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HOW IS SCRIPTURE NORMATIVE IN CHRISTIAN ETHICS?

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SETTING THE SCENES

To set our minds in motion on the topic at hand, listen to this dramatic story retold by Martin Luther in his work on *Secular Authority*:

An incident of this sort is told of Duke Charles of Burgundy. A certain nobleman took an enemy prisoner, whereupon the prisoners wife came to redeem her husband. The nobleman promised to give her back her husband provided she would lie with him. The woman was virtuous, yet desired to set her husband free; so she goes and asks her husband whether she shall do this thing in order to set him free. The husband desired to be set free and to save his life, and gives his wife permission. After the nobleman had lain with the wife, he had the husband beheaded and the next day gave him to her a corpse. She laid the whole case before Duke Charles, who summoned the nobleman and commanded him to marry the woman. When the wedding day was over, he had the man beheaded, put the woman in possession of his property and raised her again to honor. Thus he punished the crime in a princely way.

You see, such a decision no pope, nor jurist, and no law-book could have given him; but it sprang from untrammelled reason, above the law in the books, and is so excellent that every one must approve of it and find the justice of it written in his own heart.

For Luther true Christians have no need of the law. He recognizes only the ‘first use of the law’ in Christian living: It condemns us as sinners and drives us to believe the gospel. In the measure that we embrace the gospel, we are free from the law. In the Christian community we are to live by the gospel alone.

In contrast to Luther, Calvin affirms not only this “first use the law,” but also a “second use of the law.” As Christians we are not only “free from the law,” but also “free unto the law.” The law also serves as a guide for Christian living. This fact the main function of the law. The law comes to its own precisely within the gospel.

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In Luther, therefore, the movement is from law to gospel, and it stops there. In Calvin, however, the movement is from law to gospel, and then back/onward to a willing obedience to the law. This raises the question of the place and role of the biblical law of God in Christian living—to which we shall return later in considering the problem of *legalism*.

Taking another look now at Luther’s fascinating story. According to Luther. the law is necessary for life in the world. There is accordingly a “third use of the law,” namely, to restrain evil in society. Secular authority needs the bridling effects of the law. Yet

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Luther seems to praise a norm which exceeds the law, taking shape in the righteous acts of Godly rulers. Is he recommending a kind of spiritual intuition which weighs the demands of the situation and acts accordingly—something like “let your conscience be your guide”? This raises the question of situationism—which we shall also consider a little later.

CLARIFYING SOME ISSUES

The mandate given in the title calls us to address the question: How is *Scripture normative* in *Christian ethics*? In this RES setting I can safely assume a *Christian* approach to the issues involved. In this paper then we are left with the task of clarifying the other three basic ideas—the relationship between *Scripture*, *normativity*, and *ethics*. The theme of this paper can therefore be restated as follows: How does Scripture function in discerning norms for Christian *ethical* practice?

This paper as a whole aims at clarifying the idea of *scriptural normativity*. The idea of ethics, however, is extremely ambiguous and troublesome. It therefore calls for a couple of critical comments at this point.

First: “*Ethics*” often designates an academic discipline within a college, university, or seminary setting. The setting here, however, is different. Though this is a theological conference, it is oriented to the life of this body of Reformed churches. I shall, therefore, deal with “ethics” not so much in a theoretical way, suited to an academic conference, but in a more practical way, as befits the life of the Christian community in the world. Let us then understand “ethics” to mean ethical/moral practice—Christian lifestyle.

Second: There is a basic problem surrounding much of our contemporary use of the terms “ethics” and “ethical,” together with the synonymous terms “morality” and “moral.” The problem in its modern form, in both popular and academic usage, is traceable most decisively to the thought of Immanuel Kant with its dichotomy/dualism between “pure reason” and “practical reason. The world-view of Kant, the maker of the modern mind, has [p.41>] so dominated the spirit especially of the western world, that willy-nilly we all almost inescapably find ourselves walking in his shadow. The Kantian “upstairs/downstairs,” split-level of life (à la Francis Schaeffer, *Escape from Reason*) has wielded its formative influence upon the way modern man, and Christians too, generally think, speak, write, and act in their daily conduct. Following in Kant’s footsteps, we drive a wedge between *science* (clinging, until recently at least, to the myth of objectivity) and *morality* (guided by subjective convictions). Stated differently we erect high and insuperable walls of separation between *doctrine* (dealing allegedly with knowing) and *ethics* (with doing), resting upon the foundation of an assumed antinomy between *facts* (religiously neutral) and *values* (religiously biased). As an updated restatement of the longstanding nature/grace dualism, this dichotomy then defines man as a rational/moral being. Rationality then deals with the *what*-ness of life, and morality with the *why*-ness of life experience. Thus we become saddled with the bipolar tension between determinism and freedom, between the science-ideal and the personality-ideal. Large sectors of life are viewed as value-free, others as morally conditioned. Such a world-and-life view has serious and far-reaching effects upon Christian attitudes and conduct.

a) The radical and sweeping biblical idea of religion gets reduced to morality. One then seldom hears of religious decisions, except in some highly spiritual, supernatural sense. Every decision-making process, in whatever sphere of life, gets defined in

terms of moral issues. Thus we hear incessantly about the morality (not justice) of nuclear armaments, the morality (not economic fairness) of colonial exploitation, the morality (not the laws of God for the bio- and eco-system) of environmental stewardship, and morals clarification in education (on the assumption that otherwise the scientific method remains religiously uncommitted).

