

THE DISPLACEMENT OF THE DECALOGUE

No serious observer of the signs of the times can fail to remark one ominous phenomenon prevalent in our midst. The growing disesteem for the authority of the law as such betrays itself by other symptoms than the notable increase in juvenile crime. Hitherto the British people have not unjustly been credited with a reverential regard for law-observance; but that this vertebral column of the national character shows signs of curvature to-day can scarcely be gainsaid. The deflection may in part be due to the materialistic and sensuous spirit of the age and that rapid encroachment of the seen upon the unseen which Wordsworth lamented even in his sober-paced generation. One of its most mischievous concomitants has been the influx of vicious types of fiction and theatrical spectacle, tending to weaken the moral sense by flooding impressionable minds with sympathy for clever rogues or profligates and by pouring contempt on their arraigners, oftentimes to the extent of condoning, if not magnifying, successful knavery. Be that as it may, this much is plain, that the picaresque attitude widely assumed nowadays towards judicial authority serves to legitimate licence and sap that noble ideal of duty, happily still ascendant in the lists of patriotism, which has lain at the base of so many grand achievements of resolute intrepidity or patient endurance. The trend of the opposite drift is fraught with baneful enervation of soul, reducing law-abiding citizenship in the long run to a matter of expediency, and setting sharp-witted fraud above sterling integrity. Alas for a nation's prestige when ethical standards come to be seriously discounted and self-interest bears sway, when insubordination invades the home-circle and the *débâcle* spreads thence to the body politic, when life dwindles to a pageant or pantomime and sociological makeshifts supplant allegiance to principle. On that text of political demoralisation the lapsed plight of a neighbouring republic reads us a warning lesson.

The law of the realm forms the avenger of guilt and guardian of innocence within the sphere of the temporal and tangible;

but it must not be confounded with the realm of law universal. For, while civil government presents claims divinely ratified to respectful homage, there exists a loftier code than mundane legislation can frame, fenced with sanctions more august than it can devise. Human jurisprudence takes cognisance of outward acts; it represses crimes menacing the weal of society. But the Law of the Lord is a perfect instrument of justice, the index of unswerving rectitude, comprehensive of the aggregate of accountable agents, inviolable as the fiat that gave them birth. It is the inflexible standard of the relations necessarily subsisting between a holy Creator and a creature endued with moral judgment, nascent immortality and a foreboding of a final assize. Against current disparagements of this crowning distinction of humanity, its amenability to the moral Law, we feel it incumbent on us to enter our protest.

One of the most striking features of the Biblical revelation is the way in which it lays bare the tap-root of criminality in that mystery of iniquity, *sin*, which connotes rebellion against the Most High. It brands this surd quantity of the cosmos as the very symbol of irrationality. "He who would ask to see darkness or hear silence," cries Augustine, "let him ask the reason of that most unreasonable of things, sin." Infinitely above its malignity and pollution beams the stainless radiance of the thrice-holy Jehovah, beside whom there is none other "perfect in power, in love and purity". By the law of their being, His living organs are bound, instinctively or intelligently according to their several grades, to subserve the end of their creation, the glorifying of the unsullied Fountain of Light and Life by whom their derivative life is sustained. It is man's essential differentiation from the beasts of the field and the fowls of the air, that he is formed for communion with his Maker and the intelligent execution of His behests. The Shorter Catechism rightly pronounces that end to be mankind's true goal, an end steadfastly pursued by all unfallen intelligences as at once their obligation and felicity. The principle of dutiful obedience is inwoven in their textures and they have no quarrel with its terms.

We shall not, if these are our tenets, espouse the widespread notion that humanity started its chequered career with "a schism at the root of its being". Our creed will be that "God made man upright" and that his shifts to render crooked-

ness rectilinear are his own fond invention. Rainy was well warranted in affirming that "the doctrine of original righteousness cannot be given up without transforming the scheme of man's relations and obligations from end to end". The protoplast began promisingly enough in that first "garden of his innocence" which almost baffles our investigation, and as long as he abode *in statu pupillari* with untainted loyalty and no craving to set up for himself, all went well with him. For "obedience then was a smooth pathway, fringed with flowers and leading into meadows of asphodel. It did not become the strait and narrow way until sin had made obedience a toil, the sense of duty a restraint and human life a race and a fight" (Shedd).

What is the glaring anomaly of man's subsequent history in this aspect of the matter? Broadly speaking, that he has stubbornly preferred his own will and pleasure to his Creator's. "Nowhere else," wrote Henry Calderwood, "but in man has observation recognized disorder adhering to an entire species, a being out of harmony with the laws of its own nature." The sum-total of his rightful tribute to his liege Lord consists in "fearing God and keeping His commandments", an equitable demand assuredly; or in N.T. language, in loving supremely the loveliest of Beings, whom it is profanity to rate second in regard, and in loving our neighbour as ourselves. That constitutes the fulfilment of moral obligation *in toto*; and in the state of innocence its indefeasible claims were so patent that no formal demarcation of choices, lawful and unlawful, was necessary to enforce them.

