



Situation Ethics

In the mid 1960's a style of ethical thinking was developed in Western Churches usually known as Situation Ethics. In essence it claimed to be an ethic governed by the principle of love rather than the restrictions and inadequacies of law. It claimed to be concerned for people rather than principles. Consequently, it was said, there may well arise situations in which love demands that laws be broken. Since then the effects of Situation Ethics have been seen in many parts of the world. The principles involved in this repudiation of the place of divine law were in existence long before the 1960's and will remain long after the expression 'Situation Ethics' has an antiquarian ring about it. Moreover, the place of the law in the teaching of Scripture is one of the essential issues of biblical teaching. For these reasons we are printing the following unpublished article from the pen of the late Professor John Murray. While specially relevant to Situation Ethics, Professor Murray responded to that position in a way which underlines a number of vital biblical principles. Consequently what he says has a wider relevance than the subject to which he addressed himself in this paper.

The classic exponent of situation ethics is Joseph Fletcher. But we are only to regard Fletcher as perhaps the most forthright and uncompromising representative of an ethic sponsored by men who have been in the forefront of theological thought in the present generation.

Situation ethics, it is claimed, is: *empirical, fact-founded, data conscious, inquiring ... It is 'casuistry' (case-based) in a constructive and non-pejorative sense of the word. We should perhaps call it 'neocasuistry'. Like classical casuistry, it is case-focused and concrete, concerned to bring Christian imperatives into practical operation. But unlike classical casuistry, this neocasuistry repudiates any attempt to anticipate or prescribe real-life decisions in their existential particularity ...* **Christian** situation ethics has only one norm or principle or law (call it what you will) that is binding and unexceptionable, always good and right regardless of the circumstances. That is 'love' — the **agape** of the summary commandment to love God and the neighbour. Everything else without exception, all laws and rules and principles and ideals and norms, are only **contingent**, only valid **if they happen** to serve love in any situation. Christian situation ethics is not a system or programme of living according to a code, but an effort to relate love to a world of relativities through a casuistry obedient to love. It is the strategy of love ... Love is for people, not for principles; i.e., it is personal — and therefore when the impersonal universal conflicts with the personal particular, the latter prevails in situation ethics.¹

Indeed, 'in situation ethics even the most revered principles may be thrown aside if they conflict in any concrete case with love'.² The refrain is that love is the '**only regulative principle**',³ the only universal, the only absolute, the one and only thing '**intrinsically good**'.⁴

The practical application of this is apparent. Love can justify anything.⁵ 'There is no justification other than love's expedients'.⁶ Extramarital sex and even adultery may be the dictate of love. Murder may likewise in a concrete situation be the demand of love. 'If a lie is told unlovingly it is wrong, evil; if it is told in love it is good, right ... Maybe you lie, and if so, good for you if you follow love's lead ... If love vetoes the truth, so be it. Right and wrong, good and bad, are things that happen to what we say and do, whether they are veracious or not, depending upon how much love is served in the situation'.⁷ Not one of the ten commandments has an inviolable and invariable sanction, not even the first. The first commandment, it is insisted, 'is an indicative, not an imperative'.⁸ 'We could make a formal but false apostasy under persecution for the sake of dependents or the life of an illegal underground church. If the First Commandment is meant to prohibit atheistic or non-Jahwistic declarations, then it becomes like other laws and can be broken

for love's sake'.⁹ One other example will have to suffice. *'In a particular case, why should not a single woman who could not marry become a "bachelor mother" by natural means or artificial insemination, even though husbandless, as a widow is.'*¹⁰

1. Appreciative assessment

- A) With respect to the emphasis upon the concrete, the contextual, the situational, the existential, it should be recognized that situation ethics has no monopoly of this demand. No ethic that is serious ignores the relevance of the particular situation to any and every ethical decision pertaining to it. The most orthodox ethicist in the classic tradition of Christian thought is aware of and sensitive to the complexity of life and to the distinguishing particularity of each concrete situation. He knows the necessity of relating the law of God to the diversified circumstances of each situation and he is acutely conscious of the obligation to bring the revealed will of God as the good, the acceptable, and the perfect, to bear upon the endless variety and indeed complexity of life situations. In our Reformed tradition there is what is properly named casuistical theology. It is thus called because it is concerned with cases in their particularity and multiformity and should not in any respect be associated with casuistry in the depreciative sense of the term. It is precisely in the variegated conditions and demands of 'real-life', to use Fletcher's term, that the perfection and sufficiency of Scripture are to be prized. Situations are multiple. But there is no situation for which the Scripture in its fulness and richness does not provide the guidance of solution and resolution if our minds are informed, our hearts responsive, and our wills inclined.

