

CHAPTER FIVE

The Ten Commandments

CENTRAL COMMANDMENTS

The Ten Commandments have now been mentioned more than once. That is no wonder, for they occupy a special place in the Scriptures. That is clear for anyone who takes the following things into account.

The text of the Ten Commandments, the Decalogue, is transmitted twice: in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. Each time they stand where legislation begins. They were solemnly proclaimed as a sort of constitution in the hearing of the people of Israel.

The Ten Commandments were engraved separately on two stone tablets "written with the finger of God" (Exodus 31:18) and received a place in the ark (Deuteronomy 10:1ff.).

Both the Old and New Testaments show familiarity with the Ten Commandments. Think of Jeremiah 7:9f. where God says to His people: "Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, burn incense to Baal and go after other gods that you have not known, and then come and stand before Me in this house, which is called by My name?" Hosea 4:2 sums up in succession: "There is swearing, lying, killing, stealing and committing adultery." The Decalogue and the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4-9; 11:13-21; Numbers 15:37-41) were read together daily in the temple and later in the synagogue.

In the New Testament Jesus tells the rich young man that he must obey the Commandments. When the young man asks what they are, Jesus replies: "You shall not kill. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness. Honour your father and mother, and, You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Matthew 19:18-19). Here then the fifth to the ninth commandments are named, for the most part according to the sequence of the Decalogue.

A somewhat different list, but nonetheless also clearly taking the Decalogue as a starting point, is given by Paul in Romans 13:9 where he says that "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." Here, therefore, we encounter the sixth to the eighth commandments plus the tenth one.

James 2:11 mentions the sixth and the seventh commandments: "For he who said, Do not commit adultery, said also, Do not kill."

The Decalogue has also clearly influenced the sequence of the list of evil deeds which we encounter in I Timothy 1:9-10: "We know that the law is not laid down for the just but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, immoral persons, sodomites, kidnappers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine." The order of the

second table is reflected here, beginning with the fifth commandment against patricides (or with an eye to Exodus 21:15 probably better formulated as: "Anyone who attacks his father or mother") to the ninth commandment against perjurers. The eighth commandment here forbids kidnapping. That was an important aspect of this commandment in earlier days (cf. Exodus 21:16). Slave traders, shanghaiers, and traffickers in women all break this commandment!

This evidence is sufficient in order to regard the Decalogue as something special. It is said to be "a Torah *in* the Torah." We have *central commandments* here, which were just as well-known to every Israelite as they are to us now.

It is therefore no wonder that the Decalogue gradually formed an integral part of the instruction in the Christian church. It had been so in Israel and in the same way it took place in the church again too. Already far before the time of the Reformation instruction was centred on the Ten Commandments, the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer. These central Articles recur in the catechisms of the Reformation, although the actual sequence differs. In Luther's *Larger and Smaller Catechism* (1529) the exposition of the Decalogue precedes that of the Apostles' Creed and the Lord's Prayer, while Calvin — initially following Luther — in the Genevan Catechism (1545) first discussed the Apostles' Creed, then the Decalogue and finally the Lord's Prayer. We find the same division in the Heidelberg Catechism (1563). The will of God for the life of the believer found its expression in the Ten Commandments, especially for Calvin. Reformed theology followed him in this. One can easily say that Lord's Days 34-44 of the Heidelberg Catechism and the *Larger and Smaller Catechism* of the Westminster Confession (respectively questions 91-148 and 39-81) with their exposition of the Decalogue have formed the backbone of ethical instruction in the Reformed churches for centuries.

THE CHURCH STILL AT SINAI?

Not everyone believes that the Ten Commandments should be allowed to occupy this key-position. A man like Hugo Röthlisberger has sharply protested against such a key-position in his book *Kirche am Sinai*. The title of this book is already characteristic. A church which gives the Ten Commandments such a central place in its instruction, is in fact stuck at Sinai and is not a New Testament congregation.

