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Ethics: Relative, Situational or Absolute

Norman Anderson

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Today we are continually told that we live in a 'permissive' society. So the first question that arises is what the word 'permissive' really means. Bishop John Robinson has defined it—for those who like it, and for those who don't like it—as 'Freedom from interference or control, doing your own thing, love, laxity, licence, promiscuity; and, in terms of verbs, swinging, sliding, eroding, condoning'.[1] In other words, 'freedom' from any sort of authority—parental, academic, civil or divine. Or, in Mrs. Campbell's vivid phrase, 'People may do what they like, as long as they don't do it in the streets and frighten the horses'. But there are very few horses today, so this gives people considerable scope! Put in other words, individuals not only have the responsibility for making their own moral decisions, but the right to make them without any regard for what other people think.

So a second question immediately comes to mind: 'Can our contemporary society justly be described as "permissive"?' And the answer to this question (as so often, I think) is both yes and no. In some respects our society is certainly permissive—in sexual behaviour, divorce, obscenity (in books, magazines, films and plays) and in 'fiddling' of various sorts in industry and commerce, for example. But in others it is much less permissive than society was in the past. And to this, of course, there is both a bad side and a good side. The irritating side consists in the endless regulations which trammel our lives, the forms we have to fill in, and the permits, licences and visas we continually have to obtain. But all this is trivial compared with the good side—the intolerance of many of the younger generation (thank God) towards social injustice, racial discrimination, economic exploitation and cruelty of any sort. When I was young, for example, we could sing 'The rich man in his castle, the poor man at his gate; God made them high and lowly, and ordered their estate' with no sense of incongruity. Domestic servants were accommodated in frigid attics or dank basements on a mere pittance, and many other forms of exploitation were taken almost for granted. A sense of the superiority of the white races over every other race, and of European civilisation over every other civilization, was almost endemic. But today, on the other hand, there is a widespread detestation of the iniquities of apartheid in South Africa and of the horrors of modern warfare (as seen in Vietnam and elsewhere). Indeed, people continually say that such things should not be allowed to continue. They ought to be 'stopped'. But how are they to be stopped? By public opinion—that is, by morality or the moral sense of the community? By law—that is, by legislation and judicial enforcement? Or by force—that is, by war or power politics?

But in all such questions we come face to face with a strange ambivalence. An author, for example—we are continually told—must be wholly unfettered and at liberty to depict life precisely as he sees it in regard to matters of sex. But in regard to anything which degrades the coloured races we meet a very different attitude, for this must be prevented by law. With this most of us would agree; but why the difference with regard to sex—the exploitation of which also degrades

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[1] *Christian Freedom in a Permissive Society* (S.C.M. Press, London, 1970), p. x.

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men and women? This difference is not based on logic, but is purely a matter of value judgment. Indeed, Professor Duncan Williams, the author of a book called *Trousered Apes*, told me recently that he read one of the chapters of that book, when in draft, to a university society; and at the end a young woman teacher came up to him and said with great emotion: 'But this is dreadful: what you were advocating really amounts to censorship. It should not be allowed to be published!'

So a third question necessarily poses itself: 'Are standards of ethics and morality in fact purely relative, peculiar to one particular civilisation, generation or society? And this, of course, brings us at once to the subject of this lecture. In other words, are all moral statements, as has been widely argued of late, no more than expressions of opinion or exercises in value judgment which can be dismissed as the accidental products of our cultural environment, individual idiosyncrasies or predilections? For example, C. K. Ogden and I. R. Richards assert that 'good', when regarded as the subject matter of ethics, 'stands for nothing whatever, and has no symbolic function'. This ethical use of 'good', they suggest, is a 'purely emotive use'. So 'when we use it in the sentence "*This* is good" we merely refer to this and the addition of "is good" makes no difference whatever to our reference. When, on the other hand, we say "*This* is red" the addition of "is red" to "*this*" does symbolise an extension of our reference, namely to some other red thing. But "is good" has no comparable symbolic function: it serves only as an emotive sign expressing our attitude to *this*, and perhaps evoking similar attitudes in other persons, or inciting them to actions of one kind or another.'[2] Similarly, A. J. Ayer insists that ethical judgments 'have no objective validity whatever' and that the function of all 'normative ethical symbols' (such as 'good' or 'wrong') is purely 'emotive', that is, designed to express the speaker's feelings or to arouse those of the one he addresses.[3]

