Obedience to the Law of Christ. An inquiry into the function of the Mosaic law in Christian ethics from a Mennonite perspective

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Citation for published version (APA):
Chapter 1

The theological structure of justification by faith

§ 3. Christian morality in tension

A Christian theology might be tentatively defined as the labor of reflection on the ideology and practice (or discourse and behavior) of a living faith in Jesus of Nazareth as Christ, exemplified in a particular tradition and embodied in historic communities that shape their lives by it. It is a normative labor in so far as it is the task of theology to judge the authenticity of that faith against its only standard: the Scriptural tradition. I do not aspire to execute any abstract program of Christian theology. Instead, I am committed to the (Mennonite) tradition in which I stand because it will provide me with a basic perspective. Now, a perspective both limits and enables one’s sight. For that reason part of the task of the theologian is always the critical examination of his or her primary perspective. As C. Norman Kraus put it: we must have an “examination and elucidation of this system of meaning and discourse” that belongs to the Church as a community of “shared experience and discourse.”

In other words, we must come to an understanding of the limitations of the historical perspective in which we try to see our object under examination. But the main function of a perspective is that it allows one to see. It is not a blindfold, and therefore elucidation of a tradition by itself is like describing the eyes instead of the vision. A Mennonite theology therefore must go beyond self-description and seek to verify the truth-claims of its particular version of the Christian faith, and it must do so by comparing them to their given source and standard in Scripture. It must first of all be a biblical theology concerned with truth, not a descriptive theology concerned with clarification of a given terminology, even if embedded in a way of life. Nevertheless, even in such a biblical theology traditional bias and the needs of one’s Church are likely to play a part.

It is for that reason that I turn first to an assessment, however fragmentary, of the perspective that I bring to my present inquiry. The necessary starting point for an inquiry into Christian ethics in my view must be the simple definition of that ethics as obedience to the Christ of Scriptures. But what does that mean? It seems obvious to theologians and laymen alike, in all major Christian traditions with the possible exception of extreme liberalism, that Christian ethics is at least formally determined by such obedience to Jesus Christ and the Scriptures. The Christian life is certainly never thought to be without some kinds of specified duties, even in those traditions that emphasize justification through grace. It is primarily the material elements of this obedience and the explanation of its possibility that are contentious.

I would express this formal starting point for a connected series of questions from a Mennonite perspective as follows.

- First, Christ is seen as a new “Torah” (though not taken the way Judaism did its Torah), a source of understanding of God’s righteous demands, and not as an example of a “good man” to be followed. The embodied Torah is equally present in His teachings as in His life, and since the two cannot be separated, there is no room for an *imitatio Christi* that would ignore the teachings.

- Second, the authority of the teachings rests in the authority of the Teacher. If Christ commands to love the neighbor, it is our duty to do so because He commands it. His messianic status is paramount in understanding the meaning of the commandments.

- Third, if He teaches a *new Torah*, in addition to being the embodiment of the Mosaic Torah, the question remains open whether the obedience required can be construed as a following of rules and principles of behavior along the lines of Jewish *halakah*. Mennonite
ethics usually followed the familiar pattern of the distinction between a legalist and a moralist view on ethics.

As I will try to show in my exegesis of Matthew 5 and 18, there can be little doubt that Matthew thought Christ’s new halakah was certainly congruent with the structure of the written Torah and with oral tradition in general. And the persistent critique of Pharisaic hypocrisy, if we want to avoid declaring this a polemic bordering on anti-Semitism, can only be understood as a specific Matthean hermeneutic insight: that the test of any rule of law is its possibility to be done, and that its truth therefore rests on the integrity of the one teaching it. The authority of the Messiah, as enacted in His full and complete submission to His heavenly father, can then be the basis for the Christian’s obedience to the messianic Torah.

But one might argue against this by stating that surely all of this emphasis on obedience and the importance of the Mosaic law can be seen as a further development of relatively late strata in the New Testament. Paul’s letters to the Romans and the Galatians express a rejection of the Mosaic law as way of salvation and as guideline for behaviour. After all, did not Paul state clearly that “righteousness is now revealed apart from law and prophets”?

But the evidence in the New Testament does show differently. The canonical letter of James does speak about the law of freedom, apparently referring to the Mosaic law (not to be diminished to the “imperative side of the gospel” - Goppelt), and even to Paul some kind of inner congruence with Christ’s command is called being ennomos: “in the law of” Christ. Going forward in time to the gospels, especially that of Matthew, this emphasis is still clearly present. The antitheses to a particular this-worldly and lax interpretation of the Mosaic law in the Sermon on the Mount describe God’s radical commandment as the result of the breaking in of the eschatological Kingdom, showing that probably the earliest sources of the New Testament also contain such an ethical emphasis without ever breaking the link to the Old Testament. Obedience to Christ, submission under God’s sovereignty in the kingdom that He preached, allowing for rules of behavior to be set by the learned or by the “discerning community,” seem to be the alpha and omega of early Christian ethics.

An independent stress on obedience as compliance with an external command, some have argued, is a post-biblical phenomenon and a return to Judaism. According to the author of the 2nd-century letter of Barnabas, Christians need to seek out the “ordinances” (dikaioomata) of the Lord. In 2:6 Barnabas mentions the “new law of Christ, which is without the yoke of necessity.” Evangelical law, as it was sometimes called much later, though resting on grace and God’s redemptive initiative in history, was still a ‘law’: a code of defined behavior.

Such differences in emphasis, wavering between narration and reenactment of salvation, on one hand, and stress on a new code of behavior on the other, can be put into historical order with the aid of a model of social development. The words quoted above would then indicate some paradigmatic milestones in the development of Christian ethics between Paul’s original law-free gospel, through Matthew’s theological reflection on Christ’s messianic teachings, onto Barnabas’s establishment of a Christian way of life that again acknowledges a formal statute of (evangelical) law.29 They indicate movement between the law-free parenetical ethics of Paul and the formalization and institutionalization of the ethics of the Church during the time when the parousia seemed to be very far removed and the Church was trying to establish its foundations in what was later called early Catholicism. To the extent that Christians in the Roman empire were a persecuted minority consisting of gentiles without Jewish training, far from the influence of a Palestine being ransacked in the aftermath of the Jewish revolt of Bar Kochheba, their morality must have been an adaptation of and addition to civil morality.

It is not insignificant, though not decisive, how we look at this from the historian’s point of view. The common understanding of this development is part of a received set of presuppositions within the area of New Testament studies that provides a frame of reference for theology.
which has hardly been challenged since the days of 19th-century modernism, and which has been especially firm since Harnack's thesis that the 2nd-century Church developed forms of legal organization by adapting synagogal and Roman rules of law. In that approach, the distinction between obedience as a particular Christian virtue and the gospel of grace and redemption came to the fore. For our time, it is in particular Bultmann's Theologie des Neuen Testaments that provided a monument for the conviction that the law-free gospel of Paul and its justification of the ungodly is the center of the New Covenant and was seriously corroded by the return to Jewish moralism and legalism at the end of the 1st century. With Bultmann and Käsemann, the Lutheran absolute antithesis between law and grace and the secondary role of sanctification and the law was expressed for a second time.

In the Reformation era, the importance of duty and obedience was not denied, but it was hardly ever stated as an independent requirement, and it was emphatically not taken as a way to salvation. Opposition to Church law, sacramentalism, the penance practice of the Church, its claim to be the source and place of redemption, and its doctrine of merit, was worked out in a radical fashion. Christian ethics was grounded upon a doctrine believed to be the core message of the Pauline gospel: justification by faith. Because justification was an act of God and received in faith, the ethical situation had changed decisively, making Christian obedience a responsive act of gratitude to a salvation already received, in opposition to a continuing effort to achieve a prescribed behavior and through it earn redemption. Obedience in faith was defined in opposition to another type of obedience: obedience to external rules of behavior with the intent of amassing merit, doing "good works" with the intent of earning salvation. Faith was the single most important act of obedience; it grounded a life of spontaneous submission to the revealed will of God in the specific circumstances of life, summed up in the command to love one's neighbor. The latter was a response to God's grace, whereas the former was an autonomous effort of man to earn salvation under the guise of obedience, which by its own logic would lead man to a defiance of God's will and the intent to define for himself what was right and wrong. Paul's reference to justification, which figured so prominently in Romans 1-4 and in the letter to the Galatians, could be read as a firm doctrinal basis for a theology of justification that separated the status of the faithful (having been justified) from their condition and behavior.

