

Grace and Truth

The Prologue of John's Gospel declares:

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth ... and from his fulness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known. (John 1:14, 16-18, NRSV)

John commenced the Prologue (verses 1-18) with statements concerning the Word, his eternal nature, his action in creation and his participation in deity. The reason he did so was that he and others had *met* the Word and had *known* him; they had heard, seen with their eyes and touched with their hands the word of life (1 John 1:1). The Word became flesh, a human being.

In particular, the Word became a Jew, 'born of woman, born under the law' (Gal. 4:4) and, on reflection, we can see that that is most logical, given the revelation of the plan of God in the Scriptures. Far from being 'anti-Semitic', the Scriptures recognise the high privilege of Israel (Rom. 3:1-2 etc), though at the same time being realistic about Israel's participation in the sin of Adam. If there is criticism of the Jews it is not a racial criticism so much as one which is moral. Given its high privilege, the nation as a whole ought to have testified to all the other nations of the world concerning the truth of God and the wonder of worship so that those nations would come to them and join them in worship (see Isa. 2:2-4; 19:24-25). Instead, while there were obvious and outstanding exceptions, Israel, as a whole, had become insular and exclusive, failing to relate its law (*Torah*) to the purposes of God. The result was *Torah-ism*,¹ a focus on the law for its own sake, and a consequent reaction against anyone or anything which exposed that.

Much of the language of the New Testament derives from that reaction. Paul's discussion, indeed, his polemic against the law is not against the law of God but against the *Torah-ism* which threatened the truth of the gospel he preached. Salvation for the whole world was never intended to come through observance of the *Torah* and life in the new creation was not to be measured by conformity to it either.

We see this in Paul's strong statements concerning circumcision, Sabbath observance and various dietary laws. It is a generalisation to say so but, by and large, the identification of first century AD Judaism, especially outside Judea and so apart from the activities of the Temple, was found in these three areas.² Male children were to be circumcised (the command is given only once in the *Torah*, at Leviticus 11:3) and should male foreigners or male slaves want to join in the Passover celebrations they too should be circumcised (Ex. 12:44, 48). To participate in this celebration one must be a member of the covenant community. Circumcision, whatever its origins as a practice, was for Israel a sign of their unique covenant relationship with God (see Genesis 17).

The same applied to Sabbath observance. Whatever our exposure to the ten commandments might have been, it remains that Sabbath observance was specifically

¹ By *-ism* I am suggesting some systematisation of an entity in order that it may be independently identified. By this, then, the *Torah* could be defined in and for itself and people would relate to it rather than to its purpose. We might compare the development of John Calvin's teaching into Calvin-ism etc.

² Cf. N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, SPCK, London, p. 229.

for Israel, intended to indicate their relationship with the God who created all things (Ex. 31:15-17). Not only is the Sabbath commandment not given to Christians in the New Testament, a new practice of meeting on the first day of the week grew up (Acts 20:7; 1 Cor. 16:2) and, even then, Paul expressly refused to make that a binding rule (Rom. 14:5-6).

Dietary regulations were a cause of constant tension, almost rupturing the unity of the church when Peter made them the touchstone of his fellowship with others (Gal. 2:11ff). That was in spite of Peter's transforming experience, described in Acts 10:9-16. Once again, Paul in Romans 14 argues for the freedom to observe the rules and the equal freedom to ignore them. Of course the obligation to walk in love was never revoked (Rom 14:15).

Jesus was born under the law. He was circumcised on the eighth day (Luke 2:21), though in regards dietary laws and sabbath observance he did show a somewhat less rigorous approach than many of the Pharisees. For instance, he did not expect his disciples to conform to the requirements concerning hand washing and abstinence from unclean foods (Mark 7:1-23). Peter's vision, mentioned a moment ago, was in essence no different from Jesus' own expressed views, though, of course it served a different purpose. Jesus was equally unconcerned about strict observance of the Sabbath, being more than willing to heal the sick or to pick grain because these items took precedence. Those who were angry with his apparent indifference to the law often chose not to remember that some work on the Sabbath day was recognised in the *Torah* itself (Num. 28:9-10) and it had become established that, when human life was in danger, Sabbath observance could be disregarded (1 Maccabees 2:29-41).

