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AN APPROACH TO PROBLEMS OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS



INTRODUCTION

If all members of the church were spiritually mature the moment they entered the church fellowship, we might well afford to permit all of them to make their own decisions in questions of behavior, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the Word.] And if all church members were spiritually mature, they would not be offended if fellow-Christians, who sought such guidance, came to somewhat different conclusions on such ethical questions. However, this has never yet been the case.] We are at best a growing community, and therefore we must concern ourselves seriously with questions of deportment. Christian growth, according to the New Testament, is seen primarily in character. Even the concept of 'fruitbearing' is closely related to Christian behavior (Gal. 5:22).

Moreover, the church is an exposed community. It exists in a godless society in which ancient gods appear in new dress from time to time who claim the church's devotion and loyalty. The attacks on the church have at times been brutal, at other times subtle, but always dangerous. Our concern is that we protect the church against the insidious attacks of the Evil One by clear ethical teaching. Repeatedly Paul expresses fear that the enemy of mankind should ruin his work (cf. 1 Thess. 3). The church's dangers are not imaginary, and so we must point the members of the Body of Christ to Christian armor, in order to stand in the evil day (Eph. 6).

Also, the church is a witnessing community. Were this not so, our Lord would have raptured the church long ago. But in order to witness to society it must be different from society. To be

(Materials for Christian doctors)

different does not mean that we do not know our society's language, or that we do not feel something of its joys and sorrows, or that we have no concerns about this earthly life, but that we move about in our society as redeemed individuals. If we accommodate ourselves to society's ways to such a degree that our community ceases to ask for the reason of the hope that is in us, we have lost our salt.] The great desire to be 'relevant' can at times be confused with a craving to be identified with modern culture. Indeed, some professing Christians have accommodated themselves so much to society's ways, they are so 'up to date', that people may well ask whether the Christian faith has had a history at all. To make an impact on society the church as a body must live a redeemed life, otherwise ~~our~~ society becomes confused (as indeed it is, when it thinks of 'the church'). Therefore, as we are constantly challenged to be good witnesses to our generation, and as new methods of evangelization are being tested, we must take seriously the question of ethics as it relates to our witness ~~in our~~ ^{in our} society.

Furthermore, the church is a waiting community. The church shares in the life of this world in matters pertaining to her earthly existence, but her roots are in the other world. The very nature of the church calls for a pilgrim existence; it makes it necessary for her to live loosely to things of time; it makes her serious about her behavior, for soon she must stand before the Judge of all the earth. "So, whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him; for we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ . . ." (2 Cor. 5:9,10). Most of the eschatological teaching of the New Testament is designed to inspire the believer to be careful in his ethical behavior.

We see then, that a concern about ethical questions arises out of the very nature of the Christian church. Also, the pattern of the Christian life set forth in the New Testament, makes it imperative for the church to be concerned about questions of behavior. Not only were the apostles concerned about the morals of the believers, but also about their social life (1 Cor. 10), their outward appearance (1 Cor. 11; 1 Tim. 2; 1 Pet. 3), their daily work (1 Thess. 4; 2 Thess. 3), their speech (Eph. 5), their marriage and single state (1 Cor. 7), their family life (Eph. 6), their possessions (1 Tim. 6), their business undertakings (Jam. 4); in short, all of life, ~~was seen in a new light~~. If the New Testament pattern of life is at all a guide for us, we cannot think lightly about questions of behavior.

As for our understanding of what the Bible teaches about the Christian's deportment, we have less difficulty with the commands and prohibitions which concern themselves with ~~those~~ matters which are clearly 'black' or 'white' (I am not suggesting that we have no difficulty in obeying even these clear teachings). However, in the adia-
phorous questions, the so-called 'greys', we do not always understand the Scriptures in the same way. An even greater disparity is seen in the behavior of Christians in this borderland of rights and wrongs. In this essay, the question of the adiaphora is our main concern. We want to raise seriously the question of how ethical questions which lie in the ^{'grey'} ~~grey~~ area of Christian behavior can be approached.

~~AN~~ AN APPROACH TO THE AMBIGUITIES OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS >hs

~~Not~~ Negatively

Before suggesting some positive approaches, let us look at a few approaches to Christian ethics which do not ordinarily lead to good results.

← ~~Not~~ Not by Proof Texts Alone > 12 bl.

It is quite legitimate to refer to chapter and verse when evils are condemned which are wrong, always, everywhere and for everyone--lying, stealing, adultery, and the like. But the adiaphora cannot be approached in this way, since some things may be right at one time and wrong at another; or they may be right in one setting and wrong in another. Besides, our Bible does not speak explicitly to the ambiguities in Christian ethics which arise out of a changing culture. One could not, for example, quote chapter and verse for questions regarding smoking, theatre attendance, the modern dance, or even social drinking (drunkenness is, of course, clearly condemned by Scripture).

⌋ The Bible is not the Christian's law book in the sense that one can easily find the answer to all questions of ethics if one only knows the page to which to turn in a given situation. I have a suspicion that much of the shallowness of thinking on ethics among the members of our church, comes from such a shallow use of the Bible.