There is not a moment that the revealed will of God does not demand, not a moment that it does not fill with meaning. And it is the prerogative of the Holy Spirit by whose inspiration this revealed will has been given to illumine our minds and constrain our wills so that the Word may dwell in us richly in all wisdom and spiritual understanding, so that we may be perfect in all the will of God. Hence the accent placed by situation ethics on the particularity of life's conditions and circumstances is to be appreciated. But the proponents of this ethic should be reminded that in the most orthodox stream of ethical thought there has been the fullest recognition of this particularity and that the intense awareness of the same has constrained a profound gratitude to God that he in his grace and wisdom has furnished us with *counsel*, infallible and unerring because it is his, adequate to every exigency of life, so that *'the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto every good work'* (2 Timothy 3:17). In other words, it is the baffling perplexity that often confronts us in the complexities of life that compels our demand for wisdom not our own, but which has with it the quality of divinity.

- B) There is an insistence on the part of those espousing situation ethics that I must endorse with the fullest approbation. It is the forthright rejection of a widespread notion that in certain situations we have to choose the lesser of two wrongs, often spoken of as the choice of the lesser evil. Fletcher rightly criticizes Barth, Bennett and Bonhoeffer on this score. They have taken the position that something intrinsically wrong may be dictated by compassion and love, but, though wrong, is excusably wrong and may even be demanded. This is characterized by Fletcher as *'theological-ethical nonsense'*.¹¹ He insists that *'whatever is the most loving thing in the situation is the right and good thing. It is not excusably evil, it is positively good'*.¹²

There are two observations called for. (i) As will be dealt with later, there can be no agreement with Fletcher respecting the criteria by which the dictate of love or, more accurately, the course of love is to be determined. But (ii) there should be no dispute respecting the confusion involved in the dictum of excusable or commanded wrong. It cannot be too plainly affirmed that God's providence never places us in a position in which wrong is justifiable, far less demanded. This would be tantamount to saying that God's providence requires of us the violation of his preceptive will or of his preceptive prohibition. God's providence may impose upon us the choice of one physical evil rather than another and so oftentimes we have to choose the lesser of two non-moral evils. But it is never proper for us to choose the wrong rather than the right. It is as simple as this: we never *have* to sin; we always *have* to obey God.

2. Critique

Abuse of Scripture

Jesus and Paul, Fletcher avers, '*redeemed law from the letter that kills and brought it back to the spirit that gives it life*'.¹³ This is an example of a frequent exegetical travesty of Paul's statement in 2 Corinthians 3:6. It is, of course, true that there can be a formal and legalistic compliance with the precepts of the law that is destitute of the love by which alone the law is fulfilled. This formalism lies close to that which Paul has in view when says '*the law kills*'. For where the attitude of legalism obtains, the law is the minister of condemnation and death. But a contrast between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law is totally removed from Paul's thought in 2 Corinthians 3:6. He is not speaking of the spirit of the law at all, far less of the alleged contrast. In terms of the apostle's indictment of the law as death-inflicting it would be a contradiction to say that the spirit of the law as distinct from the letter gives life. And it evinces the contradiction into which Fletcher's distortion of Paul leads him to endorse the spirit of the law. For his sustained thesis is that law is displaced by love. What Paul is contrasting is not the letter of the law and its spirit — a contrast to be found nowhere in Paul or elsewhere in Scripture — but the law as law ministering condemnation and death, on the one hand, and the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of life, on the other. The denotation of Spirit is incontestably established by verses 3, 8, 17, 18 when he speaks of '*the Spirit of the living God*', '*the ministration of the Spirit*', and '*the Spirit of the Lord*.'

