

Norms and Values in Christian Ethics

by Rev. L.W. Bilkes

Introduction

In my former congregation one of the elderly sisters of the congregation who was very knowledgeable once said, 'Pastor, you have to teach the young people to think Biblically, in accordance with the Word of God.' This is indeed very important, that you live by the Word of God. That is to be the source and norm for our mind and heart and walk. This is important also when you talk with some one else, and he says, 'Why do you think that way?', then you show him the Bible and say to him: 'because God says so in His Word.' That is crucial. I cannot underline that sufficiently. I hope that if you learn anything at all from this speech, it is that you are going to get back to the Word of God.

Ethics

The word comes from the Greek *ethos*, which means 'custom' or 'habit.' Today the term **ethics** is used to mean something like morals, good or bad. A course in ethics is a course on morals, on what all is involved in making ethical decisions. When we in our Reformed churches use the term ethics, we don't mean to merely describe how we live or how people live, but how we should live. That is an important distinction.

Many angles

When you must make decisions in the whole field of ethics, you must look at many angles. (i) You have to look at the facts, you have to look at what they call the psycho-social ramifications. That means for example, that you must consider what will be the consequences of our decisions for our society, for mankind, or for that particular person. (ii) We must have a number of ethical principles or moral principles. In a great deal of contemporary ethics they consider, for example, (a) the principle of autonomy. That is the thing they talk about today with regard to the issue of assisting in suicide, the whole issue of abortion, genetic counselling, euthanasia, etc. By the principle of autonomy they mean the principle that I as an individual have certain rights, inherent rights. It is really the principle of self-rule, which has been dominating our country for quite some time now and surely seems to stand out, as time goes on. (b) Related to that is the principle of consent. You may be familiar with the rule of informed consent, which is derived from that principle of autonomy. It specifies that health providers have to provide the patient with the information that he needs, and the like.

Allow me to say already at this point that the Bible views that principle of autonomy, or self-rule, negatively, because ultimately this is the principle of lawlessness, which is contrary to what God says in His Word, in His law, as well as in His Gospel. Indeed, the Bible emphasizes personal responsibility, but that principle of autonomy ignores what the Word of God says. Think, for instance, about values. I am valuable, but I am only valuable, because God has created me, and in His grace He has given me a place in the day of grace, so that I may live under the promise of the gospel and may live under the demand to turn to the Lord while He may be found, and therefore people must respect my life.

Christian ethics

What does the term 'Christian' mean in "**Christian** Norms and Values."?

(i) A Christian is a person who by God's grace has placed his life under the lordship of Jesus Christ. He acknowledges Him as Saviour, the only Saviour, and as Lord. Not only in heaven, in the midst of the throne of God, but in His heart, as Prophet, Priest and King. (ii) A Christian is someone who has come to see Jesus as the infallible teacher and prophet. That implies that a Christian is somebody who puts his mind, his

intellect also under the dominion of Jesus Christ. Something is true to a Christian because Jesus Christ has said so. (iii) Likewise a Christian is someone who has looked on Christ as Priest, that is, as the sacrifice for sin and as the Bearer of sin. A Christian is a person who has confessed his sins over Christ, and in Him he has boldness before God and lives under His blessing hands. (iv) A Christian is someone who has come to know Jesus Christ as King Who has absolute authority over his life, as Paul says in Philippians 1:21, "For me to live is Christ". That is, Christ has come to the very center of his life. Christ is his all in all. He has become a disciple in the school of Christ, in the school of sanctification. In that school there is in terms of God's predestinating purpose one great object and aim, and this is to conform to the image of the Son of God. The means by which he conforms such a person to the image of the Son of God is the Scriptures, the inspired, the inerrant Word of God.

What do the Scriptures teach us?

