

FROM THE BIBLE TO THE MODERN WORLD : A PROBLEM FOR ECUMENICAL ETHICS¹

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I

THE question of the nature and authority of the Bible has inevitably been one of the main pre-occupations of study in the Ecumenical Movement, because it was one of the main causes of confessional divisions in the past. Part of this study has just as inevitably been concerned with ethics, particularly social ethics, for disagreements between Christians on these questions have been equally divisive. Richard Niebuhr's valuable study *Christ and Culture* (1951) has shown how five characteristic attitudes have continually been taken on the relation of the two, all drawing on the same Biblical material, and these have frequently been a cause of strife within and between confessions.

Any consideration of a normative ethic must deal with the two questions of (i) the right *motive* for action, and (ii) how to achieve the right *content* in action in particular circumstances. Christian Ethics has to deal with these two questions as has any other normative ethic : therefore what relation the Bible, among other possible sources of help within the Christian tradition, has to them is bound to be raised. Indeed, the influence of the Bible has been so pervasive, and frequently so restrictive, that I was tempted to call this lecture " The Tyranny of the Black Book ", borrowing a phrase referring to the Bible of the Welsh poet R. S. Thomas.

As part of a study of the authority of the Bible in general (of which the ethical aspect is a part) we recall that from its beginnings in the early decades of this century the Ecumenical Movement was heir to the historico-critical study of the Bible, which by then

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had had more than a century to get established, and was universally accepted in those circles which were prepared to take ecumenism seriously. This had shattered the belief in the unity of Scripture and the rightness of it being seen within a framework of dogmatic theology, which had been the traditional position in all the different Confessions. Since then the Ecumenical Movement has lived through the period of Biblical Theology. Its waxing was heralded by Karl Barth's *Römerbrief* in 1918, and its demise registered by Ernst Käsemann's speech at the Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order at Montreal in 1963; and its period of greatest flourishing could perhaps be said to be roughly the years 1935-55. As is well known, it attempted not to repudiate the gains of historico-critical study but, presuming them, to arrive at a synthesis called Biblical Theology, and in a sense to recover a more sophisticated version of the old position. The collapse of this has brought back the old vexing questions. I would not be thought to suggest that all has been a waste of time. Far from it. It would have been worse if we had never set out on the journey. As in the history of the Christian doctrine, the exploration of what turn out to be blind alleys illuminates the ongoing task of the Church. This is the continued reflection in new situations on the significance of her doctrinal and ethical inheritance from the past, the Bible being a major part of it.

Until recently the Roman Catholic Church played no part in this. In 1893 Leo XIII in his Encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* condemned the critical study of the Scriptures; and the condemnation of Modernism in the Encyclical of Pius X, *Pascendi dominici gregis* of 1907, was followed by the anti-Modernist Oath of 1910 which contained an explicit repudiation of Biblical criticism. Fruitful Biblical study practically ceased in the Roman Catholic Church until the Encyclical of Pius XII in 1943 *Divino afflante spiritu* encouraged it again. Since then scholars of that Church have rapidly appropriated the pioneering work of others and are now in the forefront of Biblical studies. Their work has had profound effects in Roman Catholic Moral Theology in the last fifteen or twenty years, which had grown remote from the Bible. But it was still some time before

Roman Catholics could make a contribution to ecumenical studies. Pius XI in his Encyclical *Mortalium Animus* in 1928 forbade Roman Catholics to give ecumenism encouragement or support, a prohibition which was only slightly modified by an Instruction from the Sacred Office in 1949. It was not until the Second Vatican Council of 1962-5 that the break-through came with the Decree of the Council *De Ecumenismo*. Since then Roman Catholic scholars have been co-operating fully in ecumenical studies, however cautious has been the approach of their Church to ecumenical institutions. With respect to the place of the Bible there is a certain irony in the fact that the Roman Catholic Church is becoming very Biblically orientated just at the time when other Confessions which have been so are finding themselves forced once more to raise queries about the Bible in view of the breakdown of Biblical Theology. There is a danger that each may repeat the mistakes of the other. But if the Ecumenical Movement does maintain its momentum, something which is much to be hoped but cannot be assumed, the prospects of scholars of all Confessions working together on the use of the Bible in the modern world are exciting indeed.

II

The Ecumenical Movement became official with the first Assembly of the World Council of Churches at Amsterdam in 1948. Just prior to this two Ecumenical Study Conferences were held on the theme "Biblical Authority for the Church's Social and Political Message To-day"; one in London in August 1946 and the other at the new Ecumenical Institute, Bossey, near Geneva in January 1947. The work of these conferences was written up in a fairly substantial mimeographed book, *From the Bible to the Modern World* (1947), from which I have taken the title of this lecture. I do not want to dwell upon it now, except to note that it says that the growth of Biblical Theology, with its two-fold affirmation of the Bible as God's Word and Jesus Christ as Lord, has meant that tension between liberals and conservatives in attitudes to the Bible has eased, but that many problems arise in relating it to modern society.

