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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Chapter 7

Christian ethics as theonomous obedience

§ 41. Summary of the argument

Mark's final redaction showed a strand of Church tradition that is determined in its core by the growing distance between gentile Church practice and the original Jewish background of the gospel of Jesus. The shape of obedience in such Churches was determined by the radical demand of the Kingdom ethics that Jesus had taught, but no longer was this obedience expressed and worked out in the legal form of discourse that we know of as rabbinic thinking. The freedom of the law that came naturally to gentile Christians, and was reinforced by Paul's preaching, implied the necessity to seek out new analogies in Graeco-Roman culture to express the contents of Christian ethics and serve as the framework of application. Jesus' demands were set in a new context that emphasized some of its elements and dismissed others.

In contrast, Matthew shows us a Christ who affirms the validity of the law and presents His gospel of the coming Kingdom as an authoritative interpretation of that law, leading to a higher degree of righteousness for a specific and separate community within Israel. Here, it seems, the continuity is greater. Still, that impression is established at least in part by a conscious effort to re-evaluate Jesus' sayings by placing them in the context of a mixed Jewish and pagan congregation and their effort to build a Jewish-Christian framework for a Christian way of life. Matthew's effort to set Jesus' teachings over against Moses's revelation on the Mount as a decisive messianic reinterpretation is one of the literary means at his disposal to make his case. There is no reason to think that Matthew is closer to the "original" tradition; in fact, the case can be made that he is actually not. Matthew's gospel therefore is part of a similar effort to contextualize Jesus' message into the framework of the ongoing concerns of the congregation, and reflects that fact by discussing the general principle of Christian exegesis and communal discernment.

Nevertheless, the picture that emerges can now be made clearer. In the whole range of ethical perspectives that the New Testament offers, Matthew and James present the case that the rabbinic form of thinking and the basic validity of the Torah, as exemplified and interpreted through the teaching and the life and death of Jesus as the Messiah and the community that He founded as the locus of application, that all of this constitutes a concrete method of ethical discernment still focussed on the Torah. Jesus is the second Moses, the prophet that Moses referred to, the son of David that Nathan referred to; the messianic Torah is the Torah as explained in accordance with the fundamental and total obedience required by God. Love for God and the neighbor can then function as the decisive pattern of interpretation of the law. To be justified in this perspective means to live in accordance with the higher standard of righteousness that Christ brought in a community devoted to that type of obedience.

In distinction to that, the Markan type of obedience involves a more inward ethics of submission for which the example of Christ in His submission to God serves as the pivotal example. The rejection of a rule-oriented or mitzva-oriented ethics is motivated in part by the exclusionary effects of Pharisaic halakah, in part by the necessity to remain focused on the one major principle: love for God and neighbor as the single requirement of the kingdom of God. In Mark's view, no halakah-type of Christian ethics is possible. Servanthood and being healed are the metaphors in Mark for the situation and condition in Christian ethics. The passage on paying the imperial tax, which refers to giving unto God what bears the image of God, i.e., total submission to the service of God and to the neighbor who is the real bearer of the image
of God, is one expression of that essential Markan ethics.

This leaves us with at least three distinct patterns of Christian ethics:

(1) Obedience to the messianic Torah in James and Matthew (the situation: the eschatological community of Jesus’ disciples; the condition: the acceptance of Christ’s authority and faith in God; application of Torah within the pattern of Christ’s life). The Jewish-Christian solution.

(2) Submission under messianic and divine authority in a law-free situation in Mark; overlay of the pattern of Jesus’ life (and in particular his stand on halakah) over common values in the environment. The Roman-Greek Church solution.

(3) Transformation through the Spirit and the inclusion into the corporate entity of the Church as the new situation and condition in one: justification and sanctification through the Spirit leading to a fulfillment of the Torah as exemplified (a) by Jesus’ life and position on love for the neighbor and (b) love for the enemy, defining the relationship to the worldly powers. Paul’s explicit position.

How do we go on from here? We have dealt with two separate issues so far. One was the question of what, if any, were the distinct characteristics of the Mennonite view on justification. We have found that, against the Reformed view, Mennonites saw an intrinsic connection between justification and sanctification. Faith to them was not inner submission within a life still ruled by sin, but enablement by the Spirit to lead a better life in obedience to Christ’s law and ordinances. Separation of Church and state and the emphasis on congregational life as part of the defining situation of man before God led to a strong emphasis on saintly life and separation from the world. That emphasis on social ethics could be maintained till our day and age, as we have seen in our short analysis of John Howard Yoder’s position.

The second issue was the question as to whether the New Testament does indeed teach a model of obedience in faith, and not submission to legality, nor moral inner freedom, that is concerned with specific and concrete “ordinances,” commandments to be kept and handed down throughout the generations. In other words, did we find within the New Testament a model of obedience that is analogous to that of Judaism? Such a conclusion would serve a double purpose. First, it would strengthen the Mennonite position on obedience in faith by showing us its biblical source and the method of exegesis that keeps it alive. Second, it would provide us with guidelines for our continuing search for the Christian’s duty in the present, a present in which Anabaptists gradually are overcoming the inherited battle between conservative and liberal positions.

The latter seems to bring us into confrontation with the Anabaptist fathers insofar as they were adamant, with Luther, that the commandments of Christ constituted “ evangelical obedience,” in opposition to external (formal) obedience to the Mosaic law. That is why we took so much time in interpreting the evidence from the gospels to show how this tension was already present within the early Church. James and Matthew, in particular, did not come out with the kind of law-free gospel that evangelical Christianity seems to prefer. Even if it were not a misunderstanding of Paul’s intentions, as we have contended, it certainly would be a misunderstanding of the gospels and James to seek to disassociate faith and obedience, grace and works. Commandments, especially because they were not understood as works of merit or as demands of purity and separation per se, are perfectly compatible with the messianic kingdom. Christian ethics could and should be reread as a Christian “halakah,” a way of life with specific instructions along the way. With regards to baptism, the Lord’s Supper, the process of discipline and ethical discernment, and Church order, but also in the area of morality: the ethics of marriage, the use of power, relation to the state, etc. Such a redefinition of Christian ethics might seem a return to Judaism. It is. It is the reappropriation of a lost Jewish dimension of our faith, which the Anabaptist fathers began and we are to complete. Let us examine this argument.
According to Dieter Philips's sixth ordinance, keeping the commandments is fundamental to Christian ethics. We have found in our discussion of James, and especially of the gospel of Matthew, that this was one of the basic teachings of the New Testament. Of course, the perspective on how the Torah was to be kept and what it contained differed from contemporary Jewish views. Jesus' rejection of Pharisaic cult-transmittal and separatism shows a fundamental rift between the early Church and part of the Pharisee movement that widened into a complete schism. Paul's historic decision to suspend the agreement of Antioch and fight against circumcision for gentiles was part of that movement toward an autonomous pagan Church. The community that Jesus established, and that was transformed into a community of predominantly non-Jewish Christians after His resurrection, was to be different from the people of Israel. But even then the demand that the law be fulfilled in us, Rom. 8, was still valid, even if it could be argued that Christians were no longer "under" the law, had "died" to the law and were therefore set free from its curse, and were supposed to live by the new life in the Spirit. The divine law was still holy and good, and its precepts were the primary source for understanding the messianic duty of "loving God and the neighbor." The judgment that 'faith' somehow transcends obedience and formal obligations is no longer tenable if we take a close look at the evidence of the New Testament.

But how then are faith and Christian ethics interlinked? Christian ethics is based on faith in a God who redeems mankind through a process of transformation of individuals as well as their social context. The faith that is required of man is a form of obedience to God's revelation in His Torah, not in general as written law-code for humanity, but in the specific form that this Torah takes on first in the life and resurrection of Jesus Christ and then in the community of His followers. The Christian reception of the law through the teaching and example of Jesus of Nazareth implies obedience to a messianic Torah that highlights love toward God and neighbor as its major commandments and as the hermeneutic principle of the whole. The Torah that the gentiles received is an embodied Torah, and the incarnate Word of God is to be found primarily in the self-surrendering love of Christ on the Cross and in His obedience to His Father unto death, which transformed the human condition as well as the ethical order.

Still, the main impetus of faith in the Pauline gospel surely was salvation, as it was in the gospel of Mark. Christ the healer has primacy over Jesus the Teacher of the law. But the connection remains firm: Christians call on the God of Jesus of Nazareth for their salvation and respond with obedience to their Lord, Jesus Christ, the Messiah of the nations. It is this relationship to God through Christ that defines our ethics, as it is said in John 15:10, "If you keep My commandments, you shall abide in my love; even as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in His love."

The image of Christian ethics that emerges throughout the whole of the New Testament is firmly linked to scriptural revelation and the new situation of the Church. Christian morality is a morality received in a Scripture and passed on by a living hermeneutic tradition. It is primarily the congregation defining a commandment to be obeyed, not individuals exercising the inner voice of consciousness to be adopted if they see fit; it is a particular morality practiced in a separate peoplehood among the nations of the world, and not a motivational power for good citizens to abide by society's standards. It is based upon a reversed moral order, where autonomous achievement and expected rewards are no longer the incentives on the road to self-willed perfection. It is based on a reversal of the situation in which man stands before God. Being justified and sanctified by participation in the life and death of Christ, Christians obey because the God of their salvation requires it and because the new life that they share implies the same.

The specific shape of Christian obedience needs to be considered. Is it a matter of submission to authority, or inner autonomy of conscience? Is it compliance with an external system of legal demands? The answer we found can be summed up like this. Christian ethics is a
theonomous morality that finds in God both the source and the standard of ethical living, as it has been revealed in the history of Israel and Jesus Christ. Finally, especially in its Mennonite emphasis, it is a morality of commandments and ordinances to be obeyed, not inner striving for submission, nor mere outward duty of rules. It is not only narratively revealed, but also present in the form of specific commandments, addressed to a community that has the authority of binding and loosing, of discernment, i.e., of finding the proper way of applying such commandments in the specific situations in which it lives. Against all types of modernism, we must hold that Christian ethics is not about individual character, duties or virtues, as it is not about inner submission or secular freedom. It is neither purely autonomous (inner conscience) nor heteronomous in any legalist, extrinsic sense (social duty). It is about the transformation of people within the boundaries of "a" people, the redeemed community, the Church, and the enablement by the Spirit to obey the divine Sovereignty that has established His Kingship over the world on the Cross.

Menno’s specific emphases, in his treatment of the doctrine of justification by faith, seem to be congruent with New Testament teaching. This doctrine expressed first and foremost the means by which man is redeemed from the power of sin, despair, and death by the grace of God. Its goal is the enabling of man to do the good. It is part of Paul’s teaching on God’s triumph over man’s inability to be loyal to the covenant. It can hardly have been the core doctrine of Paul, as such and by itself defining the ethical situation, let alone the center of the New Testament. Without a real transformation in the moral order, there would be a continuing disparity between a demanding situation and an imperfect condition. That disparity would be legitimized by the doctrine of the justification of the ungodly, leading to the ambiguities between Goppelt’s appraisal of Christ’s demands for the future age and the provisional ethics of the present. Man’s ethics would be defined by his persistent inner rebellion to God, and morality would be a compromise with society’s values. Paul’s doctrine of the work of the Spirit does not dispense with the obligation of the law, though it changes the perspective of man’s situation. No longer “under” the law, as if it were a strange authority beyond our grasp, we now have the law as the written explication of the intent of the Spirit, the Torah of Moses becoming the blueprint, so to speak, of our understanding of who Jesus Christ really was.

