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ETHICS AND THE CONGREGATION

Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ. No Christian community is more or less than this. . . . We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ.

What does this mean? It means, first, that a Christian needs others because of Christ.

—**Dietrich Bonhoeffer,** ***Life Together***

It is an ancient scene. Small groups of people, families and neighbors together, are converging on the temple in Jerusalem. As they approach the walls that surround the temple courtyard, a cantor at the gate sings out:

> O LORD, who may abide in your tent?
> Who may dwell on your holy hill?

The gathering crowd of worshipers responds:

> Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right,
> and speak the truth from their heart;
> who do not slander with their tongue,
> and do no evil to their friends,
> nor take up a reproach against their neighbors

The cantor returns the chant:

> in whose eyes the wicked are despised,
> but who honor those who fear the Lord;

At the temple gate now, the people finish the thought as the antiphonal song proceeds:

> who stand by their oath even to their hurt;
> who do not lend money at interest,
> and do not take a bribe against the innocent.

As the people move through the gates, the cantor finishes the psalm:

> Those who do these things shall never be moved. (Psalm 15)

It is a modern scene. Cars converge on the church parking lot. Families congregate in small groups with neighbors and friends. Greeters are there at the door to welcome them as they enter the church, offering a friendly word or a timely question of concern about a member of the family or a recent event of importance in their lives—a wedding, a birth, a graduation, or a new job. Soon after they have found their seats, the first hymn rings out:

> Let justice flow like streams of sparkling water, pure,
> Enabling growth refreshing life, abundant, cleansing, sure.

The choir responds by picking up the second stanza:

> Let righteousness roll on as others' cares we heed,
> An ever flowing stream of faith translated into deed.

All join in the concluding stanza:

> So may God's plumb line, straight, define our measure true,
> And justice, right, and peace pervade this world our whole life through.[1]

In the temple of Jerusalem, the worship is proceeding. There is recitation of the Scripture, a statement of the people's faith in God's dominion and God's deliverance and a description of their life as a chosen people:

> Hear, O Israel: The LORD is our God, the LORD alone. You shall love the **LORD** your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. When the **LORD** your God has brought you into the land that he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give you—a land with fine, large cities that you did not build, houses filled with all sorts of goods that you did not fill, hewn with cisterns that you did not hew, vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant—and when you have eaten your fill, take care that you do not forget the **LORD**, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. (Deut. 6:4-12)

Over twenty centuries later, the gathered people of God echo their ancestors in the faith as they rise to say their creed:

> I believe in God, the Father almighty,
> creator of heaven and earth.
>
> I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord
> He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit
> and born of the Virgin Mary.
> He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
> was crucified, died, and was buried.
> He descended into hell.
> On the third day he rose again.
> He ascended into heaven,
> and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
> He will come again to judge the living and the dead.
>
> I believe in the Holy Spirit,
> the holy catholic Church
> the communion of saints,
> and forgiveness of sins,
> and resurrection of the body,
> and the life everlasting. Amen.

A common theme characterizes both these scenes, ancient and modern, despite their outward differences. In both cases the message is that community worship is the place of commitment to the good and right in the eyes of God and for the sake of the neighbor. It is a commitment couched in the recognition and assurance that the world belongs to God who in love has created it, redeemed it, and called it to new life and new possibilities. The great *Shema* (in Hebrew *shema* means "hear") of Deuteronomy 6 functioned as a creedal confession for the people of Israel in which the memory and promise of God's deliverance is woven together with a reminder that their lives are to be lives of joyful obedience in which the will of God permeates every facet of their existence as water suffuses every fiber of a sponge. The Apostles' Creed does not speak directly of the life of obedience, but it is no less powerful in its testimony to an all-powerful and all-gracious God. It places a frame of meaning and hope around the Christian life, giving impetus to our response of love.

Another way to say this is that, in the tradition of biblical faith, the life and worship of the congregation provide the occasion for the development of faith, formation, and decision. By *faith* I mean our understanding and trust in God and God's promises. By *formation* I mean the manner in which our

outlook on life, our values, and our attitudes toward others and their needs are shaped by our understanding of God and God's promises. In short, formation is the development of character and the virtues that express it. By *decision* I mean the choices we make concerning right and wrong, in our own lives and as we address our Christian witness to the moral issues in the world around us. Faith, formation, and decision go together in Scripture, in song, in liturgy, in educational programs, and in the conversation of the faithful. There is a constant disclosure of who God is, what God cares about, and how God loves us and promises to be with us. God's gracious power is at work through this disclosure, enabling us to trust in the one we have come to know.

