

# **EVANGELICAL REVIEW OF THEOLOGY**

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The whole process of secularization and Marx's dictum (that it is not enough to understand the world; what really matters is to change it), as well as the existential emphasis which began with Kierkegaard, are all clearly parties to this emphasis on the context in our generation. Here Banks' provocation to re-define theology as more than an intellectual exercise takes meaning. With the current re-emergence of prophecy in the church, it seems we are in for an age when the Christian theologies become Christian pneumatologies, demanding not explication of the *truth* of the Spirit but more the demonstration of the *power* of the Spirit in our personal and corporate lives.

Would someone better equipped than myself take up the challenge of this felt need to clarify the principle of relevance—what on earth is it, actually?

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## Protestant Ethics: The Spirit and the Word in Action

Klaus Bockmuehl

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*In this fine theological analysis Dr. Bockmuehl touches the nerve centre of evangelical theologizing: the realm of ethics. He considers two alternatives to Christian ethics—individualized norms, and situation ethics—traces and assesses the unfortunate polarization between the Law and the Spirit since the Reformation, and attempts a convincing synthesis of both. This was a paper presented to the theological faculty of Basle University, Basle, Switzerland, in June 1987. Bockmuehl is hopeful that such a synthesis would be a working hypothesis for the reconciliation not only of Reformation orthodoxy and theological liberalism, but also of major Protestant denominations. It deserves a serious hearing.*

Editor

Protestant ethics today is faced with a number of questions for which its traditional means do not seem to provide adequate answers.

A first round of questions is created by the process of individualization that has shaped social history in modern times. Picture the following stages. If one was born in Western Europe before the days of the Reformation one would normally automatically have become a Christian within the Catholic Church. After the Reformation this general statement remained true in a limited sense in as much as one's religion was then determined by the religion of the ruler in whose territory one was born (*cuius regio, eius religio*). In the nineteenth and early twentieth century the family rather than the state decided about the character of one's religious beliefs. Now, at the end of the twentieth century, one's religion (or its rejection) has become primarily a matter of personal choice.

It seems that the same can be said of our ethical guidelines. The trend towards fragmentation is intensified by the various value systems to which modern man is expected to equally conform at work and in time of leisure, within the family and in the political arena. In addition, the ever increasing pace of secularization confronts us with

the dissolution of all social bonding, the result of which the sociologist Emile Durkheim has aptly called 'anomie'.

If so many of the traditional norms and collective patterns of [p. 102](#) behaviour no longer apply, how are we then, as individuals, to govern our actions? Can we still turn to the legacy of Protestant ethics for help?

These questions are intensified by another trend in the history of ideas. The Enlightenment of the eighteenth century confidently proclaimed that man had come of age. No longer was man in need of the tutelage of clerics and casuists. Instead, he had become conscious of their own competence and discretion in matters of proper conduct. The Enlightenment demanded not only the individualization of objective norms, it also called for subjective decisions concerning action.

In the nineteen-sixties these two trends, this two-fold challenge of the Reformational-orthodox legacy of Protestant ethics, culminated in the so-called 'new morality' of Joseph Fletcher and John A. T. Robinson. The old morality had been based on timeless and objective standards. The new morality rejected them as useless, and, in the perennial tug-of-war between norm and situation, chose to be identified with the 'demands of the situation'. This attitude has governed modern Protestant ethics to a large extent. A similar debate arose in Roman Catholic moral theology. Following the Second World War the need for an 'existentialist ethics' was much discussed, and led to a critical declaration by the Vatican in 1952. Wherever we turn we are faced with this problem of 'differential ethics', with the demand for moral instruction that relates to the respective person and situation.

Another set of questions, a constant challenge to the heritage of Protestant ethics arises from what has been known as the ethics of missions. It is thoroughly perplexing that Protestant ethics for a long time failed to perceive the task and content of the Great Commission Christ gave to his disciples which, given a different viewpoint, could well be seen as the 'imperative No. one' of Christian ethics. Not only this specific assignment to evangelism seems to be absent, but church-building activities in general, the pastoral, teaching, and serving/ diaconal ministries do not figure in textbooks on Protestant ethics. Is there altogether no '*specificum*', no '*proprium*' in Christian ethics? Is there nothing characteristic, nothing special about Christian ethics, nothing distinct—not primarily from the morality of other religions, but distinct from God's creation order, i.e. his general demands for the preservation of life?