We must also see how the development of the concept of human freedom in the Modern Age has influenced theology. The specific modern shape of the doctrine is determined to a high degree by a doctrinal shift in the Reformation period, prompted by a new understanding of the Pauline corpus. This classic understanding of justification separates justification from sanctification to such a degree that the main expression of Christian faith was the inner affirmative response to God’s saving action in Christ. Obedience to Christ’s institutions as congregational task was replaced by individual submission to grace, while leaving obedience to the state unaltered. That brought the Christian tradition of ethics in line with secular ethics of social virtues and civic duty. By excluding ethics from the sphere of faith in a narrow sense, ethics became a secondary follow-up of faith, which led finally to its becoming a non-separate realm of morality or law that Christians shared with non-believers.

That development constituted a fatal sequel to the Reformation’s rejection of medieval doctrines of merit and good works. At the same time, Western philosophy expressed the changing mood of European cultures with regard to freedom. The situation of ethics, as defined by the doctrine of justification, became secularized. The value concepts of freedom and obedience changed, and Christian ethics that had linked its faith to the new concept of human nature followed suit. Obedience was seen by secular philosophy as mere external submission, as hypocrisy by definition, and detrimental to the inner essence of man that was defined as self-relating freedom. Faith came to be considered a motivational force, not a source for a different ethics or a completely different life-style. Such an “enthusiasm” was rightly depicted as a form of paganism a religious philosopher as Emmanuel Levinas.
We have found in all three areas of investigation, in James as well as in the gospels of Mark and Matthew and in the letters of Paul to the Romans and Galatians, that the inner core of Christian ethics is theonomous obedience. The differences between the three sources center on the use of Scripture and the role of the Spirit. But even Paul’s spirit-centered ethics carefully works out an ethic of obedience to the messianically interpreted Torah and the hermeneutic pattern of Christ’s life for the community. We have also found that there is a valid reflective continuity between the discernible remnants of Jesus’ original teachings and the contextually widened interpretations of the early Church. In all of these it is either assumed or explicitly shown that the law is a source of Christian ethics, though it is viewed as on a par with Jesus’ teachings and apostolic exhortatory traditions. The pattern of theonomous obedience as exemplified in Jewish halakhic exegesis is part and parcel of early Christian morality.

§ 42. Faith as obedience

In our summary of the argument, we have indicated that the shape of obedience and its source in the revelation of Christ is our main issue. In this chapter we need to add one more element to our survey. If the pattern of Christian obedience implies the use of a written standard, the adoption of a specific way of life, and the building of a congregation that can be the environment for a particular ethics, its core remains the embodied Torah. Christ’s teachings as well as the pattern of His life and death have become binding “law,” divine instruction for the Christian community. That would include the congregational discernment that is part of the procedural commandment of Matthew 18 and 20. What we need now is to probe somewhat deeper into the nature of Christian obedience. We will do so by taking three steps. First, we will try to elucidate from the Scripture on Abraham and its rabbinic interpretation what the concept of theonomous obedience implies. Next we will try to find the specific pattern of Christian obedience of faith, and third, we will inquire into the shape of congregational obedience under the terminology of suffering and witness.

§ 42.1 The idea of theonomous obedience

What does “theonomous” obedience mean? It seems to mean that every divine command is an absolute and must be obeyed because it comes from this divine source. Since Kierkegaard, the paradigm of such an absolute submission in contemporary theology has been the story of Abraham. When Abraham was commanded to sacrifice his son, Abraham obeyed. The divine voice is narrated as an absolute commandment. Now, the case can be made that the divine will is embodied in a Scripture and not in a practice of hearing divine voices, what Scripture tells us to do we must obey as if we heard from the voice of God directly. Both Abraham’s narrated obedience and our possible obedience to the text of the narrative might be called theonomous if an assumption with regard to the authority of the source is the direct foundation of the obedience. But there is this distinction between a voice heard and a Scripture being read that we must take into consideration now. Any text involves interpretation in order to be heard. This necessity of interpretation has an impact on the presupposed absoluteness of the divine commandment.

Let us first take the notion of theonomous obedience a bit further. Mennonite Christianity defends a theonomous and revealed (inscribed) morality. Theonomous obedience is an answer to the basic question of ethics: how to choose between alternative actions, especially if we are uncertain about which is the best. The moral dilemma, as it is often stated, is about choices, and it presupposes human freedom to choose. The principles and value concepts by which these choices are guided can be derived from many possible sources: mysterious ones, like the inner voice of conscience, or such basic realities as the instinctive need for solidarity within a
group, self-preservation, or, closer to the reality of the person making the choice, utility and personal need. Moral choices differ from other acts of liberty because they need a standard by which a moral agent judges his actions to be either good or bad.

To find such a standard in the conditions of the exercise of human freedom itself has been the ultimate goal of that type of philosophy that we call German idealism. The original impetus for this quest lies in ancient Greek philosophy. It was argued that political liberty implies that a commandment can be obeyed because those who obey it have freely consented to do so. Political authority can then be exercised in the form of a commandment, but still be considered based on the liberty of the citizens. Reason provides a rationale for such an obedience, since it makes it possible to understand that the one who is commanding is in fact doing so with the interest of those who obey as his primary motive. Tyranny is that form of commandment, that defies logical analysis and is based on the self-interest of the ruler, so that liberty is turned against its own interest. To obey a despot makes a mockery of political authority. Heteronomous obedience can be defined from this perspective as that kind of obedience that does not find a reasonable ground in the interest of those who obey it and serves no other purpose than that of the authority. In effect, the reasonable commandment can only be obeyed, if a free consciousness commands itself to obey. The external law and the rational institutions of society are at the same time an expression of the liberty of human beings who consent and have rational motives for their obedience, and yet at the same time, being external, these laws and institutions are alien to the exercise of liberty itself. That liberty should command itself to obey the political authority, to safeguard its own exercise in the long-term is expressive of this ambiguity.

In that same tradition the Enlightenment philosophy sought to defend the principle of liberty as guaranteeing both the political order and the inner moral freedom of individuals. Immanuel Kant sought for the highest principle of morality in the way an action by an individual can become a natural law without destroying the human community and the freedom of others. “Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.” That is because, in the end, the moral agent would destroy his own possible freedom by acting against it. Safe-guarding the exercise of liberty for the long term becomes an ultimate motive for all actions that seem in the short-term to restrict the exercise of freedom. The absolute (categorical) imperative must therefore be: to make the guiding principle of your private action such that it can be thought of as a natural universal law of behavior. If a specific action does not obstruct the freedom of others or disrupt ordered society, it passes the test, and the action can be considered good. Does such a way of thinking allow for heteronomous obedience as a principle of ethics?

The notion of heteronomous obedience must be clarified further. The submission of freedom under the will of another subject has as its motive the continuation of that exercise in the long-term. In so far as freedom-in-obedience still refers to itself – by commanding itself to obey, by accepting the rational motive of self-interest – such an obedience leaves the autonomy of liberty intact. A divine commandment interpreted according to this political concept of freedom, must then also be understood to be in one’s own interest and would imply an internal acceptance of a restraint in the outward exercise of the will. In Kant’s perspective, the acceptance of the liberty of other subjects is only possible, insofar this acceptance can be understood as the ultimate cause of the self-preservation of my own liberty. In Hobbes’ view, it was the power of the King (=state) that made it possible for free subjects to live together, precisely because they gave up on their inherent right to defend their own interests and liberty with force. The sacrifice of liberty to the state for the common good, preserved the liberty of all people in a community. Again, all heteronomy of external restraint was ultimately acceptable because it referred back to the autonomy of liberty as its inner goal. The restraint in question was a force, a violence, that defended the liberty and welfare of all, against the opposition of an individual
liberty that broke free of the commonality and usurped powers already given up to constitute society. In fact, the state could be conceived as the status of an armistice between rivalling liberties, a truce that maintained a provisional equilibrium between citizens.

Must we say then, that all heteronomy is as such bad, unless it can be referred back to autonomy as its source? In 1796 Kant wrote a treatise on the relationship between the sciences, called in German, Der Streit der Facultäten. In the first chapter he discusses the relationship between the theological and the philosophical sciences. After admitting that a book of law that was congruent with the dictates of practical reason would be of ultimate importance to guarantee “temporary and eternal well-being” to all citizens, he stumbles over this problem. A book of law, such as the Bible might be, would need verification of its authority. It has to be verified by a rational affirmation that God was its author, and only then could it be authentic. How can this verification happen?

We would need to be certain that in it we are hearing the voice of God. But is this possible? For one thing, if God spoke to a human being, how would this human being know that it was God and not someone else? A finite mind cannot judge the infinite. God cannot be known with certainty by man at all, so how could His voice be recognized as such? The other way around, however, is possible. According to Kant, we have a method of recognizing that it is not God whose voice we hear. If God were to command anything that contradicts a moral law, we can be sure that voice is not God’s. The moral demand precedes all knowledge of God and serves as a basis to recognize that something is not God’s revelation. We can now say why this must be so: because this recognition of the moral value of a divine commandment allows for the grounding of such a commandment on the rational insight that ultimately my own liberty is being affirmed. Accepting a pure externality of the commandment would not only threaten the exercise of liberty itself, which is conceived as the condition of fulfilling the commandment in the first place, but it would also obstruct the obedience to the commandment: without a free will to respond to a commandment, the commandment is not a commandment. The externality of a commandment in Kant’s view must, by the nature of liberty itself, be conditioned by a free and rational response to a moral concept or rule.

Such a formal basis for ethics goes against the foundational notions of Christian ethics, especially when it emphasizes that a moral action is in essence a self-affirmation of autonomous reason. But maybe we could construe Christian ethics as a “material” ethics (i.e. a particular value-system that uses a symbolic language to refer to basic principles) that needs the same formal basis that Kant described as the foundation of all ethics? N. H. Søe argued in 1965 that the distinctive idea of Christian ethics lies in the fact that the question about the Good is taken as the question about God.\(^{387}\) If only God can be called good (Mark 10:18), perfect (Matth. 5:48), loving (1 John 4:8, 6), and holy (1 Peter 1:16), then “God, His will and His work are also the Good.” We have encountered the very same idea in our discussion of the commentaries on Romans 12:2. To discern the “perfect, holy, and acceptable will of God,” we must “know” God in His attribute of compassion. The argument continues by stating that God cannot be known, as Kant stated, so that it is necessary to accept that God must reveal Himself to humanity, which Kant of course denies. Acceptance of our corruption by sin is correlated to the acknowledgment that only because God reveals Himself can we know anything about Him, and therefore it is on the basis of revelation that we know the Good.\(^{388}\) All ethics, according to the Danish Lutheran theologian, is revealed. On the basis of this foundational notion of revelation a particular ethics can then be developed.

But then Kant’s question returns to haunt us. How do we know God reveals Himself? Sure enough, Søe denies that revelation can be demonstrated to non-believers. It can only be a revelation to believers who have received not only the contents of that revelation, but have also been enabled to hear God’s voice through the Holy Spirit. Because he does not claim universal rationality for the claims of Christian ethics, he can hope to dispense with the kind
of formal proof that Kant demanded for ethical principles. The only avenue that remains open to Christians is to affirm that they have a particular bias which will ground a specific way of behavior that is reasonable only to them. Only the "assumption" therefore of God's revelation brings us into the situation of Christian ethics; only by ignoring Kant's question does Christian ethics even begin to operate. The result would be that Christian ethics is a minority view on the Good without rational argument. It would prefer, like the "idiot" in "scientific sense," as Kant puts it, the assumed authority of Scripture above the light of reason that tells us what the good in itself must be. Against Kant's argument for a priority of the moral demand which gives us a standard of revelation, Soe simply turns things around. Revelation, as an "assumption" of believers, is primary and is a standard for morality.