Jesus was not a rebel in any of this. He kept the Sabbath, and the opposition he encountered was by no means as unified as it might first appear. Westerholm says:

It can be seen, however, that questions of proper observance were often a matter of interpretation. The various religious parties of Jesus' day did not infrequently differ in their practice....[Jesus'] opponents saw the divine will as requiring conformity with the terms of *Torah's* statutes as interpreted by legal authorities. Hence activities which could be construed as the 'work' which *Torah* forbade were to be avoided unless extenuating circumstances (as defined by the legal experts) could be found to legitimate the activity.³

So far was he from being a rebel, Jesus in fact stressed that the law itself was inviolable.

Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. 'Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. (Matt. 5:17-20)

The Sermon on the Mount is an exposition of the law. The Kingdom of God and the law of God could not be regarded as separate and so to live in the kingdom a person must not modify the requirements of the law.

So why, then, did Jesus say things like: 'You have heard that it was said ... but I say to you' (Matt. 5:21f, 27f. etc)? The answer partially lies in the way the various interpreters had dealt with the demands of the law. Two of the most famous interpreters were Hillel and Shammai, Jewish scholars who lived in the general period

³ Stephen Westerholm, 'Sabbath', in Joel B Green et al (Eds), *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, 1992, p. 718f.

of Jesus. These two both had schools of disciples and their frequent disagreements concerning points of application of the law can be discerned at times in the New Testament. The most well known instance is the question posed to Jesus in Matthew 19:3, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any cause?' What lay behind the question was the teaching of Shammai that restricted divorce to the situation where a wife had engaged in illicit sexual conduct, over against the teaching of Hillel that understood causes of divorce to include even the spoiling of the husband's food.⁴

While some of the positions taken were attempts to understand the law's application in contexts far removed from the situation in which it was given, Jesus also announced that 'hardness of heart' was as much an issue to be understood (Matt. 19:8) and that genuine righteousness was something far beyond that of the scribes and Pharisees (Matt. 5:20).

Some of the 'you have heard' statements in the Sermon on the Mount are really addressing the way interpretations of the law had been introduced so as to minimise the absolute demands of the law. For instance, 'You shall not murder' had been reduced to apply only to the act while leaving the intentions untouched. The same was true of the prohibition of adultery. The statement that 'you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy' was a gross modification of the teaching of the *Torah* which said both, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself' and 'you shall love the alien (i.e. the resident foreigner) as yourself' (Lev. 19:18, 34).

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus was proclaiming the truth of living in the Kingdom of God but was, at the same time, standing in strong contrast to the scribes (Matt. 7:28-29). Furthermore, while Jesus may have appeared to side with one or other school of interpretation at times, he was in fact always concerned to take the issue back to the *creational* purpose of the law. Thus:

Some Pharisees came, and to test him they asked, 'Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife?'³ He answered them, 'What did Moses command you?' 'they said, 'Moses allowed a man to write a certificate of dismissal and to divorce her.'⁵ But Jesus said to them, 'Because of your hardness of heart he wrote this commandment for you.⁶ But from the beginning of creation, "God made them male and female."⁷ "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. 'Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate.' (Mark 10:2-9)

Divorce there well may be, but is only because of the hard hearts of those that refuse to live as they were created. Given that, the attitude that regards marriage and then remarriage as a matter of convenience, has creation standing against it:

He said to them, 'Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her;¹² and if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.' (Mark 10:11-12)

THE TRUTH OF THE LAW

To the Romans Paul wrote:

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth. 19For what can be known about God is plain to

⁴ See Robert J Wyatt, 'Hillel' in Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Ed), *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* Volume Two, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1982, p.716. These two approaches to the application of the *Torah* had enormous political application. The rigorous application of the *Torah* would be potentially anti-Roman; see Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, p. 164.

