

# THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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## The Puritans and Situation Ethics

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*Editor's note: A lecture originally delivered in 1976, this edition is a conflation of two slightly different lectures delivered before two different audiences.*

In spite of the deplorable decline in the morals of our nation, it may be that this year in which America celebrates its two hundredth birthday some public figure will make a polite reference to the Puritans. They deserve more than a polite mention. It is they who maintained the high morals of an earlier era and established the intellectual foundations of our colleges and universities. Samuel E. Morrison, in a book called *The Puritan Pronaos* – the entry to the temple is the meaning of the word – says, "The story of the intellectual life of New England in the 17th century is not merely that of a people bravely and successfully endeavoring to keep up the standards of civilization in a new world. It is one of the principal approaches to the social and intellectual history of the United States." The Puritans, however, do not constitute the total American heritage in religious and intellectual affairs. One must assign a good measure of credit to the Presbyterians of Pennsylvania and the Carolinas. These people too had a sturdy religion and high academic standards. Though there were some differences between the Presbyterians and the Puritans, nevertheless, the differences were minor and their basic Calvinistic religion was the same.

### *Misrepresenting the Puritans*

Of these two groups the Puritans have been the more maligned and dishonestly caricatured. Even the gentle Longfellow, and perhaps because he was gentle, felt it necessary to say, "The stern old puritanical character rises above the common level of life; it has a breezy air about its summits; but they are bleak and forbidding."

Calvinism has always seemed bleak and forbidding to gentle opponents, while the less gentle use stronger terms. Within the field of ethics the main reason for opposition to Calvinism is the seriousness with which it views the Ten Commandments. Calvin's *Institutes* and the *Westminster Catechisms* broke with Romish laxity by devoting important sections to their exposition. The Scottish Presbyterians and the English Puritans both endeavored to obey the law of God. Sir Walter Scott, despite his antipathy toward the Covenanters, tellingly describes their devotion to truth under the most heart-rending temptations to lie, in *The Heart of Midlothian*. Similarly the English Puritans were moral giants, and men of lesser stature still feel uncomfortable in their presence. Macaulay, who ought to have known better, for he wrote one paragraph acknowledging the virtues and importance of Puritanism, allowed himself to make the jibe, now become familiar, "The Puritans hated bear-baiting, not because it gave pain to the bear, but because it gave pleasure to the spectator." Certainly the Puritans condemned people for taking

pleasure in the wanton and deliberate infliction of pain on animals. The man who can enjoy torturing animals will soon develop a pleasure in torturing human beings. Is Puritanism to be condemned because it would condemn Hitler for torturing Jews? But it is false to say that the Puritans condemned pleasure as such. Yet Macaulay's jibe has been more irresponsibly developed by a later writer.

Ernest Boyd, in *Portraits Real and Imaginary* (109) is more imaginary than real when he wrote of the Puritans, "Pleasure is the enemy, not evil, and so the joys of mind and body are under suspicion." This is caricature because the Puritans were not enemies of or unsusceptible to pleasure. They enjoyed even the physical pleasures of food and drink. Apparently Professor Boyd had never heard of Thanksgiving dinner. Instead of confining themselves to the drabness of black clothes as cartoons regularly represent them, they actually wore bright colors. Those who condemn them on the ground that they hated beauty and art not only failed to make allowances for the necessity of wresting a dependable living from an uncultivated wilderness, but also fail in their own appreciation of the Puritan sense of art and proportion in their architecture and household utensils. But credulity and animosity is extreme when Boyd, in the quotation just made, accuses them of disparaging and avoiding the joys of mind. Does he not know that the Puritan community enjoyed a higher degree of literacy than any other American colony?

Two authors, J. Truslow Adams, in *The Evolution of the Massachusetts Public School System*; and Harlan Updegraff, *The Origin of the Moving School in Massachusetts*, two other authors whose moral standards of truth do not attain to the Puritan ideal, complain that in the town of Natick in 1698 only one child in seventy could read. But what J. Truslow Adams fails to say is that Natick was an Indian town without a single white inhabitant.