Now this solution may take us around Kant's problem, except that it does not infer the material good from the reality of freedom that is called upon to affirm it, nor does it content itself to identify formally the good with the self-affirmation of freedom. Neither does it simply identify the good with the written record of Scripture, nor does it claim without foundation that such a divine norm is positively given in Scripture. It seems to ground the particular character of Christian ethics upon a particular use of human freedom: the freedom to adopt a concrete system of ethics that contains historical value-symbols of the basic principle of ethics in a community. We will see later that ultimately that is what Stanley Hauerwas seems to be arguing for. The Christian ethics may then materially be different from Kantian ethics, but still it depends on its formal basis in the notion of individual liberty. And worse, the Kantian standard still becomes the criterion for what is valuable in such a particular ethics.

If Kant is right that a biblical standard for morality precludes knowledge of the good, Paul is wrong that we need to discern the "perfect, holy and acceptable will of God" in order to know what is good. Knowledge in the sense of rational insight would be annulled by the very acceptance of biblical authority, and biblical ethics would imply irrationalism. Kant wrote an important footnote in this context to make his point clear. When Abraham was ordered to "slaughter" his son by God, he should have answered: "I know for sure that I should not kill my only beloved son, that is absolutely certain; that you, this apparition are God, of that I am not sure and I may never be sure, even when this voice came booming down from heaven." Certainty and knowledge should have been the guiding principles of Abraham's decision, in Kant's view. The autonomy of cognition is now added to the autonomy of conscience and inner faith. Only when conscience and faith can present a principle of action, a rule of behavior, that is at the same time possible to understand with certainty by an individual consciousness as in congruence with a principle of (practical) rationality, i.e., possibly universal, can such a principle be adopted.

One could argue against such "ethical idealism" that it ignores the corruption of human nature as well as the specific nature of divine revelation. Both, however, are part of revelation and only accepted by those who believe. There are no rational, conclusive arguments by which one can demonstrate the reliability of such principles.

How does one defend against the Kantian counter-argument? One strategy is to be found in the work of Stanley Hauerwas. First of all, one might attack the claim to universality that is so apparent in Kant's ethics. Kant may have a right to ask questions concerning the universal nature of moral arguments. Such questions may even betray that ethics in all cultures shows recurring and typical problems. But as soon as one tries to answer these questions, one "necessarily draws on the particular convictions of historic communities to whom such questions may have significantly different meanings." Such a relocation of moral questions from universal human reason toward the concrete community transcends both the Lutheran philosopher and his theological counterpart. Soe was as interested in finding in God the absolute ground for Christian ethics as Kant is trying to find the absolute ground in the moral nature of humanity. By positing that all concrete ethics is necessarily relative to a historic community.
with its own narrative and methods of incorporating the ethics embodied in such narrative, the Kantian standard no less than Soe’s particular Christian and revelatory ethics lose their foundation. Kant’s morality can now be deconstructed as based on the specific narrative of the Project of the Enlightenment in Western Europe, as Soe’s attempt is based on the project of the Reformation and the state Church of Lutheranism, if we indeed live in a world of “moral fragments” in which no moral argument can definitely solve any given moral problem. Connected with this is the modern human experience that tells us that we are condemned to freedom, as Sartre puts it. There is no “essence” given that we can refer to in deciding the shape of our behavior. Yet at the same time we feel that our lives are determined by “elaborate games of power and self-interest” which leave us hardly any options to choose from. In such a situation, any attempt to find a foundation for ethics is doomed to failure.

However, Christian ethics cannot simply become part of this fragmentariness. Its value does not depend on social functionality, but on some concept of ultimate truth. Hauerwas emphasizes the narrative nature of the founding convictions of Christianity, theological convictions in themselves signify ways of behavior and are not mere cognitive persuasions. Narratives ground traditions, traditions inform communities. And in the last analysis, ethics depends upon “vital communities sufficient to produce well-lived lives.” This grounding in history and community is vital to Hauerwas’s argument. The commandment is not sufficient as foundation for ethics, in that Hauerwas agrees with Kant. Christian ethics contains a definitive story that helps us envision the world. The world that we can see is the world we must act in. We need to change in order to see the world, since we must acknowledge first that we are sinners. Only through this view of the world as corrected by the basic Christian stories do we see it as it is. And these basic stories are present only in a community of story-tellers who try to act in conformity with the stories they tell each other.

What then is the difference from the view that Kant discussed and rejected? On the one hand, the experience of fragmentariness of moral judgments in this world makes us retreat from the Kantian concept of universality, that concept is relegated to the world of fragments. Kant based his demand for universal rationality of moral claims on the notion of freedom. But specific answers are being demanded, and these are informed by specific cultural and relative contents. Kant would have no trouble with that. On the other hand Hauerwas goes on to claim for the Christian story a truthfulness, i.e., universality, that cannot be grounded on social functionality, and therefore ultimately lacks the kind of rationality and universality that Kant demanded, but must refer instead to individual persuasions becoming joined in a community’s commitment. One does not know the Christian story to be right; one judges that story to be in congruence with one’s life experience, and one does so in a community of people who share the basic stories and paradigms of that persuasion.

That may be called “true” as a statement of fact with regard to the people who hold to it, but it cannot be true in the rational and universal sense. By extending the moral agent from the individual to the specific community, by moving from the Bible as book of law to the historical narrative, we still have embraced and affirmed a form of irrationalism in the Kantian perspective, not shown its truth. That is why Hauerwas needs the recourse to a critique of Kantian universalism, that is why he needs—as a subterfuge—the affirmation of post-modern fragmentariness. Only if we grant that all material ethics is relative to a social group, can we maintain any kind of truth for the Christian community. In a way, we then still affirm Kant. If it were not for the claim that Christian stories involve the claim for truth, and the idea that claims to universal morality are nothing but generalized particular claims, Hauerwas would be doing nothing but explaining and describing a particular given ethical frame of mind, peculiar to Christian communities. But the task of Christian ethics to make normative statements is then completely undercut. Hauerwas, however, still insists that the task of Christian ethics is both descriptive and normative. Such normativity must then necessarily be far removed from
what we normally would understand ethics to accomplish.

The second part of Hauerwas’s strategy in our reading is his deconstruction of the word ‘revelation’. Kant had argued that authority must be based on revelation, and revelation was equal to “hearing the voice of God booming from heaven.” Hauerwas contends that the word revelation “is not a qualifier of the epistemic status of a kind of knowledge, but rather points to the content of a certain kind of knowledge.” If it bears the “stamp of God and God’s saving intentions,” it might properly be called “revelation.” A secondary claim is that “propositional statements” can be revelatory, insofar as they combine to make up a coherent narrative with the same contents. But again, this sets up a standard by which to judge revelation that is analogous to Kantian claims to universal practical reason. A revealed morality must be in congruence with the basic formal requirements of rational morality in Kant, and in Hauerwas it has to fit within a coherent narrative framework and express “God’s saving actions.” A commandment that lacks this historical embeddedness could then very well be considered not revealed, supposedly because the lack of narrative coherence makes it impossible for the community that lives it to form a meaningful tradition around it. In the end, revelation is then up to the community’s ability to understand something in a formal sense as revealed moral demand. Its narrative imagination becomes the functional standard for Christian ethics, in very much the same manner as rational liberty was the primary criterion for any material ethics in Kant’s perspective. In the long run, Hauerwas’s depiction of the narration about Jesus and its ethical significance shows us a Christian ethics that is not about obedience, and is certainly not a theonomous one, and which submits to the Kantian claim that it must be grounded in some pre-known standard and must dispense with transcendent revelation.

Kant’s claims for a universal and rational morality, no less than Søe’s claims for universal absolute knowledge of God as the principle of Good and Hauerwas’s references to the coherent narrative that informs the lived ethics of a vital community, must each reject Abraham’s choice to obey his God. To all of them, Abraham is a murderer and possibly an idolator. If God is a symbol of reason, God could not have commanded the idolatrous infanticide, and the Bible is mistaken. If God is the Good, Abraham trusted in a God who commanded a human sacrifice, and the Good becomes irrational. If the story of Isaac provides us with a coherent narrative, how can a community live out its commandment?

And yet, a Christian ethics can hardly ignore that the Christian faith is intrinsically connected to this story. Not only is Abraham’s faith the model of ours with respect to trust in God (Rom. 4:9b) and the acceptance of a promise reaching beyond human infertility (Rom. 4:19-20), but Scripture even calls Abraham’s obedience the basis for his “justification by works” (James 2:21-23), seeing in it the fulfillment of Abraham’s faith for which he had been “justified” beforehand. As we explained in Chapter 3, that justification according to James was proleptical because that faith only bore fruit when Abraham complied with the demand to sacrifice Isaac. So what does it mean that Christian ethics finds its basis in the offering of Isaac, going even beyond the faith of Abraham as explained in Romans 4?

§ 42.2 Abraham’s example: heteronomy and the cognitive function of the commandment

A Christian morality that seeks enlightenment from the narrative of Abraham must be a heteronomous morality. It cannot ground itself on the universality of practical reason nor upon the notion of a particular narrative. It must seek the reason for obedience in God and God alone, at the risk of confounding moral reasonability, the identification of God with the Good, and the foundation of ethics in a story-telling community. It must on that account resist the temptation of all these three alternatives for the ethics of obedience. It must accept that cognition is not a basis or a verifying criterion for the ethical demand, the ethical situation does not
demand an answer to the question of what we must choose, but a response to the commandment given to us. It is the commandment that makes us aware of the situation, not the situation that makes us recall a fitting commandment.

The notion, attributed to Hans Denck, that to know Christ means to follow Him in life is a reversal of the order of rank of cognition and obedience, theoretical and practical reason. If obedience is to be theonomous, it must provide a way out of the circular reasoning that constructs human autonomy everywhere, for the Kantian counter-argument will make us say at every step along the way, “How do I know all this?” assuming that knowing the demand somehow qualifies that demand as immanent and autonomous. To understand a commandment as revealed and God-given would imply knowing that it is so, and yet “knowing” it would destroy its absolute character. Knowing is not an absolute relationship, but involves a finite act of interpretation; it means, e.g., applying a (narrative) framework to a given statement. So knowing in Christian faith has an a priori structures that enable the predicates “divine” or “revealed” to become meaningful, and yet in these predicates their origin in human reason is being transcended.

In this book we do not have the opportunity to discuss in depth the movement of “narrative theology” and its implications for ethics. Just this one remark about our position towards it must suffice. The importance of narrative in the sense of knowledge of the story of God’s actions with Israel is not being minimized by our stress on commandment and obedience. It is also true that the easiest way to see the differences between the ways of the Church and Israel is to look at their founding narratives, e.g., how these are celebrated in worship and practiced to become the major incentive for ethical behavior. It is also true that a general understanding of the intent of the commandment can be gleaned from the narrative framework by itself, and it is again true that the character of our being as the recipient of law is given through narrative. Yet, if narrative ethics were to imply a precedence of the question who we are above the question what we are to do, the matter would not be so simple any more.

McClendon explains the notion of “narrative mode” with an example taken from Frank Kermode. If we say: “the King died and then the Queen died,” we have a factual report, presupposing monarchy and social structure, but not yet a story. But if we say: “the King died and the Queen died from grief,” we have a germinal narrative because character is added as an explanation of the incident. Character in this context means the “embodiment of self” or the “continuities of that selfhood.” Next to character we have the “social setting,” and third we have the transformation of incident into an action of God. The narrative of the gospel can then be a meta-narrative in relation to our own life’s narrative, showing us the structure of response to divine actions and social setting and a specific perspective on selfhood that we can relate to.

