In Praise of Law

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From March 3rd to 5th, 1967, Incarnate Word College, San Antonio, Texas, in conjunction with the Institute of Judaeo-Christian Studies, sponsored a symposium on "Vatican II and the Jews." The weekend culminated in the conferral of an honorary Doctorate of Law upon the Editor, the director of the symposium, in recognition of his work at the Vatican Council. After receiving the hood from Dr. S. Thomas Greenburg, President of the College, the Editor made the following "acceptance speech":

IN THANKING you, Dr. Greenburg, most warmly for the honor just conferred on me, I do not mind telling you and all assembled here that at first I was a bit perplexed. You will not think me ungracious, I trust, when I admit that, on hearing that I was to be given an honorary Doctorate of Law, I felt: Such a degree fits neither me nor the cause I have tried to serve these many years. I am not, and I do not want to be, a mere interpreter of rules and statutes. I would rather proclaim the Good News, the glorious freedom of the sons and daughters of God. Doctor of Humane Letters would be an appropriate title for a writer like myself, I thought. A degree in history would suit someone who considers himself, as I do, an heir of the past and a trustee of the future, who thinks that it is his calling, as it is that of every Christian, to help make history, who feels privileged to have a part in shaping the minds of generations-to-come.

So I felt at first. But shortly after, my perplexity gave way to contentment, indeed, to happiness. A Doctor of Law, I realized, is obviously a man of justice. And what else have I pleaded for in all these years, if not for justice; that we do justice to the unity of God's saving design; that we do justice to the Old Testament; that we interpret the New rightly and graciously; that we give the Jews—not charity, but their due? Thus, I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

As a token of my gratitude, let me for a while sing the praises of law—ally, not enemy of the Gospel. Let me begin with human law. In the great play, "A Man for All Seasons" by Robert Bolt, Thomas More tells his future son-in-law that he cannot arrest a man because he seems da

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he seems dangerous, a spy who would bring harm to him, for doing so would be illegal. When his wife adds in exasperation: "While you talk, he's gone!" More answers: "And go he should, if he was the Devil himself, until he broke the law!" Roper, the future son-in-law, exclaims in bewilderment: "So now you'd give the Devil benefit of law!" Whereupon Sir Thomas counters: "Yes. What would you do? Cut a great road through the law to get after the Devil?" Passionately, the self-assured Roper asserts: "I'd cut down every law in England to do that!"

Roused, Sir Thomas asks: "Oh? And when the last law was down, and the Devil turned round on you—where would you hide, Roper, the laws all being flat? This country's planted thick with laws from coast to coast—man's laws, not God's—and if you cut them down—and you're just the man to do it—d'you really think you could stand upright in the winds that would blow then?" This, then, is the wisdom of Thomas More. Without law and the order it stands for, man is the sport of tyrants, is exposed to every ill wind. The law shields his very existence.

My praise cannot possibly stop at man-made laws. It must, above all, embrace the God-given Torah. One can still find devotional books that portray the way and life of the Hebrew Scriptures as if they were sheer legalism. Legalism is but their caricature. One has only to read Psalm 119 to realize what the Law—the Torah, God's instruction about the road His people ought to walk—meant to the Israel of old. There, the worshipper sings of the Law as his joy, his delight, his life (vss 14, 16, 24, 40). In the strength of God's words, he feels freed from the way of falsehood, removed from mad bustle (vss 28–29). While trying to keep God's commands, he can say to Him: "With all my heart I seek You" (vs 10).

The maligners of the Ancient Law see it summed up in the so-called lex talionis: "Life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise" (Ex 21:23–25). Incidentally, the rule of tit-for-tat is not of Hebrew origin; it is part of the Near Eastern milieu that shaped a great deal of early Hebrew life. Seen in its historical context, its meaning is quite different from what the uninformed reader is likely to assume.

For it breaks with the rigid rule of vengeance, characteristic of a nomadic society that lacks the organization necessary for a workable system of courts and law enforcement. It does not suggest that the injured take at least an eye for an eye, rather an eye for an eye, and no more. What it enjoins is not: "Take eye for eye, and savor the taking!" but: "Take eye for eye, and let there be an end to it." It was thus a rule of moderation. Still, this principle of measure for measure—element of every exclusively legal mind—had to make way for the counsel of offering the other cheek (Mt 5:38). Strange though it seems, the unmeasured way of generosity could not have been proclaimed by Christ had the measured course of legal justice not been taught before in Israel. The Gospel needed a soil fertilized by the Law.

The summit of the Law is found, not in the rule of talion, but in the Holiness Code (Lev 17–26), of which the most solemn passage reads:

The Lord said to Moses, Speak to the whole Israelite community and tell them: Be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy. . . .

You shall not pick your vineyard bare, nor gather up the grapes that have fallen. These things you shall leave for the poor and the stranger. I, the Lord, am your God.

You shall not steal. You shall not lie or speak falsely by my name, thus profaning the name of your God. I am the Lord.

