

been conferred upon him, and that he always owes what is demanded, that he therefore stands in constant need of forgiveness, that even as he is sanctified he cannot dream or boast that he is a saint. Indirectly, it too could easily be a proclamation and glorification of the grace of Jesus Christ, and could therefore give the glory to God alone. And therefore already it would itself have tacitly interpreted and practised the *γνώθη σεαυτόν* in a Christian sense. In the face of an ethics of this kind the question would obviously have to be answered in the affirmative. It is a "Christian" ethics in a loose sense, and it has, in fact, a place alongside theological ethics. It has its starting-point, basis and aim in common with the latter. The difference is that these do not emerge directly—or do so only occasionally. It does not attempt to draw up expressly and specifically any basic principles. It is content to show by its actual handling of the problems of human life that the Christian knowledge of God is its presupposition and that it does, in fact, derive from this. It stands in a sense half-way between theology and the Christian life itself. For it has heard the Word of God attested in Scripture and in the preaching of the Christian Church, or it shows actual traces of the dominion of that Word over all men. It is, therefore, occupied with it. But its own concern is to put this understanding into effect in a definite interpretation and representation of human life. It cannot be expected, therefore, that this type of ethics will be encountered in an academic form. To be academic, it would have to be based on principle. It would have to expose and expound its presupposition. And if it did, it would become theological ethics. It is no part of our present task to mention a particular instance of an ethics which is "Christian" although not theological. With the necessary qualifications we might think of phenomena like the life-work of H. Pestalozzi. It might be contended that this type of ethics has been presented more or less clearly and consistently, although in very different ways, in the novels of Jeremias Gotthelf, H. de Balzac, Charles Dickens, Dostoevski, Tolstoi, Theodor Fontane or John Galsworthy. Traces of it might be found—and not only within historical Christianity—in certain old and new political and social conceptions, and also, it goes without saying, in the studies of the philosophical moralists. But the touchstone of non-theological ethics of this kind will always be whether and to what extent it can stand an examination of its fundamental principles; whether and to what extent its implicit presuppositions, if they were made explicit, would prove to be identical with those of theological ethics. In practice, however, it is impossible to apply this touchstone to any great extent, for explicit theological principle is not everybody's concern. We can and must accept the fact, therefore, that this is not actually necessary. Thanks to the wisdom and patience of God, and the inconsequence of men, it is quite possible in practice that Christian insights and deductions may actually exist where their Christian presuppositions are wholly concealed, or where a closer investigation would reveal all kinds of presuppositions that are only to a small extent Christian. There are many people who live by Christian presuppositions, who even represent and proclaim them, and yet if they were questioned, could only tell us something very far from satisfactory or quite unsatisfactory, something which we might have to dismiss as heathenism or Jewish doctrine. The wise course, then, is to keep to what they actually know and not to what they unfortunately seem not to know or even in their folly to deny. The business of the reader or hearer of this type of ethics is tacitly to supplement and correct its more doubtful—implicit or explicit—presuppositions (as Paul did in Ac. 17²⁸), and for the rest to learn from it what it actually has to teach. But this does not in the least alter, but rather confirms, the fact that *in thesi*, in principle—and this is what concerns us here—correct ethics can only be Christian ethics, and Christian ethics, if it speaks scientifically, cannot be differentiated from theological ethics. In the last analysis, therefore, the only strict answer to our question is to say that in a scientific form there is only one ethics, theological ethics.

2. THE WAY OF THEOLOGICAL ETHICS

It is the Christian doctrine of God, or, more exactly, the knowledge of the electing grace of God in Jesus Christ, which decides the nature and aim of theological ethics, of ethics as an element of Church dogmatics. It has its basis, therefore, in the doctrine of God Himself. For the God who claims man makes Himself originally responsible for man. The fact that He gives man His command, that He subjects man to His command, means that He makes Himself responsible not only for its authority but also for its fulfilment. Therefore we do not speak completely about God Himself if we do not go on at once to speak also about His command. But it is the Christian doctrine of God, or, more exactly, the knowledge of the electing grace of God in Jesus Christ, which also decides the special way of theological ethics, the special form of its enquiry and reply, the attainment of its fundamental principles. Here, as everywhere, the rightness of these is decided by the matter to which they must be related—the matter which is to be presented by them. Now the matter of theological ethics is the responsibility which God has assumed for us in the fact that He has made us accountable through His command. Its matter is the Word and work of God in Jesus Christ, in which the right action of man has already been performed and therefore waits only to be confirmed by our action.