b) In academic circles the Kantian dichotomy has created a framework-of-reference for the dubious distinction between philosophical and theological ethics. The former is then regarded as descriptive ethics and the latter as prescriptive.

c) To preserve a biblically-normal approach to ethics in the face of such secularizing tendencies, many, especially theologians, try then to Christianize ethics by keeping it closely tied to dogmatics. Ethical reflection on moral problems is then viewed as an extension of dogmatic theology.

d) Given the prevailing mood as sketched above, ethics and moral theology come to cover far too much ground. Once the possibility of a purely factual, rationally objective, religiously neutral, value-free approach to reality is allowed, then, whenever [p.42>] we move on to questions of the application of such knowledge, to the decision-making stage, to making choices on the basis of values, then suddenly everything becomes a moral/ethical issue. At one level, thus, nothing is ever ethical; at another level, everything is ethical. Strangely, thus, people make too little and too much of ethics at the same time. Then nothing related to life-practice is excluded. But if everything is ethical, then nothing is specifically ethical. Moreover, if no issue can be fully and finally dealt with without considering its ethical ramifications, then eventually the ethicist, the moral theologian must be brought in on every case. What then is left for people in labor, politics, medicine, the media, etc. but to deal with the hard facts of life in a value-free way and then await the judgment of the ethical expert. The result is an inflated notion of ethics/morality. (Something of this is reflected in the assigned title to this paper; also in *God met ons*, pp. 90-103, though with an implicit sensitivity to the problem.)

Every human issue is indeed at bottom a religious issue. But not every human issue is centrally a moral issue, though every issue does have an ethical aspect to it. For the sake of clarity, I submit that ethics is concerned specifically with a certain set of human relationships: friendship, courtship, marriage, family.

Such a more focussed concern was, however, not envisioned by those who assigned this paper. A broader range of concerns was intended. Honoring that intent, the topic at hand can be restated as follows: How is Scripture normative for living the Christian life?

One final comment: As indicated, there is a more sharply focussed way of dealing with ethical/moral concerns. The extant body of moral/ethical literature, however, reflects an almost total immersion in the more ambiguous categories of thought criticized above. It is, of course, unthinkable for now to rewrite this body of literature. In dealing with it, therefore, I am compelled to meet it on its own terms and to adapt the rest of the paper to this conventional usage.

A LOOK AHEAD

In discussions of Christian lifestyles among the early Christian fathers one frequently encounters the distinction between “rigorist” and “laxist” positions. “Rigorists” adhere to strict codes of conduct, while “laxists” reflect a more free and open attitude. In the next two stages of this paper I shall borrow these categories, and update them,

and attach them to two current vie on Christian living, both by American thinkers. After thus exploring first a contemporary “rigorist” and then a contemporary “laxist” ethic, I shall conclude by looking at a more authentically Reformed view on biblical normativity for Christian life-practice.

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THEONOMIC ETHICS

Representing a contemporary “rigorist” position, I call your attention to Greg Bahnsen’s *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*. Etched deeply into this work are the basic benchmarks of a Reformed tradition. It draws heavily upon the legal literature of Scripture with its moral imperatives. True to historic Calvinism, Bahnsen makes his case within the framework of the “three uses of the law.” At the very outset he quotes approvingly from Machen’s book, *What is Faith?* as follows:

A new and more powerful proclamation of the law is perhaps the most pressing need of the hour; men would have little difficulty with the gospel if they had learned the lesson of the law...So it always is: a low view of the law brings legalism in religion; a high view of law makes man a seeker after grace. Pray God the high view may again prevail.

Bahnsen accordingly rejects legalism understood (pharisaically) as attempting to get right with God by keeping the law. The law plays its role, not in justification, but in sanctification. As he puts it, “Theonomy is not a scheme for personal self-justification” (p. 35). Rather, “Salvation is by the grace of God through faith, and sanctification is by the law” (p. x). Again, “Theonomy is the Christian’s pattern of sanctification” (p. 36). This involves a strict concern for obeying the moral law meticulously. For,

God’s law is weighty with relevance for sanctification. The breaking of the very least stipulation of the law generates God’s displeasure...The mistake of the Pharisees was not concern for detail; it was externalism, humanistic traditionalism, and hypocrisy...Their legalism was illegal. (pp. 84, 85, 89)

By way of definition Bahnsen states that “by ‘theonomy’ I will mean that verbalized law of God which is imposed from outside man and revealed authoritatively in the words of Scripture” (p. 33). Repudiating both “personal relativism” and “secular statism,” he holds to “the biblical pattern of ethics in its far-reaching details” (p. 34). For “the law of God has social, inter-personal and political directions as well as dictates for the individual heart” (p. 36).

