

CHAPTER TWO

The Characteristics of the Christian Ethic in the Teaching of Jesus

The title of this series of lectures is *Jesus Today*, and there are a large number of people who would say quite bluntly that they do not believe that Jesus has anything to do with today at all. The alternative title is *The Christian Ethic in the Twentieth Century*, and there are an equal number of people who would roundly declare that the Christian ethic has no relevance at all for the twentieth century. Are they right, or are they wrong?

You could, if you were so disposed, put up a very strong theoretical argument that the ethics of the Bible in general and of the New Testament in particular have nothing to do with 1970.

i. The oldest parts of the Old Testament date back to about 950 BC; the latest part of the New Testament dates back to about AD 120; that is to say, bits of the Bible are just about 3,000 years old; none of it is more recent than more than 1,800 years ago. How can teaching of that age have any relevance for today?

No one would try to teach doctors today with Galen and Hippocrates as their textbooks; no one would try to teach agriculture on the basis of Varro, or architecture on the basis of Vitruvius. The ancient writers in other spheres are interesting; they are part of the history of their subject. But no one accepts them as authoritative for life and living today. Why then accept Jesus? Why accept the New Testament?

ii. Further, the Bible, the New Testament and Jesus come from a tiny country. Palestine is only about 150 miles from

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north to south, about as far as Perth is from Carlisle or Doncaster from London. Palestine is about forty-five miles from east to west, less than the distance from Glasgow to Edinburgh or from London to Brighton. How can an ethic coming from a tiny country like that be an ethic for the world? Further, Palestine was inhabited by the Jews, and the Jews deliberately isolated themselves from other countries and other cultures. How can an ethic that comes from a country with a deliberate policy of self-isolation be an ethic for the world? Still further, politically the Jews were failures. They were subject to Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Greece, Rome. They hardly knew what freedom and independence were. How can an ethic that comes from a tiny, isolated, subject country be an ethic for the world?

iii. Again, it is obvious that life in Palestine was nothing like what life is today. Just think. The wages of a working man in Palestine were about four new pence a day. Even allowing for the vast difference in purchasing power, four new pence a day bears no relation to the wages which a man earns in the affluent society, in which people never had it so good. In the ancient world there was no such thing as industry in the modern sense of the term, no factories, no machines, no mechanisation, no industrialisation.

Again, in that ancient world society was by our standards extraordinarily immobile. In the early chapters of Samuel we read of Samuel and his mother Hannah. She took the little boy from his home in Ramah to the tabernacle in Shiloh and left him there with Eli the priest. And then it goes on to say that once a year she made him a new little coat, and once a year she visited him with the coat (1 Samuel 2.19). You would think that it was a tremendous journey, a journey that could only be faced once a year. In point of fact Ramah was fifteen miles from Shiloh! Jesus was only once in his life more than about seventy miles from home. When you think of the difference between that and a society in which a summer holiday in Spain is a commonplace, and a flight to the moon

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a possibility, then you see that that society and ours are worlds apart.

How then can a teaching and an ethic given in a society like that have any connection at all with today?

Two things have to be said. Firstly, externals can change while the underlying principles remain the same. Take the case of buildings. There is a very great difference between the Pyramids in Egypt, the Parthenon in Athens, Canterbury Cathedral, Liverpool Cathedral, Coventry Cathedral, and the Post Office Tower in London. Externally they look worlds apart, and yet underlying them all there are the same laws of architecture, because, if there were not, they would simply fall down. The externals can be as different as can be; the underlying principle is the same.

Now add the second thing. The one thing that the Christian ethic is all about is personal relationships. It is about the relationship between men and men, and men and women, and men and women and God; and personal relationships don't change. Love and hate, honour and loyalty remain the same.

Someone took this illustration—when Rachel arrived to marry Jacob she arrived on a camel, in eastern robes and veiled and hidden; the modern bride arrives in a hired Rolls-Royce and a miniskirt. But the situation is exactly the same—two young people in love. You remember Thomas Hardy's lines:

*Yonder a maid and her wight
Go whispering by,
War's annals will fade into night
Ere their story die.*

This is why the ethics of the New Testament and of the Bible are as valid today as ever they were. It is because they are all about the unchangeable things, the relations which do not alter so long as men are men and women are women and God is God.

