

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Evangelical Quarterly* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_evangelical_quarterly.php

SEEKING ETHICAL CERTAINTY

THERE is a great diversity of opinion as to what constitutes the true Christian ethics. Is it that ethics which is based upon the life and teachings of Christ? Or is it that which looks to the Biblical revelation as a whole for an authoritative guide? Or is the Christian ethics that which is deduced from theological truths? Or that which has gradually developed in the historical progress of the Christian movement? Perhaps it is the ethics which is promulgated by an authoritative Church, or that ethics which is confined to the insights gained by the conscience of the more devoted Christian. Could the true ethics of Christ be that which is manifested only in those rare men of great saintliness who have towered above the heads of men and led them onward for Christ? Or could it be the ethics of the great mystics, who have developed in themselves the mind of Christ through the inner workings of the Spirit of God?

We shall in the following pages make a careful analysis of most of these viewpoints and endeavour to arrive at the true nature of the Christian ethics.

It would obviously be a misnomer to call any ethical system which did not make Christ central a Christian ethics. Prior to the time of Christ there were many ethical philosophers who taught more by precept than by example. Being mere men, these philosophers could not expect to embody perfectly in their own lives the moral ideal which they preached. Theirs was an *ideal* goal, admittedly impossible of perfect fulfilment by frail men. Even the Old Testament priest needed "to offer up sacrifice, first for *his own sins*, and then for the people's" (Heb. vii. 27), and one of the greatest of the prophets responded to the theophany with the words, "Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips" (Isa. vi. 5).

In sharp contrast to this, Christ said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life . . . he that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (John xiv. 6, 9). Christ was the first and only prophet to embody personally the moral ideal which He taught—the first to propagate a lofty ethics by example as well as precept. That His life was faultless has been generally admitted. Even His

enemies could find nothing but blasphemy by which to accuse Him. Thus He has become the "first-born among many brethren"—brethren who, in turn, are "to be conformed to His image" (Rom. viii. 29). He is the norm of the Christian ethics. To be patterned after Him is man's highest destiny and privilege. "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus" (Phil. ii. 5).

But how can we live as Jesus lived? In the first place, how can we know how Jesus lived? To be sure, we have many reliable records of His life. But we do not have records of His behaviour in all possible types of situations. Indeed, He lived in such a different type of world from our own modern world that many of the situations which He faced are never faced by modern men and multitudinous situations which modern men face were never faced by Him. Moreover, the ethical quality of an act depends upon the reasons for committing it. But it is sometimes difficult to judge the motives unless one is familiar with all the ramifications of the situation. Not only are the accounts which we have of the deeds of Christ very sketchy, but also the customs and manners of the people, the laws, the ideas and attitudes are largely unknown to us. Hence, being ignorant of these things, we are greatly handicapped as we study the behaviour of Jesus and try to reconstruct His motives and interpret His life.

The conclusion is inevitable: in order that Christ might function as the norm for life, a great deal of meticulous exegesis of the text and careful interpretation must be done.

Although Christ lived in a different culture from ours, we can interpret Him in the light of His own culture and then apply the abiding principles to the ethical problems of our own culture.

For example, when Jesus questioned potential candidates for discipleship, there was one who said, "Lord, suffer me first to go and bury my father. Jesus said unto him, Let the dead bury their dead: but go thou and preach the kingdom of God" (Luke ix. 59, 60). We may discover from historical studies that the expression "bury my father" was a stock phrase for the prevalent custom of discharging one's duty to one's aged father by continuing to live with him until his death, whether it be months or years. We shall then understand better the force of Jesus' reply. We shall see that the underlying principle was specifically

that filial duty should never be allowed to postpone discipleship. This could be then generalised to the principle that no filial or civic or humanitarian duty should be given precedence over the duties of discipleship. Jesus' reply, "Let the dead bury their dead", suggests that there are always plenty of spiritually dead, unregenerate men who nevertheless have received enough of the cultural heritage of Christian ethics to motivate them to attend to the lesser humanitarian causes, so that those who are called to preach should not concern themselves with such causes. It is readily apparent then that there are a multitude of situations in the modern world which are strikingly different from those which Jesus faced, and yet they are situations in which the principle of the precedence of the work of the Kingdom over all lesser causes is applicable.