In an introductory way Bahnsen cites with approval the statement of the issue by C. Van Til in his *Christian Theistic Ethics* (p. 134): “There is no alternative but that of theonomy and autonomy.” Theonomy in ethics, Bahnsen therefore argues, means that “the Christian is obligated to keep the whole law of God as a pattern of sanctification” (p. xiii). For God has given “specific and extensive commands, since He cares for every specific of our lives as His people” (p. xv). He adds that “this is the best way to manage our lives, because it is God’s way to manage our lives” (p. xv). Therefore “theonomy is crucial to Christian ethics, and [p.44>] all the details of God’s law are intrinsic to theonomy” (p. 35). This Bahnsen calls the heart of the present thesis” (p. 35). For “if man is to be truly law-abiding, he must keep the law *as delivered* by God and *in the way specified by God*” (pp. 89, 90).

Bahnsen is clearly a literalist. He is not, however, a biblicist in the sense of holding that God reveals his will exclusively in the Bible. For, as he says, “Even before the law was delivered at Sinai, the law was in the world (Rom. 5:13ff., Gal. 3:19); that is, between Adam and Moses God’s law was binding” (p. 199). The law of God also reaches forward beyond Sinai into the New Testament, so that the Sermon on the Mount is also still relevant as a “standard of conduct.” Accordingly Bahnsen rejects attempts to push this Sermon into the past as an “interim ethic,” as well as the dispensationalist error of reserving it for a future millennial kingdom, and the idea that it stands only as an “impossibility ideal.” For this Sermon is in line with the “creation ethic” and the “Older Testament.” Referring to Carl Henry he emphasizes “the eternal oneness of the law” (p. 40). For “Christ introduced here no new standard of morality; He simply reinforced the norms of the Older Testamental law” (p. 97).

Ultimately “the law and the gospel aim at the same thing” (p. 183). For “the Older Covenant had the same *goal, definitions, principles, operating power, and foundation* as the New Covenant’ (p. 187). In fact, the New Covenant presses home the demands of the law more severely than does the Older. The economy which Jesus inaugurated cannot be characterized by ethical or penal laxity” (p. 188). Only, “the New Covenant is better *because it brings the power of obedience* with it by the agency of the Holy Spirit” (p. 190). So “the *lawful use of the law, then, is harmonious with the gospel of the New Covenant*” (p. 197). In reaffirming the “complete covenantal *unity* with reference to the law of God as the standard of moral obligation through the *diverse* ages of human history,” Bahnsen concludes that “continued blessing for Adam in Paradise, Israel in the promised land, and the Christian in the kingdom has been seen to be dependent upon persevering obedience to God’s will as expressed His law” (p. 203).

From this survey it is clear then that Bahnsen insists quite rigorously upon the “ethical obligation to keep all of God’s law,” and that in “exhaustive detail” (p. xiii). Accordingly “biblical Christians must not only face up to their obligation to keep the entire law of God, they must also take responsibility to do their exegetical homework so as to determine *which* laws are to be continuously observed as abidingly moral” (p. 216). At this point apparently a measure of relaxation enters the picture. A more nuanced approach is introduced into what was seemingly a universally binding imperative. Not all the laws of God are permanently normative for Christian conduct. Bahnsen [p.45>] softens his seemingly very hard-line hermeneutic with an to the age-old distinction between ceremonial, civil, and moral laws (pp. 212-215). The ceremonial-cultic ordinances related to the priestly-levitical service in Israel are so fulfilled in Christ that in their original form they are no longer binding upon Christian conduct—though they contain a moment of truth which is permanently valid. But they are not *ethically* normative. Ethical normativity holds only for the moral and civil laws in Israel. Bahnsen combines these two categories into one. Together they are morally normative in the way described above. Traditionally most Christians might easily agree with respect to the moral laws. What has aroused so much controversy is Bahnsen’s inclusion of the civil laws with their penal sanctions. All this must lead us to wonder about the validity of this threefold distinction itself.

Bahnsen’s rigorist position is further tempered by his concession that

the present study leaves a great deal to be explored and discussed in Christian ethics as well as extensive room for disagreement in the area of exegeting, understanding, and applying God’s law in specific situations. Two people can

submit to the exhaustive theonomic principle in Christian ethics while disagreeing on a particular moral question (e.g., whether a certain biblical command is ceremonial or moral, whether lying is ever condoned by God, etc.). Agreement with the thesis of this book is not contingent upon agreement on every particular moral issue or specific interpretation of a scriptural text. (p. xiv).

CRITICAL REFLECTIONS ON THEONOMIC ETHICS

1. Theonomic ethics is a “Christian heresy.” It is not apostasy—that is, a full-scale departure from the truth. It is a [sic] “Christian” in the sense that it bears unmistakably the tell-tale marks of the Christian tradition. It is “heresy” in the sense that certain right insights have gone wrong.

2. This work lies, moreover, clearly within the historical parameters of the Calvinian tradition. It belongs to the Reformed family of ideas in the sense that it keeps its distance from the dualist approach of the Thomist tradition, the law/gospel dialectic of traditional Lutheranism, the antinomian spirit of the Anabaptist movement, as well as the secular humanism of modern Liberalism. There is much in the Calvinist tradition to which it can legitimately appeal.

