

CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN

The Theological Basis of Personal Ethics

(A statement adopted by the Church of the Brethren Annual Conference at Louisville, Kentucky in June of 1966. The language has not been altered.)

The Church of the Brethren historically has seriously attempted to guide its conduct in personal ethics by careful and considered study of the New Testament. Brethren have always believed that the faith of the New Testament should be expressed in the many and varied situations of life. Your committee has therefore approached the query by looking first of all to the Biblical witness regarding personal conduct, and then to a historical and theological consideration of the Brethren understanding of the style of the Christian life.

Believing that the query is calling for more than general suggestions, we have consulted Brethren across the Brotherhood to discover those problems of personal conduct that are most pressing in contemporary life. The major portion of our report is given over to those problems. In keeping with the instruction of Annual Conference we have incorporated an answer to the query on gambling and games of chance within the larger report.

I. THE BIBLICAL WITNESS

Christian ethics begins with the freedom, holiness, and steadfast love (*chesed*) of God, who has revealed himself most clearly in the historical life of Jesus Christ. He is the beginning and the end, the creator, sustainer, and ruler of all. Conduct is right as it comes under the claim of God in His holiness and righteousness. The relationship of men to one another is defined by God's self-disclosure to men. Because God is love we ought to love one another, and because He is holy we are called to be a holy people.

However, in their freedom men sin against God by ignoring and revolting against his claim, through living by their own self-centered standards of righteousness and freedom rather than doing what is pleasing in his sight. The consequence of sin for mankind is a life of anxiety, rebellion, meaninglessness, social injustice, and death (John 1:10-13; Romans 1:24-27). Men prefer sloth and alienation to the freedom that comes from a covenantal relationship to God.

In the face of human despair God comes as One who in suffering love redeems and reconciles men, restoring them to right relationship with Him. The character of God's freedom and self-giving love is seen most clearly in Jesus of Nazareth, in whom the whole fullness of deity was pleased to dwell. He who has seen the Christ has seen the Father. His life and teaching, His cross, His resurrection, and His Spirit are the basis for all Christian ethics.

The Christian seeks to respond to God's claim, to live in harmony with Him, to glorify Him, to do what is pleasing in His sight, to love Him, and to be faithful to Him. Jesus' summary of personal ethics is that "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind," and "you shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:37-39). The twofold commandment makes brilliantly clear that love of God always entails love of neighbor; personal ethics always involve social ethics.

The Gospels expose any attempt to separate an act from its motive. God looks not simply upon the external act, but upon its wholeness, including its motive. Some of Jesus' severest condemnation came upon those who pretended to be faithful, while their intentions were corrupt. Bitter anger is subject to the penalty of murder, and lust to the penalty of adultery (Matthew 5:21-30). So also worthy intentions are not sufficient but must be accompanied by "good fruit." Motives, means, and consequences must be viewed in their interrelatedness in assessing whether they are pleasing to God. The act is always to be considered in its fullness.

The gospel is not a new code of conduct. Legalism looks to a law or principle to find the specific requirements of God in a particular situation, but love supersedes the most exacting legal description of an act. Love will not steal or kill or commit adultery. It is patient and kind, not arrogant or rude; it rejoices in the right. Love does not ignore injustice, but always seeks justice for the neighbor.

The New Testament points to the Spirit of Christ renewing community, prompting men to do what is pleasing in His sight. We have died to the ways of sin and now are raised in His Spirit, so that we are to walk in newness of life. One who lives under the Spirit fulfills what the law requires without slavish and deadening adherence to the law. Galatians 5:22-25 may be taken as a remarkably precise statement of the new Spirit that Jesus Christ has released into the world. "The harvest of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law dealing with such things as these. And those who belong to Jesus Christ have crucified the lower nature with its passions and desires. If the Spirit is the source of our life, let the Spirit also direct our course" (N.E.B.).

The New Testament recognizes that prayerful thought and wisdom are required in making right ethical decisions. Paul continually urges his fellow Christians to learn what is pleasing to God and to be filled with a knowledge of His will. Our decision can be responsive to God only when we constantly consider the Scriptures and when we constantly confer with those of like faith, whose judgment can often correct our own (Matthew 18). At the same time we need to be thoroughly familiar with the facts of a situation, including whatever scientific understanding or professional services may be available. Responsible choices must be well informed.

Honest Christians may well differ about the claim of God in a particular situation. In such cases we need to exercise charity and patience, remembering that we are not our brother's final judge. Such forbearance need not lead us to abandon the attempt to find group consensus and thus to leave morality to individual decision alone. Although many variations are to be found in the New Testament, it is full of accounts of those who sought a consensus in the Lord's will for them. Those who live in His Spirit will seek consensus without forcing their views upon one another.