A case in point is the fact that in Jesus' time there was no such thing in Israel as universal military service. Yet, when such a condition arose in our country during the late war, the principle taught in the above Scripture was honoured, perhaps unwittingly, by our government in exempting ministerial students from military service.

It should now be clear that, although we do not to-day have such binding customs as the filial duty of "burying one's father", we can nevertheless know how to "live as Jesus lived" by applying the *principles* which are exemplified in the life and teachings of Christ to modern situations which are very different from those which Christ faced.

As Dean Inge puts it, "The true interpretation of the Gospel Ethics will consist in eliciting the presuppositions on which they depend, the principles which animate them, the illustrations of them furnished by the character and actions of Jesus, and the applications of them to very different circumstances".¹ At this point the problem passes from an intellectual difficulty to one of power.²

It is apparent that, as in the illustration about burying one's father, a great deal of interpretation involving generalisation, abstraction of principles, and application must be superimposed upon the life and teachings of Christ in order that He might function as the norm of the Christian ethics.

But no interpretation of a life is adequate, no matter how care-

¹William R. Inge, *Christian Ethics and Modern Problems*, p. 30.

²Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Contribution of Religion to Social Work*, pp. 78 f.; *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, p. 20.

fully all historical and archaeological evidences are considered, unless it be interpreted in terms of its larger perspective. Christ must be interpreted in the light of the teaching of the Old Testament, especially of the Messianic passages; and also in the light of the rest of the New Testament; indeed, He must be interpreted in the light of the entire sweep of history—in the light of the cosmic development.

It is for this reason that we must make the entire Biblical revelation an integral part of the foundation for our Christian ethics. What a wealth of deepened insight into the significance of Jesus rewards the student of the Fourth Gospel, which portrays Jesus as the eternal *λόγος* providing the cosmic perspective! How much richer is the student of the Pauline epistles, who finds therein the *χριστός* whose life becomes significant as Saviour of men! How could Jesus' work be fairly evaluated without the book of Acts to give us an appreciation of the scope of the movement which He began? How, without the book of Revelation, could the struggles of this movement and its envisioned goals be appreciated?

If these added interpretations which make up the rest of the New Testament are dependable, they supply the balanced larger perspective, which we have said is necessary for the careful interpretation of any life. They portray Jesus as the focal point of history. He lends meaning to the cosmic process, in much the same way as Plato's vision of the Idea of the Good opened the only gate to true knowledge. Similarly, these interpretations of Jesus lend meaning to the narrated accounts of His life and to His teachings.

There is another reason why the whole Bible must be built into the foundation of our Christian ethics: we lack to-day the advantages enjoyed in Biblical times, which made it possible for Jesus to be so carefully interpreted that ethical principles which we cannot derive directly from the biographical details of Jesus' life can nevertheless be obtained indirectly as they are taught in the writings of Paul, James, Peter and John—who imbibed the spirit of Christ. Thus we can get from them the perspective of the Apostolic Age.

It is probably for these reasons that Dean Inge asserts that "the books of the New Testament" constitute the norm for the Christian ethics.¹ "There must be an absolute background",

¹*Op. cit.*, p. 15.

he explains, "against which all relative truths have to be set, if the word relativity is to have any meaning. Every philosophy asserts and depends upon some permanent reality behind the flux of phenomena; and an ethical religion must demand a similar absoluteness for its fundamental principles."¹

Corroborating this viewpoint is the conviction expressed by Osborn that the method of Christian ethics "is to use the principles discovered from these [Biblical] sources as standards whereby to judge and interpret the facts which it has discovered from its observation of life and its analysis of the process of history".²

In applying the Bible as the norm, it is important to avoid a rigid literal or legalistic method of interpretation. "The tendency to a slavish following of the letter, or to an unreflecting obedience to a fixed tradition, is dangerous, and such subservience to authority is not required of us. We have a right . . . to condemn and repudiate immoral doctrines and irrational taboos, even when they come to us supported by ecclesiastical tradition. . . . There is no excuse for refusing to apply the principles of the Gospel to circumstances very unlike those which came within the purview of the human Christ, or for denying the competence of the Spirit of truth to teach humanity many truths which believers in the first century were 'unable to bear'."³

