

‘The Basis of Christian Ethics’

1. Introduction

We will need to keep in mind that this paper is primarily concerned, not with the whole gamut of Christian ethics as such, but with the basis of ethics and primarily Christian ethics. Nevertheless since Christian ethics are deeply rooted in Judaic ethics, we will need to look at that whole system of ethics. A bibliography is appended, not because the thrust of this paper concurs with all that is expounded within the books contained in that bibliography, but because this is at once the most practical and widest of all subjects within Christian theology. It is the point - practical ethics - at which we see and experience the action of Christianity, for good or for ill. Hence the subject is very much alive.

2. The Nature of Ethics

Doubtless ethics is roughly understood by all as modes of conduct. With some it equates with law or laws. With others it is adaptive modes of conduct, i.e. ethics change with the moods and fluctuations of current social living. The term ethics derives from the Greek word *ethos* as in I Cor. 15:33 ‘good morals’ (R.S.V.), ‘good manners’ (A.V.). The Greek is **ethe chresta**. Departing from the derivative word is II Peter 3:11 ‘manner of living’ or ‘lives’. In this case it is holy living (**hagiais anastrophais**). It has been called ‘the science of conduct a systematic attempt to consider the purposeful actions of mankind, to determine their rightness or wrongness, their tendency to good or evil’ (Baker's Dictionary of Theology, p.199). Baker's Dictionary of Christian Ethics (p.221) describes it as ‘...a network of operative values, centering around the concept of love as defined in scripture.’ Loosely used the term ethics is intended to cover the codes of conduct, social customs and the like which a man, in any given culture ought to follow. It does not mean that he will follow them, but it is at least the general standard set.

When we penetrate into the Christian ethic we discover that such a loose statement will not do. There is no sense in which the Christian ethic is haphazard. Whilst we may not directly speak of absolutes we do speak of ethical principles which are unchanging, although their adaptation in any age or society may be a matter for consideration and, even, debate.

3. The Ethos or Background of Ethics

We will see that Israel had its own ethic linked with its law, and its laws. These laws were apodictic (absolute) and casuistic (ameliorative), but then the whole law sprang out of the ethos of the nation. In other words, the application of the Christian ethic will be determined to a great degree by

cultural, societal, and religious mores which exist in any ethnic or national group. We will need to keep this in mind since current Christian nations have, each of them, their own particular histories and developments.

In addition to this we have the development (or retardation) of the application of ethics in different cultures, so that an advance in understanding the Christian ethic would come through use and custom. For example Israel was a developing people under the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. It was at one time a captive people and laboured in slavery. Then it was nomadic, at least for forty years, and finally became an agricultural people, in Palestine. Even more it developed urban centres of population and had its phase of limited industrialisation. Hence its ethos would have changed and developed according to those periods. Israel had basic laws which could not be changed by further legislation. However its ethos as a nation fluctuated according to its attention to the law and covenant or according to its attention to idolatry, international politics and so on.

4. The Structure of Christian Ethics: Old Testament

In our examination of the bases of Christian ethics we will have to follow something of the following plan:

- (i) The ethics of Israel in regard to law.
- (ii) The ethics of Israel in regard to covenant.
- (iii) The ethics of Israel in regard to other elements, i.e.
 - (a) Idolatry, (b) Judgement for covenantal failure and disobedience, (c) In regard to the prophets.
- (iv) The ethics of Israel in regard to the prophecies of Kingdom, New Covenant, Messiah, and so on.

(i) The Ethics of Israel in Regard to Law

Under this heading we will have to discuss many diverse elements. We cannot discuss Mosaic law without first looking at the nature of creation, and we cannot discuss creation without taking into account the revelational nature of the scriptures, and hence their ethical application. We mean that ethics of some kind have always existed in some measure in all societies and cultures. Natural wisdom can devise or point to intelligible ethics, but the Judaic-Christian ethic is apart from this natural wisdom. Hence when the doctrine of creation is espoused then law has a different aspect to non-creational reasoning. Again the moral law as scripture presents it, say in the ten commandments, is a revelation of the way nature or creation is functionally operative. In other words, Israel did not see the law as a thing separate from God but rather the outshining, outflowing, and outgoing of His very nature. The law was not detached from God. It was vital and dynamic, and could not be known or understood apart from Him.

(a) Creation, God, and Law

It would be fairly true to say that in any society laws were originally, as far as they could be, functional. According to the understanding of a people, and having regard to the gods, elements, surrounding conditions and circumstances laws were made to accommodate to these conditions. They were made to the reasonable working of a society or group or family. Various strictures, taboos and the like were primarily for the benefit of the people or their rulers or ruler.

In the Judaic-Christian view, the creation was a perfect entity, having its

own internal functionality. Genesis 1:31, Proverbs 16:4, Eccles. 3:11, and j Tim. 4:4 indicate that creation works by certain principles. These principles, seen from another point of view are functional laws. They are also spelled out. However they are only spelled out in the light of revelation. Israel received the Mosaic writings in the wilderness and Palestine, and was given a doctrine of God and creation. It does not mean that this was not previously a tradition or even accepted knowledge, but its laws were spelled out on the basis of the God of creation and His creation. The following can be seen:-

1. **The law of sabbath rest is part of creation** (Gen. 2:1-3, cf. Exodus 20:11). This day has an actual blessing upon it. One is motivated by this to keep it.
2. **The law of marriage** (Gen. 2:18-25, cf. Matt. 19:1ff), is based upon the functional nature of man and woman, and their true relationship, as also their meaning within the creation in the terms of Gen. 1:28ff.
3. **The law of not killing** (Gen. 9:6) is based on two elements - that of all mankind being fruitful and possessing the earth, and on the fact that man is made in the image of God.
4. **The law of worshipping God and none other**, and not making petrified images of the dynamic God is inherent in God being the God of action, and the Creator.

Hence love to God and love to one's neighbour is an inherent element of 'oughtness' within the creation itself. Thus adultery, theft and covetousness are elements which are foreign to the functional nature of the creation.

