

CHAPTER FOUR

The Use of The Scriptures

DIFFICULTIES

Whoever believes that Christian ethics is possible, will have to give content to the word "Christian." Why do we find one thing to be Christian and another thing not? If we intend to give an answer to that, we must have a *norm*, a rule by which we measure what is Christian and what is not.

The word norm is derived from the Latin word *norma*, that originally meant "square" — a carpenter's tool used to determine whether the corner of a table or of another object had a good right-angle. The norm is the guideline, the measure, or the rule whereby something is judged to be right or wrong.

Now, we find the norm for Christian ethics in the Holy Scriptures. In them God has made known to us what is good and what He asks of us (Micah 6:8). God's Word is a lamp for my feet and a light for my path (Psalm 119:105). That Word is called useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness, "that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (II Timothy 3:16, 17).

But difficulties begin to arise at this point. Many people justify their actions by appealing to the Scriptures. But they certainly do not always do this in the same manner. The most contradictory standpoints imaginable have been and are defended by an appeal to evidence from the Bible. On the basis of Scripture, slavery has been approved of and rejected. Both obedience to the government and revolt against authority are defended. Also the right to property and the right of expropriation. Opponents and proponents of homosexual relations appeal to the Scriptures. Is it then not a hopeless task to determine who is right? What is actually left over of the *normative* character of the Scriptures?

The answer to this question must be that the Scriptures are misused in numerous ways, but that this misuse does not yet cancel out their proper use. Whoever finds that you really cannot appeal to the Scriptures because there are always people who use them to defend the opposite position, must consider that this is no modern-day phenomenon. In their use of the Scriptures, the Pharisees opposed Jesus and the Judaizers opposed Paul; but the Scriptures were not thereby taken out of the hands of Jesus and Paul. There are difficult passages in the Pauline epistles but Peter disapproves of the "ignorant and unstable" people who distort these letters to "their own destruction," just as they distort the rest of the Bible (II Peter 3:15f.). The Holy Scriptures, inspired by God (II Timothy 3:16), *remain* the Word of God regardless of how many hands may contaminate them.

A *second* difficulty lies in the historical character of the Scriptures. They let us see the continuing history of the salvation of God in Jesus Christ. Not everything which was imposed as a commandment from God upon His

people Israel in the course of this history is still applicable in the New Testament phase. Think, for example, of the agricultural legislation, the ceremonial holidays and the severe regulations for punishment. But what is to be labeled as antiquated and what is still valid in the commandment that God has caused to be recorded in the Scriptures?

There is still a *third* difficulty. Very many ethical questions are concerned with modern developments unknown to the Scriptures. How are we supposed to judge the limiting of the number of children by such means as the pill or sterilization? How about nuclear weapons, transplants and test-tube babies? Reaching for texts is not possible here. Do the Scriptures still have a message in such matters, and if so, how do we then track it down?

HERMENEUTICS

In this chapter an attempt will be made to give an answer to such questions. We are concerned then with the *hermeneutics* of the Scriptures in ethics. The word hermeneutics comes from the Greek word *hermèneuo*, which means “to interpret,” or “to translate.” How do we interpret the Scriptures when we ask for their judgment in ethical questions? How do we deal with the Scriptures if we want to know what God demands of us today?

When I talk about hermeneutics, I proceed from the old meaning of this term: led by God’s Spirit, a believer, may be regarded as being capable of understanding God’s Word. This cannot be done in isolation. I read the Scriptures within the *church*, “with all the saints” (Ephesians 3:18). I believe that the Word of God speaks to me *critically* so that I have to constantly let myself be corrected.

In modern hermeneutics it is usually the other way around, because there hermeneutics is directed to the self-understanding of man. The question then is not what the text — spoken in the past and valid for the present — says precisely, but whether I can expound the text in such a way that it *touches* me.

An example here will make this clearer. If someone no longer believes in the bodily resurrection of Christ from the grave, in His ascension and return, because — as he puts it — a modern man simply cannot take something like that literally anymore, he will then attempt to explain the Bible text in such a way that it is believable within the bounds of *his* understanding.

