

UPHOLDING THE LAW OF GOD

Christ-believers, writes the apostle Paul in his letter to the church in Rome, “uphold the law” (3:31 – in what follows, only verse references to *Romans* are indicated). What does that mean, and how well has the Church done on that particular score in its journey through the ages? I would argue that we have not done very well. The sad consequences of that failure have been manifold in confusion, conflict and false contrasts (grace *vs.* law, faith *vs.* works, love *vs.* justice, piety *vs.* politics, etc.).

Paul preached the gospel unashamedly and with a passion. That gospel, he believed, reveals “the righteousness of God...through faith for faith” (1:17). The righteousness of God is embodied in the holy law of God, together with “the commandment which is holy, just, and good” (7:12). Elsewhere, Paul defines his mission in terms of proclaiming Christ crucified (*Corinthians* 1:23), which is short-hand for the mind-boggling message that in the cross of Christ the holy law of a righteous God has been fulfilled in an act of sacrificial love.

The themes of righteousness and divine law are foreshadowed in the ministry of Jesus, together with the theme of the kingdom of God. The following texts are illustrative: “It is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness” (*Matthew* 3:15); “I have come not to abolish but to fulfill [the law]” (*Matthew* 5:17); “I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God...for I was sent for this purpose” (*Luke* 4:43). The teachings of Torah aim to shape all of life - personal and communal – as a sign of the promised universal *Shalom* in a redeemed world. The prayer Jesus taught his disciples with its focus on the kingdom when God’s will is done on *earth*, finds its basic source in the world of Israel’s faith and spirituality.

The “Old Testament” and the “New Testament” agree on this fundamental point: the holy law of God must be *done*. “It is not the hearers of the law who are righteous in God’s sight, but the doers of the law” (2:13). Jesus was unequivocal on that point: You seek eternal life? “Keep the commandments” (*Matthew* 19:16ff., *Mark* 10:17ff., *Luke* 18:18ff.). To the scribe who affirms that love of God and neighbor is foundational to all the commandments, Jesus says that he is “not far from the kingdom of God” (*Mark* 12:34). Paul, too, believed that “love is the fulfilling of the law”

(13:8-10). Where is such love to be found? That's the profoundly existential question, and here we come to Paul's spiritual journey as I understand it from his writings.

Paul was not some sort of marginal Jew, ignorant of the sacred traditions and thus easily seduced by Christian missionaries. He was a devout student of Torah who delights in the law even (or, perhaps, especially) after his "conversion" (7:22). He knew his Torah ABCs, and became a defender of the faith in what must be called a fanatical fashion. The last thing on his mind was to overthrow the law. Quite the contrary, he wanted to uphold God's law (3:31), albeit from a radically new perspective that he believed to be deeply rooted in the holy Torah.

Here, in my view, is the dilemma he faced-- as have millions before and after him. On the one hand, the law confronts us with a holy and righteous God who calls us to obedience. On the other hand, we are part of a humanity among whom, when judged before God, "there is no one who is righteous—not even one" (3:10, citing Psalm 14).

There is a chasm here that, in Paul's mind, needs to be bridged in order for the restless heart to find peace. Torah has come to Israel, and via Israel to the world, as a gift. For a long time, it had seemed to Paul that faithful observance of the law would be the bridge across the troubled waters of the human soul longing for peace with God. After all, as we have noted, the law must be *done* in order for us to reach eternal life. However, once we pursue that route, especially when doing so with utter sincerity, the law can surprise us with unexpected twists and turns. First, "through the law comes the knowledge of sin" (3:20) and, with it, the destructive fruit of guilt—guilt before a holy and righteous God. Second, the law tends to "arouse" in us self-defeating impulses (7:5ff.). Sin plays tricks on us, using the good commandment to seduce us into a not-so-good result. For instance, the more devoutly we seek to attain righteousness, the more we might be in danger of succumbing to self-righteousness (7:20)—thus becoming the kind of person who usually is not very loving. In spite of our best intentions, we can become a riddle to ourselves (Romans, Ch. 7).

How to get out of this dilemma? How to deal with guilt? Excuses will not do (2:1). Torah, however, points us to an answer through its Temple sacrificial cultus with its message of divine forgiveness. From that perspective, Paul comes to see the cross of Christ as the fulfillment of the

law through an act of holy sacrificial love. Here is love divine all love excelling—an offer of grace and forgiveness as an answer to guilt about our dark pasts which, in turn, leads to a life of new freedom and openness to the future. God has done what our best efforts with the law could not achieve. Now we have peace with God (5:1).

God has done what the law, “weakened by the flesh,”(i.e. the inadequacy of our works of the law), could not do (8:3). Redemption has come through Christ Jesus “whom God put forward as a sacrifice for atonement” (3:25). We receive the “free gift of righteousness” (5:17). Sin and guilt are covered under the abundance of divine grace, and this was done for all humanity. “One man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all” (5:18). God was in Christ reconciling the *world* to himself.

