy law is His own holy nature, the principle of His own holy heart, the life action and norm of His moral personality, with no source or authority outside Himself, and no claim He could even wish to ignore or evade. To tamper with it would have been to deny His own soul. He loves it as He must love Himself, or His other self, His very Son, His Holy One, dearer to Him than all prodigals. A wound to the holy law of His

Being is a stab to His own heart at least as keen and urgent as any love or pity He might feel to men.¹

Until we have some sense of the holiness of God, which means at the same time the holiness of His law, and until we realise we have not only violated the holiness of God, but at the same time our own holiness as created, then we will not realise the just wrath of God. Realising this is what Paul calls 'the knowledge of sin', the law, which could have constituted the unspeakable sweetness of life, now becomes the bitter force which damns us, curses us and slays us. Martin Luther spoke of the terrible nature of law:

The Law of the letter is everything written with letters . . . This is the Law of works, the old Law, the Law of Moses, the Law of the Flesh, the Law of sin, the Law of wrath, the Law of death. It condemns everything, makes all men guilty, increases lusts, and slays; and the more spiritual it is, the more it does so . . .

THE LAW WORKS WRATH

The point we need to keep seeing is that God's law is not apart from Himself. If we separate the law from God and make it to be a block of legislation on its own, then we have a foreign and frightening object on our hands, or rather, we are in its terrible hands. Our consciences are left to handle the matter, and all they can be are accusers, monitors of our state, and informers of our dreadful

¹ P. T. Forsyth, *The Preaching of Jesus and the Gospel of Christ*, NCPI, Blackwood, 1987, p. 109.

failures. When Paul says, ‘The law works wrath’, he is not thinking of the law having its own innate power to bring wrath, but rather that the law, by its demands for righteousness and holiness, is the basis on which the personal wrath of God works towards Man. We can have no minor idea that just going against the law works ‘wrath’ in the same sense as putting your hand into the fire brings the pain of burning, so going against the functional nature of law in life brings a kind of mechanistic retribution. That may well be true, but it is God we personally offend, and it is God who turns in wrath to us. ‘Against thee, and thee only have I sinned!’ David cried, and God agrees with this. We have sinned grievously against Him: we have violated His holiness with every movement of sin.

THE WAY WRATH WORKS

In the first chapter of Romans, Paul shows us how wrath works. He says this wrath is revealed from heaven upon all who suppress the truth in unrighteousness. The truth is the holy law of God: it is the Holy One Himself—the law of Himself. Acts contrary to His law of love bring the dreadful outcome of guilt. Guilt is dynamic in that it dislocates and distorts the very spirit of Man, who was designed to love and worship God. So, Paul tells us, God’s way of wrath is to give Man up to his sin, or—we might say—to the guilt of his sin. By ‘guilt of his sin’ we mean the elements which always attend each sin: elements of shame and unease, confusion and anger, pain and dread, pollution and blindness, disturbance and distortion, heaviness and terror—the total *angst* and anguish within us.

Three times in this chapter (vv. 24, 26 and 28) Paul shows the expanding nature of human guilt, the compounding of itself and the retrogression of the human spirit; ‘given up to the lusts of their own hearts’ with the consequent moral degradation; ‘given up to dishonourable passions’ with the consequent moral perversions which warp the human psyche; ‘given up to a base mind’ with the consequent flood-tide of all forms of evil invading the human person, and the whole corpus of humankind. This is the wrath of God. This is the weight upon the human spirit. This is the personal ‘giving up’ of us by God to guilt, for guilt to do its terrible work. There is nothing mechanistic about this action of wrath. It is intimate and personal and is felt burningly in the conscience. We cannot pause to look at human rationalisations of these actions of God. We simply note that the pain and derangement of Man are put down to other causes than God’s anger against the violation of His holy self, His holy humanity and His holy creation.

CHRIST THE PROPITIATION FOR OUR SINS

The New Testament resonates with the grace of God. The primal law has been violated and wrath has come, but the explicit ‘hard copy’ of the law of Sinai has been followed by the ‘grace and truth’ which ‘came through Jesus Christ’. His incarnation is with a view to his being our high priest, the oblation for sins, the victim for the offering, the full propitiation of all our sins, and this ‘once for ever’. He is God’s propitiation for human sin in that he is the bearer of the wrath of God on human sins, on human sinners. This doctrine of propitiation has to be opened

afresh to every generation of human beings, for such human beings will try to justify themselves by the works of the law they purport to follow. Self-justification has been the long history of Man through his laws, philosophies, religions and ideologies. Only when he sees ‘all have sinned and come short of the glory of God’, will he see the futility of self-justifying schemes. That will be when the law has shown him ‘the knowledge of sin’; and the conviction of this in the human spirit is by the revelation of the Holy Spirit.

There is a process of conviction which is most painful, but unless it happens, the beauty and power of God’s grace will not become known in full to the human spirit. Martin Luther has a statement which has all the ingredients of the terror that comes to Man, and which must lead him to apply for grace to God:

There is nothing smaller and more ignored than a dry leaf lying on the ground, crawled on by worms and unable to protect itself from the dust . . . But when the *moment* comes, horse, rider, lance, armor, king, princes, all the strength of the army and all power is frightened by its rustling. Are we not fine people? We have no fear of God’s wrath and stand proudly, but yet are terrified and flee before the wrath of an impotent dry leaf. And such rustling of the leaf makes the world too small and becomes our wrathful God, whom we otherwise poo-poo and defy in heaven and on earth.

THE CROSS THE PLACE OF PROPITIATION

Paul said:

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all

who believe. For there is no distinction; since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation [propitiation] by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God’s righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies him who has faith in Jesus (Rom. 3:21–26).

Paul means that God set forth Christ as the propitiation for sins. If God set him forth, then the setting forth and the consequent propitiation-death must be authentic and effective. God is the prime-mover in grace. This was an old story, since in Israel God had long ago said, ‘For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and *I have given it for you* upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement by reason of the life’. In the Cross, Christ bore the wrath of God that is upon sinners; that is, as we have already said, ‘the elements which always attend each sin, elements of shame and unease, confusion and anger, pain and dread, pollution and blindness, disturbance and distortion, heaviness and terror—the total *angst* and anguish within’, for these are the things to which God has given us up in the face of the law and in the face of His own violated holiness. His wrath is not mere punitive action, but is the curse which is this-wise in the human conscience and so in the human spirit. John says simply that God’s love is in this: that He sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

What happened upon the Cross is not fully explicated. It is a mystery, but then a mystery in which we live. Christ as the great high priest has made himself—his very body—an oblation, a sacrifice for our sins. He has borne our sins in his body on the tree, which means he has

borne the burning wrath of them personally, emotionally, morally, in his mind, heart, spirit—in every element which is him. He has been made to be sin for us, and all of this is the act of propitiation. The law showed the need for it, and the prophets foretold it would happen. Christ himself said such suffering was indispensable. Without his being made a curse for us, the curse of the law—the wrath of God—would always be upon us. Only the Cross dispels the wrath.

The action of the Cross was the action of the God who is love, whose love is holy, and whose holiness is the love that redeems. That is why Paul could say:

Let it be known to you therefore, brethren, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him every one that believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses (Acts 13:38–39).

9

Justified from the Law

‘DISCHARGED FROM THE LAW’

Paul’s statement to the people at Antioch in Pisidia is clear enough:

Let it be known to you therefore, brethren, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by him every one that believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses (Acts 13:38–39).

This must mean that men and women, both Jews and Gentiles, are freed from the law, and this law includes the law of Moses which, at heart, is simply primal law. The word ‘freed’ is better translated ‘justified’, as in another place where Paul says, ‘He that has died is freed [justified] from sin’. To be free from the law does not mean to be free to have no law, or free from law observance. It would be bewildering to a human being suddenly to have no way in which to walk, and equally bewildering to have to, somehow, substitute a new law for the old.

What, then, does Paul mean when he says, ‘Jesus our Lord who was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification’? He must mean that the work of the Cross justified us from the condemnation of the law, so that the penalty of sin was remitted in the sufferings of

Christ, and the guilt of the law was taken from the human conscience. The apostle had a teaching that when persons believed in Christ and were baptised, they were baptised into his death on the Cross, were with him in his going down into the tomb and in his rising from the dead, so that they emerged into newness of life. Statements such as, ‘I through the law died to the law, that I might live to God’; ‘You died to the law by the body of Christ’; and ‘But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive’, must surely mean the law has done its lethal work, but instead of being utterly destroyed, we have been liberated from the old law-bondage into a new freedom.

FREED FROM LAW’S BONDAGE INTO LAW’S FREEDOM

One can think of no clearer description of this new freedom than the passage of Romans 8:1–4, where Paul says we are freed from law in order to obey it:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, 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.

Paul is saying that the law of God, because of our sin and the law’s penalty of death, has become ‘the law of sin and death’ to us. Christ, by dying the death we should have died, has freed us from the condemnation of

the law, so that now his gospel brings us to the law—and the law to us—as ‘the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus’. The law itself could never do this because it was ‘weakened by the flesh’, but Christ has done it. Yes, but this act of Christ is not an end in itself, for the purpose of it all was that ‘the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit’.

What is ‘the just requirement of the law’? It is what the primal law demands of all human beings. Christ did not come to abolish the law but to confirm and establish it, but this could not happen until the law had done its lethal work so that we could be disentangled from the law as condemnatory in order to live in it in a new way; hence Paul’s statement, ‘But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit’. By this he surely means that the law is now no demanding, legal code but a new way of life lived in and by the Holy Spirit. In Romans 8, Paul says that those who oppose the law are those who live in the flesh, and they cannot please God. The inference is plain: those who live in the Spirit—the ones freed from the condemnation of the law—do please God because they fulfil ‘the just requirement of the law’.

We ought not to miss one important point, and it is the wording of 8:4, ‘in order that the just requirement of the law *might be fulfilled* in us’. For us to go out to fulfil the just requirement of the law might seem to mean that we have to accomplish this demand of ourselves and from ourselves, but the text is saying ‘might be fulfilled in us’, meaning that the fulfilment does not come primarily from us, from our own unaided efforts, but that the gospel and

the Spirit—‘the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus’—so work that the just requirement of the law is fulfilled in us.

