

CHAPTER ONE

The Cradle of the Christian Ethic

If you want to put it in one sentence, ethics is the science of behaviour. Ethics is the bit of religion that tells us how we ought to behave. Now it so happens that in regard to ethics we are facing today a situation which the Christian church never had to face before.

Not so very long ago, when I was young and first entered the ministry, the great battle-cry was: 'Don't bother about theology; stick to ethics.' People would say: 'Stop talking about the Trinity and about the two natures of Jesus and all that sort of thing, and stick to ethics. Never mind theology; just stick to the Sermon on the Mount, and let the abstractions and the abstrusenesses and the philosophy and the metaphysics go.' People said: 'Take theology away—I can't understand it anyway.' But thirty years ago no one ever really questioned the Christian ethic. Thirty years ago no one ever doubted that divorce was disgraceful; that illegitimate babies were a disaster; that chastity was a good thing; that an honest day's work was part of the duty of any respectable and responsible man; that honesty ought to be part of life. But today, for the first time in history, the whole Christian ethic is under attack. It is not only the theology that people want to abandon—it is the ethic as well.

That is why it is so important to look at the Christian ethic today, to see what it is all about, and to ask if it is still as binding as ever.

If you are going to understand anyone, you need to know something about his parents and about the home he came from. The Old Testament is the parent of the New Testament

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and the religion of the Old Testament is the cradle from which Christianity came. It is therefore necessary to look first at the ethics of the Old Testament.

i. The very first thing to say about the ethic of the Old Testament is that it is an *ethic of revelation*.

In this case, if we start out by simply looking at words, then we get off very much on the wrong foot. The word *ethics* comes from the Greek word *ethos*; and *ethos* means a *habit or custom*. Are we then to say that ethics simply consists of habits and customs and conventions which have become fixed and stereotyped so that things which were once the usual thing to do have become the obligatory thing to do?

Take another word; take the Greek word for law—*nomos*. If you look up *nomos* in the Greek dictionary you will find that the first meaning given for it is *an accepted custom*. Are we at the same thing again? Is law something which has become so habitual, so conventional, that it has finished up by becoming an obligation? Is it simply a case that the *done thing* has become *the thing that must be done*? Take still another word; take the Greek word for justice—*dikē*; in Greek *dikē* means *an accepted standard of conduct*—and obviously this is an entirely variable thing, quite different in one society from another, quite different in Central Africa and in the Midlands of England or the Highlands of Scotland. Are we back at the same thing again? Is justice simply stereotyped custom, habit and convention? When we talk about ethics, law, justice, are we really only talking about habits and customs—or does it go deeper than that?

In the Old Testament it goes far deeper, for, as it has been put, for the Old Testament *ethics is conformity of human activity to the will of God*. Ethics for the Old Testament is not what convention tells me to do, but what God commands me to do.

ii. Second, the ethics of the Old Testament are rooted in history. There is one thing that no Jew will ever forget—that his people were slaves in the land of Egypt and that God

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redeemed them. To this day that story is told and retold at every Passover time. 'You must remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt and that the Lord your God rescued you' (Deuteronomy 7.18; 8.2; 15.5; 16.12; 24.18,22). That is the very keynote of Old Testament religion.

That saying has two implications; it means that for two reasons God has a right to speak. First, he has the right to speak because he did great things. Second, he has the right to speak because he did these great things for the Jews. The Jew would say: 'God has a right to tell me how to behave, for God has shown that he can act with power—and act with power for me.'

iii. For the Old Testament the idea of ethics is tied up with the idea of a covenant. A covenant is not in the Old Testament a bargain, an agreement, a treaty between two people, in this case between God and Israel, for any of these words means that the two parties are on the same level. The whole point of the covenant is that in it the whole initiative is with God. The idea is that God out of sheer grace—not because the nation of Israel was specially great or specially good—simply because he wanted to do it—came to Israel and said that they would be his people and he would be their God (Deuteronomy 7.6-8; 9.4,5).