But is this attitude really tenable today—in the light of such phenomena as the Nazi attitude to the Jews (with their concentration camps, brutality and extermination); the Communist attitude to freedom of thought and expression (with writers and protestors incarcerated in mental hospitals and labour camps); or the South African attitude to non-whites (with its almost complete denial of basic human rights)? To ask if such things are right or wrong is not meaningless or merely emotive. Far from it. To suggest that it is so represents, in my view, nothing better than doctrinaire nonsense.

Now of course this relative view may seem to find support in the wide variety of codes of social morality in different cultures which anthropologists and sociologists have brought to light. As a result the ethical relativist commonly renounces any claim to evaluate other people's moral standards and is distinctly apologetic about his own! But the absence of any agreed morality has, in fact, been greatly exaggerated. Almost all communities, for example, disapprove of murder, adultery and theft—although the way in which they define what precisely constitutes these offences may vary very considerably.

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[2] *The Meaning of Meaning* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 10th edition, 1949), p. 228.
[3] *Language, Truth and Logic* (Victor Gollancz, London, 1956), p. 108.

But the basic point at issue is not whether ethics and morals are not, in some degree, relative—in the sense that there are obvious differences between one race and another, one generation and another, and one individual and another in the moral standards they adopt. The question at issue is much deeper and more fundamental than that. It is this: is morality itself purely relative? Is there no standard outside the environment or the individual by which the standards of the

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community or its individual members can be evaluated? Is it utterly impossible to say that this is beneficial, but that is not; that this is right, but that is wrong; that this is human, but that is sub-human? For, as Professor Eric Mascall has put it: 'Living like a gorilla is a very good thing to do if you are a gorilla, and living like an angel is a very good thing to do if you are an angel. And neither of these tasks is very difficult for the being in question. If, however, you are a human being, you can achieve true happiness only by living as a human being; and that is a much more difficult task.'

Let me give a simple example, taken almost at random, to show how this principle provides us with a firm anchorage in a sea of relativity. 'To live like a human being' presumably involves, among many other things, a degree of modesty with regard to our bodily functions. Now what is, and what is not, regarded as modest may (and no doubt does) vary very considerably according to race and generation. But the basic principle of modesty remains constant.

But how, and where, are we to discover what it means, basically, 'to live like a human being'—or, in other words, find some fundamental moral principles or some basic standard of ethical evaluation? To this question the traditional answer has always been 'in religion'. In the religion of Islam, for example, the twin sciences of theology and the sacred law have always dominated the lives of pious Muslims. Thus the Shari'a (which basically means 'the way to a watering place', then the path of God's commandments, and thus the sacred law) covers the whole of life, and commonly classifies all human actions under the five categories of what is commanded, recommended, left legally indifferent, reprobated, or positively forbidden by God; and this rests unequivocally on the basis of what is believed to be divine revelation. For man, Muslims believe, is unable of himself to distinguish virtue from vice. Indeed, the strictest school of Muslim orthodoxy (the Ashᶜariyya) goes much further than this, and believes that there is no such thing as good or evil apart from the divine command, on the one hand, and the divine prohibition, on the other. Other Muslims, it is true, did not go so far as this, and believed that God commands the good because it is intrinsically good and forbids the evil because it is inherently evil, and that man can at times discern for himself the difference between virtue and vice. In such cases, then, divine revelation merely confirms what man could have discovered for himself; but in all else he is completely dependent on this revelation.

Now of course religion is not the only possible basis for ethics and morality. Several other suggestions have been made. I suppose the most widely accepted basis today is some form of Utilitarianism. Naturally enough, those who adopt this general approach to morality differ considerably among themselves; but it is sufficient for our purpose, I think, to say that a common definition of utilitarianism is the promotion of human happiness and the diminution of human

suffering. Thus everything that promotes the maximum happiness of the greatest number, or reduces the sum total of suffering, is right; and everything that militates against the greatest happiness of the greatest number, or induces any increase of suffering, is wrong. But utilitarianism never professes to provide a complete code of morals; many of its conclusions remain wide open to question and debate; and it is exceedingly hard to discern, and harder still to apply, these principles amid the stresses and strains of life.