This trust and understanding take shape concretely in the sorts of people we are, individually and as a group. To know the love of God and trust in it is to become a people of love. To know the mercy of God is to become a people who are merciful. To know the creator God who cares for the earth and everything that is in it is to become a people who are good stewards of that creation. To know God in Jesus Christ as the one who gave himself up for all people is to be a people ready to receive and affirm the worth of all people, even our enemies. To know God in Jesus as the creator and redeemer of all life is to be a people who uphold the value of life. In these and many other ways we are formed out of faith by the grace of God; we become a people whose choices in life for the right and the good are a reenactment of God's action in our life. Or, to cite another way of saying it, "Our God is a performing God who has invited us to join in the performance that is God's life."[2]

Faith, formation, and decision go together whenever we think about ethics, Christian or otherwise. Ethics can never be understood simply in terms of a set of principles that tell us what is right and wrong. Unless those principles are a consistent expression of our basic outlook on life, our faith, and dispositions, they may not make much sense to us or they may not be very important to us.

Some years ago I accepted an invitation to speak to a group of businesspeople. They were a diverse group of many different backgrounds who were strangers to me. I was able to speak of principles of morality and say something about how they applied to contemporary problems of business. It was not a bad speech, and I am sure that some of the listeners appreciated some of the things I had to say. However, I walked away without a clear sense that I had communicated effectively. I could not gauge whether the convictions I expressed were in the least bit persuasive. I realized afterward that the reason for these feelings of uncertainty was that I had no way of knowing whether my listeners and I shared a common basis for thinking about ethical questions. I did not know how many shared my faith; I did not know what sorts of people they were. In order to understand how people feel about ethical principles or

how they might decide on certain issues, you must first know something about their faith and their outlook on life. What do they think is of ultimate importance and greater than themselves? What forces have shaped their character in what ways?[3] That same experience repeated itself in the years following, during which I regularly taught business ethics in an MBA program. Though I got to know my students, we were all aware of the variety of different, often unspoken, presuppositions people brought with them to the discussions. All realized tacitly that those different perspectives would condition individual reactions. In papers and presentations students would say what they felt was expected, but there was no guarantee in every case that it was what they truly believed.

There are a multitude of additional illustrations that help make this point. For example, not too many years ago it was common for family members and their pastors who kept vigil with a dying loved one to sometimes find themselves at odds with the doctors over whether or not to continue every possible effort to keep the patient alive. In faith the family and pastor may have felt that it was the fitting time to die; they knew the gospel promise; they knew that death is not the last word. But the doctors may have resisted. They may have felt that every step possible to keep the body alive is obligatory. The world of medicine is dedicated to forestalling death; death is defeat. For the family it was right to let death happen. For the doctors it was right to work their hardest to keep that patient alive. Both family and doctors cared very deeply about the dying one. They differed on what is right because they had different outlooks on life and death.

Nowadays such a conflict is less likely since medicine has more readily embraced practices of care for the dying and tempered its drive to keep persons alive at all costs. However, similar tensions have emerged in the wake of interest in physician-assisted suicide or other forms of assisted dying for the suffering terminally ill. Some people of faith may oppose it in the belief that only God can take life. Other people of faith may approve it as consistent with their belief in a compassionate God. Secular thinkers sometimes champion the practice as an expression of our personal rights. Doctors are frequently opposed to physician involvement on the grounds that their vocation is to preserve life, but some who share a concern for compassion and the relief of suffering would help persons die if it were legal.[4] We shall have further discussion of assisted dying in chapter 9. For the present the point is simply to observe that different outlooks on life and death are operating in this debate to produce very different responses to the ethical challenge.

Faith, formation, and decision go together in all our thinking about ethics just as they have always gone together in the gathered life of the people of

God. Without belaboring the matter, it seems clear that Christian ethics and congregational life need each other. The purpose of this book is to provide an understanding of formation and decision that is consistent with the faith we nurture and proclaim in the life and worship of the congregation. The reason for doing so is to undergird Christian people in their moral struggles as they seek, individually and corporately, to give a faithful witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ in the world of our time. To emphasize the congregation as the place where this can happen is important because that is the place where most Christians experience community in the body of Christ, the place where the resources for faith, formation, and decision are present in great abundance.

In a recent reflection on his journey as a theologian, Douglas John Hall raised the concern that both congregations and theologians have failed to make the serious work of theology a part of the churches' ongoing concern. The churches have failed to nurture and appreciate the theologians, and the theologians have too often restricted their work to the academy. In the end the churches are the biggest losers, for they will be deprived of needed theological depth and insight in a time when Christianity is struggling in a secular and pluralistic world.[5] I think the same concern for the life of the church can be raised in connection with that expression of theology we call Christian ethics.