If this is so, one thing stands out about the Christian ethic—it is a *community ethic*. It is an ethic which would be almost

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impossible for a man to live in isolation from his fellow men. Love, loyalty, forgiveness, service—these are community matters; things which can only be found and exercised when people live together. When John Wesley was young and still bewildered in the faith he formed a plan to get himself a hut on the moors and to go away and live alone with God. An older and at that time a wiser Christian said to him: 'God knows nothing of solitary religion.' This business of Christian living is something which is to be found among men.

Now we must ask the all-important question. What is it that characterises the ethic of the New Testament? Or to put it in another way in view of what we have been saying—what is it that characterises the personal relationship of the Christian with his fellow men?

This has got to be pushed one step back. We have to ask first—what are the personal relationships of God with his creatures as taught by Jesus? We have to ask that for this reason: one of the main features of the Christian ethic lies in the demand for imitation. Men are to imitate Jesus. Peter says that Jesus left as an example that we should follow in his steps (1 Peter 2,21). The word he uses for example is *hupogrammos*, and *hupogrammos* was the word for the perfect line of copperplate handwriting at the top of the page of a child's exercise-book, the line which had to be copied. So then the Christian has to copy Jesus. And it is Paul's demand that the Christian should imitate God—and after all is this not a reasonable demand since man, as the Bible sees it, is made in the image and the likeness of God (Ephesians 5.1; Genesis 1.26,27)?

So then what we really have to ask is—what is the new thing that Jesus taught about God in regard to God's personal relationships with his people?

If we go to the Greek ideas about God, we find that the first and most basic idea of God is the idea of God's absolute serenity, a serenity which nothing in earth or in heaven can affect. The Greeks used two words about God. They talked

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about his *ataraxia*. When Jesus talked about our hearts being *troubled*, he used the verb (*tarassō*) which is the opposite of *ataraxia*. *Ataraxia* is undisturbedness; it is inviolable peace. The Stoics talked about the *apatheia* of God, by which they meant that God was by his nature incapable of feeling. It is feeling which disturbs. If you can love, you can be worried and sad and distressed about the one you love. They felt that the one essential thing about God was this serene, undisturbed, absolute, untouchable peace. To have that peace God, they said, must be without feeling.

Here is the difference which Christianity made. Jesus Christ came to tell men of a God who cares desperately, a God who is involved in the human situation, a God who in the Old Testament phrase is afflicted in all our afflictions, a God who is concerned. A detached serenity is the very opposite of the Christian idea of God. The insulated, emotionless deity is the reverse of the Christian God.

If this is so, then the basis of the Christian ethic is clear—*the basis of the Christian ethic is concern*. Here is the essence of three of the great parables of Jesus. In the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25.31-46), the standard of the final judgment of men is quite simply: Were you concerned about people in trouble? In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16.19-30) there is not the slightest indication that the rich man was in any way cruel to Lazarus. The trouble was that he never noticed the existence of Lazarus. Lazarus was there in poverty and pain and the rich man simply accepted him as part of the landscape; he was not in the least concerned; and in the parable he finished up in hell.

The third parable is that of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10.29-37). The whole point of the parable is the concern of the Samaritan. While the others passed by on the other side, concerned only to avoid all contact with suffering, the Samaritan was concerned and did something.

William Booth would always deny that the vast and wide-

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ranging work of the Salvation Army was planned. He used to say:

We saw the need. We saw the people starving, we saw people going about half-naked, people doing sweated labour; and we set about bringing a remedy for these things. We were obliged—there was a compulsion. How could one do anything else?