None of this makes sense except God is the God of creation, and has the right to rule and direct man, and to expect his response of obedience and service. Later Christian rationalisations make the law to be love, and since God is love then the creation must necessarily emerge from His love operations. Hence the law if it is the true functional principle of creation must necessarily be both the expression of God, and the actual out-flowing of His nature. If however we do not understand the nature of God, then we cannot rightly understand the nature of law, and so of ethics. Also we cannot understand the nature of creation, and hence, of law and ethics. This, then, presupposes that a true understanding of ethic is rooted in the whole revelation of God. It also indicates that true Biblical ethics are correlated with the true nature of things, and that therefore the exigencies of time, place, culture and religion would not essentially alter these, although they may demand certain adaptations, and in some cases amelioration.

(b) The Problem of the Rejection of the Knowledge of God

We have often said in our studies that the loss of the knowledge of God is the loss of the essential nature of things. It also means a loss in regard to relating to things as they are essentially. We gather from Romans 1:19-32, 1 Cor. 12:1-3, I Cor. 8:1-6, and Acts 17:24:30 that when man rejects God in His essential nature, then he also gravitates to idols. Even atheism seems primarily to be the rejection of the God of creation, in that atheism in purity is difficult to sustain. Man generally has his gods. The first commandment of the decalogue - that man shall worship God and God only - sets the basis for the other commandments. Hence Adam's attempt to exist without being contingent upon the Creator, and man's attempt at re-rationalising the nature of God, the universe, and himself, must bring a distortion in man's view of creation-Biblical ethics. This is self-evident. Another world-view than that of the

scriptures must create an entirely different ethic, and even, in some cases an anti-ethic.

(c) The Problem of Satan and Evil

Man does not operate in a moral vacuum nor in a morally neutral zone, i.e. where evil is not present. The nature of the ethic springs from the fact that it is not only demanded that the functional principles of the universe be observed, but that this be done against the aggressive power of evil. In idolatry evil expresses itself fully for it defames the God of creation and love, and substitutes elements which depress the obedience of love, and lead to extended corruption. When it is seen that Satan and his powers actually attack that which is God and good, then the ethos for a true ethic is also attacked. The devious patterns of satanic opposition which range from threat to deception and seduction, show us the problem not merely of devising (or, recognising) the ethic, but of executing it in full.

In Israel the problem of evil exists. It exists in the matter of rendering worship and obedience to God, and in the states which are incurred by guilt. If then, the religion or laws or covenant of Israel do not have the dynamic necessary to understand and carry out the ethic then it remains simply a standard. We cannot discuss the ethic of Israel without seeing that the God of Israel opposes evil, and aids His people. If He is Creator, then He must also be 'faithful Creator' (I Peter 4:19) or the ethic has no (dynamic) basis. That is why we have to see ethics in the light of covenant.

(d) The Problem of Man and the Image of God

The Genesis accounts of man (Genesis 1, 2, 9) as also other indications of his nature (e.g. Psalm 8:3ff, Eccles 3:11, 7:29, I Cor. 11:7) lead us to believe that the image of God is the living and actional reflection of the living and actional God Himself. Also this image has relational elements, such as man and woman together in relationships reflecting the true nature of God as love. Hence the true creational ethic would be carried out as the norm by unfallen man. Fallen man in rejecting God has to reckon with his conscience, and a certain consciousness of good and evil (cf. Romans 1:32, Luke 11:13, Rom. 2:14-15). Fallen man has moral impotence (Rom. 5:6, 7:18), but the image, also, is not erased. The suggestion that it is reversed may make much sense, and explain the perversity of man. When he faces the concomitants of ethics such as authority and law, and both demand voluntary obedience, then the image in reverse refuses the ethic as authentic, and justifies contrary action. This is what Paul calls 'flesh' or, better still, 'the mind of the flesh' in Romans 8: 5-10.

This image in its state following the fall of man is no different in an Israelite, Christian or pagan. Hence the problem evil poses in its satanically organised modes, as also the inner fleshliness of fallen man, and even regenerate man who can be seduced from time to time. When it comes to objective law there may be no change, but when it comes to persons there may be concessive amelioration such as Moses gave in divorce (Matt. 19:1ff).

Man then, creationally has a thrust to obedience. In his rebellion he fights the image and so lives in tensions. Israel faced this tension, and tension had a certain ease in the dynamic of covenant. Nothing, however, altered the true nature of law and so, the true ethic.

(ii) The Ethics of Israel in Regard to Covenant

Covenant in scripture is a vast subject on its own. Some theologies see a covenant in creation. If man obeys he shall live and live in peace. It is implied that in sinning man broke this covenant. The Noahic covenant has nothing implied about it. It is clear. God moves in grace where grace is not deserved. In the Abrahamic Covenant there are two elements apparent:- (a) Universal blessing is promised, and (b) The covenant is of grace. Abraham undoubtedly had two clear incentives to live in accordance with covenant because (a) He had seen the glory of God (the God of glory, Acts 7:1). (b) He had received great promises. The covenant passes to Isaac because of his father's obedience (Gen. 26:3-5), and his son Jacob covets and succeeds in getting, the same promises.

The covenant with Israel through Moses has been called a covenant of law, although it may be better to call it a covenant of obedience. This is seen in (a) The making of the covenant (Exodus 24), (b) The preamble to the decalogue (Exodus 20:1f) where promise precedes command, and (c) The gift of the circumcised heart of Deut. 30:6-8.

There are other elements in the Mosaic Covenant. The people are bound to obey, but obedience, whilst not 'by the way' is the natural result of God's loving kindness (**chesed**) towards His people. In the whole law are contained the provisions for maintaining 'covenant level', i.e. the sacrifices restore the offerers to full relationship with God, and so kill the perverse dynamic of guilt. They give freedom to the conscience. This has some reference to those laws which refer more to hygiene than morals (eating of certain foods, bodily cleansings, etc.), and the didactic elements of the law whereby the whole ritual taught the grace of God in propitiation and forgiveness.

Whilst it is not true to say that the ethics per se give moral dynamic for obedience, yet the law when observed with the circumcised heart is also the mode of freedom, power, delight, etc. This is seen in Psalms 1, 19 and 119 (amongst others). We must not oppose the grace of covenant against law, since law is also the expression of grace, not only in the propitiation of sins by the sacrifices, but in the didactic nature of law in instruction and teaching, since this is the key-note of Mosaic law. Psalm 119 shows that it directs, opening up the way for man to walk, giving him security in direction, and assurance in obedience of functioning authentically.