It seems to me that there is more than one reason why pursuing the integration of faith and ethics is a worthwhile purpose. Our contemporary world is marked by a staggering array of ethical problems that appear to have sent our society into a moral tailspin of confusion and uncertainty: duplicity in government, shady dealings in the top echelons of the business world, exploitation and inequality in the domestic and global economic order, a morass of unsettled arguments about critical environmental issues, deep questioning over the morality of recent military initiatives, disturbing patterns in our sexual behavior and in the erosion of the institution of marriage, and the intrusion of medical science into heretofore sacred precincts of life. Surely Christians have a responsibility to speak with a clear voice to a world that seems to be cut adrift from its ethical moorings. There is so little trust in the institutions of our common life. There seems to be so little hope for change. The profound skepticism and confusion of the general public regarding moral concerns and the fact that these concerns deal with problems that threaten the very meaning and existence of life as we know it is a situation for strong Christian witness to provide direction and hope. However, even as the Christian community seeks to meet this challenge and opportunity, it must address what many consider a crisis of moral authority in both the church and society at large.

The Enlightenment, the dawn of the "age of reason" in the seventeenth century, marks the beginning of what we have come to call the modern era.

Faith in critical reason and the empirical method greatly weakened the traditional sources of moral authority that we depended on in the past. Scripture, belief in a natural moral law, the doctrine of the church, and tradition or custom once had a much stronger hold on the general public and many churchgoers than they now do. Value judgments and creeds once considered absolute became relative matters of personal preference. Authoritative teaching became harder and harder to defend in a modern world that considered the Bible and church doctrine to be developments of the past that no longer may be totally relevant in an ever-changing world. The spirit of secularization, so much a part of modernity, was one of celebrating freedom from the old authorities that once prescribed obedience and commanded our loyalty.

Now we have entered the era under the sway of what philosophers like to call "postmodernism." The modern era characterized by the Enlightenment's faith in the power of reason to lead us to truth in all matters including ethics eroded the influence of religious authority. However, the promise of a rational attainment of universal truth has never been realized as the successor to the previous authority of religious traditions.[6] Consequently, in this postmodern era there is no overarching faith, philosophy, or worldview that unites us. Instead, we live in a pluralistic world of many faiths and many different outlooks shaped by the influences of our particular social and cultural circumstances.[7]

Reactions to this postmodern state of pluralism are predictably diverse. This is true within Christian communities as well. At one end of the spectrum we find a rigid traditionalism that has condemned the lingering secular spirit and the postmodern celebration of diversity. They call for a return to the old values and as a focal point of that cause often choose a few select issues such as abortion, gay marriage, and prayer in public schools. At the other end of the spectrum, more liberal church leaders have maintained that the church must modify its teachings in light of new understandings and situations. This, they maintain, has always been the church's task throughout the ages. In the former case, an understandable desire to defend certain values can easily lead to a closed-minded absolutism and a truncated inventory of Christian concerns. In the latter case, accommodation to change can easily slide into relativism.

If there is a way to get our bearings in today's confusing circumstances, it is only in community. For only in community do we discover a shared vision of the meaning and hope of life that can provide a solid basis on which to address moral questions. The people of God gathered around the Word of God discover the ethical insights of their faith and the power of that faith to provide a moral compass by which to navigate among the competing and ambiguous choices of our contemporary world. Allen Verhey reminds us of Paul's description of the church at Rome as "full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and

able to instruct one another" (Rom. 15:14). It is a reminder that it is in the gathered communities of the faith, blessed by the Spirit with the same gifts as the church at Rome, that people find wisdom and direction. The work of Christian ethics exists to serve those communities.[8] I share that conviction. It is out of the community in which our moral vision is born of the faith and nurtured in the faith that we emerge as from a chrysalis ready for flight in a world that needs this faith-based witness.

We really do need each other. The lonely pursuit of the moral life is an exercise in despair; none of us has what it takes to understand all that needs understanding and do all that needs doing. It is part of the good news of our salvation in Jesus Christ that our salvation is not an individual happening but that the grace of God has created us anew in community, intimately linked to one another as the body of Christ. The pursuit of Christian virtue is not a solo performance. Instead, our pursuit of the Christian ethic is more like playing in an orchestra in which each of us has his or her own particular part to play in harmonious concert with others and each one of us shares in the ownership of the total sound that is produced. My gifts are your gifts and your gifts are mine. Not all of us are effective as advocates for justice, but the church is endowed with members who are and, as a part of the total community, we are all advocates for justice. Not all of us have the patient endurance to bear quietly the burdens of those who suffer, but the church is endowed with those who can, and all of us, as part of the community, are those who bear the burdens of others in love. Not all of us have the insight to reason through some of the complex moral dilemmas created by modern medicine, but the church is endowed with many who can, and all of us as a community share in that witness to what is responsible on behalf of life. And so it goes. This is Paul's image of the body of Christ after all (1 Cor. 12:12-31). It is indeed good news that we are saved as a community, as a people, and not merely as individuals. It invites us to value the gifts that all of us bring to our common tasks. It invites us to treasure the experience of those from different cultures and with different histories who can be our teachers, even as they are our brothers and sisters in Christ.