The New England populace was well educated and its scholars were not far below the best in Europe. They founded Harvard in 1636, only 16 years after landing. It is true, however, that they were unwilling to assign to pleasure, especially physical

pleasure, a value higher than their philosophy allowed it. Pleasure can be deceitful. It can be evil and it would seem that modern detractors of the Puritans are less realistic in their appraisals. But it was the evil, not the pleasure as such, that they fought against. And if Puritans attacked bear-baiting and bullfights it is because they believed that pleasure in wanton cruelty is evil.

Ralph Barton Perry, Professor of Philosophy at Harvard from 1902 to 1946, has a well-written section on "The Puritan as the Moral Athlete," in *Puritanism and Democracy* (245-268). Now first let us understand one thing. Perry is no advocate of Puritanism. He firmly rejects their ideals. Furthermore, he seriously misunderstands Puritan theology and this results in an appreciable measure of distortion. Nevertheless, he sees more clearly than many the moral strength of Puritanism and turns back on careless critics their inconsistent objections.

Perry begins by describing a school boy he knew who wanted to become the best high hurdler in the world. This decision was grim, unconquerable, irresistible. He abstained from tobacco and candy. His vacations were taken, his friends were made and his hours of sleep arranged by schedule. He weighed himself daily and clipped fractions of seconds from his record. Finally, he gathered assurance that he was one of the elect.

Perry then transfers this picture to the moral athleticism of the Puritans. Jonathan Edwards, for example, determined to achieve complete self-mastery and control. He deliberately undertook moral exercises, weighed himself regularly, and kept his spiritual record. Cotton Mather was even more methodical and business-like than Edwards. He actively sought ways of moral improvement.

The objection to this moral athleticism is the one also directed against Perry's school boy athlete, namely, he exaggerated the importance of the activity and turned play into hard work. Instead of remaining a college amateur, he wanted to become a professional. This obvious objection, however, is superficial, and those who use the objection are inconsistent. They are inconsistent because,

although they do not want to be professional moralists, they want to be professional in some other field. One may be a professional politician aiming at the Presidency, and for the purpose he chooses his friends and arranges his hours of sleep according to schedule.

Another may be a professional businessman, exhausted and ulcerated because business is all important. So too the artist, who is perhaps the most contemptuous critic of the Puritan. He objects strongly to moral discipline but devotes himself with infinite patience to the mastery of his own technique. The point is that a professional cannot consistently object to professionalism.

Perry then gives reasons for rejecting Puritanism. Some of these are objections to the Puritan technique. In some matters of method and detail, their decisions were faulty. They were not professional and efficient enough. This objection, however, is an objection to Puritans. The Puritans themselves would have agreed, in fact did agree, that they never achieved perfection either in method or in achievement. But while this is an objection to Puritans, it is not an objection to Puritanism. Perry's basic objection is, and consistently must be, an objection to their theology, their concept of God, and their high regard of moral excellence.

In what line Perry wanted to be professional I do not care to say. On what supreme principle he wished to organize all his life's activities may be difficult to discover. But it is quite clear that Perry's god could not command his allegiance. "God," he said, "and conscience, like the Supreme Court, take no cognizance of the greater part of life" (264). Clearly this sort of finite god, ignorant of the greater part of our life, is little better than another human being to whom we should, no doubt, pay some attention, but who, after all, is of minor importance.

Yet for all his rejection of the Puritan God and conscience, Perry, with commendable candor and honesty can say,

The Puritan sailed his ship in the open seas. Despite his cult of moral vigor, he was not a moral introvert. He did not confine himself within his moral gymnasium but

used his strength out-of-doors, in the world.... In the wars...he assumed the role of statesman and soldier...such men as William the Silent, Admiral Coligny, John Knox, Oliver Cromwell...and our New England ancestors. The Puritans imprinted on English and American institutions a quality of manly courage, self-reliance and sobriety. We are still drawing [now this is not written by a man who agrees with the Puritans, but he was candid enough to say] we are still drawing upon the reserves of spiritual vigor which they accumulated.