Against this emphasis on narrative we would maintain the imperative as the revelatory mode of the moral demand. We hold that only on the basis of the divine imperative can we read the narrative as an explanation of its possibility. When God gives the commandment to Adam and Eve not to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, the serpent’s question evokes commentary on the commandment (Has God said, thou shalt not eat from any tree?). Its explanation ascribes a motive to God incongruent with the divine origin of the commandment (God’s jealousy is incompatible with the free gift of life). The motive was not jealousy, but protecting love, however, as explicit in the commandment itself. The question finally denies the consequence of disobedience (thou shalt not die) explicitly stated in the commandment as God’s motive, to protect man from death. What we see here is that the narrative we have before us allows us to understand the basic issue of human obedience. But that
obedience is itself narrated and not embodied within the narrative itself. There is no “pattern” of behavior or ”character” to be emulated. There is a commandment that defines a situation, and a narrative (within the narrative) proposed as an alternative framework, which destroys the original protective intent of the commandment.

The narrative actually shows that the commentary on the commandment which takes it up in a narrative context of divine jealousy and given immortality contradicts the divine imperative itself. If Eve had taken the commandment literally, its own context would have shown that it (1) granted access to all the trees, without which no tree would have been permitted, and (2) equally sovereign, God forbade one Tree in order to protect man from death. The narrative explains that the “tradition” by which Eve was informed about the commandment provided a weakness of which the serpent could make use. To Eve, the commandment was given as tradition only, and she herself had tried to “protect” the given tradition by adding the commandment not to touch (3:3), or perhaps Adam had found it wise to do so. The point is that the narrative shows the vulnerability of a commandment when it is being interpreted from within a narrative framework. Only the divine commandment in itself ”fitted” reality and was proper behavior for humanity. So what the narrative here actually shows is that the commandment rules the narrative, or, that a narrative must be measured by the commandment it seeks to explain.

We can return now to our question regarding the experiential veracity of the primacy of the commandment. Could God’s voice then be heard only within the immediacy of an individual’s experience? Kierkegaard thought that made Abraham into the single most lonely man in history. Such a pristine and immediate relationship with God must of its own nature be a unique event. The problem is that the nature of the demand would then be completely unique to the situation in time and place in which the individual experiences it. It would be a unique divine demand, but not a commandment, let alone a rule of behavior. In fact, the intent of the passage is most often constructed to the contrary, to show to Abraham that God does not require human sacrifice, probing his response to the commandment and accepting Abraham’s intent while at the same time refuting his submission to it. Along those lines, the unique event of an immoral divine demand is avoided. In such an interpretation, the immediate and literal content of the commandment is e.g. subverted by assuming a double intent on the part of God. While demanding a sacrifice, God is actually probing (only) Abraham’s submissiveness.

If that is true, and if we are to hold on to the contradiction between God’s commandment and the moral law, Abraham must have known that such was the case. When it is stated that Abraham and Isaac went “together,” this might be an allusion to the fact that Abraham had explained the divine ruse to his son. Reason alleviated the disconcerting element in the narrative in this manner, and the story could no longer threaten our autonomy nor our image of a God who is in harmony with our view of the good. We can even second-guess God’s intention to be ultimately in accordance with moral reasoning, and in complying with commandments and ethics we “know” that God has an ulterior motive in giving us His law. Since we seek a way to justify God, we must identify all divine actions as intrinsically good. The human metaphor of pedagogy comes to mind in this reinterpretation: God lied about his true intentions to Abraham, tested him, and taught him a lesson in doing so. The lie was justified because of the goal: to test Abraham’s faithfulness.

But what was the goal of the testing? Both Kant and religious historians assume that the commandment was about murder in a religious-sacrificial context. Kant assumes that Abraham must have understood that killing his son must be a transgression of the moral law. Biblical Abraham was faced with a contradiction between the divine voice and his previous understanding of God, and yet he complied. Kierkegaard agrees with Kant but claimed the “leap of faith” that made it possible (and meaningful) for Abraham to do this, but then separated Abraham from the rest of humanity. So was the testing intended to show that Abraham would
go beyond the known moral demand to comply with the immediate and absolute commandment of God? But again we find Kant intruding upon our discourse: How then could he have known it was the voice of God?

First of all, testing is too broad a term in this context. It is stated that God nissah, put to the test, in the sense of bringing something to a higher position. Abraham was given a task that up till then he might have been unable to perform, but “after these things” (22:1) he might have been ready for it. At this stage, Abraham had been given the solid assurance that God would keep His promise, Isaac had been born of Sarah, and the blessing to the nations would proceed through the people that were to be born from this son. The object of the test is Abraham’s view on this son, more than his readiness to obey God in all things. It is “thy son, thine only one, whom thou lovest” that he has to bring to Moriah, and the command to go to Moriah is phrased in the same manner as the original call to Abram in chapter 12: lech lecha, go by thyself, meaning in isolation from all other considerations and human interests. It is the mission of Abraham, the specific status of Isaac as the fulfillment of the promise, that is at stake here, not the depth of Abraham’s faith. Just as Abram was required to disassociate himself from his country, culture, and family, he must now in a sense abandon his own son, i.e., transcend the natural relationship that exists between them.

The manner of this necessary abandonment or new separation is not understood fully if only the material act of killing this son is emphasized. God commands Abraham to bring up (ha’aleihu) the elevated (o’lah). The concept of sacrifice in the sense of making something holy (sacer facere) by destroying it, thereby giving it to God by withdrawing it from human use and taking it out of existence, is not the primary intention. Abraham has to make Isaac rise above the natural position wherein he was set, and thereby Isaac becomes dedicated fully to God and to the promise that operates through him and following generations. That this would entail killing him is an intentional paradox. How could Abraham have understood this divine command? If Isaac could be born beyond Sarah’s reproductive capacity, so Isaac could have been ”elevated,” brought to his purpose, in any way God deemed fit. And in a sense, the “killing,” as a symbol of the abrogation of Isaac’s natural state, can be read as referring to the election and specific purpose of Israel as a people in this world. The literal meaning then becomes a metaphor of the symbolic.

Nevertheless the narrative moves forward within the literal meaning. Abraham “chopped the wood” (22:3), indicating he understood the offering to mean building a fire, i.e., in any case to involve an offering of a living being. We take that to mean that Abraham intended to kill his son and so perform the offering, and we assume ordinarily that that is in fact the only possible interpretation of the commandment. But it is an interpretation, even supposing that Abraham’s understanding of the commandment had been determined by an unknown sacrificial theology of the Chaldees that Abram had taken with him from Ur. Did the test imply God’s willingness to allow Abraham to find out how the “lifting up” and the separation were to be carried out? Or did it imply finding out whether Abram was capable of leaving his paternal culture? The ambiguous divine command and Abraham’s action must be seen in their tension.

But does the story indeed assume that Abraham correctly interpreted the commandment? In verse 6 Abraham takes the wood, the fire, and a knife with him as he goes up the mount to “prostrate” himself and his son before God, Abraham intends to perform an act of complete submission to the divine will. That divine will was understood by him to imply killing his son, and at the same time was accepted by him as an “offering,” i.e., a full dedication of Isaac to God and His purposes above the possibilities of nature. But the commandment gave the key to the meaning of the act, the act itself, horrendous to Abraham in his natural love for his son, was considered because of this divine indication that it was an act of submission to and compliance with the same divine will that had given the promise and would be faithful in that and
had made possible Isaac’s birth. Both were equally beyond human capability. The commandment was not “pristine” or absolute, as Kierkegaard imagines. It contradicted a history between God and Abraham in which mutual loyalty and trust had been put to the test. It destroyed the promise and a covenant because of the way Abraham interpreted it.

Yet Abraham was perhaps acquainted with the idea of child sacrifice. That was part of his “narrative framework” as well. And in that “narrative” framework, the commandment went beyond all his former experience in giving an interpretative framework for Abraham’s action that in turn reinterpreted all of former history. The sovereignty of God, expressed in that former history, was now revealed as going even beyond its narrative determinacy. It, and not that history, defined Abraham’s situation. Still, Abraham had to interpret it to deduce the proper action. The commandment remained “Torah,” never becoming prescriptive law. Abraham understood that he was to give up Isaac according to the full measure of his human possibilities. To Abraham this meant killing his son. How God could realize His promises with a dead Isaac was beyond him. But God was equally beyond Abraham’s grasp for that matter, and so was the promise.

We can see how Abraham interpreted the commandment when we take a further look at Isaac in verse 7, who asks the obvious question. “Where is the lamb for the offering?” If they had taken a lamb, it would have been Abraham’s interpretation of the primacy of the promise as he understood it that had laid the foundation for his acts. A narrative ethics indeed! Reasoning that Isaac could not be killed as a part of the offering, he would have brought a substitute himself. As Menno put it, Abraham in this respect “had laid aside all reasoning and wisdom and followed not sense nor flesh.”

But Abraham, though obviously reckoning with the possibility that dedicating Isaac fully to God would mean sacrificing him on the altar, does not interpret the command from his own perspective. He allows the command to interpret and judge his own actions and responds by giving it the full destructive meaning it could possibly have. In a way he takes it literally, i.e., he interprets it according to the plain sense it must have on the basis of his own religious understanding. This becomes clear in Abraham’s reply in verse 8, where he states that “God will choose the lamb for Himself as an offering.” Abraham’s submission leads him to be ready for whatever God chooses to do, and if the voice had remained silent, he would have killed his son. The former commandment in its ambiguity, because it had left open the manner of the offering, is echoed in this verse.

In sharp contrast to all this stands verse 9, in which we see Abraham acting according to his own interpretation of the command. Building an altar, laying the wood in order, binding Isaac, and laying him upon the altar, all of that is Abraham’s interpretation of the required offering. In verse 10, Abraham takes the knife in his hands. And now the narrator interprets Abraham’s action for us, “to slaughter his son.” It is as if the narrator wants to show us that though Abraham on the one hand is driven by the commandment to see a specific action as the proper response, bringing an offering requires slaughtering his son as if he were a lamb, at the same time it is an action that can itself be interpreted from the outside and weighed against the divine intent. It is an external act, a risk taken. The commitment to obey the divine command is an effort to obey while interpreting. It can always be challenged by others and compared with the text of the commandment. Abraham’s obedience is an embodied commentary on a text.

Though Abraham states his trust that God will choose a lamb, he does not wait until God shows him what to do. Submission to the divine will, the interpretative framework of the commandment itself, the whole history of Abraham’s dealings with God beforehand, leads him to take the knife, not to show this submission, but to “slaughter” (lishchot) his son, since this was his interpretation of the divine commandment. The narrator’s intervention in the story means that if Abraham had in fact done this, it would not have amounted to bringing the required offering at all. In fact, it would have been a slaughter of his son. His son acquired the character of a lamb because Abraham assumes that Isaac was designated as the lamb in God’s
view and that killing him was the only way to elevate him in dedication to God. The commandment turns out to change Abraham’s view of life in two respects: Isaac can become the lamb to be slaughtered, and this slaughter can be a fulfillment of the command to dedicate him fully to God as o’lah. The commandment to elevate and dedicate fully what Abraham must have understood to be both his own and humanity’s future was therefore interpreted correctly, save for the manner of its execution. That element of divine instruction was given only at the moment when Abraham stood ready to execute the command as he understood it.