More important is the book *Biblical Authority for To-Day* (1951), edited by Alan Richardson and Wolfgang Schweitzer, which contains articles on different Confessional positions on "The Authority of the Bible", on "Principles of Interpretation", and on "Specific Applications". The Preface makes large claims to agreement on the meaning and relevance of specific passages. The most important section, however, is an agreed statement on "Guiding Principles for Interpretation of the Bible" as accepted by an Ecumenical Study Conference at Oxford in 1949. (It should be recalled that at this stage no Roman Catholics could take part and so none was involved in this acceptance.) It has four sections:

1. *The necessary theological pre-suppositions of Biblical interpretation.*

Some would query whether talking of *theological* pre-suppositions does not already beg a fundamental question and pre-suppose a greater unity in the Bible than exists, thus reflecting all too clearly the mistake of the approach of Biblical Theology. I shall return to this point. I refer now only to the last half sentence of the section which says "any teaching that clearly contradicts *the* [my italics] Biblical position cannot be accepted as Christian". This certainly assumes a unity of Biblical positions which few could maintain today.

2. *The interpretation of specific passages.*

This deals with questions of original meaning and context, pre-supposing historico-critical methods of study, and ends with the need to "see and expound the passage in the light of the whole scope of *Heilsgeschichte*", a favourite term of Biblical Theology.

3. *The discovery of the Biblical teaching on a specific social or political issue.*

This starts by saying that "one must begin with a direct study of the Biblical text in relation to a given problem; otherwise

the general principles which we establish will reflect more the pre-suppositions of our own time than the message of the Bible". This seems to pre-suppose a relation of the Biblical text to a given modern problem which is really the main question. Where the problem dealt with is the same today, for example divorce, it is the nature of the relation that needs exploring; and in the case of the many modern problems which are not dealt with in the Bible, 'factory farming' to take one instance at random, it is the relation between them and the Bible which needs establishing. Later points in this section include wise remarks about the need for care in assessing texts in too facile a manner, lest the Bible be "made to present a united witness on a topic which in fact it does not do"; and it ends with the valuable point that "the scriptural teaching of the two ages has an important bearing upon the way in which a specific social or political issue is to be interpreted".

4. *The application of the Biblical message to the modern world.*

This says that "we must discover the degree to which our particular situation is similar to that which the Bible presents. It must be remembered that absolute identity of situation is never found, and therefore the problem of adaptation becomes acute". It adds that in applying the Biblical message to our day all kinds of relativizing personal, cultural and confessional factors will cause interpreters to diverge, but that within the joint study of the Ecumenical Movement many of these pre-suppositions, some of them largely unconscious, are brought to the judgement of Scripture, and the living Word of God is heard.

These and other Biblical issues have been studied with renewed vigour in the Faith and Order movement of the World Council of Churches since its Montreal Conference in 1963, through its Bristol one in 1967 to its one at Louvain in 1971.¹ The Dutch theologian of the Bible, Dr. Ellen Flesseman-van Leer, gives a valuable report on this in an article "Biblical

¹ *The Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order, Montreal, 1963*, ed. P. C. Rodger and L. Vischer; *New Directions in Faith and Order, Bristol, 1967*; *Faith and Order, Louvain, 1971*.

Interpretation in the World Council of Churches ” which was published in the W.C.C.’s quarterly, *Study Encounter* (vol. viii, no. 2, 1972). She is very critical of the Guiding Principles on the grounds that they are christocentric, harmonizing and unhistorical. I think she is too critical. It is interesting how scholarship in theology, as in other disciplines, tends to proceed by a “ swing of the pendulum ” motion, so that positions most criticized in one generation are those held a generation before, and it takes some time before a more adequate appraisal of them can be made. The same is often the case with great contemporary literary figures, whose reputation sinks rapidly after their death and then in due course recovers. In this case I was never an advocate of Biblical Theology, though I was influenced by it. I think that there is useful material embedded in the Guiding Principles, as I have indicated, and I shall return to it later.

However, Dr. Flesseman-van Leer’s main point is a strong one. It is that a major problem to be faced is how to bridge the gap between the point in time of the Biblical writing and today. This is the question of hermeneutics, a term which was not in our vocabulary fifteen years ago but is now pervasive. The problem of hermeneutics is two fold. (i) To clarify what the author meant to say in his time and situation, or exegesis ; with this we are familiar. (ii) To clarify how it can be expressed and communicated today, for to translate from one period or one idiom to another is to make a fresh proclamation ; this is a fundamental linguistic and philosophical achievement to the hazards of which we have recently become much more alert. Biblical Theology often emphasized the gap between man and God ; yet the gap between then and now is just as great. Historical imagination, if it does its work thoroughly, may increase this second gap, as Albert Schweitzer said so forcefully early this century of the quest for the historical Jesus :

It set out believing that when it had found him it would bring him straight into our time as Teacher and Saviour. It loosed the bands by which we had been riveted for centuries to the stony rocks of ecclesiastical doctrine, and rejoiced to see life and movement coming into the figure once more, and the historical Jesus advancing, it seemed to meet it. But he does not stay ; he passes by our

time and returns to his own. What surprised and dismayed the theology of the last forty years was that, despite all forced and arbitrary interpretations, it could not keep him in our time, but had to let him go. He returned to his own time, not owing to the application of any historical ingenuity, but by the same inevitable necessity by which the liberated pendulum returns to its original position.¹