### *Contemporary Impuritans*

We need very much to replenish those reserves today. That this country needs to replenish its moral resources seems too obvious to need saying, but so few people seem to care that it cannot be said enough. The list of American deficiencies can begin with riots, the looting, the arson, and the murders in Detroit, Newark, and many, too many, other cities. These riots did not just happen spontaneously. They were prepared. Remember the plot uncovered in Philadelphia to put cyanide in the soldiers', policemen's, and firemen's coffee. But while these riots were prepared for by Communists and pro-Communists, like Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown, and Martin Luther King, of sainted memory, there has been a much longer preparation of indifference to mounting crime. The government officials whose responsibility it is to protect life and property are dilatory, because for years the increase of violent crime has been encouraged by liberal theories of penology, a perverted judicial development that has hamstrung the police and prosecutors, and a general sympathy with the criminal instead of his victim.

In addition to the increase of unorganized crime, there is also the tremendous power of the Mafia. Not only does it deal in prostitution, narcotics, and gambling, but more recently it has infiltrated legitimate businesses to confiscate their assets, all of which entails the bribery and intimidation of government officials and a few murders when necessary.

Narcotics were just mentioned. Below the level of heroin there is LSD, glue, marijuana, alcohol, tobacco, barbiturates, sleeping pills, and tranquilizers. The halls of scholarship also, where claims to seek truth are proudly made, the halls of scholarship also are tainted with moral and intellectual decay. Professor Carl Van Doren, a few years ago, shamed us all on television by being able to answer a stupendous array of questions on all sorts of topics. Hailed into court, he denied under oath that he had been coached. He was then convicted of perjury. After his conviction, the students at Columbia voted to have him returned to the faculty. They shared their professor's devotion to truth.

The central cause of this widespread moral collapse, so it seems to me, is located in the decline of Puritan religion. This returns us to the main theme of religious rather than civil history. When the seminaries and churches declare that God is dead, or when, less extreme, they substitute for the Puritan God of the Ten Commandments a different concept of god, inconsistent with the Ten Commandments, it logically and factually follows that morality is changed, too. A man's view of morality depends on his view of God or whatever his first principle may be. Different types of theology produce different types of morality.

### *Joseph Fletcher*

In order to avoid the inaccuracies and vagueness of a general description of contemporary Protestant theology, I choose the single and well-known case of Dr. Joseph Fletcher, Professor of Social Ethics in the Episcopal Theological School at Cambridge, Massachusetts. Certainly he is representative of a great many contemporary theologians and churchmen, but for the sake of clarity and definiteness, I shall confine myself to his precise formulations.

To make very clear the contrast between Professor Fletcher and the Puritans, let us note first that he attacks the Ten Commandments one by one right down the line. He advocates disobedience to every one and approves of profanity, murder, adultery, theft, false witness and covetousness. To be sure he

does not advocate these actions for every day of the week. His position is that on occasion, in certain circumstances, we should commit murder, adultery, and perjury.

Professor Fletcher supports his attack on the Ten Commandments, first by a general argument and second, by particular examples. The general argument is motivated by a distaste for a divine law and a view of life that disparages system, or as I would put it, disparages logical systematization. He contrasts system and method; the former, system, "indicating that which is most opposed to life, freedom, and variety, and the other, that which without they cannot exist."

It is not clear that this distinction between system and method can be sustained. A logical, methodical procedure must be systematic. If, on the other hand, a method is not logical and not systematic, the kind of freedom and variety it produces is what I do not want. I see no advantage in relinquishing the logical rationality of Calvinism for irrational lawlessness. However, Fletcher goes on to say, "Any ethical system is unchristian.... Jesus had no ethics, if...ethics [is] a system...intelligible to all men." On a later page a subtitle reads, "Principles, Yes, but not Rules." This subtitle seems to indicate that Fletcher is not so unsystematic and unprincipled as the previous quotation suggests. However, under this subtitle he very pointedly says that "even the most revered principles may be thrown aside" in certain situations. Therefore, one is justified in asserting that Fletcher repudiates all inviolable principles. There is no divine law and every one of the Ten Commandments ought to be broken.