The hermeneutic landscape had changed considerably by then. A widespread 16th-century criticism of prevailing Catholic practices and the general apocalyptic and introspective mood of the age was read into the historical situation of the early Church. Christianity, so it seemed, had moved away from the "Jewish" ethics of obedience that could only lead to feelings of guilt and despair and its "works of the law" as a means to escape from judgment, by shifting the emphasis to faith as a passive reception of amnesty and God's Grace in Christ. The sharp antithesis between works of the law and free grace was decisive for all the various Reformation groups, including the Anabaptists. Thus, Sola Gratia could become the identifying trait of the whole of the Reformation, notwithstanding the fact that there were important differences of emphasis in this regard between the Anabaptist, Hutterite, Lutheran, and Calvinist ways of approaching this matter. Calvin's insistence on sanctification as the goal of justification, and as its inner telos, was one such characteristic source of difference. Luther's insistence on the justification of the ungodly and Menno's demand that redemption was granted to the penitent sinner who showed the reality of his faith in saintly living were competing perspectives. A tension between law and Grace pervaded all of these movements.

§ 3.1 The central function of Paulinism

Basically the Reformation's solution to the tension between law and grace has been Paulinist in its contents, and that goes for both the Lutheran and the Calvinist positions. The terms
of the discussion, and even the basic answer to the questions, were given to the Church through the apostolate of Paul and the way the Church tried at some junctures of her history to renew her understanding of him. This is true also for the earlier doctrinal establishment of Catholicism with Augustine, and most certainly holds for the Reformation understanding of Paul by Calvin and Luther. Paul, as no other, shaped the doctrinal framework of the Church by being the author of a set of important decisions for the Church: by rejecting circumcision for non-Jewish Christians, by opposing the validity of the Jewish law for Christians, and in the establishment of a pagan Church that soon found new experiences and ideas that severed her completely from the synagogue as early as the time of the Neronic persecutions (67 A.D.).

In the affirmation that redemption rested on the Cross of Christ accepted in faith, and not on the “works of the law,” it was Paul who determined how the gospels were read and how Jesus of Nazareth was understood.

But how exactly then was Paul understood with reference to Christian ethics? And how could he have become the main supplier of Christian ethics? We must take into account that it would have been far more obvious to accept the Sermon on the Mount as the decisive constitution of the Christian life than any moral exhortation that derived from other sources. The Roman-Catholic solution was to define the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount as the exemplary ethics of a specific class within the Church, devoted to a rigorous evangelical discipline.

However, to those for whom Paul was the basis of all theology in the 16th century, it seemed clear that Jesus, despite the Sermon on the Mount, did not teach an ethics at all, did not give His disciples a code of commandments. When doctrine arose, a salvation economy was worked out. It was held that after His resurrection Christ was revealed to be the One who gave his life as a propitiatory sacrifice for all mankind. Through Christ, God had provided believers with the gift of justification. From that central assertion, the problem of ethics was determined by the Pauline polemic against judaizers and Jews about the now discarded role of the law. Anselm’s doctrine of atonement, e.g., that emphasized vicarious suffering and a substitutionary sacrifice, became a guiding principle in the Church’s thinking about redemption. Christ’s statements about the law, and in particular his Sermon on the Mount, were understood to be an explanation of the radical demand of the law, to show that the Pharisees underestimated and weakened its demand by the introduction of human teachings. The Sermon on the Mount lost its status of ethical instruction and became a preparatory statement, defining man’s need for redemption instead of being an instruction to the way of life of the redeemed. Christ’s “ethics,” if there at all, implied only condemnation, preparing mankind for the unfolding of the gospel of grace. After it had come to its full expression in the gospel of Paul, the Sermon on the Mount could in retrospect be seen as the epilogue of the law.

Having dispensed with the possible primacy of the ethical appeal of the gospels through this distinction between preparation and fulfillment, the Reformers still had to deal with the undoubted presence of parenetical material in the gospels and Paul’s letters. But the ethical contents of Paul’s letters could be read from that same perspective as a set of guidelines for the life of faith - an “inner” morality could be stressed, joined to a doctrine of works of gratitude and a concept of the rule of law in Christian society. The other-worldly direction of this ethics could be upheld, because for the present world it was not Christ’s demands but compromise with societal powers that was taught. Christian ethics became a dualist ethics, defining a spiritual principle of love alongside a “carnal” principle of worldly rule. The division between law and Grace echoed that between Church and state. Paul’s polemic against a salvation doctrine that mixed grace with obedience to Torah for gentiles, advocating instead a life in the Spirit, was construed as the doctrinal basis of Christian morality. The this-worldly emphasis of the Sermon on the Mount and of some of Paul’s paraenesis could be relegated to the realm of utopia if it was not read as an epilogue of the law, and the inner experience of guilt and forgiveness thus became the center of a Christian’s self-consciousness. Sanctification as
the corollary of justification was thereby effectively removed from the daily practice of Christian living, and the ordinary life of the believer was solely determined by the exigencies of life under the rule of the state.

Within mainstream Protestant thought, Luther's discovery of the justification of the ungodly remained the secure center of the gospel and the basic feature of the definition of ethics. Calvin's doctrine of sanctification counterbalanced that stress in part, as had Luther's concept of "living faith," which had included much of what Catholics regarded as a secondary principle and condition of salvation: love. Works in the sense of "good works," acts of ethical compliance with the gospel, summarized in love for the neighbor, were consequences rather than conditions of faith and justification. Ethics became almost identical to the responsible life of the citizen; or sometimes it became the saintly (or heroic) ideal that could be achieved by some through grace as a particular sign of the coming kingdom. This-worldly obedience to the political powers and an ethics of conformity to them were placed side by side with the aspirations of individuals toward the higher evangelical ideal. Christian ethics became divided in itself. In any case, ethics remained a consequence of salvation granted. The deed that was in conformity with God's demand was (1) a consequence of God's grace operative inside oneself and (2) in itself not an act in harmony with a given rule of behavior, but one whose value was decided by the purity of its inner intent - inner faith became in itself the defining principle of a good deed.

From that vantage point, some elements in Paul were stressed to the detriment of others. Paul had preached - so it was taught - submission to the state (Rom. 13), the acceptance of slavery (Eph. 6:5; Col. 3:22), the submission of women to men (1 Cor. 14:34, 35; Eph. 5:22; Col.3:18), and a hierarchy within the Church which made it clear that the social and political critique and teachings on salvation of Jesus as portrayed in the gospels were merely an interlude, an "interim-ethic", that no longer had a place in the life of the Church after the resurrection. Paul's ethics was about accepting the status quo, relying on the gradual Christianization of the world, of fulfilling the demands of the kingdom through a step by step improvement of civil society.

Eschatology was the dimension into which the full demand of the Kingdom could be projected. So the Kingdom might come, some day, and in the meantime Christians would need to work with what existed within their societies, accepting together with all other citizens of the state the moral demands of the era and the legal (and penal) system of their societies. In the era following the Reformation, such doctrines lent themselves readily to secular versions: obedience to Christ was transformed into a commitment to civil virtues and allegiance to the state, because that had been the concrete shape of the ethics of the former era; justification was transformed into a statement about the inherent goodness of humanity. (Wesleyanism had tried to maintain a special status of conversion within the wider body of Christian society by stressing the path of inner experience.) So the general modern image of Christian ethics emerged: the Christian was to be obedient to civil powers while working on his inner sanctification. Ethics was now primarily about what you were and not about what you did, and justification dealt with that. The gospel shaped the character, and character produced morality. To work at the improvement of society from within became the secular fulfillment of the eschatology that had motivated Paul's ethics.

The Reformers themselves were sometimes more precise than their common understanding allowed for. Calvin expressly emphasizes that justification and sanctification belonged to one and the same process. Even though to be justified does not mean to have become 'just', it does mean: esse in ipso motu seu cursu ad iustitiam ("to become taken up in a motion or drive toward righteousness"). The notional element of forensic imputation guards the extrinsic character of the ground for justification, so that only the foreign righteousness of Christ can be the ground for salvation, but it does not imply a mere outwardness of the result. In
Pesch's terminology, the forensic and effective dimension of justification cannot be seen as an antithesis in Calvin's view. Paul's exhortations could then be understood as expressive of this sanctification as the other side of the coin. This connection was all too easily lost from sight even to some extent in Calvinism. In Lutheran orthodoxy this became particularly clear. In Melanchthon's "Loci" of 1521, justification gets hardly any stress, but where it occurs the effective dimension is made secondary to the forensic. Now justification only means imputation, and sanctification is primarily dealt with as an eschatological reality.

In the wake of this development Paul came to be read, especially in the late-18th and 19th centuries, either as the champion of inwardness and of the secondary nature of (external) morality and law, or as a hurdle of foreign Jewishness that needed still to be overcome. The interpretative principles in the Lutheran reading of Paul (anti-works, anti-legalistic, stress on autonomous freedom) were now severed from their Pauline context and used against what was seen as Jewish remnants in Paul's theology and paraenesis. Some maintained that this was actually Paul's intent all along. He had emphasized the priority of grace and the secondary role of ethics - by denying any meaning for "works of the law" and by stressing a "being-declared-righteous" that was extrinsic.