Röthlisberger thinks that the Ten Commandments have not played any significant part in New Testament catechetical teaching. Many other elements have done so, according to him, such as the light-darkness motif and the motifs of love and following Christ. But nowhere has the Decalogue been the starting point for ethical instruction. According to Röthlisberger that could not be so either, because Christ is called the *end* of the law (Romans 10:4).

The church, he says, cannot remain standing at Sinai, because the Old Covenant is now obsolete. Christ has taken the place of the law. Whoever is

united with Him and lives by love has fulfilled the law. What God demands of us, He gives as fruit of the Spirit. We must test what the will of God is. What love and following Christ mean in concrete cases always has to be tested anew. In any case, the church is not informed at *Sinai* (The Ten Commandments!) what God expects of her.

Thus, no central position anymore for the Decalogue? And instead the motif of love which can show us the way of its own accord, without our still being bound to concrete biblical commands? R thlisberger can really only maintain his position about the Decalogue's being absent in the ethical instruction of the New Testament by taking a carving-knife to the Scriptures. In Ephesians 6:2, Paul admonishes the children to obey their parents and he appeals for support to the fifth commandment: "Honour your father and mother." That therefore clearly argues against R thlisberger's viewpoint. But Rothlisberger considers Ephesians 6:2 to be a later addition to the text!

Concerning the Gospel of Matthew, which surely refers to Sinai and the Decalogue more than once (see, for example, Matthew 5:17ff.; 19:18f.) R thlisberger says that it hopelessly fails to help us in the consideration of the question to what extent Christians are subject to Jewish law and to what extent they are not. Also James 2:11, where — as we saw — the sixth and seventh commandments are quoted, has no authority for R thlisberger. He sees in the epistle of James the reflection of a later development which we must view as a lapse into Judaism.¹⁰

In this way R thlisberger gets rid of everything which is inconvenient for his viewpoint. Instead of letting his theory be corrected by the Scripture passages just cited, he eliminates them. In such a way one can of course prove everything. But the testimony of the New Testament for an *abiding* place for the Decalogue is too powerful to let itself be silenced by R thlisberger or anyone else.

THE LAW — NOT A WAY OF SALVATION, BUT RATHER A NORM FOR LIFE

We have to dwell on this subject somewhat longer, because it concerns an extremely important question. R thlisberger may not be right then, but what does the statement that Christ is the *end* of the law (Romans 10:4) mean? Doesn't it also mean that the church has passed by Sinai, so that we, for example, possess the Ten Commandments in a different way from Israel?

Without a doubt that is correct. When Paul says that Christ is the end of the law, that means that the law as the way of salvation is obsolete. We are no longer under the law, but under grace (Romans 6:14). Through Christ we are dead to the law (Romans 7:1-4). We have died to the law in order to live

¹⁰ H. R thlisberger, *Kirche am Sinai*. Die Zehn Gebote in der christlichen Unterweisung, Z rich 1965, especially 13-36, 130, 145.

for God (Galatians 2:19). The law was our schoolmaster to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith (Galatians 3:24).

This rejection of the law as the way of salvation applies to the *whole* law in all its facets. It is, therefore, not only the case that Christ is the end of the law in so far as it concerns the *ceremonial* commandments, but also in so far as it concerns the *moral* commandments. The rejection of the works of the law as the way of salvation applies to all human works and achievements. Not only, therefore, when it concerns "doing" the Ten Commandments but also when it concerns "doing" good works as fruits of love. Love as the "new commandment" (John 13:34), cannot justify us before God any more than any other commandment. But the Decalogue has not thereby been thrown overboard. The same Paul, who calls Christ the end of the law also clearly says that the law is holy and that the commandment is holy, just and good (Romans 7:12, 14). We are truly free from the *yoke* and *curse* of the law, but nevertheless not yet free from binding norms and commandments. When the New Testament speaks of our liberation from the law, this does not have reference to a modification in the applicability of the law, but to the position of the believer who has been ransomed from the law's curse by Christ. The demand of the law remains, but it is now fulfilled in us who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit (Romans 8:4). The law has remained the same, but we — in Christ — have been changed!