II. THE CHRISTIAN LIFE IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

History has brought changes into modern life that have critical bearing upon personal ethics and conduct. These changes include the terror of possible nuclear destruction, the increasing secularization of religious values, impersonalization of human relationships, the industrialization and automation of work, the gulf between the affluent and the poor, the conformism of mass culture, and the widespread loss of identity and meaning. New situations call for new ways of expressing traditional Brethren concerns for brotherhood, mission, and service.

Brethren at times have responded more clearly to God's call for holy separation from the world than to His example of active reconciling love in the world. Personal ethics and conduct have often been guided by ideals of abstinence, cleanliness, and purity that are unaffected by the standards of the world. At other times, and especially in recent years, Brethren have come to acknowledge that God's claim for separation also passes through self-giving engagement within the world. This new attitude among Brethren is surely a recognition that God separates a holy people to himself in order that He might send them forth as agents and witnesses of His redeeming love among men. The same obedient devotion that prompts Christians to be separate from the world also calls the church into reconciling engagement within the world.

Consideration of the New Testament faith and of the conditions of the contemporary world suggests a style of life that might be characterized along the following lines:

1. *Self-giving engagement with the world.* An attitude of servanthood can be joined with a forthright and active mission in the world. Christians may be actively, even aggressively, engaged in a work of reconciliation in all realms of life.

2. *Reconciling love joined with a sense of justice.* Love that is genuine does not overpower the other person, nor does it gloss over genuine interpersonal difficulties. Though we allow for differences, still we are called to act unashamedly in the face of injustice.

3. *An obedient devotion that transcends legalism and remains open to new situations.* Devotion that is patient, humble, and sincere may be a part of careful attention to one's daily work. At the same time the Christian has a confidence that allows him to be open to the variety of new situations in the modern world.

III. SPECIAL AREAS OF CONCERN

Areas of personal life that have been especially challenged by the rapid changes in contemporary life may be grouped under the following headings: personal integrity, family relationships, concern for the neighbor, life, and property. Each of these topics is treated directly in the Sermon on the Mount and the Ten Commandments, as well as throughout the Bible.

PERSONAL INTEGRITY

God's call brings man into responsible selfhood. The Bible describes personal maturity as a relationship of complete and wholehearted devotion to God (Exodus 20:3; Matthew 22:37) that is always coupled with a loving concern for one's fellowman (Matthew 22:39). True selfhood comes in being centered in Christ, willingly accepting the way of the cross, having the same mind as Christ, and growing in every way into the fullness of his stature. In the power of God's presence we are delivered from the massive powers of depersonalization in our time (Romans 8:2).

The primary vocation of every person is to accept God's claim upon his life. Brethren have long recognized the integrity, humility, and servanthood that are entailed in God's call. What is so very much needed today is the realization that God's claim is upon every person in his secular occupation in the world. Be it in home or office, field or factory, every Christian is being claimed and judged by God within the special activities of that occupation.

The Bible repeatedly calls for integrity of speech (Exodus 20:7; Matthew 5:33-37). Continued use of profane language will certainly impair one's relationship to God. And yet it must be remembered that no speech is really truthful unless it springs from an open love of God and neighbor. Truth is not to be narrowly defined in terms of adherence to a fixed pattern in a day when the network of obligations is increasingly complex. Those who are faithful to God's truth become more responsive to their obligations in both word and deed. Duplicity in filling out income tax forms or cheating in the classroom can hardly be a truthful use of language.

Oaths indicate weakness in the integrity of speech rather than strength. Slander and other malicious speech do not proceed from the Spirit of Truth. Both the hiding and the expression of deep feelings become a misuse of speech outside responsibility to one's fellowman (Ephesians 4:25-29).

FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

The love of a man and a woman is one of God's most sacred gifts to mankind. Such love can be fulfilled only in marriage, which is a reflection of the relationship between Christ and His church. The fidelity of man and wife is a cornerstone of personal ethics for the Christian. To divorce sexuality from personal commitment and to use it as a passing pleasure or as a means of making material products more marketable is a violation of God's gift to man. While the Bible does not advocate the repression of sexual impulse, it does make clear that sexual intimacy belongs to a lifetime covenant between a man and a woman (Matthew 19:3-9). In a culture that is saturated with sexual stimulation, youth are asked to consider whether the intimacy they express in courting reflects the degree of commitment that they have made. The closest intimacies must be reserved for a lifetime public promise to care for and love one another.