Precisely the same thing happens to the *commandment* in the Bible. When someone finds the condemnation of homosexual behaviour to be antiquated, he will attempt to interpret the biblical prohibition of homosexual practice in such a way that the prohibition was meaningful *earlier* for the development of man, but is no longer meaningful *today*. Leviticus 18:22, for example, was meant to oppose cultic homosexuality, and homosexuality was not conducive to the necessary increase of the population of Israel. But both issues are irrelevant for us *today*. We could sooner speak about over-population and on that basis homosexual behaviour is actually commendable! Homosexuality may have been able to hinder the development of man earlier,

but it does not do that today. And for that reason, according to the defenders of homosexual practice, the Scriptures do not oppose contemporary forms of homosexual friendship.

It is amazing what kinds of exegetical conjuring tricks modern hermeneutics is capable of performing. The Scriptures must accommodate themselves to modern man, instead of modern man accommodating himself to the Scriptures. Hermeneutics goes from modern man to the Scriptures and not the other way around. Such hermeneutics can no longer allow the Scriptures to speak really critically to modern man.

At the basis of this fact lies the conviction that the Scriptures do not contain divine revelation but rather religious, human experiences. Everything is concerned with man and is anthropologically directed.

Our rejection of this modern hermeneutics is still no guarantee that we will always let the Scriptures say what they have to say to us. Further on I will point out the danger of *biblicism* of which many Christians have been and still are guilty. Someone can sincerely intend to place himself under the authority of God's Word and yet fall into the error of using the Scriptures as if he were a ventriloquist. He considers his actions to be so self-evident that he simply cannot imagine that God's Word condemns them. And in all probability the Scriptures will then say precisely what he *wants* them to say.

A DEFINITION BY KLAAS SCHILDER

The theologian Klaas Schilder (1890-1952) has given a definition of ethics which is an excellent aid in obtaining a good insight into the use of Scriptures in ethics. Somewhat more simply formulated than Schilder did it, the definition reads as follows:

*Ethics is the knowledge of the constant grounds,
the changing dispensations and the relevant, concrete,
definiteness of the obligations which man has
with regard to God's revealed will.⁷*

Let us analyse this definition more closely. It is obvious then that Schilder points out *three* aspects.

1. There are the *constant grounds*. Schilder means by this phrase that in the Scriptures fundamental issues are mentioned which retain their validity in the midst of all the changes. Man is a creature; man (unlike an animal) has been taken up in a covenant with God; man is in the image of God, that is to say, he represents God in this world which he is supposed to rule (Genesis 1:27, 28). God is king; man is regent. However different the form might be in which man — in the unity of man and woman — gives expression to the

⁷ The precise wording in Dutch by Schilder is: "Ethiek is de wetenschap van de constante rationes, de wisselende oeconomieën en de actueel concrete bepaaldheid der obligatie van de wil des mensen tot gehoorzaamheid aan Gods openbaarde wil," *Dictaat Compendium der ethiek*.

stewardship of this world (agriculture, technology, art, etc.), it will always remain his task to display the image of God. He had this responsibility in Paradise; after the fall into sin, in Israel; and today he has it just as well. Here we are dealing with a constant factor which remains effective always and everywhere.

Besides the constant grounds that Schilder mentioned, more could be noted. Think of the Ten Commandments whose validity has not remained limited to just the people of Israel. They form a universal law to which we are also bound today. To be mentioned above all is that Great Commandment of love; love which must mark all our actions.

Since the dispensation of the New Testament we could also mention following Christ. This can assume all sorts of forms but it must, somehow, be present in the lives of people who are called after Christ and want to deny themselves. In this way more constant grounds could be enumerated. We have already pointed to the sanctification of our lives which must never be thought of apart from our justification in Christ.