In view of this matter, we must first refuse to follow all those attempts at theological ethics which start from the assumption that it is to be built on, or to proceed from, a general human ethics, a "philosophical" ethics. In the relationship between the command of God and the ethical problem, as we have defined it in its main features, there is not a universal moral element autonomously confronting the Christian. It is, therefore, quite out of the question methodically to subordinate the latter to the former, to build it on, or to derive it from, it.

Just as we cannot take the road followed by Roman Catholic ethics, we cannot tread that of Schleiermacher and De Wette, and more recently W. Herrmann [(1) Natural-moral life and moral thinking, (2) The Christian-moral life]; T. Haering [(1) Christian moral teaching and its opponents, (2) Christian moral teaching in its inner context]; O. Kirn [(1) Doctrine of ethical principles, (2) Systematic presentation of the Christian moral life]; E. W. Mayer [(1) Moral philosophy, (2) Moral doctrine]; G. Wunsch [(1) The essence of the moral, (2) The essence of the Christian-moral] and others. Thinking which does not reflect about the matter, but from the matter, cannot possibly allow itself to be crowded on to this path.

But again, in view of the matter in mind, we shall have to cut ourselves free from all those deductions and classifications which start from the presupposition that while dogmatics has to do with God

and faith in Him, the concern of ethics is with man and his life. This distinction usually avenges itself at once, for the distinctive Whence? and Whither? of theological ethics are smothered by the various questions man as such has to put and would like to see answered in relation to the shaping of his life. These questions of human life replace the command of God as the proper theme, the framework of all thinking on the subject. But this being the case, how can the command of God be really stated with its primary and comprehensive questioning of man and his questions? How can justice be done to this element when in the change of scene between dogmatics and ethics it is suddenly deprived of its natural position as the subject of all statements, and is understood only as the predicate of the man who believes in God? And if justice is not done to it, how can justice be done to the task of theological ethics? Because there is no satisfactory answer to this question, we cannot take the customary path of theological ethics, quite apart from its doubtful relationship to ethics in general.

According to Schleiermacher's ingenious conception, theological ethics has to speak of the "purifying" activity of ecclesiastical and domestic as well as legal and political discipline; of the "disseminating" activity of marriage and again extensively of the Church; and finally of the "exhibiting" activity of worship, social fellowship, art and sport. According to J. C. v. Hofmann (*Theol. Ethik*, 1878), its concern is with the Christian disposition as expressed in moral action towards God in the different spheres of the Church, the family, the state and society. According to W. Herrmann, it has to do with the question of the origin and development of the Christian life. According to O. Kirn, it deals with the origin and development of Christian personality on the one hand, and, on the other, with the practice of morality in society. According to T. Haering, its theme is the new life of the Christian as a personality and what it means to be a Christian in the sphere of human fellowship. According to E. W. Mayer, it has to do with the moral disposition of the will, the nature of moral action in the different forms of activity and communities, its ordering and structure, and finally its result, the kingdom of God. According to G. Wünsch, whose arrangement is not very clear, its concern is (1) with the being of God, (2) with the consequences for morality of the experience of God, (3) with the Christian character, and (4) with "some residual problems," which include amongst other things the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount. The way of A. Schlatter (*Chr. Ethik*, 1914) is, without doubt, original and powerful. As he sees it, the *schema* of investigation and presentation is provided by the four Platonic virtues of justice, truth, happiness and power as they are related to the community of will, cognition, emotion and life.