Von Hartmann objects that appeal to a Scriptural norm makes Christian ethics heteronomous and therefore a mere pseudo-ethics. But ethics *must* be heteronomous in some sense, because it involves basically a duty to promote values. But values are meaningless apart from a supreme goal, and our microscopic perspective is utterly incapable of yielding an accurate knowledge of such a goal. The supreme goal can only be revealed by the Supreme Being, hence any dependable teleological ethics must be heteronomous. The Christian therefore "does not regard the divine law as an alien power, enforcing its will by reward and punishments. . . . Christian ethics are therefore free and autonomous, though revealed".⁴

Few ethical principles are given in code form in the Bible. Standards of values are taught throughout, and we are expected to work out our own codes with these standards as regulative guides.

¹Inge, *op. cit.*, pp. 15, 16.

²Andrew R. Osborn, *Christian Ethics*, p. 11.

³Inge, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 33.

Another danger to avoid in utilising the Bible as the norm for Christian ethics is that of an atomic approach. We must avoid "the mechanical literalism which has sought to press the language of the Gospel into precise definition of Christian duty".¹ Without extensive collation of texts and careful adherence to the laws of hermeneutics, especially those respecting attention to the context and to the larger context, misinterpretation will probably prevail.

Such extensive collation of texts and study of broad contexts usually produces a systematic theology as well as a system of ethics. In fact, the theology so produced is as important as anything else in producing the balanced hierarchy of values which is the necessary prerequisite for any teleological ethics. It is only as we understand the divine economy that Supreme Value and the supreme goal are known; and without this knowledge ethics is blind. Whitchurch therefore errs greatly when he deplors the fact that most thinkers speak as though Christian ethics were "a tail on a theological kite" and insists that instead of looking upon "the moral life solely as a fruit of religious faith", we should consider it "a root consideration in constructing that faith".²

Niebuhr, Inge, Henson, Osborn, and Knudson all strongly assert that ethics *must* be an outgrowth of theology.³

Osborn states that "Christian ethics has a unique position, for, whereas other systems are for the most part based upon an analysis of factors in human behaviour . . . Christian ethics is deep-founded upon the reality of moral order, which, it declares, proceeds from and is manifested in the character of God. The Hebrew idea of perfection was not derived from an analysis of the characters of noble men, but from the essential moral character of God".

Knudson's comments are especially graphic. He points out that Christ's ethical teachings were grounded in his theology:

¹Herbert H. Henson, *Christian Morality*, p. 149.

²Irl Goldwin Whitchurch, *An Enlightened Conscience*, p. xviii.

³Niebuhr explains that ethics is dependent upon the maintenance of tension between the ideal of love, which is a genuine REALITY in the will and nature of God, and the incomplete historical expression of it. But this ideal depends upon our theology for its explication (Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, pp. 5, 6). Christianity "is an ethical religion, but it was from the first, and still remains, a religion, not an ethical system" (Inge, *op. cit.*, p. 33). "Religion has necessarily shaped morality. The theologian must needs become the moralist. Duty grows on the stock of faith . . . conduct cannot but become the authorised commentary on creed"; and further, "For the religious man all turns ultimately on his theology, for his theology will draw a congruous morality in its train" (Henson, *op. cit.*, pp. 10, 157). Cf. also Albert C. Knudson, *The Principles of Christian Ethics*, p. 303, and Andrew R. Osborn, *Christian Ethics*, pp. 3, 4.

“ His law of love was grounded in the love of God. His emphasis on the sanctity of human life had its source both in the divine love and in the immortal destiny of man. His high ideal of personal purity and holiness was based on the holiness of God and on the transforming power of his Spirit in human life ”.

It has already been pointed out that an adequate ethics must involve obligation to a person—more particularly to the Divine Person. For ethics must certainly be more than mere behaviour; otherwise it would be but an aspect of psychology. Ethics involves *directed* behaviour, and behaviour, to be directed, must be under the control of a free will. Without the freedom of the will, the terms “ right ” and “ wrong ”, “ guilty ” and “ innocent ” are deprived of substantial meaning; for one can scarcely be “ guilty ” of a “ wrong ” in the fullest sense of the word if one’s behaviour was mechanically determined so that he had no choice in the matter.