But the whole trouble is that plenty of people can do something else—they can do nothing. It was this concern that haunted a man like William Booth. 1868 was the last Christmas Day he ever spent in the normal way with a meal and a party. He had come back from preaching in Whitechapel in the morning. He tried to keep Christmas, but he couldn't. 'I'll never spend a Christmas Day like this again,' he said. 'The poor have nothing but the public house, nothing but the public house.' Later in life he was to say when the agony of dyspepsia made eating almost impossible for him: 'They bring me eggs for breakfast and right now children are starving.' What haunted him above all was put in that most pathetic of phrases—he was haunted by the thought of children to whom the word *kiss* was a meaningless mystery.

First, then, the basis of the Christian ethic is the basis of the being of God and of the life of Jesus Christ—it is concern.

In this life of concern the Christian is the very reverse of the Greek. Inevitably the Greek saw life in terms of a God who was serene, isolated, untouchable, freed from all feeling and emotion. Therefore, he argued, a man must be like this. And so his great aim could be summed up in one sentence: 'Teach yourself not to care. Whatever happens, God sent it anyway. Therefore accept it.'

But the Stoics went farther; they saw life as a process of learning not to care. Epictetus gives his advice; begin, he says, with a torn robe or a broken cup or plate and say, I don't care. Go on to the death of a pet dog or horse, and say, I don't care. In the end you will come to a stage when you can stand

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beside the bed of your loved one and see that loved one die, and say, I don't care.

For the Stoic life was a progress in not caring; for a Christian life is a process of learning to care—like God.

Set that beside the last speech William Booth made in 1912 when he was an old man and knew that he was going to become blind:

When women weep as they do now, I'll fight; while little children go hungry as they do now, I'll fight; while men go to prison in and out, in and out, I'll fight; while there yet remains one dark soul without the light of God, I'll fight—I'll fight to the end.

And he did. If you want to see what the Christian ethic is all about place that dying battle-cry of Booth beside the education in not caring—and you have the difference.

The Gospels have a word for this attitude of concern. They call it love. Since this is at the very heart of the Christian ethic we must look more closely at it.

We begin with a disadvantage. In English the word *love* has a highly emotional content. It is that outreach and upsurge of the heart which we feel for those who are very near and very dear to us. And so when we are told that we must *love* our neighbour, and still more, when we are told that we must *love* our enemies, we are daunted by the seeming impossibility of the task. Love, as we have learned to use the word, is not something which can be diffused over a great number of people; it is necessarily something which by its nature has to be concentrated on some very few, on some one person. The Greeks knew this. They knew all about the love which was a passion and a desire, overmastering in its intensity, and they called it *erōs*. They knew of the steadfast love of affection which comes from the experience of facing life together, the lasting love which binds two people together, even when passion is spent. They called it *philia*. They knew of the love which a child has for his parent, a son for his mother, a daughter for her father, a brother for a sister, a love

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into which sex does not enter at all. They called it *storgē*.

But the love which Jesus demands is none of these things; it is *agapē*. What is it, this *agapē*? We have it described to us in terms of the attitude of God to men:

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour, and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be the sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust (*Matthew 5.43-45*).

What then is the distinguishing thing about this love of God which is to be our love for our fellow men? Its characteristic is that to good and evil, to just and unjust, God gives his gifts. The sunlight and the rain are there for all men. So this means that, whether a man is good or bad, God's goodwill goes out to this man; God wants nothing but his good; God's benevolence is around him and about him.

This is what Christian love is. It is an attitude to other people. It is the set of the will towards others. It is the attitude of a goodwill that cannot be altered, a desire for men's good that nothing can kill. Quite clearly, this is not simply a response of the heart; this is not an emotional reaction; this is an act of the will. In this it is not simply our heart that goes out to others; it is our whole personality. *And this is why it can be commanded and demanded of us.* It would be impossible to demand that we love people in the sense of falling in love with them. It would be impossible to demand that we love our enemies as we love those who are dearer to us than life itself. But it is possible to say to us: 'You must try to be like God. You must try never to wish anything but good for others. You must try to look at every man with the eyes of God, with the eyes of goodwill.'

