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One of the paradoxical side-effects of the shift of interest in New Testament studies from historicity to tradition-history (*Redaktionsgeschichte*) has been an increased awareness of the historical character of revelation. In the process of distinguishing sources and noting literary techniques we become very conscious of the personality of the writers. We discover human minds grappling with the problems of their communities, minds operating within the problematic imposed upon them by their culture and interests, minds limited by their resources. This discovery has destroyed the concept of the New Testament as an ageless monument. In its place we have a library whose volumes reflect the varied personalities of their authors. The inspired character of their insights guarantees that they cannot be ignored, but recognition of the fact that they have been conditioned historically means that they cannot be accepted without critical examination.

This conclusion has implications for both dogmatic and moral theology. Attention has centred in the area of dogma, as is only natural given the traditional understanding of the relationship between the two, but unfortunately lack of adequate investigation into the relation of language to religious thought has rendered the discussion less fruitful than one might have hoped. This difficulty does not arise with regard to morals because here there certainly can be no question of simply modifying the verbal expression. The problem posed by moral precepts is not one of understanding but of relevance: to what extent are concrete specific directives given to first-century communities binding today? Precepts of this type are found scattered throughout the New Testament, but I intend to concentrate on St Paul, because the problem is focussed more sharply by the 'occasional' character of his letters. In a previous article I argued that his concrete directives regarding slavery, the position of women in the Church, and obedience to the state were not binding, because his intention was not to pronounce formally on these institutions, but to exclude what he (given his eschatological perspective) considered to be red-herrings, and thus to focus attention on more important issues.¹ In order to determine whether his other precepts fall into the same category we must first try to discern *why* Paul issued specific precepts.

¹ 'The Christian and Society in Saint Paul', *New Blackfriars*, January 1969, 174-182.

Why Concrete Directives?

The very presence of so many directives in Paul's letters is at first sight a little surprising in view of his assertion: 'You were called to freedom, brethren . . . if you are led by the Spirit you are not under the law' (Gal. 5, 13, 18). A tempting solution is suggested by 1 Tim. 1, 9: 'the law is not laid down for the just, but for the lawless and disobedient.' In this perspective, concrete directives would have been given by Paul only to cope with particular problems, and to bring into line elements that were disturbing his communities. This explanation, however, has not satisfied others who claim that the need for precise precepts impressed itself on the Apostle only as his hope in the imminence of the Parousia began to wane. While there is a certain amount of truth in the first of these views, it no more satisfies the evidence of the epistles than does the second.

In 1 Thess. we find the following passage which is crucial for any understanding of the intention underlying the Pauline precepts: 'Brethren, we beseech and exhort you in the Lord Jesus, that as you learned from us how you ought to live so as to please God—you as you are doing—you do so more and more, for you know what directives we gave through the Lord Jesus' (4, 1-2). What is significant here is the clear indication that when Paul was at Thessalonica he did more than proclaim Jesus Christ (cf. Acts 17, 1-8), he issued detailed precepts to those who accepted Him. He here recalls three of them. The first is negative: avoidance of sexual sin, and in particular adultery (vv. 3-8), and the other two positive: concerning fraternal charity (vv. 9-10), and public order of which an important element was work (vv. 11-12); cf. 2 Thess. 3, 10). This letter was written when Paul's eschatological expectation was at its most intense, and there is not the slightest hint that the Thessalonians were at fault on these points. In fact Paul explicitly asserts the contrary. This indicates that we must dig a little deeper for the motive behind such directives.

A number of passages in Paul's letters imply that in virtue of their conversion Christians are endowed with an internal principle which makes any external guide-lines superfluous: Christ is in them (Rom. 8, 10), they are 'taught by God' (1 Thess. 4, 9), 'led by the Spirit' (Rom. 8, 14). However, many statements of this type are expressed conditionally: 'if you are led by the Spirit', 'if Christ is in you'. This betrays the Apostle's recognition that in the present age the Spirit has not yet been given in plenitude (Rom. 8, 23; 2 Cor. 1, 22), and that, in consequence, the Christian's new freedom can degenerate into a base of operations for the 'flesh' (Gal. 5, 13). Paul recognized that conversion liberates a force, and he would agree that this is love, but he was never so naïve as to say 'Love, and do what you will', because he was well aware that even after conversion there remains a tension between 'flesh' and 'spirit' (Rom. 7, 22-23).