Whoever has an eye for the constant grounds, will also not find it strange that he recognizes himself in the conduct of believers who have lived hundreds if not thousands of years ago. Our morals are different from those of David, yet we do not live in such a totally different world that David is a stranger to us when we take note of his life or his psalms. Augustine wrote very negatively about sex — something in which we must not follow him. But it is not difficult for a sincere Christian to feel more at home with Augustine in the fourth/fifth century, than with many people in the 20th century who call themselves Christians but think that there must be room for sexual experimentation inside and outside of marriage. Calvin exercised a strong discipline in Geneva; but in this city more of the Law and the Gospel was recognizable than in the life of a modern city in the “Christian” West of today.

Knowledge of the constant grounds also preserves us from doing as if *everything* today is more complicated than it used to be. Very many decisions in our lives are just as simple or difficult as they have always been: do not kill, do not commit adultery, do not steal, love your neighbour, deny yourself in order to love Christ, etc. Sometimes one can also think that the issue is more complicated than it used to be, for example the question of abortion, when in fact it is rather that we *make* the question complicated. Basically, Christian ethics does not change very much!

2. Within the Scriptures there are *changing dispensations* to be pointed out. In the New Testament dispensation many Old Testament regulations lose their validity. It is made clear to Peter that he may eat things which were earlier classified as unclean (Acts 10:9ff.). With regard to food and drink, religious festivals, a new moon or sabbath, which functioned as a shadow of the reality of Christ, Christians may conduct themselves more freely than was possible for the Jews (Colossians 2:16ff.). When salvation came not only to the Jews but also to the gentiles of all nations, it was obvious that the Old

Testament legislation with its social and economic regulations lost its validity as *legislation*. In this respect one can think of the distribution and redemption of land, the rights and liberties of slaves, criminal laws and forms of government.

It was understandable that after a period of time the Old Testament laws were differentiated in three ways: ceremonial, civil and moral laws.

The *ceremonial* laws, concerning temple service, ritual cleanness and uncleanness, sacrifices, etc., had their fulfilment in Christ and could be declared to be abolished.

The *civil* laws, intended as they had been for the old covenant people in the land of Canaan, had no validity as legislation for Christians in other lands. These laws would also not regain their validity as *integral* legislation when the world was christianized. Much respect has remained for the civil laws as legislation even up to modern times. They could, however, not be copied anywhere: they were much too closely interwoven with the land and people of Israel.

But there were also *moral* laws, with the Ten Commandments as the nucleus, which did not lose their validity — that is, their *direct* validity. With regard to these laws, we are dealing with constant grounds, in force not only in the old but also in the new dispensation.

The differentiation between ceremonial, civil and moral laws is an artificial one in as much as no Israelite would ever make this differentiation. For him in his country with tabernacle or temple, with government structures and criminal laws, there was of course just *one* law. The differentiation became necessary and legitimate only when the temple was no longer needed and Canaan was no longer possible.

What then loses its validity in these laws and what does not?

Precise divisions cannot be introduced here. The ceremonial and civil laws also have meaning for Christian ethics. We can ask what the substance, the essence of these laws is. For example: the *form* of fasting may have been done away with, but certainly not the heart of the matter (humiliation before God). We know of no sabbath-and jubilee-years anymore; but that God wanted to impress upon His people that *He* was the Lord of the harvest, the Owner of the land and the Master of the slaves, and that He not only had an eye for man and his social relations but also for land and animal, has significance for the ethical reflection of today.

3. We must also direct our attention to the *relevant, concrete definiteness* of our obligations with regard to God's revealed will. The Scriptures teach us that there are constant grounds, but the changing dispensations within the Scriptures already make it clear to us that the moral pattern is not the same for all times. Where do we live? In which time do we live? With which new questions do technological discoveries confront us? That and still much more has to be taken into account in order to explain that among all that is constant there is also much variation and development present in (Christian) morals.

In the power of the government over its subjects, of the employer over the employee, of the husband over his wife, of the parents over their children, there is a distinct difference between former times and now. Herman Bavinck could correctly write that in the Scriptures the relationship of government and subjects, masters and slaves, parents and children, husband and wife, are placed on the same level and are handled in the same way. However, these relationships are also different from one another and in the course of time they have undergone extensive modifications. We no longer say that an employee is subject to his employer, just as a slave was at one time subject to his master. Now we prefer to use the word "leadership" when it concerns authority in a business. In the husband-wife relationship too, the word "leadership" for the husband and "trusting one's self to that leadership" for the wife better reflects the present day situation than "ruling" and "submitting to that rule." The hierarchy has remained, (a constant ground), but the way in which it is experienced is different.