At first sight all this may seem of slight significance. In practical fact it is of great significance: it means that we live with the law as a new entity. We have a new view of it. Indeed we have come to the point where we ‘delight in the law of God after the inner man’. What was tasted as vinegar is now mouthed as honey. Our inner persons have no less delight in the law than the Psalmists who wrote Psalms 1, 19 and 119. We no longer dread the law. It has now become ‘sweeter than honey and than much fine honeycomb’. The drippings of it become our delight to taste. The sourness of death has passed.

We are now in a new delight.

10

The Law of the Triune God

We have seen that the law of God is the law of the Community of the three Persons. Man, created in the image of God and so in communion with God, had this law innate to his being. The Fall affected the image, and so affected his view of the law. Another way of saying this is that the law by which God subsists is one with His will, and when Man’s will was one with God, he lived in harmony and conformity with the law of God. As God subsisted on the divine plane, Man lived in parallel on the human plane. God expected no more or no less of Man than He Himself lived within Himself. In all this the power of God was with Man to live in holiness, righteousness, goodness, truth and love.

THE LAW OF THE FATHER

As the Father is love and is *fons divinitatis*, so the Son is the Son of His love and lives in what we might call ‘the law of the Father’. In John’s Gospel, Jesus keeps spelling out his desire to do the Father’s will and refers this not only to his incarnate existence but also to his being the Word and the Son from always. God has ever loved the Son and given him all things, and indeed has given all

things into his hands. Father and Son are one, though in one sense the Father is greater than the Son. The law of the Father operates within a certain hierarchical frame, though, to human beings, the word ‘hierarchy’ conjures up images other than those of love.

Paul’s statement, ‘For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God’, tells us that within ‘the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus’ God’s children obey Him as Father because of the presence and aid of the Spirit. Working back from this we see the principle of the Son obeying the Father, walking according to His will. This is what happened in his incarnation; he did all things according to the power and leading of the Spirit. Within the Godhead, the Spirit is one with the law of the Father. As Trinity, the three Persons have one law.

From John’s Gospel we can see the relationships of the Triune God. All members of the Trinity (i) honour, that is, glorify one another; (ii) serve one another; (iii) give to one another; and (iv) receive from one another. This may be summed up as subsisting in the communion of love. This is the law of God which is at once the law of the Father, the law of the Son and the law of the Spirit. This is the law in which the sons of God will certainly delight to live. Its just requirement (*dikaioma*) should prove to be neither burden nor tyranny.

We shall now take a moment off to look at a helpful discursus.

Discursus on ‘the Law of God’

Throughout the Scriptures the term ‘the law of God’ is unmistakable. We have seen that it is fatal to separate ‘the law’ from ‘God’, for then it becomes a separate entity

with which the conscience has to do. In reality the conscience has to do with God and so with God’s law. It does not have to do with *either* God *or* the law, *or* both as separated entities. Man’s dealings with God have to be relational.

When we speak of the Law of God, then we must mean it arises out of God Himself, and, in that sense, is God Himself subsisting. When we take the sense of ‘the Law of God’ as the Law which God gives to creation, and to Man in particular, then we can in some sense work back to the Law of God. For example, the passage of Psalm 19:7–9:

The law of the LORD is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the testimony of the LORD is sure,
making wise the simple;
the precepts of the LORD are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is pure,
enlightening the eyes;
the fear of the LORD is clean,
enduring for ever;
the ordinances of the LORD are true,
and righteous altogether

can be easily understood. The word ‘law’ (*torah*) here has the synonyms of ‘testimony’, ‘precepts’, ‘commandment’ and ‘ordinances’, though each has its particular, specialised meaning. If, for an experiment, we cut out the words ‘law of’ and its synonyms, we could legitimately say something like this, ‘The Lord is perfect reviving the soul; the Lord is right, rejoicing the heart; the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes; the Lord is true, and righteous altogether, easily to be understood’. In this sense

the stated nature of the law as humans are given it, and instructed in it, helps to conduct us back to the character of God. So then, Man, being made in the image of God, would, properly speaking, reflect what goes on in the Law of God as God subsists in it. It has been said that the Law as given by God is a transcript of His own being, of His own holiness.

THE FAMILIAL LAW

The law of the Father must be familial—a family law—at least in so far as Man is concerned. Jesus came to show the Father. He revealed the domestic relationships of the Trinity. In the Sermon on the Mount his most often used word was ‘Father’. God’s children were to relate to God as Father. He showed the Father in such a way that he could claim, ‘He that has seen me has seen the Father’. He revealed the name of God to his followers, the name of ‘Father’. He told them he was going to the Father’s house to prepare the ‘many mansions’ for them.

Paul takes up the theme of the life of the church being that of ‘the household of God’—a term familiar to old Israel. He spoke of ‘the Father from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named’. One of his most powerful statements was, ‘One God and Father of us all, who is above all, and through all, and in all’. When the prepositions ‘above’, ‘through’ and ‘in’ are noted in their meaning, then the world of ‘family’ is marvellously opened up.

Again, in the writings of the apostle John, the idea of family, especially through the use of the term ‘brethren’, takes us into the heart of ‘family’. Whilst ‘neighbour’

must be kept as a useful term, yet the intimacy of brethren keeps us seeing ‘the law of the Father’ as the law of family love. This warm, loving community, in which ‘brotherly love’ is a great theme, tells us the law of the Father is in action, and no less the law of ‘the elder brother, Jesus’ and the law of the Spirit of the Father and the Son. It is the family law.

The Law of Christ—I

We have seen that the Son delights to do the will of the Father and lives in the sociality of the law of his Father.¹ In his incarnation he would well be called ‘the man of law’. It is that relationship with law which we now look at under the term ‘the law of Christ’.

THE LAW OF CHRIST

Paul uses the term ‘law of Christ’ in I Corinthians 9:21 and Galatians 6:2. Doubtless, too, there is a similar thought in his term ‘the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus’. ‘The law of the Spirit’ or ‘the law of the Spirit of life’—whichever meaning may be primary—is ‘in Christ Jesus’, thus making it his law also. Here we are not seeking to prove that Christ had a law on his own—so to speak—but rather that he was always putting forward the law of God, the law of his Father. We now take a look at a few passages in which Jesus expounded the nature of the law of God.

¹ Two quotes from the Book of Hebrews show this, ‘Thou hast loved righteousness and hated lawlessness; therefore God, thy God, has anointed thee with the oil of gladness beyond thy comrades’ (1:9; cf. Ps. 45:7), and ‘Then I said, “Lo I have come to do thy will, O God,” as it is written of me in the roll of the book’ (10:7; cf. Ps. 40:7–8).

JESUS RADICALISED THE LAW

The term ‘radicalised’ has been used to show that Jesus was seeking to bring law to his hearers in its pristine nature; that is, in what we would call its primal nature. He was not altering the law, trying to transform it, or bring it out into new and better forms with more enlightened precepts. He was simply seeking to clear it of wrong interpretations, of traditional but unhelpful formalisations and of misunderstandings. So he would use antitheses—‘It has been said to you of old . . . but I say unto you . . .’. We need not go into the way these elements had come to affect Israel’s view of the law. Our first example of Jesus calling in question the view of the Pharisees is in Mark 7:1–13; the second in Matthew 23:23–24:

Now when the Pharisees gathered together to him, with some of the scribes, who had come from Jerusalem, they saw that some of his disciples ate with hands defiled, that is, unwashed. (For the Pharisees, and all the Jews, do not eat unless they wash their hands, observing the tradition of the elders; and when they come from the market place, they do not eat unless they purify themselves; and there are many other traditions which they observe, the washing of cups and pots and vessels of bronze.) And the Pharisees and the scribes asked him, ‘Why do your disciples not live according to the tradition of the elders, but eat with hands defiled?’ And he said to them, ‘Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, “This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men.” You leave the commandment of God, and hold fast the tradition of men.’ And he said to them, ‘You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God, in order to keep your tradition! For Moses said, “Honor your father and your mother”; and, “He who speaks evil of father or mother, let him surely die”; but you say,

'If a man tells his father or his mother, What you would have gained from me is Corban' (that is, given to God)—then you no longer permit him to do anything for his father or mother, thus making void the word of God through your tradition which you hand on. And many such things you do.

Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith; these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out a gnat and swallowing a camel!

These passages speak for themselves. More detailed is Jesus' teaching given in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew chapters 5 to 7. This requires careful examination. As we saw, Christ did not come to abolish the law and the prophets but to confirm and establish them. The following points cover the substance of the Sermon:

- (a) Only those who are in the beatitudinal states or modes (5:3–12) could really be able to receive what Jesus was teaching; that is, one must have a certain attitude towards law before one will desire it, and wish to live by it and in it. Life (law) must be lived from, and on, this basis.
- (b) True listeners are the salt of the earth, the light of the world, as a city on a hill, so that their works will be of God and glorify Him (5:13–16). What Jesus was teaching would be the natural way of life of the community (the Kingdom people).
- (c) The permanent, immutable nature of the law for true righteousness in God's Kingdom (5:17–20). It must be seen that the Sermon on the Mount makes no

sense apart from the teaching and reality of the Kingdom for it is 'Kingdom law'.

- (d) The five antitheses compare the way the law has been taken with the way it should be understood and practised, the true nature of law reasserting itself (5:21–48).
- (e) There is a piety which men do before men and not before God, whilst mistakenly thinking of it as being 'before God'. These acts of piety are almsgiving, prayer, forgiveness, fasting and seeking security in this life by human endeavour. Since God is Father, these acts must spring from intimate communion with him; and as for treasure, let it *not* be laid up on earth but in heaven. Regarding security, that will come from trust in God as *Father* (6:1–34).
- (f) (i) Judgment is of God, and human beings must not take his prerogative; (ii) holy things must not be given to unholy people; (iii) God must be trusted to supply what is needed, and dependent, human trust in Him will ask and receive; (iv) the way of the law and prophets is to do to others as you would wish them to do to you; (v) the law of righteousness is a 'narrow' way to life, but a sure one, demanding total choice of will, and it is the only one that will result in eternal life, rather than the way of life the crowd will take which is 'easy'; and (vi) disciples and children of the Father must be alert to disguised forms of evil. False prophets will be known by their fruits, and those producing evil fruit will be destroyed (7:1–20).