The angel of God intervenes, as one can imagine, because the slaughter of Isaac was not in reality the manner in which compliance with the commandment was demanded. But how do we deal with the reason given in 12b? “For now I do know that you fear God and did not withhold thy son, thine only son from me.” There is no way to evade the consequence of these words: that Abraham was indeed put to the test and that his submission to the divine will and his acceptance of the view of life that the commandment implied, against all his moral reasoning, was indeed part of his own “elevation.” If the intent was “not to withhold his son,” then the lamb can be offered as substitute for that son. Abraham is not praised for intending to “slaughter” his son, but for the affirmation behind it that he would not withhold Isaac in the face of God’s imperative. If on principle man would give his life, his future, fully into the hands of God, even accepting a God acting against all reason, then there can be an acceptable substitution. Or, better, the system of Torah in which atonement is reached through the intermediary of sacrifice is based upon the full dedication of life into the hands of God, against all natural instincts of self-preservation and seeking assurance of one’s own future. In this manner the basic notion of intermediary sacrifice can be set up as a model of all obedience, including obedience to the specific laws of the Torah. Behind all of them is the intent to dedicate all life to God, equal to giving up what we might call our rights, our possession of our lives, our natural bonds of community. If there is the ability and intent to give that all up, there is the basis of obedience to the specific rule, that substitutes for full submission to God and enables obedience out of faith. Heteronomous obedience to the revealed commandment of God is the substitute God gives for the full weight of absolute submission He is entitled to demand.

Against Kant, we must hold that the commandment given by the divine voice is not incompatible with anything within the order of moral reasoning precisely because it is not an item under scrutiny in that order at all. The commandment is neither a known fact before the tribunal of reason nor is it to be critically weighed within the framework of a narrative understanding of God’s intent, but it constitutes in itself a separate order of cognition that precedes moral discourse. It is in opposition to any autonomously known moral order as such. Seeing Isaac as the lamb, and his sacrifice as an “elevation” toward his purpose, is a cognitive act that is in contradiction to all of Abraham’s moral and practical persuasions. And indeed, the interpretation that Abraham gave of this commandment was flawed. His actions, based on his own assumptions about what the required offering meant, do show his submission, but also show that there was a need for instruction from God to explain the meaning of self-dedication as something else than returning life to God by destroying it. The story grounds the need for the full development of Torah as an instruction in heteronomous obedience. Abraham, in a way, implies by his actions that the full dedication of a human being to God can only be in his real death on an altar, and cannot be exercised by way of finding the good through moral reasoning. The Torah is precisely that way of hearing God’s voice in an ordered manner and within a peoplehood that makes dedication through obedience possible. By substituting the lamb for Isaac, God shows that, in a human life, total submission is exercised beyond itself, and this substitution for total self-dedication or submission in the symbolism of the cult becomes the basis for specific obedience under Torah.

In a way Abraham was right: our total submission does require our ”death.” But this death
must be “symbolical,” in order for God to fulfill His purposes on earth with humanity. The promise of Abraham is fulfilled by and through a people that has gone through the Binding of Isaac, that has symbolically died to its natural instincts of self-preservation, and has renounced its own moral instincts as the basis for its morality. Theonomous obedience therefore requires basic submission to God in such a way that His commandment becomes the binding cognitive framework for its application. Without the revelation of the divine will, both as to basic values and manner of execution, it would be our interpretation of the commandment that would lead to the concrete act of obedience. In Abraham’s case, that would lead to an inability to discern what the concrete will of God really was.

There are other conclusions to be drawn. One of them is that the result that God desired in the testing of Abraham was achieved, notwithstanding Abraham’s inability to fully grasp the nature of the test. His obedience was affirmed because it represented the highest possible form of submission in the light of what the commandment revealed to him about the world. But the goal of the commandment was achieved by the prohibition of the angel, the intermediary, therefore, who stated that Abraham should not ”slaughter” his son. The second and negative commandment belied Abraham’s interpretation of the divine command and gave a new one, and it proved Abraham’s faith that God Himself would provide a lamb for the sacrifice to be right. The effort to comply with the commandment through an interpretation that gave full weight to the “otherness” of the commandment was the correct attitude towards God, even if it led to a distortion of what God truly wanted.

In examining the story of Isaac’s offering we have found a common ground between Judaism and Christianity. We must now turn, however, to the specific characteristics of Christian obedience. The binding of Isaac does not in itself sufficiently explain the specific road of Christian ethics and the ecclesiology that surrounds it. The Church has its “own commissioned witness to the world.” The Church believes that God’s righteousness was revealed in His faithfulness to the promise by accepting Abraham’s submission as the founding event of all obedience to Torah. By restoring Isaac and accepting the substitute, the Torah came to define the witness of the Jewish people for all times. James takes this trust and obedience to be the cornerstone of Christian faith as well. But there is more to be said. The Church also accepts that God’s righteousness was revealed in the obedience of the one faithful son of Abraham, Jesus of Nazareth. Here there was no substitute, and Christ was left alone by all to die on the Cross. But in the resurrection God proved to go beyond death here as well. What God began in Abraham, He continues in the Torah-centered life of the Jewish people, and He continues that in the ”gentile stones that were made into the sons of Abraham,” the Church.

But there is a difference between the Abrahamic pattern of faith in Judaism and in Christianity that we need to deal with. We take as our primary witness the Jewish philosopher Emil Fackenheim, who wrote about Abraham’s ultimate test in connection with the Kantian position that we discussed earlier. His insights into the road Judaism travels between Autonomy and Heteronomy were a guide in our earlier discussion of Abraham. In Fackenheim’s view, Christianity suffers from a tragic misunderstanding by making Abraham into the lonely knight of faith who cannot communicate with others, and who in fact cannot claim any connection with human (universal) reason. Both Kant (who rejects Abraham’s action as immoral) and Kierkegaard (who accepts it as suspension of the ethical) make Abraham into an absolute exception. The direct and absolute duty toward God, what we have called “submission”, is a suspension of the ethical, according to Kierkegaard. Agamemnon’s sacrifice of Iphigenia, though exceeding the boundaries of the ethical, still has a universal purpose. It tries to serve the whole by sacrificing one of its members. Agamemnon is therefore a moral hero, while Abraham has to live with the paradox that he must obey the command to sacrifice Isaac and yet must believe that Isaac will live. Abraham’s obedience is therefore a private affair between himself and God, an absolute test that will not be reenacted since it could not be de-
manded of the faithful today. To Kierkegaard, then, Abraham is the father of the faithful because he accepts the paradox between commandment and promise in absolute submission to God; to Kant this was the exact reason why he had to disavow Abraham as a murderer, and both are agreed that Abraham is set apart from the entire human race by this acceptance of a divine command to slaughter his son.

Fackenheim's main argument is this: Abraham was not isolated from the human race, but his testing was for the benefit of humankind. God did not need to find out who Abraham was by giving him this demand. The midrash Genesis Rabbah that explains Abraham's ordeal is adamant that testing in this context is like showing something in its inner nature and value to others. Far from being a private affair, it was intended to show to the world the character of Abraham's faith as the one to whom God had given the promise to bless all peoples. In a direct sense, Abraham was the father of all who stand in the covenant, because in some way Abraham's obedience affects them all. It is on the basis of Abraham's merit that Israel was given the Torah, which implies that the whole meaning of Torah is dependent upon the character of Abraham's faith. It signifies that elements of Torah are in fact as absolute as the divine commandment directed to Abraham. The values of humanity and moral good that Kant deemed intrinsically absolute are relative to the absoluteness of the giving of the Torah and its divine origin.

Abraham's faith, in that sense, is a basic principle of the Torah as the sum total of divine commandment that has ultimate and absolute character. But not only the commandment as such, but also God's intervention and the gift of the lamb to be sacrificed in Isaac's stead, is part of that basic principle of Torah. Without adherence to the manner in which God demands obedience, a manner that is revealed and can be construed to be just an ethics with a particular application but without inner necessity, only complete and absolute submission could be the principle of religious ethics. And because such a submission could never be realized, we would have to resort to accepting a man-made ethics that, while being secondary and relative in itself, would in fact reign as a secondary God. Only if a particular and concrete ethics is the revealed substitute for the principle of absolute submission, and only if the former is then understood as a free divine gift, can there be such a thing as a revealed religious ethics. What Fackenheim seems to be arguing is that only by making a connection between Abraham's obedience and the fullness of the Torah can the Torah be a concrete demand of God. Without that connection there is only the absolute principle of the creator's right to demand anything on the one hand (the suspension of the ethical), and human concrete ethics (guided by political expediency and common life) without any possibility of mediation on the other, unless we find that absolute in other terms, as Kant did, e.g., by constructing human freedom as that principle.

When Menno Simons wrote about Abraham's faith, he was of course completely unaware of anything like the subtle philosophical context in which Fackenheim argued his case for Abraham against Kant. This does not make him unaware of the issues that were relevant to calling Abraham the father of the faithful. Fackenheim argued that Abraham was considered by Kierkegaard as a pattern of what may turn up in the life of a Christian as a surprise demand to abandon ethics. Every believer is a potential Abraham. But to Menno, Abraham's conduct in the offering of Isaac is the fruit of a life of already established obedience in faith. It is brought into the open by the test, as the Midrash insists. It showed the inner contents of his faith. There was no struggle between the promise and the commandment, as Kierkegaard thought. Menno stated: "He well knew that unless he would believe the word of God, he could obtain no grace, no blessing, no promise, for only the obedient obtain the promise." 408 In the manner of his obedience, Abraham can be called the father of the faithful.

"This is for the encouragement of all the pious, that they should believe, and submissive follow the word of the Lord, however heretical and ridiculous it may appear to them,
not murmuring against the Lord why he so commanded it; but it is enough that they know that he has commanded, and in what manner he has commanded.”

Surely, in such an approach Abraham is not set apart from the rest of humanity. His faith shows the pattern of obedience that Christians are called to with explicit reference to Abraham. Fackenheim would have agreed with Menno that the ultimate meaning of the Akeidah is love. When Menno wrote: “So entirely was this pious man dead to himself that he denied all his lusts, his will, and mind, and loved his God alone,” these words are echoed in those of Fackenheim: “...the original akeidah was motivated neither by fear nor by hope, but rather by the pure love of God.”

There is a second analogy between Menno’s treatment of Abraham and that of Fackenheim that we must go into before centering on the differences. Both would agree that the Akeidah will not be repeated in the life of the believer. But Fackenheim makes it clear that there is an absolute moment in the life under Torah which may lead to the ultimate sacrifice. Martyrdom, or Kiddush Hashem (sanctification of the Name of God), was a perpetual possibility. Seen from the point of view of Isaac, the Akeidah is a self-sacrifice (if the Midrash is right to emphasize that Isaac went willingly and accepted Abraham’s obedience as valid for himself) on the basis of a commandment heard from others (i.e., received by tradition), and not received in the pristine and private dimension of Abraham’s encounter with his God. Jewish martyrdom is grounded on the refusal to obey any human commandment that would invalidate the Torah as such, i.e., murder and profaning the Name by idolatry. If the only choice is that between death and apostasy or murder, acceptance of death is the only option. As Fackenheim remarks, according to Kant, a man must preserve his life “until the time comes when He expressly commands us to leave this life.” Apostasy is not a danger that must be evaded at all costs. But if the Torah (summed up in the negative by idolatry and murder, both transgressions that invalidate it) is to be kept even at the cost of one’s death, then Isaac is not a historically unique person, but the pattern of faith, as important as is Abraham. Fackenheim can then make a connection with modern Jewish martyrdom by explaining that giving up oneself and one’s children when faced with this manner of persecution is the “reenactment” of the Akeidah and a moment that testifies to the continuing basis of Torah obedience.

This connection between the (faith of the) Akeidah and martyrdom was expressly there in Menno’s vision as well, though here it was mediated by the more general concept of obedience in faith, and the martyrdom was expressed around two centers of attention: following the footsteps of Christ and the apostles, and adhering to the foundational concept of the believer’s Church: adult baptism. That is why this specific episode in Abraham’s life was not singled out to become the narrative locus of Christian martyrdom. But to Christians, the reenactment of Isaac’s binding has been singularly expressed in God’s own Akeidah when Jesus Christ, the new Isaac, was murdered on the Cross. The “seed of Abraham,” in the Christian Midrash, became Christ, who as the first-born of the Father also became the new man and the head of His Church. Through this Christological transformation within the New Testament, the focus of the connection between faith and martyrdom shifts away from the Isaac of the Old Testament to the “Isaac” of the New Christian Covenant without contradicting the former. Christian faith is about receiving the new Isaac, Christ Jesus, into the “heart”. That is a faith that acknowledges that God will not break his promise and thereby makes the believers “free, joyful and glad in spirit; though they are confined in prisons and bonds, have to suffer [death by] water and fire, in chains and at the stake;...for they believe on Christ in whom the promises are sealed.”