The objection to all these classifications is that they do not derive from the matter of theological ethics, but have been foisted on it from outside, and not to its advantage. It is certainly a very fine observation of Schleiermacher's that there are to be distinguished in human activity the three moments of criticism, edification and play. But to what extent is Christian activity as such really grasped and described by this distinction? In its own place it is certainly right and important that the fact of the Christian life confronts us (as in Herrmann and Kirn) with the problem of its origin and development, or (as in v. Hofmann) with the contrast of reflection and activity. But do these distinctions in any way characterise the Christian life? Could they not just as well be made in relation to any form of life we choose? The favourite distinction into individual

and social ethics, which we find to a greater or lesser degree in v. Hofmann, Martensen, Haering, Kirn, E. W. Mayer, may be accepted as one which is both possible and meaningful in itself (although Schlatter, *op. cit.*, p. 53 f. has some arguments against it which merit our attention), but in any case it has to be pointed out that it assumes as self-evident that Christian activity is only a particular instance of human activity in general, and that if the correlation of individual and community is constitutive for the latter, it must also be so for Christian conduct. Schlatter's derivation of the Christian doctrine of virtue from will, cognition, emotion and life has a decidedly refreshing effect alongside the rather drearily formal classifications of the Ritschlians. But we still have to ask with what higher right this determination of human action is taken from Plato and made a pattern for the portrayal of Christian conduct. These derivations and classifications are all suspect for the obvious reason that if we accept without question the correctness of the methods we have only to fill out the concepts in a different way and we can equally well derive and classify a Buddhist, or a communist, or an anthroposophical ethics as a Christian. In the fundamental concepts acquired and presented in this way there is no specific adaptability to the special matter with which theological ethics is concerned. They presuppose that the form of a theological ethics is left to the mercy or genius of the respective moralist. And so they do not of themselves make any contribution to the Christian understanding of the goodness of human conduct. They do so only when they are filled out. But to explain what is Christian, do we not have to say things which cannot be said in the framework of a concept of human action generally, however deep? To reach the Christian understanding of the goodness of human conduct, is it not indispensable that there should be a distinctively Christian way of understanding, and therefore a characteristic form of theological ethics as such? Is it not inevitable that the Christian understanding of this matter will be severely curtailed if, through taking things for granted (as was surprisingly the case from Schleiermacher to Schlatter), ways are entered and trodden which in themselves can plainly lead to very different destinations? The distinction in principle between dogmatics and ethics obviously does not bear good fruit at this point. It normally involves a change of direction and theme which, if it is maintained, necessarily means that the problem of human conduct is the measure of all things, and forms the framework of every investigation and presentation. The situation is then necessarily as it is assumed to be in those derivations and classifications, in the arbitrary self-assurance with which those different ways are taken. Man himself has to ask certain questions: How he can become and be a Christian man? What does it mean to be this, not only in disposition, but in conduct? What is meant by Christian volition, cognition, emotion and living? Assuming that his conduct is Christian, what will be the result of his vitality and cultural striving, his economy, the state and the Church, marriage and the family, art and science, his work and his recreation? And theological ethics has to answer these questions which are not posed in decision before the revealed command of God, in the act of responsibility. It has to say something to man in answer to his questions. But in reality it is man himself who is questioned. The one thing which can really be said is to be said by man himself with the act of his decision in face of the revealed command of God. Theological ethics can consist only in a sharpening of the recollection that man has always to give answer with his conduct, and that his answer is to the revealed command of God. This is where the fault lies. To be sure, even in the framework of an ethics which gives man an answer to his own questions many profound and true and serious and fruitful things are said, things which we do well to ponder. This is particularly the case in the authors cited. But the fact remains that an ethics of this kind spreads a veil over its relationship, and man's relationship, to the revealed command of God, and that this veil has only to be seen to be recognised as intolerable. For, after all, why should theological ethics act as a kind of