This second stage of the Paulinist "revolution" in Europe was decidedly 'spiritualist' in nature, either in its breaking away from the Jewish Paul or its affirmation of the Hellenist Paul. What to the Paul of the Reformation had been the extrinsic work of the Spirit within man following justification came to denote the inner autonomous ground of morality. (In Immanuel Kant e.g.) This modernist and rationalist appropriation of Paul or rather the new understanding of the interpretative tendency of the Reformation, now existed alongside a further development of the 16th-century Lutheran approach (in Schleiermacher e.g.), which however took on elements of this spiritualizing tendency as well. Faith became identified with the conscience of man and as the extension of human reason or intuitive faculty. But modernity in the 19th century was equally adamant that in Paul the emancipation from legalism and outward moralism had been completed. Whenever he was not read as the champion of inner morality, he was mostly rejected as too Jewish.

§ 3.2 The new image of Paul

The images of Paul that motivated these developments have now all been overturned again and the anti-Jewish bias of the 19th century has been severely weakened. Biblical exegesis learned to view Paul more as he must have sounded in his own day and age. A new image of Paul emerged - and it must be admitted, again there were pressures from contemporary history behind it. Against the traditional understanding of Paul, these three dimensions of interpretation came especially into play in the decades after the second World War:

(1) A new reading of Paul's context

brought an increasing understanding that there were important elements missing and misrepresented in the traditional reading of Paul. Specifically, the historical situation of the newly formed Church communities that Paul's letters wanted to address, which in the case of Romans and Galatians was concentrated in the issue of communion between Jewish and pagan Christians, was now better understood. It led to reevaluation in particular of Romans and Galatians, the prime sources for understanding Paul's view on Christian ethics. The pastoral and occasional nature of his writing was leading theologians away from their concentration on Pauline "doctrines," and studies in canon history affirmed that Paul could not be considered the single normative source for Church doctrine. There were other, differing voices as well, whose contributions had been drowned out in the chorus of Paulinists that had soon emerged in the 2nd- and 3rd-century Church.
(2) A profound reappraisal of Judaism  

brought an increasing awareness that the Church was unable to define its own mission without carefully developing an understanding of the ongoing status of Israel and her Torah.\textsuperscript{38} That was an insight that with some difficulty could be found in Paul as well, especially in the Romans 9-11 passage. That has led to a new appraisal of the Jewish roots of the Church and Paul’s theology. Apart from that, it was affirmed in the field of Biblical theology that Rabbinic tradition needed to become part of the tools of New Testament exegesis. Its approach showed Paul not only using Jewish forms of exegesis and staying closer to 1st-century Jewish thought and imagery than ever before imagined, but it also showed how favorably Paul viewed the ongoing meaning and existence of the Jewish people. Pagan Paulinism was not up to the demands of theology that this essentially Jewish Paul had set.

(3) An emphasis on the social and political dimension of theology  

led to an increasing stress on the social dimension of faith and ethics,\textsuperscript{39} which was in part adopted from the various “liberation theologies” that came to the fore especially after the 1950s. In anthropology, human individuality was seen as intrinsically connected to the self-definition of the community to which the individual belonged. Social-justice perspectives made it harder and harder to overlook or spiritualize the this-worldly ethics of the Sermon on the Mount. Within this perspective the traditional motives for the classical interpretation of Paul as polemics against works-righteousness became less important – but it must be asked if this does justice to the apostolic witness.

Within these contemporary dimensions of a renewal of theology - very broadly defined here as a new exegetical perspective and a new general orientation on ecclesiology and social identity - the questions concerning the foundations of Christian ethics can and need to be asked again.

The first dimension accounts for the reexamination of the Pauline concept of justification and its relationship to moral obedience. Recent scholarship has shown that the Protestant schematics of received grace being followed by parenetical teaching as to proper conduct was not instigated by Paul at all. It was at best a secondary motif in Paul’s continual presentation of the “Triumph of God” over sin and death. Justification and sanctification were more intrinsically connected, and the concept of obedience in concrete acts (easily dismissed as “works” and as opposed to “life in the Spirit”) was far more central to Paul than it had seemed to Luther. Paul advocated a kind of “Christian halakah” based partly on Christ’s teachings, partly on Rabbinic tradition, and partly on the developing lifestyle of the early Church in its contacts with Greek religious culture and Roman law.

In fact, the central disagreement of his day was shown by James Dunn to be that on the issue of table fellowship between Christians of Jewish and gentile descent. That surely seems to break down the traditional image of Paul’s ethics completely. Paul’s doctrine of justification was now being read as having originated primarily in its ecclesiological dimension and in its use as a polemical device to restrain Jewish Christians who tried to combine Christ and Torah into a higher unity.

That perspective also changed current views on Paul’s basic terminology. As James Dunn especially tried to show, the “works of the law” were no longer the moral duties through which one acquired merit, but specifically those commandments that defined the separate status of Israel: circumcision and food laws in particular. Paul’s insistence that there was no salvation based on works of the law implied that belonging to Israel was not the prerequisite of salvation; but it did not mean what the Church had said throughout her history, that moral action was not a prerequisite of salvation - why should Paul after all have said such a thing? Based on what and against whom? Nobody was holding that salvation was earned; some
might only have argued that a deed could be virtuous by dint of its moral effect on others, enabling them to serve God better through example, or by counterweighing other offenses. The late medieval doctrine of merit was not in place in the 1st century.

Read like this, Paul could no longer serve to ground an ethics that dispensed with concrete acts of obedience, since his polemics was not aimed at obedience as such, but against a salvation doctrine that continued to exclude gentiles, as well as against a pagan doctrine that set aside the whole of the Mosaic law. Judaizers and Gnostics were therefore both excluded. In this rereading of Paul, the whole emphasis of the Reformation reception of Paul on the antithesis between grace and law falls away or is at least seriously compromised.

The second dimension - stressing the common ground between Israel and the Church - leads to a new appraisal of this basic concept of obedience, for so long defined with reference to that righteousness of works of the law which was identified with Pharisaism and Rabbinic Judaism. It was Lutheranism, along with its philosophical expression in Kantianism, that had established the idea of moral autonomy as the basis for ethics, with its sharp distinction from mere “outward” obedience or legalism.

That concept of autonomous moral liberty became the cornerstone of modern political thought, and efforts were made to see in Paul’s writings the defense of a more inner, spiritual morality. The foundational notion of modern society, as expressed in Hegel’s philosophy of Right, became the notion of freedom. Society and history could be seen as so many aspects of freedom realized. Even if going beyond the confines of individual autonomy, Hegel reasserted the rational autonomy as that of a life within the confines of the state, which expressed, maintained, and grounded rational freedom and superseded individual ethics in a life that conformed to “realized” (not simply commanded or valued, but institutionalized) patterns of behavior and political institutions that safeguarded the autonomous liberty of the state as a whole.

The third dimension, finally, inserted the concept of social identity into the debate: justification was a matter of being a righteous community. Only then could the individual be “righteoused” too. It signified a move away from the focus on the individual’s conscience and guilt-problems. Man was essentially defined by the group to which he needed to belong. The Church could be viewed as “counter-community” (Lohfink), or as anticipatory realization of the coming Kingdom (Yoder). All of these influenced the way Pauline exegesis went forward.

§ 3.3 Cognitive and moral autonomy

Besides these revisions of Paulinism in our era, there was a major attack on the presuppositions of modern theology as it shared them with general Western culture and philosophy. Modernism and liberalism in their individualistic, spiritualistic (mystical), and socialist shapes, had in a way taken over presumptions of modern European philosophy - especially the basic notions of autonomy and freedom. In liberalism, Christianity changed from being a redemptive religion into being a religiously inspired secular ethics.

Philosophically, these basic notions of rational freedom and moral autonomy (the project of modernity) were criticized sharply in modern Jewish thought. E. Fackenheim and E. Levinas, e.g., both developed a decisively anti-modernist position. Levinas’s claim that the concealed fundament of the modern state and its principle of autonomous rationality is actually the heteronomy of the moral relationship - appearing phenomenologically in the presence of the
Other as Face - not only brought Rabbinic Judaism onto the scene of contemporary philosophy, but it reminded many Christian theologians of their Jewish and Old Testament roots. Justification as forensic declaration of acquittal might be seen as an escape from the heteronomous obedience and responsibility that were inherent in the order of creation (Torah) itself. These new insights might be affirmed against the 16th-century antinomies between grace and law and its connected anthropology of sin, as well as against the dominant paradigm since the Enlightenment, that of rational autonomy and moral freedom.

The basic paradigm and stumbling block for theologians since the Lutheran Reformation had been increasingly that of autonomy. Of course they had not all sought its center in humanity as had Kant, but most often in the faithfulness shown in God’s extrinsic act in history: the Cross of Jesus Christ. Their polemic was aimed primarily at Augustine’s theory of justification as initial grace, evoking the cooperation of man - grace that perfected the human endeavor of love. On that account, moral autonomy, even if ultimately grounded by God’s grace as Augustine had seen it, was rejected. But faith was predominantly expressed as an individual, inner experience and condition, even though doctrinally faith was a gift and part of God’s sovereign dealing with humanity. Faith as individual act of consciousness (an affirmation) was the center of a cognitive autonomy, and increasingly so in the various shapes of Puritanism. The quest for the certainty of salvation seemed to signal a return to Christian morality, because only in the life of good works could there be a corroboration of faith. Even those Lutheran thinkers who emphasized obedience and ethics had to do so after the Enlightenment, within the general framework of thinking that identified reason and consciousness as the prime expression of autonomous liberty in man.

