

Chapter 6

The Christian Message as the Revelation of the Good

1. The Christian message is first and foremost the message of the Bible, the message of the Old and of the New Testaments. The “Church,” as the community of those who have heard and understood this message, proclaims it in this sense. It is the message by which the members of the Church “have been taken captive,” for which they are bound to witness, and to try to win others, since in it they have found the truth for their own lives, the Word of God, through which He lays His claim upon the world, in order to “save” it. Hence it is the message which, although it proceeds from the Church, is addressed to the world, to the world which does not believe, in order that it may believe.

It is the message of the Old Testament: the Word concerning the Creation, which is “very good,” because it is the work of the good God. But Evil has crept into this good creation because, and in so far as, man has faithlessly forgotten and denied the existence of his Creator and Lord. Here there is no “intrinsic” Good. What God does and wills is good; all that opposes the will of God is bad. The Good has its basis and its existence solely in the will of God. An idea like that in the religion of Zarathustra: that God became Lord because He chose the Good, the idea of a law which is even higher than God Himself⁽¹⁾ is unthinkable in the Old Testament. God is not merely

the guardian of the Moral Law and of the moral ordinances, but their Creator⁽²⁾.

The Good is based on the Holy. "Ye shall therefore be holy, for I am holy."¹ The Holy means God, as the unconditionally sovereign Lord of the world; a thing is holy because, and in so far as, it is His property and is recognized as such. The holiness of man consists in knowing that he belongs to God. In so far as he acknowledges in his life, and in his existence, this property-right of God, and thus obeys the will of God, he is good. No one has a claim on a man, or on a people, save God alone, and this claim permeates all the relationships of life. It is the only valid norm. Hence the "religious" element is also the "ethical" element, and the "ethical" is "religious."

Man's relation to God is based on God's "covenant" with man; it is therefore a bond of loyalty. God does not make His sovereign rights over man felt as a blind natural force. He makes His claim felt on the basis of the fact that He has first of all graciously addressed him. Man's goodness can be no other than a response to the prevenient kindness of God. His obedience is not blind and forced, but free; it is based upon the grateful knowledge of what God is to us, what He wills for us, and what He does for us. It is only on this basis that God makes His claim. The phrase which expresses the ethical content of the New Testament is true also of the Old Testament: "We love, because He first loved us."² Man owes his God nothing but love, based on holy fear, and his relation to God and his intimacy with Him may and can be realized in no other way.

The same truth applies to the sphere of human relationships. The thought of the Old Testament, which is so entirely theonomous and theocentric, is also entirely human and social. God wills to reign, He wills to be King in His "Kingdom." His will alone is to be realized; but God wills community. God the Creator loves His human children. Therefore loving Him means to love mankind; to be united to Him means to be united to man. His will is wholly a social will, a will for a people, for a community; therefore God recognizes no service of God which is not at the same time a service of man. Unlike the God of the mystics or of the pagan thinkers God does not desire a service addressed to Himself alone; He does not wish to draw men out of the world to Himself. Religion is no more autonomous than morality is

1. Lev. xi. 45; xix. 2.

2. I John iv. 19.

autonomous. Here, above all, that element which is so characteristic of other forms of religion is lacking, namely, the sphere of the “sacred,” the “Saint,” the religious man, who stands out in his sacred dignity, the hermit, who leads a private “life of communion with God.” It is of course true that this idea of a “sacred sphere” does occur in the Old Testament now and again – but only as that which is being contested or overcome⁽³⁾. He who wills to serve God must exercise love and mercy, must know himself one with the need of his people. This is the service which is well-pleasing to God, and this is the Good.³

2. In this respect also the New Testament is only the fulfilment of the Old. The covenant with God in the Old Testament was a promise; in the “New Covenant,” whose symbols are bread and wine in remembrance of its Founder,⁴ it has become a reality. Only now does the meaning of the Old Testament become fully clear. The Good is that which God does; the goodness of man can be no other than letting himself be placed within the activity of God. This is what “believing” means in the New Testament. And this faith is the principle of “ethics.” “Whatsoever is not of faith is sin”;⁵ for it does not proceed from a heart which is united to God. Hence it may appear outwardly good, it may agree with an external law – but inwardly it is useless. “For the Lord looketh on the heart.”⁶ To let God have His way within me means to base my life, in its depths, on Jesus Christ; it means believing in the gracious Divine Word uttered in Jesus Christ; it means to be “crucified” and “raised” with Him⁽⁴⁾.

Here alone does it become completely clear that while God draws man to Himself He does not draw him out of the world. For God Himself comes to man. Here, in man, He wills to meet him. The riddle of the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew is solved only by the Incarnation: because God Himself, as man, came to man, it is possible to recognize in each man the God who comes to us. The Incarnation of God is the fact in which theocracy and humanity are inseparably united. Henceforth there is no love of God which can ignore man, and no love of man which can ignore God. But the Incarnation of the Son of God also means the Cross of Christ. Here

3. *On this point see my article: Die Bedeutung des Alten Testaments für unseren Glauben – zwischen den Zeiten*, 1930, PP. 30-48.