In that abnormal condition of things that we are familiar with the case is altered. Specific legislation, except in a single exercise of divine prerogative, may have been superfluous when love kept the law of its own accord; but it became indispensable in an environment of corruption so foul that it must needs be curbed or chastised. If we choose to view the antediluvian era as a period in which moral enactment rested in abeyance, the experiment ended disastrously, and even the drastic purgation of the plague-stricken area wrought no lasting betterment. Patriarchal simplicity waxed so degenerate that another expedient for the conservation of the knowledge of God's will was launched at the juncture when the people selected to serve that purpose came of age. Israel's judicial and ceremonial institutes promoted

the main design; but, if we read the story aright, the official promulgation once for all of the moral law at Sinai casts all other elements of the Mosaic economy into the shade. For the Two Tables traverse the whole field of moral prohibition and fence it off even as the guarded mount itself was fenced.

At this tremendous "beating of the bounds" of illegality the majesty of the Lawgiver, "able", as James reminds us, "to save and to destroy", shone forth as nowhere else and the trump of doomsday gave forth not a few solemn premonitory notes. By the law thus epitomised comes the knowledge of sin in its exceeding abhorrence; it was published principally to bring a sense of shortcoming home to every bosom and to cut all grounds of self-complacency from under the transgressor's feet.

Accepting the O.T. narrative as it stands, and the N.T. commentaries upon it, we cannot but recognise that all its most majestic sanctions congregate round the "giving of the Law" and exhibit that as the most momentous of all divine theophanies during the older dispensation. The signal rank assigned to the Decalogue comes out not only in the ascription of the two tables to the finger of God but in the voice divine which gave them utterance and added no more (Deut. v. 22), and in their enshrinement, unaccompanied by aught beside, in the ark of the testimony within the most holy place.

It is its function likewise, not so much remedial, however, as rectoral, to enunciate the ideal of manhood walking in all the Lord's ways and reflecting His image in singleness of heart. It proffers no helping hand to secure its own observance; that belongs not to its province. Nor does it present a sliding-scale, adjusted to an impaired moral stamina. The notion of a fallen law for a fallen race inverts the poles of right and wrong. Here is no temporary code, relevant to a certain stage of development, but a final, formal, fundamental summary of duty Godward and manward. This condensation of the statute-law of the Lord mounts above Judaism to a cosmical altitude of survey. Its range is not provincial but oecumenical.

As such our Lord accepts and endorses its summary proclamation. The ritual and theocratic ordinances are absorbed in His own comprehensive Person and work; but He who is Himself the Veil-render and the Way into the holiest of all, the Abolisher of the dispensation of distance and Mediator of

the dispensation of access, announces that He comes not to antiquate the moral law, but to republish it with an amplified significance, not to remove this monumental landmark of righteousness, but to ratify its validity. In His spiritual exegesis of their scope the Ten Words (to borrow the Hebrew designation) cover the entire field of moral agency, embracing within their sweep all the springs of thought and action, and leave no corner of the soul unsearched. In conformity with this affirmation the Saviour directs the young ruler who came to Him in a spirit hovering between complacency and disquietude to THE Commandments, in the real breadth of their compass, as the proper corrective of his short-sighted self-satisfaction. It was the same eye-opener that aroused the apostle Paul from his dream of self-righteousness to a poignant sense of his sinnership at the bar of final adjudication, where all alike have to plead guilty. There is but one Fulfiller of the Law, one Son of Man in whose perfect walk its content is fully reproduced and "drawn out in living characters".

Perhaps some lover of the Gospel may raise the objection here that "we are not under the Law but under grace". That is blessedly true; viewed as a channel of acceptance at the judgment-seat he may plead exemption from its claims. But the reason is that our Kinsman-Redeemer has "met the bond" on our behalf, that He is "the end of the Law *for righteousness* to every one that believeth". In Boston's phrase, "our work-arm is broken"; but the work of the Restorer of God's rights and our forfeited standing, the Lord our Righteousness, admits of no impeachment or emendation.

Our concern, however, is with the Law in its juridical aspect, regarded as the standard of rectitude, condemnatory of the "old man" already lying under sentence, and admonitory of the "new man", growing up, notwithstanding many a setback, "unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ". His unerring analysis has resolved its thunderpeals of prohibition into the sweetly distilling rainfall of love to God and man. Yet the imperative mood cannot be expunged from our lesson-books, nor the disciplinary element banished even from our most advanced training-schools. To do right unconstrainedly spells perfect liberty; but sin-impaired wills are unable to attain that table-land of grace by amateur aviation without treading the stairway of regulative enactment. For in our present state of

pupilage none of us can be safely entrusted with our own steerage. We need ever to pray with Whittier,

Around our gift of freedom draw
The safeguards of Thy righteous law.

