

CHRISTIAN ETHICS

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CHRISTIAN ETHICS AND MODERN MAN

STUDY ONE: AN INTRODUCTION TO CHRISTIAN ETHICS

Suggestion: As a basis for these studies it would be helpful to read the two LFS Studies 29 and 30, *The Basis of Christian Ethics* and *Christian Ethics and Their Practice*. Also LFS 49 *The Principle and Power of Conscience* and LFS 28 *The True Nature of Law* should be valuable support reading.

THE MEANING OF ETHICS

By the term 'Christian ethics' most of us understand 'that system of moral principles and precepts—i.e. modes of conduct—by which a Christian understands that he or she should live'. The word 'ethics' derives from the Latin *ethice*, the Old French *ethique*, and the Greek *ethikos*. The word *ethos* in Greek is 'character'. In I Corinthians 15:33 we have 'good morals' (RSV) and 'good manners' (AV). The Greek is *ethe chresta*. Ethics then is the science of morals, the study of right conduct, linked with the rightness and wrongness of certain actions. It involves moral systems of various writers and religions. Christian ethics are those which are supposed to be Christian ways of moral conduct. Christian ethics is but one of the many systems of ethics, and within theology—moral theology—there are differences of thought as to what are truly Christian ethics.

Whilst we recognize that ethics have always been a preoccupation with Judaic and Christian cultures, and morality has been a feature of other cultures, we need not assume at this point there is necessarily an authentic system of Christian ethics.

WAYS OF APPROACHING THE SUBJECT OF ETHICS

It is true to say—generally—that human beings are moral creatures, i.e. have the power of choice in regard to acts of will, and have some sense of the rightness and wrongness of those choices. Paul said, 'I want to do good...I don't want to do evil'. Our ideas of right and wrong are linked with our consciences, and since the directives or prohibitions of conscience are closely tied in with the mores, conduct and religions of varying cultures, consciences may differ on what is moral or ethical. That being the case the conscience is not an infallible guide or judge. What place does the conscience

have in moral human living? How, then, do we arrive at a reliable system of ethics? To use the adjective 'reliable' is to raise a host of questions which may not be answerable.

THE CHRISTIAN AND ETHICS

Christians vary. Some are nomists or legalists, i.e. they believe in immutable law, and believe they are to obey it meticulously. They do not question the law, but only seek to know what it is, so that they can obey it—if they can! Other Christians are antinomians who, whilst accepting the fact that there is law, look upon it as not demanding their obedience. They say they are 'free from law'. Sinless perfectionists say that since they cannot sin then what they do must be in accordance with God's law! Paul also speaks of believers who have weak faith or a weak conscience. They, too, have trouble with law, fearing that if they do not meticulously obey it they may even lose their salvation.

The emphasis we will make in our studies will be that without an experience and understanding of justification by grace—through faith—our approach to Christian ethics will always be defective. A human being who is trying to prove or justify himself in life will always have a defective view and practice of ethics. Why and how we obey is most important to our subject.

THE CONTEXT OF ETHICS: THE PRACTICE OF MORAL HUMAN BEHAVIOUR

In this study we will need to take a number of things into consideration.

I. THE BIBLICAL CONTEXT SITUATION OF ETHICS

(i) The Biblical Doctrine of Creation

(Gen. 1:26–31; 2:15–25)

If we take ethics to be a system of conduct in conformity with a given code or moral ethos—for whatever motive and goal the striving for conformity may exist—then the mandates given to man in Genesis 1:28 and 2:15 would be his area of living action. Since creation itself is pronounced to be 'very good' (i.e. functionally and purposefully good) then true action within the creation would constitute authentic ethics. The way that man would functionally go about living with God, his fellow human beings, his world and himself could be seen as the true—i.e. ontological—ethic.

Note: It is said by some that ethics always relate to law, and that law did not exist prior to the Fall. Man as innocent had no idea of law, so the matter of ethics did not arise. This raises certain questions such as: 'Were there not commands prior to the Fall, and did they not constitute law?'; 'Was not the Fall disobedience to a given law—a creational ethic?'; 'Did—and does—not the law of God exist as an objective entity, anyway?'.

(ii) The Biblical Doctrine of Man's Fall**(Gen. 3:1–24; cf. Rom. 1:19–32)**

When man rebelled against God and—having died to Him relationally—entered into idolatry, and sought to be autonomous, then his notion of right behaviour would spring from his own discernment and decisions. Some kind of morality would be inevitable since man was made in the image of God, but it would be human-centred and humanly devised. Man would ‘suppress the truth’ because he had ‘exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator’ (Rom. 1:18, 25). From this point onwards man would (a) seek prove himself, and (b) seek to accomplish his ethics through his own efforts. The question is whether man still has an understanding of God’s law—distorted though it may be by his guilt—and whether he is not trying—autonomously—to obey it, claiming he inherently has more power to do so.

Note: The biblical account teaches that mankind from the time of the Fall could be divided into (a) human beings who lived autonomously, not having faith in God, and (b) human beings who—though also fallen—had faith in God (cf. Heb. 11).

(iii) The Biblical Doctrine of Covenant**(Gen. chs 8–9; and 12ff. and the other books of the Pentateuch)**

It is right to speak of ‘covenantal ethics’, i.e. that situation of covenant which was a unilateral agreement devised by God to benefit the faithful—i.e. those upon whom He had grace—and that system of living which was set out for the faithful to observe ‘for their own good’. This system of ethics—if it can be rightly called ‘ethics’—was (to be) motivated by gratitude to God, and as the proper response to His elective and steadfast love.

(iv) The Biblical Doctrine of Redemption**(cf. Rom. 1:16–8:39; Eph. 2:1–10)**

This doctrine covers so much in both Old and New Testaments, Abrahamic, Mosaic and New Covenants but the essence of it is that believing man is redeemed from his former state of lostness and being under wrath and judgement and is brought under that grace and mercy which gives him salvation and motivates him to true obedience. If, then, there is a system of obedience called ‘ethics’ then he would be in the right frame of mind to obey it from the motive of liberation, gratitude and love that responds to God’s love and reconciliation to Himself.

(v) The Biblical Doctrine of Sanctification and Glorification**(The Sermon on the Mount, Matt. chs 5–7; the N.T. Epistles)**

This doctrine does not see redemption as an end in itself, but as that act of God which leads redeemed humanity to live a life of holiness and to look forward to ultimate glorification. It can be said, of course, that sanctification and glorification are parts of salvation, and that the knowledge and experience of them are motivating to true ethical living.

