Essays in
Evangelical Social Ethics

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Using the Bible in Ethics

Basic Assumptions

I START WITH THE ASSUMPTIONS (A) THAT *SCRIPTURE HAS something relevant to say on the subject of ethics,* and (b) that *as evangelical Christians we are bound by the authority of Scripture.* Both these propositions need a little amplification.

(a) The Bible is certainly very much concerned with ethics, that is to say, with the ways in which goodness and righteousness should be shown by individuals and groups in their inter-relations. Indeed, so great is the stress in the Bible on ethics that it has been possible in the past for Christianity to be regarded as not much more than a code of morality with a certain dash of piety tossed in to give it a faintly religious aroma, and in the present for the admitted vertical dimension to be transmuted into horizontal terms: to love God is nothing but loving your neighbour. That both of these viewpoints are ill-conceived does not alter the fact that there is sufficient morality in the Bible to give them a semblance of credibility.

(b) As for the authority of Scripture, this is more questionable in the Christian world at large, although it is accepted without much argument by Evangelicals. I will simply comment that even among non-evangelicals there remains a lingering suspicion that the Bible is authoritative; sermons are

still based on biblical texts, and if a preacher or scholar dis-
agrees with what Scripture says, he usually feels compelled to
produce some good reasons for his disagreement. On the
other hand, Evangelicals sometimes do merely lip service to
the authority of Scripture, and they have their own way of
wriggling out from under it when they find it disagreeable.

Problems in Using the Bible Today

What then are our problems in using the Bible in ethics?

1. The first of them is that *the ethical problems which con-
front us today may not be directly presented in the Bible*. This
may happen in several ways, of which I offer one or two
examples.

First, there is the development of *new scientific techniques*
which were not envisaged in biblical times. These arise par-
ticularly in the area of birth — the use of contraceptives, the
practice of artificial insemination by husband or another
donor, the possibilities of so-called test-tube babies, the prob-
lem of abortion, the potential of genetical engineering, and
the like. We cannot simply read off answers to such problems
from the Bible.

Second, there is the development of *new structures in
society* which were not envisaged in biblical times or appear
only marginally. The Bible does contain some teaching on the
Christian and the state, but that state is usually a monarchy
or empire or oligarchy; sometimes the monarchy is presented
as a theocracy. The question of the obedience of the in-
dividual to a state which is a democracy is scarcely raised, nor
is the general question of whether one type of state is
preferable to another. The problem of the participation of the
individual in the processes of government scarcely arises.
Other structures are not mentioned. We hear something about
master-slave relationships and commercial relationships, but
the existence of trade unions does not arise (the silversmiths'
guild at Ephesus (Acts 19:24f.) was more probably an
employers' federation), and we hear nothing of multi-national
companies and the problems of loyalties that they raise. 'You
cannot serve two masters', said Jesus, but many people can-
not avoid the competing claims of different masters.

Third, there is the recognition of the so-called right of
groups to achieve their aims by *methods that involve conflict
and the use of violence* in the broadest sense. Trade unions

employ industrial action in order to achieve their aims by compelling employers or the government or the public at large to give them what they want. On a wider level armed revolution takes place in some countries in order to achieve a change of ruler; this was not of course unknown in the ancient world, but is it reckoned with in New Testament ethics?

Fourth, there is the problem of *the Christian living in a state which follows standards different from his own.* If he is involved in the life of that society, how does he reconcile the performance of his Christian duty with his public duty? For example, a social worker may privately believe in the sinfulness of divorce, but may be expected to recommend it as a possible solution in cases of marital conflict. A person who believes in forgiveness of one's enemies may find himself acting as a judge and unable to forgive the convicted criminals who appear before him, or as a soldier under compulsion to kill or maim the enemies of his country.

2. The points I have discussed so far are for the most part examples of problems that arise because we live in a different world from the biblical world, and hence have to reckon with situations that are not the object of ethical discussion in the Bible. Another set of problems arises from *the character of the biblical revelation.*

First, even in terms of its own time *the Bible is not an ethical textbook*, attempting to cover systematically the legal, social and ethical problems of its time. Obvious evidence of this point is the way in which the Jewish teachers found it necessary to clarify and up-date the pentateuchal legislation so that it would work in their own situation. The New Testament teaching is also incomplete, and its detailed discussions are confined to a handful of topics, presumably the ones found most pressing in the early days of the church.