A concern for the proper expression of the relationship between man and woman has often led Brethren to raise questions about dancing. Social dancing, square dancing, or folk dancing carried out in well-supervised and well-planned settings can afford a healthy environment for normal heterosexual development among young people. On the other hand, many types of modern dance are overly provocative and indiscreet and still others reflect the meaninglessness and nihilism of much contemporary life. The decision between proper and improper dancing must be made by the individual in the light of Christian ideals after careful consideration of the issues involved and in conversations between parents and youth, Christians and their fellow Christians. Some will choose not to dance at all. An important consideration is that the physical not be elevated above the social and the esthetic. Married persons will need to consider how their marriage and home life will be affected by dancing with the spouse of another. In the matter of dancing or in any form of recreation the Christian will want to do what is wholesome and healthful.

The sale of pornography is a serious social problem in our day. The Christian is called away from that literature and those entertainments of which the primary purpose and effect are sexual stimulation with no real concern for the persons involved. On the other hand Christians should not quickly label "filth" or "pornography" works of literature of which the primary aim is social reform but which uses the realistic language of the times.

Like the love of man and wife, so also is love between parents and children a sacred gift from God. When the relationship between parents and children is lost, then the continuity between generations is impaired (Exodus 20:12). Parents who love their children will instruct them in the way of the Christian life, and children who love their parents will honor and respect them, even when they disagree (Ephesians 6:1-4; Colossians 3:20,21). The instruction of no church or school can replace that of the parents.

The delinquency of youth seems most often to be a flight from the uncaring authority or neglect of an adult generation. Delinquency becomes the symptom of the failure of love between husband and wife, parents and their children.

Parents of youth should care for them by setting limitations without being repressive, and by encouraging them toward independence without abandoning them. Youth are to respect the authority of their parents, while striving for true personhood through independence of judgment.

CONCERN FOR THE NEIGHBOR

The Bible makes it abundantly clear that personal ethics must never be divorced from concern for the neighbor. Personal ethics must always include the individual's responsibility toward the larger social issues of our day. The individual believer is bound together with others in such a way that the concern of one is the concern of all (1 Corinthians 12). The gospel proclaims the presence of the Kingdom of God, the new society among men. The whole of mankind shall finally be bound together in Jesus Christ. In Him the Old Testament distinction between the neighbor and the stranger is overcome (Luke 10:29-37). All men have become neighbors. The Christian is to associate freely with those of every race and class. The Christian today should use every opportunity to alter those social customs, practices, and attitudes by which whole groups of people are discriminated against.

Education to the very limit of a person's capacity and opportunity is desirable for service to one's fellowmen. However, education in our day is often only a vehicle for wealth, prestige, and power. Without loving concern for the neighbor, educational procedures become a sham and the educational degree a means to social domination. The Christian is called to realize that responsible love for one's neighbor is at the heart of all genuine education. The Christian will not pursue a course of education primarily for power and prestige, nor will he use devious means for the attainment of an educational degree.

The profit motive in business does not change the fact that the primary duty of man is service and loving concern for his neighbor. The Christian businessman is called to conduct his business primarily for the service of his neighbor, and to consider his employees and competitors as those for whom he has responsibility. He will not engage in a business that does not truly serve the consumer, nor will he conduct his business in a way that ignores his neighbor's welfare. So, also, the Christian laborer will care for his employer as well as for fellow laborers. He will not engage in labor that clearly and directly disregards the neighbor, nor will he misrepresent his labor to his employer.

The art of secular government should be of major concern to every Christian, especially in a democratic society in which all men have the right of free speech and where the will of the majority rules. Though insistent upon separation of church and state, Christians will regard local, national, and world government agencies as subject to God's reign. Political involvement for the purpose of achieving reconciliation and peace in our time is one of the marks of the true work of the church in the world. Christians are called to speak out on public issues and to vote for candidates, laws, and platforms after careful consideration

of the issues. Politically minded Christians are called to run for office but must avoid committing the sins of slander and misrepresentation. Once in office the Christian politician must not manipulate the state to further any of the church's peculiar ends. Through an active participation in politics at many different levels, from individual voter to top officeholder, challenges prevail in countless areas where Christians can act: righting social wrongs; revealing greed and exploitation for what they are; raising money to help heal the numerous ills of our society; and allowing the church the freedom to carry out her mission. However, the Christian, whether voter or officeholder, must not use the much-abused "Render to Caesar" (Mark 12:17) and "Let every person be subject to the governing authorities" (Romans 13:1) to justify clearly un-Christian acts that are contrary to the total message of the New Testament. Responsible statesmanship in the interest of peace and order is a lonely task, but one that must be taken up at the risk of misunderstanding, persecution, or the loss of public support.

