The use and misuse of scripture in ethics

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I. THE HERMENEUTICAL PRINCIPLE OF SOLA SCRIPTURA

1. Christian ethics must be founded upon the Scriptures.
   The Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, as the Word of God revealed to mankind, are the ultimate authority for Christians in all matters of faith and life, i.e., in doctrine and ethics. Therefore, it is essential that every step taken in ethics be made only with Scriptural support. If we fail to insure this, any ethical decision may not reflect God’s will, but merely the inclination of our own human wisdom, logic or desire. The prophet Micah declared: “He has showed you, O man, what is good, and what the LORD requires of you” (6:8; Isa. 55:8). The study of God’s Word in the openness of faith teaches us not only the will of God but also how the people of God in the past were led by the Spirit in response to His will (s. Hebr. 11-12).

2. Christian ethics presupposes the Divine authority for judgment.
   To understand God and His will, we must begin with His thoughts and “ways” (Isa. 55:9). Even in evaluating ourselves, we must look at ourselves as God sees us. We must see how we are valued and judged by God. As Werner Elert points out, Christian ethics poses the question, “what is man under the Divine judgment?” My question is: Who am I? How good am I? What is God’s opinion of what I do? Thus, the Scriptures understand themselves “as God’s judgment of the quality of human nature”. St. James warns us: “There is one

Lawgiver and Judge, He who is able to save and destroy (4:12). According to
the divine judgment, man is a sinner. Thus David gives expression to God’s
evaluation of “the children of men” in Psalm 14:3: “They have all gone astray,
they are all corrupt; there is none that does good, no not one!” But, although
we are all guilty of sin and deserve God’s condemnation, through faith in Jesus
Christ we “are justified by God’s grace as a gift”, and therefore forgiven and
acquitted as righteous (Rom. 3:23-24). Christian ethics then must take both
aspects of our condition as simul iustus et peccator (simultaneously justified
and sinner) into consideration, not just dealing with human beings as such, but
with the activity of Christians who are justified sinners.

3. God creates human beings in His image and calls man to response
and responsibility.

As the image of God, human beings are a reflection of the Divine reality.
They have been endowed with speech just as God Himself speaks, which
involves the ability to express oneself as a personality. Thus, God has created
man with the potential for a communicative relationship with Himself: man can
hear and respond to God’s call, and in responding, man demonstrates that he
is a responsible being. On the one hand, this means that every human being is
of singular value before God (s. Matt. 6:26) and that any violence committed
against a human is an affront to God. On the other hand, we are all responsible
to God for our own actions, as He quickly made clear to our first parents after
the Fall: “What is this that you have done?” (Gen. 3:13).

When Carl L. M. Rasmussen claimed on the basis of Jeremiah 1:5, Luke 1:44
and Galatians 1:15-16 that the unborn child is a person, Clifford Reinhardt
took issue with him. He first played down these Biblical expressions as being
poetic or hyperbolic in nature, then pleaded that the author’s intentions were
not aimed at postulating the personhood of the unborn but in other directions.
However, neither argument holds well, for if the LORD intended to emphasize
Jeremiah’s calling and Paul wished to stress his apostleship, it would not
enhance their presentations to use merely poetic or hyperbolic representa-
tions which could not be understood in themselves as factual truth.
Rasmussen is right, that God recognized Jeremiah, John the Baptist and Paul
as persons while yet unborn. Neither was the leaping of John in Elizabeth’s
womb either poetic or hyperbolic, but truly empirical event. However, we note
that, as for Jeremiah and Paul, the emphasis is on God’s foreknowledge and
predetermination: “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you; and before
you were born, I consecrated you; I have appointed you a prophet to the
nations” (Jer. 1:5). The point here is not really the personhood of the unborn,

4. Ibid., pp. 14, 16.
5. Ibid., pp. 23f.; Commission on Theology and Church Relations, LC-MS, “Abortion in
but that God, who has begun to create a human being in the womb since conception (cf. Pss. 51:5; 139:13-16), may already earmark such an unborn child for a definite vocation in His service.

