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 C. A. Anderson Scott
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Lecture I

THE MASTER: CHARACTER OF HIS ETHICAL TEACHING

“**F**AITHFUL is the saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.” To save them from what? and to what? The answer commonly given by those who have gone before was, to save them from hell or from the wrath of God, to save them to heaven or to the peace of God. But the modern man, changing the form but not the substance of the thought, answers, to save them from wickedness, to save them into goodness. At the same time it is becoming increasingly clear that this question of goodness *versus* wickedness is one of supreme importance for society. For even God Himself cannot make a good world, a world “fit for heroes to live in”, except by making men and women good. And, thirdly, the Christian Church is the only institution in the land which makes it an essential part of its programme to do this great service to the State as well as to the individual, to make men and women good. It is in view of these considerations that I propose to use this opportunity to examine the New Testament teaching on Ethics, the art of a good life, wherein it consists and how it

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may be attained. It will not be possible in the time available to offer a complete treatment of the subject, collecting and systematising the details. What I shall attempt, and what seems to me of primary importance, is to ascertain and estimate the main principles which underlie the ethical teaching of the New Testament, referring to such details as may be useful for illustration.

We begin with the Synoptic Gospels and the recorded teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. Among the many things which can be predicated of Him not the least important is that He was a teacher. He believed in teaching. It was a form of activity which is recorded of Him more frequently than any other. Unfortunately the records of His teaching which we have in these Gospels are woefully fragmentary and insufficient. But He not only taught far more than has been recorded for us; like all great teachers He taught far more than He put into words. And in estimating His influence we have to think not only of what He directly taught, but of what men indirectly learnt of Him, some of which must have left its mark on their thinking in after days.

It is hardly possible to exaggerate the stupendous difficulty of the task which was undertaken by our Lord—as a teacher; undertaken and partially achieved in a handful of persons while He was yet on earth, achieved more perfectly and on a larger

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scale after His Death and Resurrection. If we must for convenience draw a distinction between His 'religious' and His 'ethical' teaching (never forgetting how they interlock), we say that in religion He revealed the Father and in ethics the ideal life of man. And by revealed we mean not merely announced or proclaimed, not even demonstrated, but caused men to see, and so to see that they grasped what they saw as great treasure. These things, God as Father and the ideal life of man, became for ever after part of that whereof they were aware. Thus the two *foci* in the ellipse described by His teaching were the Fatherhood of God and the Kingdom of Heaven, by which we may understand the world of spiritual realities and values realised in a social complex. The direction of His influence in this connection and its culmination are indicated by St Paul's discovery that the Kingdom of God is "righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost".

But Jesus employed also what was practically a synonym for the Kingdom of Heaven as experienced by an individual, when He used with special significance the word "Life". The stages in the Biblical history of this word mark the great stages in the history of religion. Of these the most significant is found in the pregnant sentence in Deuteronomy, "Man doth not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of

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God". Whatever the words were intended to convey in their original context, as used by Jesus in the Temptation, they mean that man has or has open to him a life other than that which he shares with the animal world, a life which is not nourished by bread. This life, life that is "life indeed" (1 Tim. vi. 19), life which is unaffected by death, is nourished by "every word", i.e. by the total self-communication of God. And again another of our Lord's intimate friends registered the discovery, drew the inference from His teaching, "This is life eternal, that they might know thee... and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent". And he further reports Jesus as eager to give this Life, as calling Himself the Bread which nourishes this Life; and the same disciple reports His followers as saying to Him, "Thou hast the words of eternal life". All which means that they found that life in the significant sense which He gave to it was first quickened and then nourished by the total self-communication of Jesus.

Along these two lines, teaching about the Kingdom of Heaven and teaching about Life, distinct yet mutually complementary, we discover the revelation given by our Lord as to man and his true environment and as to the reactions to that environment which were to be looked for when once its true character was discovered. It was nothing less than the revelation, the bringing home to man's

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consciousness, of the spiritual world, its reality and its incommensurable value. What we call the ethical teaching of Jesus may be seen to consist of practical deductions from the revelation and discovery of man's spiritual environment.¹

We have been in the habit of speaking of these things as propositions announced and authenticated by Jesus, and then we begin to ask for proofs that they are true and to look for proof in His miracles or in His fulfilment of prophecy. Whereas we ought to begin by recognising a revolution in human thought, accomplished in the minds not of wise and learned men but of fishermen and tax-collectors and harlots. They became aware of God as Father and of the spiritual world as real. And when we ask how was this revolution accomplished, the only answer is, By the authority of Jesus.

What was the nature of that authority? In discussing this question there is one preliminary consideration which still requires to be emphasised, and that is the distinction between coercive and persuasive authority. In popular thought and popular speech the word connotes almost exclusively coercive authority, the authority of force threatened or of force applied. It is indeed the

¹ Compare C. H. Dodd, *Authority of the Bible*, p. 281: "The new thing Jesus gave to men was bound up with what he was. It is not to be formulated in propositions about God, but discerned in the whole new outlook, the new attitude, the new essential relation to God and the Universe which he possessed".