This again seems to me to be an overstatement of an important point. In some respects Jesus' outlook is seen firmly rooted in the first century thought forms which cannot be easily translated into the twentieth century; in other respects not. This is where hermeneutics has its double task, not just to take us back to the text, or behind the text, but also from the text forwards. For, as in the case of any literary work of a poet or novelist, we are not concerned merely with the private intention of the author but with what he actually wrote, and what imaginative reflection on it within a community which draws sustenance from it may come to apprehend through it. We shall do this the more adequately the more we are open to the whole range of human experience, and of contemporary culture. Modern translations of the Bible illustrate this point very well. Of course their authors need to be expert in the linguistic disciplines of the original Biblical languages. But that is only half the requirement. They need to be equally sensitive to the subtleties of the modern language into which they translate; that is to say they must be persons of wide cultural sensibilities. It is precisely here that the problems with modern translations mainly arise. Another way of putting the point is one insisted upon by Leonard Hodgson in his Gifford Lectures of 1955-7, *For Faith and Freedom*, when he says that a genuine historical investigation should lead to the question "What must the truth have been and be if that is how it looked to men who thought and wrote like that" (p. x of the 1968 edition). He adds, "But theology is bedevilled by the illusion that somewhere, sometime, someone really knew the full truth and that what we have to do is to study what he said or wrote, find out what he meant by it, and get back to it". He criticizes the assumption that "somewhere at some time it is possible to have a finally satisfactory statement of the truth";

¹ *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (English translation 1910), p. 397.

rather "God alone knows all the truth, and in this space-time universe is communicating it to us human beings as our growing minds grow in ability to receive it". Leaving aside that the adjective "growing" applied to our minds is somewhat confident (technical know-how grows but in more fundamental matters minds may become darkened), the general drift of Hodgson's remarks seems cogent, and well suited to our task of considering the move from the Bible to the modern world with special reference to ethics.

One can say of these recent Faith and Order studies what Dr. Flesseman-van Leer says¹ in particular of the Louvain Report, that they break through the "stiff and static quality, which marks so many traditional concepts, thus making them more flexible and relative". The Bristol one on "The significance of the Hermeneutical Problem for the Ecumenical Movement" dealt with the first of the two hermeneutical tasks, scientific exegesis, and emphasized the diversity in Scripture, the danger of easy harmonization, and elaborated Bultmann's concept of the element of "pre-understanding" (*Verständnis*) which one inevitably brings to a study of the text. Bultmann confines this to the existentialist analysis of human existence, but this is too constricting. The important point to realize is that neither the person nor the community within which the person studies the Biblical text is a *tabula rasa*, and that without their pre-understanding it would not be possible to proceed.

The Louvain report on "The Authority of Scripture" again stressed the diversity within Scripture, that there are several possible centres of interpretation of the Old Testament, and varying interpretations of God's redeeming act in Christ in the New Testament. Then in connection with the second task of hermeneutics—that of moving from the original text to the present situation—it spoke of "a situation—conditional hermeneutical perspective". That is to say that if the Bible is to be understood in our present situation, our understanding of that situation and our definition of the problem on which we

¹ Op. cit.

want light to be thrown by the Bible are indispensable factors in receiving insights.

So much for World Council of Churches' studies. From these I draw three conclusions :

1. The Bible and the Church must go together. Setting one against the other has been a disastrous consequence of Protestant-Catholic divisions. Confessions which emphasize *sola scriptura* must come to terms with this. Some scholars have indeed regarded both Bible and Church as encumbrances. They regard the Church as an institutional block to the living of Christian faith and life (that was the reason Charles Davis left the Roman Catholic Church), and they consider the creation of a Canon of Holy Scripture as a failure of nerve on the part of the Church. Such an anti-institutional attitude tends to be popular today. But both theologically and sociologically I would say that Church and Bible are inevitable ; the mistake has been to think of them both in too narrow and rigid terms. The Church will continually read and reflect on the Bible as a decisive element in her own tradition. But she must not merely let the Bible question her, as Biblical Theology said ; she must, from her own time-bound situations (to use a phrase of Karl Barth), address questions to the Bible.

2. The central significance of Jesus Christ is the key to understanding the Bible. This involves his relation to the Old Testament witness to the God first of Israel and then of all people, and to the new community which arose as a result of his mission and out of which the New Testament came. That the Bible correctly witnesses to the centrality of Christ is a pre-supposition of Christian faith, but to go further into that is not our present concern. What exactly that witness is remains a matter of continued reflection within the Church, and this will include the using of all relevant scholarly skills.¹

¹ I would go further and say that the Church will not go fundamentally astray in her reflection on the witness of the Bible to the centrality of Jesus Christ ; that is to say that she will in time correct her own distortions. I think there is much cogency in this respect in Hans Küng's treatment of indefectibility in his book *Infallible?* (1971), but this is another pre-supposition which cannot be developed now.