There are many things in the Bible that are very clear to us. 'Thou shalt not kill.' That is clear. But what about the issue of a 'holy kiss'? "Salute [= Greet] one another with a holy kiss" (Romans 16:16). What do we do with that? What about the foot washing in John 13? With reference to it, Jesus says: "...I have given you an example, that you should do as I have done to you" (John 13:15). In what way are we to wash one another's feet? Perhaps you say: 'Please not literally!' But what then does it mean? Or take the whole issue in the Bible of head covering. The men may not wear head covering for prayer and for the worship services. The remarkable thing is that we endorse it for the men but not for the women. At least when a young man wears a come baseball cap at catechism I ask him to remove it for prayer and for the remainder part of the class. But Paul the Apostle writes in 1 Corinthians 11 that a woman must pray only covered. The late Professor John Murray wrote once in a letter to the Evangelical Presbyterian Church in Australia in 1973 on this issue, Since Paul in 1 Corinthians 11:3b and 7ff. "appeals to the order of creation...it is totally indefensible to suppose that what is in view and enjoined had only local or temporary relevance. The ordinance of creation is universally and perpetually applicable, as also are the implications for conduct arising therefrom"¹

What is clear from I Corinthians 11 is (i) that the norms for us in this regard do not lie in our culture, but rather in the Word of God., and that God's Word and God's Spirit bring with them a new culture. (ii) What is at the heart of Paul's argument is his concern that women should know their place in the order of creation--the man the head of the woman as Christ is the Head of man and God the Head of Christ--and that they should behave in public and surely in the worship service in a way that shows that they do understand this aspect of 'order' in the creation of God. How is that to be done? Paul says that the woman needs a head "covering." Has this not been forgotten?

Why do the Christian women wear a hat in Church? If we say, 'Well, it is in the Bible!', we are not giving a proper answer, for the question then must be put: 'Why is it in the Bible?' The answer that Paul gives is that the Christian woman must show that she understands her place in that order of creation. Paul makes clear that redemption does not cut across that but rather establishes and confirms that. Paul even says that that will bring joy to the angels in heaven. I do not intend to resolve this issue in all its details. I am raising it only to point up the kind of problems which sometimes arise when we try to bring Biblical principles to the present day.

The Law of God and Conscience

1. "The Use of Head Coverings in the Worship of God," in *The Presbyterian Reformed Magazine* [A Quarterly of the Presbyterian Reformed Church] VI, No 4, p. 193.

The Apostle Paul writes in Romans 2:14 that "the Gentiles who have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law." He says the Gentiles do not have the law in that revealed form that we have in the Scriptures, but in their conscience there is an awareness that God is to be worshipped, that adultery, murder, theft, and so on, are wrong.²

Paul qualifies this because if anybody says: 'Well, if that was written in man's conscience at creation, why do we need the Ten Commandments?' the answer is that our conscience has fallen. When Adam fell, and we fell in Adam, our conscience was fallen. As a result there are people who sin, and when you point them to their sin, they say: 'I don't think that it is a sin what I am doing. At any rate, it doesn't bother my conscience!' Sometimes the comment is made that conscience is to be our guide. That, however, is not put rightly. Conscience can only be our guide if our conscience is ruled by the Word of God. After all, our conscience has been affected by the fall into sin, and it is in mercy that God after the fall gave in fullness the law again.

The Ten Commandments

2. Cf. Wenham, Gordon, "Law and the legal system in the Old Testament, in Bruce Kaye and Gordon Wenham eds., *Law, Morality and the Bible*, p.