Again, there is what is termed Intuitivism. Once more there are considerable

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differences between one advocate of this school of ethics and another; but the basic concept is that we know instinctively that some things are good and others bad. H. A. Pritchard, for example, says that our basic apprehension of certain moral obligations is 'immediate, in precisely the same sense in which a mathematical apprehension is immediate.... Both apprehensions are immediate in the sense that, in both, insight into the nature of the subject directly leads us to recognise its possession of the predicate.'[4] This is, in a sense, a development of G. E. Moore's insistence that there is such a thing as goodness, and we know what we mean when we use this term; but that the quality of goodness, though capable of apprehension, is beyond our definition. Thus he asserts that 'Everyone does in fact understand the question "Is this good?" When he thinks of it, his state of mind is different from what it would be, were he asked "Is this pleasant, or desired, or approved?" It has a distinct meaning for him, even though he may not recognise in what respect it is distinct. Whenever he thinks of intrinsic value or "intrinsic worth" or says that a thing ought to exist, he has before his mind the unique object—the unique property of things—which I mean by "good".'[5]

And so we could go on. But this last view is virtually the same as what St. Paul says in the second chapter of his letter to the Romans, where he tells us that whereas the Jews will be judged by the law revealed on Sinai, non-Jews have 'the requirements of the law' (that is God's law, or morality) 'written in their hearts' or consciences. And this brings me to what may be termed metaphysical ethics, since it seems to me impossible to come to any satisfying conclusion about the source or content of moral imperatives until we have considered such basic questions as the nature of the universe in which we live, man's place in this universe, and the meaning and purpose of human life. Only so can we come to any meaningful, conclusion about what sort of behaviour befits man as man, or the still more fundamental question whether there is not in fact a God who not only created man but had a purpose in view when He did so.

Now the existence of God is not my subject in this lecture. Like the Bible, I shall simply assume it. But if there is a God, if He created man, and if He had a purpose in so doing, then surely it is overwhelmingly probable that He would have given him certain 'Maker's Directions' as to how the creatures He had made could best achieve their purpose and come to their most complete fulfilment, through living in the way He intended for them. This is why these basic instructions are 'written' on man's heart and conscience. But the trouble (or part of the trouble) is that man

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[4] *Moral Obligation* (O.U.P. London, 1949), p. 4.

[5] Quoted from *Principia Ethica* (Cambridge, 1903), by Mary Warnock, in *Ethics since 1900* (O.U.P., London, 1960), p. 27.

has continually disobeyed his conscience, so this is now, at best, a defective and imperfect instrument and at worst 'seared as with an iron'. And that is why we find in the Bible—in both the Old Testament and the New—moral teachings or commands which spell out for us our Maker's Directions.

But what, precisely, is the status of this teaching? Are these commands really imperatives of abiding validity, or are they mere guidelines? And here we come to what is termed Situation Ethics. Now it is fashionable today, even in theological circles, to pour scorn on the very idea of moral laws which 'come down direct from heaven and are eternally valid for human conduct'—to quote John Robinson once more.[6] Many people, indeed, insist that morality should not be regarded as consisting in obedience to any laws at all—whether those of reason, nature, duty or God—but as behaviour directed to the achievement of some specific social purpose. A striking illustration of this last attitude can be found in

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the very different stance towards sexual morality commonly taken up today by Communism in different parts of the world. It is noteworthy that in non-Communist countries Communists tend to support a very permissive attitude towards sex, and to deprecate as reactionary all attempts to maintain, or reinstate, anything approaching traditional standards. But it is quite the reverse in countries where Communism has achieved full control, for there sexual laxity is by no means encouraged. On the contrary, pornography and the public exploitation of sex is much more strictly controlled in Moscow or Peking than in London, Paris or New York.

