CHRISTIAN ETHICS
RONALD PRESTON

CHRISTIAN ethics can most simply be differentiated as the way of life appropriate to those who accept the Christian faith. However, in the course of nearly two thousand years Christianity has become a worldwide protean phenomenon. Therefore there are many points of view from which Christian ethics could be analysed, and many ways in which its history could be charted. This account is written by one who can reasonably be said to be in the mainstream of Christianity, as it has been historically expressed. So the plan of this article is to begin with an overall view of the phenomenon of Christian ethics, then to deal with its foundation in New Testament times in the ministry of Jesus and the interpreter of Jesus of whom we have most evidence, St Paul, and conclude with a brief mention of criticisms of Christian ethics made in recent years.

I. SURVEY OF CHRISTIAN FAITH AND ETHICS

The Christian faith, as its name implies, is specifically related to Jesus Christ. It can be said to rest on two presuppositions. The first is the reality of God. But when the question is raised, what sort of God? (since there have been many and diverse gods in human history), the second presupposition is that God is as disclosed in the ministry of Jesus Christ. This has become a single name in common usage, though the term Christ is rooted in the Jewish faith within which he lived. It refers to an expected Deliverer who would be sent by God to put the world to rights. The earliest Christians were those Jews who believed that this had indeed happened in the ministry of Jesus.

The Jewish faith is a strongly ethical one, quite unlike the various mystery religions which were current in the Roman Empire at the time of Jesus. So it is no surprise that the Christian faith is also strongly ethical. Its sources are found first of all in the Bible. The Old Testament is seen as preparing for and being fulfilled (though also in many respects negated) by the ministry of Jesus; the New Testament is seen as a witness to the life, death, and triumph over death of Jesus, and to the new community, or People of God, which came into existence as a result of his ministry. Experiences after his death led the closest disciples to worship God through him, an extraordinary thing for strictly monotheistic Jews to do; and that is why the Christian church commonly ends prayers with the phrase ‘through Jesus Christ our Lord’. However, even the term ‘resurrection’ which the Christians used to interpret Jesus’ triumph over death is drawn from the vocabulary of Judaism in the last few centuries BCE.

Initially the traditions about Jesus were transmitted to and within the new Christian congregations by word of mouth, and in ways relevant to their situation. Later they were incorporated into the four gospels, each author having his own theological stance. Mark is the earliest, about forty years after Jesus’ death. Prior to

that we have letters from St Paul to various churches, several of which he founded. These cover both his basic understanding of Christian faith and ethics, and his answers to specific ethical problems which had arisen in the life of these young churches.

It took three or four centuries before it became quite clear which books would be regarded by the Church as included in the Canon (or Rule) of Scripture, and thus in the Bible as we know it. So the sources of Christian ethics also include the tradition of ethical reflection in the community of the Church down the centuries as it was brought to bear on the changing situations it faced. And the data themselves of these problems became another source of Christian ethics. Underlying all is the conscience (or power of reasoning on ethical questions) which Christians share with all human beings.

The questions which had to be raised ranged from the intimately personal to the complexities of economic and political life, including those of war and peace. A classic typology of five characteristic attitudes to the whole realm of human culture which continually appear in Christian history is that of Richard Niebuhr (Christ and Culture, 1951). These are (1) Christ against culture, a kind of otherworldly pietism; (2) the Christ of culture, a Christianity which casts a gospel glow over the existing order and hardly challenges it; (3) Christ and culture in paradox, which makes a sharp separation between God’s kindly rule in the Church and his stern rule (for the sake of order) in public life; (4) Christ above culture, meaning a triumphalist church which seeks control over public life; (5) Christ transforming culture, a leaven in the lump of personal and public life which allows for a legitimate autonomy of secular disciplines and seeks to influence but not necessarily to control institutions. All five positions refer back to the same biblical material showing how important is the way it is decided to move from the Bible to the modern world. These five types have usually not been exemplified in totally pure ways; they are what the sociologist Max Weber called ‘ideal types’, in which an attempt is made to distil the distinctive elements and different tendencies in each. But it is suggested that since they have reappeared so constantly in Christian history each is likely to have some basic cogency. For instance the Christ against culture type speaks powerfully when Christians find themselves against hostile and oppressive governments; or perhaps a small minority in a particularly alien environment. However, this is not to say that all five are equally plausible. All of them originally developed against the background of a social order relatively stable compared to that which the world has known since the scientific and technological changes which we call the Industrial Revolution. This has produced a new kind of civilization, and one involving rapid social change over almost the whole world. Today the fifth type, Christ transforming culture, seems to be much [[92]] the most cogent, and more so than in the days of St Augustine and Calvin whom Richard Niebuhr finds to be two of the most notable examples of it.

