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LUTHER AND CALVIN ON LOVE, LIBERTY AND LAW

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It is possible that much of the moral gap in our present society can be bridged in the social areas of Love, Liberty and Law by comparing the reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin.

I. Luther

Luther's ethic, like St. Paul's, is usually regarded as an ethic of love and liberty rather than an ethic of law. As such, it is contrasted with the ethical legalism of Aquinas before him and Calvin after him. This view of it is true in the sense that he returns to the emphasis of St. Paul on faith and love, on the one hand, and liberty, on the other, especially in his early treatise *The Liberty of the Christian Man*. But it is inadequate because it is silent about another side of his ethic in which he stresses the importance of both the moral laws of the Old Testament and the secular laws of society. We shall deal mainly with this second side which is sometimes overlooked or minimized.

Luther tells us in one of his early treatises that the law must be preached first in order to prepare man for the Gospel. Man needs especially a knowledge of the Ten Commandments, which tell him "what he ought to do and what he ought not to do," in order that he may discover that "by his own strength he can neither do the things he ought, nor leave undone the things he ought not to do."[1] Luther maintains that "the Ten Commandments contain, in a very brief and orderly manner all the teaching that is needful for man's life."[2] This astounding claim is intelligible only when we remember that before the time of Biblical criticism the unity of all

1) Luther, M., *Works*, Philadelphia, A. A. J. Holman, 1931, Vol. II, P. 354.
2) Ibid., P. 367.

the books of the Bible was assumed and that the less advanced parts were interpreted in the light of the more advanced parts. Thus, Luther explains that the Ten Commandments are based upon the two-fold law of love: they "command nothing but love and forbid nothing but love."[3] Consequently, "the law is in itself so rich and perfect that one need add nothing to it" and "no one, not even Christ himself, can improve the law."[4]

Although the law is good and necessary, however, it cannot save. "The commands, indeed," he says, "teach things that are good, but the things taught are not done as soon as taught; for the commands show us what we ought to do, but do not give us the power to do it." The result is that we are brought to despair of our own capacity to justify ourselves by perfect obedience to the law. This leads us to listen to God's promises and throw ourselves upon His mercy for forgiveness. We are justified, not by the law, but by the the grace of God through faith. Faith unites the soul with Christ as a bride with her bridegroom, and in this union Christ takes the sins of the soul upon himself and bestows his own righteousness upon her.

But justification by faith does not mean that the Christian may dispense with good works. Good works are necessary in order that he may subject body to spirit and serve the needs of his neighbors. But he will do good works, not to justify himself before God, but "out of spontaneous love in obedience to God."[6] Thus, "Christian liberty" does not mean freedom from the need to obey the law; it means freedom from the constraint and menace of the law which are felt by us as long as we seek to justify ourselves by the law. This is the meaning of the paradox of the *Treatise on Christian Liberty*: "A Christian man is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to all."[7] The Christian is dependent for justification upon

3) Ibid., P. 364.
4) Luther, M., *Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount*, Philadelphia, Lutheran Publication Society, 1892, PP. 124~125.
5) Luther, M., *Works*, Vol. II, P. 317.
6) Ibid., P. 329.
7) Ibid., P. 312.

nothing and no one but his faith as it responds to the Word. Therefore, he is free freedom in the sense of power to overcome the world and its evils. But this liberty is a responsible liberty. Through "free lord of all," the Christian voluntarily makes himself "dutiful servant of all" out of gratitude and love.

We come now to one of the most perplexing aspects of Luther's ethics, the dualism between his personal ethics of faith and love and his social ethics of life in the world. In his treatise on *Secular Authority*. he defends secular authority, its from bondage to the law, including fear of its penalties. He also possesses spiritual law, and its coercion as ordained by God and necessary for social order. Against the Anabaptists, he quotes St. Paul's injunction, "Let every soul be subject to power and authority, for there is no power but from God."[8] But what, then, are Christians to do about Christ's saying, "Resist not evil"? There are two classes of men who belong to two kingdoms; the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the world. The Sermon on the Mount was meant for the former, not the latter. Since Christians live with one another in love, they need no secular law and no sword to enforce it. However, most men are not Christians, and to restrain them from evil, secular law and force are necessary.[9] Therefore, the Christian should not go to law or use the secular sword for his own sake; but he should support the secular authority from love of others for whom it is a necessity. In this dualistic view, the ethical perfectionism of the Sermon on the Mount is maintained in private life and at the same time a policy of "realism" is followed in public life.