The place of the Great Commission within the framework of Christian ethics also turns into a question in today's debates with Marxism, especially as expressed in the ethics of Lenin. His instructions to the cadres of the Communist Party, the 'emissaries of the revolution', represent a case of goal-oriented situation ethics [p. 103](#) clearly demarcated from the code of ethics held to be appropriate for the post-revolutionary era in which the standards that have governed human affairs from time immemorial, i.e. natural Law, are again to be the norm. Although the two systems hardly bear comparison, ought we in Christian ethics not also to reckon with two realms of conduct, general moral demands and the Christian's additional tasks in church and mission?

Inevitably these two sets of questions, that dealing with differential ethics and that dealing with specifically Christian actions, will enter into any serious ecumenical discussion. On the one hand the special emphasis contained in Catholic moral theology will, in this era of ecumenism, again become a challenge to traditional Protestant ethics, or, at least, an opportunity for critical introspection. In this context we are being reminded of the three 'evangelical counsels' of monastic ethics—viz., poverty, celibacy, and obedience—of the works of supererogation, and of the connection between ethics and

ascetics, i.e the doctrine of the spiritual life which Catholic theology has preserved more effectively.

On the other hand, as a measure to overcome the differences of the past, the dialogue with the Anabaptists and the Spiritualists, the so-called left wing of the Reformation, is as important for Protestant ethics as is the dialogue with Rome. The ethical codes subscribed to by these groups contain a significant challenge for Protestant mainline churches: The Anabaptists, in particular, give much emphasis to the question of which ethics is specifically Christian.

## REFORMATION ETHICS

Now, then, are we to balance the legacy of Protestant ethics with the questions concerning differential ethics and the quest for a *proprium* of Christian ethics, in particular church-building activities? Because of the limitation of space, we shall restrict ourselves to the first of these questions, viz., that dealing with individual and situation ethics.

It would not be true to say that traditional ethical inquiry was unfamiliar with the problem posed. Ethical instruction in medieval times already stressed the appropriateness of action, i.e., it weighed the questions of what, when, how, how long, and wherefore. The Reformation and post-Reformation Protestant orthodox ethics responded to the questions of individual and situation ethics with a direct application of its two basic categories—Law and vocation. These two principles determine all of Reformation ethics. All human beings are subject to the Law of God, i.e. the Ten Commandments and their p. 104 corollaries, in addition to which *individuals* are subject to the dictates of the ‘station and vocation’ in which they find themselves by the providence of God. These are the two forms in which the will of God expresses itself. (Calvin differentiated between them by using the terms *voluntas dei* and *arbitrium dei* and in Protestant Orthodoxy they were known as *voluntas signi*, God’s will revealed in the Law, and *voluntas beneplaciti*, God’s hidden purpose.) Let us examine these two basic categories, law and vocation, a little closer.

## THE LAW OF GOD

For Martin Luther the Ten Commandments were the source of ethical instruction and a formula to guide confessions, as well as a mark of a true church. To him they were *doctrina doctrinarum*, the doctrine over all doctrine, ‘by means of which we discern the will of God, both in what he would have us do and in what we have failed to accomplish’.<sup>1</sup> It would be true to say that in the Reformation the Decalogue was both ubiquitous and omnipotent in matters of ethical instruction. Thus Martin Luther concludes his reflections on the Ten Commandments in his Large Catechism with these words: ‘Here, then, we have the Ten Commandments, a summary of divine teaching on what we are to do to make our whole life pleasing to God. They are the true foundation from which all good works must spring, the true channel through which all good works must flow. Apart from these Ten Commandments no deed, no conduct can be good or pleasing to God, no matter how great or precious it may be in the eyes of the world’.<sup>2</sup> Notice, however, that the Decalogue is not simply the measure, framework or limitation for good works as the imagery of the channel

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<sup>1</sup> Luther’s *Works*. Weimar Edition, Table Talk (WATR) 5, 6288.

<sup>2</sup> Large Catechism, para. 311, cp. The Book of Concord, *The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Theodore G. Tappert, ed. Philadelphia, Fortress, 1978, p. 407.

may suggest, it is also their origin, their fountain-head. Luther teaches both the plenitude and the sufficiency of the Ten Commandments for the full purview of Christian action.