Now 'flesh' and 'spirit' are *not two parts of man*. 'Flesh' is a *mode of being* in which the fundamental orientation of the person is to the visible and tangible, in which his true self is lost and scattered in the instrumental world of things, and in the depersonalized world of mass-existence (cf. Rom. 12, 2). 'Spirit' is *also a mode of being*, but one in which man is not dependent on the world for his understanding of himself; he sees himself as a creature and his fundamental orientation is to God. There are conversions so intense that the 'spirit' drive dominates the 'flesh' drive completely, but these are exceptional. Normally, the self-understanding bestowed with faith needs to be refined so that the Christian can in confidence distinguish a genuine impulse of the 'spirit' from one originating in the 'flesh'. Genuine love has an unmistakable impact, but while very easy to recognize *in others*, the possibility of self-deception renders it useless as a criterion of one's personal activity. The intensity of an impulse is no guarantee of its authenticity.

This is why Paul is at pains to provide criteria to judge the impulse of love (1 Cor. 13, 4-8; Rom. 12, 9-21). This is what he means when he says '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' (Rom. 13, 9-10). Paul is not at all concerned with the law as such. Activity emanating from authentic love is always in harmony with the law. Certain types of activity, however, are incompatible with genuine love and the value of the negative precepts of the law is to force a Christian, who feels himself impelled to perform one of these actions, to a deeper level of self-awareness. He is made conscious of the forces operating within him, and is thus offered a new opportunity of realizing his freedom authentically. Similarly, positive directives serve as rules-of-thumb for the immature Christian paralysed by his sincerity. In the ultimate analysis, therefore, it would seem that the ambiguity of the human condition even under grace was the reason why Paul felt obliged to indicate to his converts 'how you ought to live so as to please God' (1 Thess. 4, 1).

The Reality and Limits of Freedom

While Paul was aware of the human need for guidance in the working out of transformation, he does not seem to have envisaged the deviant behavioural forms that sincere conversion can take. At least he was tremendously surprised and disappointed when they manifested themselves. Both are related to concrete directives: one form (Legalism) majorizes and eventually absolutizes these guidelines, the other (Enthusiasm) ignores them completely. Paul's reaction to these phenomena—which have continually appeared in the life of the Church—is instructive, because in counteracting

Legalism he emphasises the reality of Christian freedom, and in trying to restrain the Enthusiasts he points out its limitations.

(a) Enthusiasm

To sum up the attitude of the enthusiasts at Corinth, Paul employs a phrase that they themselves probably used: 'All things are lawful to me.' The overwhelming experience of conversion, prolonged and intensified by the abundance of charismatic gifts in the community, was understood as a complete take-over by the 'spirit'. Any activity was therefore self-authenticating. Social customs and moral norms were structures belonging to man's pre-transformation state, and, since they had played no role in the transforming experience, were irrelevant to the new life inaugurated by participation in the death and resurrection of Christ. They were 'new' men, and 'old' standards simply did not apply to them. Former familiar norms seemed to contradict the exaltation of their experience and to drag them down again to the level of the unredeemed.

The *sense* of liberation from the law was all important, and it was fed by incidents such as the case of incest (1 Cor. 5, 1 f.), understood as evidence of their freedom. Paul saw this as arrogant self-deception, because the Corinthians were quick to appeal to unredeemed institutions such as the civil courts when it was to their advantage (1 Cor. 6, 1). The very intensity of their experience had limited their vision to themselves. Hence the Apostle's accusations of immaturity and lack of insight: they are 'babes in Christ' (1 Cor. 3, 1), 'children in thinking' (1 Cor. 14, 20). They had not perceived the ambiguity of the principle on which they stand. The freedom that is indissolubly linked with conversion is both a 'freedom *from*' and a 'freedom *to*'. It is a freedom from all factors that restrain man from achieving his true destiny. From this point of view freedom is an absolute. But it is illegitimate to extend this absolute character to 'freedom *to*', because conversion is ultimately surrender to Another ('you are not your own', 1 Cor. 6, 19). This introduces a limiting factor. "All things are lawful for me"—but not all things are helpful. "All things are lawful for me"—but I will not be enslaved by anything' (1 Cor. 6, 12).