Again, Fletcher's appeal to 1 Corinthians 10:23 (cf. 6:12) where Paul says: '*All things are lawful, but not all things are expedient. All things are lawful, but not all things edify*', exposes the same kind of exegetical violence. '*Nothing makes a thing good*', he says, '*except agapeic expedience; nothing **can** justify an act except a loving purpose ... Love could justify anything. There is no justification other than love's expedients*'.¹⁴ Several observations are necessary in order to place Paul's teaching in proper focus and disclose the fallacies of Fletcher's reasoning.

- 1) Every text must be understood in terms of the universe of discourse. Paul is dealing with the subject of meat offered to idols. His principle is that food is not contaminated by the circumstance of its being offered to an idol and consequently a believer may partake of it and ask no question for conscience sake. There is no law prohibiting the use of such food. It is this that Paul has in view when he says 'all things are lawful'. His thought is as far removed as possible from the universal and all-inclusive. He is not saying that anything and everything is lawful.
- 2) There is the elementary distinction between the lawful and the commanded, between the legitimate and the obligatory both negatively and positively understood. It is lawful to marry but not commanded for all. It is lawful to purchase land and develop it for profit, but it is not an obligation. It is this distinction that underlies Paul's statement. He does not say that he could refrain in the interests of expediency from what is commanded or that it would be lawful to do the prohibited. It is failure to observe these elementary distinctions that underlies the abuse and distortion so apparent in Fletcher. There is not the smallest support for turning Paul's teaching to the service of such an abuse as that it is lawful to do the unlawful.
- 3) In view of this elementary distinction, we may refrain from what is lawful and oftentimes it is an obligation. It is an impossibility for any person to do all that is lawful.
- 4) The apostle's reservation that not all things are expedient and edifying has reference simply and solely to the necessity of denying ourselves the use of certain things that are lawful, in the interest of promoting the well-being of the church. In this case it is the claim of love for brethren weaker in the faith who would be emboldened by the conduct of the strong to do what they are not yet able to do with a clear conscience. They thus stumble by wounding their weak conscience and they sin against Christ. So to draw the inference '*Love could justify anything*' is alien to all that Paul intended. The whole import is that expedience will dictate abstinence from certain lawful things under certain circumstances. Why is it that the exponents of situation ethics do not apply the stress laid upon the particularity of each situation to the exegesis of Scripture and recognize that Scripture also contemplates specific situations and that the universe of discourse belonging to each passage defines the scope of its application? If this

were done they would not claim the support of Scripture for such monstrous universals in total neglect of the elementary canons of hermeneutics.

These examples will suffice to show the looseness, not to mention the perversity, of the appeal to Scripture in support of an ethic which in its fundamental theses goes counter to the whole tenor of biblical teaching.

The central issue

Situation ethics maintains that love is the only absolute, the only universal, that it alone is categorical, and that the only criterion of right and wrong is the loving purpose, that love is the only *'norm or principle or law ... that is binding and unexceptionable, always good and right regardless of the circumstances'*.¹⁵ Since love is personalistic, the touchstone is what *happens* to people, and so we are *'commanded to love people, not principles or laws or objects or any other thing'*.¹⁶

The basic error of this approach to ethics could be stated in various ways. But one way of stating it is fundamental and perhaps the most necessary. It concerns the order in the matter of love. It is admitted that Fletcher enunciates this order, that we are to love God and our neighbour. But the failure to recognize the implications of this order is the fatal deviation from the biblical pattern. Ironically, it is the summary to which so much appeal is made in situation ethics that sets the points for the biblical pattern and for exposure of the fallacy on which the whole thesis of situation ethics is erected. We cannot overemphasize the significance of both the order and the differentiation in our Lord's summary (cf. Matthew 22:35-40; Mark 12:28-31; Deuteronomy 6:4, 5; Leviticus 19:18). *'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God' — 'this is the first and great commandment'. 'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself' — this is the second.* And the differentiation is no less of paramount significance. We are to love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and strength and mind and our neighbour as ourselves. We are not to love our neighbour with all our heart and neither are we to love ourselves in this measure. While it is true that if we love not our brother whom we have seen we cannot love God whom we have not seen, it is in this connection a travesty of our Lord's word to say with Brunner and Fletcher: *'God does not will to draw any love exclusively to Himself; He wills that we should love him "in our neighbour"'*.¹⁷ This mode of statement fails to take account of the *exclusiveness* that characterizes our love to God by the verdict of Deuteronomy 6:4, 5 and reiterated by our Lord himself. It is the exclusiveness of all our heart and soul and mind that God claims for himself in the exercise of love and its corresponding devotion and it is this totality that may not be exemplified *'in our neighbour'*. It is confusion and reversal of this primacy and completeness to suggest that we love God in our neighbour.

