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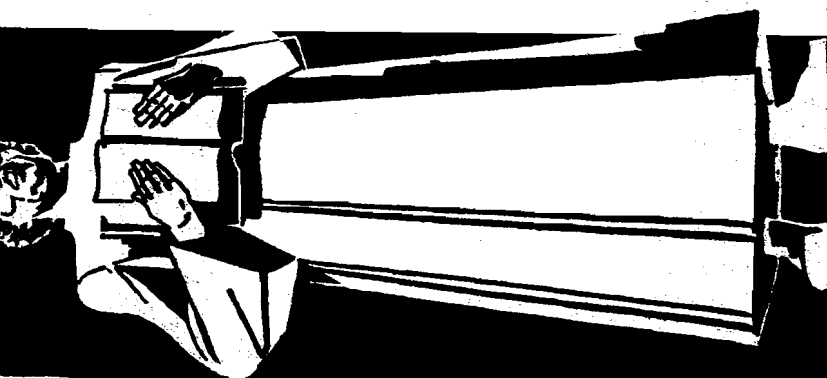
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New Morality—An Attack On The Church?

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THE PROGRAM COMMITTEE asked if I would discuss "situation ethics" as part of our study this year about the environmental influences affecting the church and ministry. I agreed with one member of the faculty who suggested that "situation ethics" was rather "old hat." In the twentieth century it does not take long for something to become outdated.

Surely, all of us have long since read Joseph Fletcher's *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (The Westminster Press, 1966) and perhaps also his sequel *Moral Responsibility: Situation Ethics at Work* (The Westminster Press, 1967). Fletcher has an engaging style of writing. Moreover, he is able to spice his books, by the very nature of his subject, with little morsels of sex exploits. He has had, and continues to have, a wide audience. In addition, those who find Fletcher too academic can resort to Hugh Hefner's popularization of the new morality. Hefner's seemingly endless elucidation of "The Playboy Philosophy" will survive in human literature as an example of the ultimate in boring repetition, if for no other reason.

Fletcher, of course, provides an interesting example of catching people on the horns of a new and more vicious dilemma under the guise of extricating them from a previous dilemma. There are, decrees Fletcher, only three ways of approaching ethical decisions. In moving from the "is" to the "ought," from descriptive to prescriptive statements (that ancient bug-a-bear) we must be antinomian, legalistic or—you guessed it—Fletcherites! Legalism is somehow equated with fundamentalism, Biblical literalism, etc. so that we are immediately put off from it. Who wants to be a legalist? Especially if it includes one among the benighted, stuffed-shirt, sexually frustrated clan which Fletcher pictures. He doesn't quite get to it, but one catches on after awhile that he is talking about good old Pastor Gutachten who is teaching the Ten Commandments to his confirmation class in the church basement on a Saturday morning—and teaching them as if God really meant His prohibitions and commandments, and as if there are moral absolutes.

Well, what kind of a guy is this former Episcopal Dean turned social ethics professor? Is he a libertine? Heaven, says Fletcher, forbid! He refuses to play the Scylla to the legalistic Charybdis. He does not want to be an antinomian. He does not seem to have Agricola in mind as much as Jean-Paul Sartre. He evidently has read Sartre and perhaps some of the other radical existentialists and has been frightened by his look into the abyss of the total and absolute contingency of human life. In rejecting an essence which humans are obliged to "fit," the existentialists admit only the bare

fact of existence—Heidegger's "Dasein." If any choice could be shown to be rational, we would be bound to it. Inasmuch as nothing is rational, we are free, but unfortunately free in a world which no longer has meaning. All of this gets a bit heady for Fletcher and he shrinks back from the awfulness of absolute contingency.

Having established his credentials as a rejector of joy-killing old Biblicism as well as rootless "antinomianism," Fletcher offers the great new answer. Situation ethics, that's what it is. Oh, he uses rules and laws. That is, he recognizes that they once had validity for someone and we had better not ignore them. In the final analysis there is only one absolute (strange that Fletcher never seems to catch on to the fact that he HAS an absolute): act in love.

Fletcher is a master of the art of concocting casuistry cases. He brings tears to our eyes. There's the rainmaker who stops his son from shooting the traveling salesman who romped in the hay with the spinster daughter. Why, that was an act of love! The dear man was only releasing the spinster's femininity. "Noah," thunders the rainmaker, "you're so concerned about what's right that you don't know what's good." Or there is the dear mother in a prison camp who discovers that if she becomes pregnant she will be released to care for her family which needs her very much. The guard who consents to assist her in the plan becomes a family hero and the resulting baby is especially loved. And *you* thought adultery was evil! The trouble with Fletcher's clever cases of casuistry is that one is led to consent to them on the emotional level and the more basic issues become obscured.

To refute Fletcher has become a fashionable pastime. That is not the intended thrust of this paper. Adequate refutations generally move in the direction of showing that Fletcher and his ilk have an incomplete notion of the significance of sin. Or they display a naive and naturalistic approach to the meaning and purpose of human life. Or they miss the point of the spirit behind the letter of the laws of God in the Bible. Moreover, they exhibit an unsupported confidence in man's unaided ability to choose the loving response. Fletcher has some peculiarly universalistic ideas, especially in his confusion of the Holy Ghost with love. He indicates in at least one place that anyone who displays a loving choice thereby has the Holy Spirit. The place of the atoning power of the blood of Christ gets short shrift.