This typology illustrates the protean nature of Christianity. Beginning as a reform movement, associated with a charismatic figure in the Jewish countryside, it rapidly became a predominantly urban movement as it spread along the great road routes of the Roman Empire. The direct Jewish influence soon ceased (particularly after the fall of Jerusalem to Rome in 70 CE), and that of the pervasive Hellenistic culture increased, with its legacy of Greek philosophy and ethics. After the fall of Rome itself four centuries later, Christianity became heir to the rickety Roman
Empire, and in due course embodied itself closely in the institutions of one civiliza-
tion, that of Europe and its later offshoots in the 'new world'. Christianity has
now spread globally and this presents it with new doctrinal and ethical issues.

Living through these changes, Christianity has split into five broad confessional
traditions, each of which has achieved a certain stability and each with a doctrinal
and ethical style of its own. (1) The Orthodox, primarily in eastern Europe and
Russia; (2) the Roman Catholic, by far the most numerous; (3) the Lutheran; (4) the
Calvinist or Reformed, met with in the English-speaking world in the form of
Presbyterian, Congregationalist and Baptist; (5) the Anglican, to which must be
added Methodism as an offshoot bigger than the parent. In addition there are
hundreds of other churches; a few are historic, like the Society of Friends or
Quakers and other Peace Churches, whilst many are the products of this century,
notably indigenous African churches. The Ecumenical Movement is bringing
greater coherence and mutual understanding into both doctrinal and ethical re-
flexion among this variety, though there remains a sizable minority which is ei-
ther anti-ecumenical or so far unaffected by it.

To come closely to grips with Christian ethics, against this general background, it
is worth noting that the term is commonly used in Protestant circles, whereas in
Catholic ones the more common term is moral theology. There is no agreed differ-
etiation between the use of the terms nor any essential difference in subject mat-
ter. Both are concerned with the two basic issues in ethics, how to act from the
right motive and how to find what is the right action in particular circumstances.
In essence the methods and procedures of Christian ethics are no different from
those of moral philosophy; the difference in Christian ethics is its starting point in
the Christian faith. (Other systems of ethics will have other starting points, either
religious or some form of humanism, for all must have some presuppositions before
they can get going.) It will be found that at many points there will be an overlap
between different systems of ethics, and this is important in a growingly intercon-
nected but plural world whose inhabitants must learn to live together.

That the two basic issues in ethics are right motive and right action seems obvi-
ous, but it is not always realized that they are. For instance Samuel Butler in his
nineteenth-century novel *The Way of All Flesh* has this passage, 'The more I see
the more sure I am that it does not matter why people do the right thing so long
as they do it, nor why they may have done wrong if they have done it. The result
depends upon the thing done and the motive goes for nothing.' St Paul, in [[93]] a
benevolent mood in the first chapter of *Philippians*, seems to take the same view.
He says some people are preaching Christ out of envy but nevertheless he rejoices
that Christ is preached. However, he would not have agreed with Butler that 'mo-
tive goes for nothing'. In furthering action from the right motive Christian ethics
is concerned with what is often called 'spiritual formation'. By that is meant a
growth in character through private prayers and public worship (both of which
involve reflection on the Bible), and discussion with fellow Christians (and others
where appropriate) so that one's insight or powers of discernment deepen. Bring-
ing motivation to bear on particular decisions is traditionally known as casuistry.
This got a bad name at the time of the Counter-Reformation because its aim
seemed to be a series of rules for the evasion of obvious moral duties rather than
to find out and fulfil what was the right action in particular circumstances. For in-
stance mental restriction, equivocation and perjury were said to be legitimate if the
welfare of the person, including honour or possessions, was at stake; whilst the
document of ‘philosophic sin’ held that no action was morally sinful unless the
agent was actually thinking of God at the moment of committing it. Such absurdi-
ties were excoriated in Pascal’s *Lettres Provinciales* (1656) and they were soon con-
demned by the Papacy. It was a passing phase. The abuse of a procedure does not
mean that the procedure is wrong in itself. ‘Casuistry’, whether known by that
name or not, is essential. But it can no longer be tied to the precise demarcation of
sins, associated with the confessional as recent Roman Catholic moral theology
recognizes. Nor is it to be supposed that there are clear, specific, ‘Christian’ an-
swers to all the ethical problems that the world throws up. More likely there is a
range of possibilities, with some ruled out. Recognizing the ambiguities of choice is
part of the task of Christian ethics.

