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# The Ethics of Community

C. E. HUBER

A TOUGH-MINDED naturalism derives its philosophy of the good life predominantly from the biological forces which it believes wholly condition man's life. Idealism, a tender-minded sister of the more masculine naturalism, conceives the good life to be best understood in terms of life's ends and as such considers that life to be more the product of controlled historical and social forces than the result of a regulated body chemistry. Communism, which is by comparison a new option for those who seek an abundant life, is the only large-scale synthesis of the previous alternatives to win massive support and frightening success in our world's history. We are all cohabitants of a world in which our thought and action are inextricably bound up with these competing philosophies of life. We run all the risks of succumbing to *their* blandishments that our Lord's disciples suffered in the Roman Empire. And we can take little heart in the apostolic triumph, for none can know ahead of time who among us will emerge a Judas.

For these reasons I should like to begin my topic by tracing briefly the foundations for all ethical principles worthy of the name Christian, thus enabling us to distinguish them quite precisely from current and forceful competitors for our allegiance. This in turn will help to allay the possibility that some of us, having been too long exposed to the secular allurements of a pluralistic society, may have become muddled in our Christian perspective and thus less inclined to understand or accept the challenge of Christ to manly life in Him.

The foundations for Christian thought and action are implicit in the Biblical resolution of the tension between what I shall call the community and the particularity of a Christian's existence.

## 1. *The Foundations of Ethical Principles*

Each Christian person is in God's eyes a unique individual. His particularity is what differentiates him from all other persons. He has what we call personal identity, which consists for the Christian in the fact that he is a unique creature of God's handiwork. "God the Creator does not create humanity," says Emil Brunner (*Man in Revolt*, p. 322), "but He creates each individual human being separately. He has 'called thee by name,' He knows you 'personally,' 'specially'." It is not every man who is a disciple, but "He who does the will of the Father," the particular faithful servant.

Men are not, however, doomed to share an existence like islands in the Caribbean archipelago. They are not "their own." We are, in St. Paul's words, "bought with a price" by virtue of which we are a people of community. And since our calling to membership in this community was ordained before the founding of the

world, we came into existence as a people destined to be parts of a living community. We are created for relationship with others in the Body of Christ, the Church. Not all men, of course, find community in this Body. Some find it in the natural community they have as members of an animal species. Some find it solely in a community of intellectual or moral interests that drive a particular culture. But that ultimate community to membership in which God destined us in love is the spiritual community of those who hear His call and live under Him as their Head.

From this it follows that we have not only personal identity but a group identity. This is true of course at various levels. On the political level the struggle between community and particularity is generally called the struggle between collectivism and individualism. We have seen in our country's development the loveless, selfish extremes to which a capitalism motivated by rugged individualism led. The nineteenth century was in fact a virtual realization of Hobbes' state of nature, a war of every man against every man where only the fit survived. In Soviet Russia and Communist China today we are beholding the morally stifling, incentive-destroying effects of monolithic states imposing their unchallengeable will on men. Such collectivism robs men of their dignity and integrity as particulars, worthy of individual concern and freedom. But individualism is just as intolerable for the disunity and fear it creates among men, destroying the peaceful development and employment of their human potentials, and making havoc out of those nobler ends that can only be achieved by concerted mass activity.

Our own present social evolution exemplifies most clearly the search for a wholesome balance between the preservation of concern for individual rights and the simultaneous imposition of individual constraints created by the necessity of group solidarity and security. No society has ever constructed a happy balance between these two concerns. But our concern here is to note the balance that exists between *spiritual* community and our own *spiritual* self-identity, for it is from this balance, wrought by God Himself, that the fundamental principle of a Christian's ethical life is derived.

Our particular spiritual identity is guaranteed and protected by the promise that God has called us each to be His own and supplies His Spirit to us personally as the "earnest of our inheritance" with the saints. There are diversities of gifts from that Spirit and legitimate differences in the exercise of those gifts which serve to make our particularity obvious, but it is our own unique possession of God's Spirit and our own unique manifestation of that Spirit which constitute our spiritual identity and particularity.