(vi) The Biblical Doctrine of God's Kingship—**His Kingdom, the People of God and the Church—All in the Light of Jesus Being the Messiah**

This doctrine embraces all Scripture and history as ‘Salvation History’, and involves the elective plan of God. The believer who lives in this context is enormously

motivated and aided by the identity and constraint he has as an elected participant in this plan. This also involves living in the eschatological hope and happening.

(vii) The Biblical Doctrine of Eschatology

(Matt. chs 13, 24; the N.T. Epistles; the Book of the Revelation)

The present way of the believer's life is greatly determined by the hope that he has for the future. Hope is a powerful dynamic for present ethical living. The person's sight—by faith in the revelation of the word of God—of what he will be and what he will consequently do throughout eternity spurs him on to being like that—now (cf. I John 3:1–3).

Note: When we see the wide sweep of these doctrines we might despair of ever getting to, or accomplishing the practice of biblical ethics. The true way of living is under the tutelage and security of the Father, abiding in the Son whose Lordship directs and enables, and walking in the Spirit whose fruits manifest themselves in the life and community of the believer.

II. THE NON-BIBLICAL CONTEXT SITUATION OF ETHICS

By this we mean the context situation of ethics of those who do not have a biblical view. This does not mean the Bible has no mention of them—indeed it does, emphatically. The Bible speaks of 'the natural man', i.e. the psychical man and shows that he does not receive 'the gifts of the Spirit', i.e. 'the things of the Kingdom of God' (I Cor. 2:14; John 3:3–6; Jude 19; cf. I Cor. 1:20–25; James 3:15). Whilst below we nominate certain expressions of ethics—particularized forms of conducts and sets of values—yet biblically we must see them as emanating from the 'the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now works in the children of disobedience', so that they are demonically inspired and aided, yet the religious thrust is not absent since the forms seek to prove the sufficiency of man, particularly in what he would call 'good works'.

(i) The Secularist Ethic

Secularism is a modern phenomenon of the so-called 'post Christian era'. The West has had a basic Christian understanding and ethic and has built societally and culturally on these but disillusionment and rejection of its mores have brought about a desacralization of things religious, and a dismantling of many of its basic ethical structures. Secularism is the belief that humanity can achieve its goals without God and without religion since religion—it is said—has nothing to offer. Secularism is not new in that it has always been the way of human materialism and self-endeavour. The building of the city Babel in Genesis 11, on the principle inaugurated by Nimrod the hunter of men, was to make a fortified city, a name, and to build a high watch-tower. This principle of secularism is found from Babel to the ultimate Babylon of the Book of the Revelation. To build a tower to heaven was a secularist attempt to dethrone God. In the fall of man there was a refusal to recognize God (cf. Rom. 1:25, 28) but religion remained paramount in the structures of idolatry.

Secularism, along with its twin-fellow humanism, denies any reference to the supernatural. Ethics are utilitarian—worked out rationally in a known universe. They are for the betterment of the race—pragmatic working ethic. The 'God of the gap' has been eliminated by man's research and knowledge.

(ii) The Humanistic Ethic

Humanism is no new thing. It began when man—and probably the first man and woman individually—thought he could be autonomous. ‘You shall be as gods’ is a fascinating thought to the human mind. Humanism is present in secularism since the demands of a Creator have no place in these two. Humanism takes many forms but basically it is the belief that not only can man handle himself and his universe, but that he must. Man is God. Humanism is often one remove from Christianity with its high view of man as the image of God, and it embraces many of its moral values though without attributing them to God. Thus humanism in emphasizing the freedom-in-autonomy of man moves to democracy, socialism and communism. Each person should have his own freedom even if it must be within a collective society. Because it has no reference to the supernatural it works out its modes of conduct rationally.

(iii) The Sacral or Religionist Ethics

Humanism and secularism cannot escape some religious element. Most societies and cultures have a basic religious structure, even if they use it in the present day to extend their own nationalism and naturalism. All religions—like secularism and humanism—can be shown to have self-justifying ethical practice since conformity with the deities or spirits is essential to acceptance and—perhaps—salvation. Devotees must conform with certain laws and practices which spring from the world-view of that religious culture. Galatians 4:8–11 and Colossians 2:16–20 indicate that idols have their own law-demands of their devotees. In Exodus 32:1–10 the golden idol represented the ‘gods that brought Israel up out of Egypt’. The atheism of Buddhism has become basically religious. The religions often breed asceticism, but at the same time moral freedom is offered as idolatry has generally to do with a sexuality that is often immoral. This can be seen within the pantheon of Hinduism. It was clearly so with the idols of Canaan. Much of idolatry holds a dualistic world-view, much to the confusion of the conscience, and enslavement of the devotee.

There can be no question about it: guilt and conscience play an enormous part in the pressure upon a person to be right—with whoever or whatever it may be—God, the idol, the law, the authority, the other person, society—but mainly with one’s own self, one’s conscience. All forms of ethics pivot about self-appraisal, self-proving, self-vindication, self-justification.

Note: Under the head of ‘Human Wisdom’ we place all systems of philosophy. Without designating them all as evil per se we can see the enormous influence they have wielded in the conduct of the race. The Renaissance and the Age of Reasoning and Enlightenment are two clear cases. Existentialism—in all its forms theistic and atheistic—has made strong inroads into traditional ethical structures. In this paper we cannot cover all these influences.

THE MANIPULATOR

Any so-called scientific research into ethics can at best examine the phenomenology of ethics in the categories nominated above. Such research does not take Satan, his fallen angelic powers and authorities, demonic forces and the world-system into account, for they are in the realm—if, indeed they exist—of the supernatural. ‘Good’ and ‘evil’—at the best—are abstractions for humanists, secularists and many others, or terms for situations and circumstances that are either for

well-being and success or for negative and calamitous happenings. Good and evil are not necessarily moral.

Satan is shown in Scripture to have ‘the power (Gr. *kratos*: ‘might’–but not ‘authority’) of death. Because of his function as Deceiver and Accuser, he can manipulate human beings, through their consciences, by guilt. He is diametrically opposed to God’s law and God’s will and since these two elements are at the basis of true ethics, he is a force to be recognized and reckoned with. The Scriptures link Satanic manipulation with idolatry and a worldly wisdom for the Satanic aeon has brilliant wisdom. Hence the constant round or succession of human wisdom in the philosophies, ideologies and religions of man which emanate from the kingdom of darkness with resultant ethical systems.