The wider issues of covenant have also to be seen. Israel is a people. Israel is the people of God. Israel is a community selected by God and given a mandate (Exodus 19:5-6). It is to be a holy community so that it does not profane the name of God. All its ethical life then will be conditioned by these factors as well as being motivated by them. Covenant spells security, vocation, for relationship with God vertically, and with fellow members of the community, horizontally. It also refers to the inner health of individual persons because they relate horizontally and vertically. The community acts as the pastoral context for living. The priests teach, the elders advise and judge, the community cares, the people are one against their common enemies, and the commandments give them direction and guidance as also experience of God and the creation together.

If we do not see this, then we do not understand the law of Moses, and (so) the laws of Israel. The covenant is not a way of evading these laws but is a committal to obeying them (Exodus 24:7-8). The blessing of covenant demands that responsibility and obedience match privilege.

For purposes of seeing these laws we include the section on the three

codes¹ of the covenant, i.e. the Covenant Code, the Holiness Code and the Deuteronomic Code, so that we can see both the modes and motivation for ethical living which Israel knew:-

(a) The Covenant Code: Exodus 20:22 - 23:33

In looking at the three codes we need to keep in mind the decalogue (ten commandments) itself, noting that the three codes are an outworking of that set of principles, although in varying ways.

Within the Covenant Code is the sense that God is the authority who governs, and that privileges have come to the people of God. The idea of a legislative body or a body to execute punishment such as a police body is absent. The congregation, as the people of God and under God, execute judgement when it is needed. We also remember the background of the seventy elders elected in the time of Moses to carry out jurisdiction and jurisprudence.

In this code the law seems to fall into two categories, (1) **Apodictic**, that is absolute judgements because things are clearly established, e.g. premeditated murder, and (2) **Casuistic**, that is ameliorating judgements and punishments when 'circumstances alter cases', e.g. a man murdering where crime has been committed, and so on. One thing about the code, as indeed all Israelitish law was that it was fixed. Amending legislation, or legislations to alter such commands was never made. In this sense the people were secure in an unchanging order of law, even if the levels of morality went up and down in the actual experience of the community.

This code covered the following elements:- An introduction reminding the people of the nature of the covenant God. Laws that dealt with modes of worship, and instructions dealing with persons. Law related to slavery, to bodily injury, to property and to the maintenance of covenant. These were linked with Yahweh's relationship to His people and so governed the dealings the people were to have with strangers and the weak. Again they also had to do with relations with neighbours, with the whole matter of worship especially as this related to the sabbath, the sabbatical year and with the festivals. In its context it closes with warnings and promises, especially as these relate to entry into the promised land.

Doubtless this code helped to form the thinking and action of Israel in regard to law.

(b) The Holiness Code: Leviticus, Chapters 17 to 26

The Hebrew word generally indicates cutting or separation. This code wishes to indicate that God wishes to share His holiness with His people. Whilst other gods have 'taboos' or 'devoted things' in the nature of their worship, yet Yahweh sets up the elements of place, days and things of worship (22:2-3, 23:2-4, 21), and also He makes His priests to be holy (Lev. 21:6-7) both to Himself and to the people. There are two aspects to holiness, i.e. separation from that which is unholy, and separation to God who is holy. 'You shall be holy to me: for I the Lord am holy and have separated you from the peoples, that you should be mine.'

Holiness is not, then, simply a mutual action alone, but it is sharing in ethical holiness.

'Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am the Lord your God. Keep my statutes and do them; I am the Lord who sanctify you'.

¹ As given in Living Faith Study No. 28 'The True Nature of Law' pp.6-7 (N.C.P.I. 1978).

Holiness, then, lies not in ritualistic impeccability alone, but in a spotless ethical purity, an obedience to, as also conformity with, the holiness of God. 'You shall be holy, for I am holy'. It is against this background that we must understand the nature of law, so mere legalism is wholly excluded.

This vertical obedience and relationship to the holiness of God is worked out in the horizontal where one loves one's neighbour, and even one's self, for one's personal rights are also nominated.

This code, sometimes called 'the priestly code' is not primarily for priests but for the whole community.

(c) The Deuteronomic Code: Chapters 12 to 26

so advanced is this code that many scholars cannot accept it as coming from Moses, and seek to find its explanation in the importation of later thought and experience, especially that of the prophets. It is acclaimed by all as a very high code, and indeed the whole book is spoken of as one of the most profound and beautiful of all the books of the scriptures, not excepting the N.T. It is certainly a rich code.

Its provisions are at one with those in the other two codes, and indeed often repeat the precepts contained within them, as well as making provision for things not included in them. The allied concepts of holiness, Covenant and love are present, but it is the latter which is so powerful. Holiness and love are not separated. As a holy people they are to purge evil from the midst (13:5, cf. 17:7, 12, 19:19). In fact this is the way of walking in love (19: 19). As for love itself God's love was first for the patriarchs (10:14-16) and then to Israel in Egypt (10:22), and this is a reason to love God. Such love, anyway, is commanded, and is shown in and by obedience (11:1, 13, 11:22, cf. 13:4).

The actual laws of the code need to be examined particularly. They deal with religious institutions, feasts, offerings, laws of purity, justice, kindness and clemency. Others deal with the destruction of pagan shrines, the appointment of judges and officers, and the establishment of cities of refuge. Prostitution was to be absent, whilst laws concerning kindness to the family, to the poor and to the debtors were magnanimous. Also a neighbour's boundary was not to be moved, whilst false witness was to be punished.

We may then conclude by saying that the three of these codes were simply the practical outworking as to people, time and place of the great moral law of the Ten Commandments. Whilst their outworking is quite remarkable, there is no introduction of a higher or better state of things. It is simply that the modes are nominated and in practice this can prove most helpful.