← ~~Not~~ Not by a Single Biblical Principle > 12 bl

A single biblical principle may at times give the answer to a certain problem of Christian behavior. Take, for example, the biblical principle of neighbor-love. It implies that I never harm my brother. If then I should discover that something which I do harms my fellow Christian, the biblical principle of love clearly tells me what

to do about such a practice. However, in another situation a question of behavior cannot be settled by this principle alone, for it could happen, that by refraining from some practice for the sake of one brother, I harm the other brother. Such a situation would call for more than just one biblical principle for an adequate answer.

← ~~Not by a Changing Culture~~ 126

The apostles refused to let the culture of their day determine the norms for the Christian's life. There was much in their culture that was good; some things were simply neutral; other practices were outrightly demonic. So it is in our culture. The prohibition: "Love not the world, neither the things in the world," must not be understood as a call to the Christian to deprecate the culture in which he lives. Rather, it is a call to be separated from the immoral and the demonic in the world, and all that which robs us of the love of the Father. [For a discrimination between that which is satanic and that which "is my Father's world" (for which we thank God), we need eyes that are illumined by the Holy Spirit and the Word. The Christian must, therefore, always sit in judgment over the culture in which he lives; he must screen out those things which are in keeping with the Christian life, and accept them with gratitude, and reject those elements in his culture which are evil. At no time, however, must he permit the practices of any given culture to be his guide. Times do change, to be sure, but to appeal to the change of times in an effort to overthrow long-established ethical practices, is an extremely dangerous approach to the question of Christian ethics. The change of mores in our culture may

become the occasion for a re-examination of established ethical patterns, but they do not answer the question of whether a practice is right or wrong, whether it should be continued or not. The examination of any question of Christian deportment must be made in the light of Scripture.

Not by Permanently Labelling Certain Practices > 120.

When a certain number of practices are labelled as sinful at a given time by a Christian community, and when such a catalog of forbidden things is passed on from one generation to the next, at least two weaknesses soon show up. The one is, that the next generation is not always informed on what ^{the} biblical grounds a practice ~~at a given time~~ was labelled as evil, and so it tends to look on such prohibitions merely as 'rules' that tradition has bestowed on ^{it} ~~them~~, and, of course, ~~they~~ regard ~~them~~ lightly. The other weakness is, that by making a number of practices taboo, people begin to think that the evil lies in the practice as such.

For example, there is nothing inherently wrong in drinking a drink that is somewhat more stimulating than another. It is inherently no more evil to drink wine than it is to drink coffee. But in a given culture it may be that connotations have been attached to one or the other, so that it is acceptable for a Christian to drink one and not the other. Or, it may be that viewing a good film in a theatre is intrinsically no more evil than the viewing of the same film in a church building, but there are other considerations to be taken into account, when one asks the question: "Would it be proper for me to go to the theatre to see such a film?" To play pool is certainly no more evil than to play baseball, but to frequent pool halls, or play baseball

with ungodly team-mates, is a different matter. For example, to put it down: "It is wrong to play pool," can be confusing, to say the least. Certainly we could not condemn a family for playing a game of pool any more than we would condemn it for playing a game of scrabble or checkers. Therefore, it will hardly do to single out a certain number of practices and to label them as either good or evil for all times. Every generation will have to ask itself seriously, whether any given practice is acceptable in the light of God's Word.

Not by Reason Alone > 12 bl -

Redemption takes in the whole man. Reason, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, and captive under ^{to} the obedience of Christ, has full ~~place~~ ^{scope} in digging out ^f biblical principles ~~from the Scriptures~~ and bringing them to bear on current issues. But ethical questions are never settled by arguing for the sensibleness of one practice over against the other. This precisely was the fault of the Corinthians (a fault which Paul corrects in 1 Cor. 8). The question was: May I eat meat dedicated to idols? The sophisticated Corinthian (the man with gnosis—knowledge) argued: I do not believe in the gods anymore. There is only one God. Therefore, the meat offered to idols has been offered to non-existing deities, and so there is no such thing as idol-meat. This was a rational approach to Christian ethics.

Basically, Paul would agree with this kind of reasoning: except that other factors had been overlooked. One, there were demonic forces at work in idolatry, and these could prove to be a threat to the Christian. Moreover, there were too many believers in the church who had come out of idolatry, for whom the whole system was so iniquitous that their consciences were not free even when they reasoned that there were no real gods behind the images of wood and stone.

The principles of love demanded that those who could partake of idol-meat with a good conscience (because they had reasoned through the matter) ^{refrain} from exercising their private liberty. By sinning against the brother, they would sin against Christ. Paul, therefore, would ~~have~~ ^{like us to} realize, that ethical questions are not settled by knowledge alone (which tends to puff up because one feels that he is more enlightened and more progressive than the other), but by love (which builds the other up).] It is difficult to put in words the difference between purely rational thinking and spiritual thinking. Spiritual thinking is by no means irrational, but one can think rationally on different levels--on the ground-level and on the spiritual level. Nor ~~should~~ anyone think that a man thinks rationally or irrationally, spiritually or worldly, in direct proportion to the amount of grey matter God has endowed him with.

