

CHAPTER SIX

Christian Morals

ONCE MORE: ETHICS AND MORALS

It can be clear from the preceding chapters that I want to talk about Christian *ethics*. But is it also possible to say that there is such a thing as Christian *morals*? Once again a reminder of the difference: morals is the totality of the traditional and prevalent customs, while ethics is the reflection on those customs.

Suppose it is true that I can reflect on morals in a Christian way, does that then mean that there are Christian morals? Do Christians *act* — that is something quite different from: Do Christians *reflect*? — so differently in this world that there are also Christian morals next to non-Christian ones?

Many answer this question negatively. Here we run up against the question whether or not we can speak about something unique in the behaviour pattern of Christians. Do they go their own way on account of their faith, or do they go along with non-Christians completely?

It is understandable that such questions arise in these very times. Traditional morals are eroding. Not only non-Christians but also Christians express their approval of the new morals. Yes, it is quite striking that people from church circles are front-runners in doubting or rejecting earlier views of abortion, euthanasia, homosexuality, marriage and authority. In his book *Honest to God*, John A.T. Robinson defended the new morality.¹⁷ Scores of theologians and ethicists have followed his example. It is more the exception than the rule that an ethicist still defends positions which were still generally recognized in the church until — shall we say — 1960 but which are now being abandoned one after another.

It was therefore self-evident that the question concerning the *proprium* of Christian morals, as it is called in technical language, would come in for weighty discussion. *Is* there something unique? Or is there at the bottom of the matter just *one* morale for non-Christians and Christians? Should we not be working towards *one* world together for the same human rights, the same freedom from oppression and the same experience of humanity? Can many Christians not easily find themselves at home in reform-plans of a Marxist variety?

Many are willing to admit that Christians have their own special motivation for their acting. Christians act out of faith in God. On account of this faith they are, for example, supposed to be better armed against ideologies than non-Christians. They are supposed to have a better view of the relativity of each situation. They are supposed to know what eschatology is: the future is always different from the present, and this future must be kept open.

¹⁷ John A.T. Robinson, *Honest to God*⁸, London 1963, Chapter 6: "The New Morality."

Non-Christians often know that as well, but Christians *must* know it on the basis of their faith. For that reason they are pre-eminently capable of delivering a critical contribution to the building of a new world. But the *content* of their actions is not thereby any different from those of non-Christians. And that is the issue when morals are discussed, isn't it? What is the result? Are there unique Christian morals, or no Christian morals at all?

WE DO MANY THINGS IN THE SAME WAY

Whoever considers the behaviour of the Christian — and by “Christian” we mean someone who really takes his faith seriously — will notice that he acts the same as a non-Christian in many ways. No one should be surprised about that, because it is clearly supposed or also plainly said in the Scriptures that a good portion of our behaviour is recognizable to the non-Christian. We read that a Christian should not offend either a Jew or a Gentile (I Corinthians 10:32). He ought to be mindful of what is appropriate, not only in the eyes of God, but also of men (II Corinthians 8:21). He must conduct himself properly with regard to those who are “outsiders” (I Thessalonians 4:12). He must behave properly (Romans 13:13), act rightly (I Corinthians 7:35) and provoke no one (I Corinthians 13:5).

Of course, that cannot be done if no clear harmony is possible in the activity of Christians and non-Christians. How would Paul otherwise have been able to be a Jew to the Jews and a Gentile to the Gentiles (I Corinthians 9:20), and even more: everything to everyone (I Corinthians 10:33)? Such statements would not have been possible, had Christian morals stood directly and completely opposed to the morals of the unbeliever. The cross of Christ is a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles (I Corinthians 1:23); but apparently it is also possible to be a servant of Christ through the Spirit and thereby to receive approval from God and respect from men (Romans 14:18). The Christian rules for the home (Ephesians 6:1ff.; Colossians 3:18ff.) and the list of Christian virtues (for example Galatians 5:22 and Colossians 3:12) contain many aspects which can also be found in heathen morals. On account of this much in Christian behaviour was not so foreign to a heathen that he would be unable to bring up some appreciation for it. On the contrary, the behaviour of the Christian can impress the heathen because he has a notion as to what is “virtuous” and “proper.”