(iii) The Ethics of Israel To Other Elements

We have mentioned that Israel lived as over and against the idols. There is some evidence that the patriarchs were not entirely without connection with idols, e.g. the teraphim of Laban and Jacob, yet they nowhere appear as idolaters. In Egypt they appear to have had some regard for some of the idols of the Egyptians. In Acts 7 Stephen argues that Israel always had incurable idolatry, both in the wilderness and Canaan. Many of the prohibitions against certain customs are structures against contemporary practices of idolaters (e.g. Deut. 14:1ff). The whole Judaic ethic as we have seen was based in the first commandment, and the first commandment in the nature of God as is seen from the Shema of Deut. 6:4. That is why there must be one shrine, i.e. one tabernacle or (later) one temple. That is why static depictions of God are forbidden.

Covenant, and its law brings people into a dynamic love-relationship with God. The keeping of the law is not a mere legalistic (or even legal) demand. It is the expression of God's love that He gives covenant, and the responsive love of His people is that they keep His law. When Israel, according to the Deuteronomic code and prophecy, forsakes God for idols, then she must expect judgement. In this some of the prophets bring terrible judgements, e.g. Isaiah and Jeremiah, and these judgements are intended to purify Israel, and to sanctify her for true witness to the Lord. The prophets are not mere prophets of doom, but prophets of the new age when Israel will be restored and the Kingdom extended. In that day Israel will be as a new people to God.

It is at this point that the prophets speak positively. We know that the return of some of the people of Israel to Palestine brought a new obedience to the law, and the utter expunging of idolatry. At last, because of suffering and difficult circumstances, especially as Israel was under the hands of oppressors, the true ethic of the law became relevant. By the time the N.T period arrives there is deep devotion to law, although often it is expressed in heavy legal structures and even in forms of meticulous legalism.

It is the prophets² who take up the theme of Israel's morality in the light of several things. These constitute Israel's calling as a holy nation, Israel's covenant with God, Israel's possession of the law and her obligation to keep it, and the outworking of that law in justice. This justice constitutes a righteous ethic. That is the three codes of the Pentateuch, rightly understood demand love and obedience to God, and love to one's neighbour, which works out in social righteousness.

Briefly we see that the early prophets demand covenant obedience. Moses as the great prophet sets out the law of God according to the covenant. Joshua is certainly prophetic in the hortatory sense. In Joshua 22:5 he exhorts love and obedience to the law (of Moses). This is followed up in 23:6f and this includes the prohibition of mixed marriages. The classic passage of exhortation is 24:15-24. All of this is on the basis of the thesis set out by Moses in Deuteronomy, that obedience would bring blessing, and disobedience cursing and retribution until the people repented.

The Judges describe the state of Israel in her ethical disjunction. Judges are raised up temporarily, and Israel is saved from her enemies. However it is Samuel who is the great prophet. In I Samuel 12:6-15 he sets out the same Mosaic thesis propounded by Joshua. Nathan the prophet confronts King David on ethical grounds, as had Samuel confronted Saul on the grounds of disobedience. Likewise Elijah and Elisha have ministries related to purity in worship and social ethics.

The Eighth century prophets are Amos, Hosea, Isaiah and Micah. They brought the law (religion) together with social justice and righteousness (ethics) and so did a great service, since their propositions obtain not only for their times but also for all times. The true Judaic ethic can be seen in their denunciations and exhortations.

Amos has been called the prophet of justice, and his denunciations can be linked directly with the Pentateuch. He inveighs against social injustice and

² The subject of the prophets is so vast as to need special attention. Its general treatment can be seen in Living Faith Study No. 7 'Prophecy: Its Meaning, Scope and Significance' (N.C.P.I. 1976). The particular treatment of the O.T prophets in regard to Israel and its ethical living is dealt with in Living Faith Study No. 30 'Christian Ethics & Their Practice' (N.C.P.I. 1978).

demands justice. He also has a good balance of judgement and hope. His positive proclamation is (from God), 'seek me and live', 'seek the Lord and live', and 'Seek good and not evil, that you may live' (5:4, 6, 14). He roots ethical righteousness in the knowledge of God. Hosea chastens Israel for her (ethical) faithlessness. His great word is *chesed* ('loving kindness'). God says to Israel, 'I will love you freely'. The ethic lies in, 'I will betroth you to me for ever: ... in righteousness and justice, in steadfast love and mercy ... and you shall know the Lord' (2:19-20).

Isaiah and **Micah** were contemporary in Judah with Amos and Hosea in the Northern Kingdom. They had two principles:- (a) Condemnation of social injustice, and (b) The exaltation of righteousness above (empty) ritual. Isaiah's great contribution is the holiness of God, His divine transcendence, and the nature of evil in the light of His being. Micah nominated the sins of Jerusalem and the cities in general, speaking against unworthy rulers, false prophets, the idle and greedy rich.

The Seventh century prophets are **Zephaniah, Nahum and Habakkuk**. They speak of judgement and hope. The idea of 'the day of the Lord' is prominent, both as a near happening and an eschatological event. Habakkuk typifies this period with his five ethical woes (2:6, 9, 12, 15, 19). He sees the use of the Chaldeans as a scourge upon Israel to be justified. Again the true nature of the law is presupposed as the basis of ethical exhortation.

The prophets of the Chaldean period are **Jeremiah and Ezekiel**, though with different messages. It is from them the promises of a new age emerge. Together they can be said to inveigh against religious formalism, social injustice, idolatry that is religious infidelity, and yet they point to ultimate restoration, contingent upon God's covenant love (*chesed*) and repentance.

The prophets of the restoration are **Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi**. By them social justice and true (i.e. heart) obedience to the law are emphasised. The giving of tithes, the refusal of mixed marriages, and God's hatred of divorce are stated.

Other prophets such as **Daniel, Joel and Jonah** have their own message. Daniel is a prophet of the exile who sees the restoration of Israel, but has a wide view of God's dealing with other nations. Jonah explicates the universal compassion of God as against an insular view of Him as only the God of Israel. Joel speaks both of the restoration of the Lord and the 'day of the Lord'.

Altogether then the prophets show that Israel's law is of divine righteousness and will have no dichotomy between daily living and religion.