You shall not defraud or rob your neighbor. You shall not withhold overnight the wages of your day laborer. You shall not curse the deaf, or put a stumbling block in front of the blind, but you shall fear your God. I am the Lord.

You shall not act dishonestly in rendering judgment. Show neither partiality to the weak nor deference to the mighty, but judge your fellow man justly. You shall not go about spreading slander among your kinsmen; nor shall you stand by idly when your neighbor's life is at stake. I am the Lord.

You shall not bear hatred for your brother in your heart. Though you may have to reprove your fellow man, do not incur sin because of him. Take no revenge and cherish no grudge against your fellow countrymen. Love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord. . . .

Stand up in the presence of the aged, and show respect for the old; thus shall you fear your God. I am the Lord.

When an alien resides with you in your land, do not molest him. You shall treat the alien who resides with you no differently than those born among you; have them thus. As once strangers in Egypt, you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt. I am the Lord.

One has to go beyond the words of this bidding to the nature of the person, born of a temperamental temperment and trained in grace, who could warn against "the curse of the Law not only the heart, but its tongue, its body. 'Do not covet.' "Do not covet, for what is a man's without love? ... "is he not a man?"... Law exists to acquire in and under grace..."rabb...
characteristic of a workable world—suggest that the eye for an eye, and the tooth for a tooth, and savor the word of God and endure to it.” It was measure for measure for the sake of measure that made way for the range though it have been promised. Justice not been legislated by the Law. As for the curse of talion, but in the solemn passage

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among you; have the same love for him as for yourself, for you too were once strangers in the land of Egypt. I, the Lord, am your God (Lev 19:1-2, 10-18, 32-34).

One has to take in the full solemnity, the compassion and beauty of this bidding in order to understand Paul's emphasis that God's own son, born of a woman, was born under the Law (Gal 4:4). One has to absorb the resolute and uncompromising character of these demands in order to grasp the Apostle's reference to the Law as our instructor: "The Law was a kind of tutor to lead us to Christ [or as some render, "in charge of us until Christ should come"] so that we might be put right with God by faith" (Gal 3:24).

Paul's view of the Law has often been misunderstood. His intense, emphatic, and passionate language, his preference for the graphic word make misinterpretation easy for those who do not share his temperament and zeal. Thus the author of the Second Epistle of Peter could warn against the misinterpretation, by "the unlearned and the unstable," of some obscure passages or difficult points in the letters of Paul, "our brother so dear to us" (2 Pet 3:15, 16). Paul spoke of "the curse of the Law" from which Christ freed us (Gal 3:13), for the Law not only makes known to us "what is right" but also "ac­quaints us with sin" (Rom 2:18; 7:7). Through the commandment, "Do not covet," sin finds an opportunity to make man, rebellious as he is, covet things he should not (Rom 7:8). If there were no law there would be no question of sin, but since there is sin the law brings the threat of the wrath-to-come. Still, the Law as given by God "is spiritual," "is holy and just and good" (Rom 7:14, 12).

Law exists that hearts be trained for freedom. In the words of the poet:

Our wills are ours, we know not how;
Our wills are ours to make them Thine.

This is the freedom of the sons and daughters of God we are to acquire in and through Christ. "No longer are we under law but under grace" (Rom 6:14). Judaism, too, envisions liberty. One rabbinical saying has it: "When the Law came into the world, freedom came into the world" (Gen. R. 53, 7). Another is from the
Pirke Abot, "The Sayings of the Fathers"—the Fathers being the great rabbis from 300 B.C. to 200 A.D. The entire collection forms part of the Sabbath Service. In its last book, which gathers opinions of a later generation of teachers, we find an intriguing interpretation of the verse that the two tablets containing the Commandments "were the work of God and that the writing was the writing of God, graven upon the tablets" (Ex 32:16). The Hebrew word for "graven" is cherut. Since Hebrew is generally written without vowels—the reader is himself to supply them—the word can also be read as cherut, "freedom," and that it be so read is the suggestion of Rabbi Joshua ben Levi (Ab. 6, 2). As the homiletically inspired exegesis of the third century rabbi sees it, the gift God offered to Israel by means of the tablets, that is, by means of the Law, is freedom, true freedom, freedom born of obedience.

These two glimpses of rabbinical thought ought to help us discard any superficial view of Judaism we might entertain. I am happy to make my own the words of a Dutch Reformed exegete:

Whoever rejects Mishna and Talmud as monstrous products of legalistic thinking must see to it that, in doing so, he does not let the concretization of the commandment, as a direction to right living, slip from his hands.  

Slightly different, but no less penetrating, is the perspective of a Presbyterian scholar:

... it is wrong for Christian theology to despise the legal concepts of post-biblical Judaism on the grounds that they differ from the Old Testament; to some extent they do, but it is also true that they are natural growths from the movements within the Old Testament itself, under the conditions then prevailing, and we lose the whole tragedy of the situation if this is left out of account.  