3. There is no direct route from the Bible to particular ethical decisions. What the Bible does is to provide a basic orientation, or stance, or vision of goodness which we bring alongside particular situations whose empirical nature we have to investigate. In this task imagination and empirical accuracy are related to one another. If we ask ourselves "what is this situation about which we are ethically concerned?", it is true that there will be "brute facts" which we need to know, and access to which Christians have no special privilege. It is also true that if we have sensitive imaginations we shall see aspects of the situation to which otherwise we would be blind, and this may lead us to weigh the brute facts at different levels of significance from what otherwise we would have done. That is why moral judgement is an art. By continued sharing in the basic orientation, stance or vision of goodness focused in Jesus Christ, to which the Bible bears witness (which in practice means appropriating them within the Christian community), we may develop habits, or virtues, or a character which leads us to respond more readily and at deeper levels to that vision. The Bible in the Church can do that for us, but it cannot provide by itself either unexceptionable moral rules, or detailed decisions, or middle axioms¹ (half way between these two). There is often talk of "Christian" or "biblical" principles but it is generally imprecise. If it is meant that a general orientation is suggested by the Biblical witness to Christ, this is so. "Respect for persons" is one such; it is prominent in much Christian social ethics; for instance, in the teaching of William Temple. Within the over-all respect for persons a particular concern for the disadvantaged and poor is often mentioned; and within the category of disadvantaged a concern for women. All of this seems cogent. When these general orientations come to be expressed in action, certain principles or rules may well develop, on the basis of experience in the course of Christian history, but they do not proceed directly from the Bible. In any case the

¹ This is a confusing term for an important concept on which the literature is scanty. I have dealt with it in the issue of *Crucible* for January 1971 (the journal of the Board of Social Responsibility of the General Synod of the Church of England).

question will always arise as to whether in a particular situation the rule will apply or not. That is to say that a basic question in moral philosophy, whether to proceed by a deontological or a teleological route in any particular moral case, is one that the Christian has also to face. And any half-way "middle axiom", or any detailed ethical conclusion, must involve some consideration of empirical evidence arising from the present situation and cannot be derived from the Bible direct.¹ This means that we must be prepared to use the ethical material in the Bible in a flexible way; but with a flexibility controlled by sound standards of scholarship, operating within the presuppositions I have mentioned and aware of their significance for the use of the Bible.

III

I turn now to give five examples of problems in the modern use of ethical material from the Bible:

1. *Eschatology as the key to New Testament ethics*:

It seems clear from New Testament studies that are so numerous and so familiar that it is not necessary to specify them in detail, that the key concept in Jesus' mission and message was that of the Kingdom or Rule or Reign of God, which he saw as having begun to exercise its authority in human life in his own activity. In this sense eschatological events, that is to say events of last or ultimate significance for humanity, were taking place through his own ministry. Much discussion has ensued as to how far his ministry focused on the present eschatological realization of these events and how far it heralded the imminent realization of them in the future. I think I represent a fair consensus when I say that the truth seems to be that Jesus regarded the Kingdom as inaugurated in his own ministry but to be fully realized in the future (of which I shall have more to say shortly). The claim that the "last" events

¹ There is a useful and brief Appendix, "Note on the use of the Bible", in *Teaching Christian Ethics* (1974), sponsored by the Advisory Council for the Church's Ministry of the Church of England.

of supreme significance, to which Old Testament hopes looked forward in their various ways, were taking place in his own ministry is, of course, a highly paradoxical one. So is the ethic which follows from it. Its most striking characteristic is that it is non-reciprocal. Whereas an everyday ethic operates on roughly a "do as you would be done by" basis, and depends on it being reciprocated, so that we do good turns to those who do good turns to us, Jesus explicitly differentiates his teaching from that. His ethic, for instance, requires the forgiveness of those who injure us not seven times (which is as much as the disciples think is humanly possible) but four hundred and ninety times; thereby he transfers the matter into an entirely different dimension. The reason for such a far-reaching demand is the fact that such is the way God deals with us (Matt. v. 43 ff.; xviii. 21), of which the weather and his own ministry are signs. For the characteristic motive for behaviour is that of a joyful response to the graciousness of God in the past and in his own ministry in the present. "Freely you received, freely give" (Matt. x. 8). I am, of course, well aware of another motive for behaviour found in the Gospels, that of rewards and punishments, but it is not the most distinctive one, and since I cannot go into it now I confine myself to saying that the rewards Jesus has to offer can only be appreciated by those who follow for love's sake not the reward's sake.

It is because the eschatological last days have dawned that Jesus' ethic is so unlike that of Torah, in his attitude to which he exhibited what can only be called an eschatological freedom which could both respect (Matt. viii. 4) and on occasion flatly contradict it (Mark vii. 19). More important, he moved in a different dimension altogether. Detailed rules, like those of the Torah, had no place in the dawn of the eschatological age. That is why pre-occupation with such questions as whether Jesus was sympathetic to the zealots, or his teaching on divorce, is irrelevant if the pre-occupation arises from the belief that the answer will tell us whether a Christian is justified now in taking part in armed revolt against his own state authority, or what rules either Church or state should enact now with respect to marriages which have broken down. That is to make too direct

a link between the Biblical text and a particular situation later. Such questions must be investigated in order to understand Jesus as accurately as possible. Also it is true that if it appeared plausible that he was submerged in the zealot pre-suppositions in particular, or those of his milieu in general, it would profoundly affect the Christian faith, just as it would have done if it had been plausibly shown, as the Christ-myth school maintained at the turn of the century, that he never lived. But the more thoroughly the New Testament is studied the more the eschatological freedom of Jesus stands out, rooted in his situation as a Jew in first century Palestine and in the history of his people, but transcending it by the very fact that he did not deal with the relativities of particular ethical decisions. Note, for instance, that he did not give a clear ruling on what to render to Caesar and what to God (Mark xii. 17).