This conviction necessarily leads to a rejection of the 'works of supererogation' that play so prominent a part in Catholic moral theology, expressed in religious exercises, e.g., pilgrimages, and especially in the 'evangelical counsels' or the monastic vows. The Reformers always place God's commandments over and against 'human commands and teachings' and 'self-imposed worship' (Col. [p. 105](#) [2:22](#), [23](#) NIV), even where these are not linked to the concept of reward. They reject the view that ethics is based on a division into commandments and counsels, and the ensuing division of Christendom into two separate categories, i.e. the laity and the 'religious'. The Ten Commandments suffice. Christ did not come as a new legislator adding to the Decalogue a new Law in his Gospel. He did not revoke the Commandments; he simply expounded them, and gave his followers the power to fulfill them, thereby granting them the righteousness exceeding that of the scribes and Pharisees ([Mt. 5:20](#)). That is why the Reformers repeatedly remind the monks of the warning expressed by Ecclesiasticus: 'You are already commanded more than you can fulfill' (Eccl'us. 3:25). At heart, therefore, Christian ethics means keeping the Law, fulfilling the Commandments of the Decalogue.

Calvin and his followers placed an even greater emphasis on the perfection and completeness of the Law. The Genevan Catechism puts it this way: 'In the Law we have the perfect guide-line of righteousness'.<sup>3</sup> Bullinger expounds this statement in the Second Helvetic Confession by saying that in this Law God communicates his whole will and all details requisite for all aspects of life, and concludes *plenissima et absolutissima est lex*.<sup>4</sup> He justifies this conclusion by pointing out that God himself forbade additions and deletions ([Dt. 4:2](#) and [12:32](#)). Or, to quote Calvin again, 'Any zeal for good works that wanders outside God's Law is an intolerable profanation of divine and true righteousness'.<sup>5</sup>

It follows that this doctrine of the perfect Law also implies the doctrine of the so-called third use of the Law. This doctrine reflects the conviction that the Ten Commandments not only safeguard communal life in general (first use) and, as a confessional formulary, prepare faith by pointing out sin (second use), it also expressed the belief that the Law ought to serve as a rule of life for the regenerate (*usus in renatis*).<sup>6</sup> It goes without saying that for Calvin and his followers this doctrine is of the utmost importance. But it can also be found in Melancthon's writings and in the Lutheran Formula of Concord. In essence it can be found in Luther too. [p. 106](#)

*It is the method of exposition by synecdoche* which provides the key to Luther's understanding of the 'completeness' of the Law, as indicated by his statement that the Ten Commandments are 'the true fountain from which all good works must spring (and) the true channel through which all good works must flow'. Luther used this method from the very outset; Calvin elaborated on it in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.<sup>7</sup> According to this method a negative commandment needs to be supplemented by its positive corollary, and vice versa. Thereafter both command and prohibition need to be applied

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Bekenntnisschriften und Kirchenordnungen der nach Gottes Wort reformierten Kirche*. hg. W. Niesel, Zollikofen-Zurich, no date, p. 26.

<sup>4</sup> A. C. Cochrane, ed., *Reformed Confessions of the 16th Century*, Philadelphia, Westminster 1966, p. 248.

<sup>5</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, John T. McNeill, ed., Philadelphia, Westminster, 1960, 11.8.5.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *Institutes* 11.7.12f.

<sup>7</sup> *Institutes* 11.8.8f.

progressively to our actions, our words, and our thoughts. In this way the Ten Commandments are developed into a complete system of Christian ethics governing even the minutest detail. In this manner Reformation ethics arrives at its confident claim that by way of interpretation the Ten Commandments provide an answer for every question of conduct that may arise, be it of a personal or situational nature.

Of course, exposition by *synecdoche* presupposes that skilled interpreters be available—skilled in analyzing and solving a problem in the light of the appropriate commandment, or, vice-versa, in construing *a priori* a system of conduct in different ‘cases’ and situations, for future application. Thus there arose within a hundred years of the Reformation the extensive discipline of casuistry and moral guidance. Believers received instruction from the ‘ministers of the Word’.

At this point it is interesting to see how Calvin defends the doctrine of the sufficiency of the Law against two opposing views. To him the sufficiency of the Law is but a special case of the doctrine of the perfection and sufficiency of Scripture, and he defends it against Roman Catholic theology on the one hand, and against the theology of the Anabaptists and the spiritualists on the other.