In addition to his ideal of a life of lawless variety, Fletcher supports his attack on the Ten Commandments with a list of horrible examples. His procedure is to state a law, then describe a situation in which obedience to the law results in disaster. Some of these laws, however, are not chosen from the Ten Commandments but are merely civil laws. Such examples are irrelevant because a Christian is not obliged to defend the rectitude of every civil law. An evil law or a foolish law can, of course, produce unfortunate results, but

these cannot be used as arguments against Puritanism.

Let us therefore consider a relevant attack on one of the Ten Commandments. It's perhaps the best known example in his book. Fletcher's defense of adultery is a story of a German woman, captured at the end of World War II and sent to prison in the Ukraine. Her children were scattered. Shortly her husband returned from his prison camp in England and collected the children, but the wife was still absent. Somehow she heard of her husband's return, but release from the Ukrainian prison camp was allowed only for serious illness or pregnancy. Accordingly, she became pregnant by one of the other prisoners and returned to her family. Therefore, concludes Fletcher, it is sometimes moral to commit adultery.

In reply to this specific case used as an argument, there are two things to be said: First, no such heart-rending story justifies Fletcher's apparent approval of suburban clubs for daily wife-swapping. Nor can he on this basis assert, as he does assert, that "whether any form of sex, (hetero, homo, or auto) is good or evil depends on whether love is served.... All situationists would agree...that they can do what they want as long as they don't do it in the street and frighten the horses." I insist that the story of the German woman does not justify the inviolable law and universal principle of not frightening horses.

There is a second and more cogent reply to Fletcher's story. The force of Fletcher's story depends on the assumption that adultery is a legitimate price for returning home. This is precisely the proposition that needs to be proved. And Fletcher gives no reason whatever for this assumption. The general idea seems to be that the wife loved her husband, and this love justifies any kind of conduct that returns her to him. One may question whether a wife who really loved her husband would commit adultery for any reason. One could also question whether a devoted husband would want his wife to commit adultery, and, if committed, whether he could accept such a sacrifice. These are aspects of the situation Fletcher never mentions. His horrible examples beg the question and assume the point at issue.

The Puritans would have asked a still more basic question. Regardless of how much the woman loved her husband, did she love God? The Puritans would insist that no specious assertion of love could possibly justify disobedience to God. Christ said, "If ye love me, keep my commandments." The Ten Commandments are not civil laws poorly written or stupidly conceived. They are divine commands.

But what about the broken family? Here the Puritans would point out that by the rules of the prison camp, the woman would be released if she fell seriously ill. Adultery was not the only possibility. Further, even Communist rules are sometimes changed, and one could pray for less severe restrictions. There is also the possibility of a personal appeal to the Soviet authorities, and God might cause the officials to favor her. Hence, there are several possibilities of release that Fletcher ignores in his attempt to justify adultery. But if these possibilities do not eventuate, the Puritans would still insist that man must obey God.

Fletcher advocates adultery not so much because of horrible examples, but rather because he acknowledges a different god. Theology is the crux of the matter, for ethics depends on theology. Instead of a God who gives moral laws, Fletcher acknowledges a god who commands nothing but love. Now, one can wax eloquent and plausible about love. One can even sound devout and Christian, but if we are logical and rational, we must analyze the position to see exactly what it means.

It is not clear that Fletcher knows what he means by love. He quotes Tillich that the law of love is the ultimate law because it is the negation of law. But this paradoxical statement contains no positive information. Fletcher tells us also that "Christian love is not desire...it is an attitude." But this statement too is negative and devoid of specific information. Later he says that love and justice are the same. "Justice," he says, "is Christian love using its head, calculating its duties." But Fletcher does not tell us what justice is or how we are to use our heads. Beyond this, Fletcher makes several other statements about love. But even if some of them should happen to be true, none of them shows how

love can justify any action, even any good action, let alone disobedience to God.

The point I wish to make is not merely that love all by itself does not justify murder, theft, and perjury. The important point is that love all by itself does not justify any action. Morality cannot be based on love alone because love alone gives no guidance whatever. As a quotation a moment ago showed, the Scriptures may require us to love God but how we are to love God is spelled out in detail: "If ye love me, keep my commandments." Without the specific and detailed instruction of the commandments we could never know how to express our love for God.