A so-called human fetus is definitely a human being. As such, it deserves to be protected equally to an adult, as it already was by the Law of Moses: “If men fight with each other and strike a pregnant woman so that her child comes forth, yet there is no injury, he shall surely be fined as the woman’s husband lays upon him, and he shall pay by arbitration. But if there is injury (i.e., to the child), then you shall exact life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot”, etc. (Ex. 21:22-25).\(^8\) The same should apply to other weak humans in our society, such as the poor, widows, orphans, strangers and aliens (Ex. 22:21f.; 23:6, 9), and we should also include pregnant women. Human life, at every stage of its development, is valued by God; after conception, human beings gradually grow and unfold what they already are.\(^9\)

Human lives are entrusted by God to our care. In respect to the question of abortion, the ethical task is to shape our wants to accept the children conceived by us, and thus given to us. Our willingness to welcome children expresses our confidence in God’s providence and our hope that fulfillment rests in Him (s. Ps. 127:3; Gen. 9:7). Our “yes” to children must also involve a “yes” to those pressured to contemplate abortion, for the entire community shares the guilt that produces the situation of an unwanted child. Christians have the responsibility to react by endeavoring to change the circumstances and causes that give rise to such situations and to offer alternatives to abortion through helpful assistance, e.g., in helping to decide for life, to bear the burden of the pregnancy and of motherhood and to give to adoption. Here, a syllogism: “Major premise: The lives of human beings — whatever their level of development or achievement — are entitled to equal care and protection. Minor premise: The unborn child is a human being. Conclusion: The life of the unborn child is entitled to equal care and protection.”\(^10\)

4. God calls each person to service within the definite orders of the world.

Each one of us is assigned by God to a definite place in history and to a certain role that he alone can play — this gives ethics its historical content. Mordecai indicated this to Esther: “Have you not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” (Est. 4:14). Obedience to God can be rendered not abstractly but only in the concrete historical relationships in the world.\(^11\)

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9. S. Commission on Theology and Church Relations, pp. 27f.
my Creator and Lord has placed me in a particular family of a particular city of a particular country and people, in a particular language and culture.

Once conception has taken place, the man and woman involved have become joint parents and God has entrusted to them the office of parenthood. As Jesus interprets the Fifth Commandment (Mt. 5:21-22), the murder of abortion begins already with anger at the embryo, renouncing it — this is spurning the bestowed gift of God and the office entrusted by Him. Of course, not only the woman bears the responsibility, but the father equally as well. If civil law and courts fail to recognize the rights and responsibilities of the father, they undermine the Divinely instituted order of the family.

Miss Ane Hjerrild of Denmark, in a lecture at a seminar of the Lutheran Institute of Ecumenical Research in Strassburg, treated the account of the man being created before the woman (Gen. 2) as dependent upon the Israelite patriarchal cultural context. With all due respect to her principle of upholding the equality of women to men before God, her handling of this passage lowers it from the status of valid Word of God to relative word of chauvinistic man. We have no right to defuse certain passages of the Scriptures because they supposedly conflict with whatever the current opinion of one segment of society happens to be. Should I as a man take offense over the fact that women were the first witnesses to the resurrected Christ? More significant than the order of the creation of man and woman in Genesis, which preceded the advent of sin into the world, is the Divine ordering of the relationship between man and woman after the Fall in Gen. 3:16. God’s punishment of woman is not more severe than that of man (from the standpoint of the burden of responsibility, it is much less). But God established this particular relationship of man and woman to each other as one of the orders of this fallen age so that not only the family but both man and woman may receive a large measure of protection against the temptations in this sinful world.

Miss Hjerrild also followed Krister Stendahl’s argument on the basis of Gal. 3:28 (“there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”) that God’s original order has been cancelled by Christ, so that woman must enjoy as much freedom as man, at least in the Church. However, because we Christians are still sinners and too weak to avoid succumbing to the temptations we face in this age, Christ has not cancelled the Divinely established orders. Furthermore, since the visible Church is composed of sinners, she, too, is subject to the orders for this age. Before God and in the age to come, women are of course absolutely equal with men — in fact, even within the orders of this age, equality as far as value is concerned cannot be contested. However, as long as we must live in this sinful age, God has assigned

to woman and man different roles, each role just as important and valuable as the other, yet different in function and responsibility. Where this order is adhered to, we are better protected against sin and temptation; where it is not respected, we open ourselves to more dangers.

