

# EDITORIAL

## TOWARD A BIBLICALLY-BASED ETHIC

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There is no more central question to Christians, and especially to those in the Wesleyan tradition, than the relation of Scriptures to conduct. There are two reasons for the crucial importance of this question.

The first reason is our commitment to the Bible as the supreme authority for practice as well as for faith. This creedal commitment has meaning only if it is actually implemented in everyday life. On the other hand, if there is a gap between our creedal affirmation regarding the ethical authority of the Bible and our existential application of its teachings, then we deny in conduct what we affirm in creed. To be true to our acceptance of Biblical authority for conduct necessitates relating the teachings of the Scriptures to our attitudes and actions at every level so that our ethic is actually controlled by them.

The second reason for the importance of basing our ethic on the Scriptures is our commitment to holiness, which is ultimately inseparable from the holy life. This Wesleyan distinctive can be realized only if, through the study of the Bible, we arrive at an accurate understanding of the true meaning and content of holiness and the holy life. If we do not arrive at such an understanding or if we do not live out our understanding, we will be misled into thinking that we are stressing scriptural holiness when in actuality we are not. It is therefore imperative that we obtain a sound grasp of the character of the holy life as set forth in Scripture and relate this understanding to all conduct if we are to make the Wesleyan distinctive a living reality.

When we recognize the importance of arriving at a biblically-based ethic, we find that we are confronted with two major difficulties in accomplishing this task. The first is the difficulty of the exegetical task. It is not always easy to know what the Bible teaches in certain areas. Take, for example, the meaning of biblical statements regarding divorce. There have been strong differences of opinion regarding whether the Scriptures

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allow for the possibility of divorce for the Christian, and if they do, whether this possibility includes the right of remarriage. Thus the first major problem is to determine the meaning of Scriptures themselves. In addition, there is the further difficulty of relating biblical meanings, once discovered, to concrete ethical situations, and determining the course of action to be followed in such situations. This difficulty relates both to drawing the proper ethical inferences from Scriptures and to analyzing contemporary situations to know how to relate biblical teachings to them. For instance, one must not only ascertain the teachings of Scriptures about the nature, possibility, and bases of divorce which have a bearing on present practice, but one must also analyze specific contemporary situations to determine how biblical teachings on divorce are related to them.

In view of the importance of arriving at an ethic which reflects the teachings of the Scriptures and in view of the difficulties in doing so, what is needed is not only a methodology for interpreting biblical truths, but a methodology for applying them as well. We need an applicatory methodology as well as an interpretive methodology. It is to the question of moving toward an applicatory methodology that this statement is addressed.

Such an applicatory methodology will necessarily wrestle with a number of issues. It is the purpose of what follows to list and to discuss briefly some of these issues. These issues will be expressed in terms of relationships.

The first of these involves the relationship between the new covenant (testament) and the old covenant (testament). It is significant to note that Scriptures themselves testify to the existence of two covenants. And it is further their witness that since only one covenant is necessary, it follows that the appearance of a new covenant has rendered the previous covenant obsolete and inoperable (Heb. 8:7-13).

It does not follow that the two covenants are mutually exclusive in every respect. In fact, the primary relationship between them is one of promise and fulfillment. This relationship is indicated by the frequent references of the fulfillment of the Old Testament by the New Testament and Christ. That Christ and the new covenant fulfill the Mosaic law and the old covenant indicates a basic continuity between them, especially as to purpose.

At the same time, such continuity is realized in part through a fundamental discontinuity. It is through such discontinuity that the new covenant transcends the old covenant and actualizes its purpose. If this discontinuity did not exist, the second covenant would be a mere extension of the first covenant and therefore not new in any radical sense. The new covenant realizes the intent of the old covenant and fills it full of meaning both by affirming certain aspects of the old covenant and by abrogating it in other respects. Christ is the end of the law, that is, he is simultaneously both its goal and its terminus (Rom. 10:4).

Both aspects of this dialectual relationship are significant for using the Scriptures as a basis for a Christian ethic. For the Christian believer operates under the new covenant and is therefore bound only by the authority of the new covenant itself. This authority excludes those elements of the old covenant which are nullified by the new covenant and includes those elements of the old covenant which are affirmed and approved by the new covenant. John Wesley acknowledged this dual relationship by using certain old covenant materials for ethical purposes while objecting to the use of other old covenant materials, such as the imprecatory psalms.