Moreover, the minute the freedom of the will is admitted, ethics has been put upon the plane of relations between *persons*—obligations of one person to another. But since our social relationships involve such great numbers of persons, we find our various obligations become conflicting. It is then that we should realise that in the last analysis our duty is really to the Supreme Person, who creates and develops these finite persons, and that we must emulate the example of the psalmist David, who in hyperbole addressed Jehovah with the words : “ Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight ”.

In view of this fact, the question as to what is our obligation to God appears as a central consideration in any Christian ethics. This question is intimately tied up with the question as to the nature of God and as to the nature of man. It also depends upon what values are supreme in the sight of God and what is God’s plan to realise these values.

In short, our ethics must be developed in the perspective of a fully developed theology. This theology should be the outgrowth of careful interpretation of the Bible. It is not enough to be able to quote a verse in support of one’s ethical teachings. Verses have been quoted in support of practically every type of teaching, ethical or otherwise. Rather, the effort should first be made to come to a systematic understanding of the divine economy—the nature of God and man, the values inherent in each, the personal relationships between them, their expectations

and capabilities, their goals. It is only as one achieves the viewpoint of such a systematic theology that one may expect to have a balanced Christian ethics.

Hence the norm for Christian ethics must be Christ, indeed, but Christ as interpreted in the light of a systematic theology derived from the Bible.

This introduces a great perplexity, for there have been numerous contradictory theologies, all of which claimed to be the explication of truths implicit in the Bible, and many of these have been adopted by men of great piety and scholarship. We therefore need some criterion by which to ascertain which is the true theology taught in the Bible and which are the private interpretations of men.

In searching for the theology which brings forth the true Christian ethics, a number of procedures are open to us. We might take the viewpoint of the historian and recognise that theology, and with it ethics, has gradually developed through the centuries. We could thus hope in a study of historical theology to find the criterion for ascertaining the true Bible theology.

Or we might recognise that each sect of Christendom possesses a distinctive theology and endeavour to judge each sect. Or finally, we might feel that no sect has arrived at the true Biblical viewpoint. But we might find within these sects individual saints, who, through much spiritual discipline and study of the Bible, and through a close intimacy with God, have arrived closer to the true theology and its derivative ethics than any Church group.

Leaving aside the larger question of finding the true Biblical theology, we shall narrow our attention to the systems of Christian ethics which are derived from the various theologies. The question then resolves itself to this: is the true Christian ethics to be recognised as a product of historical development; or is it to be identified with the system taught by any particular sect; or is it to be found only in the interpretations of Christ presented by a few individual men of God.

In the Gifford Lectures for 1935-6, Henson makes out a good case for a threefold definition of the Christian ethics as being both natural, developing, and final.¹

He admits that in some quarters the development has been

¹Henson, *op. cit.*

in the wrong direction, but he maintains that by tracing these lines of development through history we can hope to find some one stream which has accomplished a more mature development than any other. This then would be the true Christian ethics. Henson has given a masterful discussion of this theme: "This morality, we shall maintain, has developed wonderfully in the course of time, yet throughout that development has ever borne the character of an increasingly adequate expression of the principles expressed at the first in the life and teaching of Jesus.¹ 'Christian morality, natural, developing, and final,' excludes the notion of something formal and static . . . and carries the whole inquiry into the realm of life as it has actually proceeded in Christendom."²

In most religions, such an appeal to experience would involve a repudiation of the religious heritage of the group. There would be much dross to cast aside. "To this general experience", writes Henson, "there is one remarkable exception. The morality which Christianity inspires and demands is never left behind by the developing race, but ever moves in front of it like the . . . pillar of Israel's guidance through the wilderness, an ideal and a prophecy."³

This continual progressive maturing of the Christian ethics through the course of history is necessary because of the fact that "the shaping influence of environment continues still to affect the moral judgments and practice of Christians, and will continue to do so as long as the world lasts. Thus Christian morality, while rooted in the past, ever possesses a provisional character, and absorbs into itself new elements from an ever novel experience. . . . Principles, indeed, must needs be unalterable, but not their applications in practice"⁴

The significance of Christianity "has been disclosed gradually, and still continues to be disclosed, in experience. It is both original and eclectic."⁵ "The governing principles of Christian morality have indeed been fixed once for all, but the circumstances of human life, the far-extending ramifications of individual responsibility and the measures of human knowledge vary almost infinitely, and the practical applications of those principles must needs reflect the fact."⁶

"In morals as in polity much was left over for the gradual

¹Henson, *op. cit.* p. 3.