It has already been mentioned earlier that a connection exists between *freedom and law*. That connection can make the things mentioned above a bit clearer. We have been freed from the curse and the yoke of the law. But that is not to say that the law itself is a curse and a yoke. Romans 7:7-12 is instructive here. "What then shall we say? That the law is sin?" Paul asks. The answer reads: "By no means! Yet, if it had not been for the law, I should not have known sin. I should not have known what it is to covet if the law had not said, 'You shall not covet' " (Romans 7:7). The true misery is housed in the heart of *man*: "But sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, wrought in me all kinds of covetousness. Apart from the law sin lies dead. I was once alive apart from the law, but when the commandment came, sin revived and I died; the very commandment *which promised life* proved to be death to me. For sin, finding opportunity in the commandment, deceived me and by it killed me" (Romans 7:8-11).

The commandment, in itself holy, just and good, becomes fatal, because the evil human heart rises up in resistance against it. It is indeed so that the law awakens slumbering sin! As soon as the commandment says: You shall not covet, I begin to lust after precisely that forbidden thing. The commandment therefore actualizes the evil in me and in this way the law, which had to lead me to life, becomes a goad to death for me. But for whoever is a new creation in Christ (II Corinthians 5:17), there is also a new relationship to the law. Or better said: a *renewed* relationship to the law. For the law's original intention once again comes to light. He who looks into the perfect law will, with James, call it the law of liberty (James 1:25). Again he sees the law as the law of the living God Who redeems us.

It contains not a program with whiplashes for slaves, but rather one with rules of life for the free children of God. In this manner too the Ten Commandments are judged in the right way. What the water is to the fish and the air to the birds — their *element* — that is what the law is for the children of God. The Ten Commandments cannot be interpreted well without attention for the manner in which they are introduced. Their *preamble* reads: "I am the Lord your God, Who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage" (Exodus 20:2; Deuteronomy 5:6).

First, mention is made of redemption, and *then* the Ten Commandments follow. The Ten Commandments are given in order to *keep* the people of Israel liberated. And just as *the* fact of salvation of the Old Testament — the exodus out of Egypt — introduces the commandments, so too the facts of salvation in Christ precede the new life of thankfulness.

The curse of the law is removed. We are not burdened by the Ten Commandments any longer to work out our salvation. But the lustre of the law has remained. Christ has not come to abolish it, but to fulfill it (Matthew 5:17). Psalm 119 — the song of praise about the law — can also be sung in Christian congregations.

THE DEPTH OF THE COMMANDMENTS

The Church must therefore by no means remain standing at Sinai. Her ethics lapse into moralism and legalism if she knows no *Christian* ethics. She must begin with what Christ has done and via Him alone she comes to stand before the Ten Commandments of the Sinai.

A couple of things then catch the eye. In the *first* place, Christ has pointed to the *depth* of God's commandments. He has done that above all in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:17-48). After the instruction of the Sermon on the Mount it is impossible for us to crawl from under the Ten Commandments with a superficial-literalistic exposition of them. Christ teaches us that someone who has not committed murder, can nonetheless be guilty of breaking the sixth commandment when he labels his brother an "idiot" or a "fool" (21ff.). And someone who even only looks at a woman lustfully thereby already breaks the seventh commandment (v. 2ff.).

Christ has blown the dust from the law and has restored it to its sacred splendour. He has brought the law in its full meaning to the attention of His disciples and us.

The Reformation in particular has understood this message by viewing each commandment *per synecdochas*¹¹ in the exposition of the Decalogue. When it is stated: "You shall not murder," then *one* case is named here, while a whole range of sins is contained in it. A complete set of sins is identified by means of one case. Furthermore, we must not remain at the negative formulation, but we must ask about the positive side. If something is *forbidden* to us,

¹¹ The Greek word *synekdechesthai* means: "supply in thought a word or phrase in connection." See Liddell-Scott, a Greek-English Lexicon, sub voce.

what is being *commanded* of us? In the Ten Commandments, we are therefore evidently not dealing with exhaustive descriptions, but rather with illustrative commandments. (See Calvin, *Institutes*, II, 8.10.)