But that very act of grace brings its obligation. It laid on Israel the obligation for ever to try to be worthy of this choice of God.

iv. Quite often the Old Testament puts this in another way. It talks of Israel as the bride of God (Isaiah 54.5; 61.10; 62.4,5; Jeremiah 2.2; 3.14; Hosea 2.19,20). It is as if God chose the nation of Israel to marry it to himself. That is why in the Old Testament when Israel is unfaithful the prophets talk of the nation going a-whoring after strange gods. Israel and God are married and infidelity is like adultery (Malachi 2. 11; Leviticus 17.7; 20.5,6; Deuteronomy 31.16; Judges 2.17; 8.27,33; Hosea 9.1). It is also why the Old Testament can use a word about God that we perhaps don't much like nowadays

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—it talks about God being a jealous God (Exodus 20.15; 34.14; Deuteronomy 4.24; 5.9; 6.15). That is because love is always exclusive. God wants the undivided love of the nation—and if he does not get it, like any lover he is jealous.

Take it either way—take it that God entered into a special relationship with Israel in the covenant—take it that God takes the nation as his bride—either way out of sheer gratitude, out of the obligation that love always brings, the nation is—as you might say—condemned to goodness.

v. I have just been using a word which is a key word in regard to the relationship of Israel and God—the word *chose*. God *chose* Israel. The one thing about which the Jews are absolutely sure is that they are *the chosen people*; that in some way or other they specially and uniquely belong to God. This idea of being chosen has certain consequences—and they are not the consequences that you would altogether expect.

(a) First, it brings a terrifying sense of responsibility. There is a devastating passage in Amos. Amos has been reciting the sins of people after people—Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, Moab—the long and terrible list and to each its doom. Then he comes to Israel—and the feeling is that he is going to say that Israel is the chosen people, and that therefore there is no need to worry; everything will be all right. So the voice of God through the prophet comes: *You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth*—and the hearers are prepared to sit back comfortably—and then there comes the shattering sentence: *Therefore I will punish you for all your iniquities* (Amos 3.2). The greater your privilege, the greater your responsibility. The better the chance God gives us, the more blameworthy we are if we fail him. This is one of the most dreadful *therefores*: You have I chosen—*therefore* you will I punish.

(b) Equally clearly this chosenness must issue in obedience. Moses says to the people: This day you have become the people of the Lord your God. *Therefore* you shall obey the

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voice of the Lord your God, keeping his commandments and his statutes' (Deuteronomy 27.9,10). Not, chosen, therefore exempt from obedience; but, chosen, therefore for ever under obligation to obedience.

(c) If then this obedience is of the very essence of life, the law which must be obeyed becomes for the Jew the most important thing in life. As Moses said of the law when he was making his farewell speech to the people: 'It is no trifle; it is your life' (Deuteronomy 32.46,47). The law was that whereby they knew the will of God, and it was through the law that the necessary obedience could be rendered.

(d) This obedience had one obvious consequence—it meant that, if this obedience were accepted, the Jews had to be prepared to be different from all other nations. The word of God was quite clear; they were not to be like the Egyptians they were leaving; and they were not to be like the Canaanites into whose land they were going (Leviticus 18.1-5; 20.23,24). God had separated them from other peoples.

(e) And here we come to the text and the saying which more than any other are of the very essence of the Jewish religion—the voice that they heard again and again said to them over and over again: 'You shall be holy because I am holy' (Leviticus 20.26; 19.2; 11.44,45; 20.7,26). The basic meaning of the word *holy* is *different*. The Sabbath was holy because it was different from other days; the Bible is holy because it is different from other books; the temple was holy because it was different from other buildings. God is supremely holy because God is supremely different. Now the very first duty of the Jew is to be different; he is separated; he is chosen; he is God's; and therefore he is different.

This explains two of the great ethical problems of the Old Testament. There was about the Jews a complete exclusiveness. (There is a qualification of this to come, but to that we will come later.) A Jew was to make no covenant with any other nation (Exodus 23.32; 34.12-15). Intermarriage with persons of any other nation was—and is—absolutely for-

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bidden (Exodus 34.16; Deuteronomy 7.3). Here also we have the explanation of certain things in the Old Testament which have always shocked the Christian—because the Christian so often did not try to understand them. For instance, in war the shrines of any other nation were to be utterly destroyed (Exodus 23.24; Deuteronomy 7.5; 12.3). It is here that we come on that command which is so often quoted against the Old Testament. If a city surrendered, the inhabitants of it were to be made slaves; if a city resisted and was in the end conquered—you shall save nothing alive (Deuteronomy 20. 10-18; 7.1-5). Men, women and children were to be obliterated. And so within the nation, if a man left Judaism and became an apostate, he was to be mercilessly destroyed (Deuteronomy 13.12-18; 17.2-7).