Now this is an appropriate place, and it will surely contribute to a fuller understanding of the matter, to show that very little Christianity remains in Fletcher's construction. The quotation from John's Gospel, already twice made, disposes of Fletcher's contention that Jesus had no ethics if ethics is a system of values and rules intelligible to all men. In another place he agrees with Judas in condemning the waste of costly ointment on Jesus. But then he adds that the story must be wrong because Jesus never said, "The poor always ye have with you." But if the Gospels are so untrustworthy that we cannot accept this statement as genuine, how do we know that the recorded remark about loving one's neighbor is genuine? This type of textual criticism, ignoring all the established criteria, eliminates indefinite amounts of Christianity's contents.

The fact is, Fletcher has trouble even with the command to love. When he rejects "all revealed norms or laws but the one commandment to love God *in* the neighbor," he misquotes the commandment he refers to and omits the one on which it depends, namely, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind." Now a man doesn't have to be a Christian. A man may adopt any principles he pleases if he can rationally defend them. But what kind of a Christian is it that accepts a garbled Second Commandment while rejecting the First from the same authority?

Again Fletcher says, "Christian situation ethics" – he calls it Christian – "Christian situation

ethics...denies that there are any unwritten, immutable laws of heaven, agreeing in this with Bultmann." This quotation needs analysis on three points: First, Christian situation ethics; second, unwritten laws; and third, idolatrous demonic pretensions.

The present subdivision of this lecture aims to show that there is no such thing as Christian situation ethics. Situation ethics is anti-Christian. Second, Christian ethics does not inculcate unwritten laws. The Ten Commandments are written. Why Fletcher threw in this irrelevant word can only be guessed. One may guess that in the absence of a rational defense of this principle, this word prepares the way for his invidious question-begging accusation of idolatrous demonic pretensions. Does love dictate such name calling?

It is no doubt too intricate for a lecture of this sort to examine some of Fletcher's attempts to use the Pauline epistles. Such an analysis would interest those who had the time to study it; and were this done, one could see in greater detail how much Fletcher deviates from Christianity. But even without this additional material what has already been said is sufficient to show that "Christian situation ethics" is not Christian.

### *Utilitarian Calculation*

The final section of this lecture must now attempt to do justice to a part of Fletcher's theory not as yet mentioned. Above, it was said that love, all by itself, gives us no information as to what we ought to do. Fletcher actually admits this and tries to supply the deficiency. In fact, he says, "Love can calculate. Otherwise it is like the bride who wanted to ignore all the recipes and simply let her love for her husband guide her when baking a cake." Now this is excellent, and I could not have said it better. Because Fletcher wants to provide love with a recipe, or a method, one might infer that my remarks on the uselessness of love, all by itself, were beside the point, and that they leave Fletcher untouched.

There were, however, two reasons for noting the uselessness of love. One reason is that some other

religious writers do not provide love with a recipe or method so that this facet of our religious situation should be somewhere turned to the light. The second reason is that a recipe seems inconsistent with Fletcher's attack on rules, laws, and systems. His attempt to substitute the word *method*, and even worse the word *recipe*, for system does not remove the inconsistency. Nevertheless, if Fletcher's methodical calculation succeeds, the inconsistency can be forgotten. On the other hand, if Fletcher cannot carry through his method, then he faces the full force of the objection to love all by itself.

I now wish to show that Fletcher's method of calculation is a failure. To make love workable and to give the bride a recipe for cake, Fletcher professes to accept the use of the utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham. "The love ethic," he says, "takes over from Bentham and Mill the strategic principle of the greatest good of the greatest number." There is, however, one important difference between Bentham and Fletcher. Original utilitarianism aimed to produce the greatest amount of pleasure. In choosing between two lines of action, one should determine which gives the most people the most pleasure. At this early point, Fletcher shies away from the notion of hedonism. Pleasure seems too ignoble. Therefore, he explicitly substitutes love for pleasure.