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only kind of authority in which the world believes. It is the kind of authority which the world berates the Church for not exercising, claiming or possessing. And it is the kind of authority which Jesus, whether He possessed it or not, definitely and deliberately refrained from employing. He was entirely devoid of the adjuncts which usually accompany such authority—social standing, wealth, organised physical force. His critics put their finger on the absence of such authority as a fatal flaw in his cause. “By what authority doest thou these things?” They gave Him time and again a chance to display authority of this kind in a manner cognate to the claim which they felt Him to be making—“Show us a sign from heaven”, from the sky. And He deliberately and repeatedly refused. It was “an evil and an adulterous generation” which demanded a sign, some miraculous portent which would make it, as they thought, impossible for them not to believe. In His Temptation He had rejected in succession three different forms of such coercive authority, and His whole Ministry was consistent with the course to which He then committed Himself. For He knew that not by any kind of coercive authority could faith be created. “Neither will they believe though one rise from the dead.”

The stupendous task undertaken and progressively achieved by our Lord as Teacher—the

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opening of the Kingdom of Heaven, the world of spiritual realities and values, to all believers—was carried out by the exercise of an authority which was persuasive, in part something which proceeded from His character and personality, in part something which appealed to reason or to conscience or to affection. He taught with authority, “and not as the scribes”. Not that the scribes taught without authority. Nothing of its kind could exceed the authority claimed by, and conceded to, the scribes. They were the appointed organs of an accepted institution. What the people felt in Jesus was an authority of a different kind. It was an internal authority internally felt. Thus to describe the authority exercised by Jesus as persuasive not coercive is not to suggest that it was hesitating, feeble or ineffective. It carried with it the impression of tremendous urgency, of the vast importance of the issue between acceptance and refusal. It involved a paradoxical synthesis of holy passion and calm. Both, as Frick has pointed out, were rooted in our Lord’s consciousness of God. “Herein lies the power of his proclamation of the Kingdom that he takes this God with absolute seriousness, in his holy wrath as well as in his forgiving grace.”¹

The authority which radiated from Jesus was not coercive but persuasive. We must not however

¹ R. Frick, *Der Reich-Gottes Begriff*, p. 7.

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forget that there was for the second and subsequent generations a third kind of authority which may be described as experimental. It is the authority which is exercised by an individual or a group which has reacted to a certain teaching or a theory of life in such a way as to put it to the test of experiment, and is thenceforward in a position to confirm it by experience. This is of course the kind of authority by which nine-tenths of our conduct is governed. In innumerable directions it provides us with a working hypothesis, which we accept, in the first instance at least, without question or analysis, and proceed to test for ourselves by experiment. In the field which we are to examine this experimental authority begins to appear in the Apostolic Church, and accumulates as the centuries go on. It is represented on the one hand by the Christian conscience, on the other by the *communis sensus* of the Christian community.

In the region of Christian Ethics its weight and volume become clearly and increasingly perceptible after Pentecost. But it is not entirely unrepresented in the Synoptic Gospels. It has been a mistake on the part of criticism to regard these Gospels as composed in the service of doctrinal propositions or dogmatic tendencies. What is appealed to as evidence of such tendencies is of much more spontaneous origin. The material of these Gospels was collected and moulded by men

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who had reacted responsively to Jesus. They had to some extent accepted His authority and teaching. These were to some extent confirmed for them by experience. They had, to use the old phrase, “tasted that the Lord is gracious”. And many factors or features in the Synoptic Gospels, to which we can assign less historical authority in the strict sense of the word, are of the highest value as reflecting the experimental authority of those who knew Him in the days of His flesh.

But, further, this persuasive authority which radiated from Jesus may be analysed, as it seems to me, into strands or rays which differ from one another in character. It was not uniform in the kind of appeal that it made and makes. Perhaps we shall best realise this if we think of the situation to-day. We come into the circle of Christ’s disciples, His pupils, with a general impression that He is one Who speaks with authority on matters of the greatest moment. We have before us the alternative, as most people understand it, either to accept His teaching or to reject it *en bloc*. He is thought of as a Divine Legislator, Whose word can neither be questioned nor criticised, Whose ‘commandments’ must all be taken literally and must have equal and similar authority with those who accept Him as their Master.

But in practice both questioning and criticism arise in the minds of a large and an increasing

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number. Are not some of our Lord's demands impossible of fulfilment? Who can produce love to order? Are not others patently inadvisable—"Give to him that asketh of thee"? In the result many compromise, tacitly agreeing with themselves to ignore the awkward imperatives. Many others reject such an impossible scheme of life, and fling themselves out of discipleship. And yet even outside the circle there is in many quarters a wistful sense that after all Jesus knew and taught the secret sources of peace and power, if only we could understand Him.

How if we make the fundamental and fatal mistake in regarding Him as a legislator at all? It was perhaps inevitable that He should come to be so regarded. We see the process beginning and carried pretty far already in the Gospel of Matthew. We see it complete by the time of Cyprian. The treatment of the Gospel as a new law to be literally followed and obeyed by all who claim to be 'saints' was formally adopted by the Anabaptists as one of their principles. There were two strong human motives behind it, the one a natural craving for coercive authority, something 'solid' as men say, something which relieves men of the necessity of striving after spiritual insight; the other due to the reverence with which men look up to Christ as Lord and God, making them chary of claiming the privilege of an ethical insight of