It is exactly the same in the relationship of a government to its subjects. Formerly there was not much to say about the influence of the people in political life. Now many peoples choose their own government. That too gives another picture of obedience to the government than in former times. Authority and obedience can never be eliminated; principally, because an ordered society cannot do without them. But they certainly no longer stand as sharply opposed to each other as in former times. They are approaching each other and are achieving a certain compromise.⁸

These are developments which we cannot ignore. What was possible formerly, can no longer be so today, such as blood revenge and slavery. Society is different, so that patriarchal structures, for example, have disappeared. The father no longer arranges his daughter's marriage, in the way that Paul still found normal in I Corinthians 7:8 (although we certainly ought to consider it normal that parents give their approval to the marriage of their son or daughter). The marriage generally is no longer solemnized in the family circle, but before the civil authorities. The examples of change are very numerous.

Sometimes a particular matter is viewed differently because there has been a shift in the content despite the use of the same words. Breaking an engagement, for example, bears a different character than in the 16th century. Then, engagement was so close to marriage that it was actually the "I do" of the wedding. That is now no longer the case. The general view which is applicable in our surroundings regarding engagement must be taken into consideration. For that reason you cannot say that breaking an engagement is in conflict with the seventh commandment, although you can say that rashly breaking an engagement is wrong.

New circumstances admit other ethical standpoints. Admiring a cathedral with its stained glass windows full of biblical imagery would have been

⁸ H. Bavinck, *De vrouw in de hedendaagsche maatschappij*, Kampen 1918, 76f.

reprehensible in the days of our Protestant iconoclastic ancestors, whereas no one today takes any offence at it. It is easier for us to separate the aesthetic and biblical aspects of a cathedral from everything that was or is unbiblical in the use of a cathedral.

The place where we are will make a difference too. A Christian in the West can be a watchman in a museum containing images of Buddha, while a Christian in the Far East, living among Buddhists, cannot do such a thing.

When we call attention to the actual, concrete situation, we are not yet lapsing into what is called *situation-ethics*. Situation-ethics recognizes no fixed norms or rules independent of the situation. But in Schilder's definition we do not lose sight of the first aspect (constant grounds) when we reflect upon the third aspect (the concrete situation). The *invariable* commandment of God is to be obeyed in *variable* situations.

BIBLICISM

In many cases it is easy to say what the will of God is. The Scriptures are then clear enough. It may well be the case that we have no desire to do what the Scriptures command us and perhaps we attempt to make something that is clear, vague. The Scriptures, however, are not changed by this.

Alas, it is also sometimes the case that we think that the Scriptures are very clear in many different matters while they offer no, or at any rate, no quick answer to these questions. In doing so, we run the danger of using the Scriptures in a biblicistic way. *Biblicism* employs texts in an atomistic manner. Texts are pulled out of their context. No attention is paid to the time and the circumstances which give a text its particular colour. With ease, an equals sign is placed between the actions of then and now. The Scriptures then become a book with all sorts of examples, applied in the scheme of: the way they did it in those days is the way we must do it now too.

This *exemplary* interpretation does not do justice to the character of the Scriptures as the revelation of the salvation of God in history. As *history* there is that which is earlier and later, permanent and temporary. Not everything that had to characterize the life of men in one phase of salvation-history, was taken into the following phase.

Let us cite a few examples of a biblicistic use of the Scriptures.

William Perkins (1558-1602) pointed to Genesis 41:42 (Pharaoh dresses Joseph in robes of fine linen) in order to exhort his contemporaries that they should wear the clothes of their own station in life. He complained about the fact that artisans dressed like squires, squires like noblemen, noblemen like barons, and barons like princes. That would topple the order that God had placed in the different ranks of men.

The same writer condemned wearing foreign clothes on the grounds of Zephaniah 1:8, where it says that God will punish the rulers, princes and others who wear foreign clothes.