Calvin’s controversy with Rome finds expression in his response to the statements made by Cardinal Sadolet. Sadolet defended the traditions Rome had added to Holy Scripture by pleading that the Church had added them under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. To this Calvin replied: By Scripture only! *Sola scriptura*. In doing so he also undercut the basis for any ethical additions, such as monastic vows.

His exchanges with the Anabaptists and the enthusiasts were more acerbic. He attacked their ethics in a number of writings, for to him their much flaunted doctrine of the guidance of believers by the Holy Spirit went hand in hand with the promotion of lawlessness. Calvin [p. 107](#) accused both Rome and the fanatics of emphasizing the Spirit at the expense of Scripture (‘without the Word’), and unrelentingly confronted them with the statement that the Spirit speaks through the Scriptures (‘through the Word’).

Did Calvin do the Anabaptists an injustice? His accusations seem to apply to at least one leading figure among them, Pilgram Marpeck (1495–1556), who had been exiled from Strasbourg shortly before Calvin arrived there. In his writings Marpeck had quoted the apostle Paul so selectively that in the end he presented a Gospel of freedom in which all of God’s commandments and prohibitions were declared null and void. For him Christ was in every respect the end of the Law; only the Holy Spirit beckoned or constrained the regenerated.<sup>8</sup> A similar attitude is to be found in Juan de Valdes (1500–1541), a representative of the Italian Reformation. In his meditations on ‘The Benefit of Christ’ he compares the light of the Bible with that of a candle and the light of the Holy Spirit with that of the sun. When that light shines, he writes, one need no longer search only in the words of Holy Scripture. However, he does concede that one would not therefore throw away the candle. It might yet be of use to others.<sup>9</sup>

Calvin goes to war against this idea of ‘the Spirit without Scripture’. These ‘fanatics’, he writes, despise the preaching of the Word, and generate from within themselves would-be secret revelations of the Spirit. These are but hallucinations.<sup>10</sup> God no longer speaks to us in oracles as he once revealed himself to the patriarchs of the Old Covenant; he speaks to us through Scripture. Calvin interprets [Hebrews 1:1f.](#) as meaning that God’s

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<sup>8</sup> *The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, William Klassen and Walter Klaassen, eds., Kitchener, Ontario, and Scottdale, PA, Herald, 1978, pp. 315–331.

<sup>9</sup> Juan de Valdes, *The Benefit of Christ*, J. M. Houston, ed., Portland, OR, Multnomah, 1984, p. 52f.

<sup>10</sup> Comm. [Eph. 4:12](#), CO 51, 199. [Acts 10:5](#), CO 48, 228.



revelations have come to an end in the person of Christ.<sup>11</sup> We ought to be content with the ‘perfection’ of Christ’s teaching; we ought not to construe new revelations. Accordingly, Calvin defines ‘prophecy’ in the New Testament ([Rom. 12:6](#), [1 Cor. 14](#), etc.) as interpretation of Scripture and, in addition, claims that interpretation is not for ‘all’ ([1 Cor. 14:5](#)) to handle. It is to be entrusted only to the trained and ordained ministers of the Word.<sup>12</sup>

In brief: although Calvin uses surprisingly strong pneumatological language, compared, say, to Melanchthon, so that some have been inclined to call him the theologian of the Holy Spirit, all such [p. 108](#) expressions as ‘governance’ and ‘guidance’ of the Holy Spirit, and ‘listening to the voice of God’ which he does use, nevertheless point back to Holy Scripture. And that, in the study of ethics, means the Law. Here are two quotations from the *Institutes*. ‘Let this point therefore stand: that those whom the Holy Spirit has inwardly taught truly rest upon Scripture.’<sup>13</sup> And ‘God (is) dictating (us) as from his own Word what is good or unprofitable to do’.<sup>14</sup>

Calvin is led to this conclusion by his anxiety that in the minds of many the alleged guidance of the Spirit would, according to the adage ‘so many minds, so many opinions’, rapidly lead first to anarchism and then to a victory of the Counter-Reformation. The events of Munster in 1535 were vividly before his eyes. A generation later, the Lutheran Formula of Concord (1577), in a similar confrontation, follows Calvin’s example of insisting that the Spirit speaks only ‘through’ Scripture: true, the Holy Spirit speaks to the believers at all times, but he does so exclusively by means of the Ten Commandments.<sup>15</sup>

Let us now turn to the second basic principle in the ethics of the Reformation and Protestant Orthodoxy which differentiates ethical instruction in terms of the individual person and situation, i.e. *vocation*.