4. 1 Cor. xi. 25.

5. Rom. xiv. 23.

6. 1 Sam. xvi. 7.

alone is the meaning of the word “love” disclosed; for here alone is it possible to distinguish between Eros and Agape, Amor and Caritas. For one who has not died to himself “in Christ,” and through that Divine surrender is not consecrated to self-surrender and “sealed,” Eros and Agape always merge into one another, love is still limited. Love which has no limits and makes no conditions is love “in Christ.”

This love is the “new commandment” which yet, as John mysteriously suggests, is also the “old commandment.”⁷ It is, of course, true that, in some way or another men knew that love was the real Good. But before Christ love was one commandment among others, and unconditioned love was not understood. It could not be understood until God Himself had defined its meaning realiter: in the Cross of Christ (5).

The Good is simply and solely the will of God. But the will of God is the will of God for the Kingdom. Only in the New Testament conception of the Kingdom of God does the theocratic idea of the Old Testament receive its full meaning; nothing is good save union with the sovereignty of God through this will; but this sovereignty of God also means complete fellowship with man, the communion of God with men – “the household of God” as it is called in the Epistle to the Ephesians⁸ – and the fellowship of men with each other. God the Father, men His children, bound to Him by His own love, who through this love of His are also united to each other. It is this absolute will of God for community which was revealed in the Cross of Christ as the final and real meaning of all life. And this revelation, as the way in which and the place at which God meets man, makes it possible for man to love “in return.” Here there is far more than the revelation of a new idea of the Good. This “idea” is also a fact; this “word” possesses meaning only as the “word made flesh.” If love is severed from this fact, immediately the meaning of the word “love” becomes quite different. The meaning of this Ethos is inseparably connected, in faith, with this fact.

3. Therefore the “dogma” of the Church – the doctrine of the Person and Work of Christ – rightly understood simply means the effort to secure the Ethos of the New Testament against a pagan or rationalistic misinterpretation. The doctrine of the divine Humanity of Christ – or,

7. 1 John ii. 7, 8.

8. “Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow-citizens with the saints, and of the household of God” (Eph. ii. 19).

to put it briefly, the Incarnation⁹ – is, rightly understood, simply the securing of the knowledge that God's will is wholly a will for humanity, that theocracy absolutely implies humanity; but this does not mean a mere "idea" of humanity – for there was no need to re-discover the idea of humanity after Socrates; this revelation of God's will for humanity is more than this: it is a gift, and therefore a reality. For the Divine Humanity is indeed God's gift to humanity. In this fact lies the possibility of our becoming human; this Christ is the real ground of a life in love. To understand Him means to understand that we belong to our brethren.

The second main dogma, likewise, that of "satisfaction," is, rightly understood, simply the basis of the right Christian Ethos. Only he who sees at the Cross of Christ, *quanti ponderis sit peccatum* – and this can only be done by one who sees what the Atonement has "cost" – knows evil in its vast extent. Only he who there sees his own guilt condemned, takes it really upon himself; and he alone knows that in his guilt he is united with the whole of humanity. He alone ceases to judge others; he alone becomes even in guilt a brother. Here alone the worst enemy of true community, the Pharisaism of "wishing to be better," is rooted out. And at the same time the despair engendered by the sense of guilt, which always means impotence to achieve the Good, is removed. For the word of the Cross is the word of reconciliation and forgiveness, and as such is the foundation for, and the source of, a new active existence.

This was the real meaning of the dogma. But it was defaced and obscured by the hierarchical-sacramentarian and the hierarchical-juridical Church. The Reformation was needed in order to re-discover the meaning of the dogma – and its ethical meaning in particular. It betrays a terrible lack of vision to maintain that Luther treated the ethical problem far too superficially. Since the days of the Apostles no one has taken the ethical problem so seriously as Martin Luther. This alone made him a Reformer. The Reformation as a whole is simply one long protest against moral levity, one long struggle for the reality of the Good. That was the whole point of the struggle for the *sola fide* in the fight against a "righteousness of works." For moralism,

9. The connexion between the new Ethos and the Incarnation was first expressed by Paul, in Phil. ii. 4; the exhortation to "look not every man on his own things, but ... also on the things of others," is based on the coming of the Son of God to man.

with its legalism and self-righteousness, is at all times the worst enemy of true morality. It was for this reason that the two ethical questions which are usually relegated to the background were placed in the foreground of our enquiry, namely, the question of the basis of the Good, and the question of the possibility of achieving the Good, that is, the question of the agent. The first question led us out of a eudaemonistic and anthropocentric definition of the Good – away from the Aristotelian and Thomist conception (that the Good is that which is adapted to human nature) – back to the truth of the Bible, namely, that only that which God wills is good; and thus that we are to will what God wills, because He wills it. The second question led us back to faith as the source of all Good in union with God. Both, however, mean the same thing; nothing is good, nothing in the whole world, save union with God. From this new interpretation of the Biblical Ethos there arose a third: the new relation to the world. God does not will the “cloister,” but His rule in the world. Thus He wills that man should serve Him not apart from the world and the community of mankind, but in the world and in community. The obvious sinfulness of the world is no reason for turning one’s back on it, but a reason for “hallowing” it.

