

Despite what is said in the 39 Articles, I think all of us, whatever our own opinions might be, would have no problem welcoming into our fellowship someone who felt Christian ethics required pacifism - someone who says that there is no way you can square loving your enemies with killing them. I am not sure I myself would agree with absolute pacifism, but I do think the Christian Church would be poorer without the witness of pacifists who remind us of the terrible nature of taking anyone's life however much we may dislike what they do. In a messy world we may have to choose sometimes between the lesser of two evils – how we make the choice is neither pleasant nor easy – but we do need to be reminded periodically that even a lesser evil is still an evil. I would say that in some cases requiring ethical judgement, not only is it impossible to reach general agreement, we need both sides of the debate to help us work out a reasonable decision.

My whole point about the Christian life then is that it is much more than avoiding the illegal, the immoral, and the fattening. It is a relationship with God that demands a reorienting of our whole lives so that we live for others as much as for ourselves. Inevitably we fall short both in our understanding and our performance - as do other Christians with us. In the history of the church we have had to revise some notions and reject others and there is no reason to believe that our awareness is complete after two thousand years. Given this, I suggest that listening to each other and to the promptings of the Spirit of God will be more profitable than accusing each other of faithlessness. We are all under way – God alone is judge of how far on each of us is in understanding our direction and our progress on the way.

*\* In the form of marriage to deceased brother's wife*

## **Christian Ethics 2 - Can Christian Ethics legitimately change?**

by John Sandys-Wunsch

In the first essay I said that if you look at Jesus' ethical teaching, much of it is not a series of rules and regulations but stories which illustrate what love might mean - and the sort of love required is of a very high order. This week I promised I would explain both how this works out in everyday life and discuss whether Christian perceptions of right and wrong can change..

How do we know what is right? Sometimes it is easier than we think

There is a very famous story by the American writer O. Henry called "The Gifts of the Magi." It is about a couple who were not well off but who loved each other very much. Each had one valuable possession - the wife had lovely long hair, the husband a very fine watch. At Christmas neither had any money - so as a surprise the wife sold her hair to buy her husband a watch chain and the husband sold his watch to buy his wife two combs for her hair. It is a rather ironic story of good intentions gone amiss, but it is about love and it is an illustration of Luther's point that a married couple who love each other do not need a set of rules to know how to care for each other, though in light of O. Henry's story a little consultation does help.

The secret of Christian ethics is being open to the demands of love in our lives - not just obeying a set of rules for their own sake and for reasons we know not why. Here are two of many suggestions:

St. Augustine said love God and do what you wish. In theory this is quite adequate because the love of God means you are concerned about avoiding evil and doing good. In practice we need a little more guidance

George Bernard Shaw provided a useful addition to the golden rule - don't do unto others as you would have them do unto you - your

tastes may differ. Is not this the secret of treating other people kindly? You have to begin by taking the trouble to understand other people and the only way to understand them is to care enough about them to do this. Actually if you do not like people you have little chance of understanding them anyway, but that is another matter.

Still, while general principles are fine, we nonetheless need rules to help us deal with everyday life without turning everything into a big decision. The ten commandments is one such handy list even though it was designed for a middle class male in the 10th century BC (why else is it forbidden to covet your neighbour's wife but not your neighbour's husband?). But there is good stuff there – do not steal – theft destroys social order and in a small community like a student residence I have seen it do damage out of all proportion to the cash value of the stolen property. Do not bear false witness - i.e. commit perjury in court – a problem our American cousins are wrestling with even as we sit here - for a legal system is the only thing between us and anarchy. Similar in purpose to the ten commandments are the summaries of “do’s” and “don’t’s” we often find appended to epistles in the New Testament.

We need the traditions of the Christian community to guide us in our decisions - it is through these that we can be jolted out of the temptation to see the world in terms of our own self-interest. It is this body of ethical teaching we use as guidance for ourselves; it is the sort of thing we try to pass on to our children or teach in Sunday School. Traditional Christian teaching gives us general guidelines about how to treat our spouses, our children, our friends, and even those we might consider enemies.

Yet in particular circumstances these items of moral guidance need to be interpreted and sometimes modified - it is right to steal food if you are hungry, others have lots, and you have no other way of staying alive? Most moralists would say yes. All this is illustrated by a saying I am told is current in the British navy - rules are meant for the guidance of the wise and the obedience of idiots.

Now in contrast to what I have been saying there is abroad an argument that traditional Christian ethics are not just useful guidelines, rather they are immutable because they are laid down by God for all time. But does a look at Christian history back this up?

Recently I was reading a review of two books about the slave trade and the reviewer made the point that almost every group was involved in it slavery - Africans, Asians, and Europeans. Almost every religious belief was represented - Muslim, Jewish, Christian, Animist - and amongst Christians all denominations held slaves - even Quakers for a while. In the American civil war which was more or less about slavery, one of the generals on the Confederate or pro-slavery side was an Episcopal bishop, this means an Anglican bishop. And he was a real go out and shoot ‘em boys general, not just a chaplain. In the last hundred years we have rejected what was looked upon as normal practice by Christians and others for centuries and I do not think anyone wants to reinstitute slavery. The Christian ethical tradition does change - we hope for the better.

Yet someone might say, fine, but that is a social question, but surely personal ethics about sexuality have always been definite. In the midst of all our current rancour about the “h” word, I have this dream about getting up in Synod and raising the issue of marriage to deceased wife's sister. All said and done this is forbidden in Leviticus, mentioned with disapproval in the gospels themselves\* which is more than you can say about homosexuality, and is anchored the Anglican tradition, as a quick look at the Table of Kindred and Affinity in an older prayer book will show. Alas I do not think I would even get a seconder for my motion. Here is a matter of personal ethics that was hotly debated for at least three hundred years and has now been completely ignored. As far as I know, nobody seems very worried about this deviation from a biblical commandment.

There remains an argument that surely in the church we have to be clear and united in our ethical standards, don't we? Do we? There is at least one important moral debate centuries old which is not yet settled and may never be, yet we are quite used to this situation.