We have already seen that the heathen can have the work of the law written in his heart (Romans 2:15). Much of what the Decalogue presents to the Christian is also familiar to the non-Christian for the same reason. He is also often quite capable of distinguishing between good and bad. That is clear from Romans 13 in which the governing authority is called an institution from God, called to punish the wicked and to praise the good (Romans 13:3). But such governing authority — and in Paul's days that meant a pagan one — must also be viewed as being capable of distinguishing between good and bad. It really can manage its function of curbing the lawlessness of men!

In everyday life, therefore, there is much in common between the morals

of Christians and non-Christians. A Christian does not go as a stranger through this world. Even when he holds a special office as an overseer in the congregation, he is recognizable in public. Paul says that he has to have a good reputation among outsiders (I Timothy 3:7).

Apparently things that are Christian are not necessarily at odds with everyday, very common and human things. Friendliness, modesty and many other virtues are immediately recognized. Many things in our life are really so common, that we do not need a bible text in order to know what God wants from us. Only someone involved in an Anabaptist flight from this world, in which by definition everything must be different, is not satisfied with this.

A DIFFERENT INNER MAN

Nevertheless, we would remain at a superficial level if we would say no more. Let us suppose for a moment (even if it is an untrue presupposition, just as will be clear to us shortly) that every deed done by a Christian is also done by a non-Christian. Even then, the total picture of the actions of the Christian would be different. Here we can use the illustration of a *magnet*. The iron filings (to be compared to our individual actions) have nothing striking in and of themselves, but they are organized by the magnet in a particular manner (to be compared to the total picture of our actions). The framework within which the Christian carries out his actions, has become completely different.

We find a beautiful illustration of this in Titus 2:11-14. In this section we are urged to live soberly, righteously, and godly lives. These three terms can also be found in pagan literature. Arranged schematically we can say that *sobriety* concerns moderation in our personal life; that *righteousness* means giving our neighbour what he deserves; and that *godliness* concerns our direct relationship to God. This is morals in a nutshell, with three key-words known among the heathens too. Nonetheless, there is a magnet which arranges the familiar iron filings in a particular way here too. For Paul asks for a sober, righteous and godly life on the basis of the fact that God's grace has appeared, bringing salvation for all men, and that we expect the appearance of Christ. The life of the Christian lies imbedded between *remembering* this fact in the past and this *expectation* for the future. Christ is busy purifying for Himself a special people, zealous for good works (vs. 14).

The completely different character of the Christian lies first of all in the fact that he has received another inner nature. He has come to know Christ and in this way his thinking gets renewed (Ephesians 4:20ff.). His life receives another direction which can be classified as *following Christ*. In this he does not do "strange" things by imitating Christ's life (no permanent home, not married, seeking martyrdom, etc.), but instead he becomes a follower of Christ by seeking the advantage of the other and not his own (I Corinthians 10:32-11:1), by forgiving the other (Ephesians 4:32), by not seeking to escape suffering when being a Christian has that consequence (I Thessalonians 1:6; 2:14). It is a new disposition which characterizes his life: the disposition which

there was in Christ when He, by coming to earth, sought not His own interest, but that of the other (Philippians 2:5f.).

A DIFFERENT APPEARANCE

Now a Christian who receives a new view on the world does no abnormal things. When he accepts the Decalogue as the rule of thankfulness for his life, that is nothing out of the ordinary. But what is normal and what is meant to bring human life redeemed by Christ to new development can nonetheless be unusual in this world, because most men hold to a different style of life. That becomes clearer in several passages in Scripture. I shall mention a couple.

When Paul says that the Christian is “completely different,” because he has come to know Christ, then that differentness does not remain limited to the inward life. The Christian must put off lies, not let himself be carried away by anger, no longer steal, cease complaining, avoid sexual immorality, and be averse to filthy language and drunkenness (Ephesians 4:25-5:21). Earlier he was darkness, but now he is light by his relationship with Christ (Ephesians 5:8).