All of this is, indeed, ‘the law and the prophets’, but it is no less ‘the law of Christ’: not only the law that he kept, but the law that he expounded in the name of God, that is, the law of love, and especially in the relational sense as we see them in the five antitheses of 5:21–48 and especially in verses 43–48. That his words are true *torah* (law) and *dabar* (the word of command) can be seen by 7:21–27 where Jesus reveals his place of authority as judge on ‘that day’ (vv. 22–23):

Not every one who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers.’

Verses 24–27 reveal that he has not been making a commentary on the *torah* of God, but that what he has said *is* the *torah* of God, or, in short, the *torah* of Christ. This shows, then, that he is as the Lawgiver in that no choice is given to his hearers if they wish to survive the ultimate test of judgment:

Every one then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house upon the rock; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock. And every one who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house upon the sand; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell; and great was the fall of it.

There can be no doubt that Jesus is claiming his word is as the *dabar* (command) of the *torah*, and in that sense,

though Jesus is not here explicitly indicated as the new Moses, he is that—and even more than a new Moses. The people had not previously heard such words, nor witnessed such authority. Verses 28–29 indicate this: ‘And when Jesus finished these sayings, the crowds were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who had authority, and not as their scribes’.

Verses 24–27 reveal that he has not only been making a commentary on the law (*torah*) of God, but that what he has said *is* also, in fact, that very *torah*—the *torah* of God, the *torah* of Christ and the *torah* of the Spirit, even the *torah* of the Triune God.

When, then, we come to the term ‘the law of Christ’ in the Epistles, we must also include in our thinking what we have spoken of above, that which we have seen in the Gospels.

The Law of Christ—II

When we leave the Gospels and come to the Epistles and the Book of the Revelation, we see much more of ‘the law of Christ’ in the sense that the apostles looked back to what Jesus had said during his ministry and how this was to be the way of life for his community—the church. All of this cannot be realised without our understanding ‘the law of the Spirit’, which we will seek to do in the chapter next but one. Before we go on to what we call ‘the commands of Christ’, we need to see Jesus’ view of the law as it was related to creation.

THE LAW OF CHRIST AND CREATION

That Jesus saw the law as going back to creation cannot be doubted. In Matthew 5:31–32 Jesus brought up the matter of divorce, but he did so on the basis of the previous verses which spoke of the concupiscence of the human heart. This was his lead up to saying divorce was not part of true law, which is why he used the antithesis:

It was also said, ‘Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.’ But I say to you that every one who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, makes her an adulteress; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

In Matthew 19:1–12 (cf. 5:31; Mark 10:1–12; cf. Luke 16:18) Jesus based his opposition to divorce on the basis of creation, and in particular on Genesis 1:27 and 2:24:

Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, ‘For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh’? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man put asunder.

The statements, ‘from the beginning’ and ‘from the beginning it was not so’, show how Jesus radicalised marriage on the basis of creation. He saw no place for divorce in the Mosaic law, even though he acknowledged the so-called concession of Moses in Deuteronomy 24:1–4. Divorce would not happen apart from hardness of hearts, and that hardness can scarcely be said to begin specifically with any given married couple so much as it would be with generic opposition to what we have called ‘creational’ and ‘covenantal’ law. In other words that hardening began with the primal couple’s intention of going their own way via the Fall (cf. Gen. 3). The hardening against one another would derive from their hardness towards God’s law. Thus, when Jesus made his statement regarding divorce within the Sermon on the Mount, he was being consistent with *torah* as Israel knew it, and *torah* as it is, always. Primal Law and the Decalogue are one.

CHRIST’S OWN OBEDIENCE TO THE LAW OF GOD

When the rich young ruler (Matt. 19:16–22; Mark 10:17–22; Luke 18:18–23) came to him, Jesus did not vary from

the law. He said, ‘If you would enter life, keep the commandments’. The commandments were virtually the Decalogue. When, in Matthew 22:35, the lawyer asked Jesus which was the greatest commandment in the law, he replied:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.

In every way, then, Jesus supported the law of God, and, we may say, did so having taken it to himself as his own. This alone can give sense to what we are about to consider; namely, the theological terms ‘Christ’s active obedience’ and ‘Christ’s passive obedience’; terms which theologians use.

Christ’s Active Obedience

By this is meant the obedience Jesus rendered to God throughout all his life. It was obedience ‘from the heart’. It was the keeping of the law, not ‘the letter of the code’, but in accordance with the magnificent way Jesus knew the law, especially as it was the will of God, and perhaps, also, as ‘the written, preceptual image of God’ to which he gladly conformed.

Much has been made of the fact that Christ obeyed the law. A docetic view of Christ—the view that he was really God, and only a man in appearance—would find no difficulty in seeing this obedience as natural. There was, nevertheless, no docetic Son, but a Jesus who was ‘born of a woman, born under the law’; who was ‘made in the likeness of sinful flesh’; who ‘had to be made like

his brethren in every respect’; who ‘suffered and has been tempted’; and who was ‘one who in every respect has been tempted as we are’ and was ‘himself beset with weakness’. This one could call the law his own—‘the law of Christ’—because he kept it. Even so, it was no less than what he ought to have done, and, indeed, no less than all human beings should have done, and still should do, for fallenness is no part of true created humanity. Of course, had he not rendered ‘active obedience’, he could never have become the spotless sacrificial Lamb to take away the sin of the world.

Christ’s Passive Obedience

Theologically speaking, this is the obedience Christ offered in his passion, death and resurrection. This kind of obedience, as such, was not explicitly demanded by the law—although prophetically the coming of Messiah, his obedience and his redemptive work could be said to be part of ‘the law and the prophets’. He said that he had been commanded by the Father to lay down his life (John 10:17–18; 14:30–31; cf. Phil. 2:8; Rom. 5:21). We have previously spoken in chapter 10 of the *dikaioma* of the law, and this we have in Romans 5:18 (*enos dikaiomotos*) which means that Christ obeyed ‘the just requirement of the law’ in the sense of both active and passive obedience. We need to see that Christ actually took the judgment for all sins of all persons for all time (cf. Rom. 3:24–26 and Col. 2:14–15).

Our conclusion, then, is that, as regards the law of God, Christ in obeying it made it ‘the law of Christ’ even as it was—at the same time—essentially ‘the law of God’, that is, ‘the law of the Father’.

The Law of Christ—III

THE COMMANDS OF CHRIST IN THE GOSPELS AND THE ACTS

Whilst we have seen that Christ upheld the essential law of God by obeying it in both the *active* and *passive* senses, and taught that the law would not be abrogated, we cannot escape the fact that, in the Gospels, Jesus gives commands. Not only in regard to the Sermon on the Mount (cf. Luke 6:46), but also in regard to the commandment to love (John 13:34; 15:10) and other commandments, Jesus speaks to his disciples. In John 14:21ff. he promises the Triune indwelling. He also says, ‘If you love me you will keep my commandments’, ‘He who has my commandments and keeps them . . .’; and the latter accords with John 8:51, ‘If anyone keeps my word he will never see death’. Here the use of ‘my word’ (*emon logon*) really relates to the Hebrew *dabar*, the dynamic ‘word’, even the word of law. Acts 1:2, ‘After he had given commandment through the Holy Spirit to the apostles’, surely catches up the ‘proclamation commission’ passages at the ends of the four Gospels, especially in Matthew 28:20—‘teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you’—and surely links with

Acts 10:42, ‘he commanded us to preach to the people’. Paul, likewise, is commanded to do the same in Acts chapters 9, 22 and 26.

THE GOSPEL IS A COMMAND

What is also important is that the proclamation—the form of the gospel called the *kerugma*—is also a command. Listeners have to ‘obey the gospel’,¹ a term used in Romans 10:16ff. and II Thessalonians 1:7–8, and referred to in Acts 5:32; 16:30; I Peter 1:2, 22; Romans 1:5; 15:18; and 18:26. In Acts 6:7 it is recorded that ‘a great many of the priests were *obedient* to the faith’. In this sense the gospel becomes the new *torah* to be obeyed, and the outcome of such obedience is the gift of eternal life, with forgiveness of sins, justification, sanctification, adoption and, ultimately, glorification. By this we do not mean ‘obeying the gospel’ earns these gifts, but it is submitting to the saving Lordship of Christ (cf. Rom. 10:9), so that, then, the gifts are the fruit of the gospel, following the acts of repentance and faith. It is repentance and faith which are the obedience, but it is the gospel of grace which saves. Having saved, the gospel then demands the continuing obedience intrinsic to the New Covenant. It would seem equally clear in the Book

¹ Being obedient to the proclamation of the gospel lies in the idea of *kerugma*, which was a term used for the proclamation of the Emperor’s edict, delivered by his messenger, and usually in a public place. Obedience to the *kerugma* was under the threat of punishment; hence the strong statement in II Thessalonians 1:7–8, ‘when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his holy angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and upon those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ’.

of the Revelation that the servants and saints of God who ‘keep His commandments’ are at the same time keeping the commandments the Lord gave to his church. The book itself contains numerous commandments for the people of God, not least the paranetic statements in the seven letters of chapters 2 and 3. In all, then, this is ‘the law of Christ’ being obeyed in history, for he is Messiah and, as such, the Lord whose law must be kept.

‘THE LAW OF CHRIST’ IN THE EPISTLES

The two explicit mentions of ‘the law of Christ’ are found in I Corinthians 9:21, and Galatians 6:2. In the first he says, ‘To those outside the law I became as one outside the law—not being without law towards God but under the law of Christ—that I might win those outside the law’. He says clearly he is not lawless—‘not being without law towards God’—but that he is ‘under the law of Christ’; that is, he is ‘enlawed’ to Christ. To Paul the idea of being without law was unthinkable. In the context of his utterance, his being under the law of Christ, or under the law to Christ, relates to his desire, ‘that I might by all means save some’. He is not under the law simply in order to save some, for that would mean his being enlawed to Christ was utilitarian. No: all his life was lived passionately in the law of Christ, a law he would understand to be no less the law of God the Father, or the law of the Holy Spirit.

