

NOTES

MORAL OBLIGATION IN THE SERMON ON THE MOUNT

The Sermon on the Mount is generally conceded to be a synthetic construct of the Jewish-Christian author of Matthew's Gospel, whoever he was, and is not the report of any one homily preached by Jesus on any single occasion. The text of this oration, as of the other pronouncements of Jesus scattered throughout the Gospels, reflects to some degree the process by which the Church during the apostolic period reached a more or less stable position on the fundamental tenets of Christianity; indeed, the practical needs of the Church probably dictated both the form and to some extent the content of the Sermon. Though Matthew's account can hardly be regarded as incorporating the actual words of Jesus, even if it was translated or compiled from an Aramaic original, it nevertheless seems to represent the authentic tenor of His preaching. There are no fundamental differences between this address and its briefer counterpart in the Gospel of Luke, the Sermon on the Plain; the divergencies constitute, for all practical purposes, differences of emphasis. It is likely that the majority of scholars today regard the Sermon on the Mount as a kind of parenetic catechism or a *didachē* for Jewish Christians, compiled in varying degrees from Mark, Q, and M; artificial though it is, it constitutes the most comprehensive pattern for Christian living to be found in the canonical text of the New Testament.

I have deliberately avoided using the word "law" in describing the nature of the Sermon on the Mount: whether or not the Sermon incorporates a legal content is a problem on which commentators are in wide disagreement. On the one hand, Barnabas Ahern has argued recently: "There was nothing antinomian in Christ. . . . Man without law is man with little knowledge of God and of his will. Christ, therefore, like another Moses, taught laws (cf. Mt 5-7) and made provision that all through the centuries his representatives would continue to teach them."¹ On the other hand, Hans Küng has denied forcefully that the Sermon contains any new laws: "While the Sermon on the Mount and similar sayings of Jesus explain and illustrate the requirements of the reign of God, in a variety of ways, these requirements are no more than a summary, uniquely simple, of the main commandment of love of God and of one's neighbour. Jesus formulated no new laws and laid down no new detailed precepts."²

These two authors are, incidentally, both members of the Roman

¹ James Biechler (ed.), *Law for Liberty* (Baltimore, 1967) p. 99.

² Hans Küng, *The Church* (New York, 1967) p. 53.

Communion, but denominational differences seem to have little or no bearing on this particular problem. The same cleavage is to be found in Protestant thinking at the present day. Thus, G. D. Kilpatrick, discussing B. W. Bacon's notion of Christ as the giver of a *nova lex* in the Gospel according to St. Matthew, observed: "Bacon has convincingly developed the view that the Gospel is the New Law and that the fivefold division of chapters 3-25 is a deliberate imitation of the Pentateuch. The mountain of the sermon on the mount is meant to recall Sinai and Jesus is himself a greater Lawgiver than Moses."³ In contradistinction to this view one may take, *ex plurimis*, that of Günther Bornkamm: "It must be observed that in Matthew's Gospel there is no idea of a *nova lex* and cannot be."⁴

Before it is possible to ascertain the nature of the obligation incumbent on Christians to follow the teachings of the Sermon on the Mount, it is essential to determine whether its principles constitute law, and, if they do not, whether it was Christ's intention that they should be accorded legal status at some subsequent time.

Perhaps it would be well first of all to dismiss the idea which is sometimes advanced that Jesus was confirming Stoic natural law: natural law in this sense has no place in the Gospels.⁵ But, on the other hand, Jesus was very far from ignoring the Mosaic law, which He, like His listeners, regarded as the revealed will of God determining a peculiarly Jewish way of life both for individual Jews and for the community at large. In Mt 5:17 He made the fact clear that He had not come to destroy the law or the prophets but to "fulfil" them. The most significant word in this verse is *plērōsai*, which means "to bring to consummation," "to fill the requirements of," or "to complete fully." This verb does not carry the force of renovating or starting afresh. Küng and Bornkamm are perfectly correct in propounding that the Sermon on the Mount comprises no legal innovations. Their view is indirectly corroborated by the researches of Gerhard von Rad, who has argued, in effect, that the heart of the Old Testament is not a law to be fulfilled so that the Hebrews might achieve righteousness in the sight of God, but a gospel to which they could respond, and thus enter into a dynamic relationship with Him, conscious (or as conscious as they could be) of

³ G. D. Kilpatrick, *The Origins of the Gospel according to St. Matthew* (Oxford, 1946) pp. 107 f. Even though Bacon regarded Christ as a new Moses giving the New Law on a new Sinai, he postulated in *The Sermon on the Mount* that the Sermon is not legislative but prophetic; it does not enact or lay down rules. Was there an inherent contradiction in his thinking?