(iv) The Ethics of Israel in Regard to the Prophecies of

Kingdom, Messiah, the New Covenant

Here we must generalise, since such prophecies would not alter the ethics of Israel at the time of the prophets who foretold restoration, the kingdom, the coming of Messiah and the new covenant. When we realise that the foretelling (prediction) of the prophets was always linked with forthtelling (exhortation in regard to current problems, disobedience, etc.) then we know that it would have acted in a hortatory way. Yet prediction is intended not only to correct, but primarily to enlarge hope in the faithful. Hence the prophecies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel of restoration, of the Kingdom, and of the new covenant, as also the predictions of Isaiah in regard to Messiah, the Suffering Servant, and the renewal of the nation, and also the regeneration of heaven and earth, all go to build up the immense expectation which we find in the latter part of the inter-testamental period, and the times of Jesus.

We will not here seek to separate the threads of these great themes - as we find them in the prophets - but proceed to the N.T. where we see them fulfilled, if not in whole, then in part.

5. The Structure of Christian Ethics: The New Testament

(i) John the Baptist and Ethics

John was concerned with the coming of the Kingdom. However its connotation was ethical. Men had to repent, be baptised with a view to (Gk. *eis*) the remission of sins. John actually spelled out an immediate ethic (Luke 3: 7-14). This, then, was linked with the coming of the Kingdom. God was about to judge Israel for her sins and moral rottenness. He was not slow also to denounce Herod for his incestuous marriage (Luke 3:18-20).

It is, however, his insistence upon God's judgement of Israel, and the coming of the Kingdom and Messiah that John demands the fruits of repentance, i.e. an ethical outworking of righteousness in present life (Luke 3:8, 10ff).

(ii) Jesus and Ethics³

It is clear that this one who 'increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favour with God and man' was a normal person, and yet one who kept the law entirely. Hence his utterances are treated with great respect by all except his opponents. His opponents were often those who held the law in high regard, and feared lest its ritual be broken. Many of them too had a legalism which Jesus rebuked, e.g. in their understanding and demands for the keeping of the sabbath. Even then he was careful to argue from the law and not against it.

(a) Jesus' View of Law

He kept it meticulously, though not legalistically, as such. Unless we understand that not only in the Pentateuch and the prophets, but also in the holy writings of Psalms and Proverbs, as well as the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, there is an ethos which is Israel, and a general acceptance of the law and wisdom of God amongst the faithful, and which is recognised by even those who transgress it, we will not understand Jesus' use of the law. Since the law was primarily instruction in the way and not merely a body of legislation, the law was not looked upon as onerous. It was to free people from such views of law that Jesus went about his ministry.

However, he had a very high view of law, especially as it was the law of God for Israel. So he says, 'Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them'. He added, '...till heaven and earth pass away not an iota or a dot will pass from the law until all is accomplished'. He said, further, 'Whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven: but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the Kingdom of heaven'. Having said this he still needed to delineate the wrong views of the scribes and Pharisees. 'I tell you unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of heaven'.

Jesus certainly went back, in many instances to the creational basis of law. He did this in regard to marriage and divorce (Matt. 19:1ff). He upheld

³ The question of Jesus and his ethic is so broad that it needs detailed treatment, and such can be examined in some of the books recommended in the bibliography. The next Living Faith Study examines Jesus' ethics with a view to setting out contemporary Christian ethics.

the creational basis of law, rather than the restricted legalistic view of it. Rather than regarding it as a rigid rest he saw it as an occasion for renewal, Again he sees all the law summed up in terms of love to God and to neighbour, In other words, all true law issues from the love of God. Once loving God one loves one's neighbour, and the rest follows.

It only remains for Paul's epistles to show that Jesus fulfilled not only the obedience to the law required of all, but an obedience which was bearing the judgement of the law by taking upon him the sin and guilt of all men. In this sense Paul means that Christ is 'the end of the law for all that believe He means the law's condemnation is finished, Christ having borne that condemnation.

(b) Jesus and the Kingdom⁴

John came preaching the Kingdom, and so did Jesus. For both it had ethical connotation. Unless we understand the whole matter of the Kingdom we will fail to understand his ethics. The Kingdom is primarily the reign and rule of God. It is in its broadest sense the realm (though not merely with geographical dimensions) in which God reigns because He is creator and sovereign. It contains rebels. So far as Israel is concerned it is a nation kingdom (Exodus 19: 5-6), and in that sense is God's kingdom. However, it also has rebels. The day of the Lord will see the ultimate establishment of the Kingdom, that is when God shall be all in all and rebellion is banished and vanquished. This Kingdom will come through God's son, Messiah.

In the immediate present (in the Gospels) the Kingdom is coming, but in fact with the operations of Messiah (through the Spirit) the Kingdom 'comes' wherever he is, or wherever his servants are. See Matt. 12:28, cf. Luke 9:1-6, 10:9, etc. At the same time the Kingdom will not be sealed until Christ effects the redeeming work of the Cross and Resurrection. Even then it will be preached, and the Kingdom will 'come' with the proclamation of the Gospel, and at the end be consummated when its heirs shall enter into it.

However, ethically, the Kingdom is always demanding. Its true members who in one sense are in it (Col. 1:13-14, cf. Luke 22:29) and who will yet enter it (Matt. 25:34), have their way of life in the ethic of the Kingdom. If the Kingdom has come completely then evil will have been vanquished and the need to turn the other cheek (etc.) will not exist. Thus the ethic of the Kingdom is lived in this present world with all its sin and evil. Only in this context does the sermon on the Mount make sense, and in this light it must be read.

The actual ethics are the subject of our next study, but their basis properly belongs to this. We have seen that the basis is primarily creational. It also is the law of Israel with which Jesus compares his own ethic. In fact it is not a comparison but a commentary, or an interpretation or the presentation of its true spirit.⁵

Other elements must also be considered. The Kingdom is at once objective, inward (in its members), and also eschatological. These three elements determine its ethic. It is lived in obedience to authority. It is a (or, the) way of life. Its members must think in terms of its consummation, i.e. ultimate

⁴ For a fuller treatment of the Kingdom itself see Living Faith study No. 14, 'The King: The Kingdom of God: The Kingship'.

⁵ For this comparison see Living Faith Study No. 28 ('The True Nature of Law') page 9.

holiness, glorification, and the judgements of God. Again, the Kingdom is under the King. Yet the King is also the Father, for this is the import and emphasis of the Sermon on the Mount and the Lord's prayer within it. Obedience then is to the Kingship of God, but also to His Fatherhood. In this sense it is at once a Kingdom and Family ethic. All the time, nevertheless, it is the creational ethic which is universal in its functional nature. Yet, at the same time it is particular in its Kingdom connotation.

