I

Choice and Guidance

We are faced with a choice that we must make deliberately. We must choose a starting point from which to formulate an ethic for Christians, a norm to which we will constantly refer (which already implies a method). For a Christian in the reformed denomination, there can be no other starting point or norm than holy Scripture.[1]

Consequently (in our estimation), neither the authority of great theologians nor ecclesiastical decisions are sufficient or decisive. These can only be a help, a light by which to better understand the Bible—and only on the condition that they point back to the Bible itself. Holy Scripture must give us both the sense (the signification and the direction) and the Norm of Ethics for Christians because it is the will of God revealed about us and for us.

Finally, Scripture is the Reason for this ethic. But we cannot say in that same way that it gives us the content of this ethic. We must be very prudent in this domain. It is here, and in regard to this question, that we will pose the problem of Interpreting the moral texts of the Revelation (which we will study in chapter VI).[2] But we must take Scripture as a whole, whatever

1. On biblical revelation as a point of departure and norm for ethics, see the first page of volume 1 of *To Will & To Do*: "I confess, therefore, that in this study and this search, the criterion of my thought is biblical revelation; the content of my thought is biblical revelation; my point of departure is provided by biblical revelation; the method is the dialectic according to which biblical revelation is addressed to us; and the goal is the search for the significance of biblical revelation as it bears on Ethics."

2. There is no Chapter VI (or Sixth part, according to our editorial choice). One might defend the hypothesis of an unfinished manuscript, which would have had to include a supplementary chapter. But the question announced for chapter VI is treated in chapter 3 of part V, section 2 of the present volume.

our position concerning its moral content. The first error to avoid is that of choosing among the texts, holding onto the texts that seem to establish principles, that seem to address our problems, that seem to agree with a certain line of Revelation that we adopt. Subsequently, we reject the texts that, in our eyes, offer only negligible consequences or applications, or myths, or historically outmoded customs. (Most of the time, this choice is made unconsciously.) This attitude is unacceptable.

It is the Bible in its entirety that contains the Revelation of the Lord. Furthermore, selecting texts is entirely arbitrary, since everybody ultimately makes their choice as a function of criteria that they select for themselves—criteria external to the Revelation by which we claim to judge the form of this Revelation. Obviously, the criteria by which Bultmann[3] or E. Trocmé[4] select texts are not the same as those of Goguel[5]—and ever since Marcion,[6] everyone has their own reasons for choosing. Actually, obedience implies that we take every text seriously. Neither can we proceed by deriving a general principle from Scripture, from which we then deduct the whole of an ethic; this systematic, philosophical attitude does not correspond to the mode chosen by God for his Revelation. We can rest assured that even if the principle is precise, the fullness of the Revelation cannot be reduced to a principle, even in the limited domain of Ethics. This would be to throw out a large part of the richness of the gift of God. We can be equally sure that rigorous deduction based on a principle will lead us progressively astray from the reality of the incarnation. Even an existential way of understanding a principle taken from the Bible will lead us to construct an ethic that will be revealed as *ultimately* not conforming to Revelation. For example, to reduce biblical Revelation to the Principle of Love and to claim to derive an entire social and individual ethic from this principle (as has often been attempted, chiefly by Anglo-Saxons) is wholly imprecise. We cannot give a full critique of this here, but we will point out that the first error is that love is not a principle, and we can "deduce" nothing from it; the second error is that this "notion" is always so vague that it can mean whatever we want. For what makes the Love revealed by God vigorous, demanding, and exact is

3. Rudolf Bultmann (1884–1976), New Testament exegete and prominent practitioner of dialectical theology. Cf. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*; *New Testament Theology & Other Basic Writings*.

4. Étienne Trocmé (1924–2002), New Testament exegete. Cf. Trocmé, *L'enfance du christianisme*; *L'Évangile selon saint Marc*.

5. Maurice Goguel (1880–1955), historian of primitive Christianity. Cf. Goguel, *Introduction au Nouveau Testament,* 5 volumes; *Jésus*.