CONCLUSION: THE MATTER OF ETHICS IS EXTREMELY COMPLICATED

When Romans 1:18–32 describes man’s rebellion against God, his rejection of Him, his turn to idolatry and the terrible moral dislocation of the human race because of this, it would be natural to see much of man’s endeavours to escape the moral demands of the Creator. We would expect anthropology to show us a large variety of modes and manners of conduct, ideas of morality, and patterns of self-justification. We are not disappointed. Whilst there may be certain elements which are common to religions, ideologies and philosophies the fact is that the variety of ethical approaches is remarkable.

We need to turn to God’s revelation of Himself, His law and His will. This we find in the Bible—the inscripturated word of God.

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CHRISTIAN ETHICS AND MODERN MAN

STUDY TWO: THE BASIS OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS—CREATION AND COVENANT

CREATION AND ETHICS

Man, created in the image of God, was created to do His will, to be a co-worker with Him. The commands of Genesis 1 and 2 form the purposeful modes of conduct for man whose God was his Father, his Creator and his King. Jesus' statement, 'It was not so from the beginning'—against divorce—argues for a basic creational ethic. It can be well argued that man-in-innocence did not see the will of God as law, with the connotation law has for fallen man. Even given in justification, we cannot know the state of innocence, nor the freedom that obtained in it. The image of God (*imago dei*) in man meant holy union with God and delighting in doing His will. That much we can surmise. Psalm 119 is a surprising document, for it shows covenant-man delighting in the will, word, law, precepts, and commandments of God. Innocence could have brought no less delight, and no less a view of the will of God.

The fall of man brought guilt and the curse. Man was set for autonomy of living and for idolatry. Whilst Paul would seem to infer that there was no law in the world from Adam to Moses (Rom. 5:13–14), yet Genesis shows that man knew law—e.g. Cain, Lamech, Abimelech, Pharaoh (cf. Rom. 1:32)—and Abraham was commended for his law-keeping (Gen. 26:5). Man was judged for his evil in the Flood, at Sodom and Gomorrah (etc.), since his evil flaunted the law (will) of God.

CREATION AND THE LAW OF GOD

Leaving aside the concept of 'natural law', is there a 'creational law'? Genesis 1:31 (cf. Eccl. 3:11; 7:29; Prov. 16:4) speaks of creation being 'very good', i.e. functionally good, so that—for example—the law against divorce is really the law of true marriage, that is, marriage is truly functional and so wholly moral. The nature of God and the nature of man as His image presupposes relational and vocational principles, especially when we understand God's *telos* for creation from Genesis 1:28—the ultimate eschaton which is later revealed in Scripture. The principle of work is also creational, i.e. being fruitful, multiplying, filling up the earth, subduing it, governing—and so on.

THE FALL AND THE LAW OF GOD

As we have hinted, the law of God must be prior to man's fall, but would not be viewed by innocent man as it is by fallen man. Given in that the law must impose restraints

upon sinful man, its essential nature is not merely legislative and prohibitive. Guilt gives a grim view of law, and even the charge that law is only in existence because of sin may spring from a guilt-view of law. Paul certainly gives a high view of law (I Tim. 1:8; Rom. 7:12–13; cf. Rom. 2:14–15), although he—of all men—seemed to impugn law, as such. In fact, in this vein he was mainly speaking about the condemnation of law, and not law of itself. Romans 8:1–4 indicates that (i) he sees the law as ‘the law of God’ and not as merely Jewish law, so that it has a sort of eternal connotation, and (ii) he sees justification as the basis for fulfilling ‘the just requirements of the law’, and not antinomian—or nomist—pursuits. Paul’s brilliant analysis of law in I Timothy 1:8–11 ought not to be missed.

COVENANT AND ETHICS

It is safe to say that biblically theology is covenantal theology, and cannot be understood apart from knowing covenant. It is fair to say that Abraham was an ethical man (Gen. 26:5; cf. 12:4; 17:23; 18:19; 22:16,18; Ps. 112:1–2), and that his desire to do the will of God—the heart of true ethics—was paramount with him.

The covenant with Israel certainly issued in an ethico-religious system which was certainly not law in that heavy legislative, legal and legalistic connotation often given to it by nomists. It is a pity we do not have the time or the occasion to see Israel’s law in all its instructive and functional elements (cf. Ps. 1; 19; 119), such as we find in the Levitical and Deuteronomic codes (see LFS 29 The Basis of Christian Ethics, where these are explicated).

Points we need to note about the covenantal ethics of Israel are:

- (a) the law of Israel was based on grace—the grace of deliverance from the bondage of Egypt and all that is symbolized, i.e. an idolatrous system, its enslavement of a defenceless people, and the refusal to let it worship its God. This grace is seen in Exodus 20:1, which prefaces the demands of true worship and moral living (cf. Exod. 4:22).
- (b) the law was revelational, rather than an evolutionary development, a supernaturalistic (religious) rationalization, an abstractly reasoned ethic or a co-opting of laws of other cultures. It was given by God, for Israel, and was in conformity with the morality known by Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, especially after Abraham left idolatry and worshipped the Most High God Who revealed Himself to him.
- (c) the law was a total system—not just a collection of ethics. It covered all aspects of Israel’s covenantal life—worship, the sacrificial cultus, national, tribal, family and personal relationships relating to God, one’s neighbour and one’s self. It covered health and sanitation, attitudes to the ungodly and idolatrous nations. It was a theocratic system.
- (d) It was not opposed by the prophets, but rather they kept recalling the nation to the righteousness of the law, as opposed to the nominalism and hypocrisy of falsely using the worship cultus.

THE NEW COVENANT AND ETHICS

With Israel’s constant addiction to idolatry, its consequent national downfall, and the judgements of God, the prophets spoke of a New Covenant God would make with Israel

(e.g. Isa. 55:3; Jer. 31:31–34; 32:40; Ezek. 37:26). In all these predictions we notice that obedience to God’s law and its precepts follows the action of grace in this promised covenant—a repeat, really, of the principle of Exodus 20:1—first deliverance from bondage and then obedience (cf. Jer. 31:31–34; Ezek. 36:24–28). It becomes clear that the ‘new’ covenant as against the ‘former’ (Mosaic) Covenant is not outside the wide Abrahamic Covenant but rather is the fulfilment of it (cf. Luke 1:68–79; cf. Matt. 26:28).

THE NEW TESTAMENT AND THE NEW COVENANT

Zechariah’s prediction of the New Covenant coming through Messiah, linked with the preparatory ministry of his son, John the Baptist, shows that covenant and Messiah cannot be apart. This would link with Old Testament predictions concerning Messiah. Jesus’ use of the New Covenant promise (of Jer. 31:31–34) linked with his blood, Paul’s dissertation of covenant in Galatians 3, and the detailed comparison of the ‘old’ and ‘new’ covenants by the writer of Hebrews—plus his designation of Jesus as the mediator of the New Covenant—all show that the new system has outmoded the old, and that a new ethic has taken the place of the old in the nature of a ‘better than’.