⁴ Günther Bornkamm *et al.*, *Tradition and Interpretation in Matthew* (Philadelphia, 1963) p. 35.

⁵ In this connection see J. L. McKenzie, "Natural Law in the New Testament," *Biblical Research* 9 (1964) 1-13.

His salvific activity on behalf of His people, and aware of the development of the *Heilsgeschichte* in so far as their historical limitations enabled them to perceive it.⁶

Nevertheless, what one might call this Old Testament gospel, if the phrase may be allowed, was set in a legal context, and Jesus made it plain that He did not intend the New Covenant to be a relaxation from the moral demands implicit in this context: "For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. Whoever, then, relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven."⁷ Far from expecting a lower ethical standard than was required under the Old Dispensation, Jesus expected a much higher degree of perfection. The six so-called antitheses in the Sermon on the Mount ("You have heard that it was said . . . But I say to you . . .") show that though the Mosaic requirements ought to be accomplished, they are, in themselves, insufficient for those who wish to be His disciples. Even in those antitheses where Christ seems to negate the law (e.g., in the saying about oaths, Mt 5:33-37), He is implicitly acknowledging that some parts of the law were framed in such a way as to make what He regarded as unjustifiable concessions to human weakness. Consequently, He set in their place a more lofty and rigorous ideal.⁸ The Mosaic law as Jesus Himself understood it touched only the external act; it was His wish that His own more arduous requirements should touch also the interior dispositions of His followers.

Clearly, then, Jesus regarded the Mosaic law as inadequate, but He desired only to perfect it, not to destroy it. Fulfilment of the law involved basically two demands on His disciples: the first was faith in Him as the person in whom the Father's revelation was ultimately achieved, and the second was the double commandment of love for God and for one's neighbor. In the last analysis, all the biddings in the Sermon on the Mount may be epitomized in those of faith and love. Jesus Himself perfectly fulfilled the Mosaic law by requiring that His followers pursue those ideals which were later incorporated in the text of the Sermon. The gospel of the Messiah was not itself a new law, except in

⁶ Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology* (2 vols.; New York, 1962-65). See especially Vol. 1, Part 2, and Vol. 2, Parts 1G and 3. His case against the contrary positions of E. Hirsch and Bultmann is formidable.

⁷ Mt 5:18,19.

⁸ With regard to the two classes of antitheses in the Sermon on the Mount, there are some useful observations in Rudolph Schnackenburg, *The Moral Teaching of the New Testament* (New York, 1965) pp. 75 f.

an oxymoronic sense. The only justification for speaking of a literal *nova lex* in the Sermon on the Mount consists in the fact that the understanding of the Mosaic law which the text of the Sermon exhibits is entirely different in spirit from that of the contemporary rabbinate. In other words, the so-called "new law" or "the law of Christ" or "the law of the Spirit" is the perfection of the Old Dispensation. Bernard Häring, with reference to Christ as legislator, has expressed the same notion from a different but not conflicting point of view, that of grace:

Especially in the Sermon on the Mount . . . He expressed in words charged with all the majesty of His divine authority the inner compulsion of the "law of the spirit." This new law of its inmost essence is far more than a bar or hedge shutting out sin, more than an extrinsic imposition of will laying down a minimum requirement. It is rather the grace of the Holy Spirit knocking at the door of man's heart.⁹