Speaking of trappings: Tertullian was of the opinion that it was not right

for women to wear a hairpiece made from someone else's hair. After all, does not Matthew 6:27 say that one should not add a cubit to his stature?!⁹

A more recent example: women must not wear jeans, because Deuteronomy 22:5 states that a woman is not to wear men's clothing nor a man women's clothing.

There are samples of biblicism to be seen not only with regard to clothing but also concerning *social* structures. The curse of Canaan (Genesis 9:25) has been cited countless times to justify slavery (of the Negroes). The eight-hour working day has been disputed with the words of Jesus that we should work as long as it is day (John 9:4), while it is clearly said there are *twelve* hours in a day (John 11:9). The five-day work week is not supposed to be in agreement with the commandment that we should work six days (Exodus 20:9). Nationalization of property is rejected with a warning reference to Ahab's attitude towards Naboth, who would not give up his vineyard, an inheritance from his father. A works council is not supposed to be necessary for whoever sees that Boaz was on good terms with his workers without such a council (Ruth 2), or for whoever knows that the owner of the vineyard in Matthew 20:15 says: "Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me?"

In this way we can continue to enumerate examples of biblicism. Dice have been banned from many Christian homes, because Proverbs 16:33 teaches us that the lot is holy and does not lend itself to games: "The lot is cast into the lap, but the decision is wholly from the Lord." Blood sausage still remains a tabu in many homes today, because Acts 15:20 commands us to abstain from that which is "strangled" and from "blood."

It is quite easy to smile at these examples from the past. But there are also very modern forms of ethical biblicism! One can proclaim Jesus to be the great revolutionary through His clearing the Temple by placing an equals sign between the overturning of the money-changers' tables *then* and the overturning of political and economic structures *now*. Just as Amos heckled the rich in his times (for example, Amos 5:11; 6:3; 8:4), so we should condemn capitalism today. The year of jubilee in Israel as a liberation for everyone is supposed to be a protest against the right of the mightiest, against the institution of the monarchy with an army, police and bureaucracy.

Actually — in old or new forms of biblicism — one first puts *into* the Bible what one consequently pulls out of it. The status quo of all walks of life, of clothing and social relationships is felt to be the only justifiable one and is declared to be more or less sacrosanct. Bible texts then give the necessary blessing. *Or* the status quo has to be overturned, and for that too biblical "proof" is found.

It has been stressed above how careful we must be with proof texts, with *loca probantia*, in ethics. It is not necessary to examine the mistakes in

⁹ For William Perkins I used a Dutch edition: *Alle de Werken*, Amsterdam 1659, III, 247. For Tertullianus, *De cultu feminarum* II, 7 (Corpus christianorum Series Latina I, 360f.).

all examples cited above. A few examples are enough to illustrate the constantly recurring fundamental mistake: using the Scriptures atomistically, without attention to the context, the time and the circumstances.

Whoever does not want a girl to wear jeans, cannot appeal to Deuteronomy 22:5. For there the issue is one of Canaanite religious practices where-by men and women exchange clothes in order to commit fornication. A text with so much debauchery and fornication in the background naturally cannot be applied to a woman or girl who wears jeans for the sake of comfort or because of the cold. In the same way, it is a different matter when someone in The Netherlands wears a T-shirt with "Kansas State University" stamped on it compared with the situation in Zephaniah's days when foreign clothes displaced foreign religions.

There certainly are twelve hours in a day, but nowhere do we read that we have to be employed twelve-hours-a-day. Whoever considers how much free time an Israelite had, what with the sabbath, the sabbath-year, the various festival weeks and holidays, does not get the impression that our eight-hour working day is an unlawful luxury.

Canaan was cursed, but whoever thinks on biblical grounds that the Gospel ought to be brought to Negroes too should not want to keep them subservient socially. That has nothing to do with real brotherhood. The Israelites were not slaves of one another, but were all servants of the Lord (Exodus 13:3; 19:44; Leviticus 25:42; 26:13). This faith sooner or later automatically opens the way toward the abolition of slavery. When in the course of time slavery and colonialism became distressing phenomena, no Christian could rightly appeal to the Scriptures for the preservation of these things.