One has to be a child to enter it, i.e. in regard to God. Repentance is required and those who have repented are thus childlike. Obedience is also required since only he who does the will of the Father (in heaven) shall enter (Matt. 7:21). True righteousness is required, but this seems to constitute the elements of humility, poverty of spirit, hunger after righteousness and repentance (cf. Matt. 5:6ff and 21:28-32). Single-mindedness is also required (Luke 18:24, Matt. 19:23, Mark 10:23).

(c) Jesus and Discipleship

We could speak of an ethic of discipleship. This is essentially the ethic of the Kingdom. Yet Jesus required of those who follow him (as presented in the Gospels) a total committal to cross-bearing, to forsaking all, to loving one another, to bearing fruit, to serving. Yet all of this is also inherent in the Kingdom ethic. It is in one sense a temporary demand, since soon the cross will have been borne, and Jesus will have gone. Its principles however obtain for the time in which the disciples will be brethren and friends in the church.

We may conclude then by saying that the ethic/s of Jesus relate to creation, to the Kingdom, to God as King and Father and Jesus as Lord and Messiah. In one sense they are universal because of their creational connotation. In another sense they are particularised to the obedient children of God, members of the Kingdom, and disciples of Christ the Lord.

(iii) The Ethics of the Church: The Acts and Epistles

The actual ethics occupy our next study and for that reason we will not enter deeply into them. To understand the ethics in the life of the early church as seen in the Acts and the Epistles required an understanding of the apostolic doctrine (Acts 2:42, I Cor. 15:3f. Acts 17:2ff). This apostolic doctrine was compounded or formulated from the prophetic word concerning Jesus, the commands which he had given (Matt. 28:20, cf. Acts 1:1-3), and the revelation of the Spirit to interpret the events of Jesus in the Light of the O.T as also the O.T in the light of the events of Jesus.

The truth of the law in the O.T lay first of all in the truth of creation, and then in its particular Mosaic formulation, with reference to Israel as God's people. It involved covenant-privilege and covenant-responsibility, and all of this in the light of God's purposes for Israel, and then for the world, especially as outlined in the Abrahamic covenant. The fact that the church has both its continuity and discontinuity with the qahal (congregation) of Israel is seen clearly in I Peter 2:9-10 where the covenant choice of Israel is seen to be applied to the new people of God. This means they will need to be holy unto God, and a kingdom of priests to those outside, that is those in darkness. To them they are to declare 'the wonderful deeds of Him'.

This will mean that their ethic will be no less than that of Israel, but even much more since the Holy spirit as come, and Christ has 'sealed' the Kingdom by his cross-resurrection victory. The modes and manner of the ethics will, then, depend upon the ethos of the people of God, the church, 'the true Israel of God'.

In order to see this we must look again at the whole matter of God, man, creation, the fall, man's release from guilt into obedience, and the powers which motivate and guide him into God's true ethic.

6. The Basis of The True Ethic/S For The Christian Man

In commencing our study we observed that Israel had the law, but at the time of the giving of the law (whatever tradition may have been) the truth of creation was the basis on which law could be known and understood. It was the God of creation who was the God of Israel. He had long been (for them) the God of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. From the writings it was clear that man was created in the image of God, and that he fell, and was punished and that sin and death were the entail of that event.

Leaving Israel, and taking the Biblical anthropology, the following elements emerge:

- (i) Man is created in the image of God and is committed to obedience and the law.
- (ii) Fallen man is unable to keep the law.
- (iii) Man has come under the bondage of sin, death, evil powers (the gods, Satan, the idols, celestial creatures hostile to God, satyrs, demons, evil and impure spirits).
- (iv) Man now has a conscience laden with dead works (cf. Heb 6:1, 9:14). Because of conscience he is under legal tyranny, and cannot know the true nature of law.
- (v) Man lives in the fear of death and judgement (Heb. 2:14-15, cf. I John 4:17-18) and as such is able to be manipulated by Satan.
- (vi) Man not only has moral impotence (Rom. 5:6, 7:13-25) but has a drive for evil (Jer. 17:9, Mark 7:20ff, cf. Ephes 2:1-3).
- (vii) Man is in the misery of having departed from his true self, i.e. in relation to, and dependence upon, God, and as such is prey to fear, depression, hopelessness, etc.

All of the above show us the state of man in which there can be no true ability or motivation for genuine obedience. Where there is fear of judgement the conscience exercises deep tyranny. The law of Moses, whilst containing the grace of God in the provision for forgiveness (through sacrifice) often had the effect of tempting man to justify himself by 'the works of the law'. This further complicated his position as we see from a study of the scribes and Pharisees and the Judaistic Christians. However, many Jews lived by the grace of the law, and these ideas were far from them.

The effect of Jesus' coming was to show 'the law made flesh' or 'the ethic made flesh', or obedience in living form. It delineated the indifferent obedience of some and the disobedience of others. Jesus' teaching in the sermon on the mount heartened some as it inducted them into the truth of law, but must have brought others to despair and even rage, so high an ethic it appeared to be!

All of this emphasises the need for man to be freed from his bondage and brought into true (Christian) liberty⁶. Our seven points immediately above

⁶ For a fuller treatment of Christian liberty see Living Faith Study No. 9 'Christian Freedom: Crisis and Process'

must be seen in their terrifying proportions as they keep man in dreadful bondage. Nor are they imagined or mere theological abstractions. Fallen human beings, whether they know it or not are in sad bondage. Hence Jesus said, 'He that commits sin is the bond-slave of sin'. His great promise was, 'If the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed'. We now seek to see the manner of man's liberation and its effects in bringing him into new obedience.

(i) The Liberty of the Christian Man

The liberty of the Christian man, whilst personal is never only individual because it happens in the context of the people of God, the church, for the church proclaims, and then receives the liberated person, and he has his own liberty in this context, or as we say, ethos.