In his later *Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount*. Luther develops further this dualism with the aid of a distinction between a "person" and his "office" and argues that the Sermon on the Mount is relevant to the conduct of the "person" but not to the way he acts in his "office." Every "office" or "calling" is good and everyone who performs the duties of a "calling" approved by God is doing His will.[10] Thus, Jesus' saying, "Blessed are the meek," applies to the Christian as a "person" but not as one whose

8) Rom. 13 : 1
9) Luther, M., *Works*, vol. III P. 236.
10) *Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount*, P. 42.

"office" requires him to exercise authority. How far Luther was willing to carry this dualism is illustrated by a striking passage. "A prince may very well be a Christian, but as a Christian he is not to rule; and insofar as he rules he is called not a Christian, but a prince. The person is a Christian, but the office or princeship has nothing to do with his Christianity."[11] "Are you a prince, judge, lord, lady, etc., and do you have people under you, and want to know what is becoming in you? Then you do not need to inquire of Christ, but consult the law of the emperor or your state, which will soon tell you how you are to conduct yourself towards your inferiors and protect them."[12]

Luther insists that one must perform the duties of his "office" with the Christain intention of serving his neighbors. Though the duties themselves are determined by secular law of the state, the fulfillment of them is truly ethical only when it springs from faith. However, the tension between an ethic of love and an ethic of secular law, between an inner intention of Christian service and an outer activity defined by secular law, was difficult to maintain. According to Troeltsch, Luther's tendency was to relax the tension and to emphasize secular law. In any case, obedience towards authority and conformity to the demands of the calling were increasingly emhpasized by Luther. The content of social duties was largely determined by the calling, and only the disposition or motive was provided by Christian faith and love.

The strength of Luther's position is that he attacked the ethical legalism which had become entrenched in medieval Catholicism, In doing so, he used the weapons put into his hands by St. Paul: justification by faith rather than works; faith active in love as the fulfillment of the law; and Christian liberty. Thus, he restored love and liberty to the central position they occupied in St. Paul. There are few passages in Christian literature which describe more eloquently the spirit of Christian love and liberty than parts of Luther's *The Liberty of the Christian Man*

11 Ibid., P. 294.
12) Ibid., P. 195.

But it cannot be said that Luther realized all the implications of Christian love and liberty for personal and social ethics. With respect to *personal ethics*, he was too much under the influence of the medieval exaltation of the Ten Commandments to see that, important as they are, they do not tell us all we ought to do and not to do. Though he shows in his description of Christian love how much abov ethem are the demands it makes, he insists upon reading into them more than they contain and thus giving them a position in Protestant ethics they hardly deserve. With respect to social ethics, his thinking is even more open to criticism. Doubtless, there is an important element of truth in his *ethical dualism*. It acknowledges the necessity for the Christian to manifest his faith and love within the framework of the political and social order and under the limitations imposed by human sin. He is not to withdraw from the world like the Catholic monk but to work within one of the approved "callings"; and he is not to shun political life like the Anabaptist but to support the state and accept responsibility for office. Futhermore, in his calling he is to respect the technical requirements of the work itself. "As he (the Christian) cannot derive the laws of medical procedure from the gospel when he deals with a case of typhus," says Richard Niebuhr, "so he cannot deduce from the commandment of love the specific laws to be enacted in a commonwealth containing criminals."[13]

Nevertheless, it is disastrous to restrict the Gospel ethic of love to one's life as a "person" and to conform to norms derived from secular law in one's "office" or "calling." The intention to manifest faith and love in one's "calling" will make little objective difference if the acts one does are determined wholly by secular norms. Of course, it is essential for a person with a political "calling" to take full account of human sin and to do what is practically best in the imperfect situation. In consequence, the Christian ethic does not demand of him literal obedience to "hard sayings" such as "Resist not evil." But he should not allow the duties of his calling to be determined by the imperfect standards of justice operating in his

13) Niebuhr, Richard, *Christ and Culture*, New York, Harper, 1951, P. 175.

society, for the actual system of justice must constantly be subjcted to the criticism of love. Luther is misled at this point by his separation of the good will and its motives from the good works in which it expresses itself. The Christian must concern himself with an act as a whole, both its motive and its probable consequences and evil acts cannot be justified on the ground of their good motives.

The result of Luther's dualism is that his profound insight into the meaning of love and his vigorous attack in the name of liberty upon the legalism of Catholic Christianity were prevented from producing the social fruits which might have been expected from them. For love which is confined to personal relationships and liberty which cannot express itself in creative social activity are condemned to remain, to a large extent, subjectively precious but socially ineffective treasures of the inner life. It should not be a matter of surprise, therefore, that Lutheran dualism in Germany has fostered blind obedience to political authority and social tconservatism. Martin Niemoller is reported to have said in June 1945, "My soul belongs to God, my body to the State."

