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A Synoptic Irony?

BY RONALD WARD

IRONY may be defined as saying the opposite of what you really mean; but you must not be taken literally. It is a mark of the Johannine style, as Professor C. K. Barrett has so clearly shown us. When Pilate said "Behold your King!" (Jn. xix. 14), the argument of the Jews that the release of Jesus would be hostility to Caesar "is thrust back upon them with bitter irony".¹ They will never improve on that!

Again, "Johannine irony scarcely reaches a higher point"² than the remark of Caiaphas that it was to their advantage that one man should die for the people (Jn. xi. 50). Irony in a wider sense of the term is not infrequent in the Fourth Gospel. The "living water" of Jn. iv. 10 is the Holy Spirit and is used "partly because its double meaning conformed to John's ironical style".³ The misunderstanding of our Lord's words in Jn. ii. 19 ("Destroy this temple . . .") is characteristic of John and is, as often, "more than a literary trick employed by a writer given to irony".⁴ Dr. Barrett gives a list of words of double or doubtful meaning⁵ on which John plays. There is often a superficial meaning and a deeper one to the same word or expression. It is irony in this less restricted sense with which we are now concerned.

Is there anything corresponding to this in the Synoptic Gospels? We turn naturally to the parables, especially if we think that they are "riddles" in some cases. But this is the wrong tack. They are hardly likely to be obscure sayings if they are "weapons of warfare"⁶ or "a mode of religious experience".⁷ I have in mind, rather, straightforward narrative, especially a record of our Lord's conversation. Can we sometimes elicit a deeper meaning?

* * * *

There is a well known *crux interpretum* in the story of what Huck calls "The Rich Young Man" (Mt. xix. 16-30; Mk. x. 17-31; Lk. xviii. 18-30). A man ran up to Jesus, kneeled down to Him, and asked Him: "Good Teacher, what am I to do to inherit eternal life?" Our Lord replies with a counter-question: "Why do you call Me good? No one is good except One, God". This apparent disclaimer is a knotty point for the exegete; how could the sinless Son of God speak thus? It is customary to point to Matthew's reverential alterations of the Markan text: "Teacher, what good thing am I to do to get eternal life?" The Lord replies: "Why do you ask Me about the good? There is One Who is good". This hardly is an advance. Who is the One? It can hardly be our Lord Himself, unless there is a deeper reason which may emerge later. It must then be God, which is the position adopted by Mark and Luke.

The question may be regarded as still open, as there is by no means unanimity among exegetes. Modern commentators may be roughly

classified according to their rejection of a claim to divinity, their reference to absolute goodness, and a less profound exposition.

As representative of the first class Grant boldly says: ". . . still later theologians interpreted it otherwise: 'if you call Me good, you imply that I am God'—but this is wholly impossible, both in the original setting . . . and for Mark".⁸ Is it impossible for Mark? "Mark's christology is a high christology, as high as any in the New Testament, not excluding that of John . . . his assumption appears to be that Jesus is *Deus absconditus*, the Hidden God."⁹ Is it impossible in the original situation? Our Lord seems at times to have hinted at the truth rather than stated it explicitly. The Messianic Secret may well be no literary device but a mode of the Lord's ministry. Commenting on the theory of Lagrange, Dr. Taylor can leave ample room for later insight: "On this view Jesus uses *bar nasha* in (Mk.) ii. 10 in a sense which was Messianic to Himself, but non-Messianic, yet a challenge to reflection, in the hearing of His opponents. It ought not to be assumed that it was His purpose to be immediately understood, especially if in His own estimation, and not merely in the mind of Mark, He was *Messias absconditus*."¹⁰ We need not be Sabellians to suggest enterprise in the face of such a "challenge to reflection".

In view of these considerations Blunt goes too far in remarking that "it is as unwarrantable to read this phrase (i.e. Mk. x. 18) as involving an acknowledgement by Jesus that He is not 'good', that He is 'conscious of sin', as it is to read in it a covert claim to be divine (so some orthodox commentators)".¹¹ "Covert," though not perhaps the best, may be the operative word.

Again, Dr. Wood leaves himself open to criticism. He states that "v. 18 cannot be intended to lead on to a confession of divinity; it is rather the expression of that humility which was part of the moral perfection of Jesus".¹² It reminds me of the remark attributed to Spurgeon, to the effect that it would be wrong for him to deny, if asked, that he could preach. It is no part of humility to deny the truth. The question is left open, in spite of Easton's shaft that "older commentators avoided dogmatic obstacles by a facile but impossible exegesis".¹³ The "impossibility" may be due to an imposed christology; and we must hope that our exegesis will not prove "facile".