II. JESUS

We turn to the roots of Christian ethics in the ministry of Jesus, especially the
teaching in the so-called synoptic gospels, Mark, Matthew and Luke. The fourth,
John, can best be regarded as a selective and mature series of meditations on the
main themes of the first three, whether the author knew them or only the oral
traditions behind them. The crux of Jesus’ teaching concerns the Kingdom of
God, or the way God exercises his rule as King over the world. Jesus saw it as ex-
emplified in his own life and teaching. He reflected on the traditions of his people
which were available to him through the synagogues as he grew up, and interpret-
et them in a new and original way in terms of his own mission. He saw the weight
of God’s purpose for the world through Israel resting upon himself. The intimacy
of his understanding of God’s kingly rule was highly paradoxical by conventional standards, so he ex-
pressed it less by doctrinal affirmations than by indirect means, parables and pithy
sayings (as well as by choice of actions), related to everyday experiences but de-
signed to startle the assumptions of the hearers and viewers and shift them to a
new dimension. In particular God’s rule is seen not in the punishment of [94]
wrongdoers but in bearing the consequences of their wrongdoing. Equally para-
doxical ethical teaching followed.

It may be asked how far we can be sure that these teachings go back to Jesus. The
broad answer is that the gospels have been put through a more meticulous and
widespread critical examination than any other writings of the ancient world and
that, allowing for elements of uncertainty in places, there is no doubt that from
them we can know a great deal about Jesus’ teaching, even though it has come to
us filtered through the concerns of the earliest Christian congregations. One of
the indirect evidences for this is that two great themes of post-resurrection (Paul-
ine) Christianity, the dynamism of the Holy Spirit and the universality of the gos-
pel were not read back into the life of Jesus but only appear as anticipatory hints
in the written gospels.

What is conduct appropriate to a citizen of the Kingdom of God? Some of it is at
the level of ‘natural’ morality, for instance the Golden Rule, ‘Always treat others
as you would like them to treat you’ (Matt. 7: 12), which is found in some similar
form in other ethics, and which can be taken at different levels provided one is
consistent between oneself and others. Some of Jesus’ words appear to follow ‘nat-
ural' human judgements in offering rewards for good conduct and threatening penalties for bad. We shall return to this. But the distinctive feature of Jesus' ethical teaching is the way it radicalizes common morality. For instance there is to be no limit to the forgiveness for injuries (Matt. 18: 21ff), not on the grounds that it will win over the offender but because it corresponds to God's forgiveness of us. Similarly love of enemies is enjoined (Matt. 6: 14ff) not because it will win over the enemy (although of course it might) but because God loves his enemies. There is to be no restriction on neighbour love (Luke 10: 29ff). Anxiety is the surest sign of lack of trust in God (Matt. 6: 19-34), especially anxiety over possessions. So far from motive not being important provided the right action is done, Jesus was penetratingly critical of the self-love of 'good' people (Luke 18: 9-14), and it is clear from many passages in the gospels that he thought bad people to be not nearly so bad as the 'good' thought them. Underlying all this teaching lies the fact that Jesus was a man of faith (trust). Faced with the ambiguities of existence he looked at the weather, sun shining and rain falling alike on good and bad, and saw it as a sign of the unconditional goodness of the creative power of God. A sceptic would have drawn from the same evidence the conclusion that the universe is quite indifferent to moral worth. In this respect Jesus is an archetype for his followers.

His ethics is very different from an everyday ethic of doing good turns to those who do good turns to you; that is to say an ethic of reciprocity. This is invaluable as far as it goes. Social life requires a level of mutuality on which we can normally rely. One of the perils of international relations is that governments have not sufficient confidence in their relations with one another for mutuality to be relied upon. However, in our lives as citizens we do usually count on it. Some people behave better than the rule of reciprocity requires. Some keep it exactly on a fifty-fifty basis. Some get by with the minimum of co-operation. Some who do not even do that are likely to end in prison. Jesus goes much deeper, explicitly warning against loving only those who love you, and saying that there is nothing extraordinary in that, the Gentiles do it; rather, what do you do more? (Matt. 5: 45ff). He goes beyond the world of claims and counter-claims, of rights and duties or something owed to others, as St Paul clearly sees when in Romans (13: 8) he says, 'Owe no-one anything but to love one another'. Jesus calls for a certain flair in life, a certain creative recklessness at critical points.