Calvin

Calvin's view of law and its relation to liderty and love has probably had more influence upon Protestant ethics in the Anglo-Saxon world than any other single factor. Along with the ethics of the radical sects of the Reformation, it helped to shape the ethical thinking of larger denominations such as the Methodists and Baptists as well as of Calvinist churches such as the Presbyterians. It is hardly too much to say that the Puritan ethos was dominant in America down to the First World War, though there has been a sharp reaction against it during the last generation.[14]

Calvin combines Luther's doctrine of Justification by faith with a strong insistence that mat manifest his faith by righteousness. He maintains both the

14) Thomas, George F., *Christian Ethics and Moral Philosoohy*, New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955, PP. 120~121.

absolute dependence of man for salvation upon God's grace and the necessity for good works in accordance with the law. The latter bestows upon the law a primary importance for the Christian life. Calvin agrees with Luther that the first "use" of the law is negative, to convict man of sin and drive him to fly to God for mercy.[15] The second use is to restrain men from evil by a fear of penalties. This applies not only to the unregenerate but also to the regenerate before they are called, so that they may become "accustomed to bear the yoke of righteousness.[16] The third and "principal" use of the law relates to the faithful after their calling. Though the Spirit of God now lives in their hearts, the law gives them "a better and more certain understanding of the Divine will to which they aspire." Moreover, the saints need to be exhorted as well as instructed by the law. They are "burdened by the indolence of the flesh," which needs the law "as a whip, urging it, like a dull and trady animal, forward to its work."[17] Therefore, we should not attempt to escape from the law, because it "shows us a goal, to aim at which, during the whole of our lives, would be equally conductive to our interest and consistent with our duty."[18]

This leads Calvin to a very high view of the law of the Old Testament. Christ came not to destroy but to fulfill the law. Paul did not wish to adolish the law but the "curse" of the law upon those who fail to fulfill its demands. Thus, "the law has sustained no diminution of its authority, but ought always to receive from us the same veneration and obedience."[19] Consequently, there is no opposition between Gospel and Law. The difference between the Old and New Testaments is only in the "mode of administration," not in the "substance." Since the demands of the old covenant could not be fulfilled without the power of the Holy Spirit, the old covenant produces fear and leads to condemnation and death. But since the

15) Calvin, John, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Vol. II, Ch. Ⅶ, Para. X.
16) Ibid., para. XII.
17) Ibid., Para. XII.
18) Ibid., para. XIII.
19) Ibid., para. XV.

demands of the new covenant can be fulfilled by the power of the Holy Spirit, it leads to confidence and security. Thus, there is no opposition of "substance" between the two; there is only a difference between the ways in which righteousness is supposed to be attained under them.

Accordingly, Calvin refuses to acknowledge a "new law superior to the "old law." Christ made no additions to the law but simply "restored it to its genuine purity"[20] Like Luther, Calvin extends the meaning of the Old Testament law and claims to find in it much that really belongs to the New Testament. He is able to do this by following the principle that a law includes not only its explicit meaning but all that is implied by it. In determining what is implied by a law we should consider the end or purpose for which it was given. For example, the end of this commandment, "Honor thy father and thy mother," is that "honor may be given to them to whom God assigns it"[21] for the sake of the preservation of order. From this we may see that we should subject ourselves to our "superiors," "whether they are worthy of this honor or not."[22] By this method Calvin attempted to read back into the Ten Commandments even the most distinctive ethical insights of the New Testament. He maintains that "the tendency of the whole law" is to "a perfection of righteousness" and that this perfection consists in love of God and love of our neighbor.[23] For example, since "a prohibition of crimes is a command to practice the contrary duties," the meaning of "Thou shalt not covet" must be that "it is reasonable for all the powers of our souls to be under the influence of love." "Therefore God enjoins a wonderful ardour of love, which he will not allow to be interrupted even by the smallest degree of concupiscence."[24]

Calvin's doctrine of *Christian liberty* is a very limited one. The first "part" or aspect of Christian liberty, he says, is that Christians are freed from the necessity

20) Ibid., Ch. VIII, para. VII.
21) Ibid., para. VIII.
22) Ibid., para. XXXV.
23) Ibid., para. XI.
24) Ibid., para. XLIX.