The Apostle is thinking principally (but not exclusively) of certain forms of sexual activity—in the immediate context he mentions casual fornication, adultery, and homosexuality. The directives concerning these acts fall into a completely different category from those bearing on the roles of slaves and women, and the attitude towards social institutions (cf. above). The validity of the latter directives is limited by Paul's eschatological perspective, but this is not true of the former. That his conviction of the proximity of the Parousia played no role in Paul's prohibition of sexual sins is clear from what he says concerning marriage. He discourages it strongly, *except* in the case of those tempted to immorality (1 Cor. 7, 36). Paul

is so firm that it seems legitimate to conclude that he could not envisage a situation in which one of these acts (e.g. fornication) would be an authentic expression of transformation. They contradict the authentic demands of the self; they are not true avenues of development for the 'spirit'. Ultimately Paul's exclusion of these acts as legitimate options is based on finality, not that of bodily functions, however, but that which governs the dynamism of transformation: 'the body is not meant for immorality, but for the Lord' (1 Cor. 6, 13b).

Paul returns to the Corinthian principle in another context in order to bring out that a second limiting factor is also operative, this time in the horizontal dimension. "All things are lawful"—but not all things are helpful. "All things are lawful"—but not all things build up. Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbour' (1 Cor. 10, 23-24). His point is that genuine freedom can be exercised in an inconsiderate way. The enthusiasts were apparently claiming that 'food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food' (1 Cor. 6, 13a), and that in consequence all food was morally neutral. Paul could not agree more (cf. Rom. 14, 14). In such areas the Christian is entirely free—theoretically. The fact that one member of a community considers an action sinful does not make it wrong for others (1 Cor. 10, 29b). It may be, however, that his character is so weak that the liberty legitimately exercised by others inhibits him from following his own conscience. A moral pressure is generated which in a sense forces him to be insincere, and this negates his conversion (1 Cor. 8, 10-11). Thus we get the paradox of a freedom that is actualized in its renunciation. This arises because Paul is thinking of truth on two different levels. On the one hand there is the truth of an action as an authentic expression of conversion, and on the other the speculative truth of principles (e.g. those listed in 1 Cor. 8, 4; 10, 26). These two levels do not automatically coincide, because transformation has a social dimension. Of its very nature it is an openness not just to God but to others (Rom. 14, 7-8). Consideration of their need as persons is an essential factor in the truth of an action. No matter how ill-founded that need (a point formally underscored by Paul) it takes priority over the speculative truth of a principle. Paul saw through the thin veneer of quasi-respectability that speculative truth can give to self-love: '[Genuine] love is patient and kind . . . it is not arrogant . . . it does not insist on its own way' (1 Cor. 13, 4-5).

Thus the limitations on the freedom of the Christian that are expressed by negative precepts are based ultimately on Paul's understanding of conversion as an act of love that is *preserved* only through authentic reaffirmation in action. His prohibitions indicate areas in which self-love may be mistaken for the real thing, which is essentially other-directed. In some cases self-love may find a spurious justification in speculative truth, in others it is based on a radical misunderstanding of the nature of Christian freedom.

(b) Legalism

If the enthusiasts are overconfident, the legalists suffer from an inferiority complex. Arrogantly conscious of their own excellence, the former disregard all guidelines in order to preserve the emotional awareness of their being saved. These guidelines the latter cling to desperately because their ambition is, in Ronald Knox's words, 'to qualify, not to excel'. Since Paul's preaching was fundamentally the same everywhere we can infer that these two reactions stem from temperamental differences. Greek exuberance certainly influenced the deviant form that Christianity took at Corinth, and that of the churches in Galatia undoubtedly owed something to Celtic pessimism.

During the time he spent with the Galatians Paul followed his usual custom of issuing a number of practical guidelines for the living out of conversion (Gal. 5, 19-23). As he intended, this gave a certain sense of security to the neophytes, but obviously some areas were left vague, if touched on at all. This, I think, goes some way to explaining the welcome accorded to the Judaizers when they arrived with the 613 precepts of the Law. The speed with which their claim of the necessity of the Law was accepted argues that it harmonized with a psychological need. It is precisely this combination of need and necessity that shocked Paul so much. He had no quarrel with their observance of the directives of the Law, which in their material content differed in no essential way from his own. The violence of his reaction originated in a fear that the Law was becoming something more than a mere framework in which love could express itself without undue strain and anxiety. He suspected that the precepts were coming to have a value in themselves as guarantees of God's favour.