← ~~Not by Justifying One Practice in the Light of Another~~ ^{by} 126

Whatever we may think of the use of lipstick, I suppose we would all agree that the use of lipstick is less serious than the indulgence in gossip and slander, but to justify ^{the use of} lipstick on the ground that "it's better than speaking evil with your lips," is hardly a proper approach to questions of ethics (although we readily agree that some things are more serious than others).] To justify attendance at the movies (i.e. to look at so-called good films in a theatre) on the grounds that one can see worse pictures on television (assuming that most people have television sets in their homes and watch bad pictures), in my view, begs the question entirely. Where would we finally get if we kept on arguing: If this is wrong, then that is also, and so is the next thing.

Or, if this is right, then that is permissible also! For example, if it's right for me to live in a \$30,000 ~~house~~ house, then it's also right to build a church for \$500,000 ~~church~~, and it's right to drive a \$6,000 ~~car~~ car, and to spend a few thousand each year on trips to Hawaii and Florida. Nor are we justified in participating in practices which some 'outstanding' Christian, who presumably was very effective in his ministry, condoned. One could hardly justify militarism on the grounds that some great army general regularly had morning devotions.

Someone will say: "Since one can always justify the wrongness or the rightness of an action in the light of practices that are either accepted or condemned, any attempt to draw the line somewhere is a completely arbitrary and subjective approach." Precisely! As long as this line is not drawn by one individual in isolation. In every age, believers of any given community must agree, under God, to draw the line at some point in questions of amusements, dress, the use of money (and the ways of earning it), and other matters. But we ask: How shall we ever agree on any one question of Christian ethics that falls into the category of the adiaphora? We shall attempt to give some guidelines momentarily, but before we do so let me suggest a few positives in the matter of an approach to the ambiguities of Christian ethics.

Positively > h5

← 1. Finding Bible Principles > 126P

In the effort to find ~~Biblical~~ Biblical guidelines for Christian behavior, we must make use of all the tools of Biblical research that are at our disposal, constantly imploring divine help in our search.

In our search for biblical principles which lie imbedded in the Scriptures we must guard against trying to 'prove' our position, or to 'shatter' the view of an opponent. Such a spirit tends to ~~usurp~~ *destroy* our ~~methodology~~ *approach*. But if one studies the Scriptures in the presence of God, who tests our hearts, in ~~a~~ *a* spirit of deep humility, with a mind crying for illumination, and with a willingness to study hard, we will discover that the Bible was meant to be understood and not to confuse the saints.

If our interpretation (or application) of Scripture turns out to be completely out of line with what many godly men and women in the evangelical tradition of the Church have believed and practiced, we should not pontificate too vehemently on that particular point. If, for example, a few years ago it was established, that more than 90% *percent* of the members of the evangelical denominations did not attend the movies, one is forced to ask: What new Biblical principle has been uncovered which now throws the door wide open for Christians to attend the movies without compunction? ~~Or is it~~ Or is it that the movies have improved so much? Judging from the ads, I fail to see any great upsurge in the moral emphasis in this industry. The question then is: Can we get guidance from the Word of God on such matters, or is it obedience that we lack, rather than light? Let us not think lightly of the principle of perspicuity when we study Scripture.

← ~~Applying~~ Applying Biblical Principles > 126.

It is one matter to discover a biblical principle; quite another to apply it to a particular life situation. Moreover,

as we pointed out earlier, it is usually necessary that we bring a number of biblical principles to bear upon a problem of ethics. If a certain practice stands up under such testing, then the believers should be instructed accordingly, and no conscience should be burdened and no one should be offended when fellow-believers participate (or chose not to participate) in a given practice.

As a group of concerned searchers for the right way, we might come to an agreement on certain questions, and, perhaps even lead out in creating agreement in the wider brotherhood. There will, of course, always be some peripheral issues on which it will be hard to get general agreement among the brethren, even when attempting to apply biblical principles. In such matters we must be tolerant and charitable.

For some immature Christians, the attempt to bring biblical principles to bear on current ethical issues, smacks of legalism. Obviously, they do not know fully what legalism is. Legalism, which is condemned by the Old and the New Testament, is the attempt on the part of man to gain standing before God by the doing or the not doing of certain things. Good deeds (or the avoidance of bad ones) are viewed as the ground and hope of salvation. If, then, a godly believer, who looks to God's grace alone for his salvation, who lives by divine forgiveness, takes his daily life seriously and out of his devotion to God disciplines himself by refraining from certain practices which to him appear questionable, it is most inappropriate to charge him with legalism. On that count, the great apostle of Christian liberty, Paul, must have been terribly legalistic, for he did send the churches fairly long lists of "do's" and "don't's."

And if the apostles in their day found that a certain number of 'rules' were conducive to the church's health, we should not naively think that we have outgrown the apostolic pattern by dispensing with all such guidelines (concretely applied) of Christian behavior.