If Fackenheim and Menno stand in agreement, both in the notion of absolute obedience out of love and the connection between Akeidah and martyrdom, what is the difference between their respective views on obedience, apart from the obvious difference that for the one the statute of that obedience is the Torah and for the other it is the law of Christ? It must be this:
that to Menno, Abraham’s obedience to God is seen as a pattern that was fulfilled in the obedience of Christ, which may now serve as a model of our imitation of Christ, whereas in Judaism, the Akeidah is taken up as a principle in the life of obedience of the Jewish people to Torah. Circumcision and the Covenant with Abraham’s descendants according "to the flesh" bring the Akeidah to completion. Judaism turns from the present of a life under Torah and in constant danger of martyrdom to the Akeidah as its foundational principle, whereas Christianity turns from its life under the gospel first to the Cross, and only then is it able to discern its connection to Abraham. When Menno states that “obedient, faithful Abraham received his son as a type of the resurrection,” this mediacy of Christ between Menno and Abraham is theologically expressed.

It has two consequences. First, because obedience to Christ is understood as comprising first of all the spirit-led life, and only on that basis does human obedience to rules and ordinances come about, the principle of Abraham’s submission was expressed as submission to God directly and not through the mediation of Torah, like this: “inward man...does willingly all things whatsoever the Lord has commanded him, let it be what it will.” But then immediately those elements of the law of Christ are mentioned that fulfill the function of idolatry and murder in the call to steadfastness under Jewish law: baptism upon confession of faith, leading to life according to the inner word and the scriptures. This general principle of obedience is not immediately connected to the Akeidah itself, as in Kierkegaard, since there is no heroism in Menno that seeks ultimate submission by suspension of the ethical. But it is connected to a way of life that is determined by “doctrine, Spirit, commandments, prohibitions, ordinances and usages” in which they walk who “would receive the commanded baptism, surrender themselves to all obedience, and according to their weakness, walk as the Lord commands, teaches and enjoins upon all true Christians.”

Secondly, in the Christian assessment, the principle of Abraham’s faith is subjectively reenacted in the believer’s acceptance of the gospel as commandment but objectively replaced (“fulfilled”) by the self-sacrifice of the new Isaac on the Cross; in Judaism, it is reappropriated objectively as the event that merited the Covenant of Moses and inherently motivates obedience to the Torah, and subjectively reenacted in the martyrdom of the people that emulates Isaac. In other words, the Akeidah is the analogy of the foundational function of the Cross in Jewish ethics; Jesus’ life and teachings function in the roles of both the Akeidah and the Torah in Christianity. So Abraham is received subjectively and objectively in Judaism; subjectively received in Christianity as well, but objectively surpassed or reinterpreted. We should not think lightly of this difference in the basic form of the Christian and Jewish midrash with regard to the Akeidah. Rabbinical ethics could be a function of the Talmud Torah, the scrupulous study and practical application of the law, both written and oral, precisely because it envisioned the life under Torah as an embodiment of Abraham’s faith to God and the concrete and specific nature of God’s covenant in response to it. In Christianity, ethics evolved in principle without the resources of the oral tradition – or rather, oral tradition was the local tradition of exegesis but did not have universal authoritative application. It did not put the written Torah on a par with the oral, because both were embodied in the Word made flesh. The incarnation theology of John and Paul looked to the life and death of Jesus the Messiah for guidance on issues of obedience and behavioral rules.

Precisely because of these profound differences, the analogies which we found before, namely obedience from love and connection to martyrdom, are the more striking. The Kierkegaardian hero of faith and the Kantian murderer are both attributes of Abraham whose ascription Menno avoided by his understanding of Abraham as the father of all who obey the gospel of Jesus Christ.
§ 43. The heteronomous source of obedience

In § 9, we argued that despite Anabaptist insistence that obedience to the law of Christ was the first requirement of the life of faith, no evangelical law was proposed that functioned analogously to the Jewish concept of Torah. If, however, obedience was the prime requisite, and discipleship the essence of faith, this would lead to the question of how we would know the will of God. As C. Norman Kraus explained:

Faith in Scripture for the second generation Anabaptists, then, meant acceptance of it as the moral authority for life (ital. mine) rather than subscription to its authoritative doctrine. They were not primarily concerned with correct theories of inspiration which would guarantee the Bible’s rational authority. Neither were they under any logical compulsion to formulate a theory that would eliminate all the effects of human co-operation in its production and thus keep its authority purely objective. Scripture’s authority rested on the fact that it was God’s covenant with man, and it was an authority to be obeyed rather than defined.417

Obedience to Scripture did not imply having a correct doctrine as to its inspired status. The Bible was seen primarily as an instrument of finding the will of God in Christ. This did not in any way lessen the authority of Scripture, Christians were supposed to “regulate and conduct themselves only in accordance with this blessed gospel of Christ.”418 “Inspiration” refers to the high status of Scripture as a guide to knowledge of Christ, but it did not intend to express any supernatural quality of perfection, nor did it mean to put literalism in any shape to the fore as the deciding hermeneutical framework of reading Scripture. The locus of authority remained firmly in Christ Himself, and not in the written word. Only knowledge of Christ can give us the key to understanding Scripture, and only the will to obey can give us knowledge of Christ.

Ben C. Oullenburger maintained that, to Anabaptists,
(1) Scripture was authoritative for Christian behavior without limitations, but it was not applicable to the sphere of public life, as the magisterial Reformation held;
(2) The New Testament as such was the guideline for Christian behavior, and not the Old Testament; there was a prior understanding of the primacy of a Christological hermeneutic;
(3) A prior commitment to Christ was held to be a prerequisite for understanding Scripture.
(4) This commitment to obedience was the only prerequisite; no theological learning and interpretative skill could equal that.419

In sum, Oullenburger is stating that obedience to Christ is the cognitive paradigm of reading Scripture for a community. “It is the task of the congregation, not the priest or the scholar, to discern the shape of the kingdom and the pattern of obedience as we together heed Christ’s call.”

The specific brand of Anabaptist biblicism, defined by its emphasis on obedience to Christ, the supremacy of the New Testament over the Old, and the congregational procedure of discerning God’s will together did not lead to an emphasis on the concrete will of God as written commandment.420 Moral commandments, like the duty to love the enemy, and ordinances, like baptism, were both obeyed to the letter, but their interpretation occurred not in the academic’s study but in congregational life. But there are distinctions to be made.

First of all, great emphasis was laid on the distinction between two kinds of obedience. Early Anabaptists like Michael Sattler made a distinction between servile obedience and filial obedience. On the whole, the difference was expressed in this way: concern for one’s own life and the hope for reward may lead to servile obedience. The motivation for obedience is not intrinsically connected to the one who demands nor to the essential character and motivation of the commandment given. But that is only a first stage in the development of faith. Such a
life may in its turn lead to obedience out of love for God without concern for reward: filial obedience.

The role of the law as written commandment is now somewhat unclear. Its primary function is to make us aware of the judgment of God (as Lutherans would argue), but it also compels us through fear to “not do, counsel or agree to anything which...God, the righteous judge, hates in His soul and has forbidden in His holy Word.” Luther, Calvin, and Menno therefore agree on the prosecuting function of the law. According to Luther, that role of the law remained effective throughout the Christian life. To Calvin, however, the law could help Christians on their road to greater perfection. In Calvinism, the law was highly valued for its pedagogical use. According to Menno Simons, however, the regenerating and enabling power of God’s Spirit would make it possible for believers to obey all the commandments of God, making the written law a secondary source of enlightenment. Though in principle Menno would have accepted the Calvinist understanding of the law as a source for discernment, in that role it was surpassed by the new type of knowledge available under the new Covenant, which followed from having the Spirit of Christ in the inner man as God’s gift. A believer would obey the commandments of God out of love for God, seeking instruction in the Scriptures and obeying to the letter what was clearly prescribed, but most of all, he would obey whatever God commanded, taught, and enjoined in the present through His Spirit. As we have found in Paul, there was a profound difference in this idea that the Spirit could enable an understanding of God’s will that went beyond the letter of Scripture. Only in the acceptance of this effectiveness of the Spirit in the community could there be such a thing as a “law” of Christ.

But what does the expression “commandments of God” mean? It did not mean to Mennonites that the prosecuting and pedagogical use of the law are transcended and the Mosaic law set up again in full force as a norm for life. The commandments of God are first of all Christ’s commandments, given under the New Covenant and explained under its provisions. There is no direct continuity or analogy between Mosaic law and evangelical law in its contents. Yet, Christ’s teachings were considered to be “law” in very much the same way as the Old Testament was “law,” in the sense that both were simply to be obeyed because God had commanded it, the characterization of the evangelical law as appealing to filial obedience being merely one of the differences that were observed between the two covenants and their definitions of the relationship of the believer to God. In other words, the Mosaic law was seen in effect as the expression of the Pharisaic mode of thought (and the attitude of works-righteousness rejected by Paul), and not as having received a new status under the messianic covenant. Such a hermeneutical transformation was still beyond the visionary power of the 16th century, in which Torah primarily meant “law” and the meaning of law was seen as analogous to the law of the state.

The Mosaic law was therefore understood to demand servile obedience, because it was connected to governmental authority in which the state functioned as the power of punishment for evildoers. Anabaptists in the 16th century projected their own experience with state persecution into their reading of the law. If the Mosaic law dealt with government and ordered society, punishing evildoers and promoting the well-being of all its citizens, it was important because it gave a standard by which to judge our human corruption, but it was not decisive for Christians as a source of moral enlightenment. They after all had to stand apart from the government and the state, which were outside the perfection of Christ. The Mosaic law, understood in these two functions and as essentially correlated to human government, could by these facts alone never become the standard for Christian living.

The 16th century Anabaptist vision of life as evangelical obedience to the law of Christ entailed an opposition, or at least a discontinuity, between gospel and (Mosaic) law. How would one remain faithful to their vision and at the same time correct their vision of the meaning of
the law in the New Testament? We have found after all in the letter of James and in the gospel of Matthew a different perspective on the role of the law. The term “law,” as John Toews put it, “is a multi-valent word, the valence of which must be determined in each text and context.” Acquaintance with the Jewish literature contemporaneous with the New Testament is a vital prerequisite of this contextual determination. If the law is not superseded in its contents by the gospel, if Christ’s teachings affirm its validity as a principle of obedience, if the Jerusalem Council by adopting the Noachide laws for gentile Christians extends its use by adding elements of Jewish oral tradition, if Jewish Christians are still expected to keep the law, the acceptance of Christ’s teachings and commandments de jure involves an acceptance of the Mosaic law as an ongoing source for Christian obedience. The prosecutory and pedagogical use of the law then fall short both of the intrinsic meaning of law (as Torah, instruction, it is infinitely more than “law”) and its formal validity for the Christian community as source of enlightenment on what the “holy, good and acceptable will of God” really is.

John Toews affirmed this vision by stating:

In the teachings of Jesus the Torah of God as interpreted by the Messiah is normative for the disciple community and expresses itself most clearly in love of God and the neighbor. Jesus affirmed the permanent validity of the law; He fulfills it by bringing its liberating intentions to light with regard to the poor and the oppressed. The law, correctly understood, should be obeyed. Love of God and neighbor are defined as the hermeneutical matrix for this messianic Torah. It is clear that Jesus did not dispense with the law and that he called His disciples to a greater, not a lesser, obedience to it. If Anabaptist obedience is about following Christ, this obedience to the Mosaic law is part of their commitment.