When I think about the church as a community and the manner in which we support and complement each other, I often recall a story I enjoyed reading to my children. In one of the Dr. Seuss selections called *Sneetches,* there is a little piece entitled "Too Many Daves."[9] The story tells of a woman named Mrs. McCave who had twenty-three sons and named them all "Dave." As a result, when Mrs. McCave calls out for Dave, all twenty-three of her children come running at once. The fun comes when Dr. Seuss goes on to mention all the silly, different names she might have chosen instead of naming them all

"Dave." But the point is, it seems to me, that when everyone has the same name there is chaos and not order. The same holds true for the life of the church. If all of us had the same gifts, the church could not function. However, since we are not the same and each of us brings a variety of different gifts that sustain and support each other in our common faith and calling, there is order rather than chaos. That is the case, at least, when we use all the resources that God has given us in each other. The apostle Paul opens his first letter to the Corinthians with the assurance that God has blessed them with every spiritual gift they require and is faithful in seeing them through the challenges of this life to the very end (1 Cor. 1:4-9). It remains an assurance for us today.

Nonetheless, the life of the church as we experience it in the congregation frequently can be rather narrowly focused and characterized by the avoidance of difficult issues that should be a matter of Christian reflection and growth. I still remember an occasion when I was asked to present a series of lectures to an adult class at a local congregation. The subject was social ethics, and the topics included such controversial matters as economic justice and making peace in a nuclear age. As the sessions progressed, I could sense a growing restlessness among some of the people in the group. Finally, one man spoke up and expressed the feelings of a good number of the class. "I don't know why we are talking about things like this in church," he said. "We have a happy, friendly congregation here. We are all united in our love for Jesus; we like to come to church and hear the Good News. If we start talking about issues like these, it will only divide us and spoil our peaceful congregation."

The idea expressed here appears to be that community is created by preserving the outward unity of the congregation through the reduction of its commitments and convictions to the lowest common denominator. Where this kind of view is operative, we not only avoid discussing certain important aspects of our calling as Christian witnesses in the world, but also we deny each other the gifts we can bring to the task through sharing in the congregational community. We are left to our own devices to struggle with the ethical issues of life. And, unless we make the connections for ourselves, we must carry on those struggles without the benefit of understanding how our faith and hope in Jesus Christ can provide the moral compass we require.[10] Such a view stands in stark contrast to our opening scene from ancient Israel where life with God and life itself came together as the people came together.

The problem of avoidance remains with us. During the past several years I have been serving as the director for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's studies on sexuality. The first phase of the study process was focused on homosexuality with reference to questions of blessing same-sex unions and admitting persons in such committed unions into the ordained and other min-

istries of the church body. In my travels across the country to explain the study process and encourage congregations to participate, I often met the objection or fear that such a discussion will cause strife within the congregation and even result in loss of members. Such fears are understandable and yet not helpful to the witness of the church.

The irony of the claim that we should avoid controversial, ethical discussions and stick to the gospel is that, whenever we gather around the gospel, its power and promise (if we are open to it) inevitably involve us in the enterprise of ethics. Moreover, many of the ELCA congregations that did do the study I just mentioned reported a very different kind of experience from internal strife. Over 80 percent of the thousands who participated and sent in their responses indicated that they now understood each other better and had learned something. Trusting in the Spirit's promised gifts, they engaged in responsible study and dialogue and emerged from the experience enriched.[11] Not only were they enriched, but they were being faithful to the church's vocation to be a community of moral deliberation, a subject to which we shall return in part 3.

This book begins and ends with the conviction that the concerns of Christian ethics are an integral part of our gospel faith and that the Holy Spirit will guide, strengthen, and sustain the Christian community in even its most challenging tasks of moral discernment.

Questions for Discussion

1. Look through your hymnal. What hymns and other parts of the service can you find that link the gospel and our call to Christian love and ethical concern?

2. What are some of the most urgent ethical issues in our day, which Christians need to address in their personal lives and public witness? Are there issues you believe the church should *not* get involved with? If so, why?

3. Are the pressing ethical issues of the day being addressed in your congregation? How is this happening? If some things are not being addressed can you think why? What can be done constructively to integrate ethical awareness and commitment into the life of your congregation?