(a) Man is Freed from all Enemies

Christ's work upon the Cross, and in the Resurrection was to destroy the guilt of sin. He bore man's sins in his body, he caused sin's judgement in his flesh. He became sin ('was made sin for us'). The Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all. God set him forth as a propitiation. In his death he overcame the power of death. Thus he proved his victory over sin. In this manner he defeated Satan and his hosts and triumphed over them, having nailed man's guilt to the Cross. Thus although by works of the law no one can be justified, yet through his death, and faith in that death a man may be justified without works. In other words man is free.⁷

Some would see this as theoretical or theological (or abstract) liberation, but to the contrary, when guilt is destroyed by the Cross and this is known in justification then the release and the relief are personally known. Death need hold no more terror and one is not under the grip of Satan or his evil powers. He can now resist Satan and even cause him to flee. Nor is he a debtor to the flesh to live after the flesh (Rom. 8:5-11, Gal. 5:24). In other words he is now free to obey. Let us repeat, these freedoms from enemies are most powerful, and while utilised in faith clear the way for true obedience and a full ethic.

(b) Freedom Full in the Spirit

When a man believes he is immediately sealed by the Spirit for the day of redemption (Ephes. 1:13-14, Rom. 5:5f, Ephes 4:30). When the Spirit comes freedom is actual. This is seen in Romans 8:1-3, II Cor. 3:6 and 3:17. 'Where the spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty'. This liberty takes the form, not simply of legal release from the rule of evil, but actual liberty. The weight of dead works is lifted from the conscience. The new person lives. This life, then, manifests itself in obedience.

In Romans 7:6 Paul says, '...now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit'. The old prophetic connection with this is in Jer. 31:31-34. There God has said He would write His laws in the hearts and inward parts of His people. In Ezekiel 36:25-27 the people of God are washed, given a new (soft) heart, and have a new Spirit within them, and as a result they walk in God's statutes and keep His laws. The sense, then, of being

⁷ some of the scriptures relating to this liberation are - I Peter 2:24, Rom. 8:3, Isa. 53:4ff, Rom. 3:25, I John 4:10, Rom. 6:10, I Cor. 15:55-56, Heb. 2:14-15, Col. 2:14-15, Gal. 2:16-21, 5:24, 6:14, John 8:31-36, II Cor. 3:6, Gal. 5:1.

liberated is kept alive by the Spirit, and in addition he keeps alive the present sense of liberty (II Cor. 3:17). It is in this ethos that the Christian acts freely. In our last study we saw that to obey law is, anyway, to move in the actual path of freedom although we are limited to that law. The very limitation is the good constraint of law which is freedom.

Our conclusion regarding the Spirit is that as he reveals justification and applies it, so we now work, not in order to obtain justification, but because we have obtained it. The Spirit is the one who 'internalises' the law in accordance with Jer. 31:31-34, and Ezekiel 36:24-28. Thus to be led by the Spirit, and to walk in the Spirit is not only to keep fresh in justification, but to be led in obedience to the law, and the will of God. This is 'in the newness of the spirit' (Rom. 7:6), which is also the newness of our spirit/s. Thus the law is rich, attractive. Also it is applied to each situation, though not after the manner of 'situational ethics' which virtually dispenses with the Spirit as such and depends upon the subject's concept of love, and his personal application of that to any given situation.

(c) The Motivation of the Christian Man to Obedience

'The love of Christ constrains me', is enough to show how the believer is motivated (II Cor. 5:14). Jesus' statement, 'If you love me you will keep my commandments' means that first gripped by his love we respond and love, and so are obedient. It is as simple as that. Love then motivates as well as controls. Yet this love is in response to the work of the Cross, the liberating work of Christ (I John 4:7-19, cf. Rom. 5:5-10). That response comes in the context of primary repentance, faith, and the forgiveness of sins.

The living context is that Father, Son and Holy Spirit dwell in the believer (John 14:14-23). This habitation is a reality. Man relates to God in knowing Him. We saw that to know God is the basis of all ethical (or law) obedience. Doubtless this was what motivated Abraham, and indeed all who have seen God, and come to know Him. It is difficult to begin to assess the enormous power in such habitation, and its help to the Christian man in obeying the law.

We will see that having been loved by God love then flows from us to all men (I John 4:19-20). The vertical-horizontal-inward love relationship of which we spoke in the Pentateuch is the same now. It sets us up to obey those laws which are love to God and love to ourselves and our neighbours.

A powerful motivation to obedience is holiness. 'Be you holy for I am holy' may seem to be a heavy demand (Lev. 11:44 - to Israel; I Pet. 1:15ff - to the church). Ephesians 1:4 with its electing assurance tells us we shall be holy. We desire then to be now what we shall be then. This is also seen in II Peter 3:10ff. Yet the very experience of holiness is such as to inspire and motivate us to knowing it continually. I John 3:1-3 confirms this.

The truth of hope motivates to full obedience. I John 3:1-3, again, shows this principle. We shall be like him, and so now we wish to begin to be this. Yet hope in what we shall be is linked with the hope of inheritance.⁸ Hope is linked with inheritance, the glorification of the body, the new heavens and earth, immediate worship and sight of God, and the consummation of all things including the unity of all things in Christ, and the filling up of all things by him. Hence when one wishes to inherit the Kingdom (Matt. 25:34), then one desires to obey.

⁸ For a fuller treatment of hope and its promises and rewards see Living Faith Study No. 26 'The Biblical Doctrine of Hope' (N.C.P.I., 1978).

Freedom also is motivation. Freedom lies within the (objective) context of justification and reconciliation. The immense release given to the conscience, and the new knowledge of God is the work of the Spirit in applying the work of the Cross. This freedom is so coveted, that on the one hand the Christian lives in the good of being freed, and on the other in the good of being free, and free to be free. Since such freedom equates with what it is to be truly man, the structural nature of man in his humanity is recognised, and so, coveted. The success (if we may call it so) of being obedient motivates to further obedience. Thus the joy and delight of the law as seen in Psalm 1, 19, 119, and Romans 7:22 all inspire to explore the riches of obedience, reflecting Christ in 'I delight to do thy will, O Lord!' This is seen in the increasing experience of love. Love is known as it is expressed, relationally. The joy of that relationship, especially within the body of Christ, the family of God, is powerfully motivational to its further expression, and also development. This takes into consideration the personal concern of the Father, and of Christ as Lord, and the Holy Spirit as guide, comforter and enabler.