6. Marcion (circa 85 AD–circa 160 AD), second-century theologian and head of a heterodox church that taught a radical opposition between the Old and New testaments.

precisely the way it is revealed, the demonstration of its action, the forms of its incarnation—all of which is made into an abstraction when Love is made into a starting point of an ethic by "refining" the concrete data furnished by the Bible. In reality, we must allow the Bible to lead us, following only in its footsteps, entering only the domains that it points out to us, allowing ourselves to be guided in each line by what it tells us.

The Bible in its entirety should not be a mere starting point, which would imply that we move further away from it as we go; instead, it must be a constant companion in this work, the reference for every word, and in reality the absolute guide, with no independence on our part. In sum, the choice of a starting point must be explicitly specified. We cannot simply say, "we will take our ethics from the Bible"; all protestants would agree on such a general approach. But we must also specify our own attitude towards the Bible, and it is here that disagreement risks intervening. First, we must take Scripture in its totality; second, we must not use the Bible as an object, as material to construct what pleases us, as an instrument destined to respond to our questions. Instead, we must receive it as a question posed to us, allow it to interrogate us concerning ourselves, and then decide on the ethical response that we might give.[7] Now, these two things are directly linked. If we do not accept all of Scripture in its totality, we "parcel" it out, breaking it into scattered pieces. We will be tempted to construct an edifice from these pieces, one that *we* design ourselves. We take the fragments that seem compatible with our ideas, our intentions, our preoccupations; but in doing so, we put ourselves in the foreground, instituting ourselves as the active subjects. By contrast, if we accept the Bible in its massive structure, by this fact we renounce all attempts to model it, to renovate it. But only one attitude becomes possible—the attitude of submission, which puts us in the background, in the position of the listener who is questioned. All authority is given back to the one who took the initiative in the Revelation—that is, the Lord—in the Form that he has chosen.

But having made this choice, we must be aware of what it excludes. In effect, taking Scripture completely seriously is not only a positive act; it is also negative, implying the rejection of all other starting points, norms and guides.

7. Ellul defends the idea of approaching the Bible not as a collection of responses to our questions, but as a book of questions posed to us, in the following texts: Ellul, *Ethics of Freedom*, 176–77; *Éthique de la liberté,* vol. 2, 164, 181–82; *Living Faith: Belief and Doubt in a Perilous World*, 100–104; "Karl Barth and Us," 5–12 (especially 7); Ellul and Tosquelles, *La Genèse aujourd'hui,* 214; *Mort et Espérance de la resurrection: Conférences inédites de Jacques Ellul*, 53; Comte, "Entretien avec Jacques Ellul: 'Je crois que nous sommes dans une période de silence de Dieu."

A first attitude that this choice eliminates is Christian spiritualism. We have already addressed this; we will not dwell on it here.[8] This spiritualism takes on two principal forms, each with its own particular aspects. In the first form, the Holy Spirit adds new elements to the Revelation contained in the Bible, whether collectively by means of the church or by means of a predestined man, which incidentally (and this is historically observable and very remarkable) usually concern ethics. This is true first of the Roman church, and second of the "Spirituals" such as J. de Flore.[9] In the second form, each Christian claims to act under the direct and immediate inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and here again there are two possible aspects: either the Christian waits to receive an express order from the Holy Spirit to act, and only acts in this manner; or, esteeming that he is inhabited by the Holy Spirit, the Christian acts spontaneously following his will, and proclaims that everything he does is inspired.

These four forms of Christian spiritualism are unacceptable for those who accept Scripture as the sole authority of Revelation. We have already said that there is a correspondence between the Holy Spirit and the Revelation contained in the Bible. There is no novelty, no adding to the revelation (which would thus be incomplete); it is perfect in Jesus Christ, and everything is truly accomplished. And all spiritual subjectivism must ultimately be submitted to the control of the objectivity of the Word of God. Incidentally, it is very interesting that all these spiritual revelations that claim to be situated *beyond* the Revelation in Jesus Christ actually *fall short* of this latter in all respects. Either they manifest a ridiculous poverty, mediocrity, or incoherence; or they add absolutely nothing to what is already revealed; or they subordinate biblical Revelation to alleged revelations that completely contradict it.