The order and differentiation enunciated in our Saviour's summary carry with them further implications.

- 1) We are to bear in mind that our Lord's answer to the lawyer's question was framed in terms of what had been set forth in the law itself. Our Lord reiterated Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. He interpreted these Old Testament passages in respect of the order and primacy involved. But Deuteronomy 6:5 is preceded by Deuteronomy 6:4: *'Hear, O Israel; the Lord our God is one Lord'*. The import is that we are to love God supremely and with an exclusive quality for what he is. The oneness, the uniqueness, the exclusiveness of God in his being, character, and relations demand the exclusiveness of quality, *'with all our heart'*. In a word it is the transcendent majesty of God, and all thinking that is not conditioned by the apprehension of God's majesty is destitute of the one premise indispensable to its Christian character. I submit that the absence to such a large extent of the sense of God's transcendent holiness, that is, the absence of the fear of God as the beginning of knowledge and of wisdom has so perverted the thinking of our time that we are faced with such monstrous pretensions in the name of Christianity. And also I submit that the theses of situation ethics in its rejection of the binding sanction of commandments regulative of love's exercise could not have been entertained or accorded such plausibility if the transcendent majesty of God had commanded and directed thought on the subject of human behaviour. For when God in his majesty claims our thought, love, and devotion, then his revealed will for our conduct is invested with an irresistible sanction.

- 2) If we love God with all our heart, that by which he reveals himself claims our devotion. The law of God is but the transcript of his perfection. The law of God is the character of God coming to expression for the regulation of thought, word, and action consonant with his perfection. God is holy, and just, and good, and for that reason the law is holy, and just and good. And the law of God is not one general principle to cover the situations and demands of life in their diversity and plurality. Life is variegated and complex. And God has made provision for its many sidedness by directions specifically relevant and answering to the multiple situations and relationships. Yes, the law of God is truly situational. Its diversity adapted to the diversity of life is summarily illustrated in the *ten* commandments. But this diversity is fully exemplified in the amplitude of Scripture as a whole as *'the whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His glory, man's salvation, faith, and life'* is disclosed to us. It is an abstraction to speak of conformity to the will of God apart from conformity in the concrete, and therefore conformity to the particularities of God's revealed will as these pertain to the particularities of life in the realism of its diversity. And it is also an abstraction not only contrary (as will be noted later on) to the whole tenor of Scripture, but psychologically absurd to suppose that we can love God and not love his precepts. It is true that love is personalistic. Supremely we are to love God and therein love is intensely personal. But it is nonsense to say that, because so, we do not love principles or laws or objects. I protest that here is an unrealistic and impossible disjunction.
- 3) Ethical thinking today is prepossessed with the horizontal, with inter-human relations. We should not, of course, depreciate in any way the importance of the horizontal; that is the importance of the second great commandment, *'Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself'*. But the question must be asked: Why and how? And the answer is: We love our neighbour because we first love God. This is the answer to both the 'why' and the 'how'. We love God and therefore we are *constrained* to obey his command. We love God and this love to God elicits love to our neighbour. Love for our neighbour is fulfilled in obedience to God's commandment. Hence compliance with a commandment and the exercise of love in its precise terms is in no way inimical to the intensely personal quality of love. On the contrary, it is love in the most intense personal exercise that constrains this obedience. The same logic and progression of thought applies to all the commandments that regulate our relations to our fellow men. In these commandments we have the sanctions of God's holiness, justice, wisdom, and love, and our devotion to God in filial fear and love constrains obedience. It is presumption of the gravest kind for us to regard the dicta of holiness as dispensable, and to suppose that the calculations of love may require their violation is to repudiate the demands of that supreme love which offers to the institutions of God instant and unquestioning faith and devotion. It is in this perspective that the gravity of the situation created by the theses of situation ethics comes to light. It is nothing less than the love of God that is being abandoned, and that, under the guise of love for the neighbour. When the order of love is reversed, not only is the love of God dethroned, but love to our neighbour itself suffers desecration and our neighbour becomes the victim of human calculation rather than the debtor to divine wisdom.
- 4) It is a simple task to demonstrate that the aversion of situation ethics to the regulative force of commandments contradicts the teaching of our Lord and of his apostles. It was our Lord who said:

'If ye love me keep my commandments'; 'If ye keep my commandments, ye shall abide in my love, even as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.'