information bureau, inviting questions from outside, instead of putting its own questions in order that man may be called in question by the divine command? Is it not obvious that even the most profound and true and serious and fruitful things that it can say in this character are from the very outset said in a corner, that is, with no relationship to real human conduct, and that they cannot, therefore, be heard as a call to decision, or can be so only in spite of their untheological beginning? If theology, and therefore theological ethics, is in principle the science of the Word of God as it is attested in revelation, in Holy Scripture and in the proclamation of the Church, it is man who must be the questioned in face of these statements, and not ethics itself which must answer the questions of man with its statements. Its subject is not the Word of God as it is claimed by man, but the Word of God as it claims man. It is not man as he is going to make something of the Word of God, but the Word of God as it is going to make something of man. Of man—yes, with all the problems of his behaviour and therefore in the whole range of his activities. But this does not mean that its theme is these activities, or what Christianity can contribute to their fulfilment. It is not from them that it can learn its prescribed task, or derive and classify what it has to say, or win its fundamental concepts. It cannot achieve in this way what it has to achieve in relation to the problem of human behaviour. It can do this only as it sees it from the very outset in the light in which it actually stands. It can do it, that is, only when it no longer adopts a new standpoint and method in the transition from dogmatics to ethics, when it makes and keeps as its central concept, as its starting-point and destination, not the action of man in itself and as such, but the claiming of man by the command of God, his sanctification as it is accomplished in Jesus Christ, and therefore the action of God for man and in man. It can do it, then, when it directs its course by the Word of God, and not the Word of God by its own self-chosen course.

If we ask first concerning the basis of ethics, the first task which obviously confronts us is to understand and present the Word of God as the subject which claims us. It is to understand and present the Word of God in its character as the command which sanctifies man. This basis will be our particular concern in this final chapter of the doctrine of God.

The goodness of human action consists in the goodness with which God acts toward man. But God deals with man through His Word. His Word is the sum and plenitude of all good, because God Himself is good. Therefore man does good in so far as he hears the Word of God and acts as a hearer of this Word. In this action as a hearer he is obedient. Why is obedience good? Because it derives from hearing, because it is the action of a hearer, namely, of the hearer of the Word of God. It is good because the divine address is good, because God Himself is good.

We can also put it in this way. Man does good in so far as he acts as one who is called by God to responsibility. To act in and from responsibility to God means to act in commitment. Our action is free in so far as it is our own answer, the answer which we ourselves give to what is said to us by God. But as an answer, it is bound. It is a good action when it takes place in this commitment. Therefore its good consists always in its responsibility. Responsible action is good because the divine address is good, because God Himself is good.

We can also put it in this way. Man does good in so far as his action is Christian. A Christian is one who knows that God has accepted him in Jesus Christ, that a decision has been made concerning him in Jesus Christ as the eternal Word of God, and that he has been called into covenant with Him by Jesus Christ as the Word of God spoken in time. When he knows this, when he is "judged" by God through confrontation and fellowship with Jesus Christ, his action, too, becomes a "judged" action. It is in the fact that it is "judged" that its goodness consists. Therefore its goodness derives from this confrontation and fellowship. His action is good because the divine address which is an eternal and temporal event in Jesus Christ is good, because God Himself is good.

In its simplest and most basic expression this is the theological answer to the ethical question. This is the sum and substance of theological ethics. The characteristic feature of the theological answer to the ethical problem is that—although it also answers the question of the goodness of human action—it understands man from the very outset as addressed by God, so that in regard to the goodness of his action it can only point away from man to what God says, to God Himself. "From the very outset" means from the eternal grace of God as it has eventuated in time, from the lordship of His grace as it is resolved and established by God and cannot now be overthrown by any contradiction or any denial. When we understand man from this point of view, we have a positive answer to give in regard to the goodness of his action, but we have to do it by pointing away from man to what God says, to God Himself. To put it concretely, we have to do it by pointing to God's commanding, to God as Commander. The good of human action consists in the fact that it is determined by the divine command. We shall have to consider more closely what is involved in this command and this determination. But we can never seek the good except in this determination of human action and therefore in the divine command which creates this determination, in God the Commander Himself. We cannot in any sense seek it in human action in itself. "There is none good but one, that is God" (Mk. 10¹⁸). We must remember, of course, that this is a truth of the Gospel. It is not, then, the affirmation of an abstract transcendence of the good. To receive this truth is not to reject and abandon the question of the goodness of human action. It is only with this truth that we take it up. This truth is its positive answer. For this God who alone is good is the God who is gracious to man. He is not a transcendent being, not even a transcendent being of the good. From all eternity He has determined to turn to man, to make Himself responsible for man. He has dealt with man on the basis of this self-determination, and He does so still. And it is in this self-determination and action—not excluding, but including man—that God alone is good. He is this in the eternal-temporal act of His compassion for

man. He is this in Jesus Christ. It is not to any god that we point, but to this God, the God of the Gospel, when, in the question of the goodness of human action, we point to the divine command, to God Himself. There is no more positive answer to this question than that which is given when we refer to this God, just because it means that we refer away from man.