Now the proposal to seek pleasure for one's self and to give other people pleasure is intelligible. It is as intelligible as my inviting you to have a dish of ice cream with me. But while I understand how to increase your pleasure, I am at a loss as to how to increase your love. Utilitarianism is not a method for achieving the greatest amount of love for the greatest number of people. If the vacuity of choosing your actions on the basis of increasing other people's love does not fully register at first, and if you want some further technical details, why we can have either public or private discussion. But if it doesn't fully register at first, it can also be shown that the utilitarian method of determining, producing, and distributing pleasure is impracticable. If then the method will not work for pleasure, and I've tried to show that in other publications, if this method will not work for pleasure, all the less can it calculate love.

Bentham's method of calculation presupposes the identification of units of pleasure. Whether we wish to count pebbles or pints, we must be able to identify a single pebble and a single pint. We may then discover that a quart of ice cream is exactly twice a pint. But is the pleasure of eating a quart of ice cream exactly twice the pleasure of eating a pint? Does a movie give one and a half times the pleasure of a television show? What is the unit of pleasure? We can count pints of ice cream, but do we count pints of pleasure or perhaps inches or ounces of pleasure? Without distinct numerable units, calculation is impossible. If now this objection is one unit of impossibility for utilitarianism, the next objection is three or four units of impossibility.

The method requires us not only to count the units of present pleasure, but, in order to select the course of action, utilitarianism requires us to predict the amounts of future pleasure this action will produce. For example, should a college student take a job on a newspaper as a war correspondent, or should he become a professor? Both choices would produce some pleasure. The professor's life will be more calm but will have fewer hardships. The war correspondent will face hardships but his pleasures will be more intense. Which life gives the greater sum total? Can you count it up?

Remember also that thirty years from now your views on what is pleasurable will have changed. Does this moral arithmetic help you decide? Worse yet, the principle of the greatest good for the greatest number requires you to count not only your own future pleasures but also the future pleasures of every member of the human race. It's the greatest good of the greatest number. But can anyone, in order to choose between two actions, seriously claim to predict which one will give the greatest amount of pleasure to a Chinese peasant ten years from now? Yet, unless such calculations can be completed, the greatest good of the greatest number is a meaningless formula.

The usual utilitarian defense against this objection is to rely on some vague general guesses and estimates. But such sloppy arithmetic is insufficient

for any confidence in purely personal matters, let alone in questions of universal scope.

A particular case puts this objection in emphatic form. This is the case of Hitler's massacre of the Jews. The principle of the greatest good for the greatest number is precisely what Hitler needed to justify his brutality. He murdered five million Jews to make ninety million Germans happy – really more than ninety million, for Hitler and utilitarianism looked forward to a thousand year Reich. If anyone should suggest that Hitler wanted only Germans to be happy and was less solicitous about pleasure on a universal scale, we may turn from national socialism to international socialism. Not only is utilitarianism a support for Hitler, it is even a better defense for Lenin and Stalin. It is, indeed, standard liberal left-wing policy.

When Lenin lost interest in the proletariat because he perceived that the working classes would not support a revolution, and transferred his hopes to criminal conspirators, the theory was that these latter were the avant-garde whose massacres would usher in better days for all mankind. Hence, the Ukrainians and later the Tibetans and all the officers of the Polish army must be liquidated for the greatest good of the greatest number. The calculation may have been a little rough and sloppy, but anyone with a sense of the future can see that the sum of pleasure will soon be sufficiently great to overbalance a few temporary pains.

The conclusion is obvious. Utilitarianism does not preserve Fletcher's love from moral vacuity. The bride has no recipe for baking a cake. Nobody has any reason for doing anything. Everyone is free to follow his own individual, irresponsible, irrational preferences. Fletcher prefers occasional idolatry, occasional profanity, occasional murder, not so very occasional adultery, occasional theft, and occasional perjury.

### *The Toronto School*

Situation ethics and the rejection of the Ten Commandments have more recently insinuated their way into supposedly Calvinistic camps. This is the work of certain disciples of Herman Dooyeweerd of

the Free University of Amsterdam. These disciples of Professor Dooyeweerd, located chiefly in Toronto, Canada, have established multiple organizations for the vigorous propagation of their views. To what extent Professor Dooyeweerd approves of his disciples' views is not now under consideration. The point under discussion is the ethical stance of members of the Association for the Advancement of Christian Scholarship and the other related organizations they have founded. Attention must now be centered on their rejection of the Scriptures, with which rejection Dooyeweerd agrees, and the implications relative to the Ten Commandments, with which the Professor in Amsterdam may or may not agree.