EXCURSUS ON THE NATURE OF THE LAW OF GOD

Is there indeed a law which can be called ‘the law of God’? If there is such, then does it alter in various eras, e.g. antediluvian, post-diluvian, Abrahamic, Mosaic and Christian times? In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said plainly that he had not come to abolish the law and the prophets but to fulfil them, ‘For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth shall pass away not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law until all be accomplished’. The question is, what is meant by ‘until all be accomplished’? Will there come a time when all will be accomplished and all law shall pass away, or is Jesus saying, ‘Just as heaven and earth will never pass away, so the law will not’? Romans 10:4 says, ‘For Christ is the end of the law, that everyone who has faith may be justified’. This much-debated statement can mean, ‘Christ is the fulfilment of the law so that everyone who has faith in his redemptive work may be justified before the law’, or, ‘*For Christ is the end of the law as a way of being justified by the law* (i.e. by law works, i.e. works-righteousness), so that everyone one who has faith—in Christ’s propitiatory work—may be justified’. It is doubtful that ‘Christ is the end of the law’ can be exegeted to mean, ‘Christ has finished law’. Even if it were said, ‘Christ has finished Jewish law’, it would not mean the law of God is ended.

We will look at the term ‘the law of Christ’ later in our studies. This law has often been said to be ‘the law of love’, as though the law in Israel was not a law of love, and has been superseded by Christ’s law of love (cf. John 13:34; 15:12; cf. I Cor. 9:21; Gal. 6:2). However, both Paul and James sum up the Decalogue (the Ten Commandments) as ‘the law of love’ (Rom. 13:8–10; Gal. 5:13–14; James 1:22–25 and 2:8–13).

Romans 8:1–4 can be seen to issue in the following: (i) the man of faith is freed from the *condemnation* of the law, for (ii) he has been freed from ‘the law of sin and death’, i.e. the law became the law of sin and death when he transgressed it, but the Gospel has justified him from the law, and (iii) now that he is free from law’s condemnation he is enabled by the Spirit of life to ‘fulfil the just requirements of the law’, i.e. he can live according to law now that he has been freed from its condemnation. He does not have to do this in order to be justified, or to maintain that justification, but because he has been justified he is free to obey. It is notable in Romans chapters 1–8 Paul returns time and again to convince the reader that he is not denigrating or eliminating law, but rather honouring it, preserving its holy and permanent nature, and encouraging obedience to it.

Does the law, then, go through permutations? Was there a ‘creational law’ which was the original ‘law of God’, and was it succeeded by a law called ‘moral’, and was this the law Abraham understood but which filled out—so to speak—in Israel, becoming the ‘covenant law’ so that the inner core—the ‘moral law’—was simply worked out in the mass of legal details such as sacrifice, personal and community ethics, health and sanitation—and the like? Was all this detail pared away to bring back or manifest more clearly ‘the moral law’ which then became ‘the law of love’ or ‘the law of Christ’, and is this the law which now obtains? If it does, then what resemblance does it have to the original ‘creational law’? What, indeed, are its ethical outworkings, and does it have certain prescriptions? How do these prescriptions relate (i) to the New Covenant, and (ii) to the Kingdom of God?

We can see our task is not a simple one. I suggest there has ever only been one law—the law of God—and that it has been—and will be—invariable throughout all time. Its application within time to various eras and situations does not alter its essential nature, but only the relevant application of it at these points of time. For some, this is too simplistic an understanding, but I believe my view can be biblically substantiated.

Whatever our views may be, we need to apply ourselves to an examination of ‘the law of God’, for we need to understand it.

CONCLUSION TO ‘THE BASIS OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS—CREATION AND COVENANT’

We have seen that two things are important in understanding ethics as a whole: (i) the nature of the will of God, and (ii) the nature of His law. The will of God (cf. Eph. 1:11; 3:11; cf. Isa. 46:9–10) is something that He works out in history to its telos (designed conclusion) and that will is in conformity with, as well as the expression of, His nature. The problem with law is that we generally regard it as prescriptive legislation and not as revelation of the true way of life. It is looked at as a standard to be reached, a moral level to be kept, and as a certain ‘goodness’ to be done. Indeed true law is dynamic, is purposeful, is forward-looking, is goal-accomplishing, is functional to true living, and is by no means static. It is one with the will of God, and in that sense is not moralistic though it is moral, i.e. pertaining to true choices, choices which are related to the ongoing life and action of the human race, as also to God’s forward-moving purpose.

We have also seen that whilst covenant is God’s grace-way of relating to the fallen human race, yet it is also a provision for living truly according to God’s law. The covenant with Israel demanded obedience, as also it motivated it. The New Covenant likewise liberates the guilt-bound human spirit and motivates (or, constrains) it to true obedience.

We need to know these things, and to recognize them as the basis for Christian ethics. There are things, too, that we need to know, such as the nature of the Kingdom of God, the Lordship of Christ in history, the dynamics of justification and sanctification, and the motivation of faith, hope and love, to true obedience and—so—right ethical practice.

CHRISTIAN ETHICS AND MODERN MAN

STUDY THREE: CHRIST AND THE NEW ETHICS

CHRIST AND ETHICS

Jesus said to his disciples, 'If you love me, you will keep my commandments'. They were to love him primarily because of his death and resurrection—his redemption of them (I John 4:19). Responsive love was to be the basis of obedience (II Cor. 5:14). If we seek to draw out the shape of Christ's ethics by a study only of the Gospels, then we will not succeed. Even a study of the Sermon on the Mount will not help us. We need to understand the mind of the early Christian church as it comes to us via the whole New Testament, and then we will understand the mind of Christ (cf. I Cor. 2:16 [*nous*]; Phil. 2:5 [*phroneo*]).

THE LIFE-CHANGING DYNAMIC OF THE GOSPEL

Probably there would be no better passage for illustrating the radical change in life and context of a person from an ungodly to a godly life than Ephesians 2:1–10. Similar passages are Ephesians 2:11–22; 4:17–24; Titus 2:11–14 and Titus 3:1–7. The contrast between the old and new life, the radical change in personal living, and the change from old disobedience to new obedience, is quite powerful. The key lies in verses 8–10: 'For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God—not because of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them'. Since on the one hand we are saved and on the other go on to do 'good works', then how does all this take place? What is its basis and true nature?