Vocation has to be understood in the sense of one’s station in life. In the Apology of the Augsburg Confession this term occasionally equals a person’s occupation, craft or profession.<sup>16</sup> But it is more correct to think of vocation in terms of one’s standing within the three ‘orders’, or hierarchies, within which we all inevitably have our place. They are, first, the family, distinguishing the vocations of husband and wife, parents and children, and, inasmuch as a family is an economic unit, master and servant; next, the state, differentiating between those in authority and those subject to it; and finally, the church with its clergy and laity, its preachers and hearers. Individuals thus find their duties from a grid of obligations within this social structure.

Also, in the static and stratified society that prevailed in the days of the Reformation, vocation and station in life were often determined by the social stratum into which one was *born*. Although we do not [p. 109](#) normally talk of a caste system, it was generally held to be true that ‘the sons of the swineherd do not make burgomasters’.<sup>17</sup> At least one half

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<sup>11</sup> *Institutes* IV.8.7.

<sup>12</sup> Comm. [1 Cor. 14:29](#), CO 49, 259.

<sup>13</sup> *Institutes* 1.7.5.

<sup>14</sup> *Institutes* IV.13.2. Cf. my book *Gesetz und Geist, Eine kritische Wuerdigung des Erbes protestantischer Ethik, 1: Die Ethik der reformatorischen Bekenntnisschriften*, Giessen/Basel, Brunnen, 1987, pp. 372ff.

<sup>15</sup> SD VI, 12: The Book of Concord, l.c., p. 566.

<sup>16</sup> Apology 27, 49; The Book of Concord, l.c., p. 227.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. W. Elert, *Morphologie des Luthertums*, Munich, 3rd ed, 1965, Vol. 2, p. 68.

of the population was immediately subject to this accident of birth: girls were destined to be housewives and mothers.

Here we can see that vocation, the principle of differentiation for personal ethics, can also serve as a key to situational ethics. Take the calling of a mother. Her actions are prescribed in minutest detail by the daily tasks of caring for her family. Likewise the father, as head of the household and in his occupational work, is continually faced with new, objective challenges. In his trade and craft a mere look at his tools tells him what has to be done.

In response to the question 'What ought I to do?', the individual is thus instructed by his or her social and personal circumstances as they stand in the moment of asking, 'where you find yourself without your own doing' (Luther), but as the result of divine *providence*. Thus providence becomes the third horizon that governs personal conduct, in addition to one's civil vocation (occupation) and one's standing within the three hierarchies.

It was Calvin who placed special emphasis on this providential ordering of the life of the individual. His doctrine of vocation carries the full weight of his doctrine of predestination. Therefore he can say, 'The Lord bids each one of us in all life's actions to look to his calling ... Each individual has his own kind of living assigned to him as a sort of sentry post so that he may not heedlessly wander about through life ... lest through stupidity and rashness everything be turned topsy-turvy'.<sup>18</sup>

The three orders or hierarchies that form the core of this system of ethics are often said to reflect Plato's division of society into the three classes of soldiers, teachers, and farmers, and there clearly is some kind of correspondence. Neoplatonic thinking also influenced Christian doctrine: Dionysius the Pseudo-Areopagite in the sixth century taught that the hierarchy of church and civil authority corresponded to a graded system of 'choirs' of angels. But perhaps it is again Ecclesiasticus who stands godfather to this way of thinking. The Reformers removed this apocryphal book from the Catholic Bible for dogmatic reasons, yet it continues to influence Christian ethics strongly. In Ecclesiasticus the divine order of society is derived from the created order of celestial bodies, and here we also find the admonition which the Reformers p. 110 were so fond of repeating, 'Heed not what others have been commanded, but heed what God has commanded you' (Eccl'us 3:23). Here, Reformation ethics also found the proof texts for patriarchalism, e.g. Eccl'us 33:25ff.