Second, the biblical teaching is given very much *in terms of divine revelation*, with a certain amount of application of principles found elsewhere in Scripture to provide for new situations, a certain amount of appeal to 'nature' or natural law, and a certain amount of appeal to commonsense, custom and the like. All this raises the question of *the justification of a Christian ethic*. Suppose that a Christian wishes to take a stand on adultery in a secular society. What the Bible gives him is a categorical, divine condemnation. Does he justify the wickedness of adultery in a secular situation by appealing to the divine fiat? Or does he attempt to show, in a manner which may go beyond biblical teaching but

has some basis in it, that adultery produces undesirable effects in society and thus in effect try to show why God legislated against it? In short, how far can an appeal to a divinely revealed ethic cut any ice in a society which disputes the authority of God or the Bible? Can the biblical basis of morality be authoritative for people who do not accept the authority of the Bible?

Third, there is the hermeneutical question of *whether biblical ethics are intended to apply to mankind in general*, to a state which acknowledges the authority of God and/or the Bible, or merely to the godly individual. Consider again the case of divorce: is our problem simply that Jesus' prohibition of divorce applies to his followers, and that a different standard is countenanced for society at large? In fact, different sections of biblical teaching may be meant for different constituencies, and we have the problem of whether it is all meant to be universally applicable in the modern world.

Fourth, there is the question of *the permanence of the various aspects of biblical ethics*. This problem arises especially in relation to the Old Testament law parts of which are explicitly said to be no longer applicable in the New Testament era, such as the sacrificial legislation, the rules for hygiene and tithing. The New Testament writers regarded some parts of the Old Testament as still binding upon Christians, as Rom. 13:8-10, for example, makes clear. But how does one differentiate? The old distinction between moral, ceremonial and civil laws is a loose one, and I can see no evidence that it is a biblical distinction. But the same problem also arises in respect of the New Testament teaching on ethics: how much of this is intended to be of permanent and universal applicability, and how much is meant for specific people in particular circumstances?

3. A further set of problems may be broadly called *hermeneutical*. These arise at various levels.

First, there is the *exegetical* problem of determining precisely what a given biblical text *meant* for the original readers. There can be difficulties of text and vocabulary, sentence construction and so on — all the problems that arise in an exegetical discussion. Along with this there may be the question of different understandings of the text at different times. We can distinguish in theory between the significance that a given text in the Old Testament may have had for the original hearers or readers and the significance which it had when read by Jesus or the early Christians who proceed to use

the text in some way in their own teaching. I think that it would be true to say that the primary application which Paul makes of Deut. 25:4 in 1 Cor. 9:9 is a different one from that which Moses intended his hearers to make of it.

Thus even within the Bible itself we find the beginnings of my second problem which is that of *determining the significance* or application of the text to our own situation. You will note that I am being careful with my terms here. Contrary to the view of some interpreters I am assuming, along with E. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1967), that we can distinguish between the meaning and the significance of a text, the former of which is fixed and, in theory at least, objectively determinable, while the latter may vary according to the situation and character of the receptor of the text. A text has one meaning, but may have varying significance. (This way of putting it is no doubt a simplification, and a certain amount of clarification and qualification may be called for, but I feel fairly confident that the principle is basically a right one.)

Third, for most simple folk, among whom I should number myself, the significance of a text flows out of its meaning. That is why, for example, biblical interpreters in general repudiate the allegorical interpretation of non-allegorical texts, since the allegorical interpretation assigns to the text a significance which bears little or no relation to its original meaning and significance. But problems arise when *the meaning of a text may be unacceptable to the modern interpreter*. This can happen in various ways. If we were to read in an ancient text 'Thou shalt commit adultery', we would respond in all probability by rejecting the suggestion as immoral. If we know that the statement is from a secular source, or that its author is a wicked person, we have no hesitation in rejecting the command. If we do not know anything about the source, we draw the conclusion that it must be a wicked person who wrote it, and in both cases we act in this way because the text conflicts with a moral standard that we have come to accept. We may, of course, adopt a more sophisticated approach. We may ask *why* the author made this statement. I shall let the cat's head out of the bag by reminding you that this statement does actually occur in an early printed book, and that its cause is nothing more than a printer's error. But it is also possible that a writer may make the statement to shock us, and to make us ask ourselves why we assume that adultery is wrong so that we may perhaps come to a better-grounded