(i) The Dynamic of Justification

We have spoken of the compulsion of guilt—through the conscience—for a person to prove, vindicate and justify himself. This exercise virtually takes up most of man's time. The natural man believes his understanding of right and wrong is good (complete). He intends to do right, is disturbed if he does not, and becomes angry at the things which appear to prevent his perfection. Where he fails he immediately justifies himself to himself and others. He cannot afford to be wrong. Self-justification is a driving force behind all his actions, although it does not immediately appear to be that way,

and many would deny this statement. Even so, it cannot be emphasized enough that man cannot afford to be wrong. He certainly will strive to be ethically correct. In all ethical systems—especially those religious and philosophical—right ethical behaviour is a goal, and an achievement. This is not the case with justification. Ethical action proceeds from justification—does not have justification as its goal—and is the fruit of the grace of justification and not justification's justification.

THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL—THE 'WORD OF THE CROSS'

We must see, now, the source of true constraint and motivation to true ethical living. It is the Cross. The enemies of created man are Satan, his powers, his system—the world, the idols, the corrupt aeon—sin, death, law, the wrath of God and conscience. All of these hold man by his guilt. Had he no guilt he would be free of them, and would have a proper approach to God. As it is, 'he who commits sin is the slave of sin'. He is also the slave of these other nominated enemies.

The work of the Cross is the love of God (I John 4:9–10; Rom. 5:5–10), for it is the work which utterly removes guilt by the act of propitiation (Rom. 3:24–25; I John 4:10–18), and reconciles man to God (II Cor. 5:19–21). The removal of guilt defeats Satan, his world and his powers (Heb. 2:14–15; Gal. 1:4; 6:14; Col. 2:14–15). Propitiation releases man from the wrath of God (Rom. 3:24), i.e. from the curse (Gal. 3:13). The Cross—with the Resurrection—is the place of justification (Gal. 2:16–21; Rom. 5:17), and so man is set free from guilt and the power of sin (Rom. 6:12–14), the power of death (I Cor. 15:55–56; Rom. 4:25), and is cleansed from the defilement of his sins.

This liberation is immeasurable, real, effective, and irreversible, 'for the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus [the Gospel] has set me free from the law of sin and death [the law as a condemning power]'. Believing man is freed from guilt and so from sin's power. With justification from guilt the person is free to obey, and finds freedom in obedience (Ps. 119:45; cf. v. 32) since obedience to law is the true way of liberty.

(1) The Gospel is the Gospel of Grace (Acts 20:24)

Whilst justification can be said to be of faith—faith in Christ's finished work of the Cross—yet it is primarily of grace—'they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith' (Rom. 3:24–25). Grace is prior to faith so that God moves to redeem before man has faith, working upon man's will (cf. John 3:7–8). That grace is the active operation of the Godhead for man—the work of the atonement—and then upon and in man—the work of the Spirit applying the power of the Cross. Man does not approach God but God man.

(2) The Dynamic of Repentance and Faith

Repentance is a gift of God (Acts 5:31; 11:18) as also is faith (Eph. 2:8–9; Phil. 1:29). Repentance is a change of mind, attitude and thinking. Faith is trust in God—the One from whom man separated himself at the Fall. The change of mind is towards sin and towards God. Hence the lie is exchanged for the truth (Rom. 1:25). Man wishes to worship the Creator-Redeemer instead of 'the creature', and desires not to suppress the truth but express it. Repentance and faith bring the gift of grace (Rom. 3:24; 5:17).

(3) The Dynamic of Forgiveness and Cleansing

Passages such as I Corinthians 6:11; Ephesians 1:7, Colossians 1:13–14; Titus 2:11–14; Titus 3:3–7; I Peter 1:18–22; 2:24–25; Hebrews 10:9–22; I John 4:9–19; Revelation 1:5 all show us the enormous liberation which comes from being forgiven our sins personally by God, and from being cleansed from all moral pollution and defilement by Him so that one stands as new before him and one's self. The old things have passed away—they have been made new!

(4) The Dynamic of New Birth—the New Creation

The work of faith and repentance by the Spirit, the application of the atonement through the Spirit with the justification, forgiveness and cleansing which come all cause the new birth (John 1:12–13; 3:1–14; II Cor. 5:17; Titus 3:4–7; I Pet. 1:3, 21–22; I John chs 1–5), bring the repentant sinner to be a new person—a new creation. This is called the gift of regeneration. The gift of the Spirit enables him or her to live the new life in the new true ethic.

(5) The Dynamic of Sanctification

Sanctification has three elements to it: (i) the purification from sins which we saw above in '(3)', (ii) the gift of being included in the people of God (e.g. Eph. 1:4–5; 2:11–22; I Cor. 6:11; I Pet. 2:4–5, 9–10), and (iii) the present practical outworking of holy (ethical) living. It is astonishing to sense utter purification and to realize we have been given the gift of holiness, i.e. 'sanctification by faith' (cf. Acts 15:8–9; 26:18).

(6) The Dynamic of Inflooding Love

I John 4:19 is simple enough, 'We love, because he first loved us'. Romans 5:5–10 has a parallel teaching—God's love is flooded into us by the Holy Spirit as he reveals the atonement and so the extent and efficacy of that work. All the things we have nominated above—repentance and faith (as gifts), justification, forgiveness, cleansing, liberation from the power of the enemies, the new birth and new creation (regeneration), and the gift of sanctification all combine to cause the new believer to love God, and at the same time to love all others. This is the radical, dynamic change which comes at conversion and is the mainspring of all ethics.

Now we have the key to Christian ethics—the love of God flooding us. Love is the true constraint to authentic obedience—John 14:15; II Corinthians 5:14; I John 4:19; Galatians 5:13–14; Romans 13:8–10; I Corinthians 13:4–7; Philippians 2:1–2; I Corinthians 16:14; I John 3:14—and has no reason for obedience other than itself—the love of God within us causing love to God and others. The action of love is closely linked with the action and fruits of holiness (cf. Phil. 1:9–11; I Thess. 3:11–13), the very heart of ethical living.

CONCLUSION TO 'CHRIST AND THE NEW ETHICS'

Paul—in treating many problems of sexual and other relationships—often refers to 'dominical sayings', i.e. things Christ spoke about, and for which he gave prescriptions as in I Corinthians 7:10, 12, 17, 25. At the same time Paul gives

instructions where the Lord has not specifically prescribed, but sees them as being of Christ because he, Paul, is an apostle and knows the mind of Christ. This mind of Christ is also known to the church. In Ephesians 4:17–31 Paul—in making a contrast between pagan moral insensibility and Christian ethical sensitivity—says, ‘You did not so learn Christ!—assuming that you have heard about him and were taught in him, as the truth is in Jesus.’ In other words the early church knew the mind of Christ in its ethical implications.