The first thing that theological ethics has to show, and to develop as a basic and all-comprehensive truth, is the fact and extent that this command of God is an event. This is the specific ethico-dogmatic task as it now confronts us within the framework of the doctrine of God. We cannot emphasise too strongly the fact that by the ruling principle of theological ethics, by the sanctifying command of God—corresponding to the fact that we do not know God Himself otherwise than as acting God—we have to understand a divine action, and therefore an event—not a reality which (is), but a reality which (occurs). Not to see it in this way is not to see it at all. It is not seen when we try to see it from the safe shelter of a general theory. It is not seen when we think we see a being and then ask whether and to what extent we can derive from this being this or that obligation. The proposition: "There is a command of God," is quite inadequate as a description of what concerns us. For we should naturally have to weigh against it the denial: No, "there is" no command of God. What "there is" is not as such the command of God. But the core of the matter is that God gives His command, that he gives Himself to be our Commander. God's command, God Himself, gives Himself to be known. And as He does so, He is heard. Man is made responsible. He is brought into that confrontation and fellowship with Jesus Christ. And his action acquires that determination. The command of God is the decision about the goodness of human action. As the divine action it precedes human action. It is only on the basis of this reality, which is not in any sense static but active, not in any sense general but supremely particular, that theological ethics has to make answer to the ethical question. Its theory is simply the theory of this practice. It is because this practice occurs, because theological ethics cannot escape noticing this practice, in the contemplation of this practice, that theological ethics fashions its concepts. The same practice of the Word of God forms the basis of the Christian Church. It is in view of it that there is faith and obedience in the Church. It is in view of it that all theology has its legitimacy and its necessity. It is as God gives man His command, as He gives Himself to man to be his Commander, that God claims him for Himself, that He makes His decision concerning him and executes His judgment upon him. It is as He does this that He sanctifies him, and the good (which is God Himself) enters into the realm of human existence. To understand the command of God as this claim and decision and judgment will therefore be the first task to which we must address ourselves in the present context.

Once this foundation has been laid, in later sections of the *Church Dogmatics* we shall have to show in detail to what extent this divine command is actually directed to man. Even as His command, the Word of God is the Word of His truth and reality in the act of creation, in the act of reconciliation and in the act of redemption. Or we might put it in this way, that it reveals the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ as the kingdom of nature, the kingdom of grace and the kingdom of glory. Or we might say that it manifests the pre-temporal, co-temporal and post-temporal eternity of God. Or, alternatively, it speaks to us about our determination for God, our relationship to Him and (the goal) of our perfection in Him. As the command of God, too, His Word has this threefold meaning and content. The concept of the command of God includes the concepts: the command of God the Creator, the command of God the Reconciler and the command of God the Redeemer. The three concepts are identical with the fundamental concepts of dogmatics which it is the task of theological ethics to explain and recapitulate in their ethical content. They characterise in the shortest possible form the act of the God who in grace has elected man for the covenant with Himself, and in so doing they also characterise the command by which He has sanctified him for Himself. Of course, there can be no question of three parts or even stages of the one Christian truth and knowledge. The position is as in the doctrine of the Trinity. Three times in these three concepts we have to say the one whole, in which Jesus Christ is the presupposition and the epitome of creation and redemption from the dominating centre of reconciliation as it has taken place in Him. As there is only one God, so also there is only one command of God. But as the one God is in Himself rich and multiple, so also His one command is in itself diverse, and yet there is only one way to achieve the knowledge of it. It is of this inner diversity of God's command and the way to achieve a knowledge of it that we are thinking when we stress these three concepts. We are asking who and what is man in the Word of God and according to the Word of God, that is, the man elected, received and accepted by God in Jesus Christ, and therefore, as such, the recipient of the divine command. We find this man in the person of Jesus Christ Himself. He is the Son of David and of Adam who is determined and created to be the image of God. He is the One who is laden with human sin, and condemned because of it, but loved and preserved as the Son of God even in this judgment. And finally, in His resurrection, sitting at the right hand of God, He is the realisation and revelation of the divine image, received into God's eternal glory. In this threefold determination of the humanity of Jesus Christ we recognise the roots of these three concepts. And if we understand man in general from the humanity of Jesus Christ, it automatically follows that we have to understand him as God's creature, as the sinner pardoned by God, and as the heir-expected of the coming