In Jesus’ Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37), the victim of robbers confronted the Samaritan as a fellow human being, eliciting a response from one person to another; this constituted an interpersonal relationship. Potentially, anyone may encounter me as the neighbour to whom I should respond, for whom I become responsible. In my peculiar historical situations and in relationship to certain persons, God calls me to responsible action — He gives me the opportunity to be of service in three kinds of relationship, to myself, to my neighbour and to the created world, and therefore in each case to God Himself. Every situation is a unique God-given opportunity for me to be of service: “for everything there is a season and a time for every matter under heaven” (Ecc. 3:1). God creates singular occasions and opportunities for me to live and act.

In this way, God calls me to service within the orders of the world. Thus all our actions have social consequences. This distinguishes a truly Scriptural ethics from individualistic pietism, in which one is primarily concerned that he keep a good conscience before God as a private matter between him and God. The priest and Levite in Jesus’ parable may well have avoided the victim for normally good pious reasons, but they failed in their calling to be compassionate neighbours.

In his interpretation of Jesus’ Parable of the Good Samaritan, Elert recognized that through the victim of the robbers God called the Samaritan to the response of being a good neighbour. Therefore, at any time, in any circumstance, a person in need who encounters me is God’s call to me to be responsible. Here, the careful use of the prepositions are significant: Because it is really God who is calling me to respond, I am really responsible to Him; I am accountable to God, not to the neighbour in need. But because I must respond not with platitudes and feelings but with deeds of mercy, my involvement with the needy neighbour means that I am responsible for him to God. When God reproached Cain “Where is Abel your brother?” (Gen. 4:9), His rhetorical question meant: “Yes, Cain, you are responsible to Me for your brother.”

16. Elert, p. 67; Thielicke, 1, p. 83.
places us into interpersonal relationships where we are responsible to Him for the neighbours who are united with us in these relationships, either according to the world's orders, such as Cain to his brother Abel, or by an intervening encounter, such as the Samaritan and the battered victim.

II THE HERMENEUTICAL PRINCIPLE OF THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN LAW AND GOSPEL

1. Original Sin

The Fall of Adam and Eve marred the image of God. Instead of heeding God's Law, they had taken the direction of their life into their own hands, which amounts to revolt against God's will, epitomized again by the builders of the Tower of Babel and by the Israelites in the period of the Judges: "every man did what was right in his own eyes" (21:25; cf. Isa. 53:6). It is not that the world is perversive, but that "man has perverted his world",21 as "violence against the image of God". Human history follows no law of progressive improvement, but rather the law of degenerating descent into ever greater sin and guilt, into demonic dehumanizing. This is evidence of the original sin in which we all share and of our incapability of extricating ourselves from it.22

2. God judges us according to the criterion of His Law.

The criterion of God's judgment of human beings is His Law. His judgment of Adam and Eve was preceded by His command, "of the Tree of Knowing Good and Evil you shall not eat" (Gen. 2:16). Our Creator claims for Himself the authority to legislate laws for us and to judge us by His laws, i.e., by the principle of retribution:23 "for when you eat of it, you shall die" (Gen. 2:17). On this basis, both the Old and New Testament interpret the whole course of human history — "not as an arbitrary succession of events, but as retribution",24 The author of II Kings explains the conquest of the Northern Kingdom of Israel by Assyria, "because the people of Israel had sinned against the LORD their God, . . . and had worshiped other gods" (17:7). Isaiah predicted the fall of heathen Babylon because of needless cruelty against subjected peoples and vaunted pride against God (14:6, 13f; cf. Rom. 1:18-25). But once the Law and Gospel of God is preached, the Divine retribution is predicated on Christ:25 "he who believes in Him is not condemned, (but) he who does not believe is condemned already" (John 3:18).