(John 14:15; 15:10)

And even more pointed is his reference to our present interest in his word: *'He that hath my commandments and keepeth them, he it is who loveth me'* (John 14:21). And did he not say in anticipation of the ethic with which we are now concerned: *'Think not that I came to destroy the law or the prophets:*

I came not to destroy but to fulfil ... Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.'

(Matthew 5:17, 19)

Situation ethics reverses the order of the last quoted verse. And to use the language of John A. T. Robinson, the only ethic for man come of age means that to break the commandments and teach men so is the only ethic for man come of age, and the exponent shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

- 5) If we think of the apostles, none has relayed to us our Lord's teaching on the subject of love to the extent of John. And his three epistles show that he learned the great lessons of love from the lips of his Lord. His first epistle is strewn with the themes of God's love to us, our love to God, and our love to one another. And it is this John who says with his characteristic incisiveness and decisiveness not only:

'And hereby do we know that we know him, if we keep his commandments.'

(1 John 2:3)

But also: *'For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments.'*

(1 John 5:3; cf. vs. 2; 2 John 6)

It is not necessary to multiply references. These suffice. The contradiction is blatant and serves to point up the radical divergence from the total thrust of New Testament teaching, and the iniquity of appeal to a few passages that can be enlisted only when they are subjected to an interpretation that violates the canons of exegesis and their obvious intent. The teaching of our Lord and of the apostles is plainly to the effect that the commandments are regulative and that, as such, they are absolute and admit of no exception, that they prescribe the ways in which love is directed and expresses itself, and that in the final analysis they define what love to God and our neighbour amounts to. In this we must appreciate the distinction between laws imposed by men and the law or commandments of God. The former are necessary and beneficial when instituted in the exercise of lawful authority. But we must remember that human laws however proper may be violated at times in the interests of justice and love. Why? Because they are not perfect and, because so, not absolute. They may be violated and they may be repealed or modified. It is not so with the law of God. And why? Because the law of the Lord is perfect. It is good, the acceptable, the perfect. Therefore neither justice nor love can ever dictate transgression.

In concluding this study it is imperative to reiterate and expand a little what has been alluded to already. It is the desecrations of both justice and the law which the impostures of situation ethics entail in inter-human relationships. The requirements of the revealed will of God exemplified in the ten commandments and particularly, as far as inter-human relations are concerned, in the last seven, are the institutions of human well-being. They are good. They guard and promote justice. And they are the criteria of love. It is God who made man. It is God alone who knows fully what sin entails. It is God alone who knows what is good for man. He guards the paths of justice. Since God is love, he alone knows the true interests of love. Hence only God is competent to determine how all of these — the good, the just, and the loving — are to be conserved and expressed in inter-human relations. This is the rationale of his commandments. It is the presumption of blasphemy, or at least blasphemous presumption, for us to claim that our wisdom by the constraint of love can dictate deviation, suspension, or exception. And not only does situation ethics invade the realm of divine prerogative; it also deprives human kind of the charter of its highest liberty. For the commandments are *'the perfect law of liberty'* (James 1:25). We have to prize the grace, the beneficence of the law of God as that which prescribes without fluctuation the relations of men and women to one another, not only in the obligations devolving upon them, but also in the liberty before God which they enjoy by his institution. In other words, the law is the charter of rights in its prohibitions and prescriptions. What a travesty of what is most precious for men and women to be the victims of what a man or woman may conceive to be the demand of love!

John Murray

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¹ *Situation Ethics*, pp 29-31.

² Ibid, p 33.

³ Ibid, p 61.

⁴ Ibid, p 57.5cf

⁵ Ibid, p 126.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid, p 65.

⁸ Ibid, p 72.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid, p 126.

¹¹ Ibid, p 62.

¹² Ibid, p 65

¹³ Ibid, p 69.

¹⁴ 14Ibid, pp 125 f.

¹⁵ Ibid, p30.

¹⁶ Ibid, p 50.

¹⁷ Ibid, p 55.