Luther noticed one thing about the love of God. In the Heidelberg Disputation of 1518 he was talking about the love of God, and he said this: 'Sinners are attractive because they are loved; they are not loved because they are attractive.' God

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does not love us because we are attractive and lovable people; he loves us as we are, and by his love he recreates us and re-makes us. This is how we ought to love others. We do not love them because they are lovable; no one needs anyone to command him to love a winsome and attractive person. The whole point about Christian love is that it is that attitude of the mind and the will and the whole personality which can make us love the unlovely, the unlovable, the unloving, even those who hate us and hurt us and injure us, in the sense that, do what they like, we will never have anything but goodwill to them, and we will never seek anything but their good.

This is the concern of the Christian, because this is the concern of God. It is not a spasmodic emotional thing; it is not something which is dependent on the attractiveness of the other person. It has learned to look on men as God looks on them, with an eye which is not blind to their faults and their failings and their sins, but which for ever and for ever yearns to help, and the worse the man is, the greater the yearning to help. There is a sense in which the more a man hurts me the more I must love him, because the more he needs my love.

Nor is this quite the end of the matter. Luther begins the section of the Disputation from which I have already quoted like this:

The love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it. The love of man comes into being through that which is pleasing to it.

This is to say, human love loves that which is lovable; divine love loves that which is unlovable, and by loving it makes it lovable. This Christian love, then, to be like God's love has this attitude of unchanging goodwill, but it does not simply accept the other person as he is, as if it did not matter if he always remained the same and never became otherwise. The Christian, like God, wishes to love men into loveliness, into goodness, into love in return. It does not always work, but sometimes it can blessedly happen that we can love a person out of bitterness and out of hatred and into love. To answer

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hatred with hatred, bitterness with bitterness, can do nothing but beget hatred and bitterness. There are times when we will fail, but the only way to make the unloving loving is by love. And that is what Christian concern means.

But we go one step farther than this—and again it is the new thing Jesus brought—the Christian ethic is not only concern, it is *universal concern*. I suppose the greatest moral teacher the Greeks ever had was Plato; but you can only describe the ethic of Plato as an aristocratic ethic. He saw life as aimed at the production of the philosopher kings who were, as it were, right at the top of a human pyramid; and the ordinary people existed only to make life possible for the magnificent few. Greek civilisation was built on slavery, and a slave was a living tool.

It took the world about 1,800 years to begin to discover this part of the Christian ethic. As late as 1895 the Salvation Army started work in India and lived among the Indians. An English official said to the Salvationists: 'I don't know how you can bear to live among these people. To us, they're cattle, just cattle.'

That's India. All right, do you know that as late as 1865 in this country only one man in twenty-four had the vote? Just at the turn of the eighteenth century into the nineteenth century the word *democrat* was a bad word. Thomas Coke, the famous Methodist, second only to John Wesley, writes to Henry Dundas:

When a considerable number of democrats had crept in among us, to the number of about 5,000, I was the principal means of their being entirely excluded from our Society.

Did not Queen Victoria herself write that she could never be 'the queen of a democratic monarchy'?

It took the world a very long time to see that the Christian ethic demands not only concern, but universal concern.

But in contrast with what went before there is still something else to say. The Christian ethic demands concern; it

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demands universal concern; and it demands *passionate* concern.

We have already looked at Plato's ethic. The other supreme Greek philosopher was Aristotle, and Aristotle produced one of the most famous of all ethical theories, the theory of the mean. We would now call it the happy medium. He taught that virtue is always the mean between two extremes. On the one side there is the extreme of excess and on the other side there is the extreme of defect, and in between there is the mean. So on the one side there is cowardice; on the other side there is recklessness; and in between there is courage. On the one side there is the miser; on the other side there is the spendthrift; and in between there is the generous man.

When you have an ethic like that the one thing you can never have is enthusiasm. You are always busy calculating between too much and too little, balancing and adjusting. It is an ethic of calculation. But the Christian ethic is the *passionate* ethic; it is not the ethic of the man who carefully calculates every risk; it is the ethic of the man who flings himself into life, and whose sympathy with men is a passion.