Paradoxically, the extreme stress on the extrinsic source of imputed righteousness came to be bound up with an equal stress on the inner conscience as its recipient. The opposition to the imperial authority of the Pope and the priests that had prepared the Reformation - in the Sacramentalists’ movement, in the Modern Devotion, and in other sects of the 15th century - was transformed in Kant’s philosophy of morals into general and principled rejection of the moral use of all heteronomous law, through this intermediate stage which combined cognitive autonomy with moral heteronomy. The 19th-century modernists deliberately attempted to reinterpret Jesus’ and Paul’s teachings to reflect this basic moral autonomy. The pervading tendency was well expressed in the work of Schleiermacher, who defended the thesis that all theological statements were actually statements about human religious consciousness, yet maintained that in the most inner dimension of human consciousness there was an awareness of absolute transcendence which could not be reduced to human autonomy. (If the latter was lost to sight, religion was reduced to anthropology as in Feuerbach.) Inside himself, man experienced his finitude in such a way, that he became aware of the absolute as its condition. The Lutheran paradox of extrinsic righteousness imputed to me from the outside and still experienced within my innermost conscience developed into the paradigm of all human religious consciousness in Schleiermacher’s theory.

The relative autonomy of conscience and faith of the 17th century was followed by the absolutist humanism of the 18th. In the era of the Enlightenment the concept of autonomy moved from being one of man’s basic (ontic) characteristics vis-à-vis nature and society to become the ontological notion that defined man and society. Instead of having concrete freedom, to the degree possible for a finite being, man was freedom realized. All in all, this development could not but obscure all elements both in the gospels and in Paul that stressed submission to God and heteronomous obedience. The metaphor of living-in-the-spirit, which Paul had derived from Jeremiah’s prophecy of the New Covenant, was continually being read to mean inner, autonomous morality instead of a “movement” of the Spirit extra nos that guided our actions (as if or in reality) from without. And Christ’s teachings were now seen in particular as a breaking away from orthodoxy; i.e., they were valued only in so far as they in-
cluded a break with established orthodoxy and not in their positive end result.

There were other developments as well. Moral autonomy in particular became since the 18th century (Socinians!) a paradigm for a new type of secular theology. Man could only be expected to obey a divine commandment if he at the same time was able to understand such a commandment - or even more, if he was able to construe, purely by the light of his own reason, that he might have issued it himself. Practical, moral autonomy became wedded to cognitive autonomy. The moral life for Kant was now about making choices on the basis of rationally defendable principles. In 19th-century modernism that took its cure from Kant, Christ soon became the example of moral living, both in the sense that the pattern of his ethical life (with a stress on his non-conformity with Pharisaic rules, but as equally congruent with acceptance of social morality) ought to be copied, and in the sense, that he was Himself a mere example of the ethical life that was to be followed. The “positive” or “mythical” form of religion, in which Christ had been this concrete individual man and God (the two-nature doctrine), was to be redeemed by the universality of Christ-in-us. But that implied that the particular nature of Christ’s moral teachings as obedience to the extrinsic reality of the approaching Kingdom was transcended by the pattern of the inner motivation for “good behavior”. Concrete ethics was found in keeping the morality of the surrounding culture - since society as such, and not the Church, was the (universal) community that grounded and defined ethics - with the gospel as a particular motivating narrative to do so.

In 19th-century modernism it was Paul who got the reputation of turning the moral gospel of Christ into the “magical” (Schleiermacher) doctrine of the God-man becoming the cultic sacrifice for mankind. In the Netherlands, the highpoint of modernism was around 1860 with the work of Reformed theologians J. H. Scholten (1811-1885) and C. W. Opzoomer (1821-1892), and the Mennonite teacher S. Hoekstra (1822-1898). Hoekstra especially tried to keep the middle ground in the effort to find the synthesis between Christian tradition and modern secular culture, by trying to integrate neither Fichte’s nor Hegel’s idealism into theology - which would lead to variations of pantheism and spiritualism - but by trying to integrate Kantian philosophy. He tried to construct a formal religious a priori based in man’s personality. That personality was not a formal construct but a living person, seen as a developing entity under psychological laws. This made it possible for him to speak about remorse, contrition, rebirth, and the like in a psychological manner. Other Mennonite themes from the past could surface again, like the notion of the redeemed community, now interpreted as a social environment in which man was able to progress in his own inner development from guilt to new moral freedom. Even the idea of the personality of God could find a place with him.

Hoekstra’s interpretation of Paul is interesting in this context. Righteousness, according to Hoekstra, does not mean virtue, “but the spiritual condition of someone who is justified by faith, that is, of him whom God has forgiven his sins.” The status of the believer is seen as “psychological” or as “spiritual condition,” and not as legal status. Beyond this psychologically based affirmation of Paul’s doctrines, Hoekstra’s rejection of other elements in Paul’s theology is also that of the 19th-century scientist. The main thought in Christian theology might very well have been that Christ’s blood has been shed unto forgiveness of sins, but “on a scientific standpoint, this is untenable if only because the concept of the relationship between God and the human world as a covenant is only adequate to the rather anthropomorphic concept of God in ancient Israel… [on the contrary this relationship] proceeds from God’s eternal being with strict necessity…and from our spiritual nature. There can be no ‘blood of the covenant’.” Hoekstra the psychologist cannot affirm the historical and legal language that the Biblical concept of justification presents to him. In sum, the doctrine of salvation in the Church is a “conglomerate of untrue, often even absurd theses, a doctrine that cannot fail to impress anyone who is not under the spell of theological misconceptions to be lacking in seriousness.” To suffer and die for the sake of religious convictions was a pattern of life for
Christians and Christ alike. But the essence of that was a “revelation of their powerful faith and their real moral character.” The experience of faith has now become part of man’s psychological nature, historically a recourse to the actual faith of the first Church, and redemption through the Cross has become a general martyrdom for religious convictions, showing the moral fiber of the martyr. The Christ of scriptures was a mental projection of human religious needs and aspirations unto the history of this singular man, Jesus of Nazareth.

Behind this tension between an orthodox Paulinism without ethics and a liberal moralism (accepting or rejecting some image of Paul) without doctrine lay a cultural difference. From the days of the Enlightenment, Christian culture had become ruptured. On the one hand there was the modernist effort exemplified in Hoekstra and Kant to show that classic Christian symbols were actually in full alignment with the dictates of autonomous reason or else should be rejected as part of an antiquated belief system; on the other there was the conservative attempt to preserve a biblicist outlook by defending an ultimate congruence with modern rationality or (as in Neo-Calvinism and Confessionalism) propagating a division between Christ and culture. The modern distinction between “fundamentalism” and “liberalism” as tendencies within theology has its roots in the Reformation and Enlightenment periods. But both these tendencies have something in common on which their conflict is based: that we are autonomous, whether in the reception of faith or in the liberty with which we accept and follow the moral demand. In either case we define that moral demand for ourselves. The 19th-century clash between the older Lutheran Orthodoxy and Pietism on the one hand, and the morality and psychology of the Enlightenment on the other, share the basic presupposition that ethics must in some way be grounded on autonomous freedom, either restricted to cognitive and experiential autonomy of faith or broadened to equal moral autonomy or self-determining freedom.

§ 4. The conceptual logic of justification

I have chosen a particular perspective from which to tackle the problems of this development. This study starts with the relationship between what God has done in Christ (usually referred to by the term redemption or “justification”) and the new situation man is brought into and/or what man should be doing as a consequence of that (sanctification, renovatio in Lutheranism, the realm of Christian ethics). My basic question was this: is our response to God’s revelation in Christ a form of obedience to a law – whether after Mosaic law or a “law of Christ” - or a new “spirituality” that grows from the narrative of Christ’s suffering and resurrection, that shapes the source of our attitudes and behavior from within? Does justification lead to life under a new law, a renewed ethics, or a transformation of life? Some combination of these? Or all of the above?