In the *second* place, Christ has pointed out the *unity* of the commandments by calling attention to love as the fulfilment of the law. We may not employ the law, for example the commandment concerning the sabbath, in such a way that there is no concern for mercy (Matthew 12:1ff.; 9ff.). The Commandments are not legal statutes which we can observe outwardly without making them a matter of the heart. It is precisely the heart of man that the Commandments ask for, because he is placed in a personal relationship with God and Christ.

Nor is a quantitative fulfilment asked, whereby the law disintegrates into regulations, but rather a qualitative fulfilment in love, in which man offers not sacrifices, but himself (Matthew 22:37ff.; Romans 13:8ff.; I Corinthians 13; Colossians 3:14).

Here too Sinai cannot be isolated from Calvary. The loving act of God in delivering up His Son for crucifixion is the presupposition (Romans 5:8; 8:32ff., 37, 39; Galatians 2:20) and origin and source of our love to God. All human love towards God is a response to love received from God. Love is love of the Spirit (Romans 15:30) and is fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22). We must love each other because love is of God. And anyone who loves, has been born of God (I John 4:7).

In the *third* place, every action which is commanded or forbidden on account of "Moses," receives a *christo-centric* character on account of our connection with Christ. A beautiful example here is Ephesians 6:2. There Paul does not confine himself to reference to the fifth commandment when he tells the children to obey their parents. But he asks for obedience in the *Lord* (Christ). The often repeated phrase "in the Lord" or "in Christ" points out that all of the Christian's life, thought and actions are enacted in the new creation which we are in Christ (II Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15; Ephesians 2:10). Everyday life in marriage, family and society is taken up within the life with Christ. And in this way, what is ordinary does become different and what is old (Moses!) does become new.

This connection to Christ is so decisive, that adequate arguments can already be derived from it in order to point out what is good and evil in certain behaviour of Christians. Even without making an appeal to Old Testament commandments. For example, Christians may not give way to fornication, because their bodies are members of Christ (I Corinthians 6:13ff.). They must put off falsehood, because they — as new persons in Christ — are all members of one body (Ephesians 4:25).

Proceeding from this christo-centric character of our actions it is also easy to account for the fact that the church has attached the fourth commandment ("Honour the sabbath") to Sunday, the day of Christ's resurrection. The sabbath was so much interwoven with Jewish life under the law, that a break was unavoidable here. The fourth commandment retains its au-

thority in the Christian church, much like the other commandments. Unfortunately, within the church a sabbatarian stamp was set on the observance of the Sunday — a stamp which still affects many people. But an observance which proceeds from the completed work of Christ allows people to rest on Sunday in a different way than when the Sunday is caught in a network of rules and regulations again. A good understanding of the fourth commandment is a testcase as to whether or not we really have passed Sinai.

THREE DIFFERENT FUNCTIONS

Ever since the Reformation Era a differentiation has been in vogue which throws a clear light on the different functions which the law — especially the Decalogue — has in the life of man. There are three aspects (not always given in the same order) which demand our attention:

1. The *usus legis primus* as the first function of the law. It concerns the meaning of the law for public, political life and is also called *usus politicus* or *usus civilis*.
2. The *usus legis secundus* as the second function of the law. This is related to the uncovering of our guilt (the law as the source of knowledge of our misery). It is also called *usus paedagogicus* or *usus elencticus*.
3. The *usus legis tertius* as the third function of the law. It points out the meaning of the law as the rule of our thankfulness. It is also called *usus didacticus* or *normativus*.

The differentiation can also be clearly formulated as follows:

1. The law functions as a *safeguard*, whereby man is protected against himself.
2. The law functions as a *mirror*, whereby man recognizes his own miserable state.
3. The law functions as a *norm*, whereby man can give form to his thankfulness.

It is a good thing to consider *usus legis* as the *function* of the law. Not, therefore, our *use* of the law but rather the *function* which God has ascribed to the law. What is He doing with His law in our lives? When we keep that in mind from the very beginning, the one *usus* can never be isolated from the others. All three belong together.