William Law, in his A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life, ventured to say that the heart of holy living chiefly consists in the right and prudent management of ourselves with respect to such matters which are neither commanded nor forbidden in the Word of God. This godly divine, in speaking to the question of our much decried 'church rules', says: "By rule must be constantly understood a religious rule observed upon a principle of duty to God. For if a man should oblige himself to be moderate in his meals only in regard to his stomach, or abstain from drinking only to avoid the headache, he might be exact in these rules without being at all the better man for them. But when he is moderate and regular in either of these things out of a sense of Christian sobriety and self-denial, that he may offer unto God a more reasonable and holy life, then it is that the smallest rule of this kind is naturally the beginning of great piety" (p. 53--italics ours).

← ~~by~~ Re-Examining Such 'Applications' from Time to Time → 1211

Since the times change, and since practices which may have evil connotations in one generation may lose these in the next, we have to re-examine our position on a given question from time to time. However, note, ~~Not a bone;~~ ~~Not~~ the biblical principles are called in question, but our application of these to current issues. Such a re-examination should be done by a concerned brotherhood in the spirit of love. However, let

us not think that the change is always a one-way street, namely, that we always lift the ban from what was once condemned. New problems of ethics arise from time to time which are much more serious than the few we thought we had settled once for all, and we may want to condemn a few current practices today which were not condemned in the past.

Such a re-examination of our application of Scripture to life implies an important understanding of the Bible. Not only does it suggest that what the Bible teaches is binding for the believer, but it also means that the Word of God is "living and active"

(Heb. 4:12). } For some Christians the Bible is an archaic book which speaks to the problems of a generation long since passed, but which does not mention modern problems of ethics. Since the Bible does not condemn smoking, so they argue, for example, the Church must not condemn it either. Or, vice versa, Jesus drank wine, therefore, social drinking is in keeping with Biblical teaching. }

Such an approach to the Bible overlooks a few important aspects of the Bible's character. It overlooks the fact that the Bible is a book which came out of particular historical situations and, obviously, addresses itself to these life situations. Besides, as I have already mentioned, the Bible is not a law book (one is tempted to say, a catalog of laws), to which one turns when a question of right and wrong arises in order to get an answer in capsule form. }

But when the Bible becomes the living fountain by which one keeps the Christian life fresh, when the Bible is one's daily food, when one lives in the spirit of the Scriptures, then God's Word becomes alive, relevant, contemporary--and speaks to our day. And, strangely, it may speak in different words, but say the same thing. For example,

what would Paul's and Peter's prohibitions of "braided hair" (1 Tim. 2:9; 1 Pet. 3:3) mean for a Christian woman, today, who (as Paul puts it) "has confessed godliness"? I have known people who looked on "braided hair" as a mark of piety, when it is explicitly forbidden. Is then the apostolic injunction out of date? Of course not, the message is the same: "Be cautious about accepting any and every modern fashion!" "Be modest!" ~~"Be frugal!"~~ "Braided hair" in Paul's and Peter's day was a violation of these Christian virtues. When conscience becomes trained by the Word of God, the application of Scripture to current issues is not nearly as difficult as it is at times made to be.

Having dealt with the question of an approach to the ambiguities in questions of Christian ethics, let us now turn to a review of some of the biblical principles which are to govern our behavior. No one principle covers all possible situations, but when taken together as whole, our way becomes light--so light, as a matter of fact, that one begins to wonder whether it is light we need at all, or whether it is not basically a question of commitment, obedience, discipleship.

II. BIBLICAL GUIDEPPOSTS IN QUESTIONS OF CHRISTIAN CONDUCT > hs

< ~~Principle of Love~~ > 12

Love is of the essence of the Christian life and in "grey" practices the question must always be: How will an act affect my brother? Will it help him or harm him? Paul says that when we "wound their conscience when it is weak, we you sin against Christ"

(1 Cor. 8:12). The argument is strengthened by the statement that Christ laid down his life for the brother, and that it should not be hard for us to give up some practice (which we personally can engage in with a good conscience) for the sake of a brother. If Paul was willing to give up the eating of meat, when it encouraged a brother to act contrary to the voice of his conscience, surely we should be willing to give up less important things for the sake of others.

We must, of course, be clear on what it means to be an offense to others. No one can expect so to live that every brother and sister of the church will understand and appreciate all that he does. To be a skandalon means, primarily, to encourage others, by our actions or words, to do something which their conscience does not allow.

This principle does not cover all questions but it does take care of some, and since no believer "lives unto himself" it is one which he must seriously apply to all his actions.

← Principle of God's Glory → 12th.

The believer is to do all to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31). "All things," says Paul, includes eating and drinking, which are necessities of life. Certainly, then, such things which are not really necessities of life must be watched even more carefully. Paul says that we have one ambition in life: to please him (2 Cor. 5:9). Therefore, we ought constantly to ask ourselves: Is what I am doing, glorifying God? Am I pleasing my Savior, who died for me?