This leaves us with the basic task of working out the implications of an eschatological ethic in the ongoing situations of life. The New Testament gives us some very revealing examples of ways in which the Church attempted this.

(a) The earliest arose out of a combination of eschatological awareness with an apocalyptic outlook which expected the inaugurated reign of God to be completed by an imminent *parousia*. Did Jesus share this expectation himself? I have been disposed to think he did. Then I find that Käsemann thinks he did not¹ and now I am not so sure. However, it is a question I must leave to the New Testament scholars to settle, and I do not think that an answer either way is directly relevant to the questions with which I am now concerned. But there is no doubt that the earliest Christians did. St. Paul's answers to the six questions about marriage asked of him by the deputation sent from Corinth is conditioned by this apocalyptic expectation (1 Cor. vii. 29). The Christians of the early Church in Jerusalem, if we follow what Luke tells us in the last verses of chapters ii and iv of Acts, pooled their capital and lived on it in a similar expectation and one which, when unrealized, led to their impoverishment and to St. Paul's organization of a relief

¹ E. Käsemann, "The Beginnings of Christian Theology", in *New Testament Questions of To-day*.

fund for them from his Gentile Churches. Ethical responses when this belief is held are in a sense improvised and *ad hoc*; no long term continuity is involved. The Letters to the Seven Churches in chapters ii and iii of Revelation are a further example; the sense of apocalyptic imminence is so strong and the situation of each particular Church so occasional that we cannot now tell what it was.

(b) As this apocalyptic sense faded and time went on, the process of arriving at standard ethical guidance to deal with standard situations developed. Since the Christians had no civic power or responsibility it was with respect to domestic situations that this guidance developed; the need was to deal with ongoing problems of family and household relationships. That is why we find the Household Codes embedded in the later Pauline epistles, the Pastoral epistles and 1 Peter (Col. iii. 18-iv. 1; Eph. v. 12-vi. 9; 1 Pet. ii. 11-iii. 12 and v. i-v; Titus ii. 1-iii. 2; 1 Tim. ii. 1-vi. 19). To my mind the treatment of them in Kenneth Kirk's *The Vision of God* (1931), Lectures 2 and 3, is still the most satisfactory. The problem was to deal with ongoing ethical problems without losing the eschatological freedom and newness characteristic of Jesus. It was for the most part only partially solved. Kirk differentiates three tendencies, Codification, Formalism and Rigorism, examples of which can be found within the New Testament and spilling over into the writings of the Apostolic Fathers. The Household Codes in Colossians and Ephesians show signs of taking over a common morality, albeit with a Stoic flavour, and substituting Christian exemplars and motives. The Pastoral Epistles show signs of contentment with a more formally observed external ethic; the Church has become an enclave of the world, respectful of the authorities and the social order. On the other hand, signs of an opposite and rigorist attitude are found in other later New Testament writings, for example in 1 John v. 16 and Heb. vi. 4-6; x. 26-31; xii. 16 ff. In the way the teaching of Jesus is presented in chapters v to vii of Matthew, the Sermon on the Mount shows signs of all these tendencies, and so does the teaching of St. Paul in what we might call his middle period. Romans xii shows great affinity with the Sermon on the Mount

whilst Romans xiii retains more of the apocalyptic note. These examples show the freedom with which the Church reflected on her traditions, the same freedom which we have seen to be necessary today.

(c) There is nothing wrong in codification provided the sense of eschatological renewal is not lost. The problem is to preserve it without the apocalyptic belief in an imminent *parousia* with which it had been associated from the earliest days of the Church (whether in the mind of Jesus or not). The ethic of the Johannine literature is of great interest in this respect since it recovers the eschatology without the apocalypticism. It witnesses to a fundamental theological re-appraisal having taken place by the end of the first century with the dropping of imminent apocalypticism. A trace remains in 1 John (ii. 18) but no more, and it is quite absent from the fourth Gospel. The writer has reflected deeply on Jesus' eschatological ethic of *agape* and presents it in all its depth and rigour. It is true that something appears to be lost in that it is related to the fellow Christian rather than to the wider range of any man in need, as represented by the allegory of the sheep and the goats in Matthew xxv, but this can be overstated since it is clear that it is all with an intention that goes outward, so that "the world may believe" (John xvii. 21).

The Johannine ethic, however, does not cover the other half of the Christian ethical task, that of dealing with specific problems in an ongoing world. In discharging this it is vital to realize that the realization of *agape* is not a simple possibility in everyday life. Much of the wooden treatment of the Bible would have been avoided if this had been grasped. *Agape*, as taught and lived by Jesus, or as presented by St. Paul in 1 Corinthians xiii, which is a faithful reflection of it, represents a quality of life which discloses more depths the more you penetrate it; or fresh heights come into view as you scale the lower slopes. The more loving you become the more you find to draw you on. It is inexhaustible *in via*. But that does not mean that it is irrelevant. The efforts to explore its realization in practice in rules which may be codified is a necessary activity; otherwise we should be living all the time from moment to

moment like an extempore speaker, and could never learn from experience. If the rules are wise it will be because they are seen to be what love requires. That is why St. Thomas Aquinas' teaching on the Just War is part of his treatment of charity (S.T. 2a. 2ae. qn. XL, Arts. 1-4). But the richness, complexity and changes of human life and circumstances are such that an element of the provisional hangs over even the most solidly based rule, which in principle is open to revision simply because in the last resort *agape* cannot be exhaustively expressed.