The imperatives in the Sermon on the Mount should be regarded as examples of prophetism rather than legalism. A good law should be worded in such a way that at least the majority of those on whom it is imposed are capable of obeying it in all normal circumstances. A law which cannot be kept by those for whose benefit it is promulgated is to some degree an unjust law. It is unlikely that Jesus Himself expected that all of mankind, or indeed all of His own followers, could obey His teachings in their full severity and sublimity; He must have known that many would fall short in their obedience. It has sometimes been suggested that the Sermon was intended only for a chosen body of disciples: "Spoken not to the world but to the Church" is the phrase used by Charles Gore in his celebrated exposition *The Sermon on the Mount*. I would not go so far as to say, with one commentator, that the Sermon was "an ordination charge to the Twelve," but clearly the sayings which constitute it are of a kind which few but committed Christians would attempt to apply to their daily lives. In short, they are not cast as legal directives, and were very probably intended by "Matthew" or his sources for presentation only to those who had affirmed their belief in the kerygma and had received baptism.

Christ's thinking as represented in the Sermon on the Mount is closer to that of a prophet than of a lawyer—a fact which perhaps partially explains His bitter denunciations of the scribes and the Pharisees. Archibald Hunter has explained well the difference between their approach and that of their most uncompromising critic:

The scribe or legalist thinks that character is determined by conduct, and that what must be done is to frame a code of morals telling people how they

⁹ Bernard Häring, *The Law of Christ* 1 (Westminster, Md., 1966) 257.

must act in any particular case. So there arise the 613 precepts of the Pentateuch or the Mishnah's thirty-nine kinds of work forbidden on the Sabbath. Jesus' approach is quite different. He is concerned not with acts, but like the prophets, with persons and principles. He finds the secret of good living not in obedience to a multiplicity of rules and regulations—i.e. a moral standard and authority imposed from without—but in the spontaneous activity of a transformed character.¹⁰

Nevertheless, there are occasions when pressure of some kind is necessary as a final resort in preventing evil, when all appeals to the principle of Christian charity have failed. A threat of divine punishment is a less perfect form of motivation than an exhortation to love, but Jesus Himself uses the former method in the references to the damnation of the iniquitous: "For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven," and again towards the close of the Sermon: "On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you evildoers.'"¹¹

Even though the biddings of the Sermon were, in all probability, not perceived either by Christ Himself or by the author of Matthew's Gospel as juridical instruments, they are couched in an authoritative tone and are accompanied by solemn warnings that they should be obeyed. There are no accompanying threats of legal sanctions to those who disobey; indeed, attempts to use such measures could well have the effect of destroying the spirit which ought to motivate the Christian to follow them.¹² But it does not by any means follow that they can be ignored with impunity: "And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house upon the sand; and the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell; and great was the fall of it."¹³

C. H. Dodd has described succinctly the obligatory but nonforensic nature of Christ's exhortations: "The law of Christ, we conclude, is not a specialized code of regulations for a society with optional membership. It is based upon the revelation of the nature of the eternal God, and it affirms the principles upon which His world is built and which men ignore at their peril."¹⁴

¹⁰ Archibald Hunter, *A Pattern for Life* (rev. ed.; Philadelphia, 1965) p. 117.

¹¹ Mt 5:20; 7:22,23.

¹² The kinds of problems which arise from attempts to enforce morality simply because justice requires punishment for immorality are well discussed in Basil Mitchell's recent work *Law, Morality and Religion in a Secular Society* (New York, 1967).

¹³ Mt 7:26-27.

¹⁴ C. H. Dodd, *Gospel and Law* (New York, 1951) p. 81.

Häring, who has made a technical distinction between the "goal commandments" of Christ and the "limitative commandments" of the Decalogue, likewise maintains: "There can be no doubt that Matthew sees in the Sermon on the Mount the absolutely binding and liberating directive of the New Covenant. It is evident from the whole text that he has not the slightest intention of watering down the limitative commandments of the Decalogue. The goal commandments are not an optional piece of advice."¹⁵

In this spirit Hans Windisch was justified in exhorting his readers to free themselves from Pauline exegesis, and to admit that the Sermon on the Mount is as much an ethic of obedience as is that of the Pentateuch.¹⁶

Many authors, however, have questioned how the directives of the Sermon on the Mount can be binding when they constitute an impossibly high ideal. Am I always bound to love my enemy, whoever he is, and however badly he treats me? Am I bound to invite anyone who victimizes me by assault and battery to repeat his outrage? Considerations of this nature have led to what Lutheran theologians have referred to as the *Unerfüllbarkeitstheorie*, the theory of the impossible ideal.