Now it is obvious, that the desire to live for the glory of God will not always lead to proper behavior, if we do not know what pleases God. To discover that, one must fill one's mind with Scriptural teaching and become sensitized to spiritual things by prayer and commun--ion with God. Also, we must recognize that what may be for the glory of God in one situation, need not be at another.] For this reason we constantly ask ourselves (against a background of biblical teaching): Is this activity, at this time, in this place, in the presence of these people, to the glory of my God? Horatius Bonar has said fittingly: "I love my Master, and I love his service, and I want to do his bidding, but I must know the rules of his house, that I may know how to serve him. Love without the law to guide its impulses would be parent of will-worship and confusion Love goes to the law to learn the divine will."

We are not suggesting that every minute we nervously ask: Is this? is that? for the glory of God. When our whole life has this one great goal, we can live everyday in complete relaxation, trusting the Lord to alert us to dangers, and going about our daily tasks, with confidence. Mundane tasks, physical activities, the development of the mind, must all be brought under the caption of our life: To the glory of God. And where these, and other matters, cannot properly be brought into harmony with this great purpose of the Christian life, we will need to do some serious adjusting.

← c. Principle of the Better } 2 bl .

Paul exhorts the Philippians to test or examine those things which are better (diapheronta) (1:9-10). For the Christian it

is to be a principle of life to choose that which is best. Many Christians unfortunately never get beyond the question: Is this right or wrong? (where it is not plainly stated in Scripture). But the good can be the enemy of the better. One can fill up one's life to such a degree with pursuits and activities that may be good in themselves that the deeper questions of life and of one's calling in this world are completely overlooked.] Might we not make more progress in the Christian life if instead of saying glibly: "Oh, I see nothing wrong with this!" We would say: "Oh, well, I have worthier things to do than that." Jonathan Goforth discovered that certain things were "leakages of power" for him, and so he discontinued them.

Of course, in applying this principle, we will have to do so from wider perspectives. No one would dispute the fact, that it is 'better' to be at prayer than to play ball. But that is a mechanical application of the principle for it is impossible to be engaged in prayer, formally, at all times, and if we attempted it, we would ruin ourselves. We can find a place for play, for sleep, for relaxation, for associations with friends, and other good and necessary things of life, without violating this principle. But when we spend our time and energy in useless activities, or such which demand the wasteful use of money which the Lord has entrusted to us, or if we are out bowling or curling when God's people meet for worship, then the "principle of the better" judges us.

← Principle of Freedom → 1201

Paul says, "All things i.e. neutral things are lawful for me, but I will not be enslaved by anything" (1 Cor. 6:12).

A perfectly good activity may become detrimental when done in excess, when it absorbs much of our time or much of our energy. The bondage Paul speaks of is not a bondage of sin, but a bondage that "grey," questionable practices may bring us into. True freedom in Christ gives one the strength to refrain from certain activities or to limit one's participation.] Some Christians get bored, and life for them seems empty, if they do not have a good measure of entertainment such as is provided by our society--a sign of the shallowness of their inner life. *One observer has suggested:* Professor Koebner ~~suggests~~ "The more unbridled the times become the more the freedom of the Christian must consist in surrendering his freedom and in abstinence rather than in the right of possessing and enjoying. By refraining from luxuries others must be shown that the riches of God do not require the riches of this world, so that to the man whose will is undisciplined and bound, the ability to escape his apparently inescapable fetters may be demonstrated, by the lifting example of a man of faith." *W. A. R. H. H. H.*

The late Dr. Robert Speer, secretary of the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions, had played on the Princeton football team for four years during his college days. Later his friends often begged him to come with them to see a game, but he consistently refused. The reason? He had gone once and his former football passion had come back to him with such force that he saw his work for God's Kingdom endangered.] Dr. Speer's experience is not normative for any one of us, but it does illustrate the principle of "freedom." One can become enslaved to one's likes and dislikes of certain foods; one can become enslaved to the fashion god. Use ~~has~~ things, necessary things, neutral things, good things--all can become our Master. But Christ has freed us for freedom. *W. A. R. H. H. H.*

← 3. Principle of Association → 126.

In the chapters 8 to 10, of 1 Corinthians, Paul shows the Corinthians how to solve the question of eating idol-meat. The apostle begins by siding with those who have knowledge. He agrees that there are no real gods behind the images and, therefore, meat offered to them is just like any other meat. However, he also realizes that there are people who "through being accustomed to idols, eat food as really offered to idols" (1 Cor. 8:7). They cannot free themselves of the associations of idolatry. Mature missionaries know better than to ridicule the convert from paganism who takes evil spirits seriously. If all his life he has lived in fear of such spirits who indwell trees and stones, he cannot immediately free himself from such associations. Some believers may even find it hard to get a blessing out of certain songs we sing in church, because they used to sing different words to the same tunes, and the song, even though it now has religious words, brings to their mind associations which they would be only too happy to forget.

There may also be practices (and places) which have evil associations for Christians in a certain community, and so the individual believer is obligated to respect this community conscience. Take, for example, the movie industry as it is represented in most of the 'down town' theatres of our towns and cities. By and large, it will have to be admitted, that it has not contributed to the moral elevation of our society. It has acquired evil associations, and this is sufficient ground for serious Christians in a given community to avoid the movies. This principle could be applied to a number of practices which are common in our society.