In the second reference (Gal. 6:2) he says, ‘Bear one another’s burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ’. This must equate with the law of love. In Galatians 5:13–14 he has said, ‘. . . through love be servants one of another.

For the whole law is fulfilled in one word, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself ”’. This accords with Romans 13:8–10:

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbour has fulfilled the law. The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery, You shall not kill, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,’ and any other commandment, are summed up in this sentence, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’ Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

‘He who loves his neighbour has fulfilled the law’ is the principle. Note the use of the verb ‘to fulfil’ (*pleroo*–) in both the Galatian and Roman passages. Linked with Romans 8:4 and Galatians 6:2 (*anapleroo*–), the statements in all references speak of the law being fulfilled in us rather than us fulfilling the law,² and this is an important point. In Romans 8:4 and Galatians 5:16ff., the fulfilling of the law arises from walking in the Spirit, for to live in the Spirit is to experience the fulfilling of the law within us. It could not be otherwise. The fruit of the Spirit is really the way of true law-walking.

There is a further reference to ‘the law of Christ’ which, though not explicit, is thinking of law as ‘dominical’, that is, as the mind of Christ, out of his *torah*. In

² The point made is that Romans 13:8 and 10 give no explicit command to fulfil the law. In 13:8 it is said, ‘He who loves his neighbour has fulfilled (*pepleroken*) the law’; in 13:10 ‘love is the fulfilling (*pleroma*)’. Likewise Romans 8:4 says, ‘that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled (*plerothe*) in us’. Again, Galatians 6:2 (*anaplerosete*) can be translated ‘and so you fulfil the law of Christ’ (NRSV). One might conclude that the fulfilment of the law is something which is accomplished in us, rather than the idea that we set out to accomplish it, though this idea may not be wholly absent.

I Corinthians 7, Paul is giving advice in regard to marriage, the possible separation of spouses and the states of unmarried persons. For the most part he proceeds as though what he is saying is evidently correct, and that the basis for such advice is that it has already proceeded from Christ, the Lord. In verses 10 and 12 he says he is giving a certain charge: ‘To the married I give charge, not I but the Lord’, ‘To the rest I say, not the Lord’. These statements do not mean that Paul is speaking from his own mind, but really from the mind of the Lord. It is just that Christ had not given explicit pronouncements, but Paul, being an apostle, could speak *as* the Lord.

A CONCLUSION REGARDING ‘THE LAW OF CHRIST’

There can be no question about the law of Christ being the law of God. What we distil from the Gospels is a review and a conclusion of what we have seen above.

- (a) *Jesus in no way denigrated law*: He insisted that it must be fulfilled. So his statements, ‘Think not I have come to abolish the law and the prophets. I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them’; ‘It is easier for heaven and earth to pass away, than for one dot of the law to be made void’; ‘Whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven: but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven’, all give the law the highest place. He told the rich young ruler that if he kept the commandments he would have eternal life.
- (b) *Jesus did not bring a higher law*—as such—but an interpretation of the law which raised it higher than that presented by the lawyers, scribes and Pharisees. He said, ‘Except your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven’. He told listeners, ‘The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat; so practice and observe whatever they tell you, but not what they do; for they preach but do not practice’. The Sermon on the Mount has (i) ‘It was said to you of old’, and (ii) ‘but I say to you’, which was the essential truth of the law. In passing we may note that Jesus taught law, and that the ‘law-folk’ such as the scribes, lawyers and Pharisees were appalled at his presentation of it, doubtless because they were exposed as having false or inadequate views of it.
- (c) *All law in Jesus’ view had—and has—to do with the Kingdom of God* [of heaven]. Just as in Israel it had to do with covenant, and Israel was a theocracy, so in Jesus’ teaching. This is clear in the Sermon on the Mount. In the New Testament the Kingdom and the Covenant are interrelated.
- (d) *Paul’s Epistles speak of ‘the law of Christ’* (I Cor. 9:21; Gal. 6:2). This could refer to (i) the commands which Jesus gave (cf. John 13:34; 14:15; 15:12–13; Matt. 28:19–20; Acts 1:2); (ii) the law which Jesus followed and fulfilled in his flesh; and (iii) the law of love (Rom. 13:8–10; Gal. 5:13–14; cf. James 1:22–25; 2:8, 12), which was virtually the Decalogue which Jesus summarised as love to God and love to one’s neighbour.

The Law of the Spirit—I

THE LAW OF THE TRIUNE GOD

We have noted that the law of God is the law of the divine Community: the law of the Father, the law of the Son and the law of the Spirit as they are One together. No one knows the Son except the Father, and He draws human beings to the Son. No one knows the Father except the Son, and he is the way to the Father. The Spirit is the Spirit of the Father and the Son, and he reveals the Son and so reveals the Father: he reveals them both. It is by the law of love that the Trinity subsists, and it is one law. It is variously called ‘the law of the Father’, ‘the law of the Son’ and ‘the law of the Holy Spirit’, as it pertains to each Person, but it is one law.

THE LAW OF THE SPIRIT

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do: sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, 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. For those who live according to the

flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. To set the mind on the flesh is death, but to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace. For the mind that is set on the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law, indeed it cannot; and those who are in the flesh cannot please God.

In Romans 8:1–8 (above) we have an exposition by Paul of the law of God. In this case it is linked with ‘the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus’. There are at least three ways of looking at this statement. It can mean (i) there is a ‘law of the Spirit of life’ and it is operative ‘in Christ Jesus’; (ii) there is a ‘law of the Spirit’ and it is ‘of life in Christ Jesus’; and (iii) there is a law and it is of ‘the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus’. What is obvious is that ‘the law of the Spirit’ and ‘life in Christ Jesus’ are linked together. In the passage ‘the law of the Spirit in Christ Jesus’ virtually equals the gospel, for it frees the believer from ‘the law of sin and death’. We have already observed that ‘the law of sin and death’ is really the law which has been broken by sinners and so leads to death, although that was not—and is not—the primary purpose of primal law.

Put in other words, ‘The Holy Spirit brings the gospel of the Father and the Son, and where there is acceptance of his revelation, with ensuing repentance and faith, the Spirit applies the gospel to the heart and liberates believers from the death of sin—the legal demand of the law—and brings them into life and peace; that is, into freedom from the law’s condemnation. Those liberated have “the mind of the Spirit which is life and peace”, whereas before they had “the mind of the flesh which is death”’.

Part of the purpose of the Spirit's liberating us from the law of sin and death is that 'the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit'. It is this 'just requirement of the law' which has occasioned much debate, and the debate has to do with justification, sanctification and their relationship one with the other. It is not our purpose in this book to enter into that debate or to indicate much of the relationship between the two. We do, however, have to look at the problems raised by the term 'the just requirement of the law'.

'THE JUST REQUIREMENT OF THE LAW'

There can be little doubt that the just requirement of the law is total obedience to it. When a Christian is said to have been 'dead to the law', 'discharged from the law' and 'freed from the law', does this then mean that person must set about for the second time keeping the law? If so, then for what purpose? The answer must be that the law has always been and will always be, and keeping the law—fulfilling 'the just requirement of the law'—must always be. In regard to the law there are, roughly speaking, three attitudes that are taken by people who are Christian: (i) we are utterly free from law. There is really no law to obey; we just go on in Christ and everything is in its right order; (ii) we must keep the law, and keep it in detail. Although redeemed, we must never depart from law: it is our whole way of life. If we do not do this we will be condemned and our salvation will be in jeopardy; and (iii) having been freed from the *condemnation* of the law, we are free now to obey the law out of love and

gratitude to God, knowing it to be the way of true living, of life worked out in holiness. When we fail, or sin, the grace of forgiveness is still there for us. Walking in the Spirit is the way to have the law fulfilled in us. Those who opt for '(i)' are called 'antinomians', and those who opt for '(ii)' are called 'nomists' or 'legalists'. Those in the category of '(iii)', I believe could be said to have grasped New Testament teaching.

At the time of the Reformation, the theologians had to counter what they called 'works-righteousness', and in showing Christ's liberation from the condemning and lethal action of the law, they were anxious that the whole pattern of keeping the law for self-justification should not recommence once a person was 'free from the law'. If justification is properly understood, this should not happen. If it is not properly understood, then either 'nomism' or 'antinomianism' will be the way some people will go. Even so, category '(iii)' must stand, but it can only stand as 'the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus'.

We need to add that obedience to the law is what the conscience¹ will demand, and that true obedience will allow the conscience to be quiet, the heart knowing its own delight in the 'honey' of the law.

¹ See Appendix II, 'Conscience and the Law'.

15

The Law of the Spirit—II

THE PROPHECY AND COMING OF THE LAW OF THE SPIRIT

All that Christ did as a man was in the power of the Holy Spirit. It can be said that he lived in God's law—God's will—by the Spirit. His work of ministry, his death on the Cross, his Resurrection from the grave, as also his Ascension to the right hand of the Father, was by the Holy Spirit. On the day of Pentecost the Old Testament prophecies of the coming of the Holy Spirit were fulfilled. One of those promises is found in Ezekiel chapter 36 (vv. 22–27):

Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord GOD: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came. And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them; and the nations will know that I am the LORD, says the Lord GOD, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes. For I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and

I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances.

This corresponds closely with the promise of the New Covenant in Jeremiah 31 (vv. 31–34):

Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant which they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

The Ezekiel passage talks of a cleansing of the heart, the renewing of it and the placing in it of 'a new spirit'; the result being that God will cause His people 'to walk in my [His] statutes and be careful to observe my [His] ordinances'. In the Jeremiah passage the people of the New Covenant will be forgiven their sins and come to know God, and this grace will mean that, as God says, 'I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people'. Here the Holy Spirit and the gospel meet and so the just requirement of the law is fulfilled. This is the law of the New Covenant, for was it not the covenant for 'the remission of sins'? This is, then, 'the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus'. Paul calls the Old Covenant 'the

dispensation of death’, and the New Covenant ‘the dispensation of the Spirit’, meaning ‘the dispensation of life’, and sees it as a dispensation of splendour far beyond what the old had known.