THE FIRST FUNCTION

Let us first take a close look at the three functions separately.

In the first function God employs His law in order to maintain outward discipline and virtue. A bridle (*frenum*) has to be put on, Calvin says, in order to curb the evilness of men (*Institutes*, II, 7.10). He must be sealed off from evil. The result is very important, for in this way human society is made pos-

sible. The result is not really very thorough, because only external society and not the inner parts of the human heart are thereby taken hold of.

Perhaps someone will ask what the law by which governments curb the licentiousness of men have to do with the Decalogue. The connection between the one and the other was made fairly simply by the Reformers. Each man has what was written in the Decalogue in his heart, engraved there as an innate law, a natural law, as a natural light. Commandments which forbid murder, adultery, stealing and perjury, are for that reason not just on the stone tables of the Ten Commandments, but also find their way into legislation without a direct knowledge of the Ten Commandments, because all men have a knowledge of it "by nature." A text often quoted in this regard is Romans 2:14, where it is said of the Gentiles that they do by nature the things required by the law and that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts.

Now we must not desire to attach too much to this text in Romans. Without a doubt it is correct that we must not deny all knowledge of God's law to non-Christians. Romans 2:14f. clearly points in another direction.

The work of the law is written in the hearts of the Gentiles. That writ of God has sunk deep enough into the hearts of the Gentiles in order to confront them inescapably with the law. But we have to keep in mind that Paul is talking about the work of *the* law. In the context of Romans 2, that law is not the *natural* law, but the *law of Moses!* Paul does not take "nature" as the starting point for moral norms, of which the law — the Ten Commandments — could be one concrete form. Rather, he says just the opposite: The power of God's law, as found in the Scriptures, especially in the Ten Commandments, impresses itself by God's doing so much on the Gentiles, that they by nature, that is to say "by themselves" or "in reality," do what the law requires of them.

As long as we ascribe to God the fact that order and development of human life is still possible on account of the indelible impression that His law makes, then no accidents occur. But unfortunately, through theories about innate knowledge, natural law and such, people often have begun to boast of *human* capacities. The *usus politicus* is then supposed to teach us just how much man is capable of. Indeed, sometimes this *usus* is passed off as the real *usus*, for example in G. Th. Rothuizen's dissertation, *Primus usus legis*. In this study what is humane comes to stand next to and sometimes above what is Christian. According to Rothuizen, the world must be protected against christianization. Psalm 8 is supposed to lay everything at the feet of *man* and not at the feet of the *believer*. In this manner, secularization becomes a good thing!¹²

The Reformers certainly did not move in this direction, no matter how often they wrote about man's innate knowledge of God and of His law. They did state that God let light shine in this world but they added that man also

¹² G. Th. Rothuizen, *Primus usus legis*. Studie over het burgerlijk gebruik van de wet, Kampen 1962, 129ff., 216ff.

suppresses this light (compare, among others, the Augsburg Confession, XVIII, 71f. and the Canons of Dort III/IV 4).

We realize how important it is to see in this *usus primus* a function which God has given to the law. He uses His law in order to maintain human society, while the unbeliever often misuses God's law in this situation and in any case never comes further than an outward observance of the law.

Whoever isolates the first *usus*, speaks easily about natural law, secularization, humanity, etc. He also quickly turns human understanding into a *usus normativus* instead of a *usus organicus*, that is to say, an instrument which offers its services to God.

We have to keep in mind that the *usus primus* is concerned with a Decalogue which has *two* tables, not just the second one concerning horizontal relationships, but also the first one concerning our love to God. For that reason, the *usus primus* will not tolerate keeping God outside public life.

The first *usus* must therefore not be isolated. But our reaction would be just as extreme if we were to drop the *usus primus* altogether, as N.H. Sørensen wants to.¹³ We must not pull the church and the world apart, but we must differentiate them. The effect of the law of God in the world is different from what its effect in the church is (or ought to be). A politician has more to do with the "hardness of the heart" than a member of the consistory. Promoting public order is something other than urging people toward the conversion of their hearts.