How will we deal, then, with Paul’s statement that righteousness was revealed in Christ apart from the law? We cannot give a full account of the meaning of this statement, and we have already made some effort to explain its meaning in a different context in our chapter on Romans. But we will note here that the righteousness revealed in Romans 3 is primarily God’s offer to enter into a covenant relationship with gentiles, not by incorporating individuals into Israel by means of the law, but apart from the Torah, by allowing the blessing of Abraham to become a reality for the faithful from the nations. The gift of the Torah to Israel was, after all, only the first part of God’s promise. In Christ His promise was fulfilled by bringing the nations under the “wings of the Divine Presence.” God who gave the Torah to Israel also called the gentiles to obedience, not directly to the Torah, but to the embodiment of the Torah in the Jew, Jesus of Nazareth.

Before we go on, we need to summarize our present point to highlight its importance. The Anabaptist vision of the heteronomous source of obedience is, first of all, Christological. Authority resides in Jesus as the Messiah. The Bible is a means by which to find the concrete meaning and contents of that obedience – and in fact, such an obedience to Christ is in its turn a prerequisite to understanding the Bible. In historic Anabaptism, the New Testament gained a specific status. Here was the source of the faithful life under the new covenant, demanding filial and not servile obedience. The Old Testament was understood along the lines of the Reformation in general in its prosecutorial and pedagogical use. Historic experience with the power of the state, and the connection between Mosaic law and government, made Anabaptists cautious in accepting the authority of the Mosaic law. Menno Simons is the most outspoken defender of the thesis that faith implies obedience to all of God’s commandments as they are present in the Holy Word, but in practice this was defined as those commandments given by Jesus Christ.

The principles of discipleship and the authority of Christ, however, do include formally the validity of the law as the source for our understanding of the divine will. In our day and age, we have increased our understanding of the different nature of Torah in comparison to Roman law, with which it had been almost identified. Meinrad Limbeck e.g. has argued that obedi-
ence in the terms of the Old Testament was basically a “hearing”, a careful and attentive noticing of something to the effect that it became a basis for future actions. Jesus also does not call to submission (obedience in this restricted sense) but to a new attentive listening to what was already present in the law and became fully clear in His ministry (Mark 4:9 e.g.) To fulfill the law never meant political compliance, i.e. to command oneself to obey the will of another subject in order to safeguard one’s own liberty for the future, but to heed a warning or accept an invitation to act in a way that enhanced life. Obedience in the Torah never implied a factual submission under a pure external word, since the word that was heard came from the Creator who was more “internal” that I could be to myself.

Filial obedience to the Mosaic law, resting upon Jesus’ affirmation of its eternal validity, must then be a principle of any Anabaptist understanding of the law of Christ. By accepting Christ’s law as the formal principle of obedience, Menno would have been led to a reappraisal of the Torah if it had not been for the identification of Torah with (Roman) law and the doctrine of its various usages prevalent during the Reformation. If Marpeck and Philips would have had the opportunity that we enjoy, to know the spirit and meaning of the Jewish law from the inside, there might have been a totally different atmosphere to the Anabaptists’ moral thinking. Given the fact that there was a prevailing tendency to look at Jewish law in this manner, it is interesting to note how close they remained to the concept of obedience in faith as revealed in the New Testament. A secondary reason that at this stage no specific Christian halakah was developed (with the exception of Hutterites and Amish) is the strong rejection of the kind of casuistry that was present in the Catholic practice of confession.

If the Bible as text was only a means to find concrete obedience to Christ, and if the Mosaic law was not seen as being embodied in Christ’s life or teaching, there still remained one avenue open to a concrete development of what Christ’s law was about. The pattern of Jesus’ life as the perfect form of human obedience to God must be in itself the “law of love” that God had commanded the Church to follow. Obedience only became concrete as discipleship, not in any formal sense, but in the concrete sense of “following after the pattern of His life.” This meant that God called the gentiles to a form of obedience that was not contained in the Torah as written, nor in the oral Torah, but in the “embodied Torah,” the Word that became flesh.

§ 44. Suffering and witness: the experiential framework of Christian ethics

We have found so far that the general pattern of Christian obedience is theonomous. The offering of Isaac shows that submission to God’s will, whatever it is, beyond and above our own moral reasoning and even theological views on the nature of God, forms its basis. However, we have also found that ethics is not identical to this submission. Absolute submission is substituted by the heteronomy of a specific institution. In the life of Israel, heteronomous obedience to the Torah comes in place of submission. In a way, the Torah mediates between theonomous submission to God’s will and human liberty. It makes it possible for a community to have a standard for its conduct that defines a way of life for its individual members. If submission alone is the essence of ethics, all ethics would be individual, and there could be no adequate means of expressing its concrete contents.

We want to concentrate on two aspects of Christian obedience that are intrinsically connected to the meaning of Christ as “embodied” Torah.

§ 44.1 Suffering with Christ

The Christian community is first of all an extension of Christ’s presence on earth, it is the body of Christ. Therefore, the believers’ community shares His fate in this world. Christians
participate in the suffering of Christ (1 Peter 4:13-14; Rom. 8:17), there is communion with
His suffering (Phil. 3:10; 2 Cor. 1:7). Such suffering is not to be construed as a historical in-
cident that would allow us to say that keeping the faith under threat of persecution is all that
matters, and that when persecution ceases, the suffering is over. As Yoder states we should
not identify the course of history with Providence.\textsuperscript{428} The Constantinian domination of
the world by the Church, and the acceptance of the state in the Reformation, were violations of
the call to suffering. In the Anabaptist experience, suffering was considered part and parcel of
the Christian life. Sometimes it was even expressed as a condition of salvation, especially in
the apocalyptic vision of Balthasar Hubmaier, who wrote in his “A Christian Instruction”:
“What is the nearest way by which one can go to eternal life? Hans: Through anguish, dis-
tress, suffering, persecution and death, for the sake of the name of Christ.” Christian living is
“bearing the cross.”\textsuperscript{429} The effort to lead a blameless life and follow in Christ’s footsteps
inevitably leads to suffering. After all, “servants are not greater than their master, and if they
persecuted Christ they will persecute those who follow Christ” (John 15:20).

According to Menno Simons, therefore, suffering is a characteristic of the true Church; it is
one of the notae ecclesiae. Conformity with the path of Christ will inevitably lead to it. It de-
rives from the fact that Christian obedience is nonconformity with the world and the continu-
ing task of the separate community. In that perspective, suffering is not a result of the specific
social and historical situation in which the Church or the individual believer find themselves.
Neither is it limited to an inward experience of guilt and sorrow. Suffering in this perspective
is the result of nonconformity to the world, and that presupposes that there is no perfection of
the world that would take it away. The powers of this age may change their modus operandi
and thus change the specific mode of suffering. There may be regional differences in the kind
of suffering to which Christians are subjected, but it can never vanish completely. Suffering is
“participation in the victory of Christ over the powers of this age.”\textsuperscript{430} As Paul states in Phil.
2:8, the example of Christ is an obedience unto death.

One might argue that there is no specific way of life in the modern West that would imply
suffering for Christians. But, to quote just one example, Paul’s insistence that brethren should
not seek justice from the (Roman) courts, but should try to work out their own differences
among themselves, is linked to the notion of suffering as well. As Paul states in 1 Cor. 6:7, it
is a “fault” that brethren have (law-)suits before the courts. “Why do you not rather suffer
wrong? Why are you not rather defrauded?” (6:7b) To evade suffering resulting from the
mistakes of the believers among themselves, one might want to use the power and the vio-
ence of civil society to force one’s own rights. But in doing so, the old system is strength-
ened, state violence is applied, and the body of Christ is compromised. Yet, the result of try-
ing to settle differences within the congregation might be that someone is robbed of his rights
under civil law; is “defrauded.” But the alternative is that the life of the congregation would
be divided into a religious part and a civil part. Christians, however, do not live in two worlds
at the same time, since they are citizens of the kingdom of heaven, residing in the world until
the kingdom is established at the return of Christ. To use the tools of civil authority would be
in violation of that citizenship and would affirm that not Christ, but the state, is the highest
power.

And other instances could be mentioned. Christians would not be able to work in a sector of
industry that is connected to warfare and/or implies the use of force against anyone.\textsuperscript{431} Their
choice of occupation might be more limited because of their choice to follow Christ. Also
their political participation would in principle be impossible, because it would lend credence
to the system if they worked inside it. It might even follow that in Western democracies they
would not validate the system of majority power by casting their vote, not even if their vote
might make a difference or could be seen as support for a “moral” candidate. The notion that
there could be a government that is less evil than another because of Christian participation in
the affairs of the world ignores the reality of the Kingdom of Christ and the implicit judgment of a world that, as system, crucified Christ.

§ 44.2 Witness

The notion of suffering as a result of the nonconformist ethics of the Church leads to the question of what the mission of the Church really is. Whatever it is, it can never be the fusion of Church and society. We have found, in our discussion of Matthew 5, that the metaphor of salt does not refer to the influence of Christians within society at large, but refers to the vulnerability of the Church because of its contact with the world. Salting society as a means of preserving whatever good there is among the bad is not the purpose of the Church. (“Salting” the whole must mean preserving the whole, i.e., including the bad.) To be the visible city on the hill, however, is its purpose, and that purpose can be described as witnessing to the world. J. H. Yoder stated on several occasions that the Church does not have a mission, but is the mission. As he put it, “The Church’s responsibility to and for the world is first and always to be the Church.”

In order to be the mission, it has to be a visible reality. Moral nonconformity is a dimension of this visibility. Yoder enumerated the possible elements of this nonconformity.

If the Church is visible in that these people keep their promises, love their enemies, enjoy their neighbors, and tell the truth, as others do not, this may communicate to the world something of the reconciling, i.e., the community-creating, love of God.

So first of all Christian ethics is in itself mission. Obedience to Christ’s commandment will lead to glorification of the Father in heaven when it is clear that only His authority is recognized in the behavior of the Church, as we have learned in Matt. 5:16. And such a witness is basically and intrinsically linked to the social ethics of the Church, 1 Pet. 2:9 affirms that the Church is called to be a priestly kingdom, in order “that ye may set forth the excellencies of Him who has called you out of the darkness to his wonderful light.” Through brotherly love (1 Pet. 1:22), through good deeds (1 Pet. 2:12), by suffering for Christ’s sake (1 Pet. 2:19), and all the other specific virtues mentioned in this letter, it is shown that this community of the faithful is indeed a “holy nation” that belongs to God as His property (1 Pet. 2:9).

But stating that the Church in its separation and specific ethics is the mission does not exclude that it actually has one. In Matthew 28:16-20, we find that the early Church was under an obligation too, connected with the affirmation of Christ’s sovereignty. On the mountain in Galilee, where the disciples had been appointed, Christ after His resurrection gives the affirmation that He has all authority in heaven and on earth. So now the Church should do these things:

• while going [out on the basis of Christ’s authority], make disciples of [or better: teach] all the nations [whereas before the resurrection they were warned not to go into the “way of the nations” (Matt. 10:5)];
• therefore baptizing them [i.e., the disciples, never children] in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit [which makes them into disciples, adopting them into the covenant community and establishing their right relationship with God on the basis of Christ’s death];
• instructing them [continuously, as it is a present participle] to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you.