Handwritten signature or scribble.

← Principle of Danger → 130

Paul, in his argument against participating in meals offered at idol temples, where the Corinthians could possibly make good contacts for witnessing to their faith, warns against the sinister powers which are at work in idolatry. ^{to the} ~~is~~ ^{is} not contradicting himself ^{when he does so.} ~~Has he not said, that the idol is nothing?~~ To be sure, he has denied the reality of the gods behind the idols, but he accepts seriously the presence of demonic powers, and ^{warns:} "I do not want you to be partners with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons" (1 Cor. 10:21). To show how dangerous it is to go as close to the cliff as possible, he asks: "You don't think you are stronger than he, do you (v. 22)? We must take seriously the fact that there are dangerous practices and slippery grounds in our society, as well; and we better not boast in our strength, and our sense of discernment, but remember that Satan comes also as an angel of light.

To avoid certain places or activities because they threaten to damage our spiritual life, is a sign of strength and maturity, not of weakness and cowardice. Paul's advice on the matter of frequenting places where demonic forces have free play is: "Flee from idolatry." This is a hero's flight not a coward's. And we should not fool ourselves into thinking that demonic forces are working in the jungles of Africa, only. The gods of Greece and Rome can be found in modern dress anywhere in America. Let us take seriously the warnings of Scripture! They were not given to tease us. Rather they were given because of the dangers that we face.

Let Christ warn
us against
being a
fool and
putting
ourselves
in danger.

← G Principle of Edification > 1268

In 1 Corinthians 6:12 and 1 Corinthians 10:23, the principle is laid down, although certain things may be legitimate, they do not all "build up." In other words, we must always ask ourselves: Is this activity in which I am participating building up my inner life (or the inner life of another)? Of course, this would not mean that we are to engage in spiritual activities all the time; it would imply that even physical or cultural activities may build up one's inner life by "re-creating" it for the work to which God has called one. Naturally, ^{in settling any question} I must take more guide-lines than this one into account. ~~settling any question~~ For something may build me up, and at the same time shock the sense of propriety of a brother.

And, as a kind of an aside, one could say that the principle of propriety is another valid biblical principle (1 Cor. 11:13-16; Eph. 5:3,4). A practice may be completely neutral, but if people are not ready to accept it as being in good taste, it should be avoided. Anything that shocks the sense of decency of the community in which we live should be avoided. It would hardly be fitting for a Christian who has "confessed godliness" (1 Tim. 2:10) to experiment with daring fashions in dress.

But now, once again, the matter of 'upbuilding'. Obviously, that which harms or degrades the body does not build up the inner man either. The old proverb: "A sound mind in a sound body" has a good deal of truth in it. 'Edification' would take in the whole area of building up the mind by 'building' good materials into it.

~~And then, the most important aspect of edification: The building up of our inner man.~~ It would call for a repudiation of all that blunts our conscience, that lowers our ideals, that robs us of moral fortitude. Conversely, it would lead us to a search after those things which raise our spiritual sights, encourage us in the faith, and inspire us to deeper devotion. In choosing that which builds us and our fellows up, we must be judicious and discriminative.

← H Principle of Separation → 1262

Close association of believers with unbelievers is frowned upon by both Old and New Testament. "Be not unequally yoked together with unbelievers" (2 Cor. 6:14) is a permanent biblical principle. This is not to be understood as the Corinthians had understood it (1 Cor. 5:9), in the sense, that we should avoid any kind of association with unbelievers; else, as Paul says, "we would have to get out of the world" (1 Cor. 5:10). But it would mean that the Christian does not have intimate association with non-Christians. His real friends are always "the brethren." Although their calling in life may throw Christians together with unbelievers--geographically quite closely, too, for example in an office--yet we can never identify ourselves with them completely, since our whole outlook on life is different, beyond the ability of similar cultural tastes and pursuits to bridge. Although we treat them with love and kindness, our conscience witnesses to the fact that they have rejected the One who has died for us, our Lord.

The argument, that associations with noble unbelievers is more uplifting than togetherness with believers who appear to be

less noble, would still not vitiate the teachings of Scriptures on separation. Of course, where we befriend unbelievers with the intention of presenting--as the occasion should arise--the claims of Christ, the matter is quite different.

In the past "separateness" has often been misunderstood in terms of a geographical or physical isolation--contrary to New Testament teaching. Missiologists, today, are reminding us of the fact that we are living in "pre-Constantinian" times, again, in which Christians rub shoulders with pagans everyday. But it was the "separated" church of Early Christianity that made such a deep impression on its pagan community.