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kingdom of God. In these relations we recognise ourselves, not as in the mirror of an idea of man, but as in the mirror of the Word of God which is source of all truth. And it is obviously not in the framework of unguaranteed concepts borrowed from psychology or sociology, but in that of the concepts arising from these relations, that our sanctification, and the significance of the claim and decision and judgment of the divine command, can and must be understood. In these three relations we know that we are placed under the command of God. We are, therefore, taking as our basis, not a general, abstract concept of man, but the concrete Christian concept when we say that this is the sanctified man who is not the subject, but is certainly the predicate of the statements of theological ethics. Man is the creature of God. He is the sinner to whom grace has been shown. He is the heir of the kingdom of God. It is as all these things that he is addressed in God's command. In all these relations the divine command is the principle of the goodness of his actions. The one whole command of God has this threefold relation. As he lives in the Word of God and according to the Word of God, the one whole man stands in this threefold relation. In accordance with the context, the autonomy, but also the totality of the chief concepts of dogmatics, we shall not, in ethics, isolate any one of these relations from the other two. We shall not be guilty either of preference on the one hand or prejudice on the other in our systematic treatment of the three. On the contrary, we shall have to understand each one separately, not only in its connexion with the others, but also in its autonomy and totality.

The history of Christian ethics tells of numerous conflicts between the different schools of thought which derive from creation, reconciliation and redemption, or from nature, grace and eternal glory, with the one-sided orientation corresponding to this derivation. The movement which lies at the basis of these conflicts is necessary; but the conflicts, the actions and reactions in favour of one or the other of the different relations of sanctification are not necessary. Indeed, although they may often have been important historically, they are fundamentally dangerous. We shall have to understand them as historically meaningful. We shall have to note and consider and estimate their aims and interests. But for our own part we must be careful not to become involved in them. We must avoid the rigidity and the enthusiasm with which one or the other of the equally necessary and possible points of view is constantly seized and more or less absolutised. In this way we must learn from history to do justice to history.

There can be no question even of a systematic combination of the three points of view. The reason for this is that we never at any point know the divine command in itself and as such, but only in its relations. The multiplicity of God Himself obviously resolves itself as little into His unity as His unity can be lost in His multiplicity. God is not dead in a rigid unity. He lives in the multiplicity of His triune essence, of His inner perfections and therefore of His Word and work. This being the case, we have to pursue the knowledge of

His command in such a way that we try to understand and bring out its relations as stations on a road which we have to tread, and the unity of which we shall know only as we tread it. Therefore the later task of a specific theological ethics will not be to contemplate a system—either from this point of view or that, or even from a fourth position superior to it—but to traverse this road of knowledge which corresponds to the inner life of God Himself, to execute this movement of knowledge. In it we shall have to realise the fact and extent that the divine command is actually directed to man, and the divine decision concerning man is made in it. It will be an exact repetition of the same movement which dogmatics itself executes on the road indicated by its basic concepts. There is only one difference—and it is not one of matter or method, but merely of fact and practice. It is simply that in it special attention is given to the question of the character of the Word of God as the command of God, and therefore of the claiming of man. The best place to discuss it is, therefore, in a concluding chapter to each of the different parts of dogmatics. In the present instance, this means that “general” ethics forms the last chapter of the doctrine of God.