In face of this attitude which is the exact antithesis of that of the Corinthians, Paul naturally takes a completely different line. The multitude of specific directives found in I Cor. are replaced by a strong emphasis on freedom which establishes the perspective in which his own directives must be understood. His argument is complex, as one might expect from a man capable of seeing so many sides to the simplest question, and for reasons of space a number of aspects will have to be ignored. The essential is to perceive the dialectic of the Apostle's approach. He was too worked up for this to appear in *Galatians*, but it emerges clearly in *Romans*. On the one hand 'the law is holy, and the commandment holy and just and good . . . the law is spiritual' (Rom. 7, 12.14), but on the other it is a 'law of sin and death' (Rom. 8, 2), and 'all who rely on works of the law are under a curse' (Gal. 3, 10).

In speaking thus Paul is thinking explicitly of the Law of Moses, but what he says is valid also for the Law of the Spirit (or of Christ) *in so far as it is embodied in concrete directives*. Such directives are good and 'spiritual' in the sense that they provide an appropriate framework in which the 'spirit' can express itself. From this point of view

they are a manifestation of God's mercy.¹ They lighten man's burden by clarifying the context within which a decision must be made. Unless they are taken very seriously man risks becoming less rather than more human. How then can such directives become an instrument of death? Obviously law does not have this capacity of itself. It is given it by men who force it into fulfilling a function that does not pertain to it. This happens when the law is made the bearer of salvation. The Jews saw the Mosaic law as a source of life (Sir. 17, 11; Ps. 16, 11), and so it was—as long as it was regarded simply as a light that clarified men's minds (Is. 2, 5; Prov. 6, 23). This function, however, had been perverted, and Paul's opposition to the law was based on the knowledge that it had come to occupy such a position in the eyes of many that they could not open themselves to God's new invitation in Christ (Rom. 10, 1-4). It has bred a sense of security so precious that they could not seriously contemplate the death that true faith and love involve.

To talk of true faith and love as death like this may seem grandiose, but those who have made such a decision know that it is taken alone, in anguish, isolation and darkness (the Agony in the Garden is a perfect example): it is experientially a form of death. The authentic moral decision is without certitude, without security. A moral directive kills when it is made a substitute for that decision. In the case of many Jews the law was an obstacle to conversion; for Christians it can have the effect of negating their conversion if its function is so exaggerated that in any given situation it alone bears the burden of decision. This is not to say that an authentic moral decision has to be in opposition to the law (the Corinthian error). It may well be in accordance with it, but only because the law's demand is *reaffirmed* by the 'spirit'. Only thus can the indicative 'you have died' be followed by the imperative 'put to death' (Col. 3, 3.5). The law is death to the 'spirit' if it is understood in such a way as to deny it the opportunity to realise itself continually in the 'death' of authentic decision (Gal. 2, 21).

Authority and the Law of the Spirit

Paul's reactions to the Corinthian and Galatian errors are very different, but they balance and complement each other. In a sense we today are in a better position to obtain a synthetic view of his thought than either of his original audiences, but in fact they had the advantage of a synthesis that is denied to us, and one which had a greater impact (for those who desired to see) than the most lucid explanation. This synthesis he offered to the Corinthians in the words, 'Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ' (1 Cor. 11, 1), and to the Galatians in almost identical terms: 'Become as I am' (Gal. 4, 12).

Such statements reveal, not arrogance, but a clear-sighted aware-

¹ Cf. my previous article, *op. cit.*, at pp. 178-179.

ness that moral imperatives cannot be satisfactorily *imposed* from without. It is very significant that Paul never appeals to the authority deriving from his apostolic commission in order to force obedience to his directives. Paradoxically, he only appealed to this authority when Christians did not accept the full implications of their freedom! His right to speak was based not on his position as head of the community, but on his total commitment to its service. His existence was a living demonstration of the value of the directives he gave. Unless they are affirmed in this way, moral imperatives lend themselves very easily to a legalistic interpretation. Paul was respected as a person, and his existential affirmation conveyed an understanding of the moral life as the authentic development of what is truly human in man.

This finds confirmation in the fact that the vast majority of the precepts found in Paul's letters are a distillation of human experience; this is true whether their source be the Old Testament or the popular philosophy of the first century. Their adoption by Paul (cf. Phil. 4, 9) implies a recognition that conversion releases and focuses the deepest aspirations of human nature. As 'flesh' man cannot really know himself, because his frame of reference is too limited; he defines himself in function of things less than himself on the scale of being. As 'spirit' he perceives himself as he really is, and in Christ who is the focus of his conversion he sees what he can become. The true norm against which he measures himself is not an external law, but the ideal which he already is in an embryonic way. This is 'the law of the spirit of life in Christ Jesus' (Rom. 8, 2).

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