In a small book entitled *Understanding the Scriptures*, A. H. De Graaff, on page two, begins by saying, "You distort the Scriptures when you read them as a collection of objective statements about God and man. They do not contain any rational, general, theological statements about God and his creation. It is not the purpose of the Bible to inform us about the nature of God's being or his attributes" (9). He also adds, "The Scriptures are neither rational nor irrational in character" (18).

All these statements are patently false. The first three are false because the Scriptures say that God is righteous and man is sinful. In saying this the Bible informs us about the nature of God's being and attributes. The last of the four statements is nonsense. To say that the Scriptures are neither rational nor irrational is like saying that the number two is neither odd nor even, or like saying that man is neither mortal nor immortal. To search the Bible for even one statement that is neither rational nor irrational is like going to the zoo to find an animal that is neither vertebrate nor invertebrate.

More directly concerning morality, Dr. De Graaff writes, "Nor does it – the Bible – contain moral applications that tell us how to live the good life – virtues that we share with the humanist" (21). It is true that a Christian does not share any virtue with a humanist because a humanist just cannot have any Christian virtue. But it is false to say that the Bible gives no moral rules. Dr. De Graaff objects to teaching boys and girls in Vacation Bible School



moral lessons about purity, chastity, and Victorian, middle-class American standards. Instead of warning them against the prevalent loose views of sex, we should tell them about irresponsible deforesting, yellow smog, dirty water – and we should tell them these things in "a non-moralistic manner" (26). Apparently dirty water is worse than a dirty mind.

In answer to many objections from Christians Dr. De Graaff repeats, "The Bible does not teach us how to be good and how to avoid being bad" (29). So says Dr. De Graaff. But the Bible says, "All Scripture...is profitable...for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be...completely furnished to every good work." The Bible also says, "Thy word have I hid in my heart that I might not sin against thee."

But Dr. De Graaff plunges on. Speaking of the Ten Commandments (which he strangely says are not commandments at all) he says, "None of them can be literally followed or applied today, for we live in a different period of history in a different culture" (35). Imagine! It is impossible to follow or apply the commandment, Thou shalt not steal, because we live in a different culture. Thou shalt not commit adultery cannot be literally obeyed today because God commanded it in 1500 B. C. This line of thought is incredible. But check the reference: page 35, *Understanding the Scriptures*, De Graaff and Seerveld, Association for the Advancement of Christian Scholarship, Toronto, Canada. Since none of the Ten Commandments can be literally applied today, Dr. De Graaff suggests that for them we substitute agitation against police brutality (36). Love your neighbor's wife, but hate the police.

There is a further implication. If God's command against adultery is inapplicable in our different culture, why should we suppose that God's covenant with Abraham is applicable? Dr. De Graaff seems to retain some respect for the covenant. Yet how can the Mosaic command against adultery be culturally conditioned in 1500 B. C., while a religious covenant some 500 years earlier escapes such cultural conditioning? A rational thinker might in consistency reject both. A

consistent Christian accepts both. But it takes some explaining to accept the one and reject the other.

In order that no one may suppose Dr. De Graaff to be an anomaly among the disciples of Dooyeweerd and that these criticisms are not relevant to the whole movement, the same ideas are to be noted in the writings of Dr. Calvin Seerveld. In the same volume with Dr. De Graaff, Dr. Seerveld has an interesting section on the exegesis of *Numbers* 22-24. He uses this passage to distinguish three methods of understanding the Scriptures.

The first method is that of evangelical fundamentalists. Dr. Seerveld has collected phrases from Alexander Maclaren, W. B. Riley, Clarence Edward Macartney, and others who note that (1) Balaam had a strong passion for earthly honor; (2) he wanted the best of two incompatible worlds; and (3) he beat his ass unmercifully. From these points the fundamentalist concludes that we should not put earthly honor first among our choices, that we should seek righteousness first of all, and that we should not be cruel to dumb animals. Dr. Seerveld continues his list with a number of such applications and moral lessons.