29. Cf also Murray, J. *Principles of Conduct*, p. 20.

The Ten Commandments are special.³ They were written with His own finger (Exodus 31:18b; cf. Exodus 32:15f.). Indeed, the rest of the Old Testament and the New Testament has also been written by God, but through the mediation of men, who were inspired by the Holy Spirit and kept from error. But the law He wrote with His own finger, which surely indicates the special character of the Ten Commandments. To be sure, there is a slight difference between the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5, but essentially there is no difference. In the Old Testament there were also the ceremonial laws and the civil laws. Accordingly, the Reformed and Presbyterian traditions have for centuries distinguished three types of Old Testament laws. (i) The civil laws governed social, economic and political affairs in Israel. The rulers were to enforce them. (ii) Ceremonial laws regulated the offering of sacrifices, the celebration of feasts, and the tabernacle service. The priests were to supervise these rituals. (iii) God gave the third type of laws, the moral laws, the Ten Commandments, to instruct His people how to love God with all and their neighbours as themselves. For centuries the Reformed tradition insisted that these three laws must be interpreted in three different ways. (i) The civil laws applied uniquely to Israel as a theocracy. When Israel ceased to exist as a nation, the civil laws also ceased to function. Nevertheless the New Testament still refers to the function of civil government for the preservation and promotion of civil order. Romans 13:1b, 3a, for instance, says: "...The powers that be are ordained of God" and are so ordained in order to be a terror to the evil works. They are to pass laws in accordance with the will of God, and they are to add penal sanctions which invest the law and the whole judicial process with an aura of sanctity. (ii) Christ's sacrifice fulfilled the ceremonial laws with absolute finality. We no longer kill animals for sacrifices. We no longer pour our incense. We have come out of the shadows into the light. (iii) The moral law [of the Ten Commandments] continues to serve as norm for Christian life today and is written on our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Dr. J.I. Packer writes that when the Lord Jesus Christ spoke in the Sermon on the Mount "of the perpetuity of the law...He had in mind the moral law, which in different ways both the civil and ritual law had subserved." Jesus "knew that "the civil and ritual part of the law, which had been given specifically for the ordering of Israel's national life in Palestine until Christ should come, would soon cease to apply when the Israelites had passed away."⁴

Dr. B. Oosterhoff rightly cautions at this point of making this distinction.⁵ He maintains that it is incorrect to say that the civil and ceremonial laws have been abrogated in the New Testament. With reference to the civil laws he correctly argues that the 'continuing principle' is to be distinguished from 'the disappearing forms.' With reference to the ceremonial laws he is right in arguing that there are 'passing forms' but also continuing elements.' He rightly refers to Article 25 of the Belgic Confession of Faith which spells out that "we still use the testimonies taken out of the law and the prophets, to...regulate our life in all honesty, to the glory of God, according to his will." Moreover, Dr. Oosterhoff argues that the Old Testament itself does not make this distinction in the way that this was done later on. Those who make this distinction read a distinction that was made later back into the Old Testament texts. Those who make the moral law to be a separate category isolate the moral law from the other laws in the Pentateuch."⁶

3. Cf. Miller, Patrick D., "The Place of the Decalogue in the Old Testament and Its Law," *Interpretation*, July 1989, p. 230. Cf. also his commentary, *Deuteronomy, Interpretation: Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*.

4. Our Lord's Understanding of the Law of God, p. 18.

5. Justin Martyr is known to have worked with this distinction. He, as Christians before him had been, was forced in intensive discussions with the Jews, to ascertain which of the Old Testament commandments were still in force and which were no longer in force. In those discussions he argued that the moral law as expressed in the Decalogue is still in force, Kaiser, Jr. Walter C. Toward Old Testament Ethics, pp. 44-45.

6. "Hermeneutiek van de Wet," *Jaarboek 1965 van de Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland*, p. 201.

I wish to take this objection of Dr. Oosterhoff seriously. It is not right to consider the moral law in isolation from the other laws. We may not simply 'hack' the law into three sections, simply discard the ceremonial and civil sections, and insist that the law of the Ten Commandments alone is binding. To be sure, the moral law is inseparable from its setting and framework in the Word of God. Nevertheless I wish to argue for a unique place for the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments in a particular way give expression to the commandments of God. They are a summary of all other commandments of God. All other commandments are an elaboration of and are determined by the Ten Commandments.

Not Theonomy

I wish to distance myself from the theonomy movement as started by Rousas J. Rushdoony. Although I appreciate the attempt of the theonomists to have God's Word rule supreme over all of life and their insistence that the law does not justify but rather that only the blood of Christ cleanses us from all sin, they ignore the New Testament teaching that Israel's civil and ceremonial laws have ceased to function as laws, and they put so much emphasis on the law that they run the danger of putting the works of the law again in the place of the grace of God.⁷

I would love to show you for example, that what happens in the Old Testament quite often is that the law of the Ten Commandments is summarized, and quite often in the Old Testament the Ten Commandments are expanded on. In our churches it has all along been our common practice on the Lord's days during the morning service to read and listen to the Ten Commandments. This has been a very fine practice that we need to continue, but I quite often in addition read another portion from the Old Testament, to show how the Lord expands on some of these commandments, and some times all of these commandments, Leviticus 19, for example.

