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THE LAW AND THE GOSPEL AS THE BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS OF NORMATIVE ETHICS

When the concepts of law and of the Gospel are approached from the side of the New Testament and Christian tradition, we can easily fall into the trap of generalization from several aspects. It is a well-known, but misunderstood interpretation that the Old Testament is nothing more than the law, and the New Testament is the same as the Gospel. As you will see later, the law can be part of the New Testament, but at the same time the Old Testament does not lack the Gospel either. The same misunderstanding can happen if the law and the Gospel are approached as a negative or positive ethical norm, despite the fact that there are still numerous advocates of this approach.

In order to find our way in the interrelationship of these two basic concepts, we have to much better understand their Biblical function, which can be read of course both through Old Testament and with New Testament glasses. For lack of time and in keeping with the spirit of the place, we now choose the second option.

On the basis of the New Testament the most up-to-date question that can be asked about the law is whether it is currently valid for Christian people. We can respond to this question if we answer the dilemma what law really is. We can give the most precise answer to the above question if a parallel is established between its characteristic features and the criteria of the Gospel. On this basis we can set up the following difference pairs which, however, are not to be taken to extreme:

LAW	GOSPEL
demand	address
God's will	God's address
guidance	promise
prosecution	discharge
verdict over the guilty	grace
judgement	forgiveness
anxiety	comfort

The above system of relations is revealed by the activities of *Apostle Paul*, who clearly stated that although the law is necessary, yet the ethics of following Christ is based on the Gospel.

The theology of the Old Church actually continued this apostolic teaching when it looked at the Gospel as a *supplement* to the law. Old Church times offer of course plenty of counterexamples, e.g. *Marcion's* system clearly *contrasted* the two. Most of the Greek and Latin Church fathers subordinate the law to the Gospel, although none of them goes as far as referring to the law as the embodiment of sin, like *Marcion*. *St. Thomas Aquinas* speaks of the Gospel as *lex nova* thus continuing the old church tradition, although he also represents that the soul makes one ready to comply with the law. This shows the characteristic feature of the medieval theology, whereby compliance with the law could even be an act of salvation.

The Reformation, especially its Evangelical branch strictly refers again to the foundations laid by *Apostle Paul*, who also argued for the benefits of the law, although he definitively stated that it cannot be the basis of gaining credits. Both *Luther* and *Calvin* spoke about the threefold benefits of the law, which as an *usus politicus* is on the trustee of external discipline and external order, as a *usus pedagogicus* is the source of knowledge of sins, and as a *usus normativus* has a regulating or guiding role. On this basis *Luther* extracts the thought of *St. Augustine*, which became the theory of the Two Empires in the evangelic theology on the basis of his theory of Two Cities, which *separated* the law and the Gospel from each other. The consistent representation thereof undoubtedly resulted in the sad practical fact in the 20th century that the side of action of the law was left to the (hitlerite) State,

whilst the Church remained only responsible for preaching the Gospel, thus revoking its right to criticize the political system.

The dialectic theology represented by *Karl Barth* introduced significant changes in attitude in this field, too, when the order of the law and the Gospel *was reversed* declaring that there is no imperative without being preceded by the indicative. In practice, this means that God always saves man first, and gives commands only after that.

After this short theology historical detour, let us return to the initial issue: What is the law and what is the Gospel?

The law of God serves nothing more than to reveal God's will. As man can measure his own guilt on this basis, and it will be the source of the knowledge of sins, Paul's theorem whereby „*law came into the world for sin*” (Rome 7) is true. However, this does not mean that the law itself is the result of the sin; it only means that the reality of sin can be detected by using the law.

However, the question is justified whether the law did not become unnecessary and invalid in the light of crucifixion and resurrection. In fact, the normative nature of the law cannot be interpreted in the light of the New Testament any more, however, we cannot consider it as a rudimentary state which has become null and void, as it has a separate message.

Nevertheless, the New Testament speaks about the law as an impossible claim, an expectation that cannot be met by man in a satisfactory fashion. That is why we could expect that God will reverse impossible claims into possible ones, thus liberalizing expectations.

However, the situation is that the interpretation of law by Jesus leads to radicalization. Jesus does not only simply affirm that „*there is nothing to be lost from the law*” (Mt 5.18), but at the same time he „rolls” the rules and makes them impossible to comply with. Where adultery was forbidden, there the sinful wish to the other sex has become guilt. If the law prohibits murder, Jesus condemned anger, too, because it leads straight to murder. When in the Old Testament logic in addition to the love of fellow beings, the hate of enemy was justified, Jesus encouraged to love the enemy.

The most important characteristic feature of the *nova lex*

revealed in the Sermon on the Mount is the impossibility of complying with it, which proves man's guilt under all circumstances. However, the „new law” by Jesus does not become the norm, but remains in its role, showing the guilt as a mirror to the man who looks into it. The solution is no longer compliance with the law, but the faith in the Lord exercising control over the law.

So we can understand why Jesus laid down the double commandment of love as the essence of the law. Although the commandments: love the Lord and love your neighbour, answer the message of the two stone tablets relating to God and man, but at the same time, they do not focus on obedience any more, but on love.

By the love of God man recognises that he can only prevail over his guilt through his faith in Jesus Christ, who conquered death, and not by complying with the letter of the law. The commandment „Love the Lord” in itself cannot be obeyed in the long run, similarly to the teachings of the Ten Commandments. However, through repentance, search for God and obedience one can practice self-devotion, which can be complete despite all its frailty.

The commandment of love at the same time gives meaning to life, and makes practice of Jesus' farewell phrase „*True love is when someone gives his life for his friends*” (John 15:13). Anybody with whom a man is in connection and is in need of help can become a fellow being. This fellow being existence can remind people of the misery Christ released them from.

The source of this dual love is God, who is, at the same time, the judge who formulates the judgement and provides acquittal. The above-mentioned two faces of God cannot be contrasted, just as the law and the Gospel cannot either. The love of God is in its justice.

This love coming from God, the *agape* is completely different from man's love. It descends from above and cannot be put together on the basis of earthly features. But it is true that human love comes from divine love.

So we get to the Gospel, which is really able to lift people and save them from the depths of sin, because the acts of God

embodied in Jesus realized this ideal. This way the harmony of the law and the Gospel is created, and so we understand why Gospel is considered a clear norm for Christians.

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