While most of us have some trouble in identifying the essentials of our selfhood in confronting the principalities and powers which seek to mold us into one homogeneous, malleable lump, I think in religious matters we are still prone to the belief that religion at least is a private affair—the last refuge for people losing their particular identity. We are more inclined to think individualisti-

cally in spiritual matters than to conceive ourselves as particulars-in-community, who are committed not only to duties to ourselves but obligations to those who share a common Spirit with us. Therefore, I think more must be said about this community in which we live.

St. Paul speaks of the people of faith as being "in Christ" (or some equivalent) 176 times. The life in Christ is his favorite subject. By virtue of a God-bestowed faith we have died to the Law. Its omnipresent accusatory function no longer can exact the terror it was meant to create. And because we have died to the Law through the Body of Christ we are now reconciled in His body of flesh by His death; we belong to one another and to Christ as members of His living Body, the Church (Rom. 7:4, Col. 1:21). This gift of community-belonging is contemporaneous with the particular gift of faith. The whole fullness of deity exists in Christ and we come to fullness of a particular life as we live and grow in Him, His Body (Col. 2:9). There is one God for whom we exist and one Christ *through* whom we exist (1 Cor. 8:6). We are to have one mind, the mind of Christ (Phil. 2), and we are to live under one Head. Thus our particularity which is our own possession and manifestation of God's Spirit is preserved in community as we live under the Head by the Spirit's unique direction to achieve the common good, the health of the Body. "To *each* is given the manifestation of the Spirit *for the common good*. . . . All these [gifts] are inspired by *one and the same* Spirit who apportions to each one *individually* as He wills." There are many particulars, but one Body. God arranges the parts so they have "care for one another" (1 Cor. 12). This takes place in His Body on earth when each particular is working properly, as the Spirit directs, with every other particular. The total result of the community's harmonious organic operation is that the members of the Body make bodily growth. We grow up *in every way* to mature manhood in Christ and in redemptive love for one another (Eph. 4).

It is impossible on this view of Christian life to conceive of a particular life growing and prospering at the expense of another or independently of another. The welfare and growth of the community necessarily are realized as each particular member serves his unique function properly—as the Spirit directs. On the other hand, the progress of the community as a whole is thwarted to some extent whenever a particular member is malfunctioning. Self-growth invariably contributes to mutual upbuilding. The stunted growth of a particular self invariably contributes to deterioration of the community (1 Cor. 12:26). Just as in the metabolic functions of vital organisms, so too there is no static equilibrium in the life of the Church, no suspension of the life functions. It either grows or dies. The dynamic balance of both the Christian's particular life, and the life of the community of believers can now be understood as the result of God's own work of realizing His purposes through His Spirit in the Church. Since each Christian shares in the one Spirit and since all mature under one Lord, there is con-

tinuity and consistency in the progress of Christian life without stultifying conformity, a sense of lost personal worth, or the corruption of the self-image. This life is, therefore, the most dramatic, visible and dynamic form of unity-in-diversity. It is God's own life expressed through the particular lives of people who are God's building, members of the household of faith.

## 2. *The Primary Moral Principle*

Once we understand the particular-in-community character of Christian life in this way, the principle derived from this dynamic balance of particular and communal forces is readily recognized. The primary moral principle must be promotion of the growth of selves-in-community. This growth is the preeminent way in which each of the members and the community itself are preserved from exterior destructive forces. Secondly, this is the way in which both are strengthened within as each member is drawn closer to the others. Thirdly, this is the way in which both maintain their unique identity. That is to say, both persons and group maintain by growth the qualities of their unique natures which distinguish them from that of the world in which they exist. They are severally alive to God and communally the Living Body of Christ on earth (*Apol.* VII-VIII, 12). In contrast, the world around them is a body of death and its qualities, because of their deceptive appearance, are formidably representative of the world's hostile and alien nature.