He who isolates the *usus primus* quickly falls into humanism. But he who negates the *usus primus* and will only hear of working out the law in church style, falls into Anabaptism. Such a person closes his eyes to *this* world, with which God, in His long-suffering, still wants to concern Himself. And if God also gives His law in order to make possible a bearable society for Gentiles and non-believers, then we cannot remove our hands from this world.

This conclusion is of great importance in particular for our *social* ethics. Cooperation in the improvement of political and social situations, for example, by the elimination of the gross contrasts between rich and poor countries, or by fighting racial discrimination is necessary, *even though* it might not lead to the conversion of the people we come to the aid of. When our political and social actions can lead to a better world, then we are completely in line with what God intends with the *usus primus*.

THE SECOND FUNCTION

In the second place, God employs the law to reveal to man his misery. A word from Galatians 3:24 is frequently connected with this function: "The law was our custodian (*paedagōgos*) until Christ came, that we might be justified by faith."

In classical antiquity, the *paedagōgos* was an unpopular figure who was

¹³ N.H. Sørensen, *Christliche Ethik*?, München 1965, 179.

supposed to keep an immature lad in line. He was therefore not a teacher, (for this see the *usus tertius* or *didacticus!*), but the “child-tender.” Our need and powerlessness become visible.

It is now clear why the second *usus* is called the *usus paedagogicus* or *usus elenchticus*.¹⁴ Actually, the designation of *paedagogicus* is less correct, because Galatians 3:24 says, that the law *has been* our custodian. Here the redemptive historical purpose of the law is pointed out: Now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to the custodian, subject to the law (Galatians 3:25). Nevertheless, we have also once more received the law in a new relationship to Christ. We are allowed to say that we get to know our misery in the mirror of this law. If we but see the Law-giver behind the law, Who does not want to kill us with His law, but instead make us live. We must not uncouple the law and the Gospel, for right in the light of both we get to know our own misery.

We see that even more sharply when we consider how the law is often written about quite negatively in Lutheran theology. For Luther and the Lutherans, the *usus secundus* is the real foremost *usus*, even though some things are said about the *usus primus* and (less frequently) about the *usus tertius*. The function of the law is often understood *dialectically*: the law which of itself can only work death, becomes a means to repentance in God’s hand. Christ and the preaching of the cross also lead to repentance, but that is not their real work, their *opus proprium*. It is the work of the law, and not of the Gospel, *to kill*.

In my opinion there is a strong abstraction here. One must not, as I have already remarked above, separate the law from the Law-giver and the law from the Gospel. Only in their unity do they reveal our misery to us.

When someone speaks of a *dialectic*, we should always be careful. In dialectical arguments we are supposed to believe that things which in principle really exclude each other are actually united. Applied to the law, the law is made into something ambiguous. The law *kills* (that is supposed to be its “real” work), but it is nonetheless to be valued positively because God Who gives life (that is *His* “real” work) makes use of this negative work. In this way, the law, which only works death, becomes an instrument in His hand towards repentance.

But in such a line of thought the gospel character of the law is not honoured. Consider the preamble of the Decalogue! The law is not intended to kill us at all, but simply to keep us inside the enclosure of the redemption brought about by God. That is, therefore, its *opus proprium*. But on account of our own evilness we re-act to this good law of God in such a way that it becomes a springboard and base of operations for sin. Through the law, sin becomes virulent (Romans 3:20).

Even after the law has lost its custodian-function, as Galatians 3:24 speaks of it, it is still necessary to keep talking about the second function of

¹⁴ The Greek word *elenchein* means here: to convince (of guilt).

the law as the revealer of our misery. Otherwise Christian life becomes superficial, and legalism and moralism quickly take the place of the humble confession that *Christ* is our life.

THE THIRD FUNCTION

In the third place, God gives us a norm in His law by which man can give expression to his thankfulness. Calvin terms this *usus* the foremost one, which is directed to the actual goal of the law.