THE OUTWORKING OF THE LAW OF THE SPIRIT

Here we must remind ourselves that we are still concerned with the primal law, the law of the Triune Godhead, the law of love, the law which Christ confirms and establishes and which has its ‘just requirement’ on the human plane of love to God and to the neighbour. Paul speaks of the law of the Decalogue—‘the ten words’—and describes it as the law of love. James speaks similarly, calling it ‘the royal law’ and ‘the law of liberty’. It is the law of Christ which is brought to the heart by the Holy Spirit who enables persons of faith to live in it.

In Romans 7:6, Paul wrote, ‘But now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code, but in the new life of the Spirit’. Notice that we do serve, and notice that it is only in and by the Holy Spirit that we do this. In the same chapter he speaks of the law as ‘holy’, ‘just’ and ‘good’—high terms indeed. Then he says, ‘The law is spiritual’, contrasting it with human fleshliness. What is spiritual is always of the Spirit. Another way of saying this is that when we look at the law through the revelation of the Spirit, then it is indeed a wonderful thing, and we ‘delight in the law of God after the inmost self’.

In Galatians 5:16–26 the same Paul presents us with some interesting principles. He says that if we are led by

the Spirit, we are not *under* the law. To be under the law is the way and experience of nomism and legalism. The result of this will be ‘the works of the flesh’ which are quite dreadful. Nomism is fleshly—human self-effort—and it results in the works of the flesh and not at all in keeping the law, and those who produce the works of the flesh will not enter the Kingdom of God. Those who set out nomistically to obey the law will have a bad end.

The opposite principle is to walk in the Spirit; that is, be led by him. The result of this is ‘the fruit of the Spirit’. The fruit, that is, the harvest of the Spirit, is most beautiful and beneficial to all. It is evident that they who have the fruit of the Spirit produced in them *will* enter the Kingdom of God. Paul says, ‘Against such there is no law’. He is really saying that there is a law against the works of the flesh, or that the law is against the works of the flesh, but the law is not against the fruit of the Spirit. He is really saying, ‘The fruit of the Spirit is in accordance with the law. They are the very expression of the law’. If this be the case, then we can see the beauty of law *as lived in the Spirit*. Fleshly living is bitter and vinegary. Living the law in the Spirit—the law of the Spirit—is honey to the palate and sweetness to the heart and quietness for the conscience.

LIFE IN THE SPIRIT

So far we have not gone wider than talking of the law of the Spirit; meaning that we live out the primal law, the law of the Trinity, by the power of the Spirit. When we look at the work of the Spirit in the New Covenant community, we are dazzled by his many qualities, gifts and

works. He is the Holy Spirit, so that from him issues the personal life of holiness for the community. He is the Spirit of love, the Spirit of fellowship, the Spirit of unity and the Spirit of peace. When we explore these rich and powerful elements, we see that they enable the community to live in the two great commandments which sum up the law and the prophets; namely, love to God and love to our neighbour. That love is shown in worship towards God and service towards others.

In our next chapter we shall look at the new life in the community which lives under the law of the Father, the law of Christ and the law of the Spirit, all three being *one* law.

16

The Law of Love and the Love of Law

THE PROBLEM OF LAW-KEEPING

There are sane believers who honestly fear that if keeping the law is essential to true holiness, then some Christians will again come under the pressure of their consciences and live nomistic lives; that is, live life under the old tyranny of law. For them it is tempting to become antinomian, to say that there is now no law for believing people, and to assert that there is a freedom from law which really leaves them free to live. Of course, they agree in a general way that there is a law of love, but that love, and not law, ought to determine the manner of one's conduct or behaviour.

Some who recognise that the life of the community ought to be holy, argue in one or more of the following ways: 'Under the New Covenant we have freedom to make fair choices. We are not under some ironclad law, some rigid, implacable, eternal set of divine legislation which must govern every movement of our lives so that we feel caged in. Grace makes us into mature people, and we can make sensible choices. The law of Israel no longer is our law, even if we recognise that the ten commandments are a good set of principles. Certainly we do

not want to go all the way back to creation when life was in its infancy. No: what has happened in the New Covenant is that a new kind of law has been given to us. Christ showed his fellow-Israelites that they had mistaken the real meaning of law, but he came to give us something of a new law, but not one which is ironclad, and certainly not a recast of the old. His law was the law of love, and so we must make mature choices. Certainly in the Epistles we have many injunctions and precepts put before us, and these may—put together—constitute something like a new law, but we will not call them a law since the word “law” conjures up those old, hard pictures of law. In fact we would even prefer to have the word “command”, for a command is something personal and something directly from God’s mind to our hearts. When a command comes in this personal way, we will obey it, but the harsh idea of law will be absent’.

Much more could be argued along these lines and there is certainly a lot of sense in some of the things said. For example, we have in the New Testament teaching which is called paranetic and paracletic. So many things which are said are injunctions and even precepts, and we call them ‘paranetic’. There are so many exhortations to love this way and that, and we call exhortations ‘paracletics’. The ones arguing the things of the last paragraph might say, ‘Oh, lump these all together and in a sense they make a new law. Yes, we could live by that law without thinking of it as *law*’. Part of the trouble of thinking in this kind of way is that the person probably never had a love of God’s law. Conscience and guilt may have caused him or her to have a dislike and dread of the law, and the image developed of law meant that when that person saw God’s love and forgiveness, he or she felt

free from the old guilt, but did not want to ‘start all over again’.

A HELPFUL EXERCISE REGARDING LOVE OF THE LAW

Every person should give many hours to reading the Psalms, and especially those which show a love for the law of God. The reader will be driven to ask, ‘What is it that made these Psalmists so love the law, for they say many times that they do, and they certainly delight in the law?’. Dislike of the law must be something we have raised up. We could talk about the Fall, about the guilty conscience and human depravity, but the root cause of dislike of God’s law is dislike of God. This dislike is linked with the authority of God, and that authority is seen by guilty people in a bad light. Authority, properly understood and properly exercised, is the responsibility of love which the one in authority has towards all. People who are authoritarian—who like to rule it over others—give a bad press to true authority.

We come back to our old point: the law of God is the way in which the three Persons subsist together as one in honouring, serving, giving to one another and receiving from one another. It is the principle of being ‘other-person regarding’. Anyone who has seen this in the divine Community will be entranced and delighted, and will long for such law-living in his own community. Of course we are aware that this way of living will differ in some of its forms from age to age, place to place, generation to generation, but the core principles will never vary, for, by nature of the case, they cannot.

HOW WE COME TO LOVE, AND SO TO LIVE, THE LAW OF LOVE

What we have to grasp is the whole matter of loving as set out in the New Testament. John the apostle teaches us that all love is of God and only of God. God is love. Initially, apart from the work of the Cross, we cannot know that love, for to know love is to know God. Love is not a quality of God: God *is* love. Jesus spoke of loving the Father, and of the Father loving him, and he prayed—regarding his own people—‘that the world may know that thou hast loved them *even* as thou hast loved me’. Such love for the world caused the Father to send His Son into the world to become the propitiation for its sins, and ‘he did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all’.

John further teaches us that ‘we love because he first loved us’. He means we will never genuinely love until first God’s love comes to us and changes us. The Holy Spirit causes this love to be flooded into our hearts, which is the same as saying, ‘God is flooded into our hearts’, or ‘God is present as love by the Holy Spirit’. Then we will love, and that loving will be the living out of the law of the Trinity, the law of God, the law of love. This we find to be the case in the events describing the life of the Church in the Acts and the Epistles, to say nothing of the Book of the Revelation.

THE LIFE OF LAW IN THE CHURCH OF THE TRINITY

In this we are not looking at some idyllic scene. Certainly what we see does not match up with the prophecies

concerning the marvellous *shalom* which comes upon the world in the days of Messiah—those depicted as: ‘where the lion lies down with the lamb’; where ‘they shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain’; when ‘the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea’; where ‘they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks’; and where ‘nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more’.

We are, nevertheless, looking at something no less rich. In a world where men and women are seeking their own, where sin and evil and selfishness seem often to have the upper hand, the happening of Pentecost is the miracle of the Church: a comparatively small community in which men and women love one another, where a daily distribution of help to the poor, the orphans, widows and the aged is commenced, and which burns to take the liberating gospel to the whole world—and does. There can be no doubt that these were people of high spiritual and moral calibre, even though many derived from the lower and slave classes. No people has had such strong respect for their love, their simplicity and purity of life and their high moral behaviour.

The sweetness of the honey of God’s law began through the gospel and the coming of the Spirit to flow across the world.

Honey Spreading over the World

Our last but one chapter has two components. The first is the gospel spreading across the world, and the second is renewal of men and women in the image of God, so that, as they are renewed in Christ, the true image of the law is being magnified in them.

THE GOSPEL BRINGING LAW TO THE WORLD

In Isaiah 2:1–4 (as in Micah 4:1–4) the holy city Jerusalem becomes the centre of the world:

The word which Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

It shall come to pass in the latter days
that the mountain of the house of the LORD
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
and all the nations shall flow to it,
and many peoples shall come, and say:
'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.'

For out of Zion shall go forth the law,
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
He shall judge between the nations,
and shall decide for many peoples;
and they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.

In this passage the peoples of the world wish to learn from the Lord, and so they move towards His holy sanctuary that 'he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths'. Note that 'ways' and 'paths' are terms used for God's law. At the same time something important is emanating from the holy city, 'For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem'. In the room where they were gathered on the night of his resurrection, Jesus spoke of a similar happening:

Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgive-ness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem' (Luke 24:45–47).