²*Ibid.*, pp. 7, 8.

³*Ibid.*, p. 27.

⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 137, 138.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 138.

⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 145, 146.

determinations of history.”¹ But the area of these determinations will always remain circumscribed. “The norms of right human conduct are on record in the Gospel, which provides a final court of appeal against the delusive casuistries of history.”²

Whenever novel situations and novel institutions develop in the course of history, the problem arises of expressing the Christian ethics in these new realms. “The character of the State”, for example, “has changed. . . . Therefore the free citizen of a democracy has to enlarge his conception of moral obligation by including within it a more extended area of social behaviour, and, as a Christian, he has to discover the bearing of discipleship on his civic duty, and to apply the principles of his religion to the novel and multiplying activities of citizenship. . . . Industrialism . . . in the monstrous forms which, notably in America, it has taken, is plainly challenging the Christian conscience.”³

Titus is in agreement with Henson. “Christian ethics”, he writes, “has never been a closed or static thing. . . . [It] has taken into itself the gains and the insights of continuous experiments in Christian living. . . . There are, however, certain common elements or assumptions, certain basic attitudes which any ethics that can rightly be called ‘Christian’ will include.”⁴ These are, in brief, as follows:

- (1) It must always consider Jesus as its personalisation.
- (2) It must always try to win men to desire a better life; it must be strongly motivating.
- (3) It must always be based on theistic philosophy.
- (4) It must always stress “love for one’s neighbour and the clean heart or the inward side of moral experience”.

Practically all of the systems of Christian ethics which have developed adhere to the above basic points. We must therefore search further for the criteria by which to distinguish the streams of development which most closely approximate a valid application of the Biblical ethics. In an effort to do this, many have appealed to the authority of the Church. If this method is proper, then the problem resolves itself into that of choosing from among

¹Henson, *op. cit.*, p. 148.

²*Ibid.*, p. 151.

³*Ibid.*, pp. 172-4.

⁴Harold H. Titus, *What Is a Mature Morality?*, pp. 64-7.

the myriads of churches and sects the one which embodies the divine authority.

In quoting Matt. xviii. 18 as Scriptural authority for such a procedure, careful discrimination is called for, because much confusion has been occasioned by the fact that our Vulgate and Authorised versions do not accurately render the tense of the verbs. In another publication I have endeavoured to clarify this issue as follows:

When Christ first announced that He was establishing a Church, He made it clear that He expected every corporate decision of that Church to reflect the decisions already decreed in heaven. This is the import of the following statement given not only to Peter as the representative confessor of Christ in Matt. xvi. 19, but also again to the whole Church in Matt. xviii. 18—"Whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall already have been bound¹ in heaven and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall already have been loosed in heaven". In short, the Church should be so in tune with the Holy Spirit that whenever it passes or votes down a motion, that action should be a mere echo of a decision already made in heaven. Though a minority may miss the leading of the Lord, in any spirit-filled New Testament Church the majority vote will nearly always reveal God's will. However, if a Church is so infiltrated with . . . "isms" that this is not the case, it is an apostate Church. Such Churches Christ has disowned. "I will spue thee out of my mouth" (Rev. iii. 16), He declares.²

It is significant that the above Scripture appears in a context in which the discipline of a sinning brother is being discussed. It seems clear that if this Scripture teaches that the Church possessed authority to discipline those guilty of un-Christian behaviour, it must necessarily possess the authority to define the content of the Christian ethics.

It is important at this point to raise the question as to whether this authority was intended to reside in any given Church institution and to be passed down by Apostolic succession, or whether it was intended to reside in any local Church which is properly constituted, regardless of its origin, its place in the succession, and its affiliation.

The criterion in deciding this issue may be taken from Matt. vii. 20, where Christ gives as the test for distinguishing the false prophets from the true the statement that "by their fruits ye shall know them". These fruits appear not only in worthy social projects, but also in the reconstruction of lives and the development of "the fruit of the Spirit" in the

¹Our translations do not bring out the force of the future perfect passive of the verbs "bind" and "loose" as it is in Matthew's Greek. One can scarcely do this adequately without the use of the adverb "already" as in the above translation.