In assessing the value of this theory, one may readily admit that many of the verses in the text of the Sermon on the Mount contain no notion of obligation: the Beatitudes are the best examples of these. One must also make all due allowance for the special genius of the Aramaic language, in which the substance of the Sermon was first delivered, and especially for such figures of speech as hyperbole and paradox. It has been observed that the commands in the Sermon disclose a dual kinship with prophetic speech on the one hand and with proverbial and rabbinic wisdom sayings on the other. Neither category involves the necessity of invariable literal interpretation. Then there are a few cases where a command in the text of Matthew differs in some seemingly significant detail from the corresponding verse in Luke's Sermon on the Plain: for example, in Luke's redaction Jesus forbids divorce without qualification; in Matthew's, a man may divorce his wife only on the grounds of fornication. The suggestion has often been proposed (perhaps rightly) that the phrase *parektos logou porneias* is an interpolation—that is to say, it is authentic from a literary standpoint but historically unauthentic—and there has, as a result, been a sometimes disedifying cleavage between those authorities who would permit

¹⁵ Bernard Häring, "The Normative Value of the Sermon on the Mount," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 29 (1967) 382.

¹⁶ Hans Windisch, *Der Sinn der Bergpredigt* (Leipzig, 1937).

divorce for fornication (or adultery) and those who would not. These problems have sometimes been exacerbated rather than alleviated by theologians in the past who have attempted to apply the concept of *inerrantia scripturae* indifferently to both the Matthean and Lucan Sermons.

To deal with this latter point first, I propose that the term *inerrantia scripturae* could well be abandoned: it has been the cause of innumerable misunderstandings and misinterpretations, and has from time to time been the source of more heat than light. It is surely sufficient to speak of biblical truth, a concept which leaves uninterpreted those logia of Scripture which do not bear one clear meaning, and which is, in any case, not applicable to any of the logia of Scripture taken *in vacuo*. Part of the fallacy of the *Unerfüllbarkeitstheorie* is that many of its proponents have tended to consider the precepts of the Sermon on the Mount *in vacuo*, and have consequently failed to interpret them in the broad context in which they occur.

The notion of biblical truth has been discussed by many authors in recent scriptural literature. It is sufficient to restate here that truth, for the Hebrew mentality, was not merely a matter of intellectual assent, but also involved the concept of personal commitment to a God who had made a unique covenant with His chosen people. The idea of truth held by St. Augustine, and in general maintained by most Christian writers until very recently, was fundamentally Greek rather than Jewish. One of its principal effects was to superimpose on Scripture an abstract, perfectionist ideal of truth which was quite alien to the biblical Jewish mentality. All of the logia of Scripture should be seen against the background of revelation and, in particular, the historical circumstances in which revelation took place. Christ was the acme of divine revelation, whether or not He was fully conscious of His actually being the Messiah; but His human knowledge was not perfect, nor was He immune from making statements that were logically inconsistent. His outlook was necessarily conditioned by the formation which He had received in the synagogue at Nazareth. He was not principally concerned in His teachings with rightness (or wrongness) in the abstract. His primary objective was that the lives of all those whom he strove to influence should conform as far as possible to God's plan for mankind, and that man, by submitting his will to that of the Father in heaven, should accept His sovereignty in every aspect of his life. Whenever He criticized or emended the Mosaic law, it was in order to express more adequately what was for Him the will of His Father. Religious obligations, in particular, should be performed, He declared, not to impress other men but to please God.