3. More substantially, its very virtue is turned into a vice. True to Calvin and his disciples, theonomic ethics emphasizes the integral relationship between law and gospel. This is part and parcel of its over-riding emphasis upon the unity of Scripture. Along the way, however, this unity shows signs of getting reduced in a procrustean-like way into rigid patterns of uniformity. It thereby disturbs the delicate biblical between

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continuity and discontinuity in the unfolding acts of the drama of redemption moving across the pages of Scripture, coming up out of the “Older Testament” into the “New Testament.” The richly variegated discontinuities embedded in salvation history tend to get eclipsed by a semi-static view of continuity. There is indeed something refreshingly right about the way Bahnsen refers to Genesis-Malachi as the “Older Testament.” It helps to counteract dispensational tendencies to downgrade “the law, prophets, and writings” (Luke 24:44) as “Old” in the sense of being antiquated and obsolete, having a lower canonical status, and therefore being no longer or less authoritative, normative, and relevant today. Yet, as it functions in theonomic ethics, this stress on continuity tends to diminish that dimension of radical newness which came in Jesus Christ. The idea of a progressive opening-up process in revelation gets obscured. The valleys and mountains in biblical history get levelled out into an almost monotonous plateau. The New Testament distinction between shadows and reality gets blurred. The promise and fulfillment motifs get fused to such an extent that the real need for the New Testament gets called into question. Despite its references to “diversity,” this idea fails to function decisively in this moral philosophy. Despite its protestations to the contrary, it remains highly a-historical. Revelation gets frozen into a single ethical mold.

4. Bahnsen states his case strongly on the longstanding distinction between ceremonial, civil, and moral laws. This distinction, he argues, is not arbitrary, but real, true to the very nature of biblical revelation. Despite his assertions, this triple distinction, however significant its role in the history of western Christianity, remains a very dubious part of our heritage. For a large part it reflects a questionable

trichotomous anthropology and an equally questionable view of our threefold office as prophet-priest-king. Its non-arbitrariness is far from biblically self-evident. Bahnsen argues this point more by affirmation than convincing evidence. Ultimately this distinction makes sense only within the framework of a scholastic theology. Usually within this tradition both ceremonial and civil laws are regarded as temporary, and therefore now abrogated in Christ, while only the moral laws possess an abiding authority. Bahnsen introduces a variation on this theme. He telescopes the civil into the moral. Only the ceremonial laws are no longer binding on Christian practice. The civil-moral laws still hold as ethical imperatives. Therefore, as he puts it, “we *must* identify and distinguish ceremonial observances *from* moral requirements” (p. 213). This then constitute his basis for personal (moral) and societal (civil) ethics. What Bahnsen (and other scholastic moralists with him) regard as a self-evident distinction appears, however, to be more self-serving than self-evident. It appears to serve as a rather arbitrary standard by which to relieve the Christian conscience of the problem [p.47>] of perpetuating “Older Testamental” cultic rites (e.g., animal sacrifices), while yet maintaining that the other (moral and/or civil) laws still hold in a more direct way for Christian conduct. In the end this triple/double distinction undermines a very fundamental tenet of theonomic ethics—its strong emphasis on the unity of Scripture.

5. Anticipating my alternative at the close of this paper, let me add that what we need is a better hermeneutic key to open up the biblical norms for Christian living, a more consistently applicable method of interpretation which does justice more fully to the unity-within-diversity of the Scriptures. Given the historical-redemptive nature of biblical revelation, and accordingly that this revelation as Word-of-God written is history/time/culture-related (a better formulation, I think, than history/time/culture-bound, since the Word is also trans-historical/temporal/cultural; better also than *history/time/culture-conditioned*, since the Word itself conditions history, time, and culture) in its total extent and in all its parts, therefore what Bahnsen says concerning our response to the ceremonial laws also holds for our response to the civil-moral laws, namely, that “the ceremonial observances no long apply, but their meaning and intention have been eternally validated” (p. 209). To the question whether “New Testament Christians are required to observe Older Testament rituals,” Bahnsen answers with both a yes and a no. Yes, in the sense that “Christians under the New Covenant are still responsible to offer blood atonement for their sins and tend the obligations of the temple.” No, in the sense that “the *way* or *manner* in which Christians do these things under the New Covenant is not identical with the Older Testamental observance of the ritual and ceremony” (p. 207). The basic question is the nature of obedient response. I submit that Bahnsen’s approach to ceremonial laws holds for our response to Scripture as a whole. Such a hermeneutic rings true to the testimony of the Reformed confessions on the nature of biblical authority (cf. Belgic Confession, Art. 25; Westminster Confession, Ch. 19). In all biblical imperatives (ceremonial/civil/moral or whatever) we must distinguish the aspect of actual observance (which is fulfilled in Christ in the sense of being left behind) and the aspect of abiding meaningfulness and normativity (also fulfilled in Christ in the sense of being redemptively updated and renewed). Abandoning the time worn ceremonial/civil/moral distinction in view of its failure to do justice to either the unity or the diversity of Scripture, a better way to “handle aright the Word of life” would be, in every biblical pericope, to distinguish between the then-and-there *form* of obedience and the here-and-now *norm* for obedience. More on this later.

SITUATIONAL ETHICS

Much of the contemporary debate on Christian lifestyles oscillates [p.48>] between the two uncritically accepted poles of the so-called Old Morality” (“rigorism”) and “New Morality” (“laxism”) as though these were the only options open to us. As representative of the latter, now prevailing school of thought, I turn to the situationism of Joseph Fletcher.