It might be thought that another emphasis in the gospels, that on rewards, is incompatible with this non-reciprocal ethic. Indeed it has continually been misunderstood. It is true that there is one passage in the gospels, about taking the lower seat in order to be promoted to the higher (Luke 14: 7ff) which is presented as pure prudential morality, presumably teaching that egoism is self-defeating, as a traditional proverb might. But it is most uncharacteristic. The usual teaching on rewards is found in such passages as Matthew 19: 29, where it is eternal life, or Luke 18: 22 where it is treasure in heaven, and especially the Beatitude in the Sermon on the Mount, 'Blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God' (Matt. 5: 8). This teaching, as that on punishments, must be taken as a statement of fact. In the Kingdom of God there is only one reward whether, as in the parable of the labourers in the vineyard, you have worked all day or began only at the eleventh hour (Matt. 20: 1 ff). The thrust of the teaching is towards a self forgetfulness which results in an unselfconscious goodness. Writers on spirituality often call it disinterestedness. Jesus spoke severely against self-conscious goodness, as we noted when referring to Luke 18: 9ff. In the allegory of the sheep and the goats the
sheep are unconscious of either their goodness or of rewards. The rewards Jesus spoke of cannot follow from the direct pursuit of them. Indeed consciously to pursue disinterestedness is self-defeating. One cannot pursue self-forgetfulness. If God is as Jesus said he is, it must be the case that following his way of life brings us to God; and to turn our backs on it must bring us to destruction, vividly symbolized by the perpetual burning rubbish dump outside the walls of Jerusalem (Gehenna). The fact that one can be tempted to do the right thing for the wrong reason, which was the fourth and most insidious temptation of Becket in T. S. Eliot's play *Murder in the Cathedral*, cannot alter that reality. The reward of God's presence must be for those who follow `the way of the Lord Jesus' for love's sake, not the reward's sake. Indeed only they will be able to appreciate the reward. Whether anyone with full knowledge will turn their back on the vision of goodness lived and taught by Jesus is a question to which we have no answer. If there is a hell of destruction, is it empty?

This teaching on rewards has often not been followed or understood. Almsgiving is a litmus test. Donations and bequests have often been made with the motive of securing God's favour now and after death, and not as a joyful response to a graciousness of God already known.

It is significant that Jesus did not give a precise ruling on detailed ethical issues. When asked whether tribute should be given to Caesar (Matt. 22: 25ff) he said that what was due to God should be rendered to God and what due to Caesar should be rendered to him, without saying which was which. This has had continually to be worked out in varying circumstances. Education is a key area. When asked by two brothers to divide an estate he refused (Luke 12: 14). There is truth in Richard Robinson's contention (An Atheist's Values, 1964, p. 149): 'Jesus says nothing on any social questions except divorce, and all ascriptions of political doctrine to him are false. He does not pronounce about war, capital punishment, gambling, justice, the administration of law, the distribution of goods, socialism, equality of income, equality of sex, equality of colour, equality of opportunity, tyranny, freedom, slavery, self-determination or contraception. There is nothing Christian about being for any of these things nor about being against them if we mean by `Christian' what Jesus taught according to the synoptic gospels.'

Some have thought that the passage in the Sermon on the Mount concerning `turning the other cheek' is an injunction to pacifism as a political technique (Matt. 5: 39ff), but this is to ignore its literary character as well as the nature of Jesus' ethical teaching. It occurs along with the command to pluck out an eye or cut off a hand rather than fall into evil and also to give your cloak as well to anyone who asks for your coat (and thus be naked, for only two garments were worn). Like paradox, hyperbole is a way of giving concreteness to abstract ideas. The passage is neither for nor against pacifism as a political technique; Robinson is right.

Divorce is the one apparent exception to the fact that Jesus did not give detailed ethical rulings, but it is very doubtful if it is so. The key passage is Mark 10, 112 which deals with God's basic intention for marriage, without any direct reference to ecclesiastical still less state, law. In Matthew 5: 32 and 19: 9 this is modified to include a clause forbidding divorce except on the grounds of porneia, usually translated as adultery. There has been an immense discussion of these texts. Apart from the inherent improbability that Jesus would give a detailed rule on only one issue, it seems clear that Matthew has made him arbitrate between the two rival con-
temporary rabbinic schools of Hillel and Shammai on what justified divorce in terms of the Mosaic ruling in Deuteronomy 24:1.

The fourth gospel reflects in its own way the distinctive features of Jesus' ethical teaching. There is no ruling on any specific issue. The concentration is on the radical challenge Jesus brings to accepted ways. All is darkness except the white light focused on him, and through him on his intimate disciples. Indeed mutual love in the first instance is restricted to them, but it is only a provisional restriction, for the world is to be saved and not abandoned (17: 20ff). Love in word, will and action is stressed, even as a condition of knowledge (7:17). There is a parallel here with classical Marxism, which has been picked up by recent liberation theology, that only those who are actively committed to the cause of the poor will understand the Christian faith. It is certainly the case that Jesus challenged society's standards by the standards of the Kingdom of God in his attitude not only to the poor, but to heretics and schismatics (Samaritans), the immoral (prostitutes and adulterers), the politically compromised (tax collectors), society's rejects (lepers), those whom society neglected; and to women as a sex.