Things like that shock us; but just try to understand. At the back of this there was nothing personal; there was no hatred. What there was was a passion for purity. Nothing—absolutely nothing—must be allowed to taint the purity of Israel; the infection must be mercilessly rooted out. Holiness had to be protected by the extermination of the enemies—not of Israel, but of holiness and of God. There is nothing political here; there is no thought of a *Herrenvolk*, a master race who will exterminate other peoples; it is holiness that matters. The day had not yet come—it was to come—when they began to see that the best way to destroy God's enemies is not to kill them but to make them his friends; God's enemies are to be destroyed by converting them, not by annihilating them. But early on the passion for holiness produced the demand for destruction—a demand which is not to be condemned without being understood.

The second ethical problem is to be found in a feature of the Jewish law which leaves anyone who studies it initially amazed. One of the strangest things in the Jewish law is the way in which the ethical and the ritual, the moral and the ceremonial are put side by side. Things are put side by side, one thing which seems to matter intensely and another thing

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which does not seem to matter at all, and they seem to be treated as of equal importance. Let us take an example; here is a passage from Leviticus:

You shall not hate your brother in your heart, but you shall reason with your neighbour, lest you bear sin against him. You shall not take vengeance or bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself; I am the Lord.

You shall keep my statutes. You shall not let your cattle breed with a different kind; you shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed; nor shall you wear a cloth made of two kinds of stuff (Leviticus 19.17-19).

This passage begins with one of the greatest ethical principles that has ever been laid down—to love your neighbour as yourself—and it ends with a prohibition of wearing clothes made of a certain kind of cloth—the reason for which is completely obscure. You have the ethical and the ritual completely mixed up.

Now a great many people criticise Judaism because it makes so much of a physical thing like circumcision, because of its food laws, and things like that. But, you see, it is crystal clear that if Judaism had not had these laws it would not have survived at all. The point is this. A good man is a good man to almost any religion or philosophy—Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill, a Stoic, a Christian, a Jew—all agree on what honour and honesty and courage and chastity are. C. S. Lewis spoke of 'the triumphant monotony of the same indispensable platitudes which meet us in culture after culture'. If it was just a matter of morals there was no great difference in the action of the Greek, the Roman, the Jewish and the Christian good man. What made the Jew stand out, what made him different, is his ceremonial law. You can tell him by what he eats and what he does not eat.

I have told this story before, but it so perfectly illustrates what I am getting at that I tell it again. When my daughter

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Jane was young her closest friend was Diane a little Jewish girl. We used to go out on Saturday afternoons in the car, and we would stop somewhere for afternoon tea, and when the sandwiches arrived, Diane would say to me: 'Can I eat it?' At afternoon tea in an hotel Diane was a Jewess, *and she showed it*. Would to God we Christians were as willing to show our Christianity! But the point is that the Jewish ceremonial law is designed to show the essential difference of the Jew—it was his witness to his Judaism—and so far from mocking it or criticising it, it was that, we must remember, that kept Judaism alive. The Jew has always been the great non-conformist, for the Jew—all honour to him—is the man who had has the courage to be different.

We now come to what is the greatest contribution of Jewish religion to ethics. *Judaism insisted on the connection between religion and ethics*. This may seem to us the merest truism, but it was not a truism in the ancient world. We can see this connection in two things. First, one of the widespread practices in the ancient world was that of temple prostitution. The ancient peoples were fascinated by what we might call the life force. What makes the corn grow and the grapes and the olives ripen? Above all, what begets a child? This is the life force. So they worshipped the life force. But, if you worship the life force, then the act of sexual intercourse can become an act of worship; and so temples in the ancient world had hundreds and sometimes thousands of priestesses attached to them who were nothing other than temple prostitutes.

In Deuteronomy there is a passage like this:

There shall be no cult prostitute of the daughters of Israel, neither shall there be a cult prostitute of the sons of Israel. You shall not bring the hire of a harlot or the wages of a dog (that is, a male prostitute) into the house of the Lord your God in payment for any vow; for both of these are an abomination to the Lord your God (Deuteronomy 23.17, 18).