In the second class stands the respected figure of W. Manson. "Goodness", he says, "in the full sense implies not only the absence of defect but a perfectly unlimited range of moral activity, and this in the nature of things can belong only to God."¹⁴

G. B. Stevens held that our Lord's aim was "to heighten the man's idea of goodness. . . . Hence Jesus himself declines the epithet. He is himself passing through the process of human development."¹⁵ This is followed by Dr. Taylor, who believes that "His question implies a tacit contrast between the absolute goodness of God and His own goodness as subject to growth and trial in the circumstances of the Incarnation". He further observes that "the use of the question along with the statement that God alone is good implies a contrast of some kind between Jesus and God".¹⁶ Without pressing the point, we may wonder if "absolute goodness" is a philosophical element alien to the context.

This may be countered by McNeile, who judges that the man's "conception of goodness was inadequate, since he treated it as quantitative, and attainable by a definite act or series of acts. Jesus therefore gave to the adjective its deepest meaning".¹⁷ Cranfield likewise notes that the man's idea of goodness involves no more than human achievement, and helpfully refers to Jn. v. 19: "The Son can do nothing of himself". In consequence, "Jesus directs the young man's attention away from himself to his Father, who is the only source and only norm of goodness".¹⁸ But in an analogous case our Lord says, "I will, be thou clean" (Mk. i. 41), without saying that it is the Father's will also (cf. Jn. v. 30). And in any case can the Father's absolute goodness be the norm of human goodness, without further qualification? This question, it seems to me, is one which ought to be put, to balance any interpretation of this class. Thus, according to Filson, ". . . (Jesus) implies that the Father is good in a sense that even Jesus may not claim. Jesus is not confessing sin, but saying where the clear standard of perfect holiness, undimmed by sin or human limitations, is found".¹⁹ A salutary corrective or at least a challenge to this is to be found in the words of T. H. Green: "It is because Jesus, under limiting conditions, lived a life which is limited to no conditions, and under special circumstances proclaimed a principle which is applicable to all circumstances, that His life and His principle are rightly called absolute."²⁰

Archbishop Carrington neatly evades the issue: "(The word God) creates a problem in theology for those who deduce theologies from these conversational exchanges: was he disclaiming the word 'good' for himself? An absurd question."²¹ Theologies are not thus deduced, though they may be reflected in such exchanges. We are here indebted to T. W. Manson who pointed out the vital principle that "the essential spirit and principles of the whole Ministry (actualize) themselves in the seemingly unimportant details of his teaching and his behaviour".²²

The third class need not detain us long. A. B. Bruce thought our Lord was rebuking the ascription of goodness as a matter of mere courtesy, and detected "the supremacy of the ethical". He surprisingly adds that "Jesus . . . thinks so well of this man as to desire him for a disciple".²³ Others see a check to self-confidence²⁴ and, from early times, to flattery.²⁵ According to Leaney, "Jesus is as unconscious of his sinlessness as he is free from a sense of sin".²⁶ But all these interpretations, both singly and as a whole, are unsatisfying. "The God who is good alone, and the Christ whom it is life to follow, are set side by side, and left unrelated. Can there be two absolutes?"²⁷

It is understandable, therefore, that from the Fathers onwards some reference to our Lord's divinity has been seen. Calvin held that it was "as if He had said, 'thou falsely *callest Me a good master*, unless thou acknowledgest that I have come from God'".²⁸ Dean Alford asserts that "our Lord's answer . . . is a pointed rebuke of the very view of Christ which they who deny His divinity entertain. He was no 'good Master' . . . He was *one with Him* who only is good, the Son of the Father . . . The low view then, which this applicant takes of Him and His office, He at once rebukes and annuls." Alford

proceeds to state again the dilemma : " *either*, ' There is none good, but God : Christ is good : therefore Christ is GOD ' ;—*or*, ' There is none good, but God : Christ is not God : therefore Christ is NOT GOOD ' " .

A decade after this Cook can write : " Nothing but a recognition of the divinity of Christ could justify the expression used by Him, if it were taken in its highest and absolute sense " . (Jesus will not permit the term as a conventional form of an expression of reverence.) " This text, however, is not a declaration of that doctrine, but a preparation for it. " ²⁹ In more recent days a choice spirit can comment thus : " It is as though He had said : ' You have given Me a title of adoration. Do you mean it ? ' " ³⁰ And now (1956) Geldenhuis shows still the vitality of the view which refuses to dispense with some reference to our Lord's divinity : " . . . as the whole context shows, Jesus here teaches indeed that He is one with God and thus claims absolute authority over the life of man " . ³¹

It may be that a kenotic christology has influenced exegesis. It may be that some ascriptions of divinity are naive or facile. But it would seem that a fresh examination of the text would not be out of place.

