

THE SPIRIT AND THE LAW

By BARNABAS AHERN

EARLY one Sunday morning a few weeks ago, I passed through Piccadilly Square in Manchester. A motley group of young people, all in beatnik attire, huddled together on the benches, some still sleeping, other already awake. With no one else in sight, I felt a little fearful as I saw a young man and woman rise from the benches to speak with me. All they wanted was change for a ten shilling note. Theirs was a simple request; but the voices which spoke were crisply accented and richly modulated. The scene presented the conundrum of today: young people and old at odds with their upbringing, resentful or at least bored with the restrictions which keep intact the fibre of social life.

The ways of yesterday have undergone change; the phenomenon of beatniks is but a sign and symptom. Laws have always been broken; some spirits have always been antinomian – against the government. But a legally structured life, whether in state or church, was always seen as a preservative of right living, and as a guarantee of full human integrity. When, for instance, in the nineteenth century George Eliott entered upon an illicit union with Mr Lewes, men looked askance not merely because such a union defied law but, even more, because illegality of this kind was identified with the shame of a scarlet woman.

Today, this bond between life and law is fast being dissolved. Though the vast majority of people recognize the need for legal prescription, they see it most often as a merely adventitious safeguard, repressive and restrictive yet needful to keep cities from becoming jungles. Even the laws of God and of his Church have become features of christian life which some find difficult to accept. The emphasis of our day is on christian maturity and the *élan* of the Spirit. One can ask, therefore, what is the role of the law in a programme of spirituality which stresses liberty and spontaneity, self-fulfilment and 'togetherness', life in the Spirit and the self-giving of charity. Almost instinctively men of today resent the incursion of law into the re-discovered areas of our freedom in Christ.

At times, unfortunately, ill-used authority is to blame for this obfuscation of the role of law in christian living. Precepts and direc-

tives have not always respected the liberty of the children of God. Authority has sometimes imposed on individuals and groups regulations which, because prompted by misinformation or biased interests, were not rightly directed to the full development of the individual or to the common good. Every thinking man has a right to resent and to protest against this abuse of authority. St Paul the apostle would be the first to cry out against it, even as at Antioch he rebuked Peter to his face for conduct which silently abetted the faulty attitudes prompting the rules and regulations imposed by the judeao-christians.¹

Paul, doctor of christian liberty

During a great part of his ministry the apostle to the gentiles found himself involved in the defence of christian liberty against the invasions of law faultily imposed. Two of his greatest letters, to the romans and to the galatians, are manifestos for the perfect freedom which the christian enjoys in Christ. Some might conclude, as some actually did, that Paul was antinomian. The real truth is that Paul saw all christian life as ruled by the most exacting of laws, 'the law of the Spirit'.²

The christian world today needs to be reminded of the apostle's full teaching on this law of the Spirit. There are still among us those, who, like the judeao-christians of old, think that holiness is something man-made, a perfection to be achieved by man himself through heroic fidelity to precepts and prescriptions. Such men and women think that if one tugs long enough at his boot-straps he will rise to God; and so they wonder why they never get off the ground. On the other hand, there are also among us christians of antinomian spirit who, like some of the gentile christians of old, mistake the meaning of christian liberty and condemn all restriction as fettering the flight of the spirit. Such people think that merely emotional 'hot air' can waft them into the presence of the Lord; and so they wonder why eventually they become more dizzy than whirling dervishes.

To both these mentalities Paul would speak only one word: *Mē genoito* – 'heaven forbid'! His thought, like all wisdom, soars to an eminence where false perspectives are corrected, and the good elements in both these erroneous mentalities are harmoniously reconciled under the light of truth.

One might say that of all men Paul was the least likely to under-

¹ Cf Gal 2, 11-14.

² Rom 8, 2.

stand sympathetically the meaning of christian liberty. As a jew of the diaspora and as an ardent pharisee, Saul of Tarsus could boast, 'As to conformity to the law's requirements, I was blameless'.¹ For this man 'all holiness derived from the law',² so that for him the only way to please God consisted of heroic human efforts to observe every jot and title of the law of Moses. His devotion to the law was so intense that it drove him to persecute the nascent Church which preferred 'the teaching of the apostles'³ with its emphasis upon Christ to the teaching of the pharisees with its emphasis upon the law.