Anyone, therefore, who pays attention to the way in which the world treats God’s law, can hardly avoid seeing that there are Christian morals next to non-Christian morals. The number of upright Christians may be very small and a great many Christians may have long ago surrendered to morals which can hardly be called Christian anymore. All that does not detract from the mandate and apparently also not from the possibility of Christian morals: blameless and harmless as the children of God in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation in which they shine as lights in the world (Philippians 2:15).

Unmistakably clear is the call in the Scriptures to lead a good life. Who is wise and understanding shows his works in the meekness of wisdom (James 3:13). The good *life* among the Gentiles must be so striking that by closer examination they will have to take back their accusations (I Peter 2:12). Women married to unbelieving husbands can by their *lives* perhaps succeed in winning their husbands for the Gospel without words (I Peter 3:1f.). The good *life* of the Christian can be slandered (and how can this be explained otherwise than that he does *not* live as the Gentile?), but if he goes on with gentleness and respect and with a clear conscience, then he can put his opponents to shame (I Peter 3:16). Such texts teach us two things. Deep in their hearts, Gentiles must acknowledge that Christians display respectable behaviour. And in the second place: the behaviour of Christians is only different and striking, because people in their surroundings want to lead their own lives alien to the service of God. For that reason, the Christian life has its own character.

That has been understood since the very beginning in the Christian church. This is expressed very well in the letter to Diognetus (ca. 150 A.D.). We read there that Christians are different from the rest of humanity neither

by their abode, nor by language or customs. Neither do they reside in their own cities, nor do they use one or another different language, nor do they have a peculiar life-style. But while they live in Greek and non-Greek cities and follow the customs of the land in clothes and diet and in the other matters of everyday life, they nonetheless display a life-style that is puzzling and generally acknowledged to be strange. For, the letter proceeds:

They live in their own countries, but only as aliens. They have a share in everything as citizens, and endure everything as foreigners. Every foreign land is their fatherland, and yet for them every fatherland is a foreign land. They marry, like everyone else, and they beget children, but they do not cast out their offspring. They share their board with each other, but not their marriage bed. It is true that they are "in the flesh," but they do not live "according to the flesh." They busy themselves on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven. They obey the established laws, but in their own lives they go far beyond what the laws require. They love all men, and by all men they are persecuted. They are unknown, and still they are condemned; they are put to death, and yet they are brought to life. They are poor, and yet they make many rich; they are completely destitute, and yet they enjoy complete abundance. They are dishonoured, and in their very dishonour are glorified; they are defamed, and are vindicated. They are reviled, and yet they bless; when they are affronted, they still pay due respect. When they do good, they are punished as evildoers; undergoing punishment, they rejoice because they are brought to life. They are treated by the Jews as foreigners and enemies, and are hunted down by the Greeks; and all the time those who hate them find it impossible to justify their enmity.¹⁸

That hit the nail on the head! For what is abnormal about behaviour which rejects adultery and fornication, in which children are neither abandoned nor aborted, in which homosexual conduct is avoided, the women are as chaste as girls, widows and orphans are cared for, hospitality is given to foreigners, prisoners receive visits and the dead are buried in a honourable way? Repeatedly these and other matters are brought forward by early Christian writers in order to defend their Christian morals as *normal* morals. Yes, they are *different*. The Christian has a different inner life and also a different way of life.

But this being different is the consequence of the aversion there is in a diseased world with respect to the commandments of God. Accordingly, that which is completely normal and human is regarded as being something foreign and uncommon.

A CHRISTIAN LIFE-STYLE

Even though we do not simply place an equals sign between the early Christian church in *her* world and the contemporary Christian church in *our* world, things have basically not changed much. Just as it was possible then to speak of Christian morals, so too it can rightly happen today. Whoever is

¹⁸ *Early Christian Fathers*³, ed. by Cyril C. Richardson, New York 1976, 217.

seized by the Gospel of Christ, will also bring that to expression in his life in actions which distinguish him from non-Christians.

