
Guest Editorial: The Law as Schoolmaster

by Anne Wicker Kuhn

Frequently called “the master of the heavy metaphor,” St. Paul very nearly outdid himself when he wrote to the Galatians (3:24) that “the law was our schoolmaster, to bring us unto Christ.” Those who search the writings of the New Testament for any disparagement of the Law, search in vain. The Law is declared to be ‘good’, ‘holy’ (Romans 7:12), and ‘spiritual’ (Romans 7:14).

In the Galatian letter, the Law is declared to be not merely intrinsically and affirmatively good, but actively and functionally creative. The metaphor of Schoolmaster appeals in an especially powerful manner to one who has devoted much of her life to the ministry of teaching, particularly in the area of modern foreign languages. It may be helpful to note some of the roles and obligations of the teacher in gaining a clue to the functional uses of the Biblical Law, including the basic moral and ceremonial laws as given in the Pentateuch.

The conscientious school teacher is dedicated, first of all, to the task of creating within students an intellectual want and need — elements which underlie the entire process of learning. The effective teacher does this not to frustrate the learners, but to challenge them to effort and to striving for something further, something better.

The effective teacher must also, of necessity, create within students a sense of discipline. Free-flowing learning, so greatly praised by avant garde educators, has proved to be weak and ineffective. The Law begins with rule as well as action. Indeed, it is within this context that the two conventional divisions of Old Testament Law — moral and ceremonial — operate. Discipline is used not as a means of

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demonstrating personal authority, but as a prerequisite to vital learning.

In applying the learning process, the dedicated and conscientious teacher seeks not merely to impart information, but to expose the educand to the inner and deeper meanings of things. The teacher must make the learner aware of the coherence of all knowledge — to the pattern which may be found in the adventure of exploring ideas. It is here that the similarity between the truly concerned teacher and the Law as schoolmaster appears. The law is designed not simply as a guide to conduct, but as something which reveals God's essential nature.

The dedicated teacher furthermore recognizes the temporary and progressive nature of his/her task. That is to say, the teacher avoids at all costs the student's building of long-time dependence upon the teacher, realizing the absolute necessity for the development of maturity which prepares the student for life at its best. This maturity is one of God's greatest gifts to the alert person — the person always glimpsing beyond the present educative process.

So it was also the function of the Law in the historic succession of steps in God's education of the race. Beginning with a chosen people, God used Law as a means of producing fixed centers of spiritual conviction upon which might be built, in the fullness of time, a receptivity to our Lord. And as true education points to something beyond itself, so the Law as Schoolmaster sought always to engender a sense of incompleteness. Such was accomplished by the development of an underlying conviction that genuine maturity was unattainable through legal obedience — a perplexity to those under the tutorship of the Law. But this perplexity was never engendered as an end in itself; rather it was intended to serve the purpose of creating a sense of want plus anticipation. And if the moral law produced a feeling of want and deficiency, the ceremonial law produced a strong intimation of the Christ — the One who came in the fullness of God's time.

It appears from the foregoing, that the Old Testament Law fulfilled in an admirable manner the best intimations of the dedicated and conscientious teacher. As learning frequently involves painful disciplines, the painful feeling of frustration, and the painful awareness of defects and inadequacies, so did the Law. But the ultimate objective of the pedagogy of the Law was far above that which the merely human teacher can envision or impart. The teacher

Law as Schoolmaster

may challenge to effort, to adventure, and to exhilaration in the gaining of knowledge, but the Law served the superlative purpose of bringing men and women to Jesus Christ. Small wonder it is that St. Paul called the Law ‘holy’, ‘good’ and ‘spiritual’. ■