What is the meaning of love to which Jesus referred when he said that the Old Testament law (Torah) could be summarized in two commandments, love to God [97] and to one's neighbour as oneself? (Matt. 22: 34ff). Without going into a detailed word study, it is well known that the one English word love covers several different Greek words, notably eros (a yearning for satisfaction at any level up to the heights of beauty, truth and goodness), philia (friendship), and agape. This last was a relatively colourless Greek word which Christians took over to express the heart of Jesus' teaching. The two loves are not univocal, for adoration and worship are involved in our attitude to God, but not to our neighbour. Briefly, love of neighbour means being responsible for our fellow human beings, not because of their idiosyncratic qualities but because of their humanity as made in the image of God (Gen. 1: 22). It does not depend on natural affection in the one who loves nor natural attractiveness in the one loved. It does not imply identical treatment, but putting oneself in the neighbour's shoes. It is not a question of what you would want if you were in the neighbour's shoes. It does not mean submission to being exploited; for one thing it would not be for the good of the neighbour to be allowed to exploit you. Nor is it in the first instance concerned with self-sacrifice; it is service to the neighbour, not a loss to the self which is important. Indeed an affirmation of the self is needed. Those who hate or despise themselves cannot love their neighbour. It is pride, sloth and anxiety which are the enemies of the self, and thus the enemies of agape.

When more than two people are involved the expression of agape involves being fair to each of them. Questions of corrective and distributive justice are in the background of the New Testament, but the relation of them to agape is not systematically worked out because it is not a systematic work on ethics. The focus is on the new community of the church. Response in neighbour love to the love of God requires life within a community of love, a fellowship of repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation. The New Testament is very rich in its picture of the church in this respect, and very sharp in its criticism of the church when it fails to be such a community. But questions of justice remain. Suppose, for instance, parents have two children. They love both equally; but children of the same parents can differ greatly and it is still necessary to be fair between them. If this is so in the
intimacy of family relations it is just as necessary and far more difficult to arrive at what is fair, in the wider collective relationships in which humans are involved. These extend even to issues of war. St Thomas Aquinas’ brief discussion of the rudiments of a ‘just war’ doctrine occurs in the framework of his treatment of love. (Summa Theologiae, 2a, 2ae, q.40 articles 1-3.)

The relation of justice and love is complex. It quickly brings in questions which are discussed in moral philosophy, like the place of special obligations. At least it must be said that love presupposes justice; it cannot require less than justice even if it transcends it; otherwise it degenerates into sentimentality.

Love as motivation does not give detailed content to ethical decisions. That requires knowledge and discernment, a combination of skills and perceptiveness. A love which is unwilling to be formed in this way and is content to ‘mean well’ is irresponsible and potentially dangerous. Some of the worst sins against love have been perpetrated by those who ‘meant well’.

One theological tradition, the Lutheran, has particularly emphasized the gratuitous and unceasing love of God, his ‘amazing grace’, which is not dependent in any way on the merits of the loved one. It does this because it wants to remove any possibility of human boasting, any trace of a religion of works which thinks it can earn acceptance by God, that a credit balance of meritorious deeds is a prior condition of being ‘right with God’, rather than the Christian life being a response to God’s prior graciousness. In a major modern work, Agape and Eros, Anders Nygren ends by comparing human beings to tubes or channels through which God’s grace flows to the neighbour. Something has gone wrong when humans are compared to tubes. Rather they are called to share in God’s non-reciprocal love which yearns for a response from the neighbour but does not give up when it fails to elicit it. In this it differs from friendship, which is more mutual and changeable, and needs agape to save it from self-centredness. Eros also, which can move from the instinctive level of sexual libido to the highest levels of aspiration, needs to be set in the context of agape to save it from self-centredness.

The Church has had trouble in holding to this radical understanding of love. It is focused in the question of how to interpret the very radical sayings found in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7), the most considerable collection of Jesus’ teaching. Several ways have been adopted, all having the effect of neutralizing these radical elements and bringing them nearer to common-sense morality. One has been to say that Jesus expected the imminent end of the world and that the ethic was meant only for the short time left. This is probably correct about Jesus’ expectation, but it does not follow that the ethic is irrelevant now that the world has not ended. Another way has been to siphon off the more radical elements as ‘counsels of perfection’ to which a few are called. They are usually to be found in monasteries and nunneries, having taken vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, and are called the Religious with a capital R. The rest are called to follow the basic ethical ‘precepts’ which are binding on all. One way of expressing this is to say that one must be just and one may be loving. It is a kind of Honours and Pass course in Christian living. A serious feature of it has been to make the married state a second best. Whilst Religious communities still flourish, they are rarely advocated to-day, even by their members, on such grounds. Still another way is to make a sharp separation between the realm of love in the church and the stern realm of justice and order in the world, or to say that the purpose of Jesus’ radical
Christian Ethics is to convict us of sin and prevent the development of spiritual pride. None of these attempts will do. The radical elements in Jesus’ ethic are an authentic corollary of the radical stance of the Kingdom of God, calling us past the necessary struggles with justice to a fuller realization of love. It is the more challenging because the more serious sins feed on moral achievements, not on the more coarse and flamboyant ones. Both with individuals and collectives corruption can feed on moral achievement, so that if there is a moral collapse it can be greater than if the achievement had been less. Nazi Germany is the great example of this in the twentieth century. Hence the question has been raised, Is there any point in such a radical ethic which is always being ignored? Would not a less drastic and more practical one be better? It is a question which is frequently asked in this century by adherents of other faiths, such as Jews and Muslims. [99]