We have to add still something else to the concern of the Christian ethic; the concern of the Christian ethic is a *total concern*. As Paul saw it, man is body, soul and spirit. The body is the flesh and blood part of a man; the soul, the *psuchē*, is not what we usually mean by soul. The soul is the animal life of a man. Everything that lives has *psuchē*. An animal has *psuchē*; even a plant has *psuchē*; *psuchē* is the breath of physical life which all living things share. The spirit, the *pneuma*, is that which is unique to man; this is what man alone has; this is the part of man which is kin to God and to which God can speak.

Now here again Christianity brought something new into the world. The ancient world by and large despised and feared the body; it thought that all man's troubles and sins and sufferings came from the fact that he had a body. Plato said that the body is the prison-house of the soul. Seneca spoke of

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the detestable habitation of the body. Epictetus said that he was a poor soul shackled to a corpse. The ancient world hated the body. And there is still a strain in Christianity which is ashamed of the body, a strain which is still frightened of sex and of physical things, and which thinks that things like that are not quite polite and should not be spoken of.

The Christian ethic is quite sure of two things. It is quite sure that we can take our body and offer it as a sacrifice to God (Romans 12.1); that in fact is exactly what we must do. To allow the body to become weak and ill and inefficient and fat and flabby is a sin. It is just as much a sin to let our body run to seed as it is to let your soul run to seed. Physical fitness is one of the duties laid on a Christian.

Second, the Christian is as concerned with men's bodies as he is with their souls. William Booth could never forget the saying of Jesus before the feeding of the five thousand: 'Give ye them to eat' (Matthew 14.16). That is why he started his Food-for-the-Million shops and why he gave men and women free meals. That is why Bramwell Booth was in Covent Garden Market with a barrow at three o'clock in the morning begging for rejected vegetables and bones to make soup. That is why Booth said:

No one gets a blessing, if they have cold feet, and nobody ever gets saved if they have toothache.

Booth knew that men's bodies mattered. George Whitefield was with Booth here. When Whitefield went to America he certainly took one hundred and fifty common prayer books and a lot of books of sermons; but he also took enough material things to fill two pages of print—at random—twenty-four striped flannel waistcoats, twelve dozen shirt buttons; rhubarb, senna, saffron, gentian-root, a Cheshire cheese; three barrels of raisins; pepper, oatmeal, onions, sage and two hogsheads of fine white wine! When he got on board ship he writes in his diary:

The sick increased upon my hands, but were very thankful for my furnishing them with sage-tea, sugar, broth etc.

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He reached America and we find him supplying a family with eight sows and a pig; we find him giving a cow and a calf to a poor woman; and barrels of flour to a poor baker. There are times when sermons and prayers and Bible readings are very poor substitutes for a good meal.

We will not forget that the Christian ethic ought never to forget that men have bodies and these bodies are the property of God and that they matter to God.

We have always to remember that the Christian ethic is an ethic which looks to the beyond. It remembers that there is a world to come. That does not mean that it offers pie in the sky; it does not mean that it is so concerned with heaven that earth is a desert drear. But it does mean that the Christian knows that life is going somewhere; that this life is the first chapter of a continued story; and that what happens after death is affected deeply by the kind of life that we live here.

When Dick Sheppard died after his most notable ministry in St Martin-in-the-Fields, one of the great national daily papers published a cartoon. It showed Dick's empty pulpit, and on the pulpit, an open Bible, and beneath, the caption: Here endeth the reading of the first lesson.

The Christian ethic lives in the consciousness of eternity.

You remember the byreman in Stevenson's story. Stevenson asked him if he never got tired of the muck and the mud and the dirt of the byre as his work. 'No,' he said. 'No; he that has something ayont need never weary.' The Christian ethic is lived in the light of the beyond.

It is very important to note that the Christian ethic is a positive ethic. This is to say that the Christian ethic on the whole tells us rather what to do than what not to do.