According to Fletcher (and most ethicists seem to agree) we are compelled fundamentally to choose between three conflicting theories, which may be “simply labelled as legalism, antinomianism, and situationism” (*Situation Ethics* p. 17; *Situation Ethics [Debate]*, p. 17²). Like most moral theologians he rejects the extremes of legalism and antinomianism in favor of a mediating position which, in his case, he terms “situational.” True to his basic commitments (positivism, personalism, pragmatism, relativism, contextualism) he seeks to drive home his point in a largely anecdotal way, drawing heavily on case studies.

Fletcher illustrates legalism with a story from Sir Walter Scott, whom he characterizes as “an incorrigible, irreversible, Calvinistic legalist of the first order” (II, p. 20). The story centers on two orphans. The one, Effie, not so bright, is on trial for adultery and infanticide. The other, Jeannie, is hauled into court as a witness. She faces a dilemma. If she answers straightforwardly the questions in the form they are put to her, she will seal Effie’s fate. But Jeannie knows that Effie is innocent! Should she therefore commit perjury to save her friend? Finally, in melodramatic fashion, the story has a happy ending. Simplistic moralism, Fletcher responds. “Ha!,” he says, “So everything is okay, see? What an absurd falsification of the infinite variety and complexity and tragedy of authentic human existence. Plain crap!” (II, p. 21).

Fletcher exemplifies the second ethic, antinomianism, with another incident. Two men work side by side in the factory. The one asks the other how he intends to vote in an upcoming election. “Gosh,” the other replies, “I don’t know. I suppose I will not [be able to decide] until they hand me a ballot.” This Fletcher calls “simple untutored barnyard existentialism” (II, p. 23).

Between these two abhorrent extremes, as his alternative, Fletcher places “situationism, the third stratagem of conscience, and a mediating position in the spectrum. The situationist enters into troubling moral situations armed, like the legalist, with some wise sayings and sophia—some reflective generalizations about what is ordinarily and typically the right thing to do. But, unlike the legalist, he refuses to absolutize in an idolatrous way any normative principle. From the other side, like the antinomian or spontaneist or impromptuist, he is prepared to depart [p.49>] from a usually applicable generalization if in the particular case the consequence of following the rule is to minimize rather than optimize whatever the first-order value is to which he is committed” (II, pp. 23-24).

To concretize what he means by situationism Fletcher retells his story of the St. Louis taxi-driver. At the height of a typically American political campaign he announced to his rider that “my great-grandfather and my grandfather and father before me all voted a straight Republican ticket.” The rider answered that surely as a loyal son his driver would then be voting for the Republican candidate. “To which,” Fletcher writes, “God bless him, the driver replied, ‘No sir, I ain’t. There are times in every man’s life when

² Referred to further as I (*Situation Ethics*) and II (*Situation Ethics [Debate]*).

he's got to put his principles aside and do me right thing!" (II, p. 19)—adding: "That St. Louis cabbie is this book's hero" (I, 13).

If then situationism is a real alternative to antinomianism as well as legalism, as Fletcher argues, what are its guiding maxims?

I think there are no normative moral principles whatsoever which are intrinsically valid or universally obliging. I would contend that we may not absolutize the norms of human conduct or, if you like theological rhetoric, we may not make idols of any finite and relative rules of life. Whether we ought to follow a moral principle or not would, I contend, always depend upon the situation. This is, of course, a reasonably straightforward statement of ethical relativity. If we are, as I would want to reason, obliged in conscience sometimes to tell white lies, as we often call them, then in conscience we might be obliged sometimes to engage in white thefts and white fornications and white killings and white breakings of promises and the like. (II, p. 15).

Instead of urging conduct suited to some system of truth or moral order, situational ethics relies on a decision-making process which aims at "contextual appropriateness—not the 'good' or the 'right' but the fitting" (I, pp. 27-28). Fletcher claims that situationists are willing "to make full and respectful use of principles to be treated as maxims, but not as laws or precepts" (I, p. 31). Their "four working principles" are these (I, pp. 40-56):

1. Pragmatism: means oriented to desired end on the basis of expediency.
2. Relativism: all absolutes relativized, without absolutizing any relative values.
3. Positivism: moral acts based not on articles of faith or rational deductions, but on the concrete data of daily experience.
4. Personalism: centering ethical concerns on human person [p.50>] ality, not divine law or moral order—being thus not a "what asker," but a "who asker."

Conscience informed by agapic love is our sole guide. For morality was made for man, not man for morality. We are therefore to live by the law of love, not by love of the law—seeking always what works best for the greatest good for the greatest number. For the end justifies the means, and nothing else. If legalism is a "law ethic," situationism claims to be a "love ethic." In opposing legalism, situationism claims to be circumstantial, not principled; dynamic, not static; open-ended, not committed to a closed system; existentialist, not ontological; offering cautious maxims, not manuals of coded does and don'ts. Though the situationist "enters every decision-making situation fully armed with the ethical maxims of his community and its heritage and treats them with respect as illuminators of his problems," he is nevertheless "prepared in any situation to compromise them or set them aside *in the situation* if love seems better served by doing so" (I, p.26).

Critical Reflections on Situation Ethics

Note again the following points of critique:

1. Situationism too is a heresy. I hesitate to call it a Christian heresy. The marks of biblical religion and the Christian heritage have been all but completely effaced. Apostasy lurks just around the corner.