If promoting the growth of what I have called selves- or particulars-in-community is the primary ethical principle, the corollary of that principle is that Christian life, exemplified either in a particular self or in the community, never appears at rest. It is dynamic. As I said above, there is no static equilibrium to that life, and this is so because growth implies change. Growth into Christian maturity implies change for the better. It is, in short, life in motion toward Christ because He is the end of our righteousness, and under Christ because He is the Head of the Body.

From this it follows straightaway that the moral life is essentially *creative*. In response to the changing threats and temptations of the mutable world, Christians and Christendom — selves-in-community — react with creative vigor. New answers are found for moral problems which arise out of our unique situations. As Christ Himself met the particular needs of men confronting Him, so we devise methods and solutions which meet our peculiar needs. The Christian therefore recognizes no set of pat answers to particular moral conflicts. He accepts nothing slavishly merely on its recommendation as a tried-and-true remedy for this or that particular ill. There is no instance where St. Paul, for example, urges his readers merely to refer to the Old Testament laws for the specific answer to their unique moral needs. Jesus repeatedly goes beyond the laws. He harvests grain on the Sabbath and defends His disciples for doing the same. He demands not merely physical chastity but inner purity; not simply the preservation of human life, but

development of human health. The point is that in being creative, the moral life is not content with immobile reflection on standard formulas. Because it is God's own life it is actively creating new devices for meeting, and new answers to the novel problems which arise in new situations.

As Koeberle significantly remarks, God "is ready at all times to give to each life an understanding of the content of His will. . . ." We are obligated to make "renewed attempts to describe the content of Christian ethics as it must be newly grasped, when the mysterious changes of history continually alter the situations that arise in wedlock, school, church, nation and state." (*The Quest for Holiness*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1938, p. 122). Christian life fulfills the Law because its essence is the creative and redemptive activity of God manifest in His "ambassadors." He works in us to will and do His good pleasure. This is what it means to say we are no longer under Law but under grace, dead to the Law and alive to God. The life we now live in the flesh we live by faith, which is the ultimate refuge from the ceaseless negative function of the Law. Christian liberty is therefore absolutely essential to the moral life. For it is only in freedom that creative and redemptive activity can occur. It is, in fact, for the very purpose of free, creative and redemptive activity that Christ made us free (Gal. 5). The achievement of this purpose in the life of the Church is the most eloquent witness to the Gospel that is possible for us. (Cf. for example, I Cor. 14:24-25).

Thus far we have seen the primary moral principle of the Christian life and one of its corollaries. It is necessary now to describe the mechanism by which the principle functions, for only when this is understood will it be possible to discern the bounds within which Christian liberty exists and to derive a specific moral rule.

Our individual growth in Christ as well as the growth of the community depends upon love. There are many gifts of the Spirit, but love is first among them (I Cor. 14:1). It is significant to note that St. Paul follows his description of the Church as Christ's Body in I Cor. 12 with the rhapsodic tribute to redemptive love in chapter 13. By the love which God alone dispenses through the Spirit the particulars-in-community are held in fellowship, grow in fellowship, and win others to that fellowship. Even Christian discipline is regarded as an act of love. Retribution is never regarded as a legitimate activity of people who are in Christ. Love is the most cohesive, aggressive and sustaining force a Christian can have. "There is nothing love cannot face; there is no limit to . . . its endurance. Love will never come to an end" (I Cor. 13:7f., NEB). Since God is love, the life of God is a life of love; and as without God we accomplish nothing, so without love "I am nothing . . . I gain nothing." As members of Christ's Body we share in His Spirit and thus receive and dispense the fruits of that Spirit. In his catalog of those fruits, nine in number, St. Paul gives love first place and makes it clear that all of them operate free of constraint

and without any predetermination of the form they may take. "But the harvest of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law dealing with such things as these. . . . If the Spirit is the source of our life, let the Spirit also direct our course" (Gal. 5:22 ff., NEB).