This basic understanding of Christian Ethics derived from the eschatologically significant ministry of Jesus, is not in essence hard to understand in the twentieth century. The first hermeneutical task of exegesis, making it clear in its context, is something which has been the basic concern of New Testament scholars. The road has been exciting and tortuous but there seems no reason to doubt that sufficient has been made clear as a basis for living. The second hermeneutical task of translating it into our situation does not appear too difficult as far as the essentials of the eschatological newness of *agape* is concerned. If the Johannine literature can present it without an apocalyptically imminent *parousia* so can we. Presented in this way it will remain relevant as long as time lasts. This does not necessarily mean that it will be easily received. Many may be hard of hearing. There may be extraneous obstacles to hearing. Anyone who is convinced that what is of eschatological significance cannot be in the past but must lie, if at all, in the future, cannot hear it. And the development of science and technology, which is always pushing the frontiers of knowledge into the future, leads many to assume that this is the model for every kind of knowledge. Nevertheless I see no reason in principle why the task of making the essence of the ethics of the New Testament intelligible today cannot be accomplished.

In saying this I must partly take issue with a very recent and able discussion, *Ethics in the New Testament* (1975) by Jack T. Sanders of the University of Oregon. He maintains that one cannot live continuously under the command of love, without eschatological sanctions (p. 39), and that to maintain the language of imminent eschatology when it ceases to be imminent leads to

an impossible ethical situation (p. 48). Knowing that my life is running out is not the same as knowing that the *parousia* is imminent (p. 16). The teaching of the Sermon on the Mount is preposterous without the *parousia* (p. 45). The Household Codes represent an insignificant popular morality which is completely worthless for Christian Ethics (p. 75). The ethic of the Johannine literature is that of the new fundamentalism; according to it all you can do for your neighbour is to bring him back to Christ (p. 100). The Johannine ethic is morally bankrupt. These judgements are, of course, buttressed by scholarly argument and not just thrown at the reader as *obiter dicta*. My own reaction to them will I hope be to some extent evident from what I have said earlier. I think once more they are an overstatement of a case. If one wants to move directly from these particular ethical stances of the New Testament to the modern world the criticism of them is to a large extent valid. Almost the only valuable teaching that Sanders finds is James ii. 15 ff., which calls for a human response to a basic human need (p. 126), whether the needy one is a Christian or not. I think he overlooks the fact that the *content* of Christian ethics may overlap with conventional ethics to a considerable extent, as it is worked out in particular situations, particularly collective ones; but it will always be set in a new, non-reciprocal, transcendent dimension. To bring this out is, in fact, Sanders' intention, for at the end of his admittedly negative book he asks, "Can theologians and philosophers reflect . . . on the validity of the concept of transcendent love and the implications of such a notion? Otherwise throw out the New Testament as an aid to ethics once and for all" (p. 129). If he had made a clearer distinction between eschatology and apocalyptic Sanders would not need to have written so negatively until almost the last page of his book.

2. *The abandonment of apocalyptic as a concept of ethical use to us.*

It may seem paradoxical to suggest this when Käsemann has called it "the mother of all Christian Theology",¹ even

¹ Op. cit. p. 108.

though theology soon moved away from mother's apron strings, for it did not outlast the collapse of the hope of the *parousia* and the start of the Gentile mission. Moreover, apocalyptic has come into favour in some modern theology. Pannenberg views it as a revelation of universal history which can only be seen from its end, of which the resurrection of Jesus is proleptic. Moltmann stresses a hope and promise in the Christian faith which proclaims the future as unlimitedly new, with a radical discontinuity from the present.¹ There are in my judgement serious difficulties in these views. The more one emphasizes radical newness and discontinuity, the more useless it is in providing a guide to the present. Presumably not all that is radically new and discontinuous can necessarily be approved of, and if change itself is not a criterion, a basis for evaluating and guiding it must be found in what we already know, and this is based on our present understanding of the past. This is, in fact, explicit in the greatest Christian apocalyptic, Revelation, where the Lamb who was slain in the course of human history in the past is the key to the visions of the future. There are, however, other serious difficulties in apocalyptic thought which I can most concisely summarize in a quotation from what I have written elsewhere :

- (i) It has claimed too much knowledge of the future in God's intention, continually forecasting the date of the *parousia* and not being willing enough to live by faith.
- (ii) It has had a pessimistic view of history, assuming that things must get worse before Yahweh intervenes to sort out the mess and vindicate his faithful. History comes to a terminus not a *telos*.
- (iii) It has not attached much importance in any case to ongoing events in human history in view of the expected cataclysmic future, all of which is determined.
- (iv) Its hopes for an absolutely new future have been too discontinuous with the ongoing events in human history.

¹ W. Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology* (1970), chs. 1 and 2; J. Moltmann, *The Theology of Hope* (1967), ch. 2, and *The Experiment Hope* (1975), ch. 4.