If we analyze all concrete forms of spiritualism, we will see that they fit into these three categories (from Marian revelations to those of the Mormons).[10] And in the moral domain, this can only lead to incoherence

8. Cf. Ellul, *To Will & To Do*, part III, chapter 1, note 21 (vol. 1, 196–97).

9. Joachim de Flore (1130–1202), Cistercian monk and theologian of the Middle ages, who received visions that he recounted in these terms: "I, Joachim, in the middle of the silence of the night, at the hour, I believe, when the lion of Judah was resurrected from the dead, deep in meditation—suddenly a light swiftly brightened my intelligence, and revealed to me the fulness of the knowledge of this book, and the spirit of the Old and New Testament" (*Concordia Novi et Veteris Testamenti*).

10. The Mormons constitute a millenarian sect (The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints) that adds to the Bible, giving the same status of Holy Scripture to *The Book of Mormon*, transmitted by the prophet Joseph Smith (1805–1844). Cf. *The Book of Mormon: Another Testament of Jesus Christ*.

or to a crystallization: an anarchic incoherence when each one claims to be beyond all control, directed by the Holy Spirit—or authoritarian crystallization, when the group claims to *possess* a specific revelation of the Holy Spirit. Now, these two tendencies are perfectly anti-biblical.

We will dwell at length on the second possibility of this choice. Most moralities (including Christian moralities) actually begin with man. Of course, given that we are discussing the thoughts of Christians, we will not say that we adopt human Nature as a criterion and starting point in order to elaborate a morality (even if certain Christian philosophers might accept a dichotomy between their thought and their faith, conceiving that a moral existence might be founded on this or that aspect of human nature). But in any case, we generally take the questions posed by men, the needs of these men, and the situations in which they find themselves as a starting point. And whether we are talking about a morality that assigns man the end of realizing himself, or another morality that "passes through the mediation of others"—a morality that, even in the name of Christian charity, associates itself with lay moralities of relation and interdependence; a morality that affirms that our dependence in relation to the other is the sole aliment of our moral acts, which recalls that the sole vocation worthy of ethical man is to make choices responding to the human needs and expectations that surround us . . . in all these cases, we begin with man and man alone.

We begin with a factual analysis of the questions that man asks himself: how must I act towards my creditor, towards the State, towards my father, etc.; can I lie in this or that circumstance? What should I do to be a good citizen? How can I attain happiness or security? And for these questions, we seek answers that would be Christian. Now, we really must distinguish two domains here: on the one hand, that of counseling (a man who approaches a brother in the faith to ask what he must do), and on the other, that of ethical reflection. As much as it is normal in the relation of faith that one might respond to the concrete question of another, participating in the prayer and responsibility for the decision that must be made, it is vain to draw up a catalogue of the questions that the men of this time ask in order to give a comprehensive response. Incidentally, let us note right away that through this method we claim to reach the concrete man, to truly speak to our times, etc., in contrast to the abstract theories of theologians. Now in reality, these questions are concrete as long as they are personal, and the response is concrete when it is *ad hominem*. But they become abstract when they are generalized, and the responses no longer mean anything because