Nationalization of land which has no regard for property rights is wrong. But one cannot appeal to the history of Naboth in order to reject the nationalization of land in a society where a few very rich landowners live in the midst of a poverty-stricken people.

Our forefathers considered Proverbs 16:33 to be a very special text. But it is more natural to say that this text is in the Bible because casting lots is so common. It is just as common as thinking about your future (Proverbs 16:9), changing your direction (Proverbs 20:24), seeing the grass and plants growing for man and animal (Psalm 104:14), seeing even only a sparrow fall, or seeing even only a hair of your head fall (Matthew 10:29). But *precisely* in these common things the Scriptures say that we may see God's guidance. So too in the result of throwing dice. Without thereby turning that into a sacred matter.

The Christian of gentile provenance had to abstain from eating blood in the first Christian church in order not to offend his Jewish brothers. But there also came a time in the church when the eating of blood sausage or meat that had to do with idols no longer evoked any troublesome memories of Old Testament blood sacrifices or pagan temples. Just as little as Roman Catholic cathedrals still necessarily evoke memories of Protestants dying at the stake.

One should not quote Jesus or Amos in order to give revolutionary ends

a biblical tint, if one really does not intend to call man to give his heart to God. For that is what Amos and Jesus did do. Social and economic evils were *religious* evils as far as they were concerned. And anyone who can do without God and conversion to God in his arguments cuts the heart out of the Bible.

EQUITY

It is not a capitulation to admit that the Scriptures do not have or give an answer to everything. For even then they still remain a lamp for our feet and a light for our path. Whoever employs a lamp still has to use his own eyes in order to remain on the right path. The Scriptures are not an automatic answer-dispenser which, at the push of a button, hands us the necessary texts for all our questions. Rather, they give us light that enlightens *us*, so that we are able to look around us in the correct way. We can employ our heart, our soul, our understanding and our strength in the proper way. Many things are not told us in the Scriptures, yet we still know how to deal with them.

It is therefore certainly not the case that whenever something is not specially approved of in the Scriptures, it is therefore wrong. We do not read anywhere that women are to be allowed to take part in the Lord's Supper; that Sunday has taken the place of the sabbath and that infants may be baptized. Nevertheless, we believe that these three things are in agreement with God's will.

More examples could be given in the same way. Is it permissible to adopt a child? The Scriptures answer neither with a yes nor a no. We read of cases of adoption which are certainly not disapproved of (Genesis 48:5ff.; Esther 2:7, 15). But that does not settle the issue. Although adoption took place during biblical times, we must still then pose the question whether or not we are talking about the same thing in our comparison between then and now. *Then* sons were adopted in order to safeguard the inheritance and/or other family or business interests. *Now* it is a means of child-protection. Therefore, deeper lying questions than simply the question whether or not cases of adoption can be found in the Bible have to be answered. For example, whether or not the government is forbidden from ever intervening in the natural relationship (parents-children) and whether or not parently authority is always bound to the bloodbond.

Another question could be posed. Who inquires as to whether or not war may be waged, can appeal to the Scriptures for a positive answer. There one can even read of "wars of the Lord" and of the sword which the government does not bear in vain (Romans 13:4). The evidence is clear enough to preclude a pacifist's position. But here too we have to keep the relevant, concrete situation in mind. Are we allowed to conduct a *nuclear* war? Should we condemn *nuclear* pacifism too? For that, we have to weigh all sorts of factors against each other; for example, the seriousness of the communist threat, the effect of nuclear weapons as a deterrent and the risk of global suicide.

Summed up: in many matters we have to use our brains. Next to the Scriptures the Reformers calmly appealed to nature or reason in order to

demonstrate the evident character of particular decisions. In this manner, Calvin pointed out in his *Institutes* that all peoples have the liberty to make laws which they regard as profitable for themselves, as long as the principle of love lies at the basis (IV, 20.15). Notice here again the constant ground which must be present as a common foundation amongst all the differences!