Coming from a (Mennonite) tradition that has always stressed the notion that “knowing Christ is to follow Him in life,” i.e., faith is obedience to (the law of) Christ and thus obedience makes one understand who He is, this question takes on a specific shape. We ask whether it is possible to maintain a moral and a cognitive heteronomy in Christian ethics, as indicated by the dictum of Hans Denck. Following Him (moral heteronomy) leads to knowing Him (cognitive heteronomy). Is righteousness in man a passive result of God’s declaration of amnesty and being taken up in the movement of the Spirit? Then we have an extrinsic act establishing cognitive and moral autonomy. And is therefore Christian ethics a pneumatological motivation within an ever changing ethical situation at best? Or does the New Testament teach obedience to the law of Christ, implying the ability to comply with the known will of God through a free act of our own volition? Or does this opposition between the two wrongly state the issue? Because we might see later that to Paul, at least, the presence of the Spirit in man actually constitutes a fulfilling of the law.
With regard to the ecclesiological emphasis of our time, the same questions take on a slightly different shape. Is righteousness about moral qualities and behavior (a condition) or does it signify entrance into the covenant community changing our situation? Is it about obedience to the Mosaic law, as interpreted by the ordinances and the law of Christ, mentioned in the New Testament i.e., a new kind of messianic Torah for a new type of community? And then of course the decisive question: if so, what is this “law of Christ”? What are the ordinances and instructions that shape the life of the Christian community? Against such an emphasis on the difference and concreteness of Christian ethics many have protested. Is Bultmann right in his assertion that the post-Pauline Church slipped back into a moralizing and judaizing attitude that produced a Christian casuistry and lost sight of the righteousness that God revealed in Christ? (Bultmann, 1953, 545)

We can also put the question into more classical theological jargon: how are justification by faith and sanctification and/or the Christian life of good works related to each other? In the domain of general ethics, the question might be put differently: is there any specific Christian character in ethics when it is based on justification by faith? Or are Christians committed to the same standard of right and wrong as they find in the societies they are in, better motivated perhaps than others to do the good and avoid the bad? All these questions can be summarized into one: what does Christian obedience mean?

We should at this stage first try to understand in broad terms the meaning of the term justification and the inner logic that showed itself in its reception history from the 17th century up to now. Let us consider first what we ordinarily mean by justification by faith, starting with the Reformation period. McGrath gives us three distinctive characteristics of the primary Protestant doctrines of justification, as established in the literary output of the theologians of the Lutheran and Reformed Churches over the period 1530-1700:

1. Justification is defined as the forensic declaration by God, proclaimed through the gospel, that the believer is situationally righteous, rather than the process by which he is made righteous, involving a change in his status or situation rather than his nature or condition. (In other words: it is basically the divine verdict that someone will be pronounced acquitted in the future judgment and the change in situation for the present that is its consequence.)

2. A deliberate and systematic distinction is made between justification (the external act by which God declares the sinner to be righteous) and sanctification or regeneration (the internal process of renewal within man). Although the two are treated as inseparable, a notional distinction is thus drawn where none was conceded before.

3. Justifying righteousness, or the formal cause of justification, is defined as the alien righteousness of Christ, external to man and imputed to him, rather than a righteousness which is inherent to him, located within him, or which in any sense may be said to belong to him. God’s judgment in justification is therefore synthetic rather than analytic, in that there is no righteousness within man which can be considered to be the basis of the divine verdict of justification; the righteousness upon which such a judgment is necessarily based is external (extra nos) to man.

The most important element in this context is the clear delineation between justification and sanctification whereas Augustine still understood justification to mean primarily: justum facere, i.e., to be made righteous whereby the two concepts remained one. The point of the separation is of course that now no intrinsic righteousness of man can be seen as the basis of God’s declaration of righteousness so that the practical life of sanctification is now no longer a road to salvation but a way of life of the redeemed. In part this functions to fend off notions of self-redemption or a human assistance in God’s work of redemption, and it also fits better into the comparatively gloomy view of human nature that was pervasive in that age.

The anthropological notions of the 17th century were well expressed in the doctrine of the
fall, which was taken to imply the absolute corruption of man’s nature (though some argued not in man’s essence, but in his accidental qualities). To be able in one’s power to obtain the status of righteous was consistent neither with the high notion of righteousness in itself nor with the prevalent view on man’s inaptitude. Justification by works would imply, so it was understood, that man had “earned” it through his own merits, which was deemed also to be unacceptable within the anthropological understanding of man’s inability to comply with God’s demand and the radical nature of that demand, in itself involving the complete inner submission to God’s will that was taken to be part of the messianic, radical understanding of the law.

If justification addressed the situation of man and not his condition, this implied a twofold understanding of sin. Sin in general is defined as defectus naturae et actionum in naturis intelligentibus, pugnans cum lege (“a defect within the nature and actions of intelligent beings that conflicts with the law”). As peccatum imputatum the original sin is guilt, which is attributed to the nature of man. Man’s actions on the basis of his nature are perverted by the objective situation of his standing guilty before God and if he acts without taking that into account, all his subsequent actions are sinful again. Besides that there is peccatum originale inhaerens (the body of sin) that is the reality of sin in man. It was explained as an attitude and direction of human activity that is opposed to God. Through it, human nature was corrupted: Peccatum originale est reatus et corruptio totius generis humani ex lapsu illo primo inde ab origine conceptionis inhaerens. That’s why man was (1) deprived from the good and (2) inclined to all evil.47

This meant that sanctification that related to human behavior, and therefore involved the second notion of sin, could only be seen as a secondary result of justification and as separated from it both in time and in substance. Any connection between the two was of a logical nature, as if a practical deduction: if we are righteous before God by declaration, let us then conform to that and act righteously in every-day reality. Righteousness in practice was motivated by our response to received righteousness: gratitude.

But even then, the logic did not fail to produce a still greater emphasis on grace. The “works of gratitude” themselves had to be caused by God, humanity still being unable to respond freely to God’s grace after having been declared righteous. Otherwise the forensic nature of that declaration and eo ipso God’s sovereignty would be compromised. The logic of justification therefore tended to destroy all human liberty in so far it involved spontaneity and thereby reduced man to an object in the hands of God. The doctrine of predestination, especially in its form as “double predestination,” expressed that. Man was elected by God’s sovereign grace either to be saved or to be doomed for eternity. The emphasis shifted from justification by faith to justification of the ungodly expressing a sovereign act of God that remained extrinsic (solo verbo) to the believer expressing the pattern of Christian life even after conversion. The inability to serve God was not removed after conversion.

The general dynamic of this doctrine can be summarized with reference to Bultmann’s theology as an indicative-imperative transition, whereby elements of the imperative were continually being integrated into the indicative to the point that their distinction got blurred. With such a logic in place, a particular reading of Paul could be developed. Especially Paul’s letters to the Romans and Galatians were read in this light. It became necessary to make a clear distinction between justification of the sinner (God’s extrinsic and sovereign act dealing with the human situation) and evangelical obedience or sanctification (man’s response, or rather: God’s continued work in the believer, dealing with his condition), even if that distinction could only be made in “conversation” and could not be found in the texts. As we will see, this distinction, though perhaps meaningful in discussion, tends to weaken the intrinsic connection between the two that is apparent in Paul’s terminology and treatment of the matter. Sanctification must neither be interpreted after the pattern of justification so as to maintain a sense of
their unity, nor the other way around. What we seek is a concept that will hold the two together in their intrinsic unity without blurring their distinction.

What kind of connection is made between justification and ethics? We can clearly hear the distinction between justification and sanctification, e.g., in the words of John Calvin:

I trust I have now sufficiently shown how man's only resource for escaping from the curse of the law, and recovering salvation, lies in faith; and also what the nature of faith is, what the benefits which it confers, and the fruits [my emphasis] which it produces. The whole may be thus summed up: Christ given to us by the kindness of God is apprehended and possessed by faith, by means of which we obtain in particular a twofold benefit; first, being reconciled by the righteousness of Christ, God becomes, instead of a judge, an indulgent Father; and, secondly, being sanctified by his Spirit, we aspire to integrity and purity of life [my emphasis].

So "integrity and purity of life" is something we aspire to on the basis of our having been justified, "being reconciled by the righteousness of Christ." The concept of sanctification seems to be added to that of justification. The reconciliation referred to here is therefore not a restoration of man's ability to perform God's will, that would unite the forensic and the intrinsic meaning of justification, but it does provide the basis for our "aspiring" to it. Calvin wants to make sure it is understood that justification by faith and sanctification by the Spirit belong together, but still he emphasizes that justification is the main pillar of the Christian faith. Justification is a full reality at the moment when faith begins (even though it is predestined from eternity), and sanctification starts as a correlated process. The grace of God is not an aid in acquiring inherent righteousness - since God’s grace is not a perfection of nature but a radical renewal - but it is an imputation of an alien and undeserved righteousness, a benefit which is conferred by God and experienced by man through faith, i.e., the righteousness of Christ. Or in another imagery: sanctification is in no way a prerequisite of justification, but rather a fruit which it produced over time. It is understood that sanctification has its origin extrinsically, just as justification does.

In that way the concept of justification becomes the criterion or the fundament of what can be said about the role of ethics in Christian life, and it determines both the form of evangelical obedience and the shape of the community that is constituted by it. Justification, understood as declarative amnesty, as extrinsic to man, becomes the logical pattern of sanctification. It is this doctrine of justification that provides a specific basis for Christian ethics, since it makes the forensic declaration of righteousness the main pillar of faith and makes sanctification into a process that transforms man from the outside by constant reference to this imputed righteousness. But we must take note that Calvin's language has no problem with a word like 'aspires', which connotes human effort though he states that the process is a gift. Because extrinsic justification defines man's basic ethical situation, the language of sanctification and obedience can still refer to human endeavor, because it is understood that this is a consequence of God acting within man, and not man acting on his own.