The day came, however, when this man of the law was brought face to face with Christ and, like the other apostles at Pentecost, was enveloped with light which blinded fleshly eyes to illumine his mind with full conviction that Jesus is the messianic Son of God, truly 'the Lord through whom all things have their being, especially ourselves'.⁴

Paul's experience at the gates of Damascus eminently contained everything. He felt no personal need for further instruction. Writing to the galatians⁵ he affirms that three years passed before he even went to see the other apostles. The visit he then made to Jerusalem was merely a courtesy call; he payed his respects to Peter and to James, but saw no one else. Greater, however, than his confidence in the fullness of his enlightenment was his compelling conviction that in Christ he had discovered God himself, the very end of all law. He recognized gratefully that the law of Moses had been his attendant on the way to Christ.⁶ But now that he had reached Christ himself, he entered upon an entirely new way of life where Christ would be all.

Life in Christ

According to Paul's own favourite expression, his life after conversion was to be spent wholly 'in Christ'. Many current interpretations of this phrase have missed the point of Paul's thinking. Some have suggested that he saw himself as a bird soaring about in an atmosphere which is Christ, or as a fish swimming about in a sea which is Christ. To designate this atmosphere or sea men have spoken of a spiritual Christ, a pneumatic Christ, a mystical Christ: something more extensive than the real person of Jesus himself. Nothing could be further from Paul's mind. The Christ of whom he

¹ Phil 3, 6.

⁴ 1 Cor 8, 6.

² Phil 3, 9.

⁵ Gal 1, 18-19.

³ Acts 2, 42.

⁶ Gal 3, 24.

speaks is always the actual person who lived upon earth, died and rose, and now abides with his Father as the Lord of glory. The phrase 'in Christ', therefore, cannot be understood in a locative sense. The apostle created this expression on the basis of the Old Testament phrase, *batahu beYahveh* – 'depend on Yahweh'; and so he used it to express the complete dependence of the christian upon Christ. For Paul every christian is like the spouse of the canticle who comes up from the desert leaning upon her beloved.¹ The phrase 'in Christ', therefore, sums up in lapidary form the most characteristic affirmation in the whole pauline corpus: 'He has become for us God-given wisdom and holiness and sanctification and redemption; so that, just as it is written, 'Let him that takes pride, take pride in the Lord'.³

Christ who revealed himself at the gates of Damascus opened up before Paul the total fulness of a new life to which nothing could be added. There was no longer any question of ways and means to prepare for the messianic mercy of God. Because of the death and resurrection of Christ, the eternal Father is now ready to embrace as beloved children all those whom his own Son 'is not ashamed to call his brothers'.³ Because of the salvific act of Christ, God has bestowed upon man everything which even he can think of: 'He who has not spared even his own Son but has delivered him for us all, how can he fail to grant us *all things* with him?'⁴

In one of the most revealing autobiographical portions of his epistles, Paul tells all that happened in his soul when, after years of really fervent life in judaism, he at last found God in Christ. He describes his conversion as a total rejection of all merely human efforts to become holy and as a total acceptance of the unique way of life in Christ:

The things that were an advantage to me, these for the sake of Christ I have counted loss. More than that, I count everything loss in comparison with the supreme advantage of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I count them as rubbish that I may gain Christ, and be found in him, not with a holiness of my own derived from the law, but with that which is obtained by faith in Christ, the holiness which God imparts on condition of faith. I would know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, becoming

¹ Cant 8, 5.

² 1 Cor 1, 30-31.

³ Heb 2, 11.