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them, because God has shown it to them. ²⁰Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made. (Rom. 1:18-20)

When Gentiles, who do not possess the law, do instinctively what the law requires, these, though not having the law, are a law to themselves. ¹⁵ They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness; and their conflicting thoughts will accuse or perhaps excuse them (Rom. 2:14-15)

Although Paul's concern at that point is the dilemma of human beings under the wrath of God, we should note the framework for his thinking. It is the splendour of created humanity. In particular, mankind was made in the image of God and that includes being created to express the truth of God's moral glory (see Ps. 8⁵). 'The law' may conjure up all sorts of images in our minds, but we should say the law of God is first the truth of God's own being and so the way by which all things were created and ordered. Reduction of 'law' to mere rules and regulations tends, because of our 'fallenness', to leave us with a sense of oppressive obligation, whereas the truth of humanity is seen in the serenity of simply being one with God in all that he is and all that he is doing (these obviously being inseparable).

Questions of obedience versus disobedience and so on would have made no sense to 'innocent' man. To be at one with the law of God was to be at one with oneself and with all creation, the law being written on the heart, that is, part of the fabric of the whole person.⁶ We may speak of 'the natural man' (1 Cor. 2:14 NASB, ASV, AV) or 'natural limitations' (Rom. 6:19 RSV, NRSV, which the NIV calls the weakness of our 'natural selves') but those translations do not really convey the richness of being 'natural'⁷ 'Natural' refers to what is created and not to its perversion (so Rom. 1:26 - 27). Mankind 'knew God' (Rom. 1:21) and that knowledge was rich and intimate. It was to be both lived in and lived out.

The fall of humanity from 'the glory of God' means that the law of God stands both as a revelation of God's 'eternal power and divine nature' and as a delineation of human guilt. The law of God has not changed, it is still the law of his holy love, the law of the fulness of his being, but fallen humanity now constantly comes up against that law. Men and women must, they think, suppress the truth of God if they are to survive, but the more they suppress the truth the more the truth of the law of God becomes a spur to greater rebellion. In that sense, the law works wrath (Rom. 4:15).

ISRAEL'S LAW AND THE WORLD'S REDEMPTION

As we said above, Israel was the people of the *Torah*, the instruction of God. They were the descendants of Abraham because of God's covenant with him. God had created humanity for intimacy with himself, so that the heavens and the earth might be resonant with the joy of his righteousness and that purpose was never given up. His

⁵ The exercise of dominion (Ps. 8:6) without the glory of the law of God, the law of his holy love, results in the continuous tendency to corruption.

⁶ See Geoffrey Bingham's three works which deal with the topic: *Oh, No, Lord! Not Law, Lord!!!* (1979), *Sweeter than Honey, More Precious than Gold* (1995) and *The Law of Eternal Delight* (2001).

⁷ 1 Cor. 2:14 has 'the soulish [ψυχικός, psuchikos] man', which stands in contrast to 'the spiritual [πνευματικός pneumatikos] man' (v. 15). Rom. 6:19 actually reads 'the weakness of your flesh', and the word 'flesh' carries its own special significance. The word 'natural' is out of place in these passages. Better might be 'unnatural' or even 'anti-natural'.

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plan was never within the framework of history but always determining that framework.

Remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like me, ¹⁰declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, 'My purpose shall stand, and I will fulfill my intention,' "... I have spoken, and I will bring it to pass; I have planned, and I will do it. (Isaiah 46:9-11).