Let's look at the next section, "Jesus and the law."

Jesus and the law

We must look at what Jesus says about the law in the light of what He has done about the law. Jesus did essentially two things. (i) He died for the sins against the law of God--against the first commandment, the second commandment, the third and every other one of the commandments, and we have sinned against every one of the commandments. Only Christ has paid, and (ii) He did what I should have done and didn't do. He fulfilled the law. He did those two things. Sometimes we talk about the 'passive obedience' of Christ and the 'active obedience' of Christ. His passive obedience is that He paid for the sins of His people. That was not enough; He had to do what they failed to do. He did. But when we come to belong to Him by a true faith, then the commandments come back to us, and we desire and learn to keep them out of thankfulness for so great a deliverance *in and through Christ Jesus by the Holy Spirit*.

To be sure, that thankfulness can be there only *in and through Christ Jesus, through the Holy Spirit*. For you can try to keep the commandments in your own strength; it never works. After Paul had been converted, he said in Romans 7 that he desired to do the good. In verse 12 he said that "the law is holy, and the commandment...good." However, in verse 19 he said: he found that he did not do it. He doesn't say: I manage for 75%, but rather I fail. Nevertheless in very beginning stages there does come about a life of thankfulness in which the Ten Commandments come back to us *in and through Christ Jesus by the Holy Spirit*. Of everything that I do when I keep the commandments out of a thankful heart, I must say: 'I've come short! I am ever in need of the atoning blood of Jesus and the renewing work of the Holy Spirit!' Nevertheless

7. At the same time I wish to acknowledge that not all theonomists are extreme in their presentations. For instance, Greg Bahnsen avoids some of the excesses and extremes of the reconstructionist model. Barker, William S. & W. Robert Godfrey, eds. *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique* is a helpful evaluation.

God will look upon me in Christ as having kept the commandments.

The Fourth Commandment

Notice, for instance, how the fourth commandment comes back to us in the life of thankfulness. On the one hand Jesus denounces the approach of the Pharisees with their "casuistry of abstinence," and He shows "on biblical grounds," that God made the Sabbath "for man's good, and that not only works of personal necessity, but also acts of love and kindness to others, might be performed on the Sabbath with the greatest propriety."⁸

In Matthew 8:4f. Jesus shows that His disciples are not violating the fourth commandment but rather the Pharisaic Sabbath. Moreover, in verse 8 He asserts His own authority over the Sabbath. "The Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath day," that is, 'I am the Lord of it and will judge My people how they observe it.' In Mark 2:2, Christ adds: "The Sabbath was made for man, and not man for the Sabbath." In other words, man must not be a slave of the Sabbath. After all, God made the Sabbath for the benefit of man, because in God's judgment man needs the Sabbath on the physical and the spiritual level. When then in verse 7 Christ says, "I will have mercy and not sacrifice,' He is teaching that we may never use the fact that it is the Sabbath day to deny somebody an act of mercy or an act of charity.

8. Packer, Op. cit., pp. 18, 19.

That is an important point. Whereas we perhaps tend to think of acts of mercy as exceptions to the fourth commandment, Jonathan Edwards correctly suggested that they are no exceptions at all. There is no better way to spend the Sabbath than in acts of mercy, in relieving human loneliness and human misery. It is lawful to do good, to be gracious, kind and generous on the Lord's Day.⁹ Visiting the sick on the Lord's Day, visiting and even helping the needy, encouraging those who are in need, that is all part of work as mercy on the Lord's Day. The Lord's Day is not merely for socializing. When we do get together with others on the Lord's Day in the evenings, then we must see to it that we do not spend it in gossiping but rather in resting from the works of sin. We must see to it that in our heart there is a desire to carry forth something of Christ's Word. There must be a desire for Christian fellowship or for reaching out to others with the Gospel.