### 3. *The Primary Moral Rule*

While much more could be said about what I have called redemptive love (agape), we have enough to establish the ground for deriving the primary moral rule of Christian life: Moral action must always flow from redemptive love. The building up of individuals and their community cannot take place without the expression of love on the part of each member. This is the necessary and sufficient condition for the growth occurring within individuals and of the growth of the community as a whole. Love is indispensable for the qualitative and quantitative increase of the Church. Action that is not of love is not of God. And people without love are people without God (I John 4).

If we must speak of standards for moral decision, the open-ended standard of love must be regarded as the most vital. It is open-ended in the sense that no specific forms or maximal limitations are placed upon loving activity. The exemplification of love in the life-history of Jesus, where love's nature is most clearly seen (I John 3:16), shows that it may lead not only to self-denial but death (Phil. 2). It may appear as diversely as rebuke or healing. It would, however, be somewhat misleading to speak of love as a standard for life, since it is more accurately part of the *essence* of that life. Love can only be regarded as a standard if one is, so to speak, detaching himself from its possession and imaginatively conceiving himself trying to conduct his affairs parallel to it. The same misunderstanding frequently occurs when we speak of a person living in imitation of Christ. A life which is not quite Christ's, but parallel to it is thought to be imitative. But do not make this mistake. Christ is our righteousness. An imitative life, properly so-called, is not an *imitation*. It is the real thing—the life of God in us. And so action which meets the "standard" of love is not a love-like action but a *loving* action which can proceed only from a heart filled with God's own gift of love.

To say that the "standard" of love is open-ended and thus able to take on whatever form is needed in particular cases is to say that a loving life is free and creative. Creative activity in love meets the particular situation in ways which only love knows how to do. Luther remarks,

For everyone who so lives as to secure for himself all graces before God is well pleased with spiritual purity; consequently it is much easier for him to resist carnal uncleanness and the Spirit *instructs him in his faith* how he shall avoid all evil thoughts. . . . For the faith in divine

favor, as it is continuous and always active, does not cease to admonish those who possess it concerning what is pleasing or displeasing to God, as St. John says [I John 2:27]. (Quoted by Koerberle, *op cit.* My emphasis.)

Because this insight is true it is therefore impossible before the fact to state explicit moral rules prescribing the course of our conduct in particular situations. It is impossible to know ahead of time all the possible sorts and conditions of men. It is therefore also impossible to make a catalog of specific imperatives adequate to all men's needs for this reason. But if the opposite were the case, there would be no room for faith to be tested or for freedom in our lives.

The very desire to *have* a catalog of such rules is already an expression of our anxiety before the future and our wish to return to the carnal security of Law. It is this precise desire which is at the heart of temptations to legalism. For legalism is the refuge of every man who cannot live by faith which frees life for creative pursuits and trusts only in God for benediction on his action. But the imposition of a legalistic system destroys our freedom in Christ while giving the illusion of security, and we are once again convicted of our inability to cope with the demands the system makes. Such a life the Scriptures frankly call *death*. A penetrating observation on this subject is made by Koerberle when he says,

Next to the localizing of divinity in holy objects and holy places the natural man in his sluggishness desires nothing so much as a fine meshed casuistic, a puritanical regulation of the course of his life, in which he is relieved from the burden of making moral decisions by a strong external authority that prescribes his conduct for him. (*Op. cit.* p. 120.)

Now if we are dead to the Law and alive in Christ, we are free. And if we are free, there is no necessity for proliferating particular moral rules. If we live by the Spirit, let us then walk by the Spirit.

It should now be clear that the proposal of further moral rules is not required. What is required is that all action flow from redemptive love and thus promote the growth of persons-in-community. What then is our responsibility to "sheep who are not of this fold"? The question is somewhat unfortunate because it suggests that in seeking the growth of the Church we are not fulfilling any obligations to those who by their own choice stand outside of it. This implication is false. In contributing to the qualitative growth of Christ's Body we are witnessing to the world the power and value of the life God bestows through faith to all who accept it. This witness is the principal fulfillment of our obligation to the world. Growing in community testifies that only by God's power, which fills that community, can the otherwise insuperable obstacles of race, culture, prejudice, habit, vocation and interest be transcended.