understanding of a principle that we have accepted without thinking very deeply about it; or perhaps again a writer may believe that in certain circumstances, or rather (to use the trendy word) in certain 'situations', adultery is right, and be trying to persuade us accordingly. We then consider his arguments, assuming that he does develop and defend his statement, and assess them by our own moral standards. And we feel free to accept or reject the statement, letting our own conscience be the ultimate arbiter. But now, having let the cat's head out of the bag, let me allow its body to follow by reminding you that my text 'Thou shalt commit adultery' is in fact found in an early edition of the Bible. True, it is nothing more than a printer's error, but what do we do with other statements of a similar kind when we find them as a genuine part of the Bible? I open the Old Testament almost at random and discover that during the conquest of Palestine Joshua fought against Libnah, 'and the Lord gave it also and its king into the hand of Israel; and he smote it with the edge of the sword, and every person in it; he left none remaining in it' (Jos. 9:30). Plainly Joshua and the author of this text thought that it was the Lord's will that the people of Libnah should be massacred (see Deut. 20:10-18), and that the Lord enabled Joshua to carry out the massacre. There is no problem if we read about something like this in an ancient historian; but it is a problem when we read something like it in the Bible and find that it goes against our moral sense. Here the meaning of the text seems to be morally unacceptable. (I am aware of the reason given for this kind of genocide in Deut. 20:18; but is it a principle on which modern Christians would feel able to justify the practice?)

Fourth, we have the problem that *the thinking of the Bible may not correspond with ours.* There is the case in 1 Cor. where Paul commands that a certain person who has committed incest is to be 'handed over to Satan' for the destruction of the flesh at a solemn church meeting. Later in the same epistle he comments on the possibility of members of the church having fellowship with demons by participating in pagan cult meals, in the same way as they can have fellowship with the Lord in the Lord's Supper, and he intimates that God may act in judgement against those who thus provoke him to jealousy. Indeed he says that disrespect for the Lord's Supper has led to the illness and death of some of the members. Whether or not we accept this way of thinking in theory, the vast majority of us certainly do not accept it in

practice. Excommunication may happen, but I have never heard of a modern church in this country actually handing over one of its members to Satan, and I do not think that any reputable evangelical pastor has ever suggested to a grief-stricken widow that the reason for her husband's sudden death was that he had provoked the Lord to jealousy or had partaken of the sacrament in an unworthy manner. I suggest to you that our practice speaks more loudly than our possible private beliefs in such matters as these. In practice we do not believe that this kind of thing happens, and we certainly do not behave as if we believed it. There is a different kind of thinking at certain points in the Bible.

Fifth, there is the problem that *the teaching in the Bible may vary in its different parts.* I have spoken of the legitimacy of the total ban placed on pagan populations in Joshua. But we have only to turn to Amos to find stirring denunciations of exactly the same kind of conduct committed by pagan nations, and there is not the slightest doubt that had contemporary Israel acted in the same way Amos would have been as fearless in condemning it as he was in inveighing against the injustice that existed in the commercial and social life of the people. There are differences of level and content in the ethical teaching of the Bible, and in the understanding of God's will that lies behind the ethical teaching.

All these points build up to a situation of considerable complexity, and it is time now to consider what may be done in the light of it.

Some Contemporary Approaches

I turn therefore to a listing of *some possible approaches* that arise in dealing with the problem of using the Bible in ethics.

1. *Extreme biblicism* takes the Bible literally and typifies the popular understanding of 'fundamentalism': all the Bible (with the exception of certain parts of the Old Testament) is true and prescriptive on the same level. This is the sort of approach which has led, to cite some of the more extreme cases, to the prescription that women must wear their heads covered at worship, or to an insistence on the capital punishment of murderers, or to a refusal to take the oath in a court of law.