Thus the Christian's ethic is ultimately under the authority of the law of the Spirit of Christ or the law of liberty rather than the letter of the law of Moses (Gal. 6:2, James 1:25, Romans 8:2). The person who has been crucified and raised with Christ and who is led by the Spirit has been released from the old Sinaitic covenant (Gal. 5:18, Romans 7:1-6). The law serves for him as a custodian until Christ comes, but once he is in the hands of the teacher, he is no longer under the custodian (Gal. 4:24-26). Christ becomes his Lord, and he is obedient to the commands of Christ as embodied in His life rather than to the law of Moses. Only those aspects of the old covenant which are confirmed by the Christ of the new covenant are authoritative for him.

If this view of the relationship of the two covenants is valid, it follows that the indiscriminate use of the old covenant is a misapplication of Scriptural authority. To be sure, some parts of the old covenant are still authoritative, because there is continuity between them and the old covenant. The twofold commandment of total undivided love for God and love of neighbor as oneself is an example of this relationship (Matt. 22:34-40). But those parts of the old covenant which are abrogated by the new covenant, such as the guaranteed physical prosperity of the righteous, are no longer authoritative.

Thus the ethic of the Christian is ultimately Christocentric. It is biblical in that the Scriptures, including the old covenant, help us to know the meaning of the Christ-event. But it is the Christ of the Scriptures, or Christ as portrayed in Scriptures, who becomes the ultimate authority for Christian practice. Christ calls all men to follow Him, and the Scriptures became a means of communicating the life and message of the one who calls all to discipleship. It is when the Bible is used to ascertain the will of God in Christ that it serves its proper function as an ethical authority for the Christian life. Thus the acid test of any ethic derived from Scripture, in view of the witness of Scripture itself, is whether it accords with the life, commands, and spirit of Christ.

A second issue involved in developing an applicatory methodology is the relationship between the historical and the trans-historical.

This issue is closely connected with the one just discussed, for one accounts for two covenants in terms of an historical process of revelation.

However, it transcends the preceding issue in that it makes possible certain distinctions even within the new covenant. For there are certain new covenant teachings which do not become authoritative for contemporary practice for the simple reason that they can be accounted for in part by non-recurring, historical factors. This principle is probably operative in Paul's advice to women to wear veils during worship and not to speak in church (I Cor. 11:2-16, 34a-36). Such teachings are historical but not necessarily trans-historical. They are valid for a given time or situation but may not be valid for all time or situations.

A determination as to which biblical truths are trans-historical depends on considering several factors: a) the total message of the new covenant; b) an analysis of the biblical-historical situation and the present-historical situation and a comparison between them to ascertain whether there are basic similarities or dissimilarities; c) a distinction between central and peripheral concerns; and d) an understanding of the possible bearing the historical situation had on the biblical teaching. In light of such factors as these one could well conclude that the advice of Paul to Timothy in I Tim. 5:23, namely, that he no longer drink only water but use a little wine for the sake of his stomach and his frequent ailments, may be historical rather than trans-historical and therefore not universally applicable. One does not find such a teaching recurring in the total message of the new covenant. It represents a statement made in an historical situation which is quite different from the one that obtains in many places today as regards the nature of the wine, the water, and Timothy's problem, and the medicinal view concerning wine and water. Such a teaching is peripheral rather than central, and may well be accounted for in its specific form by the particular past-historical situation confronting Timothy and Paul which may not be universally present. Therefore the New Testament believer is not obligated to follow the advice of Paul to Timothy.

In those cases where historical rather than trans-historical factors account for specific biblical teachings, it is necessary to probe deeper to find underlying ethical principles which may be trans-historical and therefore applicable to all times and situations. The underlying principle of I Tim. 5:23 is that the body is the instrument of the Holy Spirit, and that the Christian should therefore take care of this body that it may serve in the highest sense as a vehicle for Christ and his Spirit. This principle is trans-historical though its specific outworkings will always involve relating it to concrete historical situations. These situations are variable and may differ not only from time to time but from place to place and from person to person. How the trans-historical truth will be implemented in a given situation will depend on an analysis of the situation and of how best to apply the truth in that situation.

In treating these trans-historical principles it is important always to

remain close to the biblical text, which means particular texts and contexts as well as the total biblical message. The danger of doing otherwise is that of arriving at moral ideals whose content and use are not controlled by biblical revelation. This danger is seen in Fletcher's use of "love" in *Situation Ethics*, where he defines "love" in humanistic rather than in a theistic and biblical sense.

A third issue in developing a biblically-based ethic is the relation between the absolute and the relative. The tendency in this regard has been to view biblical revelation as being purely absolute or purely relative. This either/or approach causes certain problems if in fact a both/and approach is inherent in the teachings of biblical materials.