One of the first Jewish writers to make a sustained effort to get behind the polemics and persecutions of the centuries and take a new look at Jesus was Joseph Klausner (Jesus of Nazareth, 1925). He has had a number of successors. This is a remarkable change. Christian scholarship at the same time has become alert to the deep Jewishness of Jesus. Klausner’s verdict is that all Jesus’ ethical teaching is to be found somewhere in Jewish sources but nowhere else gathered together without any commonplace matter. However, it is an ethic for the days of the Messiah and impossible short of them. It breaks up the family, ignores justice, and would disrupt social stability. More than that it has been ignored by all except priests and recluses; and in its shadow every kind of wickedness and vice has flourished. How much better the practical corporate ethic of Judaism! For instance the Rabbis would have been likely to agree with Jesus that ‘the sabbath was made for man and not man for the sabbath’ (Mark 2: 27), but they wanted a rule for breaking the normal sabbath rules and this he did not give. This is not because life can be lived without rules or codes, like an ex temporare speaker, but because Jesus’ ethic is in a different dimension. It always seeks an adequate expression of agape whilst transcending particular instances of it.

To these charges Christians tend to make two replies. One is to say that it is indeed fortunate that Jesus did not give us detailed ethical instructions or we would be forever trying to relate them to very different and changing cultures and involved in tortuous exegesis in doing so. Second, and more important, they stress the relevance of an impossible ethic. Its point is to bring us to see that the reward of loving is to learn more of the depth and range of love, so that even those who we consider the most ‘saintly’ are those who are most conscious of the gulf in their lives between what is and what ought to be the case; and this not because they are morbid but because they have grasped more of the inexhaustible nature of love.

Such a perspective is meant to be a spur to action, with both a personal and social reference, and not an excuse for a spurious otherworldliness (as distinct from a hope beyond this life which is involved in following Jesus’ understanding of human destiny). To paraphrase the rather prosaic words of a modern New Testament scholar, the Christian ethic does not provide a law for either the individual or society, but creates a tension which has transforming results. (Jesus the Messiah, William Manson, 1943)

That is how it should work out. What did the earliest Christians make of it? Here our best witness is St Paul; and his later years lead on to post-apostolic Christianity and the latest books of the New Testament.
St Paul is a controversial figure because of the controversies in which he was involved, and those which have focused on him since, not least at the time of the Reformation. Because of his Pharisaic background and his split from it he cannot be considered apart from the question of the self-definition of the Christian community as against Judaism, particularly after the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in 70 BCE. By then the number of Jews in the Christian community was small. The kind of character that Jews and Christians admired was very similar, and hence Christianity attracted admirers of Judaism in the Gentile world because it commended the virtues of Judaism but without circumcision and the food laws. The dominant gospel picture of Jesus’ controversies with the Pharisees must not be taken as a complete picture; indeed there are indications in them of a positive relationship between him and some Pharisees. The Pharisees were not a uniform party. In an effort to find and follow God’s way in every detail of life they were argumentative. Moreover arguments were not finally resolved; minority opinions continued as part of the tradition. Some Pharisees were like the dominant gospel picture, but it has been a Christian travesty to say of all of them that they were content with a religion of outward observance of moral rules as a means of establishing their moral worth in God’s eyes, whereas Jesus probed to inward motives. This travesty was intensified by Luther’s struggle against the spirit of late medieval Catholicism, as he encountered it, which often became attributed to Pharisaism. Wherein, then, lay the difference between Jesus and the various parties of Judaism, particularly the Pharisees? In the first place it was their exclusiveness, and in the second their understanding of the range and depth of love was not radical enough. But with respect to St Paul he was a complex thinker and these issues are still much discussed and by no means resolved.