With regard to the fourth commandment, there is a distinction between the Old testament and the New Testament. (i) In the Old Testament in the religious laws for worship, more restrictions are spelled out with reference to the fourth commandment.¹⁰ They plod on until he comes, Who can say: "I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28). (ii) They remembered the Sabbath day to keep it holy after six days of rest. In that way they stretched toward the rest. This is different in the New Testament. Christ has finished the work of atonement and obtained the rest. Guilty persons may by faith rest in Christ and in that way delight themselves in the good pleasure of God. It is in and from that rest that we may go to do our work. That is why we rest on the first day of the week, on the Lord's day. On that day Christ arose and appeared to His disciples. On that day also, "when the day of Pentecost was fully come" (Acts 2:1), he poured out His Spirit. On that day He gathered [and gathers] His congregation. It is in the light of this teaching of Jesus on the fourth commandment that the New Testament spent the Lord's day. They transferred the obligation from the seventh day to the first day by the authority of Christ.

They did not bring about a change in the fourth commandment, for instance along these lines: "Remember the Sunday, to keep it holy...." On the contrary, it continued to be: "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy...", that is, 'remember the Sabbath rest in Christ. rest in Him all the days of your life, rest from your evil works, and let the Lord work in you through His Spirit and so begin in this life the eternal Sabbath,' (Heid. Cat., Answer 103). That is the fourth commandment, and the purpose of keeping the Lord's Day is to promote that and direct us in that. The purpose is not to keep the Lord's day as an Old Testament Sabbath day, still less as a Jewish Sabbath day.¹¹ Neither is the purpose to fall into the other extreme and regard Sunday simply as a day off with the exception of attending one or two worship services. Then the Lord's day is being degraded.

When they gathered they did not simply look back, remembering Him and His work; they met with the risen Saviour. They preached the Gospel and sat at the Lord's Table. Every time they met, Christ was with them, as He said, "I am with you always even to the end of the world" (Matthew 28:20b). "Wherever two or three gather in My Name, I will be in the midst..." (Matthew 18:20). They reminded themselves of the empty tomb. They remembered Him Who was crucified and smitten for our sins, Who bore our condemnation, Who broke the bands of death and rose triumphant.

9. Cf. "The Perpetuity and Change of the Sabbath," in "The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Vol. 2, p. 103.

10. Take, for instance, Exodus 35:2-3, where "the people are reminded that a death penalty has been imposed on all transgressors, and that no fire should be kindled in the homes. Thus, housework on the part of the wife (with cooking and baking) would be prohibited, although this could be understood from Exodus 16:23," Dressler, Harold H. P., "The Sabbath in the Old testament," in D. A. Carson, ed., From Sabbath to Lord's Day, p. 25.

11. B. J. Oosterhoff puts it this way: The Lord's Day is not merely the Israelite Sabbath transposed from Saturday to Sunday, "Hermeneutiek van de Wet," Jaarboek 1965 van de Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland, p. 203.

Norms and Values from the Word of God?

Jesus at one point said to His disciples, 'You know they're going to take you into a prison for My Name sake, but fear not, when you must give testimony, for then I shall give to you what to speak' (Matthew 10:19).¹² W. Hendriksen correctly remarks that this promise of the Lord Jesus "does not mean that the mind of the persecuted apostle is a blank tablet...and that then in some mechanical fashion God will suddenly begin to write words upon that blank space." The Lord is not promising flashes of special revelation. By now we have in Scripture all the revelation of God that we need. But what is needful is that the Lord through His Word and Spirit so minister to our intellect that we receive in our minds a discernment and judgment in moments of crisis, when we are carried beyond the depth and reach of our own experience. What this promise means is that all "the previous apostolic training which they received from Jesus will be enlivened and sharpened and raised to a higher plane of activity." It is the Spirit of the Father Who "will be speaking in them" and reminding "them of everything that Jesus himself said to them (John 14:26)." ¹³

That's how it is to be also when we go out into daily life after the Lord's Day, as nurses, as medical doctors, (maybe not yet, but we will become so), as judges, or lawyers or just persons desiring to live in the light of God's Word. Then we need to pray for a wise heart, as Solomon prayed it, and as Jesus spells it out in the Sermon on the Mount. There He talks about the wise man building his house upon the rock, and the rock is that he seeks the narrow way that leads to life, and not only that he seeks it, but that he seeks also the entrance to that road on the narrow way to life. That road and walking on that narrow road is the way of wisdom under the authority of Christ. What we need is to grasp not only the Ten Commandments but need to grasp the very Word of God, the principles of the Word of God, the whole Word of God.