- (v) Believers have been too certain of their place in the new post-apocalyptic order, and too certain that it is an exclusive place. Apocalyptic literature is full of cries for vengeance, there is no hope of expectation or apparent desire that a sinner may change, or any sense of God's love for the sinner.¹

In my judgement apocalyptic thought cannot be rendered intelligible or useful today by any process of hermeneutics, and it is useless to us theologically and ethically. Any ideas derived from it which do provide valid insights, such as belief that human history is working out within the scope of divine providence, despite the power of evil forces, and that providence extends beyond this terrestrial life of ours, is not peculiar to apocalyptic, and so we shall lose nothing by dispensing with it.

3. *The relation of problems of power and justice in human society to the eschatological reality of the inaugurated Kingdom of God.*

The fact that no clear link is made between the two in the teaching of Jesus has not created the difficulty in Christian history that might have been expected, because resort has been made to particular teachings in other New Testament writings (Romans xiii. 1-7 on the State being an obvious example), without allowing for their relative and conditioned character. Resort to the Old Testament has had an added defect, because the New Testament writings are at any rate responding to a new understanding of God through Jesus Christ, whereas those of the Old Testament are not, and yet have often been treated as though they were on the same plane. In the Old Testament God's power is seen first of all in history, especially in creating and then preserving his people. His power over nature was appre-

¹ Most of this is quoted from p. 156 f. of an essay of mine, "Reflections on Theologies of Change", in a book I edited, *Theology and Change* (1975). It is interesting to note that Buber takes the same adverse view of apocalyptic (as compared with prophecy) in *Pointing the Way* (Eng. tr., M. Friedman, 1957), pp. 192-207. Because the future is destined, the present loses its value, and faithful endurance is all that can be called for from each individual. Cf. also Sophie Law, "Can Apocalyptic be Relevant?", in *What About the New Testament?*, ed. Morna Hooker and Colin Hickling (1975).

hended after this and as a partial corollary of it, and from this man's power over nature was derived, as developed for instance in the myth or parable of Genesis i. In the New Testament God's bestowal of power is connected with the vastly deepened gift of the Spirit—who had spoken by the prophets, as the Nicene creed says—in the eschatological age inaugurated by Jesus. And it is power expressed in a way as paradoxical as the non-reciprocal ethic (Mark x. 42-45) so that it can be mistaken for powerlessness. There are also angelic and demonic spirits, as part of the intellectual *mise en scène* of the first century, but since Jesus Christ is held to be superior to the angelic ones and to have dethroned the demonic ones, they need not concern us further. The important point is that there is no worked out concept of secular power for the service of men. This is because in the Old Testament a theocracy was assumed, and in the New Testament the Church was so insignificant in the Roman Empire that the issue did not arise for it; and there were the imminent apocalyptic expectations held by most of the writers which made it in any case an irrelevant one. If the various texts on the subject of secular power are considered in their contexts and woven together in some sort of pattern it amounts to saying that when the State authority is neutral to the Church it is to be firmly obeyed, and when it is hostile it is to be enduringly opposed. To try to follow this maxim today in situations as diverse as China, Pakistan, Spain, South Africa, Chile, Eire, Cuba (to make a random selection) is to show what a wooden and mistaken way of using Scripture this would be; truly a tyranny of the Black Book.

Again, if we turn to the question of justice, the ethical teaching of Jesus is not of much direct help on a great number of issues which cannot be avoided. Indeed it appears to be anarchic and utterly indifferent to collective issues. It certainly does give a strong indication that God is "biased" on the side of the poor and unprivileged, and the strain in the Old Testament which links wealth with divine approval is corrected by it. This bears on distributive justice; but there are many other issues, such as those concerned with corrective justice, which have to be faced. So it is not surprising that an immense literature

has grown up on justice because of issues, inevitable in civil society, arising in this field. The "Justice Tract" in traditional Moral Theology looms extremely large, so large that a student never gathers that it is all in the service of love. It is too simple to say with Joseph Fletcher in his various works that justice is nothing but love distributed. That could only be so if *agape* was solely conceived in terms of what is done, to the exclusion of concern for the motive for which it is done; and also if we were concerned only with the quantity of *agape*, so to speak, and not with its manner of distribution. Other theologians, like Nygren, have opposed love and justice.¹ Rather they must be related. There is no justice without an element of love, at least in the sense of affirming the other in his otherness as a person and not because of his function. There is also no love without justice, otherwise we have either sentimentality or egoism. Love pre-supposes justice; it can never require less than justice and never be a substitute for it (in the sense of 'acts of charity'), but it points to the inexhaustible creative love which transcends any particular responsive embodiment of it.

The New Testament doctrine of the two ages, developed in their own ways by St. Augustine with his two cities and Luther with his two realms or kingdoms, is the setting within which the ongoing problems of social ethics are best related to the eschatological ethics of love. They have sometimes been used, as has the Bible, in a wooden way which makes a rigid and inflexible gulf between the two. But there is no necessity for this, and there are plenty of indications of a more flexible way of relating them which we cannot discuss now.