For Calvin the evangelical meaning of the law is central. He does not qualify the law negatively, as is often the case with Luther. It was once remarked that Calvin spoke about this *usus* as the foremost *usus* in conscious polemic with Luther. Among the Lutherans the *usus tertius* often only has meaning for the man-as-sinner. The law is a killing law, which the Christian as believer has nothing more to do with. Law and Gospel are strictly held apart, just like God's holiness and His grace.

Helmut Thielicke has written an ethics which makes the antithesis between law and Gospel, in the sense of Luther, into a basic theme. In his *Theologische Ethik* he can write quite impressively about the law. According to him, law and Gospel must be strictly held apart. Yes, he even dares to speak of a struggle in God, between God Who accuses us in His law and God Who is gracious to us with His Gospel.

This is the only way, according to Thielicke, that the miracle of God's grace can remain a *miracle*. Grace cannot do that if it does not have the condemning law next to it.¹⁵

Now we also want to continue to differentiate between law and Gospel. Thielicke correctly criticizes Karl Barth, who has called the law the *form* of the Gospel. Barth lets the law get absorbed by the Gospel, so that it loses its independence as an accusatory law, for example, at the Last Judgment. In fact, in Barth's conception, the law can no longer condemn because all men take part in the salvation of Christ. In this way grace has become a *cheap* grace.

But we are also not in agreement with Thielicke's standpoint. The contrast is not: God's holiness and God's grace, or: law and Gospel, but: God's law and His Gospel on the one hand and rebellious men on the other. Because man turns against God, the law takes on a grim character. But that is not its "nature"!

For that reason the law can also have its third function: giving guidance to the Christian life. This is impossible for Thielicke, since the second function of the law also predominates in his view. In the life of the believer the law does nothing more than reveal to him the misery into which the fall has plunged him. In its negative wording, the Decalogue, says Thielicke, does not point out natural law, but instead natural law-breaking that exists in killing,

¹⁵ H. Thielicke, *Theologische Ethik I*³, Tübingen 1965, 188ff., 210ff.

stealing, adultery, etc. The Decalogue (and also the Sermon on the Mount) is like a gauze which has to keep the wound of our sinful state of being open.¹⁶

Quite a lot depends on the decision we make here. Is it really true that we are stuck in the negative aspect, so that the law can only humble us, *or* is there also the possibility of a positive, Christian life, in which the law forms and guides us?

This question is the subject of our following chapter. Do Christian morals exist, yes or no? Must we conclude with Thielicke and many others that the Christian life does not have its *own* content, so that we actually cannot speak about a Christian life, a Christian design for political and social activities, or any other activity? The answer to such questions is, in fact, the confirmation or denial of the *tertius usus legis!*

Once again this answer has everything to do with our *social* ethics. We saw that the *usus primus* compels us to be concerned with the world in an edifying way — in its political and social aspects too. But the same thing applies on account of our faith in the *tertius usus*. The law of God as the norm for our Christian life does not only want to be concerned with forming our personal life, but the social life around us as well. The Gospel is the salt of the *earth* and the light of the *world* (Matthew 5:13ff.). Christ has received *all* power in heaven and on earth (Matthew 28:18). He lays claim not only to individuals, but also to the structures in which they live. Political and social life must be subject to Him too.

As Christians we can perhaps accomplish very little in public life by calling politicians, businessmen and scholars to follow Christ. However, we must not let ourselves be led by the chance of success, but rather by our faith.

Whoever really believes that *all* power has been given to Christ, will also believe that ministers, businessmen, academics and artists have to be Christian in all their work. *Christian* politics and *Christian* scholarship may well be rare phenomena in this world, but for that reason we must certainly be active in order to exhibit the Christian faith as a healing power for all society in *all* its aspects.

It is clear that something like this goes far deeper than what we said concerning the *usus primus*. *There* it concerned the bridling of the lawlessness of men and the preservation of a livable society, even when people are not converted to Christ. *Here* it concerns the working-out of the Gospel in a society which wishes to listen to Christ.

¹⁶ *Op. cit.*, 188, 707ff.