Of interest too is how Calvin continues. In all laws, he says, we must pay attention to two things: to the precept (constitutio) of the law and its equity (aequitas). The precepts may very well be different as long as they are directed to the same goal of *equity*. That equity is the goal, the rule and the boundary of all laws. They must display humaneness (humanitas). They must be appropriate for the circumstances of time, place and people. Sometimes other laws do that better than the law of Moses (*Institutes*, IV, 20. 15f.).

These comments are not only of importance for the jurist and the politician, but also for our ethical reflection. After all, we must not only ask about the letter of the (biblical) law, but also about the spirit of the law. What Jesus said about the sabbath can be said about all the commandments: "The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath" (Mark 2:27). Whoever, therefore, gives concrete form to the divine commandments in a way that forces human life into a strait-jacket is certainly on the wrong track.

If we know what equity is, we will be wary of a biblicistic use of the Scriptures and of clinging to antiquated ethical viewpoints. The way has to be kept clear for renewed reflection. Developments which place us before new questions must not be avoided. The permanent commandment of God, that is clearly given to us in the Scriptures, has to be obeyed in *our* circumstances and in *our* times. For that we need not only the Scriptures but also our understanding. Understanding, not in the sense of an autonomous reason, but in the sense of Psalm 119:34: "Give me understanding, that I may keep Thy law and observe it with my whole heart."

WATCH OUT FOR MOTIFS

One can misuse practically everything. Also the term equity. One can *play it off* against existing law. With an appeal to the "spirit" of the law, one can ensure that nothing is left of the "letter" of the law. That will become more concrete to us if we think about the word already used above in connection with equity: *humanity*. In modern ethics this term has become the predominating motif. Everything has to be directed towards what is humane, the life worthy of a human being. Now, the concept humanity is a precious thing for us too. But what kind of content does it have? Is the concept filled with a biblical content, or does modern man himself determine what may be called humane or inhumane?

Let me give an example. If a marriage is on the rocks and one of the partners can find security and affection with a third party, can you then say that here humanity is coming to development? Whoever makes humanity a central motif, *and gives his own content to it* will probably answer affirmatively here. But a Christian knows the saying of Jesus, that anyone who looks at a

woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart (Matthew 5:28). From all sorts of Scripture passages he knows that marriage is a sacred institution and that it may not be broken. He *believes* that the seventh commandment is also a good and beneficial commandment for man, and for that reason he can never pass off marital infidelity as humanity. Perhaps it all *appears* to be quite humane, but it *is* not for someone who lets the Scriptures determine for him what is truly humane.

In the preceding section we saw how dangerous it is to appeal to isolated texts. But it is just as dangerous to employ a motif, a theme and then close our eyes to texts. That applies to the motif of humanity and to many other motifs which play a role in ethics, such as justice, welfare and love. Motifs such as these are completely biblical and Christian as long as they also receive their biblical and Christian content.

In particular, that applies to *love* of which the Scriptures say that does our neighbour no harm (Romans 13:10). Imagine that one could come to divorce by mutual consent, or to pre-marital sex, promiscuity, homosexuality, or to suicide, so that in everything one has taken one's neighbour into account and has not troubled him — do we then meet the requirements of love as God demands it of us? *Or* are we again honouring a motif to which we give content while separating it from the commandments of God? Are we not once again playing the theme off against texts? God has not only given us the commandment to love, but He has also said *what* we should aspire to in love. And that can be read plainly in all kinds of places in the Scriptures.

Sometimes theological motifs can play a major role in ethics. Think of the well-known differentiation of creation-reconciliation-redemption. It is possible to accentuate each one of the three one-sidedly, so that justice is not done to the fullness of what the Scriptures reveal to us.

Whoever stresses the *creation-motif* can speak about the ordinances of creation in such a way that he quickly begins to absolutize them. In that way existing social and political relationships are then easily regarded as creation ordinances, while they are often nothing more than attainments which will be outdated some day. The doctrine of creation ordinances has had great influence especially in Lutheran ethics. The danger of conservatism, which does not remain open for new relationships, is great. It is good to pay attention to creation ordinances (think about what Genesis 1 and 2 say concerning subduing the earth, work and marriage), but never separated from what such ordinances mean "in Christ."