But to come back to Situation Ethics. The main thesis of many of its advocates is that there is only one 'absolute' imperative, which Christians usually designate as love; and that all the other moral laws in the Bible are no more than guidelines. So, provided a man or woman does the most loving thing he or she can in any particular circumstance, this is absolutely right, whatever other moral law he may have broken. This sounds all right, no doubt, and even biblical, when you first hear it. After all, did not Jesus Himself sum up the Mosaic Law in love to God and love to one's neighbour; and did not St. Paul say that 'Love is the fulfilment of the law'? Indeed they did, and in a perfect world this would no doubt be all the instruction man needs. But how on earth are we—ignorant, sinful, very imperfect creatures as we are—always to know instinctively what is the course and dictate of absolute love, not only to one other person but to several, and even to the community as a whole—especially when our own emotions are most deeply involved? It is, I fear, mere wishful thinking to say with John Robinson that 'Love alone, because, as it were, it has a built-in moral compass, enabling it to "home" intuitively upon the deepest needs of the other, can allow itself to be directed completely by the situation.... It is able to embrace an ethic of moral responsiveness, meeting every situation on its own merits, with no prescriptive laws.'[7] Surely it is much closer to the realities of life to say with B. H. Streeter 'When passion is the arbiter, my own case is always recognised to be exceptional.... When Aphrodite whispers in my ear, a principle which admits of no exception may nerve me to resist; but if any exception is admitted, my case is certain to be one.'[8]

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[6] *Honest to God* (S.C.M. Press, London, 1963), p. 106.
[7] *Ibid*., p. 115.
[8] *Adventure, the Faith of Science and the Science of Faith* (Macmillan, London, 1937), p. 125.

Now there is a point we must certainly recognise as valid in Situation Ethics (although it is a point which was known and discussed long before Situation Ethics were ever heard of), which can be termed the doctrine of 'the lesser of two evils'. This is why I do not myself very much like the phrase 'absolute moral laws'. I much prefer to speak of them as 'laws of abiding validity' or 'principles of intrinsic authority'. For the fact is that sometimes, in this very imperfect world, two such principles will come into conflict, and then one of them will have to give way. In that sense, therefore, it cannot be absolute in the full sense. But it is still a moral law of abiding validity.

I suppose the most obvious example of this principle would be something like this. Imagine that I was standing on a lonely heath, where a single path divided into two—the one branch winding down into a wood and the other running up over a hill—when suddenly a little girl ran along and took the path into the wood, followed, some two minutes later, by a man with wild eyes who demanded to know which path she had taken. What should I do in such a situation? The ideal solution, perhaps, would be to take him home for a cup of tea or coffee; but he might not accept the invitation! The next best thing might be to engage him in

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conversation until he became calm and rational and the little girl had had plenty of time to get away. But suppose neither of these alternatives seemed feasible. In such circumstances I should myself unhesitatingly point to the path up the hill and tell him that she had gone that way—knowing perfectly well that I was telling him a downright lie. I hope, moreover, that I would realise that to tell lies is to go against a principle of abiding moral validity, and that it is intrinsically evil. Yet, in the circumstances, it would clearly be the lesser of two evils. So it would be wrong to pretend that this was right in and of itself, but it would be the right action to take in the circumstances—as representing, in a very imperfect world, something which, however wrong in itself, was preferable to any practicable alternative. And one only needs to read any book on ethics to find a multitude of far more difficult and complex examples of the same principle, where the person concerned is faced with an agonising moral decision in which he can easily make the wrong choice, and where he often has to balance what seems to be beneficial or even loving in the short-term against what, in the long-term, might be neither helpful nor really 'loving' at all.

Is it a mere quibble, then, to criticise the advocates of Situation Ethics in such circumstances? Might it not be argued that I am myself saying precisely the same thing, even if in slightly different language? I do not think so. Professor William Barclay has helpfully suggested, in this context, the analogy of dangerous drugs. These may, he says, in certain circumstances rightly be prescribed by a doctor and taken by a patient; but this does not mean that they are not intrinsically poison, and that they should not be labelled as such.[9] When J. Fletcher (a great protagonist of Situation Ethics) pours scorn on Cicero's assertion that 'only a madman could maintain that the distinction between the honourable and the dishonourable, between virtue and vice, is a matter of opinion not of nature', his scorn is in fact entirely misplaced.