they address nobody—except maybe Man in himself! Our scholars of the concrete and current should remember that nothing is more abstract and inhuman than the generalization and conceptualization of the concrete and personal. In a similar perspective, we claim to begin with Situations: we must consider man in his true situation and provide him with a Christian ethic as a means to confront this situation, to "respond" to the challenge laid out for him, to behave as a Christian man in a given situation. And so we begin with a socioeconomic analysis of man's situation, pairing it with the results of philosophical reflection, which we take for granted: we see man as the phenomenologists, or Marx, or Freud see him.[11] Since these facts of human reality are decisive, we use them to situate ourselves and seek to formulate a concrete ethic as a function of these situations. Most of the time, these two very traditional perspectives determine the choice of the framework and subjects to be treated in ethics: married man, man and work, man and vocation, and money, lending and interest, the right to vote, strikes, children and parents, divorce, class relations, war, the death penalty, suicide, euthanasia, etc.—currently we add to all these subjects foreign relations, the relation to communism, colonization . . . in other words, the object of ethical reflection is imposed on us from the outside by circumstances, and we allow ourselves to be guided by material facts. Now, this seems to us to be a decisive error, the source of innumerable banalities, setting out on paths leading resolutely nowhere. The responses that the Christian could bring to these problems with such starting points will always be inadequate and of no interest for the man living in society. Of course, the Christian will have his conscience for himself: "I have proposed my solution, and you don't want it." This is true—all too true: it really was a solution, and not the Word of God. But it cannot be otherwise when we adopt the concrete situation or the questions that man asks himself as our starting point. For most of the time, these are poorly understood situations and false questions. Here we are in a domain inhabited by Myths, and one of our first duties is to exorcise Myths.

Finally, we can claim to begin with the needs of man. This emanates from good intentions: out of love for our neighbor, we must become aware of their needs and respond to these needs, in the ethical domain as in other domains. But precisely, if an ethic for Christians must express the Command of God towards man and the concrete Response of man to the question of God, there can be absolutely no question of starting with the needs

11. Phenomenological philosophers (e.g. Edmund Husserl [1859–1938], Maurice Merleau-Ponty [1908–61]) considered man primarily as a consciousness of perception of phenomena; Karl Marx (1818–83) considered man as an economic actor determined by the interests of his social class; and Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) considered man as a subject of drives conditioned by his psychic unconscious.

of man. We do not have to formulate an ethic as a service to man, but as a service to God.

Of course, this formulation absolutely must not lead to the idea that ethics is situated beyond needs. The distinction between a sphere of needs (essential needs, security, happiness) and a sphere of choices, in which the first is amoral and only the second is the object of ethics, is theologically unacceptable. It is precisely at the level of concrete life, in response to needs, and in seeking the satisfaction of these needs—in other words, outside of spiritual and intellectual domains—that the question of ethics is posed. To formulate it otherwise is to make ethics into a vain game, a collection of gratuitous constructions, and an ideology.

The very notion of incarnation implies that the consequences of received grace and Revelation must be brought to bear in the concreteness of living in the most elementary needs and satisfactions. As Saint Paul reminds us, this happens at the level of eating and drinking.[12] Choices that teach us otherwise are intellectual distractions.

If ethics is not inscribed in the sphere of needs (the search for comfort, security, happiness), if it does not bear on decisions concerning our sexual drive, or our instinct of self-preservation, or eating, if it does not ultimately put in question what is the most natural and essential—well, then it ultimately concerns nobody. But if it must be applied in this domain to be taken seriously, that does not mean that its research must begin with the needs of man, still less that its goal should be to satisfy these needs. It is not a supplementary means put at man's disposition to guarantee his security and happiness!

When we adopt one or the other of these starting points, we are necessarily led, first of all, to a casuistic. Of course, we can escape this tendency by sticking to very vague propositions (as in the case of the phenomenologists[13]), but these propositions remain very abstract and miss their target. To be honest, if we begin with the needs, situations, and questions of man, we cannot avoid constructing a casuistic. We must respond to this inventory with an inventory of responses and distinctions between good and evil in each case. We will thus end up with an unending stream of analyses and hypotheses. The faithful will have to find a response to every one of their problems, and the circumstances themselves will vary infinitely. Even the modern ethics of protestant theologians do not escape this. We necessarily return to "What should I do if . . . ?" And in fact, K. Barth's detailed study

12. Ellul is likely referring to 1 Cor 10:31: "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God."

13. Cf. note 11 above.

of "limit cases"[14] comes down to a casuistic! Now, a morality for Christians cannot be a casuistic! Precisely because a casuistic tends to be imperative, because it does not leave man the choice of his responses, because it leads to the laziness of a predetermined attitude, because it cuts off the creativity of faith. And reciprocally, if we do not end up with responses to offer to man, what good is it to be part of his questions?