2. Situational ethics exploits one dimension of Christian life-practice—the situation itself. Clearly decisions take place nowhere but in down-to-earth situations. Actual situations are indeed a part of the picture. When, however, that part is allowed to fill the whole picture, then radical distortion sets in. It is, of course, true that our life-situations are infested by numerous ambiguities and contingencies in our fallen, not yet fully redeemed world. To then locate whatever remnant of a love-norm situationists may still cling to in the midst of these shifting relativities is to plant one's feet in a quagmire. To enter such situations armed only with maxims born of earlier situational memories is to invite at best reckless adventure, at worst agnostic despair.

3. Situationism revels in its wholehearted acceptance of relativism. But relative to what? Fletcher protests absolute relativism, since, if it were possible, it would be “inchoate, random, unpredictable, unjudgeable, meaningless, amoral—rather in the antinomian mode.” There must therefore be “an absolute or norm of some kind if there is to be any relativity”—namely, “agapic love.” Yet even this “absolute” can be implemented only relatively (I, pp. 44-45). To what then is love relative? Not to some transcendent norm, but only to the situation itself. Ultimately, then, the situation creates its own norms. This is little short of unadulterated historicism.

4. Despite Fletcher's disclaimers to the contrary, situational ethics is barely distinguishable from antinomianism. It recognizes no appeal beyond the disciplined mores of conventional behavior. Even its references to the self-evident promptings of agapic love serve only to reinforce personal and communal self-justification. The end of the matter is pure humanism, enclosed within a secular (a thinly disguised closed continuum) view of life.

5. Situationism is bad theory as well as bad practice. These, of course, go hand in hand within a biblical perspective. For good theory seeks to account for life practice—to illumine, enrich, and deepen it. On this situational ethics fails. It is an impossible possibility: possible in that some may try it, but impossible in that no one can pull it off. For we live in a divinely ordered world. We act within the context of normed situations. The Word of God holds for us even when we disobey it. Situationism is therefore parasitic. It lives off the truth even while distorting it. For it is this very normativity which makes possible situationism's anti-normative claims. For situationists too respond inescapably, though unwittingly to the norms which establish the very conditions of life. Situationism is therefore impractical: at a most fundamental level it does not “work,” despite its pragmatic claims.

6. Love is indeed the central and comprehensive biblical imperative, summarizing the law of God. Love (the agapic love to which situationism appeals) is a *directional* reality. It tells us not *what* to do, but *why* and *unto whom* (for Me, or for someone else, as Christ says). *What* we are to do lovingly—this we learn as we live within the *structures* of our various ordered life-relationships (marriage, family, labor, education, church, state, etc.)—all of which are normed by the law of God. Therefore all talk of love without law is empty, doctetic. It lacks the concreteness which seems so important to situationalists. For law is the structure of love. Life is unliveable by some free-floating love ideal.

A BIBLICALLY-REFORMED APPROACH

Affirmations (what one says yes to) are often best clarified by negations (what one says no to). Having negated the legalistic leanings of theonomic ethics and the antinomianism of situational ethics, I shall now conclude with a few affirmations

concerning biblical normativity for Christian conduct—all of this designed not to issue some final word on the matter, but to set the stage for our July 26 discussions. [p.52>]

Note the following ideas which give shape to this alternative to both “rigorist” and “laxist” views:

1. From the fifth and sixth critical comments under situationism (see p. 13 above) I conclude that we must take seriously the norms for obedient living given in, with, and for the creation order. Biblical norms for Christian life, given by God the Redeemer are the very norms given by God the Creator. These creational norms stand abidingly as God’s Word for life in His world. They continue to call all men to live as God’s servants, even when they turn a deaf ear to them. For the Redeemer God summons us through the Scriptures to confess: Our help comes from the Lord, who made the heavens and the earth. Scripture re-articulates God’s will which lays its claim upon us from the beginning and re-directs us to obey it. Christ came to restore us to the original and abiding intent of creation. The Holy Spirit renews us unto conformity to what the Father wanted from the beginning. Redemption does not abolish creation, nor replace it, nor oppose it, nor draw us away from it. Redemption restores creation. We can therefore turn to Scripture in the expectation of finding there a re-publication of the creational norms which still hold today, which shape our life situations, and which will uphold all things to the end of the ages. By thus honoring the way Scripture points us to the norms of the creation order, Christian reflection, decision-making, and action can be relieved of the burden of biblicism (Scripture is God’s only revelation), legalism (theonomic ethics), and arbitrariness (situational ethics). For biblical norms re-affirm God’s Word for creation.

2. Within these contours of Christian living Scripture is the hermeneutic key, the noetic starting-point, the normative guide. For “all Scripture is inspired of God, and therefore profit able for doctrine, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be fully furnished unto every good work” (II Timothy 3:16, 17). Scripture is therefore profitable for instructing us in our Christian walk of life. It is not so much a source-book as a guide-book for Christian conduct. In its light we are to go our way. It serves, however, not as a light upon which to stare ourselves blind, but as a light falling across our shoulders directing and illumining our choices. On this point Calvin’s analogy of the “spectacles” is helpful (*Institutes*, I.,6,1). No one in his right mind spends all his time polishing his glasses (in this case, studying Scripture); but having polished them, puts them on and gets going. We profit best from Scripture not by reducing it to a code-book with ready-made examples and models of conduct for us to emulate, but by discerning its abiding norms, principles, and directives, and in doing so to experience its liberating and reforming power in seeking to love God above all and our neighbors as ourselves, and in working this out in concrete situations with their specific demands. [p.53>]

3. Summarizing what has been said, perhaps we can cut it this way: We are called...

- a) to discern the norms of God’s Word for our in together in creation,
- b) in the light of God’s Word inscripturated,
- c) under the rule of God’s Word incarnate,
- d) by the leading of the Spirit...

thus to bring our thoughts, words, and deeds captive in free obedience to Christ Jesus the Lord.