Finally, looking at the ethical teaching on station and vocation in the days of Reformation orthodoxy, we are left with the impression that here Paul's doctrine of the church as a body with many members and endowed with many gifts (cf. [1 Cor. 12](#)) has been transferred to civil society. These gifts and services complemented each other; here stations and vocation are meant to do the same. Such a transfer of ideas is understandable if we bear in mind that the Reformers still presupposed the identity of church and society within Christendom, the *Corpus Christianum*.

## A CRITIQUE OF REFORMATION ETHICS

We have already expressed concern whether the legacy of Protestant ethics can cope with questions regarding, first, differential ethics, and second, particular Christian activity, e.g. church-building activities. We now move to examine the two basic principles of the ethics of Reformation orthodoxy, again with special emphasis on individual and situational ethics. Looking first at the concept of vocation, it would appear that the ethics on station and vocation is no longer adequate to provide guidance for the individual in today's

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<sup>18</sup> *Institutes*, III.10.6.



circumstances. We will, of course, emphasize that certain basic structures and their corresponding duties persist forever: such as providing the necessities of life, food and shelter, educating the young, and maintaining social justice and security. Modern society, however, is no longer a static, but a mobile system, governed by significant geographical shifts in population and, at times, by an unavoidable mobility between occupations. Rapid industrial development often leads to job changes and to changes in function, especially in the present 'second industrial revolution'. And then there is movement within one and the same profession with its frequent concomitant promotions and demotions. Also, what are we to make of an ethical code based on station and vocation in the face of endemic unemployment (and lack of a secure station) in so many countries today? In addition, how are we to cope with the changed role models forced upon us by social necessity and economic circumstances? What about wives, say in times of war, becoming the bread-winners, or, more recently, husbands having to keep house and raise children, because of a restructuring in the economy? Add to this the **P. 111** general erosion of patriarchalism and tutelage in all three departments of society—the political, the ecclesiastical, and the economic (including the family). Under these circumstances, principles of guidance based on concepts such as vocation and standing become questionable, to say the least.

It is, moreover, regrettable that the Reformation reduced the spiritual gifts of the New Testament, and the related commission to serve, to the level of civil vocations, especially in the case of the clergyman who was assigned much of the specifically Christian activity, primarily of church-building, as a civil vocation. This also resulted in an accumulation of offices which has led to the much lamented 'one-man show' within the church. So much for vocation. What about the Law? What can be said about the claim made by the ethics of Reformation orthodoxy that it can give specific guidance in particular cases? Synecdochic interpretation does not keep what it promises. This method of exposition often leads to quibbling and arbitrary judgment. In my view, the attempt to develop casuistry *a priori* has proven itself inadequate by its neglect of the Great Commission and of other New Testament admonitions which represent essential elements of Christian action. Perhaps they can all be traced back to the Ten Commandments, but they cannot reliably be deduced from them. Perhaps this weakness will explain why Protestantism failed to engage in missionary work for its first two hundred years.

Then, too, it is less than desirable that in this ethics of the Law the individual—no less than in the Middle Ages—remains dependent on a teaching office that is skilled in interpretation by synecdoche! This dependency leads to a disenfranchisement of the congregation and shall we say, to an aristocratism in the interpretation of Scripture. That is not the picture the New Testament paints of the Church.

A fundamental weakness of this method, too, is that the interpreter is a human being and as such can never fully enter the situation of the one posing the question. By definition he remains a stranger to the problem. If the inquiry concerns more than a technical exposition of the Law, if it concerns, e.g., the spiritual analysis of a situation, there is no apparent reason why the inquiring lay Christian cannot have immediate access to the Spirit of God, just as the minister has. The same needs to be said about patriarchalism: in both cases the problem of discerning the will of God is simply shifted from the layman to the would-be expert or to the superior.