Perhaps it is the recognition of a combination of absolute and relative factors which is necessary to work out an ethic derived from Scriptures. There is, for example, no doubt that discipleship and Christlikeness are the very essence of the ethic of the New Testament. Yet such discipleship is not meant to be absolute, else it would involve, among other things, celibacy, the practice of the Jewish cult, and a death by crucifixion for every follower of Jesus. Similarly, the life of love, which is central to the New Testament ethic, is necessarily conditioned in its expression by the particular circumstances in which it operates. Thus though turning the cheek may be the loving course of action in certain circumstances, in others, such as in the disciplining of one's children, it may be unloving because unredemptive.

In other words, there is a prudential element in the Scriptures, including the teachings of Jesus, which needs to be recognized. An example of this element may be found in Matt. 5:25-26, where Jesus' concern that the kingdom member not lose all he owns leads him to suggest an out-of-court settlement. The reason for Jesus' exhortation is practical and is made in relation to the particular jurisprudence of the day. Given another kind of jurisprudence, the same practical reasoning might result in suggesting the very opposite course of action, namely, letting a judge settle the matter. Jesus' exhortation is relative to a concrete historical situation which is variable, and there is serious doubt whether it should be construed as an absolute.

That is not to say that the Scriptures do not contain absolutes, for they certainly do. For example, the twofold commandment to love God with all heart, soul, strength and mind, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is an absolute command from which there is to be no deviation.

At the same time, it does not follow that all parts of Scriptures should be considered absolute. In addition, even the absolute portions need to be related to concrete and changing situations. Thus, for example, the command to love one's neighbor as oneself needs to be implemented in various ways, depending on the particular situations in which it is made operative. The historicity of human existence and of the Christian ethic necessarily inject a note of relatedness or relativity even when we are dealing with biblical absolutes.

It is therefore difficult if not impossible to take a prescriptive approach to the ethics of the New Testament, that is, to treat the new covenant as if it were a series of casuistic regulations similar to those in the old covenant. In fact, one of the major differences between the two covenants is that the new covenant is not codified like the old; it is a covenant of the spirit rather than of the letter. Therefore, there is a question whether a reduction of the new covenant to a series of absolute prescriptions for conduct may not run counter to its very essence.

There is a fourth issue which deserves consideration in evolving a methodology for a biblically-based ethic, namely, the relation between individual ethics and social ethics. This relation is significant because the two are ultimately inseparable; therefore, it is not possible to work out an individual ethic without becoming involved in social ethics, and vice versa.

The link between the two is both theological and sociological. God and His kingdom are concerned with social structures and problems as well as with individuals, as is suggested by the teachings of the New Testament regarding the Christian's relations to government (see Rom. 12). In addition, because of the individual's entanglement in social structures, it is impossible to express an agaic ethic toward him while ignoring the social structures of which he is a part. The individual is inevitably affected by the social milieu in which he finds himself, with the consequence that any concern for him will necessarily include the society in which he lives.

Two problems immediately arise as one explores the relation between an individual and social ethic on the basis of Scripture. One problem is that the social circumstances of at least some contemporary Christians are radically different from those of Jesus Christ and the New Testament Church. The New Testament ethic was geared to a tyrannical sort of situation, where individual responsibility for certain social decisions could not and did not play a significant role. Thus the practice of slavery, for example, was approached on an individualistic and spiritualistic basis (Gal. 3:28) rather than as a social phenomenon (Philemon). On the other hand, in those contemporary situations where similar problems exist within a democratic society, a Christian bears certain responsibilities which differ from those of Christ and the Early Church, and there is therefore a social dimension to Jesus' ethic which necessarily flows from His posture of love. What the relationship is between the individualistic ethic emphasized in the New Testament and the social ethic of the contemporary Christian thus becomes an important question for working out the ethical implications of the biblical view.

A second problem which exists involves the relation between an ethic based on the good of an individual and that based on the good of society. What may be right and good in individual relations may not be right and good for the greatest number of persons. For example, Jesus teaches that in personal relations one should follow the principle of suffering, redemptive love rather than *lex talionis*, an eye for an eye and a tooth

for a tooth (Matt. 5:38-39). However, if one were to follow this same principle in courts of law, or in dealing with vast social problems, the result might well be the very opposite of what is desired.