Its shortcomings are manifest. First, it is *tacitly selective* in its approach to the Bible. It accepts certain prescriptions and

not others. Second, it is often *guilty of inadequate exegesis,*
since it tends to be wedded to an unscholarly approach to the
text. Third, it can produce *ethical results which are out of
harmony with modern ethical insights.* There is of course
nothing wrong with that: a biblical ethic may sharply chal-
lenge modern ethical systems where these fall short of the
divine will. But my point is rather that the biblicistic
approach may lead to ethical prescriptions which are out of
harmony with an approach based on the Christian church's
development of the biblical teaching: for example, modern
rejection of capital punishment may arise from a develop-
ment of biblical teaching regarding the dignity of man, the
possibility of divine forgiveness, and so on. Put otherwise,
the biblicistic approach fails to appreciate the character of the
Bible which is such that certain parts of the biblical teaching
may render other parts obsolete for the present day: the
generally recognised abolition of certain parts of the Old
Testament law in the light of the New Testament revelation is
but one aspect of a wider phenomenon.

2. The opposite extreme is typified by D. E. Nineham's
book on *The Use and Abuse of the Bible.* Here what is
emphasised is *the cultural gap between the thinking of the
biblical world and the modern world,* and it is evident that for
Nineham this gap is so great that the Bible can scarcely be us-
ed at all today. The whole of the book is a development of
this theme. I do not want to go into the book in detail. It
must suffice to raise the fundamental question whether the
gap is as great as Nineham makes it out to be. His criterion
appears to be that what is unacceptable to modern man is of
no direct use today. But one might observe, first, that the
thinking of Christians is in fact to a large extent already
determined by the thinking of the Bible, so that it might be
hard for them to distinguish between the biblical and other
influences upon their total world-view. It seems possible to
achieve a biblical world-view which will at the same time do
justice to the insights of modern science. It is in fact the task
of systematic theology to do precisely this, and it is somewhat
sweeping to declare in effect that the venture is an impossible
one from the outset. Second, one must insist that the biblical
world-view may act as a challenge to the beliefs of so-called
modern man. If modern man thinks of himself as judging the
Bible in the light of his own beliefs or even of his own
agnosticism, he may find that the Bible is calling his own
outlook into question and pointing to dimensions of reality

of which he is unaware. One can point out, for example, how Christian thinking brought a needed challenge to the male-dominated society of first-century Judaism, and performs a similar service today, and that the fundamental challenges to Nazism and to racism generally have been based on a biblical outlook.

3. Another type of approach, which recognises the sort of problem raised by Nineham, and is indeed probably the source of his approach, is that of R. Bultmann and *the demythologising school.* This approach attempts to take what is expressed in the mythological language of the first century and translate it into another type of language which can speak meaningfully to modern man. The aim is a positive one, and perhaps we all practise it to some extent. Thus, if the biblical writers did in fact think of heaven as being 'up there' and of Jesus as literally ascending on a cloud that could take him all the way to heaven, we would most of us argue that this was an acted parable, and that in reality Jesus was moving to another dimension of reality. What I want to suggest is that we have perhaps reacted against a fundamentally valid insight in Bultmann's treatment because of three possibly extraneous factors. One is that Bultmann's approach was linked to *an extreme historical scepticism* not only about the miraculous elements in the biblical narrative but also about the presentation of Jesus and the early church in general. This scepticism is completely unjustified, and there is good reason to adopt a much more favourable attitude to the historicity of the documents. A second factor was Bultmann's *total rejection of the supernatural* which led to denial of the miracles, the resurrection, and the activity of the Holy Spirit. Here, however, is precisely one of the points where the biblical world-view may challenge the modern assumption of a closed universe, and we are not compelled to follow Bultmann here. The third factor is that Bultmann tied his thesis to *the idea of 'myth'*, affirming that biblical concepts were presented in the garb of timebound myths. His idea of what constituted myth was undoubtedly something of a ragbag, and here more careful definition is required. Whether he would have called Heidegger's philosophy a modern mythology I am not sure. Unfortunately, however, he used what is undoubtedly a pejorative term to refer to biblical ways of thinking.