← Principle of Example → *WBL*

With respect to outsiders, the principle laid down in Colossians 4:5,6 should be observed: "Walk wisely toward outsiders, redeeming the time. Let your speech be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone." Our concern must always be: Will this practice, this act, this participation in some event, make me a more effective witness? Also, the principle of accommodation (in neutral things) set forth in 1 Corinthians 9:20,21, "To the Jews I became a Jew in order to win Jews. . . . To those outside the law I became as one outside the law . . . that I might win those outside the law," must be governed by the important parenthesis, "not being without law toward God but under the law of Christ."] The salvation of souls is so serious a matter for Paul, that he is willing, like the runner in a race, "to exercise self-control in all things"

(v. 25) for the sake of the great goals of the Christian life, and for fear that by careless living he "should himself be disqualified" (v. 27). In all our associations with unbelievers we need to keep in mind the possibility, that some day we will want to witness to this one or the other, ~~how~~ ^{there At that time,} how will our associations with him affect our witness ~~when~~ when he asks us the deepest questions of life and eternity? Dietrich Bonhoeffer points out, that the desire of the church to be relevant in the modern age is not satisfied entirely by the church's learning to speak the language of its society. ~~but~~ ^{but} The church is really ~~relevant~~ ^{only} relevant if it lives up to what it preaches. Where an exemplary Christian life is lived, it is amazing with what facility a witnessing believer can bridge the language barrier.

This principle must also be observed with a view to other believers: "Brethren, join in imitating me" (Phil. 3:17); "That you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, do" (Phil. 4:9); "I urge you, then, be imitators of me" (1 Cor. 4:16). There is nothing quite so effective in teaching others the Christian way as a good example. Particularly is this the case with those who serve in some public capacity--in the field of preaching, teaching, music-making, leading, etc. Unless we foster high ideals by personal example, our teaching will not be really effective. There is something strangely fascinating and winsome about the example of genuine saints.

← J. Principle of Thanksgiving > 120

Paul lays it down as a Christian principle that the believer is to say thanks for everything. "Always and for everything giving thanks in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ . . ." (Eph. 5:20; cf. also 1 Thess. 5:18); "For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving; for then it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer (1 Tim. 4:4,5). The question then must be: Can I give thanks to God for what I am engaged in? I suppose it would border on blasphemy if someone thanked God for the opportunity of spending an evening at a place of bad repute, in questionable activities. This principle would not mean, necessarily, that we pray formally before the beginning or closing of every event; nor does a closing prayer after some questionable activity sanctify what has been done. But where a believer lives in fellowship with God his heart will want to go up to God in thanks all the time, and he would fear to have his horizons clouded over by engaging in such things for which he could not thank his Lord.

These, then, are some of the guidelines which help the Christian find his way in a world that often perplexes him. The one who has accepted such principles as spiritual laws which lead to a full and rich life, confesses with John: "His commands are not burdensome."

If we earnestly desire to know God's will about some matter of conduct in our Christian life, we might apply these principles in the following manner: Take the matter of social drinking!

Would I be an encouragement to others to walk the narrow way, if I drank? Could I honestly say that thereby I would magnify God's glory? Is it the best I could do under the circumstances? Will I remain free from the habit of drinking, or could I possibly become enslaved to drink? Do I build myself and others up spiritually thereby? Am I identifying myself with the good or the evil? Can I honestly thank God for the privilege of drinking strong drink in company with others? When we ask these and similar questions, when we face the question of theatre attendance, smoking, business, the use of money, modern fashions, television, and a host of other questions that may arise, God will surely show us light.

III. TOWARD A SOLUTION OF ETHICAL PROBLEMS IN OUR CHURCH TODAY >hs

If we should find general agreement among members of our brotherhood on the approach to Christian ethics as set forth in this essay, we would then have to raise the question of how to implement such an approach. Let me give a few suggestions!

← The Margin of Personal Freedom > 12/11

Although no one lives to himself in the body of Christ, there are certain matters which are of a more private and personal nature. It is significant to observe that Paul, after exhorting the believers to bear one another's burden (Gal. 6:2), follows this injunction up with the statement, "each one will bear his own load" (Gal. 6:5). In certain matters the individual believer stands before God alone, even though the church is a fellowship in which no member can live in isolation. Although we live our life in the eyes of the world, yet our life is not entirely public.

There will be a hundred occasions almost every day in which the individual believer must make decisions about which only he and God know. At times a believer may seek pastoral counsel on something that is rather private, but this does not mean that all the private corners of every church member's life are open for inspection by fellow church members or even by the ministers of the church.

On the many details of getting and spending, work and play, on the intimacies of family life, and many other areas of Christian living, the church should be cautious in legislating to its members. Although--and this is somewhat surprising--some church members ~~would prefer~~ ^{appear to prefer} detailed regulations for every possible eventuality; ~~it makes~~ ^{it appears} them the pain of decision-making before God; it makes them feel much more secure; it would relieve them of much guilt feeling which comes out of making decisions.

We will have to allow a margin of personal freedom where the member of the church exercises his spiritual senses of discernment; where he seeks to apply ⁶ biblical teaching to his particular situation. Of course, where there is a misuse of Christian liberty so that other members are affected by someone's way of life, then the matter is no longer merely a private concern. I am of the impression that our ~~particular denomination~~ ^{brotherhood} has allowed for a rather wide margin of personal freedom, and that the charge that the church legislates over too many areas of ethics is without foundation.