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20. Thielicke, 1, p. 597.
22. Thielicke, 1, pp. 597f.
24. Ibid., p. 53.
25. Ibid., p. 54.
3. The First Use of God’s Law (usus politicus)

The law of the state prevents the destruction of communal order, protects life and property and demands retribution for violations (Rom. 13:1-7).26 The political realm is one of the two modes of God’s rule. Speaking more precisely with the Old Testament, Judaism and the New Testament, and following the lead of Helmut Thielicke, we have to do with two aeons temporally following each other: “the age to come” breaks in upon and challenges “this age” (Matt. 12:32)27 with its provisional orders. God sanctions all the temporary orders of “this age” out of His longsuffering patience and mercy to protect humanity against self-destruction through their own sinfulness. Because God lovingly wants to grant people time and opportunity to repent and turn to Christ in faith, He protects these orders of the fallen world for the sake of restraining evil and permitting the proclamation of the Gospel.28 Therefore, when we fulfill our offices in the family, vocation and society, we fulfill God’s will and carry out His business.29

Thielicke here adds a corrective to Luther’s “doctrine of the two kingdoms” (Reiche, realms) by noting Luther underestimates how “the age to come” calls into question “this age”. Through Christ’s radical law of love (John 13:34), the world’s orders are revealed to be only interim solutions, designed for neither the protological Paradise nor the eschatological Fulfillment, but merely for the intervening period of this fallen aeon (cf. Gen. 9:5-7). Peaceful coexistence between the two realms is therefore ruled out, for the laws of the left realm are alien to the law of the right realm (cf. Rom. 13:2-4 with Matt. 5:43-45). And Christian ethics, then, is likewise an interim discipline, struggling to work out a modus vivendi between these two mutually contradictory laws. In effect, the Christian who wishes to be true to Christ’s law of love usually finds himself not with clear choices between good and evil, but only with choices between lesser and greater evils. Furthermore, as much as the Christian is constrained to be obedient to this fallen world’s orders, they are like a macrocosm of the sinful human heart; i.e., they are capable of total corruption. Institutionalized evil is the extreme example of the true nature of this age. This raises the possibility that the law of an order of this world which has degenerated into extreme injustice may have to be broken in order to obey God’s Law (“legitimate illegality”; cf. Acts 4:19f.; 5:29). The Christian is then confronted by a conflict situation in which “whatever I do, I am guilty” — doing wrong in order to prevent a much worse wrong.30 In fact, even in a “normal” state of affairs in this world, is there any deed we do that is completely free of guilt?

Romans 6:1-14 is interpreted by Thielicke in respect to the Christian

26. Ibid., pp. 68f., 74; Schlatter, p. 60; Morgret, pp. 14f.
27. S. Dan. 12:1; Wilch, pp. 111-115.
29. Luther, Works, AE, 9, 19f.
confronted with a “borderline” or extreme conflict situation. This fallen world of sinfulness “shall not be master over you, for you are not under the Law, but under grace” (6:14). Having died with Christ to sin (6:2), the Christian’s “old man” that is a slave to the fallen world’s orders has been crucified to them and freed from them (6:6f.), so that he should no longer be an “instrument of unrighteousness”, but an “instrument of righteousness to God” (6:13), enabled to live in this fallen world by the grace of forgiveness (6:14).³¹

Thielicke applies this principle to the conflict between life and truth with which many Christians in Germany were faced through the Nazi persecution of the Jews, particularly those who were in some position to save a Jew’s life. For example, those actively engaged in aiding Jews in one case arranged with an eye clinic to accept to their staff a Jewish girl earmarked for liquidation. But to travel there, she had to have a valid pass in order to obtain a train ticket. It was arranged with another woman to lend her pass, but it could only be used if it were counterfeited and the name and number were altered. Arrangements also had to be made with the underworld to purchase stolen ration cards. Furthermore, a detailed life history for the Jewish girl had to be concocted to hide her background. Everyone involved in this operation was constrained to lie and deceive the authorities in various ways in order to save one life.³² This one example was multiplied hundreds of times, and often enough the attempts were exposed, resulting in the death of the participants. These are the overlooked martyrs of the German church. But being free in Christ to disobey the orders of this fallen age, they belonged already to the coming age, sustained by Divine forgiveness.