Therefore this “secularity” of the Reformed Faith differs entirely from that of the Enlightenment and of Free Thought. Here, indeed, there is no idea of the emancipation of man, but of his union with God; there is here no question of “freedom of conscience” for every individual, in the sense of the autonomy of reason, but, on the contrary, of the union of the individual to the Word of God, to Christ as “King.” Erasmus had to learn from Luther, and the opponents of Predestination from Calvin, how deep is the gulf which separates the view of the Reformers from that of “modern” thinkers. The *sola gratia* and Predestination (6) mean the same thing, namely, that the true Good lies only in the power of God and not in that of man; that no other human goodness and good conduct exists save that which is based on the free gift of God.

4. Thus we see that in the Christian message “the Good” is explained in such a way that the difficulties which surround this question in the natural ethos are finally overcome. In the first place, the Good is based solely on God’s transcendent revelation, on His covenant and His word; thus its basis is wholly “religious.” For this very reason, however, it is truly “human” and “ethical,” for its meaning is love, union with other men. This theonomy dispenses with the irrational and “magical” element; and this clear humanity

has the depth of the Holy. The service of God can only be realized as the service of man; and the true service of man is only possible as the service of God. Secondly: here the antithesis between freedom and necessity (?) is removed. The Gospel is wholly a doctrine of freedom. It is concerned with the release of man from bondage. But this freedom is at the same time complete captivity, indeed more than that: it is absolute dependence on God's action. "If the Son shall make you free you shall be free indeed."¹⁰ The ancient error, which consists in thinking (in view of the formal freedom of man) that freedom consists in emancipation from all ties, in an empty sterility, in the *liberum arbitrium indifferentiae*, is here revealed in its true colours. Man who is a creature, not a Creator – finds his true freedom only in complete union with his Creator.¹¹ Thirdly: the opposition between the moral content and Formalism has been overcome. To the Good, understood in the Christian sense, the Kantian formula can be applied perfectly well: "Nothing can possibly be conceived in the world, or even out of it, which can be called good without qualification, except a Good Will."¹² Nothing is good save obedience to the command of God, just because it is obedience. No reasons of determination from content here come under consideration. The "form" of the will, obedience, is all. But to be obedient to the will of God means: "love your neighbour!" Hence the content of the commandment is not an abstract law, not a programme that can be known beforehand and codified, but it means a swift responsiveness to the needs of others, and action in accordance with their needs in their particular circumstances. Love is determined by "content" to such an extent that it is wholly impossible to conceive of love in terms of rules and regulations.

Fourthly: the opposition between the individual and the universal is also overcome. This Ethos is universal through the unconditional character of the commandment of love, which applies absolutely to all, in all circumstances, and in every kind of situation; it is universal also through the worldwide breadth of the divine will, which wills

10. John viii. 36, 2 Cor. iii. 17 means the same: "Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty"

11. "Being then made free from sin, ye became the servants of righteousness ... for when ye were the servants of sin, ye were free from righteousness" (Rom. vi. 18, 22).

12. First sentence of the *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten*.

nothing less than this: His Kingdom. To serve this purpose means to love. And at the same time it is quite individual, at least in so far as it is the individual who obeys, because in solitude and silence and secrecy, in the depths of his being, he hears the Call of God⁽⁸⁾; it is also individual because love does not work according to schedule, but simply according to his neighbour's need, in any given set of circumstances. Finally, the conflict between Eudaemonism and Rigorism is overcome. The Christian Ethos is wholly "eudaemonistic" in the sense that sharing in the will of God means "salvation," "rescue," "blessing," "blessedness," and even eternal blessedness, and love to one's neighbour means that in doing good both to body and soul it helps to make him happy. It is this which constitutes the humanity of love, which differs entirely from rigorism, from the rigidity and coldness of mere devotion to duty. When love impels us to act in a certain way, we are not moved by a sense of duty, but to use Schiller's ironical phrase "unfortunately by inclination." At the same time, it is this spirit which is the greatest contrast to everything which comes under the heading of Eudaemonism, in so far as the Good is only achieved when it is done solely in the spirit of love to God and in obedience to His command. This "inclination," this "impulse" is the impulse of a divine constraint, the imperative of faith; it means being guided by the "new law of the Spirit." Therefore in love to God, based upon faith, the antithesis between happiness and duty is removed, because the God who claims me for Himself is the One who gives life to me and to the whole world.