When we ask about 'repentance and remission of sins', we realise these sins are, without doubt, universally against the law of the Lord.¹ When we see that this gospel 'should be preached in his name to all nations, *beginning from Jerusalem*', it is reasonable to link it with 'For out of Zion shall go forth the law [*torah*], and the

¹ See Appendix I, 'The Natural Law', noting the universal guilt of the human race.

word [*dabar*] of the LORD from Jerusalem'. We do not have room here to develop the fact that the gospel brings the law to the world in a way no other factor or movement can. We are always careful never to mingle and merge gospel and law, but whatever the views may be on 'gospel and law', the obedience of law always springs from the redemptive grace of God, and this in both Old and New Covenants.

Another passage in Isaiah covers a similar thought. In 25:6–9 we see a universal banquet prepared for those for whom God has destroyed 'the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all the nations'. The original covenant banquet enjoyed by the elders on Sinai gives place to this glorious feast when 'death is swallowed up for ever', and the effects of the curse dissolved.² This is the future of the nations to whom the gospel is preached and who have—as nations—become disciples of the Lord Christ. They have been taught whatsoever things Christ commanded his apostles.

At this point we may refer to Koheleth's conclusive and inclusive statement: 'The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole [duty] of man'. The whole meaning of Man is to love and fear God and keep His commandments! Who, left to himself or herself, would have thought that? Out of the honeycomb of the law drips the ineffable sweetness of life for those who love His law. Human fulfilment lies in the richness of law fulfilment. 'The aim of our charge', Paul has said, 'is love that issues from a pure heart and a good conscience and a

² Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah*, IVP, Leicester, 1993, pp. 209–210.

sincere faith'. This is the honey that satisfies the eager palate of a once sinful race. It is the universal remedy for a troubled conscience, bringing it to peace and quietness.

**MAN, BEING RENEWED IN THE IMAGE WHO IS
CHRIST, KNOWS THE INTRINSIC SWEETNESS OF
THE LAW**

The law of the Triune God is essential to the happiness and welfare of the human race. Paul's wonderful words in Philippians 2:2–4:

. . . being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves. Let each of you look not³ to his own interests but to the interests of others,

are words which flow from the very life of God. Christ comes to be and to show that law; to live it before us and to effect its saving elements in his atonement. This is surely the law of love.

We have seen that baptism into Christ is not only wholly union with him, but also life now lived in communion with the divine Community. We have been 'called into the fellowship of his Son'; 'we have fellowship with the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ'; 'our lives are hid with Christ in God'; and 'we are partakers of the divine nature'. We dwell in love and love in us; that is, we dwell in God and He in us. In baptism we have put off the old

³ I have omitted the two words 'only' and 'also' which are in the RSV but not in the Greek. The NRSV also omits them. This radically changes the meaning.

humanity—Adam with his hostility to law—and have put on the new humanity—Christ the redeemer and law-giver. Paul tells us that in this ‘exchange’ the new humanity in which we participate is ‘created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness’. That is, we are being renewed in this ‘true righteousness and holiness’ which are the very nature of God Himself. In another place the same apostle tells us the new humanity which is now ours means we are ‘being renewed in knowledge after the image of [our] creator’.

Translated in terms of our living, it means we are being renewed in the original image of God in which we were made, but this is all happening in Christ who is the ‘Radiance of the glory of God, flawless Expression of the nature of God’, ‘the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being’.⁴ If we go back to our saying that ‘man is the living personal image of God and the law is the written preceptual image of God’, then we see that as Man lives out the law of God, his image is bright with the ‘true righteousness and holiness’, for he is being ‘renewed in knowledge after the image of him that created him’. Man, the image of God, is one with the law, ‘the written preceptual image of God’. To this Paul adds, ‘Here [in the image] there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free man, but Christ is all and in all’. This comports with other of his statements, such as, ‘There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female’; and:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptised into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and were all made to drink of one Spirit (I Cor. 12:12–13).

What he is saying in these remarkable statements is that the law of God—of love—obtains for all the differences human beings know by reason of race, religion, culture, community and gender, and ensures that such differences and variations are dealt with wonderfully in that community of Christ, so that all become ‘other-persons regarding’; all put all others before themselves; and all think highly of those others, honouring them, giving to them, serving them and receiving from them with thankfulness.

In one sense we have scarcely touched the wonder of the law, but within Christ the living image, our images are brightening and shining. As the foolish impediments we make of our variations and differentiations are ‘lost in wonder, love and praise’, so we can see what the wise writer was about when he said, ‘The path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day’.

The ‘full day’ will be when we are finally inducted into the mystery of the Godhead, into full fellowship in the divine Community, the love of the Three, revelling with Them in the law in which They subsist, and we, also, with Them, and this for ever.

⁴ Translations of Hebrews 1:3 by J. B. Phillips, *Letters to Young Churches*, Fontana Books, London, 1947, p. 183 and *NIV*.

Postscript

The 17 chapters which have gone before this one have covered the matter of God's law in a simple way. Some would think in a way that is too simple, since many matters concerning law have not been covered. I can only plead that much more will be covered in a future book on the law. For practical purposes, the material in this present, small volume should give some sense to the subject, and some readers may now desire to live out the glorious law of God and Man in their lives. They ought to go ahead and do this.

The two Appendices on 'The Natural Law' and 'Conscience and the Law' address the universality of law without claiming uniformity for it. The conscience of Man is so dynamic an element of his being that no treatment of law would make sense without it. I have also included some material for meditations on the law of God, which I thought could be helpful.

I have discovered over the years that 'How To' books are not entirely satisfactory. Perhaps it is because each one of us learns to do things by certain urgings, necessity and practice. People who are addicted to 'How To' books are unconsciously postponing the day of doing. I am convinced that the way to live in, under and with the law of God is just to go ahead and do it. Israel was given the law after God had delivered her as a nation from the bondage of Egypt. We might call that 'the launching grace for obedience'. Likewise no human being who has

not had a 'grace launching for obedience' will truly live in the law of God. The degree to which we have seen our desperate state of inner lawlessness, and our violation of God's holiness will help to determine the view we have of needed grace to bring us to forgiveness and to justification from the wrath and curse of the law. This will constitute our 'launching grace for obedience'.

Given that we are now lovingly motivated to obey the law and that we realise our failures in obedience are always covered by forgiving grace, yet there is a driving power which we have as human beings who are in communion with God. Not only do we desire to please Him because He loves us and we love Him, but obedience itself also has—so to speak—its own motivating drive. It is as though obedience begets obedience. The way of the transgressor is hard, but there is honey for the obedient. This is not some sort of bribe, but, as they say, 'it goes with the territory'. Obedience is the pleasurable way of life. The taught conscience approves, the heart is free of the guilt disobedience brings. Our eyes see the beauty of God's law.

None of this is to say that the way of the obedient is wholly pleasurable and easy. Jesus warned that those who lived in God would be persecuted, but even that persecution should be a cause for joy. The hatred of law generally, and of God's law in particular, is no small element in our society, and if we are allied with God's law, we will receive much of that hatred. The witness of obedience is disturbing to many. All of this has to be taken into consideration continually, but the principle still remains, 'The path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, which shines brighter and brighter until full day'. We need to persist in loving obedience even when it has to be accomplished at great cost.

When we keep in mind that the law of God ever was and ever will be; that all lawlessness will ultimately be destroyed; and that the life of the Kingdom will be lived in the law of the Kingdom, then we will eagerly pursue the life of holiness lived in the law of the Triune God.

I sincerely hope this little book will be of help to many readers, and the honey of the law will be gladly and gratefully tasted. The qualities of honey are many for healing, for maintaining health, for sustaining life and for giving enjoyment, but the health, life and joy of the law far transcends even the image that honey can give. We toast one another and say, ‘Taste and see that the Lord is good!’.

Appendix I

The Natural Law

The reason for looking at this subject is that since the conscience is universal and because it always pertains to law, then law is significant. We wonder at the variety of laws which tribes and cultures know, and the compulsion that comes with conscience to constrain men and women to obey these laws. The idea of a law being in some senses common to all cultures seems to be contained in Paul’s view of the nations and their laws. In Romans 2:12–16 he says:

All who have sinned without the law will also perish without the law, and all who have sinned under the law will be judged by the law. For it is not the hearers of the law who are righteous before God, but the doers of the law who will be justified. When Gentiles who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them on that day when, according to my gospel, God judges the secrets of men by Christ Jesus.

Here he is saying that the Jews have one law and the nations have laws which are different, but yet are somewhat analogous to the Mosaic law. Verse 15 is important: ‘They show that what the law requires is written on their

hearts, while their conscience also bears witness and their conflicting thoughts accuse or perhaps excuse them'. It would seem that since the Fall there has always been natural law, but the theological–philosophical idea of natural law from a Christian point of view was developed by Thomas Aquinas along with his natural theology—though the idea of natural law was extant long before his treatment of it. He thought human beings could gain considerable knowledge of God's law without having biblical revelation, and although they might not call it 'God's law', they would see it as natural to human living. Roman Catholic theologians have strongly developed the idea of natural law. More and more Protestant theologians are leaning on the idea—though not in its Thomist form.

It is an interesting fact that when the Nuremburg War Trials took place, there had to be some kind of resolution of the varying views of law. The Chief Prosecutor for the French Republic, M. Francois de Menthon said:

There can be no well-balanced and enduring nation without a common consent in the essential rules of social living, without a general standard of behaviour before the claims of conscience, without the adherence of all citizens to identical concepts of good and evil.¹

It is interesting in this case that the fact and value of conscience is taken for granted, as indeed is the idea of 'identical concepts of good and evil'.

Another view of natural law would be that cultures and tribes do not so much come to their laws by observing and

reasoning—though that may well be so—as that there is an inner ontological pressure on them to observe the law of God, innate in Man from creation, so that their laws which form over a period of time generally take the shape of what we call 'the moral law'. Conscience, in some sense, has a consciousness of moral law, and so cultures are driven by such an image or related images. Luther observed that the natural law 'is clearly and well summarised at Mount Sinai and in a better way than by the philosophers'.