It is clear, however, that St Paul grasped that the basis of Jesus’ ethic is a joyful response in life to the overflowing graciousness of God. ‘Freely you have received, freely give’ (Matt. 10: 8). The Kingdom of God in the first three gospels is witnessed to in St Paul’s letters as the new life in Christ, which he understood as essentially a community experience. A typical expression is ‘We who are many are one body in Christ’ (Rom. 12: 5). The ‘law of Christ’ is Christ himself (Rom. 10: 4). The Kingdom of God is both a present reality and a leaven in the lump of history (Rom. 14: 7), and yet it is still to come in its fullness (1 Cor. 15: 24 and 50). Love is the cornerstone of it. The characteristics of love are spelled out in 1 Corinthians 13 which is somewhat like a Stoic diatribe but quite different in spirit. Jesus was the model for this passage. St. Paul does not directly quote incidents from his life but assumes they are known to his hearers and readers by referring in passing to his birth, teaching, crucifixion, burial and resurrection. He assumes that the young Christian congregations know in their own experience that the work of Christ has led to an outpouring of God’s spirit which has broken down barriers between people which humans have created; between Jews and Gentiles, men and women, slaves and free. He uses this shared assumption to chide them when they fail to express this reality. In Romans 13 he sums up the Christian ethic as one of love, as has been mentioned.

Moreover what makes St Paul so important for us is that he is the first Christian of whom we are aware who was called upon to bring his understanding of the Christian ethic to bear on particular problems thrown up by the churches, as
when a deputation from Corinth puts to him various questions about marriage which he answers in 1 Corinthians 7. In dealing with them he shews on occasion, as we would expect, that not every corner of his mind was instantly converted to understand all the implications of his new faith. Some of his teaching with respect to women is incompatible with his best insights. Too often the church has taken his instructions as a permanent rule so that, to take a trivial example, it is only in this century that women have been able to enter churches without hats because of what St Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 12.5ff. Again as we would expect, his advice has to be put in the context of the situation of the early Christians in the first century AD. His expectation of the imminent end of the world influenced his advice on marriage. However, he took a typically robust attitude in urging the Christians to get on with their daily lives and work just because time is short, and not sit about waiting for it to end. By the close of the first century the church had made a major change of view in this matter (though the attitude has continued among some to this day). The fourth gospel re-interprets the return of Christ and the end of time as the gift of the Spirit within the community. Cosmically St Paul accepted the current view that superhuman powers affect human affairs (though the exalted Christ had now drawn their sting). These ideas have to be translated by us into a realistic sociology. As to earthly powers, Christians were in no position to alter human institutions or affect public policy. In this situation St Paul takes a favourable view of the pagan Roman state, of which he was proud to be a citizen and to which he had reason to be grateful. The abolition of slavery does not enter his view, though he does show how Christians can transcend its structures (note the letter to Philemon). In short he gave to people oppressed with a fear of change and of a fate decreed by the stars a present security and a future hope because of his belief in the lordship of Christ.

The problem of Christians in the later years of the first century, as of all Christians since, was to sustain the radical rigour of the gospel ethic without an expectation of the imminent end of time. The ongoing life of the local churches produced a number of standard problems, particularly in the realm of marriage and the family. In the later books of the New Testament we find codes of conduct inserted, often taken from Greek ethics and Christianized with biblical illustrations. Examples can be found in Colossians (3. 184J), Ephesians (5.12-6.9), 1 Peter (2.iiz-3. 12 and 5.1-5), Titus (2.1-3.2), and 1 Timothy (2.1-6.19). There is here a difference in emotional tone as well as in content from that of earlier letters; piety and perseverance are stressed, and love becomes one virtue in a list of others. There is no reason to object to codes of conduct to cover standard situations, provided the radical ambience of the gospel is kept. However, some of it was lost. The church is settling down too easily in the current social and political order. An unfortunate feature of some of the codes is a stress on the duties of the `inferior’ to the `superior’ party, wives to husbands, children to parent, and slaves to masters, without any corresponding stress on the duties of the `superior’ party. Such an ethic of patience and submission is hardly adequate for our world, which is more and more conscious of personal responsibility and the need for social structures which encourage it, or even in some situations of oppression begin to make it possible for the first time.

However, periodic persecutions prevented the church settling down too easily, and we can find elements of a challenge to those who tried to do so in these later New Testament writings. It takes the form of a rigorist reaction against
mere conforming, in the shape of references to sins which cannot be forgiven. We do not know what was the ‘sin unto death’ of John 5: 16 (perhaps apostasy), but we are forbidden even to pray for anyone who commits it. In three places Hebrews refers to sins which cannot be forgiven (6: 4-6; 10: 26-31; 12: 16ff), whilst Revelation never considers that any of those who suffer the fearful penalties of John’s visions will repent, nor hopes that they will; rather it exults in their punishment. These two tendencies continued. Conformism in the church, especially after the ‘conversion’ of Constantine, as it is usually referred to - it is not clear how far he was using Christianity as a weapon in his political struggle - led to the rigorist reaction of the Desert Fathers, and then to the beginnings of communal monasticism and to the double standard of counsels of perfection and precepts. Thus by the end of the New Testament period the creative tension established by Jesus had largely been dissolved into disparate elements, though it has always remained as a source of renewal in the church, challenging distortions.