It is also unsatisfactory that Reformation orthodoxy in essence presents us only with an Old Testament legal code of ethics. It overlooks the New Testament dialectic between Law and Spirit, Law **p. 112** and liberty, and thus easily relapses into a legalism of its own. This can actually be demonstrated by pointing to the Protestants' opposition to the so-called works of supererogation which go beyond the call of duty, an opposition that is based on the doctrine that the Law is sufficient and complete. True, the Roman Catholic

Church linked its teaching about these good works with the idea of reward; but if one cancels that linkage (which is quite possible), one can soon think of examples of deeds which exceed any direct commandment. It is not true to say that *all* Christian ethics is derived from duty. Paul, for example, writes to Philemon, 'Confident of your obedience I write to you knowing that you will do even more than I say' (v. [21](#)); and Calvin admits that the woman who anointed Jesus' feet (according to [Luke 7:36ff.](#)) was not obliged to do so.<sup>19</sup> The same can be said of the widow's mite, and of the restitution offered by Zacchaeus, which went beyond what was required by the Law. Incidentally, supererogatory works are again being discussed in philosophical ethics, and are defended as being an expression of human liberty, creativity, and dignity.<sup>20</sup>

All these examples point to the more fundamental relationship between Law and love, which is a special case of the relationship between Law and Spirit. Christian charity and the Holy Spirit will fulfil the requirements of the Law ([Rom. 8:4](#); see also [Rom. 13:8–10](#), [Gal. 5:14](#), and [Mt. 24:12](#)). That will always become apparent, in retrospect. But the Law as such cannot completely predict or even prescribe acts of love. Law and love, I submit, are not congruent. Love is the fulfilment of the Law, but Law is not the fulfilment of love. Nor can Law describe the perfection or completeness of love. Law is an exposition of love, or, if you will, its framework. It is the channel through which love flows; it is not its fountain-head. Contrary to Bullinger it must be affirmed that the Law is not 'most absolute'.

Further, a critical examination of the system of ethics provided by Reformation orthodoxy has to take into account the consequences that flow from its combination of Law and vocation. This juxtaposition necessarily leads to the thesis that the requirements of the Law are to be fulfilled within the context of our civil occupations. It can be shown that at least within the Lutheran tradition this emphasis has led to a neglect of what might be called the ethics of the first table of the Decalogue—man's attitude toward God. Silence shrouds the love and [p. 113](#) friendship of God. Then, and now, the twofold commandment to love ([Mt. 22:37–39](#)) is reduced to its second part, the love of one's neighbour. Ethics is limited to a doctrine of earthly duties, and in that capacity it unwittingly promotes a secularization that no longer corresponds to the Gospel. However, our relationship to God, i.e., our spiritual life, inevitably constitutes part of Christian ethics. Wherever this is forgotten, the specifically Christian motivation to do good will with the passage of time also be lost sight of in the field of human relations.

Both Law and vocation are expressions of objective ethics in which an individual is taught by others, from the outside, just as in the Middle Ages. Even where this form of ethics tries to differentiate, it can only guide us by 'remote control'. Legend has it that at the Diet of Worms Luther declared, 'Here I stand, I cannot do otherwise', and Calvin spoke of the inner witness of the Holy Spirit within the heart of man. The Reformation marks the beginning of a new era in the realm of dogma. In the realm of ethics everything remained the same. At least for the time being.

## THE SYNTHESIS: NECESSARY AND POSSIBLE

Having said all this, we find ourselves in a dilemma. On the one side are those who play off freedom against the Law, on the other are those who advocate Law versus freedom. Must it be the one or the other? Reflecting on the time immediately following the Reformation, Emil Brunner said that the Reformation balance of Word and Spirit

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<sup>19</sup> J. Calvin, *Harmony of the [Synoptic] Gospels* on [Mt. 26:10](#).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. D. Heyd, *Supererogation, Its Status in Ethical Theory*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982

collapsed. That has remained true to this very day, certainly in the realm of ethics. What, then, ought we to do? Needed is a solution that avoids both versions of an antithesis of Law and Spirit. We need to seek a dialectic that makes room both for norm and situation, for the commandments of God in general and God's contemporary command in particular.

The synthesis of Law and Spirit can already, at times, be found in the Reformers. Martin Luther knew that one could not simply oppose an attitude 'without the Word' as represented by 'the fanatics' with a programme of 'Word without the Spirit', if one wished to be true to the biblical evidence. The proper response to 'the Spirit without the Word' (*spiritus sine verbo*) is simply 'the Spirit and the Word' (*spiritus cum verbo*). (The contention that we find the Spirit only *in*—or *through*—the Word (*per verbum*) clearly is an over-reaction in which the balance between the two is jeopardized.) In the Smalcald Articles Luther turns against the enthusiasts 'who boast that they possess the Spirit without p. 114 and before the Word and therefore judge, interpret, and twist the Scriptures or spoken Word to their pleasure', as Thomas Muenzer did. He writes that 'in these matters, which concern the external, spoken Word, we must hold firmly to the conviction that God gives no one his Spirit or grace except through or with the external Word which comes before. Thus we shall be protected from the enthusiasts ...'<sup>21</sup> Luther therefore insists that the Spirit comes *through* the Word, but he also allows that the Spirit comes *with* the Word. His study of Old Testament prophecy obliges him to state both aspects.