Seen in this light, the Sermon on the Mount constitutes an epitome of the endeavors of Jesus to guide His Jewish contemporaries away from what He seems to have regarded as the pettiness of the scribes and Pharisees, and towards a grander and more genuine conception of His Father's total purpose in the course of revelation.¹⁷ The fact that some Christians, or even large numbers of Christians, find the standards proclaimed in the Sermon on the Mount impossible to fulfil completely is no reason why they should not attempt, with the aid of divine grace, to put into practice the highest ideals of Christ to the best of their ability. In this way they will attain a more perfect degree of virtue than would have been possible if they had attempted what might have appeared a more practical ethic. No human act is ever absolutely good: the precepts of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount should be taken in the spirit in which they were originally declaimed. The intention of Christ which lies behind the words is to give His followers clear direction towards the fulfilment of the will of God rather than to legislate for particular cases. To put the ideals of the Sermon on the Mount into practice may well be impossible for most men; to follow humbly in the direction indicated by Christ is impossible for no morally responsible individual.

To strive to live the Sermon on the Mount, with the help of God's grace, is surely obligatory on any individual who regards himself as a Christian. Certainly the nature of this obligation was recognized in the apostolic and subapostolic periods. As Harvey McArthur has pointed out, the much discussed "escape clauses" do not affect the nature of the Christian's duty:

Furthermore, and significantly, the early Church took for granted that the injunctions of the Sermon were to be obeyed and could be obeyed. True, "escape clauses" appeared in the text of the Sermon itself and in the commentaries upon it. But these insertions appeared precisely because it was assumed that the commands were to be obeyed! The function of the "escape clause" was to limit the areas in which a particular command was to be regarded as applicable. The intention was to eliminate obstacles to obedience, which was always taken for granted.¹⁸

There is no necessity here to discuss at any great length the question of whether or not the Sermon on the Mount was intended to be an in-

¹⁷ This condemnatory attitude of Jesus *may* have been partly the result of the human ignorance which was one of His characteristics as man. It has been suggested, for example, that one very justifiable intention of Jewish legalism was to make the prophetic ethic relevant and practical. See W. D. Davies, *The Setting of the Sermon on the Mount* (Cambridge, 1964) p. 449.

¹⁸ Harvey McArthur, *Understanding the Sermon on the Mount* (New York, 1960) p. 140.

terim-ethic. Various writers from Johannes Weiss to Albert Schweitzer have interpreted the Sermon according to the tenets of a radical eschatology, and have regarded it as a collection of crisis laws, framed on the assumption that the end of the world would be only a short time in the future, and not therefore intended as a guide for Christian behavior over any protracted period of human history. True, the dynamic of eschatology is inherent in the Sermon, but what is important is the quality of the ethic rather than the length of time for which it was intended to serve. If the ultimate purpose of the Sermon was to guide mankind to do the divine will, then no *necessary* time factor was involved. Christ is not represented in the Sermon as basing His requirements on the nearness of the Last Judgment; it seems more plausible to assume that He wished men to live on as high a moral plane as they would if the end of the world were expected at any moment. One may argue, like Schnackenburg, that the ethics of the New Testament are best regarded from an eschatological point of view, but his view of the eschatological content in the Sermon is essentially different from that of Weiss and Schweitzer. Schnackenburg is certainly justified in describing Christ's ethics as eschatological in so far as all earthly realities, by comparison, attain a character of temporality and inconstancy.¹⁹

In conclusion, it deserves insistence that the heart of the Sermon on the Mount is the gospel of love, and that its teachings should be interpreted in this light. The text of the Sermon makes it apodictically clear that the follower of Christ is expected to love as well as believe, and to extend his love to his fellow men without exception: "For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you salute only your brethren, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."²⁰

The last injunction may sound impossible to accomplish, and was no doubt proposed to Christ's followers as an ideal. It seems to have been suggested by Lv 19:2 and Dt 18:13; the Greek word for "perfect" is *teleioi*, which has the connotation of "mature" or "perfect of one's kind." The corresponding Lucan word is "merciful" rather than "perfect." But the obligation on the follower of Jesus to strive constantly towards greater love is implicit in both the Sermon on the Mount and the Sermon on the Plain: herein is the essence of the Christian message for the world.

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¹⁹ Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Present and Future* (Notre Dame, 1966) p. 33. The whole of chapter 2, "The Challenge of the Sermon on the Mount," is relevant.

²⁰ Mt 5:46-48.