This is the most impressive witness the Church has at her disposal. When the Roman Empire beheld the primitive Church's steadfast continuance in the Apostolic doctrine, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer it was "turned upside down" by the Bible's own record.

All this is said to avert the suspicion that Christians advocate a monocular and even incestuous concern only for "members of the club." Although mutual love is the natural and immediate response of faithful hearts, and although in this way the power and value of the Gospel are made visible and effective in winning a quantitative increase of the Church, there are obviously more direct obligations to those who are not yet counted among its parts. In such cases the moral rule still holds: all action must flow from redemptive love. This does not allow the possibility that our action might be injurious to the community of faith. It is impossible that redemptive love could be expressed in a way such that the agent's community suffers. Insofar as it is an act of redemptive love *it is God's own work in the world*. "We know that *in everything* God works for good *with those who love Him*, who are called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28). Thus, the power to help people of the world creatively lies not in what we can be or ought to be, but in what we *are* by faith: sons of the living God. For from what we are arise those works which alone build the Church, aid our neighbor, and win him for fellowship with Christ.

Christian existentialism has made it fashionable to say that action prompted and guided by redemptive love always expresses an infinite, passionate commitment to God, trusting fully in His forgiveness and depending solely on His benediction. (Cf. W. Elert, *The Christian Ethos*). This is said because such an act toward another person always constitutes a risk. One never knows how it will be accepted or if it will be welcomed. The reaction may be negative. As we say, one's feelings are then hurt and one is tempted to withdraw to the security of private pursuits. Acts of redemptive love express a person's trust that those acts are, regardless of their unpredictable consequences, *redeemed* and *redeeming*. They are done "in the Spirit." The demand, then, that we have some way of "checking" on the acceptability of our actions is, at its base, a betrayal of that faith and trust which are initiators of redemptive activity! Those who are of God do God's will spontaneously and voluntarily, as the Formula of Concord says (*Sol. Dec. VI.*)

#### 4. *The Role of Conscience*

The fact that we can speak about a betrayal of the faith suggests that what we have said to this point is not all that must be said about the ethics of community. In warning against temptations to legalism and against the demand for rules of conduct the assumption is that we *are* so tempted and do make such demands. The assumption is quite correct and utterly realistic. One might wonder, however, how temptation can arise in the Christian life since, as we have described it, it is God's own life and therefore virtually

invulnerable and immune to imperfection. The point of contact between that life in us and our assumed limitations in the conduct of that life is found in conscience.

One of the most obvious facts about our ordinary experience is that it is heavily freighted with moral perversity. Evil thoughts, murder, adultery, theft, slander—the list is a long one, and the reading of almost any modern novel will fill you in if you lack the grace of perspicuous self-analysis. Although it is true that the lives we lead we live in the flesh by faith and love, it is still true that it is life in the flesh, and that in us, that is, *in our flesh*, no good thing dwells. The realism of community ethics consists in realizing this fact and taking account of the role that conscience plays in it.

Conscience is an integral part of "the constitution of human nature" as Bishop Butler put it. The witness of conscience is evidence that something exists in our makeup which is not God's own life. The term 'conscience' appears thirty-one times in the New Testament in some form. In most cases it is used in contexts which suggest that it makes a negative judgment on present or past action. The witness of conscience testifies to the existence of the very antithesis to God's life in us which the Bible calls "flesh." But since in at least seven cases the New Testament speaks of conscience being good or pure or clear, it is possible that its function is not entirely negative. This may be understood, however, merely as the failure of conscience to cause a type of pain, its proper function, when a deed is done "according to the Spirit." Whatever the proper function is, we must clearly face the reality of a deeply-felt and ever-present conflict between flesh and Spirit which is brought to the level of awareness by conscience. It is the flesh that makes demands for laws to live by and seeks to make even the Gospel another law. Very often the inflection in our voice can transform the story of Good Friday into the most terrifying condemnation. And all too often that is the sum of the exhortation. Flesh searches for security by striving to live by laws and is always defeated in achieving the goal. By the Law, therefore, the knowledge of sin comes. Conscience is the witness of our nature that the pursuits of the flesh are perpetually frustrated.