A second problem is that with this starting point, in fact, we will establish a Christian morality, which will be situated precisely at the level of other moralities, as one morality among others: a human morality, with all the characteristics of such moralities that we have indicated. We will establish a collection of rules that will be neither more nor less human than those of Aristotle. Or, if we are modern, we will reject the idea of rules, preferring Values instead, and we will set up Christian Values in the forest of other values. Christian solutions and responses will take their place among all the others, competing on the same footing; which is to say that in the end, it is completely useless to go to all this trouble! The other moralities are sufficient for satisfaction, reassurance, and the justice proper to men.

A third problem provoked by this starting point is that we are led to consider the Bible as a dictionary of answers. A given problem is posed . . . what does the Bible say about it? We search, we gather all the texts in a Concordance that directly or indirectly relate to the question, and we use these shredded fragments of the Word of God to furnish a response. We have already said that this attitude is unacceptable, that it establishes our Mastery over the Word of God and our Independence towards God himself.

We treat holy Scripture as a thing at our disposal. We should also be careful, for by working in this way, we can take anything we like from the Bible. The procedure is well-known. With biblical texts, we have shown that God was for the monarchy, or for democracy, or federalism, or a strong State, or anarchy . . . and thus for all the problems that man poses, simply because we employ fragments of torn-apart Scripture, we can reconstruct whatever we like. We can be certain that considering the Bible as a dictionary in this casuistic will necessarily lead us to false responses.

Finally, if we want to go even further, we encounter another trap. Realizing that we cannot use the Bible in this manner, but on the other hand wanting to begin with man, we will abandon the Bible altogether. And beginning with a very general, very abstract and transcendent theology (unless we are talking about the spiritualism addressed earlier), we will free ourselves from "biblical solutions" only to enter into philosophy or psychology, into economics or politics. And we will seek responses and solutions in

14. Cf. Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III.4, 229, 261–65. Henceforth *CD.*

these domains. Incidentally, since the relation between these sciences and theology is infinitely delicate and difficult, theology will fade out little by little, relegated to the heavens, and we will progress with unimpeded steps in human quests. From there, we can either justify this with a philosophy (and we will return to this), or get off by declaring, "it is a question of being personally Christian and doing philosophy, or economics, and our faith will show through in what we are." But when the problem is to formulate an ethic for Christians on this basis, this attitude is a radical lie. Far from leading us to translate the faith into an ethic, it leads us to propose human behavior, taken from human sciences, and to cover them with a cloak of hypocrisy: they are Christian because they are formulated and invented by a Christian. Curiously enough, this attitude is often recommended by Christians who are hostile to individualist spiritualism (to which they return), who affirm the necessity of theological objectivity.

In sum, we see the contradictions, the imbroglios, and the vanities we are led to by adopting this starting point and this general perspective on the question.

Another starting point, another perspective excluded by our decisive choice of Scripture, is philosophy. Needless to say, theologians are tempted by philosophy. Would it not be a good method of *approach* to pose the ethical problem in philosophical terms? And could we not ultimately construct an acceptable ethic for Christians upon a philosophy? Indeed, this was continually attempted, and by the same token philosophy influenced, contaminated theology. This is true of Saint Augustine with Neoplatonism, Saint Thomas with Aristotle, the German theologians of the nineteenth century with Fichte and Hegel, and current theologians with phenomenology or existentialism, to take several simple and well-known examples. Now this simple list (which we could easily extend considerably) manifests a first weakness of this attitude: philosophy is terribly variable and uncertain. We cannot say that we progress in this domain, and that the philosophy of the eighteenth century is truer, more certain than that of the thirteenth century. I know a certain devotee of Plato who estimates that all later philosophy is only a regression . . .

The same goes for Descartes or Rousseau. Who can guarantee that today's philosophy is closer to the true or the real than yesterday's philosophy? Why would I adopt this one instead of another? Because it is the philosophy of today? Because it is modern? These reasons seem meaningless to me. It will be said that existentialism is very close to Christianity; will the degree of