The gift of the law at Sinai was within the context of God's faithfulness to his covenant to Abraham (Ex. 2:24) and the action of his rich love (Deut. 7:7-8). The giving of the law through Moses was pure grace. The formation of the covenant with Israel, through Moses, was in order that Israel might be the nation which leads all the other nations of the world back to true law and true worship. It must not be forgotten, either, that one of the major results for Israel was joy, a deep satisfaction with and pleasure in God and his dealings. What is more, the laws of sacrifice and tithing within Israel were accompanied with the regular command to 'rejoice', often with practical instruction on how to do it. For instance:

Set apart a tithe of all the yield of your seed that is brought in yearly from the field. ²³In the presence of the LORD your God, in the place that he will choose as a dwelling for his name, you shall eat the tithe of your grain, your wine, and your oil, as well as the firstlings of your herd and flock, so that you may learn to fear the LORD your God always. ²⁴But if, when the LORD your God has blessed you, the distance is so great that you are unable to transport it, because the place where the LORD your God will choose to set his name is too far away from you, "then you may turn it into money. With the money secure in hand, go to the place that the LORD your God will choose; "spend the money for whatever you wish - oxen, sheep, wine, strong drink, or whatever you desire. And you shall eat there in the presence of the LORD your God, you and your household rejoicing together. (Deut. 14:22-26)

The *Torah* was never mean-spirited (see Lev. 9:24; 23:40; Deut. 12:7, 12, 18; 16:11,14, 15 etc.). Salvation from God was always associated with rich joy (Isa. 9:3; 12:3, 6).

With such living, *Torah* living, Israel would be a demonstration to the world that being set apart for God and living in intimacy with him was a matter of great wonder.

In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. ³Many 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 instruction [*Torah*], and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. ⁴He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; 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. (Isaiah 2:2-4)

Even their former enemy would be transformed:

The LORD will make himself known to the Egyptians; and the Egyptians will know the LORD on that day, and will worship with sacrifice and burnt offering, and they will make vows to the LORD and perform them. (Isaiah 19:21).

A reading of the Old Testament shows that Israel's joy was, sadly, more often a joy in evil (Isa. 22:13), bringing the judgment of holy love on the nation. Israel had opted out of its own purpose and chosen not to know God.

Hear the word of the LORD, O people of Israel; for the LORD has an indictment against the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no knowledge of God in the land. (Hosea 4:1; cf. 5:4)

Israel may have opted out of its true identity, but that could not invalidate the covenant of God. Judgment came on disobedience *because* of the covenant, but that was because the purpose of God would still be accomplished: 'I will take you for my wife in faithfulness; and *you shall know the Lord*' (Hos. 2:20).

Of great significance is the promise of Jeremiah 31:31-34.

The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³²It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt - a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD. ³³But this is the covenant that 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 on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, '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 remember their sin no more.

The promise is that the law would no longer stand against Israel because their sin will be totally removed. Instead it will be written 'on their hearts' meaning that there will be the restored drive to obey (cf. Ezek. 36:25-27). At the heart of this is the restoration of the intimacy for which humanity was created: 'they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest'.

JESUS: THE MAN OF GRACE, THE MAN OF LAW

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, ¹²training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly... (Titus 2:11-12)

The word becoming flesh⁸ was the revelation of the glory of the Father in the person of his Son. The Son was full of the grace and truth of the Father. These were not mere 'attributes' but were the whole action of God to restore men and women to the truth. To that extent the truth had to break in and be established even in the face of the repeated attempts to suppress it.

Now the truth of (not just 'about') God himself is present in the Son who declared, 'I am the truth', 'no one comes to the Father except through me' (John 14:6). Further, the Holy Spirit, who will be poured out on all who believe, is called 'the Spirit of truth' for he is the one who will lead *into* the truth (John 16:12-15). To live in the truth is utter freedom (John 8:32), because the Son sets us free (John 8:36). But this is not just freedom 'from' something, although there is no doubt that he came to save his people from their sins (Matt. 1:21) and to 'take away the sins of the world' (John 1:29). 'This is 'the freedom of the glory of the children of God' (Rom. 8:21). So statements by Jesus about obedience are not about the way we purchase our blessings but about the very essence of living in the truth.

'If you love me, you will keep my commandments. ¹⁶And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. "This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.

¹⁸I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. ¹⁹In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. ²⁰On that day you will know

⁸ I take this to mean more than just the fact of Jesus' 'flesh'; it must include all that he did in his flesh, i.e. his full humanity, his teaching and his works, through to the cross, resurrection and ascension.