The holy law of God has been fulfilled. The concept of fulfillment has a redemptive quality to it. It has nothing to do with the idea that the law has somehow played its divinely ordained role and can now be sidelined. Rather, it means that through God’s intervention the law has been confirmed and validated.

For Paul, the new understanding of the law in light of Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross was a life-shaking experience. Since he never intended to join another religion, it would be inappropriate to call it a “conversion.” Rather, it involved a radical re-evaluation of Israel’s covenantal tradition. The life of faith in the power of the Holy Spirit now becomes a central theme in Paul’s witness; and a strongly dialectical tension enters into his thought world.

For instance, the notion of “works of the law” is now seen as posing a threat to faith because it so easily slips into a “no thank you, I can handle this” attitude with respect to God’s offer of salvation through Christ. On the other hand, without good works there cannot be an upholding of the law, because the latter implies the former in obedience to the commandments. As the author of II Timothy put it, all scripture is useful for training in righteousness and for the equipment of believers “for every good work” (3:15-17). Since there was no “New Testament” at that time, the reference is obviously to the Torah.

Those who are no longer “under the law” cannot escape the claims of God’s commandments, nor the intentions of Torah to claim all spheres of

life. Walking “according to the Spirit” represents a way of life that is law-bound, in order that “the just requirements of the law might be fulfilled in us” (8:1-4).

Paul sees faith and righteousness exemplified in the life of Abraham—the man who heard a voice from “beyond” and bet his life on the promises of God. Trusting the visionary message about the destiny of Israel and the nations, Abraham ventured forth into a new and uncertain future. This faith was not about acceptance of propositional truths with which to build intellectual castles. Rather he “believed with the heart” (10:10)—a mystically empowered faith that leads beyond the heart into history. Thus, as “instruments of righteousness” (6:13) believers become servants of the coming kingdom of God.

Instances of a complete overthrow of the law have been rare in Christian history, but so have been examples of a wholehearted upholding of the law as validated in the cross of Christ. Antinomian tendencies in the life and theology of the Church have prevented the law of God from functioning in full force as a shaper and molder of communities, cultures, and even continents. The widespread neglect of the “Old Testament” has produced a truncated gospel, and has subjected the Church to all kinds of spiritualist and Gnostic heresies. It is happening before our very eyes!

Two articles in the December 1, 2009, issue of the *Christian Century* are illustrative of the point I am making. Douglas Harink discusses N. T. Wright’s critical treatment of the traditional Protestant doctrine of justification. I have yet to read Wright’s latest work on that subject, and have not kept up with all the various controversies surrounding his writings; but two quotes in the article caught my attention: a) The predominant approach to that doctrine “tends on the whole to be highly individualized and spiritualized; it is focused on ‘my relationship with God’ and in ‘my going to heaven when I die,’” and b) “it is a massive exegetical failure; it has thoroughly de-historized, de-Judaized and ‘de-covenantalized’ Paul’s thought.” I believe that such charges can be made against much traditional theology.

Indeed, the core issue of the gospel is not how I get to heaven, but rather how the power of God’s kingdom breaks in upon the earth, and through the Spirit establishes signs of the New Age to come. Wright’s statement in a June 12, 2008, *Christian Century* article to the effect that “the Gospel

demands to be read in deep and radical interpretation with the Old Testament” will go a long way, in my judgment, to help us better understand what it means to uphold God’s law. He is right: the kingdom of God, although not *of* this world, is emphatically *for* that world. “On the cross,” he states elsewhere, “politics and religion, as well as love and justice, and a host of other abstractions, meet to merge” (*Themelios* 16.1, 1990, p. 13).

This leads me to that other article in the aforementioned issue of the *Christian Century*: Nicholas Wolterstorff’s piece on “The way to justice” in the “How my mind has changed” series. He comments on the widespread view that in the teaching and life of Jesus, love has supplanted justice. To that way of thinking, “Justice is outmoded Old Testament stuff.” Such objection only intensifies when justice is interpreted in down-to-earth terms of a just society and the rights of its members. That kind of resistance, I would argue, is rooted in a misreading of the biblical message of fulfillment.

The gospel of the fulfillment of the law is not about bickering about *adiaphora*, as happened in the church in Rome (Ch. 14). Nor is it about confining the role of God’s law to personal ethics. Rather, it involves a view of Torah (“Moses and the prophets”) that deals with all spheres of life, and functions on the stage of history where the Lord of the Universe wants to establish signs of the coming kingdom of God. The Church’s *Kerygma* needs to be constantly informed and, if need be, transformed by Torah. At times, that may require radical revisions of widely accepted concepts that are part of an almost sacred and untouchable tradition. Nothing less than the biblical vision of redemption is at stake.