Though Calvin purposed to keep justification and sanctification together, the way he understood both makes it possible to apply the logic of the connection in a different manner. In other words, once you disengage the contents of sanctification from the concept of justification, you possibly lose sight of their intrinsic relationship. In modern, post-Enlightenment Protestant thinking, this logic of extrinsic connection has been used to define a new mode of "obedience" as obedience to the voice of inner conscience or moral self-awareness and to express the whole as a relationship between a motivational event or reality and a universal, human ethics. Especially in the early 19th century, the demand for liberation from all external bonds and authorities grew to the point that even Christ as Model or Ideal of human life was put forward only as an external motivation to discover the inner Moral law. Love was set against any kind of external obedience to law. Sola fide was exchanged, one might say, for
sola corde (only through the heart), and a moral and inner certitude replaced the response of faith to the Biblical Christ.

What was lost here was the Reformation’s insistence that both justification and sanctification were processes and events that originated outside of us, extra nos. (But modernism at least addressed the problem that justification and sanctification were only extrinsically connected.) The logic of justification in the early Reformation had stressed an inner morality consistent with the pattern of faith as gift, as opposed to any kind of outward legality. In this first stage, the doctrine of justification defined the ethical situation as basically extrinsic, as a situation in which man is placed of which his inner faith is merely the awareness; now that same logic (in its third, pietist-modernist stage) produced interiority as the basic inner value and justification as an inner process leading man to autonomous morality. The cognitive autonomy of consciousness that experienced outward grace was gradually strengthened to imply moral autonomy, the inner experience of the “voice of conscience.” When the Enlightenment declared the main essence of humanity to lie in his freedom and defined that freedom in the manner of Leibniz as “having the ultimate ground of being in itself” or in the language of Spinoza as (participating in) the absolute substance as causa sui, all relational (extrinsic) aspects of human nature were relegated to a place of secondary importance. The relation to God, as the “external” relation per se, external from the human side, that is; immanent from the side of God, was replaced by the God-in-us perspective.

In the 19th century this development reached its culmination when German idealism made the Spirit, God in His immanence in creation, into the most basic ontological category, and defined it by freedom. The measure of all things was now not only man in his finite, concrete nature (as the 17th-century pre-Enlightenment had tried to show), nor man as a creature of both intellect and corporeality (Kant), but man in so far as he was able to be in the manner of a self-relating closed, monadic identity. Fichte’s concept of the universal monadic ego and Schelling’s vision of the absolute Being beyond our intellect were sides of one and the same coin. Hegel’s conception of the Absolute Spirit as immanence in the world trying to overcome the vestiges of transcendence, which would lead to a secular fulfillment of Paul’s vision of God’s being “all in all,” was the most forceful statement of that enterprise.

Through this momentous change in the basic paradigm of theology in the 18th and 19th centuries, not only was the specific nature of Christianity severely weakened, but the logical connection itself: obedience or at least what was left of it after the Reformation itself declared that the Anabaptist insistence on obedience was “revolutionary” or “fanatical”. Justification now became more objectively the cosmic drama of the narrative of Christ, with pedagogical or psychological value only. To quote just one example, Joseph Fuchs wrote:

The specific and decisively Christian aspect of Christian morality is not to be sought first of all in the particularity of categorical values, virtues and norms of various human activities. Rather it resides in the believer’s fundamental Christian decision to accept God’s love in Christ and respond to it as one who believes and loves, as one who assumes the responsibility for life in this world in imitation of Christ, that is, as one who has died with Christ and is risen with him in faith and sacrament thus becoming a new creation. 50

The point of this passage is that the specific Christian character of ethics resides in the motivational power of the Christian faith as a force that pervades our whole person. Justification had made all of morality, all “good works,” immaterial to salvation, but had kept in its early stages and in Calvin the connotation of (evangelical) obedience. The extrinsic righteousness of Christ led to our being set on the road of obedience to God’s demands, not society’s. But now the concept of justification is seen as a force that motivates and stimulates Christians to a better behavior that was in itself formally defined according to the values and standards of western culture, even if that culture was no longer permeated by Biblical values.

Christian values are then not different from other human values in our different societies
and are not the private domain of Christians. In a sense, as soon as the connection between biblical sources and Christian ethics was given up because that would constitute "moralism" or a return to a Judaistic works-righteousness, as soon as justification became an internal event within man's consciousness and sanctification a matter of character and no longer of outward obedience, there were specified Christian values but no specified Christian behavior. These values could only "work" when they were ingrained in society and practiced in Church. But they got the status of ideas and goals that were ultimately successful only if they were in themselves in conformity with the demands of universal reason. The utopian dream of rationalism replaced concrete obedience to rules and institutions. National societies replaced the counter-community of the Church as the primary environment of Christian values. The development of western European anthropology, with its modern insistence on inner freedom and the role of the state as the embodiment and guarantor of that freedom, took over from scripture as the material source of Christian ethics.

That development not only made the Old Testament law and the idea of commandment in itself immaterial for salvation, which was the polemical edge of its inception phase, but it also declared the striving for all works that accord with the principle of obedience to law, or by which man strives for merit, or, in more modern language, that include self-conscious acting according to external rules of behavior, to be in opposition to the very essence of salvation. Salvation was freedom, not bondage, not even to Christ. The antithesis between a curing law and a liberating grace precluded any possibility of accepting evangelical obedience as an analogy to Torah-obedience, i.e., as "law of Christ" or as "messianic Torah."

The more general problem in this connection is whether we can truly ground a Christian ethics by defining it as behavior in accordance with the values prevalent in a society or seen as foundational to the well-being of that society, and our deeming the traditional Christian values to result from compromise in the confrontation between gospel and society. If the elements of forensic and external imputation are taken away from the doctrine of justification because the prevalent anthropology of society has changed, then the result seems to be that the connection between justification and sanctification falls away or is at least modified beyond recognition. If justification is thought of as extrinsic, then sanctification is equally extrinsic, i.e., a process that leads man into a sanctity that is not necessarily identical to that of surrounding society, though Calvin is more adamant that Christian ethics retains its specific character than is Luther.

Our disagreement with Calvin might be about the source and the nature of Christian ethics, not that it has a specific character. Calvin applied the logic of justification to the issue of practical sanctification in such a way, that he needed the law to provide its contents, thereby preserving the specific character of Christian ethics. Because however the law also had to function as the incentive for accepting the gospel, as indictment against humanity, the function of the law became intrinsically ambiguous. Justification and sanctification could then never be understood as parts of the same process. When the Reformation made sanctification into the secondary corollary of justification, it provided later centuries with a problem: their change in the appreciation of justification was prompted by changes in anthropology since the 17th century, in particular the Enlightenment, because if justification is intrinsic, a mere corollary of human self-improvement under the guidance of reason, then sanctification implies commitment to society's values. It might very well be the case, that the change in the understanding of sanctification reversely influenced this reinterpretation of the extrinsic justification into the motivational background of moral behavior. Society's values changed as well, making a life in accordance with predetermined values of a pre-Enlightenment age more difficult to hold on to, though some tried. The result of the particular connection made between justification and sanctification by 17th-century Reformation theology was that, with the change in anthropology and social morality, justification had become a motivational pedagogy.
leading to Christians observing the political and social values of the day.

That was particularly true for the 19th century, but this connection between theology of grace and society remained in full force as a prime concern for Christians. In our less optimistic age, political responsibility has become the major paradigm of love for the neighbor, and as a result the Church is seen by many as an instrument of social critique. Liberation theologies of various kinds preach the primacy of action over liturgy and prayer. With respect to the doctrine of justification, and its insistence on the primacy of grace, this meant a decisive change. Salvation was not the free gift of God to the body of believers, and through them a present reality, but consisted in gradual changes within society. Grace could no longer be the pure inner reality of faith, but must be present and active in a real progress in society toward a greater degree of real, social justice. So salvation is never a present reality, it is something we hope for and strive for. It is fundamentally a thing of the future. “Hope” has become one of the major paradigms for Christian thought and living. This tendency is reinforced by an alternate change in theological paradigms: the notion that reality counts as it is experienced and not as it is evaluated by faith. Bultmann had argued in 1962 that faith in the existence of God was only possible against experience. Now the paradigm shifted away from faith to experience: either grace is a visible experience in the social and political dimension of life, or it is abstract and/or absent.

Starting with experience implies starting with man. The quest for God’s grace must begin with determination of the self-experience of man and his view on his condition. We can only determine in what sense God’s grace is the answer to man’s predicament if we have first established what man’s condition really is. Grace is then defined as liberation from whatever ails and oppresses man. If man is approached from his own (self-)experience, his liberation must be empirically concrete, with a view to changing the real conditions in which man lives as a social and political being. But the definition of his predicament is then not informed by insight into what grace is, but just the other way round.