Several reasons are worth noting which account for this difference. One involves the reality of evil in society which needs to be considered in determining any course of action which has social ramifications. Whereas the grace principle may be effective on an individual plane, because of the possibility of the redemption of the individual, law with its prohibition and threat of punishment is needed to deal with the social reality of evil. This accounts for the striking similarity between civil law and the old covenant. A second reason is that there is a complicated web of responsibilities in social decisions which are not involved in individual decisions. Social relationships are exceeding complex, involving as they often do, among other things, matters of civil law. Therefore, especially when one is operating on the basis of evaluating possible consequences and weighing advantage over against disadvantages, social complexities might play a vital role in tipping the scales in a different direction from what might happen in a one-to-one situation.

These problems are highlighted in the experience of a law-enforcement officer, who wears two hats. On the one hand, he wears the hat of an individual who, in his relationship with other individuals, is controlled by the same ethical principles which govern us all. On the other hand, he wears the hat of an official representative of legal authority. In his latter role he wears a weapon and may on occasion use it, whereas in his former role he does not wear a weapon or use it. As a policeman he is governed strictly by legal code, and he does not have the option of acting outside that code; whereas in his individual relationships he may transcend the law.

There is a need, therefore, to take what is primarily an individual ethic as presented in the Scriptures and to translate it, where necessary, into a social ethic which accords with the spirit of Scriptures and with the realities of the situations to which it is applied. This kind of translation needs to be done in matters of war and peace, poverty, racial discrimination, and a multitude of other social problems which confront the individual Christian and the Christian Church. In so doing it is necessary to keep in mind the problems involved in relating an individual-oriented ethic to a social ethic.

A fifth major issue to consider is that of the relation of biblical idealism to a realistic appraisal of situations. Such a statement of this issue implies that the Scriptures exhort us to follow a biblical ideal which is not always fully realizable in concrete situations, with the result that the best course to follow is an ethic of approximation. This ethic of approximation often involves the highest good or the least evil in a given situation where it is not possible to accomplish absolute good.

This ethic of approximation may be most clearly seen in the call to follow Christ, which has already been mentioned. This call is not and can-

not be applied as an absolute call, or else it would make impossible the assumption of responsibilities toward a family. Christ did not have a place to lay his head, and he lived a life of poverty. To follow him absolutely would be to deny the possibility of family responsibilities. The Early Church as portrayed in the Acts did not put such an absolutistic construction on the commands of Jesus, because it differentiated between being Christlike and being Christ. To put it another way, there are some elements in Christ's history which are unrepeatable or not to be repeated, and some elements which are repeatable and should be repeated. It is the repeatable elements which should be repeated for which we are held responsible, and not those elements which cannot be and should not be repeated.

It is an ethic of approximation which governed God's salvation history with man. This fact accounts for a God who commanded wars of extermination in a given historical context where they were necessary, even though his final revelation is in the Christ who submits himself to death and who calls on his disciples to do likewise. Unless God is to be understood as self-contradictory or as not having commanded the wars of extermination, his actions can only be understood in terms of an approximation of the absolute good by realizing the highest good in a given historical situation.

It is such an ethic which alone is workable in certain circumstances which do not permit the absolute good. The alternative is ethical paralysis in such circumstances, which is the ultimate evil. Thus for the Christian the ethic of Christlike love is the ideal, but where such an ideal is not realizable, he will prefer approximating it to surrendering the situation to the forces of evil. It is this kind of ethic which makes possible Christian policemen, lawyers, politicians, doctors, and businessmen.

There is still another major issue which is worth noting, namely, the relation between the past Christ, whose word is fixed, and the present, living Christ, whose word is fresh and new. To be sure, there is no fundamental conflict between them, for Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever. And the present Christ will use His past words as a means of communicating His present word. But new situations require a new word, and even situations which are fundamentally analogous to those which Jesus addressed need to have his general teachings applied in concrete ways.

Jesus surely had these needs in mind when he indicated that the Holy Spirit, who is the Spirit of Christ, would teach us all things (John 14:26). This guidance into all things must transcend specific biblical formulae, for in many situations there is no way to move directly from biblical statements to their application in life. What is required for a Christlike life is a living Christ who speaks his guiding word to the conscience of the believer whose life is dedicated to Him.

In summary, what we have suggested is that it is supremely important that an ethic be based on Scripture, and that this requires working



out an applicatory methodology which will make possible translating biblical truths into an everyday ethic. If this methodology is to be sound, it must be grounded on a recognition of a number of complex and inter-related issues. There is no simplistic or easy solution to these issues. What is required is a careful analysis of all the issues involved, and the development of an approach which is true to the Scriptures and which allows the Christ of the Scriptures to be the Lord of all life.