The Ten Commandments are on the whole *Thou shalt not's*. In one particular commandment—not one of the Ten Commandments—this is of the first importance. This is in what is usually known as the Golden Rule. In its negative form the Golden Rule is to be met with in many systems of ethics: Don't do to others what you would not like them to do to

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you. But the Christian version of it is positive: Do to others what you would like them to do to you (Matthew 7.12). The Christian version is much the more demanding. It is not so very difficult to abstain from doing things. But the Christian demand is not simply that we abstain from doing things to others, but that we actively do to them what we would wish them to do to us.

This is the Christian doctrine of love. We have to note very carefully the word the Christian ethic uses for love. It is the word *agapē*. It has no passion in it; no sex; it has no sentimental romanticism in it. It means an undefeatable attitude of goodwill; it means that no matter what the other man does to us we will never under any circumstances seek anything but his good. It is an attitude of goodwill to others no matter what they are like. It is not simply a reaction of the heart; it is a direction of the will. It can be exercised even to the person we do not like, because, even not liking him, we can still deliberately and purposefully wish him nothing but well and act for nothing but his good.

The whole point of the Christian ethic is not that it supplies us with a list of things we must not do. It says to us: Your attitude to your fellow men must be such that you wish only their good. And if you look at men like that, then the practice of the Christian ethic becomes the inevitable result.

There is another and a very important sense in which the Christian ethic is a total ethic. It is an ethic of thought as well as of action; of feelings as well as of conduct. Thus it condemns not only murder, but also the anger which brought about the murder (Matthew 5.21, 22). But we must have a care as to just how we state this inner demand, and in particular in one application of it. Jesus said:

You have heard that it was said: You shall not commit adultery. But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart (*Matthew 5.28*).

If we will only think, we will not say—as some have said—

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that the wrong desire is just as bad as the wrong deed. If that were so, we would be saying that it is just as wrong to have a temptation as it is to fall to that temptation. In that case we might as well fall to the temptation straight away. To have a wrong desire and to resist it cannot be as bad as to have a wrong desire and to act on it.

This saying of Jesus has worried a great many people. If we go to the Greek of it, we see what Jesus really meant. What the Greek condemns is not the person who looks at a beautiful person and has an instinctive reaction of admiration and even of desire. What it does condemn—and the Greek makes this quite clear—is the person who looks at another in such a way as deliberately to awaken and to foment desire. What is condemned is a particular kind of looking; the kind of looking which reads pornographic literature in order quite deliberately to waken desire; the kind of looking to be found at a strip-tease show; the kind of looking which, as the French phrase has it, undresses with its eyes the person at whom it looks; the kind of looking which smears anything with a kind of smut and filthiness. This does not condemn the kind of looking which comes to all of us simply because a man is a man and a woman is a woman and God made us so. It condemns the prying, peering looking which uses the eyes to foment desire.

What in the end Jesus is saying in these teachings of his about the inner desire is that in the last analysis the only thing which is truly sufficient, the only peak which is at the top of the Christian ethic, is the situation in which a man has come to a stage when he not only does not do the wrong thing, but does not even want to do it—for only then is he safe.

It is here that we have to look at the phrase which dominates the letters of Paul—the phrase *in Christ*. In Paul's letters everything is *in Christ*. A great New Testament scholar used an analogy to explain this phrase. He used the analogy of the air, the atmosphere. We cannot live at all physically unless the air is in us and we are in the air. Other-

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wise, we cannot breathe; we die. Just so, for the Christian, Jesus Christ is the atmosphere of his life. The Christian is conscious always of his presence.

We may take another analogy. There are certain abnormal psychological conditions which make a man behave in public in ways he should not behave; and one piece of psychological advice which is very often given to such people is never to go out alone, always to go out with a friend. The whole basis of the Christian ethic is that the Christian never goes out alone. He goes out always with the memory and the presence of Jesus Christ.

So then to sum up, the keynote of the Christian ethic is concern; that concern is embodied in Jesus Christ and is the expression of the very life and heart of God. It is a concern that knows neither boundaries nor limits. It is expressed in the life of the world; and in the world it is purified and inspired by the continuous memory that life is lived in the presence and in the power of Jesus Christ.