The Discipline for Violations of Christian Ethics > 126

Although our church has permitted a wide margin of personal freedom in carrying Biblical teaching into private practice,

there always has been a minimum of ethical requirements which every member was expected to comply with. (Whether this minimum covered the essential ethical requirements of the New Testament or whether it included some matters that appear to some to be peripheral, is not our concern at this point.) There may be some dispute on how big this minimum ought to be, but no one who knows his New Testament would want to go so far as to say that we should do away with such a minimum requirement.] When we speak of a minimum of ethical practices we are not thinking of those unchanging biblical demands which are part and parcel of every Christian's life--the "fruits of the Spirit," or of those prohibitions which are always "works of the flesh." But we are thinking of such matters which are temporally and culturally limited (e.g. smoking, drinking, theatre attendance, etc.), to which the church applies biblical teaching and which it then either ~~prescribes~~ ^{prohibits} or permits. It is concerning such matters that we have objections raised constantly.

It is our conviction that since the church is there to train the consciences of its members and to equip the church for its great task of witnessing in the community, there must be a minimum number of ethical requirements which every member of the church should be expected to subscribe to. Since we stand in a church tradition which emphasizes voluntarism in church membership, this should create no problem. If, before joining the church, the baptismal candidate is fully informed on the ethical practices of the church and he is willing to accept these for himself, then why should he complain after he has joined the church. Usually, I think, it's the indifferent older church members which disillusion the young members in this matter.

The burning question in many churches today is: How should we discipline offenders? It would seem to us, that there are different ways of exercising discipline. One is that of admonition-- almost a lost art in our day. This admonition should be given by those church members who notice offences. We have not done our duty merely by reporting someone to the pastor. However, if there is no response to private admonition, the help of others must be sought, and, of course, this is where the pastor of the church plays an important role. He will exercise the necessary patience with the offender, but when there is no response, the elders of the church should be duly informed. The offender may even be asked to appear before a group of brethren. He may be asked to refrain from participating in the communion services. If he has a service to perform in the church, he may be asked to let others take his place until the matter is cleared up. If there is no positive response the final step of excommunication must be taken. In such a case it can hardly be said that he was excommunicated for some misdeed, but because he gave no evidence of living in fellowship with God. One can hardly conceive of a member of the church who loves God and the brethren, who would not gladly give up some practice on which the church frowns, in order to enjoy the blessings of Christian fellowship.

← G. The Need for Sound Teaching → 126

Perhaps one reason why some church members today constantly express an aversion to 'church rules' is that they have not been shown from the Scriptures why these regulations were drawn up.

When someone asks, "Why should I not attend the movies?" it will hardly do to answer, "The church forbids it!" But why does the church forbid it? There's the rub. We have not shown our members sufficiently the biblical foundations on which certain prohibitions rest. Nor are we bold enough to examine those questions with our membership.

I am not suggesting that we ought to re-examine our few church regulations every year, but occasionally the whole church will have to be shown why we believe certain things to be detrimental. However, this should not be merely an attempt to substantiate former practices, but we should be alert to current issues, e.g. business practices, the use of television, etc. If agreement can be found in a wider brotherhood (provincial, national), it becomes much easier for the individual churches of that brotherhood to strengthen their witness in ethical matters.

When one looks back upon apostolic and post-apostolic times, when the church spoke to such questions as vocations, dress, jewelry, reading materials, attending the races, entertainment in the homes, etc., one feels utterly ashamed at the lack of spiritual stamina in the church leadership today.

However, it is not only a lack of sound teaching which has brought about a kind of confusion in ethical matters, there is something even deeper, we think: It is the spiritual lethargy of the church in general. I think you would agree with me, that many of the ethical problems we face in our churches today would be solved quite spontaneously if we could experience a genuine spiritual renewal.

← The Need for Spiritual Renewal → 1268

The Christian faith is more than an acceptance of a dogma or a code of ethics; it is essentially a personal, loving relationship between the believer and God, who, in Christ, becomes our Father. Where a warm, affectionate relationship between the believer and his Lord is found, there is a readiness and openness for God's commandments. Where such a tender relationship is lacking, the spiritual organs of perception are not in proper working condition, and it becomes rather meaningless to discuss ethical questions with such a person (other than as an academic subject). Where the soul is responsive to God, "His commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3). On the other hand, where the Christian life is viewed as a duty, an obligation, it becomes a burden too heavy to bear. When Christian behavior is thought of only in terms of do's and don't's, the true spirit of the Christian life is absent.

Therefore, ^{my} It is ~~not~~ conviction, ^{therefore,} that if we want to make progress in the area of Christian deportment, we will have to work and pray for the spiritual renewal of our church. As a matter of fact, we may stand in danger of dissipating valuable energies in quibbling about the minutiae of right and wrong, instead of spending them on the building of good Christian character through biblical teaching, and the winning of the lost for Christ. If the brothers and sisters of our congregations could catch the vision of building God's Kingdom, and if this should become an absorbing interest, many of our problems in the area of ethics would evaporate.

David A. [unclear]