I want to suggest that Bultmann might have done better to speak in terms of models or symbols of reality, and to make the point that what is expressed in terms of one kind of model

or symbol may also be expressed, and perhaps more mean-
ingfully expressed, in terms of other models. There are times
when the older models may be the most appropriate ones for
communication. If a young child who cannot conceptualise
abstractly to any great extent asks me who God is or where
heaven is, I shall not communicate intelligibly with him by
stating that God is the ground of being or Being itself or that
heaven is not capable of being plotted on a space-time con-
tinuum. But if I tell him that God is like a father and that
heaven is 'up there', I shall convey some information to him
that is not totally misleading and which expresses for him, at
his level of comprehension, what can also be expressed in
more abstract terms for those who find the simple models
open to misunderstanding. In other words, the biblical ex-
pressions are valid in their own way, and so are the modern
expressions, although the latter need to be continually tested
and reformulated so that they are accurate translations of the
biblical expressions.

I believe, then, that this may be a helpful approach, and I
am suggesting that in fact we often practise it even though the
concept of demythologisation may be anathema to us. But it
is only fair to point out a difficulty. Whereas this approach
can take care of biblical concepts such as heaven and God
which lie outside our space-time frame of reference, *it is not
clear what we are to do with points where the Beyond im-
pinges upon our frame of reference.* Here I am thinking of
things like demon possession or the appearances of angels
where the biblical concepts take on historical form. Put
otherwise, it may not be too difficult to regard the angels in
heaven as pictorial representations of the glory of God, and
of his power and love streaming forth; it is more difficult to
transpose the actual appearance of an angel to Zechariah in
the temple or to Mary into the story of the development of an
inward conviction about the purpose of God. Any attempt to
use the transposing of models as a refinement of the Bult-
mannian programme which avoids its manifest shortcomings
must find a satisfactory answer to this difficulty.

4. In some of his writings J. L. Houlden stresses *the variety
of ethical positions* in the New Testament and the impossibility
of discovering any norm. Houlden illustrates this by looking
at two or three areas of New Testament ethical teaching and
shows the existence of development and variety. The sort of
conclusion that may be drawn from this type of approach is
that the Bible shows us examples of ethical thinking that may

be helpful but cannot be normative. We may see in general terms that ethics must be theologically based, but not much more than this.

5. A somewhat similar type of approach is to be found in J. T. Sanders who finds that *most of the New Testament ethical teaching is tied to outworn theological concepts* and cannot be made the basis for modern thinking: Jesus' ethics, for example, are based on the imminence of the kingdom of God, and stand or fall with the fulfilment of his expectation. Faced by such problems, writers of this outlook tend to investigate whether there is any general ethical principle which informs New Testament teaching as a whole and which appears to be in harmony with modern ethical consciousness. Sanders comes near to saying that the New Testament says nothing distinctive about ethics, and falls into the trap of thinking that what it says is therefore valueless. Other writers identify the principle of love for one's neighbour as the basic principle which comes to expression, sometimes imperfectly, in New Testament ethical teaching, and then claim that we are thrown back on this principle as our basic guide with which to approach modern problems.

The questioning of Houlden's and Sanders' position must take place at an exegetical level. I would query it at various points. First, we would want to ask *whether the different elements in New Testament teaching are so irreconcilable with one another.* May not the differences be due to the influence of different circumstances? Second, I would certainly want to differ from Sanders in *his understanding of the eschatological teaching of Jesus and the New Testament writers* which seems to be decidedly faulty. Third, I would assert that while the New Testament does take over statements common to secular ethical systems this in no way diminishes their value or their authority. Sanders is right to ask what is distinctive in the New Testament understanding; he is *wrong to imply that anything that is not distinctive is lacking in value.*

However, the positive value in this approach is that it alerts us to the need to account for the variety in biblical teaching and to see whether a fruitful synthesis is possible.

Towards an Evangelical Approach

Against this background we now turn to consider *the*

evangelical discussion of hermeneutics which has been conducted by A. C. Thiselton, and which I have attempted to develop in my own way in an article in *Third Way*. The essence of this approach is to suggest that when we come to a biblical exhortation *we must inquire into the underlying theological and ethical principles* which are expressed in it, and then proceed to work out how to translate those principles into appropriate exhortations for today.