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What on earth has the price of a prostitute to do with the temple of the gods? In Greece, everything. In the temple at Corinth there were one thousand sacred prostitutes and they came down to the streets in the evening and plied their trade. In Greece Solon was the first Greek statesman to institute public brothels, and with the profits of them they built a temple to the goddess Aphrodite. The ancient world saw nothing wrong in this. Chastity and religion had no connection. Judaism for the first time made religion and purity go hand in hand.

The second thing that Judaism insisted on was that the most elaborate ritual and the most magnificent church services cannot take the place of the service of our fellow men. What does God want? the prophet asks; and the answer is not church services, but to share your bread with the poor, to take the homeless into your house, to feed the naked. To do justice and to love mercy is what God wants us to do (Isaiah 1. 12-17; 58.6-12; Jeremiah 7.8-10; Amos 5.21-24).

So Judaism insists that there can be no religion without ethics. And that to serve God we must serve our fellow men. As Micah had it, you can come to God and offer him calves a year old; you can offer him thousands of rams; you can offer him tens of thousands of rivers of oil; you can even take your own child, fruit of your own body, and offer him; not one of these things is what God wants—the only real offering is to act justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly before God (Micah 6.6-8; Hosea 6.6). Once and for all the Old Testament unites religion and ethics, and it did it so permanently and so well that today no one would ever regard a religion as a religion at all, unless it joined the service of God and the service of men.

Before we look at some of the detail of the Old Testament ethic, there are two other general things that we ought to notice.

First, the Old Testament is not in the least afraid of the reward motive. The Old Testament is quite insistent that the

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prosperity of a nation is in direct ratio to its obedience to God. Given obedience to God, the rains will fall, and the harvest will be sure, and there will be victory over their enemies; and given disobedience to God the national life will fall apart (Leviticus 26; Deuteronomy 28; Leviticus 5.18,19; Deuteronomy 7.12-16; 11.13-17). There are two things to be said. First, the Old Testament had little or no belief in any life to come, and therefore it had to promise its reward in this life; that is one of the differences which Christianity made (Cp. Job 14.7-12; Psalms 6.5; 30.9; 88.5,10-12; 115.17; Ecclesiastes 9.10; Isaiah 38.18). It brought in a new world to redress the balance of the old. Second, there is a real sense in which the Old Testament prophets were right. This much is true—there is not a problem threatening this or any other country just now which is not a moral problem. Industrial unrest, for instance, is not basically an economic problem today; it is a moral problem because—dare I say it?—and to this we will return—it springs from the fact that all of us—I, like everyone else—want to do as little as possible, in as short a time as possible, with as little effort as possible, and to get as much as possible—and de'il tak' the hinmost. You cannot mend an economic problem when the attitude to life of most people makes it insoluble.

The second broad fact to note—and again to this we will return—is that the prophets were politicians. The prophets were not talkers; they were doers. They were quite clear that the only way to turn the vision into fact was through political action. The prophets were the best friends the poor man ever had, and the biggest scourges the rich man ever had. Péguy the philosopher said: 'Everything begins in mysticism and ends in politics.' Of course, a man must have the vision of a perfect society. The demand of the prophet was; 'All right! You've had the vision. What are *you* doing about it?'

So then we come to look at some detail.

i. The supreme characteristic of the Old Testament ethic is its

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comprehensiveness. It involved every man and covered every action. One of the most extraordinary commands of God to the Jews was: 'You must be a kingdom of priests' (Leviticus 19.6). Goodness, religion, was not the business of a few experts; it was every man's business. Some poet wrote a poem about Judaea in which he said that all Judaea was 'pregnant with the living God'. The writer called Ecclesiastes, the preacher, said: 'He has set eternity in their heart' (Ecclesiastes 3.11, RV margin). All life came within the command and the service of God.

ii. Within the family parents were to be honoured (Exodus 20.12). To strike a parent was to deserve the death penalty (Exodus 21.15; Deuteronomy 21.18-21). If we may digress for one moment—the ancient world honoured parents as a duty which was built into life. The Babylonian code, the code of Hammurabi, has as the penalty for striking a parent that a man's hand should be cut off. Plato laid it down that the punishment for such a crime was permanent banishment, and death if the transgressor returned (*Laws* 881 BD). Cicero said that Solon the greatest of the Greek lawgivers did not legislate for the eventuality of a man striking a parent, for he believed that it was inconceivable that it should ever happen (*Rosc.* 25). Chastity and purity stood very high. The ideal of marriage was high but the practice did not reach the ideal—but of that more later.