Wherever I go, I must love God, love my neighbour, love my superior or my inferior, if you like, my equal, my rival, my competitor, my enemy, I shall love him as myself; I shall love him, even as Christ has loved me. Then when I come into a situation where I am asked to compromise principles, I must not be guided by my job and my income but by the Word of God. If I can be transferred and make more money somewhere else, but that job is going to carry me away from a Church where the Word of God is preached, then I must say, 'I'm not taking that job,' That's how I go into life, with that very Word of God.

Think of Romans 12:ff. "I beseech you... brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy acceptable to God...and...be not conformed to this world, but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind...." It means a living in total dependence on the Lord. It means living in the fear of the Lord, which is the beginning of wisdom (Psalm 111:10).

A wise man or a wise young woman fears the Lord, fears God's correction, chastisement. When we trifle with sin, when we run the risk of temptation and apostasy deliberately, we run the risk of getting the wrath of God on us. Do you believe that? Or are you mistaken in your thinking about the wrath of God? Many believe that the wrath of God is for the reprobate. But the Bible teaches that it is God's people who are objects of the wrath of God. The Bible teaches that God was angry with His people Israel. The Bible teaches that a wise man fears the displeasure of God. That's what I read in the New Testament. "As many as love [the Lord says] I rebuke and chasten" (Revelation 3:19). If we would understand that, we would not trifle with sin. A wise man fears the final judgment of God. We shall all appear, you and I, before the judgment seat of God. The wise man builds upon the rock. Christ said, The fool builds on the sand, that is, on the wrong foundation. The fool is the person inside the church. He [or she] may be a young person or older person in church who hears the Word of God, 'Turn ye unto Me!', but he goes home, and he does not turn to the Lord! The wise man is the man who builds his foundation on hearing the Word of God **and** doing it.

12. I realize that what the Lord promises in Matthew 10:19 is related to missionary activity. Nevertheless the Lord promises elsewhere that He would indwell the hearts and intellects of His disciples and people (John 14:23). Paul prays for it in Ephesians 3:16f.)

13. *Matthew, NTC*, p 464.

When it comes to making ethical decisions, I must ask the question, Am I wise enough to build on the foundation of not only hearing but also doing the Word of God, that Word that says, "Strait is the gate and narrow is the way that leads to life, and few there be that find it" (Matthew 7:14). And having heard that I strive to enter in.

Assisting in Suicide?

What should we say about assisting in suicide? In British Columbia we have had the 'case' of assistance given to Mrs. Sue Rodriguez who was suffering from the Lou Gehrig's disease. How should we respond to the suicide manual *Final Exit: The Practicalities of Self-Deliverance and Assisted Suicide for the Dying*, written by Derek Humphry? What should we say about it?

We should oppose assisting in suicide, as we should oppose suicide. But on what basis are we opposing this? First of all, on the basis of the sixth commandment. The Lord God says, "You shall not kill." Moreover, the Bible says that those who kill shall be judged. In the Old Testament that judgment of God was severe. For instance, we know from Deuteronomy 21:1-9 that when some one had been murdered and his body was found lying in somewhere in the countryside, and it would not be known who was responsible for the crime, then one had to measure the distance to the cities, in order to determine which city was closest to the dead man. Then the elders and judges of the town closest to that place had to come, take a heifer, take that heifer to a valley, with a perpetually running stream, break the neck of the heifer there, and wash their hands over the broken-necked heifer. What they did was (i) assume responsibility for the crime and say: 'we have not committed the crime, nevertheless the crime is to be punished, as the broken neck of the heifer showed.' (ii) Nevertheless the hand-washing of the elders indicated that, although they accepted responsibility of what had happened, they were free from the guilt attached to the crime. At any rate, it makes clear that God judges murders severely.

I am reminded of a young mother who was expecting a baby. During the pregnancy there were complications, and pro-life obstetricians determined that the baby she and her husband were expecting was anencephalic.¹⁴ The pro-life obstetricians said to her that it would be legitimate for her to have an abortion, in view of the fact that the baby would not be able to live outside the womb of the mother. However, the mother was opposed to it. She said: 'I know that this baby cannot live once my baby is born, but if I schedule an abortion, then I schedule the moment of my baby's death, and I may not do so; I must leave that to God.' She waited until that day came. That's how it ought to be, also when you suffer from a disease such as Lou Gehrig's disease.