If we adopt this approach we can easily see how much exhortation is the practical expression of concern and love for one's neighbour.

A simple example would be the incident of footwashing in Jn. 13 where Jesus tells his disciples that they ought to do to one another what he has done to them (Jn. 13:14f.). There are some Christian groups which follow his command literally, but the practice is not general. The changed conditions of our culture mean that footwashing does not have the necessity, the significance, nor even the convenience which it had in first-century Palestine. It is, however, abundantly plain from the context that what Jesus was commanding his disciples to do was to display humility and mutual love and one appropriate way of doing this in the first century in Palestine was by performing this service. So the principle in the action is apparent, and we are to fulfil that principle by showing humility and love in service for one another. We may feel perhaps that we ought to find some modern equivalent to the action which Jesus chose as a real example of humble service and as a symbol of what we should be always ready to do in other ways, but in fact we have not done so, and perhaps if we did have such a symbolic action we might fall into the temptation of thinking that in performing it we had fulfilled our Christian duty. For what it is worth, however, I suggest that in a culture where the automatic dishwasher is not yet the common status-symbol of middle-class Christians, guests should relieve their hosts of the task of washing up after partaking of a meal.

This is a comparatively simple example where we begin from a biblical exhortation, analyse it to find the basic principle expressed, and then examine our culture to find appropriate ways of expressing the exhortation. In principle we need to do this with all biblical ethical teaching.

Let me now make some comments on this method, especially in relation to the problems and approaches outlined in the earlier part of the paper.

1. This approach to biblical ethical teaching *takes the authority of the Bible seriously.* Even where the text prescribes something that seems to be strange to us, we must still wrestle with the text to discover what it is really saying and then apply this to our own cultural situation. In this way the whole Bible will continue to speak its own word into our modern situation, and it will continually challenge the accepted life-style and easy assumptions of modern society. The biblical ethic will continue to find creative application.

2. This approach to biblical teaching *takes the variety in modern situations and cultures seriously.* What is appropriate in twentieth-century Britain may not be appropriate in other places and times, and our principle recognises that this is so; the significance of Scripture for each individual situation must be carefully worked out. There is nothing new about this concept; we implicitly recognise it when we admit that the same sermon may not meet the needs of different congregations.

3. This approach allows for the application of the biblical material to situations that are not specifically envisaged in the Bible, or to problems that do not receive sufficiently detailed attention. The task of the biblical moralist is *to extrapolate from Scripture to the particular ethical exhortations appropriate in different situations.* To be sure, there is a problem here. It may not be easy to start from the modern situation and discover what biblical teaching is relevent to it. The appropriate biblical principles may be locked up in material that at first sight has little or no resemblance to the modern problem. We must have a thorough general knowledge of the biblical material and the principles which it enshrines in order to have the teaching resources to apply to our contemporary problems.

4. In view of the differences between the biblical situations and problems and our own ones the common factors will be found in *principles that can be applied to both types of situation*, principles of sufficient generality to be applicable in a variety of circumstances. Often these principles may be clearly apparent and lie, as it were, on the surface of the text, so that we can do a fairly straight application to the modern situation; at other times, we may have to burrow more deeply in order to find them. Obviously many modern situations may have close biblical analogues; in such cases application is simple, although we must be careful not to draw hasty, superficial analogies. My concern is to draw attention to the areas

where at first Scripture seems to have nothing to say to us, and to claim that it does in fact have relevant teaching.

5. By this method we can overcome the cultural gap at one level. We are in effect carrying through a transformation of biblical teaching similar to that practised in the kind of 'evangelical alternative' to demythologising that I have described earlier. *We are no longer forced to take literally commands which are no longer applicable in changed circumstances.*

6. In the same way, we may have *an answer to the problem of the alleged lack of consistency in biblical teaching*. The existence of different law-codes and varying ethical commands may be simply the result of different application of the same basic principles in different situations. Two points arise:

(i) *Are the biblical ethical principles* underlying the surface application *consistent with one another?* Or do the differing applications reflect inconsistent principles?

(ii) Are the biblical principles reducible to, say, one basic principle, which would be that of love for one's neighbour? If so, do we need subsidiary principles, or can we dispense with them?