When, then, we come to the ethical teaching of the Gospels given by Christ, we have a whole world of material. Much of this might seem to be explicit prescription—as in the Sermon on the Mount—but we need to have the background of the covenant with Israel, the teaching of Israel’s prophets, and the truth of the Kingdom of God in order to truly understand his teaching. The subjects of the Kingdom of God and the people of God bring us, then, into the realm of eschatology, and we will have to understand that all ethics are eschatological.

This, then, will be the next area in which we will venture in seeking to understand Christ’s ethic.

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CHRISTIAN ETHICS AND MODERN MAN

STUDY FOUR: THE ETHICS OF THE KINGDOM

THE FACT AND NATURE OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD

The Kingdom of God is the reign and rule of God. This rule has always been and ever will be. God rules as King over all His creation, whether its inhabitants be those unseen—in heavenly realms—or seen to human sight, i.e. within this universe: all things are under Him. He has made them, and they have not made themselves, therefore He is King.

His Kingdom has been questioned. It has been attacked by Satan and the forces he has recruited to be his—from celestial creatures and mankind. There has been rebellion in the Kingdom. At the time of the Fall man rebelled under the seduction of Satan and his deceit. God's Kingdom nevertheless stands sure, albeit there are rebels and quislings within it. All celestial creatures which have not rebelled and all human creatures who are persons of faith are within this Kingdom. In history Israel has been a special part of that Kingdom as the covenant people of God. In the New Testament the people of Christ's community are within the Kingdom. They have entered the Kingdom by the new birth (John 3:3–6) having been transferred from the dominion of darkness through the forgiveness of sins (Col. 1:13–14). This Kingdom is for them 'righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit' (Rom. 14:17). Nor is it simply 'talking' but it is power (I Cor. 4:20).

THE KINGDOM HAS COME, IS COMING, AND WILL COME

Whilst God is always King, His history has been designed to move to its climax when the Kingdom will be paramount in the universe, all subversive elements having been destroyed, all true heirs having inherited the Kingdom, and God's people will be 'a kingdom of priests' to reign on the earth, and to reign forever (Rev. 1:5–6; 5:10; 20:4; 22:5; cf. I Pet. 2:4–10). In the Old Testament it was predicted that the Kingdom would come (e.g. II Sam. 7:11–14; Dan. 7:9–27; cf. Isa. 52:7), and this prediction was linked with Messiah (cf. Isa. 52:7). John the Baptist proclaimed the immediate coming of the Kingdom and Jesus himself taught that the Kingdom had come with himself (Mark 1:14–15; Matt. 12:28). Even so, the Kingdom was yet to come with power (Matt. 10:23; 16:28; Mark 9:1). The apostles were promised the Kingdom (Luke 22:28–29; cf. Luke 12:32), and they proclaimed the Kingdom in their Gospel (cf. Acts 14:22; 19:8;

20:25; 28:23, 31). Believers will ultimately inherit the Kingdom (Acts 14: 22; Matt. 25:34; cf. I Cor. 6:9–10; Gal. 5:19–22; Eph. 5:5).

CHRIST AND ‘THE LAW OF CHRIST’

One thing is clear, namely that Christ came to do the Father’s will, and doing the will of God is true ethics. When we realize that his behaviour sprang from the dynamics of his mission, his being aligned to the Father’s will, then ‘ethics for ethics’ sake’ cannot exist. In the Pauline letters there are two statements—‘under the law of Christ’ (I Cor. 9:21; *ennomos Christou*), and ‘the law of Christ’ (Gal. 6:2; *ho nomos tou Christou*). The first means ‘enlawed to Christ’, and the second is about fulfilling ‘the law of Christ’. When we ask what this law is, we could say it was the law of love which he commanded to his disciples—‘you love one another’—, or it could be the law under which he came as a man and which he said would not be abrogated. We should conclude that the creational law is ‘the law of God’, but we have seen that that law was not only functional—pertaining to the ontological nature of creation—but was forward-looking and purposive, i.e. moving towards the appointed telos of all creation.

When, then, we see that in one sense all creation is the Kingdom of God, and in a particular sense the realm in which all things gladly accept His authority—then we can see how there must be law in all things, and that law pertains to the rule of God, i.e. His Kingdom. In Paul’s and James’s Epistles the commandments—as we have seen—add up to the law of love. This seems to be the meaning of ‘the law of Christ’, i.e. the law of God.

CHRIST AND THE ETHICS OF THE KINGDOM

We have shown that Christ’s coming was primarily to effect the Atonement, thus leading men to reconciliation with God (II Cor. 5:19–21) and that ‘in him [Christ] we might become the righteousness of God’, having become ‘dead to sin’ (I Pet. 2:24). Thus the dynamic for ethical obedience springs from the Atonement. If we add to this that through the Atonement (i) the Son leads all believers to God as Father, (ii) all believers are under the Lordship of Christ, and (iii) all believers are baptized in the Spirit and so are filled with love and power, and are under the Spirit’s guidance, then we have the true picture of the new people of the Kingdom (cf. Acts 1:3–8; Rom. 14:17; I Cor. 4:20) who—although they do not constitute the Kingdom as such—have the ministry of proclaiming the Kingdom in the world (Acts 19:8; 20:25). Their ethical obedience comes in the action and thrust of that proclamation, as in fact was the case with Christ. This is surely the substance of what Christ taught his disciples to pray in the Lord’s prayer, ‘Our Father.....hallowed by thy name.....thy kingdom come.....thy will be done’.

When we talk about Christ and the Kingdom we have to ask ourselves, ‘Did some new element enter into the ethics of the Kingdom with the coming of Christ?’. The answer must surely be, ‘The creational ethic by nature of the case could not—and would not—change, but the approach to that ethic would be changed by redemption, and the new dynamics of the New Covenant’ (see Study Three, ‘Christ and the New Ethics’). That is why we have emphasized the three factors above which determine the constraint and power of the believing community for obedience.

THE ETHICS OF CHRIST

We saw in our last study that the early church was taught Christ and learned the truth is in Christ (Eph. 4:21). These ethics are given from a number of sources:

- (a) *the sayings and commands of Christ given to the disciples* (John 14:15; 16:14; cf. Matt. 28:20; Acts 20:25). Contrary to the statements of some scholars, Jesus gave many commands in the period of his ministry.
- (b) *the teaching and actions of Jesus in the Gospels*. Jesus, by his actions, demonstrated and taught the way of one who was (is) the Son and servant of God, so when Paul could say he was an imitator of Christ (I Cor. 11:1).
- (c) *the direct teaching of ethics in the Sermon on the Mount*, where the ethics do relate to the Kingdom of God. For purposes of our study we will assume all that he commanded, and all that he did by way of practical precepts are contained within, as well as exemplified by, the Sermon on the Mount, so that as we look at the Sermon on the Mount we will see his ethical teaching, i.e. the ethics of the Kingdom.