The general idea seems to be that it is impossible for human beings to live without some kind of law and that they are not left to do so. Examination of actual laws would take us into the realm of the development of cultures, and the Pauline idea that Man, in rebelling against God, substituted idols for God and worshipped them, means the matter is quite complex. For example, did the idolaters see the idols as having moral laws and demands? Was the law of God transposed to the idols, at least in some form or other? Questions like these are not easy to answer. Linked also with the formation of natural law—any law—is the worship cultus and the priestly hierarchies that go with that cultus. All cultures train the conscience to have certain standards for behaviour. In addition we need to look at the break-up of a more monolithic humanity as a result of the event of the Tower of Babel. Languages are at the roots of a culture, and knowledge of them leads us to the heart of that culture.

What concerns us mainly in the matter of natural law is the idea that the concept of law is universal, and that, roughly speaking, the form of law is universally moral. It would seem that, even behind the patterns and mores any

¹ Quoted in Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics, Volume 1, Foundations*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1966, p. 386.

culture uses to train the conscience, there is still the law of God and the image of God; that is to say there are images of God and images of law. The fall of man has, to a great degree, altered the primal image of law and the image of God known by Man in innocence. Man could not face the full force of these two things and has had to transmogrify them to some extent, in order to be able to be free of them. Thus his substitute for God is the polytheistic idols, or a religious and philosophical monotheism; whilst his substitute for the law of God is his natural law by which he seeks to maintain some order of morality, so that the community has a form of collective social security. Natural law is not thought, by those who hold it, to be a substitute for ontological law, but to be of the very nature of it.

Already we can see how the subject of natural law demands an understanding of the human conscience. Man cannot get away from an image of God and an image of law, and thus his conscience drives him on, and subjects him to misery when he does not conform to law; that is, to the natural law he knows. We cannot here talk of the deeper conflict he may know from what we call the ontological pressure from God's true law, for that image may well be deeply seated within him and may often try the defences which he may have erected in his formalised 'natural images'.

From the passage we quoted above, and the one we are now quoting from Romans 3:19–20, we see that at some point in a person's history—if not continually—the law of God confronts men and women *universally*:

Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped, and the whole world may be held accountable to God. For no human

being will be justified in his sight by works of the law, since through the law comes knowledge of sin.

The use of the 'every mouth' and 'the whole world' must mean that God's law is what essentially—and perhaps ultimately—confronts Man.

We can conclude, then, that all human beings have an image of law and an image of deity, and they live with these in the context of their consciences. Ultimately all will have to face the true God and His true law. In all of this we are assuming what we have set out in our present book. We can only add the observation that often in the history of the church—and perhaps most often—it has happened that theologians have mistaken the true law of God—the law of His Being—for natural law. This would account for much confusion in what are called 'Christian ethics'. It would also account for deficient views of the need for, and the nature of, salvation, since those who hold to natural law and its so-called 'oughtness' seem to hold to the ability of Man to keep such law. Whilst the conscience brings a sense of guilt where there is failure to keep the law, and with that guilt often a sense of misery, yet something within Man generally holds an optimism that he can either 'make it up, atone or eventually succeed'. The Reformers saw the first use of the law to be a guide to society in promoting civic righteousness, and its second use as that of bringing conviction of sin and driving sinners to Christ. Natural law, as such, does not have that kind of scheme of salvation which obtains through the Christian gospel.

Appendix II

Conscience and the Law

In Appendix I we have seen the closeness and relatedness of conscience and law. There are varying views of what constitutes conscience.

**SOME PRELIMINARY REMARKS
ABOUT CONSCIENCE**

There is no word for conscience in the Old Testament, the closest to it being ‘heart’—David spoke of his heart smiting him. The writer of Proverbs (20:27) says, ‘The spirit of man is the lamp of the Lord, searching all his innermost parts’. This may refer to the conscience. Just a few uses of the term in the New Testament give us some indication of the nature of conscience: ‘I . . . have a clear conscience before God and man’, ‘I thank God whom I serve with a clear conscience’, ‘holding faith and a good conscience’, ‘a pure heart, a good conscience, and a sincere faith’; as against these: ‘By rejecting conscience certain persons have made shipwreck of their faith’, ‘liars whose consciences are seared’, ‘an evil conscience’, ‘a conscience [consciousness] of sins’. John talks about the heart condemning or not condemning, and this may be a Johannine way of using the idea of conscience

(I John 3:17–21). These few New Testament quotes show the dynamic nature of conscience.

Some Views of Conscience

The Oxford Dictionary speaks of conscience (from the Latin *conscientia*) as:

. . . privity of knowledge, consciousness, from *conscire*, know or be privy with another or oneself, inward knowledge or consciousness; internal conviction . . . The internal recognition of the moral quality of one’s actions or motives: the faculty or principle which pronounces upon the moral quality of one’s actions or motives, approving the right, condemning the wrong . . .

The Greek words *suneidesis* (noun) and *synoida* (verb) carrying the idea of ‘being aware’, really parallel the Latin-English term. So in I Corinthians 4:4, ‘I am not aware [conscious] of anything against myself’. The word, then, could add up to something like ‘conscious with’, ‘co-awareness’ or ‘joint awareness’. When we ask ‘With what or whom?’, the answer could be that, in innocence, Man had co-awareness with God, in which case he would have had a pure (innocent) conscience, but that following the Fall he had a self-consciousness, a conscience aware with and of himself. Possibly it could be that he has an awareness of God and law according to his images.

Further attempts at defining conscience are: ‘that faculty in man by which he distinguishes the morally right from the morally wrong, and which urges him to do that which he recognises to be right . . . which passes judgments on his acts and executes that judgment within his soul’. A superseded word for conscience is ‘inwit’!

C. A. Pierce quotes Menander as saying, ‘Conscience is God in every man’, but warns against receiving this statement as a generalisation. The Puritan Sibbes observed, ‘Conscience is not one power, but conscience is in all the powers of the soul . . . in the understanding, in the will, in the affections . . . it is [understanding] with God’.¹

THE HISTORY AND THEOLOGY OF CONSCIENCE

If we take ‘co-awareness’ as a reasonable description of conscience, and understand by this Man’s awareness of his being which comes with his awareness of God, then this would be how Man lived in conscience in innocence. The Fall altered this *state* of conscience, though not its *principle*. Man—that is man and woman together—were one with God and one with each other in communion with God, for this is the true meaning of Man being the image of God. When that communion was altered by Man seeking to be *as* God in his being, and *like* God as regards ‘the knowledge of good and evil’, he was assured he knew what was good and what was evil. Henceforth he would make his own decisions in regard to what was right and what was wrong. He did not need God for that exercise.

His problem was that now he had what the writer of Hebrews calls ‘a conscience of sins’. Often translated ‘a consciousness of sins’, it is even more than that. It is a conscience which has to do with the guilt of sin. In other

words it is a conscience which is not tranquil because of the person’s guilt. The same writer calls it ‘an evil conscience’, and he describes it as being polluted with ‘dead works’ (sins). That is, it is defiled.² It is the opposite to what he calls ‘a cleansed conscience’, and what Paul calls ‘a good conscience’ and ‘a clear conscience’. Paul also speaks of a ‘seared conscience’; that is, one which cannot be sensitive to moral values and principles, and of a ‘corrupted’, that is, a ‘defiled’, conscience;³ something approximating to the ‘evil conscience’ of Hebrews.

As we have said, the operative principle of conscience did not alter with the Fall. Our previous Appendix has shown that Man has to have an image of God, an image of the law and, hence, an image of himself. He has virtually taken God’s place in deciding what is good and evil, but his consciousness, on the one hand, of Deity, and on the other of the fact that he is not yet perfect, keep him in a state of disunity within himself. Because he is a creature and does not have deity, he is taking upon himself what he could only accomplish in union with God. His conscience is ever concerned with his attaining of unity, that is, perfection within himself, hence its prohibitions of evil and its demands for the person to do what is good, even though that conscience does not really know what is *essentially* good and evil.⁴ If we add to this

¹ For the sources of these comments see my *The Conscience—Conquering or Conquered?* (NCPI, 1993, p. 5).

² See Hebrews 10:2, 22; 9:14 for these bad states of conscience. See 13:18 for a good conscience.

³ For Paul on a good and a clear conscience see Acts 23:1; Romans 9:1; II Corinthians 1:12; I Timothy 1:5, 9; II Timothy 1:3, 3:9; Titus 1:15.

⁴ This is not to deny that, behind its present deficient state, the whole of God’s law may not be wholly present, in one sense threatening the devised images of God, law and Man, and confronting them with the real; in other words with ontological demands for a pure conscience and true law obedience. P. T. Forsyth once said, ‘Nothing will satisfy the conscience of man which does not first satisfy the conscience of God’.

the burden of guilt for failure in every area, then we see Man has lost his inner integrity—something that could only obtain in full communion with God.

Conscience and Idolatry

Because Man has a need for God, for some deity to which he can refer, and indeed something he can worship—give worth to—the idols become his substitute for God. He thinks he can handle the idols for, after all, he devises them! Leaving aside the biblical teaching that idol shrines become the habitations of demons, the system or culture which grows up around idols now sets the pattern of values for the conscience. Our previous Appendix on natural law dealt somewhat with the fact that the conscience does its work in the light of its images, but we can see now a further confusing factor. Ontologically there is only one God—the Triune God—so that confusion must be within the person concerning the true God and the gods. We have suggested that, because Man is in the image of God, he can never be wholly free from the image of God Himself, which means at the same time the law of God and the authentic image of Man. We are not suggesting that these are seen clearly and brilliantly, but only dimly, yet that is enough to bring unease to the person. The conscience struggles to get the person to perfection, but without avail, and the back-pressure of failure and its guilt are devastating to the person. Of course the idols are of no help.

Conscience Is as Conscience Sees

What we are talking about may approximate to what Jesus was teaching about ‘the eye’. He said:

The eye is the lamp of the body. So if your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light; but if the eye is not sound, your whole body will be full of darkness. If, then, the light in you is darkness, how great is that darkness (Matt. 6:22–23).