Conscience is not an infallible witness however. The whole of Butler's brilliant ethics collapses because of his failure to recognize this fundamental limitation. "Had it power as it has authority," he wrote of conscience, "it would rule the world." But conscience does not even have universal authority. There are many people who still believe they are justified by living in accord with laws. The New Testament evidence makes it necessary to regard conscience as a relative and not an absolute authority, just as modern psychiatry does. It is subject to the environment. A weak conscience (the Bible's own term) is a common phenomenon. When in youth we first delight in experimental vice, we are later often horrified by the guilt incurred and the indelible memory of wasted hours. But when vice "is seen too oft, familiar with her face, We

first endure, then pity, then embrace" (Pope). Out of the ruins of a dead conscience, the hardened life is built. And with such a life, a man is dead, as Joseph Sittler aptly puts it, whether the amenities of a funeral have been gone through or not.

The same Spirit by which we live as particulars-in-community must inform and enlighten conscience. Only with this Spirit can the pursuits of the flesh be understood for what they are: antithetical to God and inconsistent with *His* life, not merely inconsistent with a particular culture. This fact the Epitome of the Formula of Concord affirms when it observes that men cannot perceive their acts as *sin* (*non vere agnoscunt*) even though they hear the bare preaching of the Law. The love of God in Christ must be present before sin is understood in all its depth as alienation from the life of God (*Epitome*, V, 7). The *Spirit* convinces us of sin (John 16:8) while conscience alone may be silent. Conscience must therefore bear its witness with God's Spirit before it can become a dependable phenomenon.

The possibility of sin in human life and the ontological reality of the flesh which an enlightened conscience proves must qualify our understanding of the ethics of community. We do not have an ethics of perfection, but only the hope of perfection. The ethics of community, as our primary principle indicates, is an ethics of growth or self-realization and community-realization. We are to *develop* a maturity of faith which exhibits in any given action the power and value for all life which God's charismatic gifts bestow on our lives. As we grow in faith we grow in the Spirit. This occurs always and only when we maintain close contact with His Word. For it is the Word alone which confers wisdom on knowledge, creativity on service, and beatitude on human life. When we increase in the wisdom derived from God's Self-revelation, we increase in the stature of the fullness of Christ. Our moral lives improve. The outcome of our struggle with the flesh becomes less tenuous. The demand for rules decreases. The defense of self-justification loses more of its appeal. The old man "drowns and dies with all sins and evil lusts." And the hope of life in the eschaton becomes more of a reality than an apocalyptic dream.

One word describes life as Christians live it. "Better." It is always better than the life of the flesh, even though it is still life in the flesh. It is always better than yesterday and the day before that. Its history is the odyssey of the pilgrim making progress. Our lives cannot be understood in terms of rules that are kept, but in terms of opportunities which are grasped. In this simple fact lies the meaning of Christian life. As God gives us grace we shall discover those opportunities, and with His love we shall fulfill them. Thereby, the crescendo of Christian life is heard in the uttermost parts of the earth.

I have not yet reached perfection, but I press on, hoping to take hold of that for which Christ once took hold of me. My friends, I do not reckon myself to have got hold of

it yet. All I can say is this: forgetting what is behind me, and reaching out for that which lies ahead, I press towards the goal to win the prize which is God's call to the life above, in Christ Jesus. Let us then keep to this way of thinking. . . . Only let our conduct be consistent with the level we have already reached (Phil. 3:12 ff., NEB).

God willing, so will it be.