The second method is beside the present purpose. The third method Dr. Seerveld assigns to the "remnants of staunch orthodox churches," and he cites Hengstenberg and Calvin. This method specializes in doctrine, rather than in ethical application. It notes that *Numbers* 23:19 is a clear statement of God's immutability. And there is considerably more in the passage.

Dr. Seerveld disapproves of these methods. He challenges their hidden *aprioris*; he suggests that they miss the richness of Scripture, and mislead fledgling readers who use them (67). As for the fundamentalist method of moral application, Dr. Seerveld says, "Balaam's invitation from Balak is not remotely within my experience as a Christian school teacher because my twentieth century situation and the ancient parallel made abstractly ideal jibe of sorts only after a dozen qualifications...the binding force is lost" (68). Thus "the world upside down changing message of

*Numbers* 22-24 is reduced to a mess of moralistic pottage" (69).

The method of the Reformers, the orthodox Calvinistic method, is equally bad. This "Scholastic reading of the Scriptures is always after truths that can be theoretically formulated and held to be universally valid, consistent Bible teaching against all attack" (74). This Reformed method is bad, says Dr. Seerveld, because "it removes the reader half a step from the convicting comfort and humbling facing God's love and anger brings, removes the reader half a step away from existential confrontation with the living Word of God and asks him to comprehend these realities in codified propositional dogmas" (75).

But is the Reformation method, the method of studying and learning what the Bible says, such a bad method? Is it not rather commendable? Let it be noted that the Apostle Peter at the beginning of his second epistle says, "Grace to you and peace be multiplied by the knowledge of God" (3:18). The Apostle John also emphasizes doctrine and propositions. Without mentioning existentialism or irrational confrontations, John, in fact Jesus himself says, "If any one guards my doctrine, he shall not see death, ever" (8:51). Another verse that makes Christianity depend on an understanding of and an assent to propositions is, "If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote of me; but if you do not believe his writings, how can you believe my words?" (5:47). Jesus also said, "The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life" (6:63). The Reformation use of the Bible, like the evangelical fundamentalist method also "is interested in the practical lessons we can learn from it." The Westminster divines would have rejected Dr. Seerveld's charge of reducing the Bible to a "mess of moralistic pottage." Their careful and very detailed exposition of the Ten Commandments in the *Larger Catechism* shows how greatly they valued morality.

But Dr. Seerveld in his remarks on *Numbers* says, "To make Balaam a warning model for the reader is to distort the nature of biblical narrative and ignore the historical solidity of God's disclosure. Scripture

never gives biographic snatches to serve as ethical models" (68).

In contrast with Seerveld's view of the Bible stands the practice of the Apostle Peter. Speaking of the false teachers who introduced heresies instead of accepting orthodox propositions, and who lived in contempt of Dr. Seerveld's moralistic pottage, the Apostle writes, "having forsaken the right way they went astray, having followed the way of Balaam, son of Beor, who loved the hire of wrong-doing" (2 *Peter* 2:15ff.). Here the Apostle most assuredly uses "biographic snatches to serve as ethical models." If a modern exegete condemns the Apostle's use of the Bible, then the modern exegete must have gone astray – not the Apostle.

## *Conclusion*

Now, for a short conclusion let it be noted, as was indicated four paragraphs back, that the Scriptures stress doctrine, information, and knowledge. Second, let it be noted that this information and knowledge includes rational statements about the nature and attributes of God. Third, let it finally be noted that the Bible teaches morality. While the outside world founders in moral perplexity and considers the murder of unborn children as desirable, while the apostate churches organize congregations for homosexuals and make contributions of fifty-thousand dollars to a prostitutes' union, we who believe the Bible can rely on the Ten Commandments. In contrast with a great amount of contemporary counseling, let us emphasize the exposition of those commandments as it is found in the *Westminster Larger Catechism*. The Puritans lived by the Ten Commandments. Our choice today, then, is between the colonial Puritans and the contemporary impuritans.