This may have some link with Proverbs 20:27, ‘The spirit of man is the lamp of the Lord, searching all his innermost parts’. Jesus could well be saying, ‘The conscience is the eye which—when healthy—can bring a flow of light to the whole person, but if the conscience be unhealthy, then it will bring only darkness. If you think it is bringing light to you when in fact its light is darkness—you have mistaken it for this!—then how great is that deceiving darkness. It is, as it were, double darkness’. Something like this is found in Psalm 18:25–26 where the writer says, ‘With the pure thou dost show thyself pure; and with the crooked thou dost show thyself perverse’. It accords with Titus 1:15, ‘To the pure all things are pure, but to the corrupt and unbelieving nothing is pure; their very minds and consciences are corrupted’.

The Bondage of the Conscience

The conscience is tyrannical: it will never let the person off the hook. This is its functioning nature, whether the person relationally knows God or only the idol. Dietrich Bonhoeffer points to the dynamics of conscience when he says:

Conscience comes from a depth which lies beyond man's own will and his own reason and it makes itself heard as *the call of human existence to unity with itself*. Conscience comes as an indictment of the loss of this unity and as a warning against the loss of one's self. Primarily it is directed not towards a particular kind of doing but towards a particular mode of being. It protests against a doing which *imperils the unity of this being with itself*.

So long as conscience can be formally defined in these terms it is extremely inadvisable to act against its authority; disregard for the call of conscience will necessarily entail the destruction of one's own being, not even a purposeful surrender of it; it will bring about the decline and collapse of human existence. Action against one's own conscience runs parallel with suicidal action against one's own life, and it is not by chance that the two often go together. Responsible action which did violence to conscience in this formal sense would indeed be reprehensible [emphasis mine].⁵

The referents the conscience uses are the natural law, the images of God, Man and creation, and within the insistent use of these is the unease of sin-consciousness, sin-guilt, and—if we may use the term—the conscience of God behind the conscience of Man. How, then, does Man escape from this tyrant, his conscience?

CHRIST THE LIBERATOR FROM THE CONSCIENCE

In a stroke the writer of Hebrews tells us the story when he compares the cleansing rituals of the covenant of Moses and the covenant of Christ. In Hebrews 9:13–14 he says:

For if the sprinkling of defiled persons with the blood of goats and bulls and with the ashes of a heifer sanctifies for the purification of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify your conscience from dead works to serve the living God.

He is saying that the sacrificial death of Christ purifies the conscience from its long history of dead works, so that the person is now free, indeed is powerfully constrained, to worship the living God. The fact is amazing. At last the conscience is freed. It is no longer corrupted, fraught with a consciousness of sins, evil and guilt, but is utterly purified. Of course the writer has set out his thesis in a determined argument, showing that Christ is the Son of God; the outshining radiance of the Father's glory; the creator and owner of all the ages; is greater than angels; greater than Moses; greater in his Melchizedekian priesthood than was Aaron in his Levitical priesthood; and that, whereas the priesthood of Aaron dealt mainly with the outer court, Christ takes us into the inner sanctuary, the holy of holies, and not through blood which had to be offered up yearly in the sacrifice of atonement, but 'once for all' in his sacrifice on the Cross. Moreover this sanctuary into which Christ takes us is not a copy of the heavenly one, but the heavenly one itself.

All of this needs more treatment to bring it as an unveiled mystery to the human spirit, but we do not have here the time and space to do this. It is the 'once' and 'once for all'⁶ of Christ's sacrifice that has 'once for all' ended the conflict of a 'conscience of evil' and has established the purified conscience. Daily, certain sacrifices

⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, SCM, London, 1960, p. 211.

⁶ Hebrews 9:12, 26, 28; 10:10.

were offered in Israel for the sins of the people, and yearly, the whole nation was atoned for in the propitiatory sacrifice, but the conscience—even if it experienced a certain temporary relief—remained basically unchanged. Now, through the work of Christ, it becomes transformed. In terms of Hebrews, it becomes a cleansed conscience and a good conscience. In Pauline terms it becomes the conscience of a justified person. The conscience is delivered from corruption and becomes good and pure. It also testifies to the rightness of life of the person. Justification is the key to the liberation of conscience in Paul. Sanctification is inseparable from justification. In this twin reality the conscience is at peace.⁷

**Liberty of Conscience in the Forgiven,
Purified and Justified Person**

Relating to what we have said above, the person now lives in communion with God. His old ‘consciousness of sins’ has been exchanged for a true consciousness of God. This means a true knowledge of the law of God and of the nature of created Man: Man who has now been redeemed and regenerated, the one who is ‘a new [renewed] creation’. The old images have fragmented, and the new has come. Or, we might say, the old images have been transformed into the new. Instead of guilt, the new conscience is aware of God as love, as grace, and not as grim, vengeful, legalistic and condemning. Living with a pure conscience is a wholly new experience.

**The Place of Faith in the Liberty
of the Conscience**

Here the writer of Hebrews is most helpful. We note that on the *hapax*; *ephapax*—the ‘once’ and ‘once for all’—the conscience is for ever cleared. It is not, however, cleared by an idea—the *hapax*; *ephapax* idea—but *by Christ himself*. Thus in chapter 11 the writer directs us to faith in God through Christ, and in chapter 12 to Christ himself who is ‘the author and completer of our faith’. In other words, the conscience is kept quiet, good and pure only *in Christ*. Luther once remarked that the conscience had to be ‘filled with Christ’. If we look at the faith of the saints in chapter 11, and the object of that faith in chapter 12, then conscience will remain free to do its proper work. Apart from this assurance of faith the person will retrogress to the self-justification of works, and so turn sanctification into a legal tyranny. The old images of God, law and Man will return with disastrous consequences. Keeping faith may then seem a difficult condition for continuing freedom of conscience, but when we realise that our faith is cradled—so to speak—in the faithfulness of God and of Christ, then the task is not a heavy one. The statement in Galatians 2:20, ‘The life which I now live . . . I live by [the *faithfulness* of] the Son of God’, is the way we must see faith.

There are other factors which we cannot fully develop here, the first being that we are now the children of God, sons of the Father. The old legal image of ‘God’ has been replaced by the warm, loving and securing image of the Father. Our view of law is the view of the family law of God. At the same time the presence of the Spirit is the assurance of our sonship, for ‘as many as are led by the

⁷ In order to understand this afresh we need to look back to those chapters which deal with the nature of law as lethal and the Cross as redeeming.

Spirit are the sons of God'. Paul said, 'I am speaking the truth in Christ, I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit'.

What we are really saying is that, in the context of Christ, of the Father and of the Holy Spirit, our consciences will be kept clean, fresh, alive to God, and give us that divine-human 'co-awareness' which will permit us to live in the liberty of conscience. The law of God will no longer be a tyrant but the source of perpetual sweetness.

Faith Continually, Whether Weak or Strong

In I Timothy 1:19 Paul spoke of 'holding faith and a good conscience', and in 3:8–9, in speaking of deacons, he said, 'Deacons must likewise be serious, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for gain; they must *hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience*'. Holding the mystery of faith is the practical way of life, of living. The opposite to this is 'By rejecting conscience certain persons have made shipwreck of their faith'.

This brings us to the situation in which we see some Christian believers are 'weak in faith' or 'weak in conscience'. Their weakness in faith and conscience are surely linked. Paul counsels those strong in faith and conscience to tread gently in such situations. Romans chapters 14 and 15, and I Corinthians chapter 8 are two sections where he deals with these matters. For those strong in faith—and, so, strong in conscience—all things are lawful. Surely this means that, when our faith is in the *hapax; ephapax* of Christ's work, then the conscience is rock-solid: justification makes us strong against a

legalistic view of law and salvation. Even so, the strong in faith and conscience are counselled to take the weaker brethren into consideration and treat them with loving understanding, not demanding strong faith and strong conscience.

CONCLUSION: CHRIST THE LIBERATOR AND MAINTAINER OF A GOOD CONSCIENCE

Paul can sometimes talk of 'the testimony of conscience'. In Acts 23:1 he told the Sanhedrin, 'Brethren, I have lived before God in all good conscience to this day'. He told the Roman Governor Felix, 'So I always take pains to have a clear conscience before God and towards men'. In II Corinthians 1:12 he wrote:

For our boast is this, the testimony of our conscience that we have behaved in the world, and still more towards you, with holiness and godly sincerity, not by earthly wisdom but by the grace of God.

Later in the letter he says:

Therefore, having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart. We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways; we refuse to practice cunning or to tamper with God's word, but by the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God (II Cor. 4:1–2),

and:

Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men; but what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience (II Cor. 5:11).

Paul is careful to cover his tracks in a passage such as I Corinthians 4:1–5, and so warns us against presumption of pride of well-doing as though infallibly commended by conscience:

This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. Moreover it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court. I do not even judge myself. I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me. Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then every man will receive his commendation from God.

Given all these elements, the most precious of all is ‘the testimony of a good conscience’. The Reformers—Lutheran and Calvinistic alike—saw this as the desired goal. Luther saw it as the fruits of the theology of the Cross (*theologia crucis*), a theology in which God reveals himself under an appearance that contradicts revealed truth. The conscience itself cannot be trusted to witness to itself concerning God’s grace towards the person, but it must believe and trust in the testimony of the word of God to the conscience.⁸ Calvin’s teaching of the testimony of a good conscience is couched in the language and thought of adoption, of filial life with the Father. No less than Luther he points to the liberation wrought by justification, and then points on to sanctification as the way of life lived in the law which confirms the

conscience in the matter of its testimony to the person. Luther’s doctrine was concerned more with the inner understanding of the gospel, and faith in the salvific promises of God and their fulfilment in Christ; whereas Calvin’s doctrine, although it embraced this theology, looked for an outward action in holiness of life that removed contradictions from any claim to the witness of a pure conscience.

These are issues far wider than this discourse and our book, but they need to be taken up and examined. The relationship of the conscience to the law is immensely important.

⁸ cf. R. C. Zachman, *The Assurance of Faith: Conscience in the Theology of Martin Luther and John Calvin*, Fortress, Indianapolis, 1993, p. 5.