²Lawrence H. Starkey: "What is a Baptist Church?" *Bulletin Los Angeles Baptist Theological Seminary*, Vol. XX, No. 5 (December 1947), p. 3.

individual soul. In the second and third chapters of Revelation, the seven Churches of Asia are each evaluated by Christ. Each evaluation begins with the words, "I know thy works". Difficult though it may be for the layman to work out all the nuances of the Christian ethics, it is simple for him to evaluate the various Churches by their works. Even the heathen possesses enough natural moral consciousness to recognise a Church which is bearing fruit and doing a wholesome work. As in any valid appeal to authority, the credentials by which the true authority may be recognised are capable of evaluation by the amateur.¹ An authority not recognised as such cannot function as an authority.

In evaluating the fruits and works of the various Church institutions, even the amateur will note that no denomination or sect has a corner on the production of fruit. There are some denominations which bear very little fruit, and some which bear much fruit. But there is no Church institution of any proportions among which are not found many individual Churches which are relatively fruitless. Indeed, among the larger denominations, fruitfulness is the exception rather than the rule. It is thus evident that not only a great many Churches, but also many whole denominations have received the treatment which Christ predicted in Rev. ii. 5 and iii. 16: "I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place" and "because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth". They have been repudiated by Christ and therefore no longer possess the authority spoken of in Matt. xviii. 18.

The criterion of fruitfulness thus leads even the amateur to reject the notion that the authority is the special possession of any particular Church institution, and especially of the Roman Catholic Church, and that such authority is passed down by Apostolic succession. If it were the possession of one denomination, we would not encounter the anomaly of many Churches of eminent fruitfulness outside of this denomination, as well as that of many Churches within that denomination showing little fruitfulness. We must therefore adopt the alternative view that "the Church" to which the authority has been committed is any local Church so constituted that it functions as a spiritual unit keenly receptive to the divine guidance spoken of in Matt. xviii. 18.

¹David Elton Trueblood : *The Logic of Belief*, Chap. V.

Such Churches are few and far between. Sometimes there is an inner circle within a large Church organisation which is pure enough to function as such a Church—a true Church within an apostate Church. Of such groups Jesus said, “Where two or three are gathered together *in my name*, there am I in the midst of them” (Matt. xviii. 20). It is from such groups as this that we may look for the true Christian ethics to emerge.

The Christian ethics might then be defined as that body of ethical teachings which emerges after free discussion in a true Church assembly of mature Christians who are prayerfully endeavouring in every modern situation to apply as norm the Christ, as interpreted in the light of a mature theology based upon the Bible.

Some parts of this definition need amplification.

It must first be noted that this assembly should consist of mature Christians. This implies many things. First of all, they must be regenerate individuals in the sense expounded by Paul, especially in the Epistle to the Romans. It is clearly stated in 1 Cor. ii. 14–16 that “the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him; and he cannot know them, because they are spiritually judged. But he that is spiritual judgeth all things . . . we have the mind of Christ”.

Moreover, to obtain the greatest insight into ethical truth, these Christians must be careful students of the Bible and of life. They must have such a thorough grasp of the Bible that they have been able to develop a mature and systematic theology. They should be able to say truthfully, “Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee” (Ps. cxix. 11). They must have studied the Bible so thoroughly as to have acquired a profound understanding of the mind of Christ.

Finally, they must have developed an intimate sensitiveness to the influence of God, through prayer and fellowship with Him, and through a life lived in implicit trust in and co-operation with Him. In the hearts of such Christians an enlightened conscience may be expected to develop—a conscience which fulfils the exhortation of Paul, “Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus” (Phil. ii. 5).

The judgments of such an individual conscience would be adequate in themselves if it were not for the fact that, no matter how devout the individual Christian is, his receptiveness to the guidance described in Matt. xviii. 18 is occasionally hindered

by self-interest and by the uniqueness of his personal viewpoint. It is impossible in this world, while we still "see through a glass, darkly" (1 Cor. xiii. 12), to throw off all prejudice. But the devout Christian will find that this hindrance to the free influence of God is the exception rather than the rule. It therefore follows that in a group of such Christians the majority opinion will practically always be right. Individual prejudices will be cancelled out and the truth will emerge. The exhortation often given by Dr. Sydnor L. Stealey to his classes in the Seminary, "Always check with the brethren", is pertinent here.