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[9] *Ethics in a Permissive Society* (Fontana, London, 1971).

Now it is true that even Fletcher concedes that a responsible moral decision must be 'informed by principles and guidance derived, not simply from your own experience, but also from the collective experience of the human race'. But he continually insists that, while Situation Ethics is willing to make full and respectful use of 'principles', they must always be 'treated as maxims rather than laws and precepts'.[10] And this provokes J. W. Bowker, of Cambridge, to make the pertinent comment that 'it is precisely here that the weakness of Situation Ethics appears: it is so preoccupied with saying over and over again what status principles do not have—i.e. they are not rules—that it gives far too little consideration to the status they *do* have. We are told they are not rules, but why then should we accept that they are guidance? Indeed, how do we find out what they are? A "collective bank of human experience" would contain, to put it mildly, a great variety of material—would it not contain, for example, what Hitler thought to be the most loving thing in his situation, that genocide was ultimately beneficial to all concerned?'[11]

This is, no doubt, an extreme example, but the principle is applicable over a wide range of moral problems which I cannot discuss here. The point I want to emphasise is this: that the Bible gives us a number of moral laws or principles of abiding validity which we must then apply, as intelligently as we can, to all our moral problems—sex relations, euthanasia, abortion, or anything else. It is a basic mistake to put law, in this context, over against love. If these two were in

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fact antagonistic, it is obvious which we should choose. But they are not so, although it can be made to appear that they are. In reality, however, God's moral laws are our Maker's Directions as to how love is best to be exercised and expressed.

But religion does not concern morality and ethics only in the sense of providing a source or basis for moral principles. It also provides the inspiration that helps us to live accordingly. And here an important distinction must be made. If we are concerned with inspiration alone, then almost any religion or ideology might serve, for it might well suffice to lift us out of ourselves, to give us something to live for, and to provide us with a meaning for existence. Even a false religion, or a mistaken ideology, may do that. But in such a case what an awful shock and disillusionment it will be if, or rather when, we realise our mistake. But the case is very different when we stand in need not only of inspiration but of positive help, from outside ourselves, to effect in us an inside change. In such circumstances there is all the difference in the world between a false religion and a true one. Let me give you a very inadequate illustration. The story is told of a man named Blondin who was supreme in the art of walking on a tightrope. So one day he arranged for a rope to be stretched over part of the Niagara Falls, where a fall would mean certain death; and he then not only walked across it himself but wheeled another man over in a wheelbarrow, while thousands of people stood watching. Finally, he joined the crowd and asked a teen-aged boy whether he had been watching. 'Yes, sir,' said the boy, 'it was wonderful.' 'Well, do you believe,' asked Blondin, 'that I could wheel you across in a wheelbarrow?' 'Why yes, sir,' said

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[10] *Situation Ethics* (S.C.M. Press, London, 1966) p. 31.
[11] *Making Moral Decisions* (ed. D. M. MacKinnon, S.P.C.K., London, 1969), p. 58.

the boy; 'I've seen you wheel a grown-up man: why shouldn't you be able to wheel a boy?' 'Come along then,' said Blondin, 'get in the barrow and I will do so'—but he could scarcely see the boy's heels for the dust as he ran away home.

Now this story is normally told to illustrate the difference between a mere mental belief and what the Christian terms 'saving faith'. But that is not my purpose in this context. Let us suppose, first, that the boy was so confident in Blondin's powers that he got into the wheelbarrow without a qualm. He would then, no doubt, set out on his hazardous journey in a spirit of pleasurable excitement but complete trustfulness; but that would not help him if Blondin were in fact to slip. But suppose, on the contrary, that he had only just enough faith in Blondin to persuade him to get into the wheelbarrow, but with a sick and sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. The beginning of the walk would then be a much less pleasant experience; but provided Blondin remained master of the situation, the boy would be perfectly safe. Nothing would ultimately depend on his feelings, confidence or 'inspiration'; it would all depend on Blondin.