In this development, four stages can be clearly observed.

The classic debate – 16th century

In the first stage, justification by faith as opposed to justification by works was the point of disagreement among Catholics, Anabaptists, and Protestants, specifically as regards the objective nature and externality of justification. Differing anthropological and conceptual differences were largely responsible for the variance among their basic views. The Reformed view ran like this: If I was a sinner and justified as such, my faith made me the recipient of external forensic justification; a declaration which set me free. Sanctification was a direct consequence of the life in the spirit that was made possible by the initial amnesty of God’s grace. Justification was the condition of ethics, defining the new situation in which I was placed before God. I remained a sinner, so moral behavior could not involve autonomous action in compliance with the known will of God as expressed in commandments. Still, the motivational force of justification led to specific Christian duties that were added to our common duties under civil government.

The Scholastic stage – 17th century

Drawing on the same pessimist anthropology and continuing along the lines of searching for the ultimate expression of God’s sovereignty, the Scholastic phase of Lutheran theology came to stress the extrinsic imputation as a declarative, not constitutive act, thereby severing the intrinsic link between justification and sanctification. One of its expressions was double-election theology, in which all vestiges of human cooperation and liberty were denied. One of the responses it provoked was Puritanism, which tried to reconnect the two by stressing the inner experience of faith-conversion as a subjective process.
The turnover in the 18th and 19th century

In its tertiary stage, the doctrine was taken up into a decisively different anthropology, which stressed man’s moral and spiritual freedom. Justification came to express an element of the inner life of man, i.e., the common morality of humanity could be expressed in a Christian fashion without its being a Christian prerogative. Christian morality was about affirming man’s inner moral nature. In this liberal or Enlightenment stage of the process, specified-Christian duties were non-existent. The social and political virtues of the various Christian societies were normative sources for our knowledge of the good. This was the era of modernism.

Social and political critique – 20th century

Then there was the dawn of a fourth stage. In the sixties of our century, this conformity with social virtues of the day was transformed into a more or less radical position of social critique. Liberation theology defined the life of faith as social activism, striving for the concrete improvement of society, holding on to the hope of a just society but also demanding that part of this hope be realized in the present-day.

The exegesis of Paul’s letters in the New Testament remains a source for this fourth approach to Christian ethics. It has been said recently that Paul is an “antinomist” who wants to have nothing to do with laws, whether of a legal or a moral nature. Christian ethics is about being “taken up in the movement of the Spirit,” without rules of conduct, not as a task to be performed, but as a reality of the heart. Paul’s exhortations are not commandments, but descriptions of Christian spirituality that intend to let others become involved in a new reality. The objective nature of this involvement lies in the social and political critique to which it leads and the rejection of inner experience, including the life of faith, that would stand in the way of this movement toward social reality. Zuurmond’s position conforms to the paradigm of the post-60s theology that we sketched briefly above. This position breaks away from traditional Reformed thought by stressing three things:

• Justification by faith is not an amnesty for my private sins and is not experienced in an individual emotional event. This of course addresses not the doctrines of the Reformers themselves, since Calvin, e.g., is very much concerned with the extrinsic character of the imputed righteousness, and not with the emotional condition in which it is received, but its anti-Wesleyan intent leads to an exaggerated objectivity. Still, at the same time this objectivity is also a matter of experience in the sense that it is oriented toward the real political experience of freedom.

• Justification by faith does not refer to “private” faith, but faith is understood as a personified power that works within the congregation. So in conjunction with the removal of the individual experience, the emphasis now falls on the social dimension of the gospel, and faith is “objectified” to become a descriptive term of a historical movement or a tendency in what happens.

• Justification is not about the final state of man before God, not something that will be real in the future, but is about the present of a community: it is about creating the conditions in which we can live as free human beings. That sentence refers directly to the a priori value of being a “free human being” and takes the social dimension as the condition for experiencing that freedom. If “hope” plays a role here, it is still an expression of the reality of salvation in terms of hope. Thus it is to be distinguished from the orientation to the future that is, e.g., present in classical Marxism, in that it does not accept a preliminary stage on the road to salvation.

As a consequence of such a position, and increasingly so as the doctrine moves from its classical to its modern variants, there emerges a clear antithesis to morality as such, let alone
biblical morality, which is argued as non-existent. Morality belongs to “this” world as long as it expresses itself in the imperative. The new life can only be expressed by transcending the command and its shape of obedience and heteronomy, i.e., only by using a morally inspiring narrative. Christian freedom was once understood as freedom from powers of sin leading to a particular kind of new obedience, but this obedience was declared to be a gift of God in faith, i.e., in the “inner man”, and not a task or duty presented as a goal for man’s activity. This understanding of obedience as “internal” was the key for the development that followed. The moral perspective that goes with it would describe obedience as an act of the will in conformity to the will of another, making the question of who is obeyed, who is Lord, the primary one. Obedience implied submission to authority. But the modern notion of freedom as exercised within a community is felt to be inconsistent with a morality that defines a priori limitations to the exercise of that freedom. It is sometimes held, as a popular belief and axiom, that there can be only legal restraint, which must ultimately be grounded upon the necessity to ensure that different freedoms do not destroy each other. The freedom that is exercised in the shape of submission to scripture must of necessity now seem to be an alienation and a bondage under external powers.

In conformity with Luther’s renewal of Paulinism, modern Lutheran theologians like Bultmann not only reiterate the position that “good works” are mere straw since they only address the outward behavior (the “legality”), but add to this that the underlying attitude (the motivational side of acquiring merit to Luther, of being self-centered in Bultmann) is itself sinful. Zuurmond posits a pneumatic ethos as a direct opposite of “morality” whereby the latter only has meaning in those practical circumstances where decisions must be made concerning right and wrong. So freedom is not understood as self-centered, as in the early half of the 19th century in German idealism. Rather, it is the eccentric rather than the egocentric freedom of man that places him in essential relationships, that is deemed to be the core essence of this human freedom. The modern concept of individual, inward autonomy is changed to mean independence from everything that is not contributive to the welfare of the social whole to which one belongs. It is that social whole that becomes the bearer of a collective autonomy. The pneumatic ethos in Zuurmond’s reading of Paul is a social ethos, but, in distinction from Yoder, it is no longer a morality. It is a description of God’s work in man beyond his inner experience focusing on the community, and not a concept of a condition granted to man enabling him to respond in a specific and prescribed manner to God’s will.

The general outcome of this entire development of the concepts of justification and sanctification, as they moved beyond Calvin’s effort to separate them “in conversation” but hold them together experientially, is that Christians would have no special insights toward a better morality, they would only be motivated differently in seeking to conform to the standards of modern society. The contents of such ethics would still be derived from a universal human condition and be grounded in the practical possibilities of political freedom, not in the commandments of the eschatological Kingdom. The Kingdom-ethos would be a force that moves us beyond such matters of morality and legality and, to some extent, beyond all practical matters of good and evil.

§ 5. Leander Keck: Justification as the definition of the ethical condition

The most fervent advocates of the doctrine of justification (now stressing the justification of the ungodly as in Rom. 4:5) can be found in the school of Rudolf Bultmann, in particular E. Käsemann. Here we find the statement that this doctrine really is the canon in the canon, repeating the Lutheran insistence that justification is the issue on which the Church stands or falls. In particular this defense of the Lutheran thesis contends that justification is not part of Paul’s disagreement with Jewish Christians on the issue of “boundaries”, as has been de-
fended recently by Sanders, and James Dunn; at the same time it tries to develop a position that goes beyond the anthropocentric (existentialist) presuppositions of Bultmann’s own position. I will illustrate the inner structure of the modern argument in favor of the individual justification-doctrine by briefly summarizing the position of one of Käsemann’s pupils.

In 1976 Leander E. Keck published his contribution to the Festschrift in honor of E. Käsemann under the title: “Justification of the Ungodly and Ethics.” The article deals with a lot of issues, including the question of what is to be seen as the center of the New Testament and the role of canon history in finding the core message of the gospel. I want to focus, however, on the main issue of the article, which is the question of how justification and ethics are related. According to Keck, the doctrine of justification deals with the core problem of Christian ethics. Paul’s key contribution to ethics is not that he answered the questions that have traditionally been seen as the definition of ethics since Kant: What must I do? and, How can I know it? Paul focuses on the third question of Kant’s ethics: What is man? Paul “transforms the situation of the doer.” That is consistent with the former conclusion, that a major difference between Anabaptism and the Reformation lies specifically in the area of the anthropological presuppositions of the doctrine of justification and ties in with the post-Enlightenment emphasis on justification as about character or being and not about deeds. The key problem in ethics, according to Keck, is the dichotomy of “condition” versus “situation.” Is it true that justification changes the situation and not the doer himself?