IV. CRITICISMS OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS

Problems of moving from the Bible to the modern world continue to be explored, as do the different traditions in thinking about ethical issues which have developed in Christian history. Notable among these has been the incorporation of Natural Law thinking into Christian ethics; on this see Article 11, MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE ETHICS, and Article 13, NATURAL LAW.

It is necessary, however, that mention should be made of some common contemporary criticisms of Christian ethics.

(1) Christian ethics is intolerant and breeds intolerance. There is much evidence to support this charge. All the major confessional traditions have at times persecuted each other. Indeed it was only at the second Vatican Council (1962-5) that the Roman Catholic Church finally abandoned the position that ‘error has no rights’. Anti-semitism was also a major disease of Christendom (though also found outside it). Toleration came into the ‘Christian’ world largely through the influence of those who were appalled by Christian intolerance, and Christians learned through the sceptical tolerance of a man like Voltaire to distinguish tolerance from an indifference to truth. There have always been Christians who understood this. Bitter lessons this century have brought it home.

(2) Christian ethics is immoral because it works on a system of rewards (heaven) for good behaviour and threats (hell) for bad; and not on doing what is right simply because it is right and for no other reason. The question of rewards has already been mentioned and seen to be overdone. (See also Article 14, KANTIAN ETHICS.)

(3) Instead of leading to self-fulfilment Christian ethics is repressive. Most modern psychological analyses of human growth and development advocate as an ethical norm an altruistic, autonomous character. They do not look to Christianity to produce it; rather they think it leads to defensive and restrictive behaviour, and to a static social conformism. This is connected to a further criticism. [103]

(4) Christian ethics keeps people at an immature level because it leads to stock moral reactions regardless of circumstances. It prevents people from learning from experience. Many immature people are ‘religious’. At its worst Christian ethics has certainly had this effect, but at its best its effect has been quite the reverse, as in its
traditional teaching on conscience. The traditional teaching has been that it is reasons which justify moral judgements, and conscience has been the name given to the power of reason and discernment brought to bear on moral issues. This is so central to the integrity of the person that the teaching is that 'conscience must always be obeyed'. In saying this no claim is made for the infallibility of conscience, or for more certainty than the very nature of the uncertainties of ethical decisions can provide. The teaching is accompanied by a call for the formation of an informed and sensitive conscience by living in the Christian community, and making use of the resources for the education of conscience which have already been mentioned. Differences between Christians on ethical issues often arise from different weights attached to these different sources. Sometimes this whole teaching has been suspect as leading one to put one's own unregenerate judgements in the place of the guidance of God. Hence sometimes conscience has been seen as the 'voice of God' within the self, but the problems and dangers of this, as of all forms of intuitionism, are obvious. (On intuitionism see Article 36, INTUITIONISM, and Article 40, UNIVERSAL PRESCRIPTIVISM.) Once the complexities of the moral life are faced, the traditional teaching on conscience is seen to lead to vigorous, creative and hopeful Christian living.

Within the spectrum of attitudes among Christians to Christian ethics there is a strong, though not universal stress on the dignity of the human person, the reality and universality of the community of the church, and a concern for its contribution to the holding together of humanity in a pluralistic world. Christianity must not add to its divisions, but exert a healing influence. These convictions are in conflict in many respects with the 'possessive individualism' which has had a wide influence in Western circles in the late twentieth century. It has produced in some circles a version of Christian ethics in its own image, but one which is not accepted by the majority of contemporary Christian ethicists, certainly not those influenced by the Ecumenical Movement. Rather there has been a growing emphasis on giving preference to the needs of the poor. These two emphases, concern for the unity of mankind and for 'a preferential option for the poor', mark the end of the embodiment of the Christian ethic in Church and State which for centuries characterized its heartland, Christendom.

References

Aquinas, Thomas: Summa Theologiae.
Manson, W.: Jesus the Messiah (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1943).

Further reading


——: *A Survey of Recent Christian Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).


What is Christian ethics? If you were to compare Jesus’ moral teachings with Greek moral philosophy, the closest relations are with virtue theory, very similar to that of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Virtue theory focusses on doing good to be a good person for one’s own psychological well-being, Jesus focusses on being a good person to do good for one’s relationship with God. Christian ethics as a separate discipline emerged comparatively late in the Orthodox tradition. After the Great Schism of the ninth century, the penitentials continued to be an important genre of moral teaching in the East. Despite some legalistic and ritualistic tendencies, Orthodoxy’s emphasis on spirituality and striving for perfection served as a safeguard against a minimalistic legalism.