Here we can speak of a *Christian life-style*. By "style," we mean the whole association of expressions and forms, which are characteristic of particular artist, school or movement. Whoever is acquainted with a particular style, recognizes a painter, a building or also a pattern of behaviour. He can say: "This is a Rembrandt," or: "This is a gothic church," or also: "This is a Christian." It is certainly possible that there are impure elements present in a Christian behaviour pattern, just like a gothic cathedral often includes various non-gothic elements in its construction. But if we survey the totality and re-view the whole life (*life-style*), then the stamp "Christian" can be seen on it very clearly.

Let me illustrate that with a number of examples.

1. A Christian believes in God and brings his thankfulness to expression in special forms, for example, by honouring the Sunday, by praying and giving thanks each day, by reading from the Scriptures or by singing psalms and Christian songs. All of this also belongs to the responsible actions of man about which our definition of ethics speaks. One can certainly attempt to classify this as separate behaviour under "worship" and not under "*ethos*," but the two cannot be separated from one another. The issue is whether or not there are Christian morals, a Christian pattern of behaviour. Whoever wants to answer that cannot cut Sunday off from the rest of the week, or act as if prayer before a meal at work or in a hotel is not a very characteristic action of a Christian. This would also be completely in conflict with experience, because Christians are often recognized on account of their church attendance or their boldness in giving thanks before eating while a great deal of mankind neglects to do that.

2. A Christian knows that he may not use the name of God in vain. Further, the whole of his language should be characterized by an antipathy towards such things as complaining, demanding his rights, concentrating on himself instead of on others, the foul language that he hears around himself daily and from which it is often very difficult to distance himself. If he receives the strength to be pure in his language, then he is just as striking as by the things mentioned in number 1.

3. A Christian knows that he must first seek the kingdom of God (Matthew 6:33). In practice, this means that he, depending on the circumstances, will attach greater value to one thing than to another. Possessing money and material goods cannot stand at the top of the list. It is possible that he may give up everything in order not to deny his belief in God. In this manner, thousands of Christians are in prisons or labour-camps, because they know that in following Christ suffering may not be evaded. But even where God does not ask for this martyrdom, there is every reason for the Christian to have different priorities than people around him have. He must do what is good for all men, and especially for his fellow believers in the world (Galatians 6:10). This task of ministering demands much of his time and of his money. Whoever

really takes this seriously exhibits a different life-style than the average man who in this affluent world is determined not to let anything slip away which he can acquire for himself.

4. For a Christian there are no taboos concerning marriage and sexuality, because they are good gifts from God. But he uses them within the boundaries established by God. For that reason, he rejects sexual intercourse before marriage and does not view marriage itself as an experiment, as something which can be dissolved or traded in at will for alternative forms of living together. If he is unmarried or a homosexual, then, in spite of the difficulties, he will resist the temptation of free sexual or homosexual relations.

5. The Christian rejects abortion just as strongly as the early church did. He also does not intend to decide the hour of his death either by suicide or by euthanasia. (Although he does not ignore the problems with which modern medical developments can confront him: prolonging human life artificially instead of healing it.)

These are five points which, in my opinion, are easy to come up with if people ask in what respect Christian morals display their unique features. Here it is also the case that all aspects have to do with the Decalogue, with *both* its tables and with the double commandment of love towards God and the neighbour. That many Christians do not take the above-mentioned points seriously in their lives is no reason to cease speaking about a Christian life-style. Many pass themselves off as Christians without even being one. And though they want to be upright Christians, many others are in *danger of becoming* the victims of a propaganda which would have them believe that modern secularized morals are really quite "Christian."

Even the fact that many non-Christians can sometimes feel at home in the actions and viewpoints listed in the five points above takes nothing away from the right to talk about a special Christian life-style. Again, the issue is not the iron filings but rather the magnet which organizes the whole. And what was also said earlier: a Christian life-style contains no foreign elements, but it is answerable to the law of God which has universal application. What is Christian is normal, truly human. It is no wonder that its power always breaks out into the open. The world can attempt to break loose from God's law in new morals. But the work of that good law cannot be erased that easily, since it is written in the hearts also of those who do not believe in God and in Christ (Romans 2:15).