(ii) The Christian Man and Ethical Fruits

John the Baptist demanded the fruits of repentance. Likewise Jesus, in giving the commission demanded that the apostles taught the things he had commanded them. In Acts 26:20 Paul speaks of the commission given to him to preach to both Jews and Gentiles that they should repent and turn to God and perform deed worthy of their repentance. This must mean that ethical fruit must evidence itself. The nature of this is shown in I Cor. 6:9-11 where Paul says, 'you were...' indicating that they are no longer adulterers, idolaters, homosexuals, thieves, etc. In Ephesians 4:17-30 he points out what they had been as Gentiles, and now what they are, and are to do, as Christians. This is ethical fruitage.

In the famous passage of John 15:1-17 Jesus demands fruit. This can only be produced by abiding in him which means being one with him, and being subject to his work through them. Then they will bring forth much fruit. It is clear that this fruit is primarily, or in any case springs from, love.

In the epistles this fruit is seen in obedience, service and love. The components of which the fruit are constituted are nine elements, or one which is love and which is expressed in eight elements. Literally this is the fruit of the Spirit and not of man, but seen rightly it is the fruit of the seed of the Gospel which the Spirit brings to fruition in Christ's people. Now this fruit is not simply a gentle operation of piety for rightly seen the fruit is the very nature of God, calling for strong expression and making high demands upon the Christian person. It can be said to be the very fruit Christ evidenced in his life and ministry, also making high demands of him.

For our purposes, here is the true ethical flowering, and then, fruitage, of the Christian. It takes all of his liberation from evil powers, his relationship with God, his continual battle against conditioning forces of evil powers, and his reckoning on the work of the Cross to keep him in a position where he can bring forth the fruits of the Spirit.

For this reason the injunctions to go on being filled with the Spirit (Ephes. 5:18), to be aglow with the Spirit (Rom. 12:11), to go on in the spirit (Gal. 3:1-5), and to receive that which the spirit supplies (Phil. 1:19), as also to walk in the Spirit and be led by the Spirit (Gal. 5:16, 18, 25, Rom. 8:14) are necessary to him. He must live in the Spirit for true ethical living.

(iii) The Christian Man and the Context of Ethics

We have seen that the Christian man has at least three contextual situations : -

- (a) **Covenant**, in which he is forgiven, and receives the blessing of justification (Gal. 3:13-14) and of the Spirit. This places him within the people of God.
- (b) **Kingdom**. Romans 14:17 says the Kingdom of God does not consist simply in matters of eating and drinking, but is in righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. The Christian is a member of the Kingdom, and so under the Lordship of Messiah, Jesus, and the King, God the Father. His relationship with God and the other members, as well as the 'goals' of the Kingdom's action set him on, and help to maintain him in, ethical actions.
- (c) **The Church**. We have seen from I Peter 2:9-10 that this demands holiness. In other figures such as the bride, the family, the temple and the body, each person is contributory to the whole action of the church, but is sustained by all, and receives encouragement and comfort, as well as gives it.

Hence ethical living - which is not anyway a goal in itself - is the natural spin-off of the life lived in these three contextual situation.

7. Conclusion: Indications of Ethical Living

We have said that the context of obedience to God is a wide one. When we consider that man as created was yet to be glorified, then we know he was not as then complete, if only in the sense that he was not ultimately fulfilled. We have seen that the fall gave him a different and destructive orientation. It took the life and work of Christ to make the Christian man, and to put him into new context.

The matters which we will discuss in our next study - Christian ethics themselves - will relate to man's relationship with the State, and the ethics which present themselves within the society of each, and the cultures of mankind in general. It can no longer be held that man can privatise his ethics. The N.T. portrays him as going out into the world and living there, and indeed serving there, although without participating in moral evil. He has many questions to answer, especially as to how his ethic is to be brought to others without denying true ethical freedom to all.

The early church had its tensions in living within a hostile society. It immediately began to look after its own who were widows, orphans, poor and sick. It covered the indigent, and had an oversight of eldership which cared for all kinds of needs. In this way love worked out, not as a pious element of a religious group, but as a practical activity where there was need.

We have to see how these matters work out today, especially (a) Where the West has had some Christianisation, and (b) The parts of the world which have not had such conditioning social problems have arisen which did not exist in the same way in the early centuries of the Gospel.

What, however, we must keep in mind is that the Judaic-Christian ethic arises from a special ethos, and has its own particular origins, and its own theological rationale. Whether it can now cut loose from these, or should endeavour to do so is a matter of debate. What we do know is that the liberating and motivating power of the Gospel, as well as the directing power of the

Holy Spirit cannot and must not be considered capable of change. Add to this the realities of covenant, the Kingdom and the church, and these factors stand firm in demanding a true and unchanging ethic no matter how the circumstances about us may change, or the tides of moral good or evil rise or fall.

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- APPENDIX -

Situational Ethics

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

- (i) There is no universal validity of the commandments because
- (ii) No one is under a commandment unless it has spoken to him for
- (iii) No commandment has existence outside the mind of the one to whom it is particularly directed. That is
- (iv) 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 of my 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. One must not be committed to any ethic, but only to His love. Nor is this 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', realising 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 cases out of 100, but they are not intrinsically so, for the only intrinsic evil is lack of love. Continence 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?' or 'How much 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. H. 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 from your own will - it comes from - from the middle - from God. Beyond me, at the middle, is the 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 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 is a 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'. The girl has performed 'an act of charity which proclaims the glory of God'. 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 of 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 the 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 assumption that love is natural to all men. Whilst we agree that love 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) Romans 7:6, 13:8-9, Gal. 5:14, James 1:22- 25, 2:8-13, (b) I Tim. 1:8-11, Ephes. 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 Ezek. 36:24ff and Jer. 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, Ephes 5: 17-18) and know that the given result will be consistent with God's moral law, This is 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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-Appendix Bibliography -

See article by Cordon Clark in 'Baker's Dictionary of Christian Ethics pp. 623, 624, entitled 'Situational Ethics'.

See also:

ROBINSON, Bishop John	'Honest to God'
FLETCHER, J.	'Situation Ethics'
FLETCHER, J.	'Moral Responsibility'