You see, the Bible does not say about suffering what man says about suffering. 'Suffering is pointless,' many people say, and they want a painless assisted suicide to be available and to be legal. However, it is not in accordance with the Word of God. Moreover, assisting anyone in this regard is not caring for the well-being of that person. Over against those who think that suffering is the ultimate evil and that suffering must be removed at all costs, the Word of God shows that there is more to a person and more to life than health and well being. Assisting in suicide is assisting in killing. We should not participate, doctors should not participate, and the Government should not participate.

I realize that in a certain sense I do not know what I am writing, for I am healthy as far as I know. But must I wait with making a decision until I suffer from the disease, or must I go by what God says in His Word? It is the latter. The Lord God says in His Word to us: "Therefore choose life..." (Deuteronomy 30:19).

Conclusion: "...Therefore choose life..." (Deuteronomy 30:19).

It surely appears that we are living in the twilight of a great civilization. If God spares you and me for some time yet, we will likely see the disintegration of our whole Western civilization. That is part of the

14. That is, the child would be born without brain.

judgment of God. God is in these days vindicating His own righteousness and integrity, because our nations are throwing aside and even repudiating the great Christian principles upon which this Western civilization was based. We know that our problems are not merely economic, not merely political; they are only symptoms. God may well overthrow our nation and our whole Western civilization. God did it in the Old testament. God overthrew the kingdom of the ten tribes of Israel. He had warned His people already by the mouth of Moses. He had said: "...If your heart turns away, so that you will not hear, but shall be drawn away, and worship other gods, and serve them; I denounce to you this day, that you shall surely perish, and that you shall not prolong your days upon the land, to which you are about to pass over Jordan to go to possess it" (Deuteronomy 30:17, 18).

God is not only the God of Israel; He is the God of the whole world. God sees what happens in the world and is involved in the world. He see what is happening in the world. He sees the prostitutes and the pimps, He knows the drug addicts, shooting the drugs into their arms, etc., God knows the gay community and God sees the woman or girl who at this moment is being raped in the back seat of a car somewhere in a back alley. He sees it. He does not just sit back silently. He will judge our nation. He is the almighty and righteous God over all. That is why He calls also our nations to obey His commandments, for Christ's sake. If the nations will do so, they may count on the blessing of the Lord. If they do not do so, then they had better count on the curse of God. Let us take care that now we do not look down on the nations. We are part of the nations, also of the nation Canada [or the USA]. We are one with that nation.

The question may well be raised: But can you address the words of Deuteronomy, which were addressed to the people of Israel, to the nations of the world? I believe so, because the God of Israel has been at work in the history of the nations. Before the Lord Jesus ascended into heaven, He commissioned His apostles to "go and teach all nations" (Matthew 28:19). The Gospel has gone to the nations.

However, I should particularly draw the line from Israel to the church of Christ. But the sad thing is that also in the churches there has been a frightening decline in many ways. The fact that the Western nations have been departing from God is very sad, but if only the churches had been more faithful in its witness, then there would still be more hope. But instead, in the Western world many churches in mind and manners have in so many ways conformed to the world. The message of many churches has become focused mainly on the horizontal level, preaching a political message of peace and assistance to the Third world countries, pleading the cause of feminism and promoting the cause of compassion apart from the message of reconciliation to God through the death of His Son. The result has been that many churches have no more a unique message in the world. We are seeing the very same thing that happened to Israel later on, namely Israel took after the gods of the Gentiles and adapted to their life-style. So today many churches and world have become one, whereas the church is to have its own place in the world. God called His church out of the world to testify in the world of God, His law and His Gospel.

It is the task of the church, also of Christian ethics, to set before the world life and death, blessing and curse (Deuteronomy 30:19). The remarkable thing is that then Moses does not say to the people of Israel: 'Choose between life and death,' take your pick between blessing and curse!' Rather: "Choose life." That is a very positive message. Moses makes clear: There is only one passable way. That is the way of God, the way of His commandments, the way of life.