If situation ethics is intended to be a system—or perhaps its exponents would prefer to call it a non-system—it is open to endless wrangling in the arena of ethical theory. This would take us far afield, but we can point out some very simple, yet devastating objections. If this is a value theory, it is untenable because it establishes the base for the methodological model upon the exceptional case. Moreover, Fletcher's own procedure contradicts his own principles. He is a contextualist. Yet, in the unusual story of the two mothers in the wagon trains, he has the nerve to ask, "Which woman made the right decision?" He asks us to generalize moral

judgments without careful examination of the whole range of contextual configurations. That's the basic trouble with *all* of his illustrations which are supposed to prove his case. Ethical theory through the ages has had great respect for the experience of the human race and the judgment of the Christian community. Nowhere does Fletcher urge readers that they had better not leap to conclusions which contradict that experience and witness without long pondering. He leaves the impression that we can quickly make a moral judgment and sweep aside the accumulated experience. His isolation of cases from the whole network of relationships and involved structure of human personality is simplistic in the extreme. He assumes that people who are immediately involved and emotionally entangled are in a position to determine that a certain act is "the loving act." Most of his illustrations are in a sexual context. Most of the applications have been made to young people. It is naive to run wild to assume that a young man fired by the passion of the moment is in any position to be a clear-headed contextualist, even if contextualism were valid. The most-used and least-defined word in all of the contextualist writings is the word "love." Someone has said that the word runs through all of Fletcher's writings like a greased pig.

Well, it may be fun to refute Fletcher, Robinson, Sittler, *et al.*, but we are really intending to discuss the problem which this whole movement creates for the church today.

The problem, as I see it, is that contextualism looks so good, so kind, so loving, so freeing, so fresh and good that IT MAKES INTRINSICALISM LOOK BAD. We have a new game. Prior to contextualism, immorality certainly existed. But it was recognized as immoral by those who committed it. There was a defiance, and a cronyism of those who rejected Biblical morality, but there was not this devastating *self-righteousness* about being immoral. This is the maddening part and that which creates problems for the church. None wants to be legalistic, unloving, lacking in patience and understanding. And the situationists put all exponents of objective, intrinsic morality into that bag. A number of years ago CPH published a book entitled *The Ten Commandments Will Not Budge*. In the light of the misuse of the phrase "God is Love," that is made to sound like a collection of dirty words today. Those who still believe in an absolutism which holds that some things are wrong no matter who does them and under what circumstances look like haters of mankind in the light of the liberating new gospel. Years ago I heard one of Fulton Sheehan's sermons in which he thundered with great authority: "Right is right if nobody is right. Wrong is wrong if everybody is wrong." Principles are not merely "illuminators" but "directors." Right is ultimately *anchored* in the revealed will of God. Scripture contains not merely *descriptions* of what other people in other circumstances considered right and wrong, but actual *prescriptions* which are universally and cosmically valid.

A few indications of our response in this difficult situation follows:

1. We need to re-examine our system of Christian ethics to make sure that we have not "taught for doctrines the commandments of men." It is possible, and it has happened, that human prescriptions do get mingled in. This will only weaken our stand. Sabbatarian laws are bad if they breed disrespect for genuine divine law.

2. We need to place more stress on the doctrine of Christian suffering and cross-bearing. It is not true that we must always look for the will of God to relieve suffering of a human being. If we teach that doing the right thing will always bring peace and happiness in this life, we will soon run into trouble.

3. We need to draw firmer connections between Christian ethics and Christian eschatology. In the light of the brevity of human existence on this earth and the inevitability of the hereafter, the need for bearing of pain makes sense.

4. We need to emphasize and admit the difficulty of moral decisions and relate them directly with the central doctrine of the faith, justification by grace. There will be times when it will be very difficult for a Christian to make the "right" choice. The basic motive is not love of man, but first of all fear and love of God. This is a truly Lutheran accent and a great heritage from Dr. Luther. It is a bad step to place the love of man—even of our dearest ones—at the heart of our ethical system. The fear and love of God is a firmer anchor. With Joseph we need to say, "How can I do this great wickedness and sin against God."

5. On the other hand, we need to stress that love and fear of God will not often lead us to actions which even remotely seem to disregard love of man. The horizontal relation to man flows naturally out of the vertical relation to God. While the Christian church has much to be ashamed of because of the selfish and hateful actions of men who bore her name, nevertheless, she also has much to be proud of. Christians moved by the love of Christ have not been the blue-noses of the world who have sought to spoil everyone's fun. They have been the kind and joyful healers of mankind. We need not submit to slander in this debate.

6. We must stand firm in our preaching of the Christian ethic. The Bible does have clear indications of God's will. Those indications are universal. It is not difficult to separate the moral from the ceremonial laws or the descriptive from the prescriptive in St. Paul. In all the emphasis upon the Gospel as the central message of the church, we must not neglect the law which is God's Word and which does God's work.