Teaching the gospel, baptizing disciples, and instruction in the law of Christ are the components of the mission. One should not downplay the connection between Christ’s authority and the words for discipleship and commandments. The sovereign power of Christ is not part of
the gospel, but its basis. Becoming a disciple is an acceptance of that sovereignty, expressed in the obedience of baptism. And the Christian life that it sets out to establish is obedience to the commandments of Christ. Teaching the commandments is not equal to catechetical instruction in the doctrine of the gospel. The missionary statement in Luke 24 explains the contents of the teaching or kerugma that is first mentioned in Matthew. When Christ "opened their understanding, to understand the scriptures," the gospel can then be summarized in two sentences:

- It was appropriate for Christ to suffer and to rise from among the dead the third day,
- Repentance and remission of sins should be preached [keruchtenai] in his name to all the nations, beginning at Jerusalem.

The gospel of John contains another missionary statement that emphasizes Yoder’s point that the Church is the mission. “As the Father sent me forth, I also send you” (John 19:21b). In verse 23 of the same chapter, the mission of the Church is shown to be about forgiveness, and the Church has been given the power to forgive in practice. It can be read as a further explanation of how the "remission of sins" that Luke had mentioned functions within the context of the congregation.

In sum, the mission of the Church is twofold. (1) In its capacity of being the redeemed community, consisting of those who have accepted Christ in faith and have submitted to his authority, they show Christ’s sovereignty through their behavior as a priestly kingdom, glorifying God’s “excellencies” and making others glorify their father in heaven. But they also (2) have a mission, a direct command to teach the gospel of remission of sins and repentance, and to be the community in which forgiveness rules. Teaching the gospel must have a continuation in teaching the commandments of Christ. The shape of the redeemed community is the product of its obedience to Christ’s law. Only then can the Church be the city on the hill, the visible Church.

We cannot go into the dimension of ecclesiology beyond the short remarks we have given above within the confines of this inquiry. It must suffice for the moment to conclude that the ethical demand of the New Testament, comprising the Mosaic law as the primary written source for moral discernment, and the Noachide law as a source and model of halakhic reasoning, providing an example of such moral discernment, and finally, the understanding of the redemption in Christ through the Cross as the basic pattern of righteousness, are given to the Church as a whole. It is in the community of the faithful, that put their trust and hope for redemption on a glorified and risen Christ alone, that Christian ethics turns out to be social and political ethics. And precisely because this communal ethics is based upon a transcendent act of redemption of divine origin, such an ethics is always embodied in a morality that can be imposed upon individuals, or rather, that liberates people to become individuals. The liberated community can then by no means become a new oppressive power. To show the possibility of such an historical enterprise the Mennonite Church has been called. It can only fulfill its mission by returning to a life of committed obedience to the divine commandment as revealed in Scripture. Only through such obedience will it know its Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.
§45. Epilogue

In this study I tried to present some basic principles and viewpoints for establishing the formal nature of Christian ethics. We have emphasized that its basis is justification by faith, including repentance and the betterment of life and the process of subjective sanctification. The moral implications of the life of faith we have tried to characterize as theonomous obedience to Christ's commandments as embodied in Scripture. We have found in the Mennonite tradition an emphasis on the redeemed community as the bearer of the specific commandments of Christ: it is to remain separate, nonconforming, witnessing to the law of Christ, teaching the world by example and doctrine and most of all by the faithful application of Scriptural law to our present situation.

The new reading of Paul helped us come closer to the concept of a specific Christian ethics. The paraenesis in Paul's letters contains a vital connection to the Torah, addresses the separate community, and views the state and outer society as an "old order." Living as citizens of Christ's Kingdom within the old world makes suffering and witness into the basic constituents of Christian life.

Our reading of the gospels in the light of our understanding of 1st-century Judaism added another dimension to our discussion. Besides Paul's concept of life in the Spirit in which the demands of the law are fulfilled, there is also the messianic hermeneutic of Matthew and the discourse on justification by works by James. Both construe the meaning of Torah as a direct source for our understanding of God's will, both adopt the position that obedience to Christ entails obedience to the messianically explained and "fulfilled" Torah. In Mennonite Anabaptism, this element of "legalism" was more present than in other versions of the Radical Reformation. This "legalist" position can now be understood as a product of the insight that obedience to the revealed Scripture is the basic tenet of Christian ethics – but it should be worked out as a careful practice of casuistic reflection, distinguished from what Mennonites have called "moral discernment" by its rigorous discipline of adhering to the legal exegesis of Scripture. Our renewed understanding of the meaning of the Torah in Judaism and the oral tradition in which it is interpreted (and the process of ethical discernment in the congregation in which it is applied) may signal a return to the Jewish mode of thought about God's will and human obedience.

What is needed for the future is the construction of a Christian way of life that can be called "halakah" because it tries to determine the basic guidelines for a Christian way of life for a separate community that is committed to the Nachfolge. That derives from the given of the New Testament commandments of Christ and the hermeneutic framework in which the Torah is read by the messianic community. It should entail the Noachide commandments as adopted by the Jerusalem Council as a blueprint or constitutional law. It should endeavor to study the principles of Torah-law in concentrated legal reflection and try to apply them to our situation. It would mean a return to a Christian casuistry that has been rejected so vigorously for so long, and a farewell to the dualistic nature of an inspired narrative of ethical grandeur for the saintly and conformity to society's standards for the common man. After all, what else can casuistry be in this context than the sustained effort to understand and apply divine law on the ever-changing circumstances of life? In short: it is a systematic mode of communal discernment. It should provide us with a grip on what our real task is today.

Let me conclude with a story that has become a paradigm for the Mennonite view of Christian ethics, that may show us the inadequacy of narrative ethics.

In 1569 Dirk Willems was seized in Asperen, his native village, on the charge of being rebaptized in Rotterdam, the Netherlands. In his final arrest, he was pursued by the thief catcher and several others, including the mayor of the town. Dirk managed to cross an ice-
covered river, but the thief catcher was not so lucky. He fell into the icy water, calling for help, and at that moment Dirk could easily have escaped. Considering, however, that the others would not be able to reach his pursuer in time to help him out of the water, Dirk turned around and helped him. Now why would he do that? On the basis of narrative ethics, he might have understood that he was like Israel, fleeing from Egypt, and the punishment for the thief catcher would be a righteous one. Just as they did on the pursuing armies of Egypt, the waters would have closed down upon him. The life of the pursuer was in God's hands, after all, and so was his own. Could he not have understood this situation to be a result of divine intervention on his behalf? And how would Kant have judged this situation? By risking his own life to help his pursuer, did Dirk Willems in fact make his private rule of behavior into a moral law for all people? Then it would have set a standard difficult to follow.

Now there was the commandment from Christ to love the enemy. Was it applicable here? Surely the demand to love the enemy would not entail risking one's own life. The world was not yet redeemed and the kingdom was not yet a reality. If one could interpret a commandment on the basis of one's rational assessment of the situation, there was no direct precept. Goppelt would have answered that such an action could not be required from anyone. Loving the enemy was a good inner intention, but practical reasoning would have led to the decision to leave the thief catcher to be the victim of his own recklessness, it would show that those who live by the sword will die by it.

So the demand to love the enemy would have been counteracted by moral reason, by the narrative framework of salvation, and by a sober acknowledgment that the Kingdom was not yet present. But to Dirk, the commandment to love the enemy was not to be judged by moral reason, narrative theology, or practical reasoning. The commandment changed his perception of his own life and that of his pursuer. He was not to reason about morality, but to obey the commandment, trusting in God to lead the situation as he saw fit, even if that might cost him his life. When faced with the representative of the state, the principle of neighborly love had full force, even if that state was nothing but evil. The thief catcher was its victim as surely as it intended to make Dirk into its victim. But that did not change the main point: the life of the pursuer was not his to judge, nor was his own life to be esteemed “higher” than that of his pursuer. So Dirk acted like Abraham, considering that all life is in God's hands, and that the promise of life could be fulfilled by God even above and beyond Dirk's own efforts of preserving his own at the expense of that of his pursuer.

Dirk's action did indeed lead to his death. After rescuing the thief catcher, the latter was willing to let Dirk escape. But the mayor began to shout that he should arrest Dirk on the spot. Under oath to obey, the thief catcher reluctantly did so. Dirk was found guilty and burned at the stake. What did he accomplish with this action? Was there any visible result but his own death? Apparently not. But he showed in an extreme manner that obedience to Christ does not depend on our judgment and moral reasoning, and certainly not on our estimate of the good result. The commandment determined his view of life; it results in the paradox that we should love those that use force against us, make us suffer in Christ's name, because we ourselves were God's enemies and live by the power of forgiveness and reconciliation. We may not show the courage that Dirk has shown, but we cannot lay our consciences to rest in the conviction that Dirk was exceptional whereas he in fact did what is commanded of us all.

The “Martyrs Mirror” that relates these events is a book that speaks about those moments in time when witness and suffering were joined together. The trust in God that is put to the test speaks in the nonresistant actions of those who had to endure the evil that lies at the heart of the political powers in this world. World history and its Constantinian realism meets with the anticipatory power of faith: faith in a Christ who promised not to leave His disciples alone until the end of time (Matthew 28:20). Faith in a God who transcends the boundaries of death and evil and enables us through His Spirit to do the impossible: follow Christ in our lives. To
live according to that future reality in which Christ will be everything in all, to live the life of obedience to Christ that is determined by caring, self-surrendering love, and reconciliation and forgiveness, is the moral legacy that comes to us through the channels of time and tradition from the era of the New Testament.

To accept that legacy means to affirm that the ways of the world and the realism of its history do not have the last word. The final word is the word that Christ will address to those who follow him in life, take up their cross, separate from the ways of the world, and obey his commandments: “Well done, thou good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:21).

Now there was the commandment from Christ to love the enemy. Was it applicable here? Surely the demand to love the enemy would not remain unmet when a war was on. This war was not yet over; and the kingdom was not yet a reality. If one would bring a commandment to the level of one's personal measurement of the situation, there was no direct commandment that would have been applicable here.

One would have answered that each act of war could not be regarded from apes. Thinking of war was a good inner intention, but practical reasoning would have led to the conclusion that one's chief concern was to be the action of the enemy's code—what it would do to the world in the future. Those by the sword will die by it.

But the demand to love the enemy would have been: commensurate by moral reasoning, by the nature of man's situation, and by a deeper acknowledgment that the kingdom was not yet here. For to love, the commandment to love the enemy was not to be judged by moral reason functionally, but by the principles of the state, the nature of God, and the life of the purpose. He was not to reason about morality, but to observe the commandment, trusting in God to lead the situation as he saw fit, even if that might put him to death. When faced with the representation of the state, the principle of religiously debt him full force, even if that state was anything but evil. The third solution was his own voluntary action. This was to make the demand to love the enemy into its values. But that did not change the state's point of view. The life of the purpose was not his to judge, nor was his own life to be assumed "higher" than that of his purpose. No, God acted like Abraham, considering that all life is in God's hands, and that the purpose of this life could be fulfilled by God's own words and beyond everything else acting out the best at the expense of that of his purpose.

Surely this was the truth. After sanding, the third answer, the latter was finally making its way. When the enemy began to show that he would listen, Dick was found guilty and burned at the stake. Was there any victory worth his own victory? That he learned to die in an accurate manner, was obedience to Christ, does not impact on judgment and moral reasoning, and certainly not on our essential order of the good. He considered determined his view of life as it results in the practice that we should know of that which is to come, make us suffer in Christ's name, because we sometimes know and need a surrender and live by the power of forgiveness and reconciliation. We may not know the enemy, we can't understand, but we cannot let our conscience be in the presence of God — what is remembered by the body.

Mary's answer is that since these events in a book that nearly reach their moment in history, and without knowing everything before, that is our story. Wieland's and the Countess of Sydney meet with the realization that the truth to a woman who preaches not to learn lies. Her happiness becomes a fine thing. When she has the right to do the impossible,记者从 Christ in our lives. Fo