To 1st-century Judaism, the answer to the first two Kantian questions would have been: Torah. The Mosaic law both tells us what to do and how to prepare for doing it. The Torah is many things, civil law, cultic law, ethical exhortation and moral pedagogy. It therefore details a system of restoring the unwitting sinner, the one who sinned because of ignorance. It was equally positive that sins, perpetrated with intent and knowledge of evil had no means of being atoned for unless they were punished and in that sense it kept a condemning edge, though Rabbinic literature expanded the efficacy of repentance to such a degree that it worked for almost everything. Now to Keck, the issues of law and of ethics become intertwined to form one and the same argument. Paul took up the matter of law by arguing that (1) all are under the curse of the law since no one is able to do all that the law has commanded (Gal. 3:10), and (2) the law gives us knowledge of sin, but it does not give us the power to abstain from evil. The law is weakened by and even perverted by the flesh. The power of sin actually abuses the law to promote sin. That is not a problem of the law in itself, but a problem of the human condition vis-à-vis the law. “The utter perversity of sin is manifested precisely in its ability to work death by means of the good and life-promising law.” So the problem with the law and all ethics of obedience is that its situation (the being “under” the law; freedom having to obey) does not harmonize with the condition of the moral subjects under it. Still, the law makes a promise of life. It states that disregarding what needs to be done has serious consequences, and it posits that doing what is commanded is validated by God, who controls the consequences of any act. In short, law and ethics both make an assumption with regard to the “moral order” as a concurring “situation” that takes the weak condition of man into consideration. “A God who would or could not vindicate the good and the right of which He is the ground is either immoral or incompetent.” Seen against that background, divine Mercy must then consist in forbearance and patience in the face of human failure. Grace can be seen as a moderation of the human situation with respect to obligation. Jew and gentile are only different in this respect because the Jew has the knowledge of the good in the Torah and can therefore rightfully pass judgment on others because of their ignorance of the law, and the gentile is “still asking the ethical question,” but apart from that both “construe the ground of the good to be commensurate with what they are trying to do.” So the law makes the question: What to do? the most basic question and separates people into those who know and those who do not know the answer to it, the latter then being unable to comply with the demand.
We must note in passing that to Keck the law still figures prominently in this model of "moral order" as a system of rules of behavior, punishments and rewards. No effort is made to understand the law from its inner core as means of reconciliation, as if Leviticus 16 dealing with the Day of Atonement were not an integral part of it. From the outset, the law is not taken as "Torah" (instruction), but as "lex."

If God nevertheless vindicated the condemned Jesus, Keck continues; if God resurrected a Jesus who despite his complete compliance with Mosaic law had become cursed under that same law by hanging from a tree because that was the punishment for those who broke the law and opposed it, then there is a righteousness beyond law and ethics. The situation rather than the condition of man has been changed decisively. Christ's death proves that the situation of man under the law will not work the good, because it cannot address human weakness. So now the good as known is no longer a reliable guide to answering the question of what to do. The problem of ethics is no longer solved by changing the condition alone (by preparing man for obedience) because that is a hopeless enterprise, nor by ignoring the human condition and changing the situation (by removing the law), but only by changing man's moral condition and his situation under the law both at the same time.

More to the point: the clue to the improvement of the condition of man is no longer given in the situation of man under the law. Right relationship to God is no longer based on the presumption that knowing the good is knowing the Creator. God is not the guarantor of the moral order if God justifies and resurrects someone whom the law must condemn. So it is no longer our achievement that grounds moral judgment, since Jesus in terms of the moral order failed to accomplish anything. If God vindicates Jesus, then it must be said that God justifies the ungodly, not those who are perfect in terms of the moral order or the law. For Jesus was vindicated Himself after taking the place of sinners, effectively by dying the death of a sinner. The right relationship to God is therefore not based on trust in God as the basis of the moral order, but on trust in a God who transcends that moral order and in doing so frees mankind from its obligation, because that obligation only strengthened the power of sin under which man suffered.

If this is the new basis for ethics, then the moral demand gets a new face. The justification of the ungodly becomes the decisive context of ethics and as a consequence ethics is no longer an issue of harmonizing the situation of man before God under law with the human condition. It means that the good can now be done

- without calculating the effect of the good that is to be done; (because there is no moral order any more that can ground such calculation)
- with the understanding that doing it does not add to or supplement what one is; (so the situation of man before God is detached from his actions)
- in freedom from self-regard and egocentric motivations;
- without fear of the judgment of others;
- with a new ability to return good for evil and to accept suffering. (That implies an enablement to live beyond the dictates of moral law in sacrificial love.)

So Keck can conclude: "...for Paul ethics is not a matter of paraenesis for the justified, but rather the justification of the ungodly transforms the ethical situation of the doer with respect to the obligatory good and its ground." 58

We have been investigating the general structure of the various doctrines of justification for a specific purpose: to find the inherent logic with which these doctrines approach or define the problem of Christian ethics. In the Reformed tradition, justification by faith basically means the imputation by God of Christ's righteousness to the believer, who thereby receives amnesty for his sins and is declared guiltless in the sight of God. Having obtained such a once-and-for-all pardon, man gets the possibility to start a new life, on which, however, his salvation does
not depend. The moral order, as Keck would say, is rendered invalid. Ethics, then, in practice involves obeying both human and divine authority, but the criterion for Christian ethics remains the inner submission of man to God's grace. The imperative in a way follows the indicative. Such is the basic pattern of the Reformed understanding of the doctrine. A bleak anthropology and misgivings about human spontaneity and liberty accompany a tendency to increase the inherent force of the concept of God's sovereignty to the extent that, finally, we play objective parts in an unfolding divine drama.

Catholic teachings emphasize, however, that this justification is not merely declarative, but also constitutive. Justification refers, beyond amnesty, to a process of transformation from the condition of wickedness to the state of righteousness and to God's grace in preparing man for a renewal of life. In this perspective there is no contradiction between affirming God's grace and demanding works of obedience as well. Grace is seen as enabling and perfecting, human response and cooperation is still needed to obtain full salvation. But this grace is dispensed through the institution of the Church: in sacraments and works of obedience to Church law.

Mennonite doctrines, though using much of the language of Reformed (Lutheran) teachings, are closer to Catholic doctrine on this point in their 16th-century shape. Menno Simons in particular combines justification as God's forensic act in grace that changes the status of the believer, and as the operative grace that transforms and re-creates man, into one single experiential concept: repentance, the betterment of life. The amendment of life becomes indistinguishable from conversion and faith. In the balance between sanctification and justification, sanctification becomes not only the dominating concept, but it also serves as the point of departure for the understanding of the basis, nature, and goal of justification, without becoming identical to it. Most importantly, the Anabaptists did not share the anthropological assumptions of the Reformers, and instead accepted an amended Augustinian doctrine: the liberty of fallen mankind was restored to allow a free decision for or against God to take place. Their insistence on believers' (adult) baptism and their doctrine of a possible relapse of believers into sin was grounded in that. In that sense, they had a Christological basis for their anthropology and did not use the categories of natural theology: it was Christ who in his propitiatory sacrifice made free acceptance of the gospel, conversion as an act of human will, possible.

Later we find in various Confessional statements the increasing tendency to express a separate doctrine of justification conforming to general evangelical-Protestant teachings, but at the same time maintaining the emphasis on sanctification, repentance, and renewal that separated Menno's teachings, e.g., from those of Luther. The emphasis on the visible Church and concrete obedience in the sense of submission of the free and unhindered will of man under God, is made possible again by the specific notion that Christ's work implied a liberation of the will for all of mankind. The experiential and ethical side of the life of faith cannot be separated from the declarative element of amnesty and pardon that is part of redemption also.

In contemporary theology, the school of Bultmann, in particular his pupil Käsemann, have maintained a vigorous insistence on the justification of the ungodly as the main emphasis of the biblical message. That has consequences for ethics, since it redefines the moral situation as such. The believer must be removed from the old moral order where his deeds are weighed against the standard and where knowledge of the good is the essential prerequisite of doing what is demanded. The essential feature of Christian ethics is the doing of the good because of its inherent nature and not on the basis of obedience to God, or on the basis of the acquisition of merit, or on respect for the standard. We argued that L. Keck, who defended this doctrine in the early seventies, has actually made a Kantian approach to morality the basic notion behind Paul's doctrine. The social dimension of ethics and the insistence on obedience fall away because of the identification of ethics with the concept of law in Paul.

In the one example of a modern Anabaptist theology that we will discuss (J. H. Yoder's), Christ's teachings of a new righteousness are developed as a Christian ethics, giving para-
mount importance to the Sermon on the Mount though again restating general allegiance to a justification-by-faith position. By taking up the exegetical insights of the seventies, Yoder manages to steer clear of the older grace-law antithesis still found in the Bultmann school. The law gives life, and does so for the Church as well, the voluntary nature of keeping the law and the changed social situation (the law is to be fulfilled by a community that rejects all social distinctions) defines the social ethics of the Church. So here justification comes to mean the process of peaceful integration of Jews and gentiles into a community that serves God according to the messianic pattern. In this approach, the justification of the ungodly is only minimally present and we can see an overemphasis on the element of sanctification, though it is not connected with individual achievements, but to social ethics.
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