The question of war and peace has become an issue of survival in this generation. The official position of the Church of the Brethren continues to be that in the light of the spirit and the teachings of the New Testament, war is sin. Christians are called to work for those conditions and climates within which international problems can be resolved without resort to violent force. Recognizing the difficulties of the ethical dilemmas that often arise between love and justice, the church allows for difference of conscience regarding military service. Nevertheless, Brethren are called to witness to their faith that the Servanthood of Christ, the way of reconciling love, is of ultimate power and relevance in today's world. We need a sense of urgency in working for alternatives to military destruction. Youth are encouraged to elect alternative service. To find the means for peace is the call of God for our epoch of history.

LIFE AND PROPERTY

Life and property are gifts to man from God. As a living soul and by God's grace, man is enabled to have dominion over the earth and to care for his fellowman. Separation from God brings thorns and thistles, anxiety, sickness, isolation, and death to man (Genesis 3). In Jesus Christ man gains abundance of life, the hope of resurrection, and the promise of a new heaven and a new earth. Life and property assume their rightful significance when man recognizes that he is to be a good steward of God's gifts, using them in nourishment of and care for his fellowman.

One of the threats to life in our day is the widespread use of stimulants and narcotics. Such drugs often represent a way of escaping from the one's own selfhood. Christians should be aware of those drugs that have power to draw men into slavery and ought to use them only with medical advice. Although a Christian's faith cannot be judged simply upon an issue such as smoking, Brethren are encouraged to consider matters of health and the avoidance of what is offensive to others in their decision about smoking. Christians are to have

freedom not only from legalistic codes, but also from enslavement to deleterious habits.

In our time the use of beverage alcohol and the consequences of its use have become one of the greatest of social problems. Because it impairs mental and physical acuity, drinking is the cause of a large share of the injuries and fatalities that occur on the highways. Because it is a depressant drug, alcohol dulls sensibilities, releases inhibitions and causes man to be unable to respond to the love of God or neighbor. Because it is a habit-forming drug to many people, alcohol has resulted in the disease of alcoholism, the incidence of which is exceeded only by heart disease and cancer in the United States. It is urgent that Christians use every opportunity to point up the need for greater attention to and care for those who are subject to alcoholism. In his care for the neighbor the Christian is called to witness in his personal life against the evils of beverage alcohol and to oppose the massive social and economic pressures for its use.

In an affluent society in which many persons are seeking security through possessions, it must be affirmed again and again that life does not consist of the abundance of things and that the Good Life is not found in material possessions. Christians must see affluence as either a potential blessing in the establishment of the Good Life among all men and nations, or a possible peril greater than poverty. Luxurious living must not be allowed to crowd out involvement in social issues such as civil rights, poverty, or urban decay, nor must materialism divorce us from the great issues of our day. In his search for security the Christian is called to resist the many pressures of our materialistic living and to practice the "simple life" as God's faithful stewards of our time: to purchase within his reasonable financial means; to beware of excessive deficit spending and long-term, high-interest installment buying; to renounce luxuries which are inconsistent with the life of service and suffering; to set aside first his responsible giving to the church and its world ministries.

One of the most critical social problems of today is the widespread popularity of small lotteries and policy games, from which organized crime receives its major source of income. The hope to gain something for nothing is a flight from reality, so much so that for many persons gambling is habitual and uncontrollable. Life before God is not an unrealistic hope for a lucky break, but is a way of facing the future in the confidence that Jesus Christ discloses God's steadfast love and care for man. The risks it runs are those of faith undertaken in loving concern for one's fellowman and the surprises it expects are not those of chance but the free operation of God's grace. The Spirit of Christ is that of charity, sacrifice, and self-giving rather than of gaming in order to gain the property of the neighbor, no matter how worthy the use to which the gain is put. Christians are called to act and speak openly against the sources of organized crime and to work for the release of those who are so economically oppressed that they are inclined to gamble. It must be recognized that some prizes appeal primarily to recognition or enjoyment rather than to chance gain. The Christian is to distinguish between gambling and innocent games in conversation with his fellow Christians.

CONCLUSION

The above discussion of special concerns may be helpful only so long as Brethren "hunger and thirst after righteousness" under God's loving claim, as a servant people in the midst of the world, with the assurance that the Spirit of Christ is alive and active in every realm of contemporary life reconciling men to one another and to God.

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