⁴ Rom 8, 32.

like him in his death, that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.¹

Life as a child of God

For Paul, becoming a christian meant life in the fullest sense of the word, life 'at home' with God as Father and Christ Jesus as brother, life as a beloved son whom God has adopted, not by mere legal fiction, but by the gift of divine life imparted and preserved by God's own holy Spirit. In comparison, the life which Paul had lived previously seemed like a state of slavery in which he stood outside the family gathering. His whole existence had been ruled by commands and precepts which came from afar; his whole function was to carry out behests which kept his life a service. In the period of the old covenant to which Paul had belonged, even Moses, though faithful in every part of God's household, was only a servant.² Nothing man did could release him from the spirit of fearful awe. Though he spoke of God as Father, he uttered the word as a slave speaking of his master. For him the door was always shut to the intimacies of family life with God.

The salvation which Christ accomplished changed all this. When the Word became flesh, he left his Father's house to mingle with men, to take upon himself their state of servitude and to become flesh of their flesh, their brother. When, therefore, he returned to his Father, he bore in his own body an eternal blood bond with every man of earth. By our sharing his flesh, and through the love which this brother bears us, every slave now has access to the full love of the Father. The only thing yet necessary was the deed of adoption, the gift of the holy Spirit who, with creative power, would turn the heart of a slave into the heart of a child. The loving Christ, all powerful as God's own Son, has seen to this. His first act, on returning to his Father's home, was to send back upon his brothers his own Spirit to be their Spirit. If only a man accepts Christ for what he really is, as Paul accepted him at the gates of Damascus, the work is done: from being a slave he now becomes a son. St Paul describes this historic process of salvation in words which carve a perfect cameo:

When the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.

¹ Phil 3, 7-11.

² Cf Heb 3, 5.

And because you are sons, God has sent the spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying Abba! Father! So through God you are no longer a slave but a son, and if a son then an heir.¹

Law of love

Entering on his new life as son of God and brother of Christ, Paul became immediately aware that the whole manner of his existence had changed. He knew first of all that he was completely free of the laws, commands and precepts which both God and man had imposed upon him in his state of slavery. Because he was now the Lord's son, he owed no obedience to any mere man; because he had become God's beloved child, he would never again be treated by his Father as a slave. Every fibre of his being thrilled with a tingling sense of liberation. He was convinced that 'Christ has set us free to enjoy freedom'.²

His ringing affirmations of liberty may seem to echo thoughts bent on libertinage. His words, as repeated today by many, sound on their lips like a raucous manifesto for profligacy. Paul, however, has forthrightly disclaimed all share in such faulty misunderstanding of christian liberty. To those who abused their new-found freedom he wrote: 'Yes, brothers, you have been called to liberty; only do not use liberty as an occasion for sensuality'.³ To follow a wayward life as a prodigal son of God is to Paul an even worse slavery than that from which he had been drawn. The slavery of men under the law of Moses could be honourable as a faithful service; it had dignified and sanctified the lives of the Old Testament saints. But the profligacy of a child of God is a wanton and wretched servitude to the evil which debases, a slavery which leads only to death and destruction.⁴

The apostle was fully conscious of all that his new status involved. If he enjoyed liberty, it was because the holy Spirit ruled his life as he had ruled the human life of Jesus, perfect Son of the Father. Through the work of the Spirit who lived in him, Paul's heart was alive with faith, a complete and loving committal of his whole being to the Father, and with charity, God's own readiness to love and to help all men. No human law could ever be as exacting as this spirit of sonship. When a son is truly devoted, he wants only what his Father wants, and does only the things which please him. When a son shares his father's love for the rest of the family, he becomes a true brother, ready to spend and to be spent for all.

¹ Gal 4, 4-7.

² Gal 5, 1.

³ Gal 5, 13.

⁴ Cf Rom 7, 15-23.

If anything, then, the life of a true son of God is ruled by a more intransigent standard than the norms which slaves must follow. No requirement is so exacting as love. A hired hand may discharge his duties faithfully and with scrupulous care. But such duties are never more than chores performed by one who is an outsider to the family interests. But let the employee be adopted into the family by the master who cherishes him as a father loves his son, and the whole picture changes. The estate becomes the adopted son's estate, the home, his home; he has become a son and a brother. He will do the same things he always did, but in an entirely new way. His charges are a son's share in running the household. His duties are trusts, confidently given to him by a father who loves him. The wealth which he gains for his father is rich with new meaning; it will provide security for the family he loves and treasures, for all to share. The inheritance which he will receive as son is not a mere bonus given to a servant; it is a father's last bequest which a devoted son must carry on and increase for the glory of the family name.