Whoever stresses the *reconciliation motif* can rightly say that the essential thing has taken place already: on Calvary. Christ *has* paid the price for us and we *are* liberated from slavery and death. Yet here too a wrong accent can be laid and a pietistic misconception can appear. The work of reconciliation is then thought of apart from its creation- and recreation-contexts. Ethics becomes an individual matter, no longer concerned with the redemption of the world. It is only concerned with the conversion of the person, while the Gospel of reconciliation remains outside social and political structures.

Whoever stresses the *redemption-motif*, wants to concentrate all attention on what is new. Do not the Scriptures say that "all things will be made new" (Revelation 21:5)? This *eschatological motif* wants to settle accounts with what is old. The established order is the centre of attack. The structures which we now have in the economic, social and political spheres have to be cleared away. Revolution and liberation are the key words.

It is above all this eschatological motif which is acquiring great influence in modern ethics. Its one-sidedness is self-evident. There is no interest in the reconciliation in Christ that is completed. Everything has to point forward, everything has to be revised. Talking about creation ordinances, then, naturally has a bad smell.

This short — very sketchy — survey of theological motifs which make their presence felt in ethics can warn us against one-sidedness. Watch out for motifs! We must allow the whole of the Scriptures to resonate in ethics. No biblicism therefore which would cause us to hang all our decisions on individual texts. But also no themes isolated from the bible texts which begin to take on a life of their own. Again and again it will be necessary to have our views corrected by the Scriptures.

MATURITY AND DISCERNMENT

At the end of this chapter it could appear as if using the Scriptures in our ethical reflection is a difficult matter. Now it is true that we must not make it easier than it is. We do not have the answers to all sorts of ethical questions at hand, even though we are firmly convinced that God's Word is a lamp for our feet and a light for our path.

That we have to ponder about matters and must search for answers is not a disgrace but rather an honour. Israel in the Old Testament dispensation was taken by the hand and kept under tutelage, whereas the New Testament Church may speak another language. Her honour is her maturity (Galatians 4:1ff.). We no longer live from milk like children, but from solid food like adults. Through experience and exercise our senses are being sharpened in order to discern between good and evil (Hebrews 5:12ff.). We may endeavour to discover what pleases the Lord (Ephesians 5:10). Paul prays that the love of the Philippians might abound more and more, "with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent" (Philippians 1:9-10).

Enlightened by the Holy Spirit we will be capable of employing the Scriptures in a lawful manner. Difficulties in learning to discern what is decisive certainly exist, although we should not exaggerate them. We also do not have to solve the questions which arise all by ourselves. We stand in the fellowship of the Church in which generations before us have listened to the Scriptures and have left us their answer. And today too we do not stand alone. Together with others who are confronted by the same questions and who want to listen to the Scriptures with us, we must work on our ethical reflection.

It is individualistic to say that everyone has to work out things on his own with God. That is not the right attitude. The Holy Spirit binds us to each other and wants us to take each other into account even when viewpoints differ (Romans 14f.; I Corinthians 8ff.). If we go our own way, then we also have to know what it is: "Let everyone be fully convinced in his own mind" (Romans 14:5). That is a powerful summons. Everyone must know what he is doing. It must be his inner and firm conviction. That certainly sounds stronger than "Allow everyone his own conviction." We cannot be so non-committal toward each other. Maturity is something different from individualism.

The Scripture passages quoted here bring us into a totally different sphere from that of uniform legalism or of a fixed morality. At all times prayer has to be present for clear insight and discernment. Whoever prays for a renewed understanding, is praying to be allowed to discern what the will of God is, what is good, acceptable and perfect (Romans 12:2). In that way not the easiest but certainly the most beautiful way gets pointed out to us. Bound to the Scriptures and led by the Spirit, we make our decisions in a freedom in which Christ intends to let us act as sons and not as slaves (Galatians 5:10ff.).