* * * *

The rich man, then, came with his question and Jesus countered with His own question.

Mark and Luke record our Lord's next words thus : " You know the commandments " . Matthew adds some details : " If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments " . The man says to Him, " Which ? " At this point Matthew, in common with Mark and Luke, quotes from the Decalogue. With minor variations of order and style, all three record : " Thou shalt not kill, thou shalt not commit adultery, thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not bear false witness, honour thy father and mother. " . Matthew prefixes the Greek singular definite article to his quotation from the Decalogue, which has the effect of turning the whole expression into a sort of large composite noun. It may be presumed that our Lord is making a selection, and the definite article serves to *identify* the source : " (What commandments ?) *the* (list that every Jew knows, containing, for example) thou shalt not kill. . . . " Matthew adds, " and thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself " .

Notice what our Lord has done. He has not merely quoted some commandments, any commandments as long as the Decalogue is identified ; in all three accounts, whether that of Matthew, Mark, or Luke, He has chosen those which are concerned with social action. All are concerned with men. Murder, adultery, theft, false witness, and failure to give reverence to parents ; all are sins against a fellow human being. There is no mention of God at all.

Cranfield has observed that " only commandments of the Second Table are mentioned . . . , not because they are regarded as more important than those of the First Table, but because it is by a man's obedience to the former that his obedience to the latter must be outwardly demonstrated " . ³² He may well be right. But it is important to notice that it is the Second Table—no more.

Observe the sequel. " Teacher " , says the Markan account (not

“ good teacher ” !), “ all these have I kept (Mt., Mk., and Lk.) from my youth (Mk. and Lk.) ; wherein am I still lacking ? (Mt.). ” That is precisely the point. Something is missing. What is it ?

Taylor quite rightly rejects the idea that “ just one act ” is necessary for eternal life ; this is gained by following Jesus. But, comparing the LXX of Ps. xxiii. 1, he suggests that “ the man lacks one all-important thing supplied only by a resolute sacrifice ”.³³ The “ thing ” is no doubt, in the language of Ps. xxiii, to have God as his Shepherd. But this is “ supplied ” only negatively by the sacrifice. Cranfield is on surer ground when he explicitly states that “ the one thing lacking is the all-important thing, a single-hearted devotion to God ”. This he regards as “ obedience to the first of the Ten Commandments ”.³⁴ Is this the last word ?

So far the man has had no room in his life for God. It is almost an open invitation to refer, not to the First Commandment, but to the First Table. There are four commandments so far not mentioned :

Thou shalt have none other gods before Me.

Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image . . .

Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain . . .

Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy . . .

It would seem that he is trying to gain eternal life without God : which is impossible. Now if we state these commandments positively, we may say : one thing is lacking : worship truly the true God

uniquely : none other gods before Me

spiritually : no graven image, that is, no idolatry

seriously : God's name not to be taken in vain

regularly : keep holy the sabbath.

We almost expect our Lord to speak in this manner. But He does not. Or rather, He does, but He gives to His expected words (for us) an exciting turn.

The man had great possessions. It is generally recognized that the command to sell all and give to the poor is not a general rule but a particular case. Why was the man told to get rid of his property ? Cranfield speaks of “ possessions which have become an idol ”, but goes on to say that “ Jesus seems to be at this point particularly concerned with the First Commandment ”, and adds : “ it is perhaps also an indication that the First and Second Tables of the Law cannot be separated ”. But though within an inch of his goal he does not draw the inference.

The man had great possessions and worshipped them. First, then, he must smash up his idols : sell all that you have ! But what is he to do with the pieces ? Instead of throwing them away or burning them he may as well benefit somebody : give to the poor. The ground has now been cleared. It would have been the easiest thing in the world for our Lord to have relied once again on the word He had used at the Temptation : thou shalt worship the Lord thy God and Him only shalt thou serve. It would have been equally easy, and in context, to have quoted the First Table, for it would have been the appropriate rebuke to idolatry. But He did not speak thus. He said instead : “ Come ! Follow—ME ! ”

Who is this Person who thus puts Himself in the place of God? We may, if we are foolish with the foolishness of impiety, assert that it is but the man Jesus, a poor peasant with a magnificent ethic but a perverted theology. But if we pay attention to a sort of non-Johannine irony of ambiguity, and look to a deeper meaning in our Lord's words, to a new commandment which is but a Christian exposition of the old Decalogue, we shall hear the divine voice in the human, and recognize in the Man of Nazareth the Deity who dwelt among men.

