Obedience to the Law of Christ. An inquiry into the function of the Mosaic law in Christian ethics from a Mennonite perspective

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Citation for published version (APA):
Preface

For, impelled by the desire of the eternal and pure life, we seek the abode that is with God, the Father and Creator of all, and hasten to confess our faith, persuaded and convinced as we are that they who have shown to God by their works that they followed Him, and loved to abide with Him where there is no sin to cause disturbance, can obtain these things. This, then, to speak shortly, is what we expect and have learned from Christ, and teach.

(Justin Martyr, First Apology, chapter 7)

In this dissertation my goal has been the development of a thesis by John Toews from Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, about the relationship between the faithful community and the Torah of Moses. In 1982 Toews presented his design for a theology of law in the New Testament. I would summarize his position in this manner: In the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth the Torah is normatively interpreted for the community of Jesus' followers, who affirm His messianic position, and the nucleus of this interpretation is the love of God and neighbor. From this thesis we can deduce a number of implications, that I will try to explore in this dissertation. If the above thesis is valid, how did it come about that the Christian Churches ignored this central position of the Torah? What doctrine took the place of the Torah in grounding Christian ethics? And how did we arrive at the almost insurmountable schism between the demands of the Kingdom and the exigencies of ordinary life in the modern state? Is a Christian first and foremost a citizen with a specific religious attitude? Or a citizen of the Kingdom of heavens, that awaits the return of Christ while living in the remains of an old order, destined to fade away? It seemed necessary to look with a fresh mind at the Pauline epistles and the gospels, as well as at the historical context of the Reformation theology to answer these questions. After all, in modern Christianity, there seems to be no place for the concept of a true obedience to the Torah as an integral part of Christian ethics.

That is true to some extent also for the Churches that originated in the so-called Radical Reformation, despite their insistence on sanctification as the corollary of (extrinsic) justification. It was necessary to consider the basic shapes and inner logic of the doctrine of justification by faith as the doctrine that expressed most forcibly the need to abandon the Torah. Here the (magisterial) Reformation formulated its basic concept of the essential form of Christian ethics, only partially followed in this respect by the Churches of the Radical Reformation. Such introductory questions needed to be addressed in order to gain a perspective on the meaning of our questions about the function of Torah and the shape of Christian ethics. After such an introduction I could begin to deal with the exegetical questions, that form the heart of this dissertation. The debate around the 16th century doctrine of justification is one of two historical perspectives that I bring to bear on the exegetical task to redefine the basic principle of a Biblical ethics.

The second historical perspective is derived from a new understanding of the 1st century environment of the New Testament. The main part of this dissertation has become a new assessment of the sources that have been the classical basis for the doctrine of justification, the rejection of a continuing validity of the Mosaic law and the concept of faith-obedience for
Christian ethics. I chose to treat those passages and documents in the New Testament that could provide some insight into the variety of positions with regard to my question within the New Testament: the letter of James, the two classic statements of Paul’s doctrine of justification in Galatians and Romans, and the gospel of Matthew in its distinction to that of Mark. Especially the introductory passages of the Sermon on the Mount and the seemingly straightforward denial of the validity of the Mosaic law in Mark 7 have been singled out for discussion. Many elements of my analysis could only be pointed to and that goes especially for the method of reading the New Testament and the debate with different commentators on these passages. In its present form, my analysis owes much, if not all, to the work of James D.G. Dunn in its attempt to understand Paul, and to Rudolf Bultmann and Adolf Schlatter in my reading of James, even where I arrived at different or even opposite conclusions. For my reading of the Sermon on the Mount the work of H.D. Betz has been the solid basis. In the analysis of the doctrine of justification of faith many authors have played a part, but none more than A. McGrath and his Iustitia Dei. Finally, the influence of the Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas on this research has been decisive, though I was unable to document the extent of his influence in detail because of the limitations set on a dissertation by its very nature.

My sincere gratitude goes to my promotor and teacher professor S. Voolstra of the Dutch Mennonite Seminary. Not only did he encourage me to take up the subject of Christian ethics in the context of biblical theology, but he also made me aware of the necessity to combine the perspectives of dogma-history, exegesis and philosophy to treat the topic in a comprehensive and “synoptic” manner. His insights into the historical development and meaning of the theology of the Reformation and Anabaptist history were invaluable in the course of this investigation. Most of all, his own commitment to the understanding and enhancement of the Dutch Mennonite legacy in the Netherlands and his faithful commitment to Christ has been an example to me even beyond the domain of intellectual pursuits.

My gratitude also to my wife Mirjam, who has endured the birth of this dissertation and made it possible. My thanks to her and our three children who had to accept that their father despite his good intentions has frequently been somewhat removed from family life.

My gratitude also to those who have on many occasions shown their interest in this dissertation and with whom I share the concerns expressed in this work. My sincere thanks and appreciation goes out to Verlin Garber from Boston (Mass.) who read the entire manuscript and corrected my English (and pointed out to me the occasional errors in the footnotes or in the logic of my argument). Thanks to him this dissertation has become readable in English following the “Chicago convention”. I alone of course bear the responsibility of presenting this thesis in a foreign tongue, with all the problems in communication that come with it.

Robbert A. Veen, Appingedam, 11 februari 2000