4. The arena for arriving at greater clarity and common conviction in fulfilling this mandate is the Christian community. This is not something to be undertaken individually. For “no man is an island.” The varied gifts of the Spirit are distributed not to members in isolation, but to members (recall what Paul says about “eyes, ears, hands, and feet”) within the organic unity of the body of Christ. Such common reflection, policy-making, and implementation is one important expression of “the communion of the saints.” As an RES community we stand in a Reformed tradition. Only by standing within (not outside) such a tradition can we make biblical progress. That communal heritage undergird and surrounds us, and keeps us in living contact with the historic Christian faith reaching back across the centuries. That catholic community then stands as (a) the bearer of our tradition, (b) the shaper of our identity, (c) the forum for our reflection, and (d) the stimulus for faithful service.

5. For the hermeneutic principle which lies at the heart of this “third way” of understanding biblical normativity I refer to that method of interpretation introduced in the fifth point of my critique on theonomic ethics (see p. 9)—namely the *norm/form* distinction. Abiding norms come to us in Scripture in the historical-cultural forms of that day. This is nothing to regret. Nor may we play the contingent off against the permanent, neither absolutizing its forms, nor relativizing its norms. God’s universally valid Word is revealed concretely in the local and temporal particularities of Israelite and early Christian habits. Embedded in these changing conditions are enduring motifs which still lay their claim upon us. To sense their impinging power on our lives calls for obedient listening to the Word.

6. To concretize this norm/form hermeneutic with a view to our upcoming discussion, let us look briefly at a few contemporary case studies as they confront the Christian community.

a) Without commenting one way or another on its general hermeneutics, *God With Us*, in seeking to discern biblical norms for the contemporary worldwide arms race offers some stimulating comments (pp. 76-79): [p.54>]

...The Bible of course gives us no direct answer to the question whether nuclear armament is justified... [Yet] we shall try to answer the question whether it is indeed true that in such instances the Bible can no longer serve as a guide... According to the Bible man was made lord over creation (Gen. 1:27, 28; Ps. 8:6-9). On the basis of this stewardship man is obliged to exclude at the start every possibility to destroy the work of the Creator by his action... [Accordingly,] it is striking that in the Old Testament trusting in weapons is rejected... Most striking however is the resistance in the Old Testament against the most deadly weapons of that time, namely, the chariots of war. Neither under Moses (Ex. 14, 15) nor under Joshua (Josh. 17:16, 18) nor under Saul (I Sam. 13:5, II Sam. 1:6) did Israel possess horses and chariots. On the command of the Lord Joshua had to burn the chariots and cut the hamstrings of the horses (Josh. 11:6-9). In the same way, David put the chariot horses out of commission (II Sam. 8:4; etc.). Samuel warns the people that among the many negative sides of the kingship this also will be found, namely, that the young men will have to serve in the cavalry (I Sam. 8:11, 12). The law of the king (Deut. 17:16) forbids the king to have many horses (and thus also many chariots). It is therefore not without significance that precisely the rebels,

Absalom and Adonijah, purchased a chariot and horses (II Sam. 15:1; I Kings 1:5)... The Old Testament [thus] sees the use of chariots as an unavoidable evil that can be tolerated only if one is certain to act in agreement with the will of God. To trust in mighty chariots brings one close to idolatry. Israel had to put its trust in principle in God and might not make use of the most modern weapons which were then available... In no other nation in the ancient Near East does one find the idea that the use of chariots is really religiously impermissible. Here we have a truly unique biblical idea. We may, therefore, not conclude too lightly that the Old Testament at this point would not be normative for us.

This exposition then leads to the following “biblically justified” conclusions:

(i) In trusting the Lord we must consciously strive for a decrease of the modern weapons of annihilation and surely state that the manufacture of them is in conflict with our stewardship over God’s creation.

(ii) A decision on the question whether in an extreme situation of threat weapons may nevertheless be taken, can only be made before the face of God who commanded us to love our enemies even if they adhere to anti-Christian ideologies. [p.55>]

(iii) We may never be satisfied that violence happens in our sinful world, but through the spreading of gospel of peace cooperate in deed for the coming of the Kingdom of Peace for all peoples.

b) A further question arises: Is there such a thing as “just war”? In what sense is warfare ever justifiable? Or is it always anti-normative? At best, a necessary evil, a second-best solution to a bad situation in a fallen, not fully redeemed world? On this issue let me cite a few lines from John W. Montgomery in his “situational ethics” debate with Joseph Fletcher:

...I’m not entirely happy with the just war concept... There is a sense in which a war might be “just,” that it might hopefully result in less hideousness than not fighting. But I want to stress as strongly as I possibly can that in terms of the biblical ethic and the classical Christian faith, Protestant and Catholic, no war is inherently just. Wars are *damnable*... I think we make a mistake if we try to slither ethically around this question. Now, again, this doesn’t mean that the Christian may not find himself in a position where he cannot help but fight, but heaven help him if he thereby feels that he is engaged in a justifiable activity. He is in fact participating in the kind of activity that we sinful and fallen human beings have brought about on this planet, and we had better come to see that this situation is a good deal more wretched than we are willing to admit... In these cases, the “lesser” of evils may have to be accepted, but it is still in every sense an evil and must drive the Christian to the Cross for forgiveness and to the Holy Spirit for restoration.