Some of these thoughts have been lucidly presented by C. A. Anderson Scott. We must appeal to the "experimental authority," he writes, "the witness of the educated Christian conscience accumulated and tested and developed through many centuries".¹ The Christian ethical principles can be expected to operate only over that area which "includes those and those only who have accepted Jesus as Lord, and find in the God whom He reveals a Father, whose will it is their ambition to discover and to obey".²

"And we do not have to be Quakers in order to follow their method of ascertaining the will of God. All I wish is to remind you of what was St. Paul's belief and seems to have been his experience, that this was the method of ethical discovery, the method of reaching a common mind, which was in fact the mind of Christ, that it was possible to ascertain the Will of God."³

The scholar may reply that this is merely the method of devout scholarship in Christian ethical philosophy—that the scholar can "check with the brethren", indeed, with the greatest saints of all ages, through their writings; that there is no freer interchange of ideas than through the printed page; that there is no wider scope of opinions against which to check one's own view than those found in the literature of the ages.

Truly, such scholarly activity is a very valuable part of the preparation of each individual in the Church. But it cannot entirely supplant the assembly of believers in which, under the inspiration of united prayer, ethical problems are worked out in fellowship together. "Praying always with all prayer and supplication *in the Spirit*, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplications for all saints" (Eph. vi. 18).

¹C. A. Anderson Scott, *New Testament Ethics, An Introduction*, p. 131.

²*Ibid.*, p. 132.

³*Ibid.*, pp. 145, 146.

It is through such a fellowship of prayer in the Spirit that we rise from our own petty individual perspectives and prejudices to heights from which we can see things in the perspective of the Spirit of the living God himself. It is then that Christ's prediction is fulfilled: "When he, the Spirit of truth is come, he shall guide you into all truth" (John xvi. 13).

The implications are clear for those who maintain that they can live just as wholesome a Christian life apart from the Church as in it. Christian fellowship is essential for the discovery of the true Christian ethics. "Let us consider one another to provoke unto love and good works; *not forsaking our own assembling together*, as the custom of some is, but exhorting one another" (Heb. x. 24, 25).

But how may one find this fellowship of prayer in the Spirit? It is found simply by searching for a little group of Christians whose lives manifest the fruits of the Spirit—fruits both in the sense of Christian influence on others and of stable and noble Christian character in themselves.

Fortunate indeed is the one who finds an entire Church which manifests such fruitfulness. The spiritual atmosphere and wise prayer-borne counsel of such a Church fellowship will foster the maturation of Christian character as nothing else can do, for every activity of such a Church will be divinely guided. Blessed is the Church which maintains itself thus pure from all infiltrations of influences alien to this spirit!

But, since most of us have never encountered such a Church, we must be content to find within a larger Church organisation an inner circle which will function as such a pure Church. This group should be free to function unhampered by the less spiritual influences within the organisation. Ideally, voting membership should be confined to these.

But if the Church becomes so apostate that the divine guidance within the inner circle is often overruled by the action of the Church as a whole, the values to be derived from such a prayer fellowship are subverted. "A little leaven leaveneth the whole lump" (1 Cor. v. 6). Such a Church loses its testimony and no longer maintains a witness for Christ. Christ's warning is disquieting: "Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent" (Rev. ii. 5). It is to such a Church that

Christ said, " So then because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spue thee out of my mouth " (Rev. iii. 16).

But what of the faithful little inner circle? When Christ has forsaken their Church, shall they remain within its doors? If they can obey the command of God to " purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump, as ye are unleavened ", the Church can be restored. But often there is no choice but to follow the command of 2 Cor. vi. 17: " Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing, and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty ".

In these days of continually spreading apostasy, when pure Churches are so few and far between, and when subversive influences penetrate even into the exclusive upper room, it is becoming increasingly true that the Christian who seeks to conform his life to the true Christian pattern must seek the divine guidance and power in prayer fellowship with a little group of separated Christians whose one consideration is loyalty to Christ whatever the cost may be. It is from such a group that the true Christian ethics can best emerge. Would that all Christians might mature in such sweet fellowship!

LAWRENCE H. STARKEY.

*Baptist Theological Seminary,
Los Angeles.*