That law has been well defined as "truth in the department of morals", and its compendium inscribed on the two Tables of Testimony presents an indispensable criterion of right and wrong for a wayward and ill-affected race. An age so markedly impatient of restraints as ours and so prone to ebullitions of self-will can least of all afford to dispense with its sobering curb. It seems a strange fatuity that at such a season the Anglican Church should have thought fit to dislodge the Ten Commandments (for the most part) from her chancel walls and omit them from her amended liturgies, in deference possibly to the theories of speculative criticism or the groundless notion that a code stamped with marks of universal import was designed for that people alone to whom it was first addressed. The consequences of this relegation of the Decalogue to obscurity have been most pernicious. Catechisms, like many other wholesome traditions of the past, are out of fashion at present; but there was a time not very remote when the Decalogue was taught in all its breadth of application as the rule of virtuous living and synopsis of human duty. In those days idolatry ranked as a moral monstrosity, the most heinous of affronts to the majesty on high; now we deem it a venial offence or temperamental peculiarity. Adultery was then a crime of the first magnitude; now illicit connections are too generally salved with euphemisms or buried in silence. And how vain is the dream of many that the sanctity of the Lord's Sabbath-day can be maintained against the blatant clamour for its secularisation merely as a Church festival, or on any lower ground than its Divine institution as the prerogative commandment of the Ten! Whether these present-day traits betoken progress or declension let the reader judge.

It may be said, however, that the "educated moral consciousness" is a competent mentor of good and evil. Of that we are exceedingly sceptical; for its pretensions, which amount to lavish faith in its own insight, seem to us a poor outfit for the voyage of life. Its *ipse dixit* may be quite as biased as the most conventional standards. It may, for example, display abundant enthusiasm for humanity in all its varieties from the sage to the

scoundrel, and yet be utterly estranged from a holy Deity. St. Paul has instructed us that even that demoralised Pagan world to which he was sent had a residuary conscience not altogether beyond appeal; but he was far from conceding that its responses were oracular or exhaustive. No more are those of its modern congeners. For, instructive as ancient moral philosophy may be to the discriminating student, there is a fatal flaw (remarked by Gladstone) in its ethical theories, the fact, namely, that they bear no intelligible relation to a supreme Ruler and Judge. Traversing much of the ground covered by the Second Table of the Law, they virtually ignore the First. How could it be otherwise in the case of a Pantheon like theirs, stained with the most flagrant vices, and where, moreover, it remained a moot point whether Zeus himself or Fate were paramount? There is a large measure of truth in De Quincey's contention that nothing short of sycophantic fear of beings detestable in character but superior in power to mortals could have bowed self-respecting minds before the altars of Greece and Rome in a *cultus* emptied of all religious signification, that was not absolutely puerile.

But let us be generous and assume that these worshippers of bestial celestials (or at any rate ethical anomalies) were sincerely conscientious. Then we must admit that their consciences were singularly warped, and welcome Plato's banishment of the poets and their mythologies from his Utopias with a sigh of relief. Yet there were other departments of morals concerning which he was as much astray as any of his countrymen. Clearly we cannot, with the Quaker, place the crown of authority on the head of Lady Conscience. She is not our lawgiver, whatever binding power her sentences may carry with them. There is only one true Potentate, and "the office of conscience is to discern His law and urge us to obedience, not to make laws of its own" (Baxter). With Joseph Cook we may speak of its "throwing out its antennae and touching objects within the veil", or of its vibrations as bearing witness to an extrinsic authority dominant over the instrument that responds to its signals. Vinet describes it as "the Divine Law individualised". But those signals may be misconstrued or perverted and it may itself be defiled or seared. Here we can discover no final court of appeal. "A conscience without God above it is a tribunal without a judge."

His judgments alone tally with truth, nor can we escape from the moral norm of Sinai any more than from the pervasive domain of physical law. Like the Roman centurion we are listed "under authority", not sovereigns in our own right but subjects of the King Eternal, as Plutarch explicitly avers.¹ Rabbi Duncan hit the mark when he said that "ethics without law are as bad in theology as law without ethics. That leads to a system of equality with God in which unholiness ceases to be sin or crime".

There are two main currents of opposition distinguishable nowadays to the inhibitions of the Decalogue. First of all, we remark signs of the propensity to licence, rife in so many directions, the insubmissive spirit of self-assertion which flinches from every yoke of subjection and eyes rules and restrictions much as the convict the walls and bolts of his cell. That temper seldom yields except to measures of stern coercion. But the same virus lurks in unrenewed hearts where it does not mantle into orgies of lawlessness or brood in rankling malevolence. For, to quote the striking language of a non-Christian moralist, the redoubtable Immanuel Kant, "man would willingly be rid of that deterring reverence which perpetually shows him his own unworthiness". *L'orgueil ne veut pas devoir*. Hence the marked repugnance of many to religious acknowledgments of dependence on a higher Power; hence, too, the sedulous suppression, by the same parties, of the evidences of Divine government legible in history and providence.