Thus we face the enigmatic question: Is it sometimes (morally) “right” to do what is (biblically) wrong?

c) As Christian communities how are we to respond to the mounting toll of broken homes? When divorce seems sometimes to reach epidemic proportions, are there biblical norms to which we can appeal to secure stable family life? Do they still carry binding authority?

Jesus' critics confronted him with a similar question concerning marriage and divorce in terms of first century Jewish practice (Mark 10:2-12). Reconstructing that dialogue, the critics pose the challenging question: Is divorce allowable according to the law of God? Jesus responds in effect: You know the law of Moses; that's clear enough.

Critics, in effect: Well, you, a pretended rabbi, don't seem to know your Bible: Moses allowed us to submit a bill of divorce and thus separate from our wives. Jesus: Yes, but only as a concession to your hard-heartedness, as an anti-normative "solution" to anti-normative situations. But then Jesus [p.56>] makes his ultimate appeal, back to the creation order, saying in effect: Marriage is for good and for keeps!

There are, therefore, no "biblical grounds" for divorce, only a "second best" way out of an untenable relationship, as a last resort, when marriage partners are unable to live up to the norm. Divorce, however, always remains anti-normative.

d) Should we as Christians join with Jews in their kosher regulations forbidding diets which mix meat and milk products? After all, appeal is made to a clear-cut biblical injunction, "Thou shalt not boil a kid in its mother's milk" (Deut. 14:21). Is this an abiding, universal norm? A right response to this Mosaic law calls for taking into account the Israelite situation. God's people lived in the neighborhood of Canaanite people. Among them boiling a kid in its mother's milk was an integral part of their pagan rituals, which took place at the shrines of Baal and Ashteroth, where male and female prostitutes plied their trade—all this designed to induce fertility among the herds and crops. If Israel were to emulate such practices, even in non-cultic ways, it would no longer be clear which God/gods they were serving. Their religious identity was at stake.

In our very altered situation, the *formal* aspect of this law is no longer relevant. Yet it also has a *normative* aspect which carries an abiding validity. We too are to abstain from culturally-conditioned practices which would accommodate or compromise our confession. Should Christians, for example, play the state lotteries? Pledge allegiance to the American flag and all that it stands for? Collaborate (in the 1930's) with the Third Reich? Participate in the annual Voortrekker Monument ceremonies?

e) Some Christians practice footwashing: Why not we? We who confess the plenary and verbal inspiration of the Bible, its authority and infallibility! After all, Jesus' command could hardly be more clear and forthright:

Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you (John 13:12-15).

Yet none of us obeys these words strictly. And with good reason. In a first century banquet setting in Palestine, footwashing was an appropriate way to demonstrate discipleship. But given the modern more hygienic conditions for our dinner gatherings, this practice would come across as arbitrary and forced. The *form* of this ethical/moral command is, therefore, of passing interest. Yet its *norm* stands: Render loving humble service to one another. [p.57>]

f) Is our New Testament "Sunday" simply an extension of the Old Testament sabbath? Or is it a wholly new day? Is there a promise-and-fulfillment relationship between sabbath and "Sunday"? What, if anything, of the sabbath is still abidingly normative for us today? What belongs to the passing forms and shadows? Assuming some continuity, was the sabbath established solely for Israel (Deuteronomy 5)? Or

does it go back to a creation ordinance (Exodus 20)? What are we to make of the prohibition against gathering firewood on the sabbath? And of the sabbath-day's journey observed by early Christ-believers?

Many questions! Is there in all of this a normative word for Christian practice today? I submit for discussion that the following biblically normed line of thought still holds for us: From the beginning God provided a time for renewal and worship in man's weekly routine, that this was given a structured place in life throughout the unfolding history of redemption in both the Old and New Testaments in the form of a day set aside for this purpose, and that this still holds for us today in a New Testamentally updated and eschatologically directed way.

g) Must we always "tell the truth"? Even when enemy marauders are standing at the front door asking the whereabouts of our hideaways in the back room? After all, human lives are at stake. At bottom this moral/ethical issue depends on the meaning of the biblical idea of truth. Truth is more than a correct statement which corresponds accurately to a given state-of-affairs. Truth means living in the truth, standing in the truth, being truth-full, walking in the truth, doing the truth—in the name of and in fellowship with Him who said "I am the truth." In our abnormal world, however, it is doubtless not surprising that we are sometimes induced to act in anti-normative ways. Can, therefore, telling a "white lie" be the right way to express the truth?

With that as background the door now stands ajar for your comments and discussion at the Chicago RES Theological Conference in July.

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