of seeking salvation by the righteousness of the law. The second "part" is that "they yield a voluntary obedience to the will of God." Unlike slaves who are in bondage to the law and are always fearful because they cannot please their masters, Christians obey the law willingly and gladly. Like children, they do not hesitate to present thir parents with their imperfect works, "in confidence that their obedience and promptitude of mind will be accepted by them, though they have not performed all that they wish." The third "part of Christian liberty is that we are under no obligation with respect to "external things," such as meats, wine, delicate foods and ceremonies.[25]

It can hardly be denied that Calvin's ethic is primarily an ethic of law rather than an ethic of love. This is due to his failure to grasp the radical and unique character of Christ's teaching. He is right in insisting that Jesus did not mean to lay down a "new law"; but he is wrong in holding that Jesus merely "purified" the "old law." As we have seen Jesus sought to express the absolute will of God which had been only partially revealed in the law of Moses. The fact that he quotes the two-fold law of love from the law of Moses does not imply that love occupies the same place in his ethic as in that of the Pentateuch, or that it is merely a "summary" of the Ten Commandments. The meaning of the law of love for Jesus must be derived from a study of all he said and did, including his death on the cross. Such a study discloses that his ethic is not an ethic of law, even when love is included as the primary law; it is an ethic of love, which accepts and makes use of laws only insofar as they embody the demands of love.

It is only when Christians can be independent in their use of moral laws that Christian liberty can have its full meaning for them. As we have seen, Christian liberty has meant several different things in the history of Christian thought: freedom from the ceremonial law of the Old Testament: freedom from the vain effort to win one's own salvation by good works of the law; freedom from bondage to sin and moral power to will the highest good; freedom to obey the law willingly

25) Ibid., Vol III. Ch. XIX.

as a son; and freedom to do good works spontaneously from love in one's personal relationships. But Christian liberty has also been limited or attenuated in various ways: by the conception of righteousness as strict obedience to the moral laws of the Bible, as in Calvin; by a restriction of Jesus' ethic of love to personal relationships, as in Luther; and by a literal conformity to the teachings of Jesus interpreted as a new law, as in the Anabaptists.

Comparison and Conclusion

We have already criticized the first and the last of these limitations, and it is unnecessary to speak about them again. But it may be worthwhile to reconsider briefly the legalism of Calvin and the dualism of Luther in the light of our conclusions about the nature, necessity, and use of moral laws. The ethical legalism of Calvin is due to a false idea of Christian morality as consisting primarily of obedience to the moral laws of the Bible rather than of active love serving the needs of one's neighbors. The assumption behind this idea is that the Biblical law, especially the Decalogue, gives us an accurate and comprehensive knowledge of all God commands us to do. In reality, as we have said, the biblical law gives us an "exposition" or "guidance "as to what love requires, but does not tell us beforehand what to do. Thus, it cannot relieve us of the responsibility of deciding for ourselves what God wills us to do. When men seek through submission to authority to escape from the resonsibility of following their own conscience they do so at the cost of their freedom, as Dostoyevsky points out in his great legend of the Grand Inquisitor in The *Brothers Karamasoff*. On the other hand, if they reject the temptation and accept their moral responsibility, they possess the freedom co participate creatively in the fulfilment of their destiny and that of their neighbors.

The ethical dualism of Luther also rests upon a false assumption. Social institutions and callings, Luther assumes, are sanctioned by God in their existing form and with

their present imperfections. As such, they constitute a social order which is fixed and unchangable and which defines the duties of each "calling." The logical conseqnence of this is that love is powerless to act upon as well as within a "calling" and to transform the institutions and "callings" of society in accordance with the demands of a higher justice. But if we reject Luther's assumption and regard social institutions as in part a product of the historical decisions of men, man's creative freedom can be extended from his personal to his social relationships. Christian liberty will then include the capacity to reshape social institutions and "callings" in order to make them more consistent with love. The discovery of this truth by Christian Believers in political democracy in the seventeenth century and social justice in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is one of the greatest achievements of the history of Christian thought.

The view of moral law we have suggested is consistent with both the primacy of Christian love and the privilege of Christian liberty. We must not forget, however, that we cannot fulffill the moral law without love and that love can be bestowed upon us only by grace. Moreover, it is only grace that can destroy the power of sin and restore to us the freedom to choose our highest good. Thus, both Christian love and Christian liberty spring from divine grace. Whenever it has been forgotten, the Christian ethic has ceased to be an ethic of love and liberty and has degenerated into a form of ethical legalism by which men seek to save themselves. Whenever it has been remembered, Christians have through faith known the love which fulfills the law but fulfills it in liberty.

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