We think that this neo-antinomianism may be traced, secondly, to the widespread denial of the fact that the God of revelation, and indeed of conscience, is a *disciplinarian* Deity, so to speak, and that, as Chalmers put it, "we live under a retributive economy". Here we come into inevitable conflict with all those effeminate versions of the Godhead which have such a vogue nowadays, and against which in the last generation Forsyth entered a vigorous protest, when he affirmed that a "merely fatherly God is not in sufficient moral earnest" to win or retain our homage. So he censures "the pathetic fallacy of fatherhood in which judgment has no place" and reckons it a product of the feebleness of our moral indignation against wrongdoing. We are "no longer frightened at ourselves", having learnt to look at sin "in a softer light than God's". Religious

¹ οὐ νομοθετήσαντες πάρεσμεν εἰς τὸν βίον ἀλλὰ πεισόμενοι τοῖς διατεταγμένοις.

liberalism is ready to deny the moral constitution of the universe that it may exalt easy indulgence at its expense.

Nevertheless heaven's first law is moral order and the Eternal King "sitteth evermore on the throne of His holiness". Is not the Judge of all the earth bound to do right? If our finite thought may be suffered to single out one Divine perfection as fundamental to the rest, holiness is that bond of perfectness, inasmuch as no other attribute would be adorable in default of it. We have, indeed, no right to regard those perfections as composite, for they blend in indissoluble unison. But the Lord is supremely *glorious* in holiness. Holiness suffuses His entire being; it is His robe of state, a vesture of surpassing lustre and beauty. He may be merciful, but He must be holy. "He loves the sinner," says Forsyth, "but He loves the law of His own nature better still." He cannot deny *Himself*.

That would be the case if the standard of rectitude for moral agents became lax in proportion to our laxities! There may be cause, however, for its definite enunciation. Thus the Decalogue in its spiritual compass sums up its requisitions in a portable and articulate form. In one sense the Law is "not made for the righteous man"; for perfect love to God and our neighbour would fulfil its precepts spontaneously. But in a world out of gear and lurid with portents of judgment, its chief function comprises a ministry of condemnation, accentuated in the contrast it enforces between that "personal, perfect, permanent obedience" which it enjoins as our reasonable service and a company of "communists in sin". The Law is given to cut the comb of our pride and by its relentless surgery to lop off our lofty pretensions to innocence.

Our quest has brought us round once more to the Gospel, to which the moral law forms the best of all propaedeutics. Haziness of sentiment respecting the one induces haziness of outlook on the other. It is one of the main defects of Dr. Whale's recent book on *Christian Doctrine* that he entirely ignores the nexus between the Law and the Gospel. No truly Biblical theology can be regardless of the necessity that the Law itself should be honoured in the very process of redemption. Sin cannot be committed with impunity, nor sinners be let off by evasion of the issue. Law infringed without penalty loses its identity: it dwindles to a *brutum fulmen*. But that righteousness which is like the great mountains does not deal in makeshifts

or compromises. Nay! the righteousness of God's mercy is its sublimest credential, its grandest authentication. The massiveness of the fabric proclaims who is its Builder.

That stupendous problem how the outraged Law might be vindicated, *and* the transgressor justified without sacrifice of rectitude could be solved only by Infinite Wisdom. It has been adjusted triumphantly once for all at the cross, "a labour worthy of a God", as Spurgeon happily styles it. But the finished work exhibits not a law set aside but fulfilled in every jot and tittle, not consigned to oblivion but superlatively honoured and ratified. Salvation is of grace, but legally secured. To displace this rule of righteousness from its unique station is an act of sacrilege. Its interdicts are needed both to keep anarchy at bay and to warn saints to walk circumspectly. This apparitor of the High Court of Justice above is not to be discharged from his post just because his rod of office makes us smart!¹

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¹ A striking commentary on the neglect of instruction in the Divine Code presents itself in the multiplied offences of pilfering and wanton damage that have grown of late into a public scandal. At the annual meeting of its shareholders the Chairman of the L.N.E.R. Company deplored their prevalence on our railroads and added significantly that, *until the normal standard of right and wrong was recovered*, the evil could scarcely be abated. That standard of moral obligation, adjusted with perfect equity, faces us in the Ten Words of the Law of God. For lack of their salutary curb our generation threatens to run wild. Let the foregoing utterance of a prominent figure in the business world be laid to heart by our ethical mentors.