Moses says: That is not inaccessible, for that law "is not in heaven, so that you should say, Who shall go up for us to heaven, and bring it to us, that we may hear it, and do it?" And that law is not "beyond the sea, that you should say, Who shall go over the sea for us, and bring it to us, that we may hear it, and do it?" Rather that law "is very nigh to you, in your mouth, and in your heart, that you may do it" (Deuteronomy 30:11-14). According to Patrick D. Miller,¹⁵ when God's law is "taught and studied and learned, that teaching can be appropriated and made a part of one's life ('in your mouth and in your heart')." Paul quotes and adapts

15. Deuteronomy, Interpretation, p.216.

these words in Romans 10:5-8. John Calvin comments: "Moses mentions heaven and the sea, as places remote and difficult or access to man. But Paul, as though there was some spiritual mystery concealed under these words, applies them to the death and resurrection of Christ."¹⁶ Paul is speaking in terms of the fact that through our sin we are unable to do what the law says to us. And yet the law requires that we do it. In that conflict the law of God become a fiery law" (Deuteronomy 33:2). That law consumes and condemns us. Therefore to choose life is to discover that we are "dead in trespasses and sin" (Ephesians 2:1). It is impossible to do what the Lord requires in His law. When the disciples ask Jesus: "Who then can be saved?" But then Jesus gives that marvellous answer: "With men it is impossible, but not with God; for with God all things are possible" (Mark 10:26, 27). That is the Gospel. What Moses says is the Law. What Jesus says is Gospel. The Law says: 'You must....' The Gospel says: It is possible, it has been made possible for you, to choose life.

The apostle Paul spells it out in Romans 10 that links up with Deuteronomy 30. In Romans 10 Paul writes: 'Moses says: That law is not far away but rather close by, in your mouth and in your heart. But upon further consideration that it turned out to be impossible for us to attain to life by way of the law. Now I know something else [Paul continues] that is not far away, not in heaven and not in the deep¹⁷ but rather very close by, "in your mouth, and in your heart." And that is not the law but the "word of faith, which we preach." That is therefore, as it were, the New Testament version of the call of Moses. When Moses says: "Choose life," then he points to the law. But when Jesus says, "Choose life," then He points to Himself. Apart from Jesus Christ, the way of the law is a way that runs dead. The way of Jesus is a way that has been opened, for Jesus says: "I am the way, the truth and the life" (John 14:6). "I have come that they might have life...abundantly" (John 10:10). When we come to Jesus with our sins and trespasses, then Jesus gives us life. It was for that that he Himself entered our death and bore our curse. God also set life and death, blessing and curse before Jesus. It is most remarkable that Jesus chose death and curse, even though he had a right to life and blessing, in order that we through His death might receive life, and through His curse might receive His blessing.

Therefore to choose life is to choose Jesus. Then we receive life and begin to live. The striking thing is that then the law comes back to us, not in order that we through keeping the law might receive life (for Jesus has done that for us), but in order to keep that law out of thankfulness. And then Moses turns nevertheless to be right when he says that that law is close to us. How true! And that law is not very difficult to keep (1 John 5:3). The Heidelberg Catechism says that "it is impossible for those who are implanted into Christ by a true faith not to bring forth fruits of thankfulness" (Lord's day 24, Answer 64). At first it was impossible to keep that law, i.e. in our own strength. Now it becomes impossible not to keep that law, "because the love of God has been shed abroad in our hearts through the Holy Spirit Who was given to us" (Romans 6:5). Then in love we shall keep the law of the Lord, by faith in Jesus Christ. Then we shall live, we and our children (Deuteronomy 30:19).

16. Romans, *Calvin's Commentaries*, p. 389, although John Murray rightly comments that we would completely misconstrue Deuteronomy if we interpreted it legalistically, for Moses is speaking within the framework of the covenant of grace, and he is saying that "the things revealed for faith and life are accessible....By revelation 'they belong to us and our children for ever' (Deut. 29:29)", *The Epistle to the Romans II, The International Commentary on the New Testament*, p. 52.

17. 'The abyss.' Cf. Murray, J., *Op. cit.*, p. 53.