4. *Care in the use of the Old Testament as a model.*

This illustrates the dangers of not using the concept of the two kingdoms, and arises from the desire to make too direct a link between the Bible and some specific decision on the contemporary world. This constantly crops up in the most re-

¹ e.g. *Situation Ethics*, 1966; *Moral Responsibility*, 1967 (Fletcher); *Agape and Eros* (Nygren), rev. Eng. tr., 1953.

spectable theologies. Karl Barth frequently makes these sudden darts from a Biblical text to a specific conclusion. One of the most well known is his statement that because Jesus Christ is the light of the world the Church must be the sworn enemy of all secret diplomacy.¹ It would be illuminating to work through ecumenical documents to see how often a similar thing is done and with what effect. I have occasionally noted instances, but never worked at it systematically. I suspect that it is particularly a legacy of Calvinist theology. The examples I have in mind at the moment both concern the Old Testament. Theologies of Liberation and Revolution are making much of the Exodus saga as the model for discussing God's activity in history today. But how by itself does it enable one to judge between the various changes which are dramatic and discontinuous? Change itself is not a criterion; and some of it presumably is *counter-revolutionary*. How do we discriminate? Moreover what of the Settlement? What of those who were disturbed and possibly displaced in order that the people of Israel might settle? And what of the Exile? Why is that central event in Old Testament history not made a key model of interpretation? It all savours of covering subjectivity in using the Bible with a mask of objectivity. The root of the matter is that in the Old Testament there is only one Kingdom, which is also the people of God, the Church; it is both Church and State. History is interpreted from the point of view of its choice, guidance and disciplining by Yahweh. The people of God in the New Testament has broken the bounds of the one Kingdom and become in principle universal. There are now two Kingdoms, that of the people of God and that of the terrestrial state, and the Christian lives in the two at once. It is as illegitimate to transfer models from the Old Testament to secular kingdoms (or to the Church) now as it was to regard Tudor monarchs as Godly Princes on the model of King David. In particular it imparts a dangerous messianic tone to contemporary Christian attitudes which exacerbates divisions and clouds judgements.

A different case is the use of the Genesis creation saga in

¹ *Christengemeinde und Bürgergemeinde* (1946); Eng. tr. 7 "The Christian Community and the Civil Community", in *Against the Stream* (1954), para. 22.

connection with recent environmental controversies concerned with the pollution of earth, water and atmosphere, the wanton use of irreplaceable natural resources, and damage to the ecological balance of nature. I think there has been much exaggeration on all three points, but there is some truth in the charges. The Judeo-Christian tradition has been attacked for preaching a crude dominion of man over nature on the basis of Genesis i. The attack flatters the influence of that tradition in any case but, be that as it may, Christian theologians have come to the defence of their tradition and found meanings in Genesis i which fit the policies the critics advocate. But why do we feel obliged to base our teaching on Genesis i? We are in danger of imitating Karl Barth, who found an enormous amount ostensibly in Genesis i. 21 on sexuality in man and woman which no one had ever seen there before, and which in fact came from a whole range of aids to theological reflection, not least secular knowledge developed in the course of time in the human sciences.¹ It is the tyranny of the Black Book again. We need all these resources to deal with the problem of man and nature, just as we do to deal with man and the state.

5. *Attention to the relative and conditioned element in the New Testament teaching on specific ethical problems.*

This point has perhaps been sufficiently made by now, so that a brief mention in conclusion is all that is called for. The teaching may be conditioned by the total social, economic, political and cultural situation of the first century, and in that sense be "time bound", to repeat Karl Barth's useful phrase. We can see that it would have been impossible for St. Paul to stand outside the institution of slavery and conceive it not being there, that is to say as an institution that might be abolished. Similarly he could not have known that there are some five per cent of each sex who are by 'nature' homosexual. However, the teaching may also be limited because it is imperfectly Christian. In certain places St. Paul writes like a male Jew of the first century with respect to women (1 Cor. xi. 2-6 : xiv. 34-36).

¹ *Church Dogmatics*, esp. par 41.

Not every corner of his mind had seen the implications of his new faith. There is nothing to be surprised at in this. His central affirmations seem wholly in line with the eschatological newness of Jesus' ethic, and this is the main thing. It only causes trouble if we use his teaching in a wooden way.

An instance of a different kind is that of food offered to idols where he is in a sense "too Christian" in resolving the dilemma (1 Cor. viii. ff. : cf. Rom. xiv). It will be recalled that he urges three principles on a matter of secondary importance, as he held this to be : (1) Follow conscience. (2) Do not upset a weaker brother. (3) If these two come into conflict, the second should have preference over the first. It seems very Christian, but as it stands it hands the Church over to those who suffer from what Moral Theologians call a scrupulous conscience (a well-known phenomenon to anyone who gives spiritual guidance), and if consistently followed would lead to a frighteningly restricted and timid way of Church life.

A final example is the subordinationist ethic in the Pastoral Epistles, where in the case of husbands and wives, masters and slaves, fathers and children, only the party who is called upon to show obedience is dealt with. This is one of the influences which have produced an excessive emphasis on obedience in the history of Christian ethics and it has given a handle to Marxist critics of it. The emphasis in it on patience and submission is indeed serious in an age which calls out for an ethic of responsibility.

We have travelled a considerable distance from the heights of general issues of hermeneutics to details in the Pastoral Epistles. We are in danger of seeming to end with a whisper and not a bang. However, the journey has been in aid of liberating us from a tyranny based on the Bible to an affirmation of the Bible as a continued source of renewal, when drawn upon in the Church by those who are sensitive to the needs of their own day and wish to press on, as they are bound with others in the bundle of humanity, to their full stature in Christ.