iii. There is one very notable thing in Jewish law. The law was specially designed to protect the widow and the fatherless and the poor, for they were held to be specially dear to God (Deuteronomy 10.18; 1.17; 16.19; Leviticus 19.15). But—here is the special thing—the Jews insisted that there must be one law for everyone, the same for the Jew and the resident alien within their gates (Leviticus 24.22). There are two things about a Jew which together make an amazing paradox. The Jew never forgets he is one of the chosen people; he will not intermingle with the Gentile; but at the same time no nation ever more firmly banished racialism from their society. No

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matter who a man was, justice was his, because God cared for him.

There is only time to dip here and there into the ethic of the Old Testament and to choose some of the outstanding things.

i. To the Jewish ethic business morality mattered intensely. One of the most extraordinary things about the ethic of the Old Testament is that the obligation to have just weights and measures is laid down no fewer than seven times (Leviticus 19.35,36; Deuteronomy 25.13-16; Proverbs 16.11; Ezekiel 45.10-12; Amos 8.4-6; Micah 6.10,11). As the writer of the Proverbs has it: 'A just balance and scales are the Lord's; all the weights in the bag are his work.' Here is the God not only of the sanctuary and the church, but of the counter and the shop floor. The weighing out of the housewife's order and the measuring of the customer's request become an act of worship for the Jew. And that is why I think that it is safe to say that you will never find a dishonest Jew who has stuck to his religion.

ii. One of the outstanding features of the Jewish law is its stress on responsibility. A man is not only responsible for what he does; he is also responsible for the wrong thing he might have prevented and the damage for which he is to blame because of his carelessness or thoughtlessness. If an ox gores someone, if the ox was not known to be dangerous, then the ox is killed and the owner goes free; but if it was known that the ox was dangerous, then not only is the ox killed, but its owner too is liable to the death penalty—for he ought to have prevented the tragedy (Exodus 21.28-32). Palestinian houses were flat-roofed and the flat roof was often used as a place of rest and meditation. So it was laid down by the law that if a man built a house he must build a parapet round the roof, 'that you may not bring the guilt of blood on your house, if anyone fall from it' (Deuteronomy 22.8).

The Old Testament is sure that I am my brother's keeper; it is quite sure that I am not only responsible for the harm I

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have done, but that I am equally responsible for the harm I could have prevented.

iii. Lastly, there is in the Jewish ethic a kindness that is a lovely thing. A Jew wore only two articles of clothing; an undergarment like a shirt and an outer garment like a great cloak. He wore the cloak by day and he slept in it at night. It was laid down that, if ever he pawned the outer cloak, it must be given to him back again at night to sleep in. And the law-giver hears God say: 'And if he cries to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate' (Exodus 22.26,27; Deuteronomy 24.12,13). The law cared because God cared that a man should sleep warm at nights even in his poverty.

A Jewish workman's pay was no more than four new pence a day. No man ever got fat on that and no man ever saved on that. And so the law lays it down that a man must be paid on the day he has earned his pay—'lest he cry against you to the Lord and it be sin to you' (Leviticus 19.15; Deuteronomy 24.14,15; Malachi 3.5). God cares that the working man should get his pay.

A lost ox or ass is to be returned to its owner, or kept till it is claimed. An animal which has collapsed has to be helped to its feet again (Exodus 23.4,5; Deuteronomy 22.1-4; 21.1-9). In a nest the mother bird must always be spared (Deuteronomy 22.6,7). A field must not be reaped to the edge, nor gleaned twice; the olive trees must not be gone over twice; the vineyard must not be stripped and grapes which have fallen must not be gathered, for something must always be left for the poor and the stranger (Leviticus 19.9,10; 23.22; Deuteronomy 24.20,21). A deaf man must never be cursed and a blind man must never be tripped up (Leviticus 19.14; Deuteronomy 28.18). A man who had just married must be given no business to do and must be exempt from military service for one year to be 'free at home and for one year to be happy with the wife whom he has taken' (Deuteronomy 20.5-7; Leviticus 24.5).

There are few more wonderful ethics than the ethic of the

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Old Testament. It has its sternness and it has its severity; but it has its mercy and its kindness and its love. It is the very basis of the Christian ethic, and the Christian ethic could not have had a greater base or a finer cradle.