But this illustration goes less than half-way. I believe with all my heart that God our creator, Who loves us and understands us, has given us first His 'Maker's directions' in the moral law of the Old Testament (justice, mercy, honesty, etc.)—echoed, as it is, throughout the whole of the New Testament—and then a supreme example in Jesus Christ our Lord, Who Himself perfectly kept the moral law. But the New Testament continually emphasises that He not only lived, but died on a cross. Why? It was for our sakes, we are repeatedly told—because we have not kept the moral law. Now I know, of course, that it is often said that the sense of sin and the need for forgiveness is largely strange to the modern mind. I know that Dr. Reinhold Niebuhr wrote of the 'complaisant conscience of modern man',

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and that others dismiss sin as a 'psychopathic aspect of adolescent mentality'.[12] But however common is the apparent absence of any sense of sin or any appreciation of the meaning and need of divine forgiveness, this—as D. M. Baillie insists—is in fact 'naive and unrealistic. It betrays a profound ignorance of human nature and even... of modern psychiatry.' For even modern man has at least a moralistic substitute for a sense of sin in a sense of failure—or even, sometimes, a moral-failure complex. This may be personal—in the form of a profound dissatisfaction with his own character and conduct. Or it maybe corporate—in 'an obscure sense of complicity in the great public evils which have brought such tragedy to our age'. It may easily be repressed, but it is still there.

And the fact is—Baillie goes on—that the moralist, if he is serious, can never wholly forgive himself. That is where we find the 'bankruptcy of the attempt to have morality without the life of faith'. The attempt to reform oneself, to have a moral wash and brush-up and make a new start, is, in the final analysis, bound to fail. For inevitably it makes one self-centred. If one still falls short (as most of us do, even according to our own standards) the effort ends in disillusionment and despair. And if one seems to succeed, it ends in legalism and self-satisfaction. But the Christian message is very different. For Christ not only lived, He died. And He died not only to

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[12] Cf. D. M. Baillie *God was in Christ* (Faber & Faber, London edition of 1961), pp. 106ff.

show us what sin is like in God's sight (so black that even He could only deal with it by carrying it to a cross), and not only to demonstrate the fact that God still loves us, all the same (so much that He was willing to go to such an incredible length to save us from ourselves), but because it was essential that He should identify Himself with us in our sin and thereby provide a moral basis for our forgiveness. It was God Himself Who, in Christ, was reconciling the world to Himself when He took our place and bore our sin. So when we come to see our moral failure as sin against God, the whole situation is transformed―for now it is sin that He can and does forgive, sin for which Christ died. As a result, we can forgive others and even forgive ourselves.

This is an unique morality. It sets us free from the stains and guilt of the past. It liberates us, too, from the need for self-justification or an attempt at self-reformation in the present. And it provides an inside change for the future. It is what is called, in the Old Testament, the New Covenant―in which sin is forgiven, the past is blotted out, and there is a complete release. As the prophet Ezekiel put it 'Their sins and iniquities I will remember no more'. Again, God in Christ becomes our friend, companion and guide, for we, who used to love our own way and hate God's way, have been reconciled, forgiven and accepted. In the words of Ezekiel once more 'All shall know me, from the least to the greatest.' And God's moral law is no longer written on tablets of stone to challenge an external, unwilling and even impossible obedience, but, instead, engraved on our hearts and minds―so that we find that our desires and our way of looking at things have themselves begun to change.

Now of course we are still far from perfect, and always shall be here in this life. Of course we have got a very long way still to go. And of course we need forgiveness all the time. But the forgiveness is always available, and it is ever new. For myself, I would despair of morality or ethics apart from Christ. I meet many people who think they can get on without Him―and perhaps they can, for a time. It all depends, really, on what it means to 'get on' in this context. But, speaking for myself, I know I shall always stand in need of both forgiveness and the continual renewal of a new life―for there is all the difference in the world between a perpetual turning over of a new leaf and the reception of a wholly new life. But St. Paul, as usual, appeals to basic logic when he assures us that 'If, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, much more, now we have been reconciled, shall we be saved in His life'.[13]

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[13] A considerably fuller treatment of the substance of this lecture may be found, *passim*, in my book *Morality, Law and Grace* (Tyndale Press, London, 1972), from which a number of quotations and references have been taken.