Love and liberty

Paul's new life, therefore, was a life of liberty precisely because it was totally inspired by 'the law of faith',¹ 'the law of the Spirit'.² Faith made him cling to the Father with devoted committal, while the Spirit filled his heart with overflowing love. Therefore the apostle constantly wanted to do all the things he had to do. His soul, like the soul of Christ, was a limpid pool imaging without ruffle or ripple the vast expanse of heaven's will. Hence Paul could make his own the words of Christ his brother: 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work'.³ This is the perfect liberty of the children of God who love and who are loved, and who do always, out of love, the things which please the Father.

All this Paul has said of himself. But he has spoken as a christian, knowing full well that the least child in the family of God enjoys all the privileges which are his. To each one baptism brings the fullness of the christian mystery. All who are baptized have 'put on Christ';⁴ clothed inwardly and outwardly with likeness to God's own Son, they are received and cherished by the Father as sons. Every christian has received the Spirit of Jesus, who constantly breathes faith and love into his hearth, and ceaselessly 'bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God'.⁵ Everything, therefore, which

¹ Rom 3, 27.

² Rom 8, 2.

³ Jn 4, 34.

⁴ Gal 3, 27.

⁵ Rom 8, 16.

Paul has written of his own life he has written in the name of every son of God. The 'I' of Paul is the 'I' of every christian.

Practical conclusions

There are many conclusions to draw from Paul's teaching on christian liberty. We choose the three which are most needful for true christian thinking at the present time.

1. Those with authority in the Church must see the Church for what it really is: a divinely structured organization intended by God to show forth the perfect life of his own Son, Christ Jesus. The Spirit of God, therefore, must be allowed full play in the life of every christian. If authority in the Church or in religious organizations fails to keep its ear open to the voice of the Spirit speaking through christian movements and christian charismata; if, in accord with previous usages or customary ways of thinking and acting, it trammels new manifestations of the Spirit or impedes doctrinal development, then authority fails in its responsibility. St Paul emphasizes the respect which authority must have towards manifestations of Jesus' Spirit in the Church: 'Do not extinguish the Spirit. Do not despise the utterances he inspires. Hold on to that which is good, and have nothing to do with any kind of evil'.¹

Final doctrinal decisions and jurisdictional directives rest with those whom 'the holy Spirit has placed as bishops to rule the Church of God'.² But the very responsibility of rule demands full recognition of the illumining and often charismatic activity of the holy Spirit in the christian himself. Vatican Council II has affirmed that, under the action of the holy Spirit, there is true progress in the Church's understanding of the realities and words which have been handed down. It explains that this takes place 'through the contemplation and study made by believers, who treasure these things in their hearts, through the intimate understanding of spiritual things which they experience, and through the preaching of those who have received through episcopal succession the sure gift of truth'.³ It is clear, therefore, that true development can and must take place in the Church. Authority must humbly watch for its signs, and 'breathing' of the Spirit; and, when these signs appear, must provide for progress by wise adaptations and sound encouragement.

Sometimes in the past authority has repressed rather than supported. How many saintly doctors, even St Thomas Aquinas and

¹ 1 Thess 5, 19-22.

² Acts 20, 28.

³ *Dei Verbum*, § 8.