To return to the Apostle's designation of the Law as paidagogos... eis Christon (Gal 3:24), the paidagogos, the tutor, being the guardian who looks after a child on the way to school. Now that Christ has come, He has taken the place of the Law. This, however, does not mean that the Christian life is ruled "by the law of Christ," by the "law" of love (Jas 2:15). The young Christian would do well to listen to the words:

Do not live any longer in the world of illusion that stifled their consciences. They were practicing any form of bondage, learning nothing of the voice...  

Finish... with the marks of a creature that is separate units but alive.  

Let there be no violent self-asserting marks. Be kind to others as God for Christ's sake would have them be.  

As children copy their parents.  

Live your lives in the truth in which He perfectly trusted His Father (Eph 4:17).

Christ's example and His claims from Sinai that are being them is forever on the assumption, of faith (2 Cor 18:20–22). No one can live in God's care for his own life, except they that a modern Decalogue watchmen, man. With few exceptions, part of Christian

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mean that the Christian is a lawless man; on the contrary, he is bound by the law of Christ (1 Cor 9:21) or, as James calls it, by "the royal law" of love (Jas 2:8). Hence, the Apostle clothes his insistence that the young Christians of Ephesus be done with their old life in these words:

Do not live any longer as the Gentiles live. For they live blindfolded in a world of illusion and are cut off from the life of God. . . . They have stifled their conscience and then surrendered themselves to sensuality, practicing any form of impurity which lust can suggest. But you have learned nothing like that from Christ, if you have really heard His voice . . .

Finish . . . with lying, and tell your neighbor the truth. For we are not separate units but intimately related to one another in Christ . . .

Let there be no more foul language, but good words instead—words suitable for the occasion, which God can use to help other people. Never hurt the Holy Spirit. He is, remember, the personal pledge of your eventual full redemption.

Let there be no more resentment, no more anger or temper, no more violent self-assertiveness, no more slander, and no more malicious remarks. Be kind to one another; be understanding. Be as ready to forgive others as God for Christ's sake has forgiven you.

As children copy their fathers you, as God's children, are to copy Him. Live your lives in love—the same sort of love which Christ gives and which He perfectly expressed when He gave Himself up for us in sacrifice to God (Eph 4:17-19, 25, 29, 31-32; 5:1-2; Phillips).

Christ's example, that is, His love does not repeal those Ten Words from Sinai that are the epitome of all the laws given to Israel. Keeping them is forever the conditio sine qua non, the indispensable presupposition, of following Him (Mk 10:19-21; Mt 19:17-21; Lk 18:20-22). No cold imperatives, the Ten Commandments are rooted in God's care for His people, in His gracious acts, His saving deeds that brought Israel out of Egypt (Ex 20:1-2; Dt 5:6). So basic are they that a modern scholar can say: "In all its commandments, the Decalogue watches in a quite elemental fashion over the humanity of man."² With few exceptions, the Decalogue has been an important part of Christian moral instructions. Even that early manual of

morality and liturgical practice, the Didache, built the Ten Commandments into its moral program, the "Way of Life." That Way begins with a reference to the great commandments of love, that of God and that of neighbor; it continues with quotations from the Sermon on the Mount, and it ends with the Decalogue or, rather, with a homiletic amplification of it.

The fact that here the Decalogue has to take third place underlines, in my opinion, the ministerial function of all laws. Wherever law is given first rank as if it were God, it tends to turn into a tyrant. Only when it serves does it fulfill its purpose, does it help protect evangelical freedom. As a matter of fact, it will be hard to attain that freedom unless we have undergone, in some measure, the discipline of laws, statutes, injunctions, and admonitions, unless the law stands behind us, looks occasionally over our shoulders, guards and reprimands us. This leads me to the question whether it may not be one of Judaism's functions in the divine scheme of things, in some way, to be our examiner and warn: to see whether or not "we do the truth in love" (Eph 4:15), whether or not we live our beliefs; to give us no peace till we, till our confidence, till the concern of our lives make lovingly clear that the Lord Jesus has indeed wrought our redemption. (I stressed "one of Judaism's functions," that is, a function relating to the Christian world, for as a living reality its principal purpose is obviously to serve God, sanctify His Name, bear witness to His fidelity, pray, and make ready for the appearance of His perfect reign.)

To sum up, by His redemptive work Christ has freed us, not just from Mosaic law nor, for that matter, from Canon law, but from all law, from all external law that by constraint forces us in the direction of the good. He has freed us so that the inner dynamism of faith, the movement of grace, the spontaneity of love, in short, the power of the Spirit make us do what is right.5

Alas, we do not always live on that high plane. In the hour of weakness, then, when threatened by selfishness or self-deception, we need the reminder of laws. May the Law, therefore, be praised as the servant of all that is higher than itself, as the guardian of freedom, as the keeper, sustainer, and defender of love.