Calvin, too, at least once testifies to this 'togetherness' of Law and Spirit. In his sermons on Job he says that we do not know if Job lived before or after Moses. Whatever the case may be, Job did not need the Mosaic Law in order to know that he ought to love his enemies. That he could learn from the Law that is inscribed in the heart of every believer. Has God, in the two tables of the Law, Calvin asks, put together anything other than he, through his Holy Spirit, always writes into the hearts of his children? 'Of what benefit is Scripture to us today,' Calvin continues, 'if not this, that it holds before our eyes what the Spirit chisels into our souls?' So it comes to pass that 'there is utter agreement (*summus consensus*) between the doctrine that is preached and the inner grace that God gives through his Spirit'.<sup>22</sup>

We have already mentioned the heterodoxy of Juan de Valdes. He too comes very close to seeing this high degree of consensus between the Spirit of God and the Law of God, when he, in a different place, says that the believer compares that which he learns from the Spirit of God with what he finds written in Holy Scripture. In other words, he tests his spiritual insight with the Bible.<sup>23</sup>

This is the way in which the formula 'Law and Spirit' is to be expounded, and to be defended against one-sided interpretations, be it by those who advocate the Law without the Spirit, or those who preach the Spirit without the Law. This also points in a direction that could lead to some degree of reconciliation between main-line Protestant churches and the so-called left wing of the Reformation, the Anabaptists. Most of their representatives knew themselves bound to the Bible no less than Calvin did.

Calvin's harsh words were directed to extremists. The ethics represented by the Anabaptist is not typically antinomian. What it does p. 115 do, however, is to relegate the

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<sup>21</sup> A. Sm. pt. III, art. VIII; The Book of Concord, l.c., p. 312f.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted by P. Lobstein, *Die Ethik Calvins*, Strassburg, 1877, p. 59, from the Amsterdam Latin edition of Calvin's works.

<sup>23</sup> J. de Valdes, l.c., p. 38.

Law as found in the Old Testament to a secondary position behind the ethics of the New Testament, especially in the Sermon on the Mount, and in the apostolic exhortations.

Why should we not find a synthesis where both are represented: the ethics of the Reformation on the one hand, based as it is on the moral Law and on wisdom literature of the Old Testament, and on the other hand the ethics of the New Testament and the guidance of the Holy Spirit? Such a synthesis would lead not only to a reconciliation among different denominations, but also to regaining an integrated view of biblical teaching. We need, at least, to reverse the present-day division of our biblical inheritance.

‘Law and Spirit’—one could be tempted to call this a ‘pietistic’ solution. Seen historically, Pietism has always endeavoured to preserve intact the legacy handed down by the Reformers and the biblical insights of the Anabaptists. We could even go further. Perhaps this formula might even yield a working hypothesis for the reconciliation of Reformation orthodoxy and theological liberalism?

*(Translated by Manfred W. Fleischmann)*

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# Paul—The Experience Within The Theology

Robert Banks

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*The great lack among evangelical theologians, as many have remarked, is the lack of an evangelical way of doing theology. This article by Robert Banks is a fine attempt to bridge the gap created by the Enlightenment between knowing and doing. Taking Paul as a good example, Banks shows how one’s experience is integrally bound to one’s theologization. On this basis, the author also calls for new models of theological education along with a new definition of theology.*

Editor

We hear conflicting voices today about the relationship between theology and experience. According to some, we must first get our theology right through Bible study, reading and reflection, and then our experience will follow the right channels. According to others, we must give first priority to our experience of God and allow that to shape our theology. Many Christians find themselves torn between these two or on the move from one to the other.

It is a pity that theology and experience have become polarized in these ways. Increasing familiarity with the Bible, and with the great Christian thinkers of the past, calls into question any sharp separation of the two or subordination of one to the other. In the biblical writings, and in the books and sermons of Augustine, Luther and Calvin, Wesley