St John of the Cross, have met with criticism from those who should have encouraged them, and have even faced condemnation from men of authority who preferred their own limited thoughts to the authentic voice of the Spirit. For Paul, such negative repressiveness is a sin against the Spirit who breathes where he wills.¹ No christian writer has defended christian liberty so forthrightly as Paul, who was convinced that the liberty of the children of God and the liberty of the holy Spirit are one and the same thing. He writes: 'The man led by the Spirit can scrutinize all things, while in turn he is subject to no merely human scrutiny. Who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him? But we have the mind of Christ'.²

2. The very presence of the Spirit in the heart of the christian prompts an intense devotedness to God and a burning love for the Church. The christian enjoys liberty only because he has been received into the family of God as a son and as a brother. This divine vocation rules out every form of self-seeking, rugged individualism and claustrated indifference to the interests of the Father and to the good of his family, the Church. There are things to do in this family life, ways of acting to follow, a whole programme of conduct to observe. Children must be worthy of their father's love and vitally concerned about the needs of their family. Even human love has fixed ways of proving itself. If these ways are despised love dies; if proprieties are neglected love cools. In the language of St Thomas Aquinas, full christian living involves not only activity springing from love, but also careful regard for the *ordines caritatis* – the proprieties of love.

Christian life, therefore, must always have its commandments, precepts, normative directives, and fixed ways of acting. If only these are rightly understood, they will be recognized as essential to true christian life. Certainly they are not the 'laws' which a master imposes from afar upon a slave. Rather they are the blueprint of the very form of life which love prompts the child of God to live. A father tells his son to help with the household work, not as though he were giving a command to a slave but as describing the very act which a son's love should prompt him to do. In heaven there will be no occasion for 'commands' or 'precepts'; for, as perfect sons of God, all shall know fully the exigencies of love. But here upon earth, where the children of God often grow thoughtless, it is needful that our Father should often remind us of all that life in his family, the Church, really means.

¹ Cf Jn 3, 8.

² 1 Cor 2, 15-16.

He has provided, therefore, that his Son, our elder brother, should speak to us through the authoritative decisions of the Church. We shall not always understand why the Church has spoken; often too we may feel that the word of authority is not the best word. But because we are only young children in the family of God, we must recognize that sometimes the word of Christ in his Church is uniquely intended to school us in the spirit of humble faith, the true spirit of God's real sons. When the holy See spoke its word of criticism against the great dominican biblical scholar, Père Lagrange, he bowed humbly and said nothing. Later years proved that Père Lagrange had not failed in soundness of teaching. Looking back on this experience, we find it regrettable; yet we can also see that Lagrange's humble deference to authority had a value all its own. It made him a saintly son of God and enriched the Church with an example of what life in the family of God really means.

3. Life as God's child means life in the Spirit of Jesus. The gift of the Spirit constitutes the reality of our adoption; his rule in our hearts forms the very substance of christian existence: 'Whoever are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God'.¹ The son of God upon earth, therefore, always has a touchstone to determine how fully he is living his christian life. If the holy Spirit has full sway over his heart, the christian will show forth the fruits of the Spirit in his conduct, the fruits which St Paul has described as 'love, joy, peace, long-suffering, affability, goodness, fidelity, gentleness, self-control'.²

Here is matter for examination of conscience. In this day of transition in the Church, tension is inevitable. Some would forge ahead, some would lag behind, some would remain stationary. Views differ, opinions clash. Many in the Church feel that others are slothful in implementing the directives of the Council; others are of the opinion that hastiness in change will ruin all. Such ferment has been in the Church from the beginning. The first generation of christians needed the Council of Jerusalem to iron out frictions, which were inevitable then as they are inevitable now, and as they will be so long as the family of God dwells upon earth.

In the whole process of ferment one norm must always rule supreme as the standard for personal conscience: Is the holy Spirit really in control? If there are 'enmity, contention, jealousy, outbursts of anger, quarrels, factions, schisms, envy', then, as St Paul

¹ Rom 8, 14.

² Gal 5, 22-23.

makes clear, the holy Spirit is not present, but only selfishness and sensuality.¹ If, on the other hand, the fruits of the Spirit are observable even in the midst of differences, if conduct is ruled by charity, joy, peace, gentleness, self-control, then the Spirit is very much present and men are living as true children of the Father. We have St Paul's word for this, a word which sums up all he has written on christian life and christian liberty: 'Whoever are led by the Spirit, they are the sons of God'.²

¹ Cf Gal 5, 19-21.

² Rom 8, 14.