In the light of this we may return to the beginning of the story. "Why do you call Me good? No one is good except One, God." It may well be the case that our Lord rebuked the man for calling Him good *without knowing who He was*. There is a story told of a Roman emperor who used to stroll at night through the streets of the city. To preserve anonymity he dressed as a slave, and as might have been expected he was at times involved in street-fights. One night he found himself fighting with a senator, who struck him vigorously. The unhappy senator later recognized the identity of the "slave" and sought pardon. But it was refused: what the emperor would have tolerated when unrecognized, he declined to allow when known. It is the opposite with Jesus. What He would have tolerated if the rich man had recognized Him He declined to allow when He was merely "found in fashion as a man".

It may be that Alford was right. It may be that we are not so naive after all if we see here the very Son of God who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven. It may be that our Lord's words have both a superficial and a deeper meaning. They send us back to search the Synoptics again to try and find out if there are yet further instances of what we have somewhat loosely called a non-Johannine irony.

Such an exegesis has certain points in its favour. It recognizes the sense of contrast which has impressed Dr. Taylor so much, only it is a contrast between the Lord recognized and unrecognized. It is not impossible for Mark, who, as we have seen, seems to believe in Jesus as the *Deus absconditus*. It would be rash to say that it would have been impossible for our Lord, unless we assume that His filial consciousness was limited to the "devotional". This is His secret. Are we forced to believe that He did not know who He was? It further makes the "one thing" big enough. And it allows for the "absolute" and "relative" uses of the word "good". As unrecognized, our Lord has still to complete His ministry. He is good at every point, and will yet achieve wider good (Lk. ii. 52; Heb. v. 7-9): He learnt obedience from what He suffered.

Is the suggestion of a Synoptic irony tenable? I hope that others will investigate this field. In the meantime, as T. W. Manson once said in another connection⁵, it is "a fascinating picture".

NOTES

¹ C. K. Barrett, *St. John*, p. 454.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 339.

³ *Op. cit.*, p. 196.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 166.

⁵ *Op. cit.*, p. 173.

- ⁶ J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, p. 19.
- ⁷ T. W. Manson, *The Teaching of Jesus*, p. 73.
- ⁸ F. C. Grant, *Interpreter's Bible*, VII, p. 801.
- ⁹ Vincent Taylor, *St. Mark*, p. 121.
- ¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 200; cf. O. Cullman, *The Christology of the New Testament*, p. 318.
- ¹¹ A. W. F. Blunt, *St. Mark*, p. 217.
- ¹² H. G. Wood, *Peake's Commentary* (1926) p. 693.
- ¹³ B. S. Easton, *St. Luke*, p. 271.
- ¹⁴ W. Manson, *St. Luke*, p. 205.
- ¹⁵ G. B. Stevens, *Theology of the New Testament*, p. 75.
- ¹⁶ *Op. cit.*, pp. 426-9; cf. Cullman, *op. cit.*, pp. 93f.
- ¹⁷ A. H. McNeile, *St. Matthew*, p. 277.
- ¹⁸ C. E. B. Cranfield, *St. Mark*, pp. 327-330.
- ¹⁹ Floyd V. Filson, *St. Matthew*, p. 209.
- ²⁰ T. H. Green, *Works*, III, p. xxxix, quoted by H. R. Mackintosh, *The Person of Jesus Christ*, p. 393.
- ²¹ Philip Carrington, *According to Mark*, p. 214.
- ²² T. W. Manson, *The Servant-Messiah*, p. 67.
- ²³ A. B. Bruce, *Exp. Gk. Test.* I, pp. 248-250.
- ²⁴ A. Plummer, *St. Mark*, pp. 238f.
- ²⁵ V. Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 427.
- ²⁶ A. R. C. Leaney, *St. Luke*, p. 237.
- ²⁷ Austin Farrer, *A Study in St. Mark*, p. 124.
- ²⁸ *Harmony*, II, trans. by William Pringle, p. 393.
- ²⁹ F. C. Cook, *Holy Bible With Commentary*, N.T., I, p. 263.
- ³⁰ David Smith, *Disciple's Commentary*, I, p. 322.
- ³¹ N. Geldenhuys, *St. Luke*, p. 458.
- ³² Cranfield, *op. cit.*, p. 328.
- ³³ *Op. cit.*, p. 429.
- ³⁴ *Op. cit.*, p. 330.
- ³⁵ *Journal of Theological Studies*, XLVI, pp. 181ff.
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