What we have to keep in mind is an understanding of the true nature of the Kingdom, the constant references to the Father and His relation to the Kingdom, that the Sermon on the Mount was spoken to the disciples, that it did not abrogate ‘the law and the prophets’—shall we say the moral reality of the law?—but in fact etched it out more clearly than it had been known, corrected legalistic misimpressions and accretions, and showed the essential nature of true law and the powerful nature of obedience to that true law so that the obedient ones could be likened to a man building a house which would survive all the drastic crises which might happen to it—the obedient ones would be accomplish a ‘building’, would stand fast throughout all crises, and could live with the satisfaction of having ‘loved the law of God after the inner man’.

The Sermon on the Mount removed from the whole context of the Gospel, and left unrelated to the dynamics of salvation, of God’s Fatherhood, of Christ’s Lordship, and of living by the Spirit and—so—walking in the Spirit, is indeed a sermon without true context or meaning.

Note 1: At this point we need to refer again to the nature of law (see Study Two) which is—of itself ‘for life’, holy, just, good and spiritual (Rom. 7:10, 12, 14), and see that although it is difficult for fallen man to obey it, yet it stands in its own ontological reality. To say that the Sermon on the Mount is too high an ethic for man is to say nothing. It is like saying that love is too high for man to exercise! The side of law which we see in I Timothy 1:8, ‘Now we know that the law is good, if any one uses it lawfully’, is the truth of law and its intention, but verses 9–11 of this passage tell us that the law becomes the enemy of the impenitent and ruthless sinner. It has often been pointed out in regard to the Sermon on the Mount that Christ is giving an exposition of law which will unhand the legalistic person, and drive into despair the one who has thought he has fairly reasonably obeyed God’s law! In his exposition of the Sermon on the Mount Jesus does not give his reasons for preaching it.

Note 2: Many commentators have shown that the substance of the sermon on the Mount is innate in the Decalogue or Moral Law—the law of God, and that nothing new is introduced by it. Thus the Sermon enhances our view and—perhaps—brings it into line with the high understanding of law shown in Psalms 1, 19 and 119.

CONCLUSION TO 'CHRISTIAN ETHICS AND MODERN MAN'

The four studies we have traversed may disappoint some who wish to get down to the substance of actual ethics. This we will do in a future series. Meanwhile we should recognize that the studies we have done are valuable for seeing the setting and framework of the matter of ethics, i.e. man doing the will of God according to His nature, and the nature of man himself, within the functional creation. We must realize that right behaviour is not a telos in itself, but is oriented to the telos of God.

When the surround to man is recognized—his identity situation of creation, redemption, sanctification, service and glorification—then the true context of ethics will be seen, and right behaviour will be understood. That God should do all this for man is the revelation of His love, and is His love.

Most of all we will have to recognize the highest that is for man. This is, 'God is love'. That love, of course, is holy and is in no way tolerant of evil. It is the love which constrains us to all obedience. Jesus said, 'If you love me you will keep my commandments'. John said, 'We love because he first loved us', and he showed that God's love is seen and known in the act of the Cross. Paul showed that we must 'do all things in love' (I Cor. 16:14), saying that the most powerful of acts without love are nothing and accomplish nothing (I Cor. 13:1–3). Jesus rebuked the church at Ephesus (Rev. 2:1–7) because 'you have abandoned your first love'.

To 'abandon love' is to abandon Christ, is to abandon God. Our 'first love' may be 'the love you had at first', but then we loved because He first loved us. The love that constrains us (II Cor. 5:14) is Christ's love for us and Christ's love in us, and not even our love for him. If we loved because he first loved us, then we go on loving because he goes on loving us, and if we obey his commands because we love him, then the whole dynamic and constraint for true ethical living arises out of his love, and the love of the Father (I John 4:9–10), that love which is flooded into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5; 15:30). We have seen that the law of God is primarily the law of love, i.e. love first to God, and then to our neighbour and so ourselves. Those who loved the law in Israel knew it to be the way of freedom, and those who live in the law through the new covenant find it to be the way of freedom.

This is the freedom we call 'responsible freedom'. Our wills are caught in the love of God and so we love His law. Forgiveness in the heart has released us from guilt-compelled 'legal' obedience, and living in the Spirit is walking in the Spirit, which is following the way of life into which the Spirit leads us, constrains us, and enables us. The new 'law in the heart' (Jer. 31:31–34) is the law of love alive in the heart because God has placed it there. This was the love which was 'at the beginning' (I John 2:7) and it will be the love that will be at the end, when we meet him face to face'. It has always been the law of the Kingdom—in which is 'righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit'—and always will be.

APPENDIX:SITUATIONAL ETHICS

When we come to the realm of 'situational ethics' we must hold in mind these thoughts of the philosophical argument:

- (a) There is no universal validity of the commandments because
- (b) No one is under a commandment unless it has spoken to him for
- (c) No commandment has existence outside the mind of the one to whom it is particularly directed. That is
- (d) The existence of the commandment is entirely subjective to man himself.

This arises out of the existentialist's claim 'I am completely locked up to my own experience. I cannot know the experience of another. The experience is my own here and now'. This naturally denies any propositional content to revelation since revelation is (only) a personal 'encounter'. The Biblical view is that revelation is a divinely initiated event plus divinely guided interpretation. That is, that it is not left to subjective interpretation

When the existentialist principle—which ultimately involves personal freedom and total responsibility of the existent—is applied each literally does that which is right in his own eyes. Since absolutes are rejected and a 'creational structure' is denied—at least in that sense—then each decision is made according to the 'situation'. Bishop Robinson speaks of three ethics:—

- (a) **Heteronomous** —of the 'God out there', i.e. supernatural.
- (b) **Autonomous**—after Kant, derived from the subjective 'ought' which will ultimately run to seed, becoming replaced by every kind of ethical relativism – utilitarianism, evolutionary naturalism, existentialism.
- (c) **Theonomous**. Taking up the concept of God being 'the ground of all being' there can be no supernaturalism or transcendency of the 'God out there' nor 'the moral self' but one which is encountered in, with, and under the Thou of all finite relationships as their ultimate depth and ground and meaning. In practice this means that our ethical decisions and acts arise from living in Christ, the 'new being' in the Spirit, and here there are no absolutes but His love. Nor is the ethic merely for the Christians but it is universal and often comes incognito to others. Even in this case it is not foreign 'since it is the claim of home, of the personal ground of our very being.....[i.e.].....theonomous".