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that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. ²¹They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.' ²²Judas (not Iscariot) said to him, 'Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us, and not to the world?' ²³Jesus answered him, 'Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them. ²⁴Whoever does not love me does not keep my words; and the word that you hear is not mine, but is from the Father who sent me.' (John 14:15-24).

To keep his commandments is to abide in his love, because that is exactly how Jesus relates to the Father; and that is where full joy is known (John 15:10-11). Jesus knows the Father!

I know him, because I am from him, and he sent me' (John 7:29).

I know him; if I would say that I do not know him, I would be a liar like you. But I do know him and I keep his word. (John 8:55)

I am the good shepherd⁹. I know my own and my own know me, ¹⁵just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. (John 10:14-15)

This knowledge of God is what history is about. 'They shall all know me', and Jesus is the one in whom that knowledge of God is seen and known. The world may not be drawn to Israel's *Torah* in the precise way Isaiah expressed it, but Jesus said, 'I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw people to myself' (John 12:32).

ALL IS ACCOMPLISHED

We must return to Matthew 5:17-20. Jesus spoke of 'the law and the prophets' and as a reference to the law of God himself and the prophetic word from God to humanity we should understand that these remain and will be the way things are at the end, the telos, of the age. Then all things will be restored to their true identity as God is all in all.

Related to this may be another way of understanding Jesus' statement. It is to see 'the law and the prophets' as being a specific reference to Israel's *Torah* and to the words of the prophets who were sent to bring to Israel and to the world the word of the God of the *Torah*. Jesus was certainly not about the abolition of these things, rather his concern was to see them fulfilled. That means that there was a particular role for Israel and the *Torah*, namely to be the way by which all the nations are drawn to God, and by coming as he did Jesus was ensuring that that goal would be reached. Because the law and the prophets are the word of *God* and 'every word of God proves true' (Prov. 30:5), then 'until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished' (Matt. 5:18).

The Son, born of a woman, born under the law, came not simply to set an example of obedience but to bear the curse of the law. That curse was the curse on Israel through its breach of the covenant made through Moses. Behind that was the fact of the curse which lies on creation because of Adam's (humanity's) breach of the covenant of creation.

The direction of history was determined by the covenant God made with Abraham to 'bless all the families of the earth' (Gen. 12:3). So when he 'bore our sins in his own body on the tree',

⁹ From within an Old Testament framework, this is an obvious reference to God, ; see Isa, 40:11; Jer. 23:1-6 and especially Ezek. 34:11-12.

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Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us - for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree' - "in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith. (Gal. 3:13-14)

Now the goal has been reached. It is finished¹⁰ (John 19:30). The law of Israel, the *Torah* of God, was not the tyrant which stood against grace but was the gift of grace. It was, of course, a tyrant to the guilty and impenitent, but remained grace nonetheless. Now we have received from the fulness of the Son grace upon grace.¹¹ What the law could not do, because it was weakened by the flesh, God has done by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and to deal with sin. Sin was then condemned in Jesus' flesh, *so that the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us*, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. (Rom. 8:3-4).

We have been set for true law living. This does not mean keeping the *Torah*. As the law for Israel that has been concluded; but as the expression for Israel of the truth of the law of God himself we now rejoice as it directs us to the God of the eternal covenant. But now we must clearly recognise that whatever revelatory value the law had, and it was great, it pales when the glory of God is seen in the face of Jesus Christ (cf. 2 Cor. 3:7-11; 4:6).

No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known. (John 1:18)

Ian Pennicook, March 2004

¹⁰ 'It is finished' is one word in the Greek, τετελεσται, tetelestai, which is grammatically a perfect tense, meaning that the goal has been reached and that it remains thus.

¹¹ See the stimulating article by William J. Dumbrell, 'Grace and Truth: The Progress of the Argument of the Prologue of John's Gospel', in Donald Lewis and Alister McGrath (Eds), *Doing Theology for the People of God: Studies in Honour of J. I. Packer*, Apollos, Leicester, 1996, pp. 105-121.