Paul certainly claims that the second part of the decalogue is reducible to the one commandment to love one's neighbour, and indeed he goes on to claim that if there is any other commandment it is summed up in this one (Rom. 13:8-10). *This does not, however, mean that the individual commandments can be dispensed with*; on the contrary it would seem that we need to be reminded what love means in concrete situations, and indeed what love itself means. For this we need guidance, and I would claim in broad terms that we need to be reminded about the character of man as a creature made in the image of God and as the sinner for whom Christ died, so that we may know how to love people as people. We also need the biblical doctrine of the community so that our love will not be purely individualistic but will take account of God's plan to create a people bound together by mutual love.

7. What I have said indicates that the Christian concept of love is *derived from the Christian revelation of God* and his will for his people. In other words, the command that we should love God is prior to the command that we should love our neighbour and gives content and meaning to it. We have,

therefore, a hierarchy of commandments, to love God, to love our neighbour, and to do so in specific ways. It can, therefore, be said that the principles which we shall expect to find underlying biblical ethics will arise out of the biblical revelation of God's love and in his commands to us to love him and one another. It is for guidance in the practical out-working of these commands that we turn to biblical ethics.

Biblical ethics thus arise out of biblical theology. The nature and force of the commands arises out of the doctrine of God and the world which lies behind them. Their validity is therefore that of the biblical revelation itself, and a discussion of this point would lead us further afield than our present limited topic.

Nevertheless two further questions which arose from our preliminary discussion must be briefly answered.

8. *What is the status of biblical ethics in relation to secular-based ethics?* Humanists believe in the primacy of love and care for human beings as human beings. Can we not take our stance on that principle, and so seek common ground with secular moralists, and leave out the theology? Very often in practice we do this. We argue the case against euthanasia, for example, on general grounds rather than because we believe that God has forbidden us to take life in this way. But we should, I think, want to argue that the status and nature of persons is difficult, if not impossible, to uphold without the Christian basis, and that it is our duty to stress this in the long-term interests of ethics, even if we may ally with other defenders of what is right or argue against what is wrong on grounds that are less directly theological.

9. *Is progress in ethical thinking possible?* The familiar example is the way in which slavery is tolerated in the Bible, although the Bible contains the doctrines which were ultimately seen to render slavery unacceptable. In the same way, parts of the Bible may tolerate genocide, but the Bible as a whole contains the principles which render genocide unacceptable. The problem has two aspects. First, there is the presence in the Bible of divine commands to perform acts (such as genocide) which are unacceptable in the light of later biblical teaching on the love of God for all men. Second, there is the question whether specific commandments may not be regarded as examples of the law of love which are no longer appropriate and can be disregarded. In other words, might it not be possible for crucial biblical principles to be dismissed as being simply time-bound applications of the

biblical principle of love? It might be claimed, therefore, that my method is an example of 'thin-end-of-the-wedge-ism' and fraught with danger. However, I should want to argue against this rejoinder and protest that the existence of difficulties and risks is no argument against a method; an extreme biblicist approach runs the opposite danger of demanding absolute obedience to time-bound commandments, and this, one might say, is a case of 'thick-end-of-the-wedge-ism'. So far as the other point is concerned, that of attributing unloving commands to God, the problem is again wider than the question of ethics, and I submit that it is one for general theology.

I have not been able to tackle all the problems raised in my opening survey, but perhaps sufficient has been said by way of elucidation of a possible answer to the question of how we use the Bible in ethics. In effect I have concentrated on how to interpret the Bible; the problems that arise in applying it, thus interpreted, to contemporary ethical issues would require another paper or series of papers.

Reading List

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Questions for Discussion

1   In what ways can we commend a biblical ethic in a society which does not accept the authority of the Bible?

2   Can any guidance for modern warfare be drawn from Deut. 20:10-18?

3   Is it true that 'certain parts of the biblical teaching may render other parts obsolete for the present day'?

4   How big is the cultural gap between the biblical world and the modern world? How would you counter the claim that it is so great that biblical teaching has largely lost its relevance for today?

5   Discuss the validity of the process of extracting ethical principles from biblical commands, as outlined in the closing part of the essay.