This ethic (it is said) is flexible and meets every situation at its particular point in time. Love has a built-in moral compass which intuitively orientates itself to the needs of others. Whilst there is a constant and moral flux in the world, yet there is a constancy in this love which is 'prepared to see every moment as a fresh creation from God's

hand, demanding its own and perhaps wholly unprecedented response.' Tillich is quoted as calling it the 'ethics of the *kairos*—of the God-given moment, mediating the meeting with the eternal in the temporal. 'Love', realizing itself from *kairos* to *kairos*, creates an ethic which is beyond the alternative of absolute (supernatural) and relative (natural) ethics.'

After this explanation Robinson then quotes an article of Professor Joseph Fletcher (Harvard Divinity Bulletin 1932) entitled The New Look in Christian Ethics. In this Fletcher puts the non-prescriptive ethic or the 'radical ethic of the situation' over against the ethic of 'supernaturalistic legalism' (sic). Robinson then gives us the practical outworking (after Fletcher) of such an ethic. '.....nothing of itself can be labelled as wrong. One cannot for instance, start from the position that 'sex relations before marriage' or 'divorce' are wrong or sinful in themselves. They may be in 99 cases or even 100, but they are not intrinsically so, for the only intrinsic evil is lack of love. Continenence and indissolubility may be the guiding norms of love's response; they may and should be hedged about by the laws and conventions of society, for these are the dykes of love in a wayward and loveless world. But morally speaking they must be defended, as Fletcher puts it, 'situationally nor prescriptively'—in other words, in terms of the fact that persons matter, and the deepest welfare of these particular persons in this particular situation matters, more than anything in the world'. Fletcher rightly states the logical conclusion 'If the emotional and spiritual welfare of both parents and children in a particular family can be served best by a divorce, wrong and cheapjack as divorce commonly is, then love requires it'.

Robinson gives the illustration of the young man asking concerning the girl, 'Why shouldn't I?' The answer could be 'Because it's wrong', or 'because it is a sin', but he says this may not speak to this generation. It is closer to the point to ask 'Do you love her?' Chastity he says is the expression of charity—of caring enough. Such 'morality' is simply Augustine and his 'love and do what you please' or—better still—'love and then what you will, do'. D. L. Lawrence is quoted as coming very close to Robinson's thesis in these words, 'And then—when you find your own manhood—your womanhood.....—then you know it is not your own, to do as you like with. You don't have it for your own will—it comes—from the middle—from God.' Quoting Bonhoeffer's words 'God is the 'beyond' in the midst of our life', Robinson admits that this 'God' is different from that of our former supernaturalism, but suggests that 'there is a way through here to the transcendent in a world without religion'.

Another mark of New Moralists is the rejection of external authority. Dr Comfort professes to be an anarchist, but in the case of churchmen this tendency appears as the rejection of the full authority of Christ and of the Scriptures: or, if not openly a rejection, a reference to these standards in an equivocal and piecemeal way. This comes out in analyses of human situation which are used to illustrate the proposition, Charity before chastity'. We may take two examples from the Rev. H. A. Williams in the book Soundings. He discusses the film Never on a Sunday, which tells of a sailor and a Greek prostitute in the Piraeus who helps the sailor to achieve a capacity for physical union. This matter dealt with on the physical plane, yet Mr Williams speaks of the sailor gaining self-respect, going away 'a deeper fuller person than he came in'. It is incredible that Mr Williams can omit consideration of the morality of the whole relationship—the sailor's wife, the girl's family possible offspring of the union—and yet use terms or a moral and spiritual kind to describe it. Again, in his reference to *The Mark*,

he tells of a man with an abnormal sexual tendency who is cured by spending a weekend with an adult woman. 'Where there is healing, there is Christ, whatever the Church may say about fornication.' 'Healing' is a dangerously ambiguous word; all that has happened is physical, or at most psychological, healing. What of the parties as moral and spiritual persons?

We are now in a position to sum up the matter of New Morality, so far as situational ethics are concerned. It rejects 'absolutes' as such, and whilst the word 'absolutes' as a term leaves much to be desired, yet it is preferable to the almost incoherent relativism and subjectivism which denies absolutes. In practice the existent makes the decision which he feels and believes is the correct one. He bases this on the thought that it does the least harm and is of the greatest benefit. The New theologians assume that man loves in this way. The doctrine of depravity is set aside for the humanistic doctrine of man's innate goodness. It also assumes that one may reasonably arrive at the best conclusion, which seems to make little allowance for passion, inner drives of selfishness, utilitarian motives and so on. It in fact believes that experimentally one can work out what is best whereas in any given case this may require a complex and involved 'computing'. The greatest deficiency, however, is the true motivating force for right action—yet it must be seen that agape (divine love) does not properly operate in and through other than redeemed man, and then only under conditions where the Spirit leads and enables (cf. Gal. 5: 16–25). Thus only a believer has true agape. His agape is shown in obedience to actual commandments (John 14:15; cf. I John 2:5–6; 3:22–24). Again the Epistles show us conclusively that it is dangerous to depart from God's announced laws and precepts (see (a) Rom. 7:6; 13:8–9; Gal. 5:14; James 1:22–25; 2:8–13; (b) I Tim. 1:8–11; Eph. 5:5–6; I Cor. 6:9–11; Gal. 5:19–21; 6:7; etc.).

We must not, however, miss the truth that there are situational elements in moral decisions. Primarily one is guided by the objective law. That will be the basis for all decision. However, sometimes two commands may seem to conflict and a decision has to be made, e.g. whether a lie may save someone from death. In such a case the known 'thrust' of love will have to be considered situationally. It is at this point that our study on the 'internalisation' of law must be seen. However, we see from a comparison of Ezekiel 36:24ff and Jeremiah 31:31–34 that obedience to the law will come with the Holy Spirit internalising the law; cf. II Cor. 3:15–17; Rom. 8:1–4; and this is shown so clearly in Gal. 5:16–18; 22–25. The Holy Spirit is more than man's subjectivity although he dwells internally. His ministry is to lead in the matter of obedience. Thus we wait for his witness at these most difficult times (cf. Col. 3:15; Eph. 5:17–18) and know that the given result will be consistent with God's moral law. This more than subjectivism which simply feels 'rightness' of a decision. However, it presupposes submission to the Spirit and the Word. On this basis absolutes are not just hard prescriptions for legal submission. Indeed we understand them to be the mind and will of God and look at them positively.

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