Yet, the Church herself is not to engage in politics directly as if she were the left realm, but is to remain the right realm by concentrating on addressing the Word of God to persons in order to transform them.

Against a “false conservatism”, the Church should not restrict the Law and Gospel to the purely private and personal arena, for they also have a claim upon public life. John the Baptist directed the repentant tax-collectors, “Collect no more than you have been ordered to,” and the repentant soldiers, “Do not take money from anyone by force” (Luke 3:13-14). The Church has the duty before God to speak out over against those in authority — not in defense of herself, for not even the “gates of Hades shall overpower her” (Matt. 16:18) — but in defense of anyone suffering injustice, not only because everyone has been created in the image of God (Gen. 5:1-3), but even more so because Christ has died for the redemption of every person (John 3:16): “each one has been “bought with a price” (1 Cor. 7:23). The Church functions in the political world as God’s watchman, calling politicians and civil servants to account for injustice.

The Church should not advance political programs. However, she should

³¹ Thielicke, 1, p. 597.
³² Ibid., p. 588.
become very familiar and knowledgeable about existing programs in order to speak to the consciences of those engaged in them and in order to hone the consciences of Christians who may be confronted by them or may bear some measure of responsibility (as all do in a democracy). She should follow the example of Paul, who in respect to Onesimus convinced the runaway slave of his responsibility to return to his master, and in respect to Philemon undertook to convince him of his responsibility to accept Onesimus as a Christian brother (Philemon 8:21). Instead of denouncing the institution of slavery as such and proposing a “Christian” institution in its place, Paul undermined slavery from within and foreshadowed its eventual overthrow among Christians with his appeal for a Christian to accept a fellow Christian — whatever his social standing and despite whatever the social institution — as his equal brother in Christ. This does not force the Christian to oppose the current social institution, for which he may not be in position, but it does call him to practice both human justice and Christian love as much as possible within the given situation (Philemon, e.g., could legally set Onesimus free and employ him as a servant).

The Church should not misunderstand the function of the right realm by presuming to establish the Kingdom of God on earth, a real temptation in both the Roman Catholic and Reformed churches that is playing a significant role today in ecumenical churches in the debate over liberation theology. The Kingdom of God is established by Christ alone inwardly (Luke 17:21), a spiritual entity dependent only upon Him in this fallen aeon. It cannot be furthered or established by political, economic or social programs or institutions. As Rev. Nilo Figur, a Lutheran pastor in Brazil, recently declared (in direct opposition to his countryman and major proponent of liberation theology in the Roman Church, Leonardo Boff): “We preach redemption through Christ, which changes individuals, who then change society. A society cannot change itself if its individual members do not change. Jesus addressed the crowds, yet . . . did not see a faceless mass, but an assembly of individuals”.

4. The Second Use of God’s Law (usus elenchticus)

As Melanchthon so well formulated: Lex semper accusat (“the Law always accuses”, Ap. 3:164), this is the usus proprius of the Law, making man’s sin obvious, making me see that I am opposing God, calling me, everyone, to repent, as Jesus warned His audience: “Unless you repent, you shall also likewise perish!” (Luke 13:3, 5). Although the immediate reaction to the Law may well be resentment and increased opposition to God, the purpose of its accusations is to drive us to hope in Christ. Even when the Christian is in

33. S. Rengstorf, p. 201.
the state of justification, the Law properly functions to continually accuse him of violations. Although already justified, we remain imperfect humans in an imperfect world and thus are still sinners. As long as we abide in this world, we are crippled by a wound that cannot heal. As Thielicke portrays it, God's Law fulfills the function of "gauze in the wound", of preventing a false healing, 36 lest we imagine that in this age we are already perfect and sinless (s. I John 1:8, 10). This use of the Law reminds us, then, that nothing we do is totally good and fully devoid of sin, as Luther declared: "All our works are in vain, even in the best life" 37 (cf. Luke 17:10).

Jesus was not content to allow the Law to be interpreted in effect as a negative casuistic list by which we could prove our innocence by avoiding to commit the prohibited actions. Instead, He demonstrates with His radical interpretation of the Mosaic Law (Matt. 5:17-48) that God protests not just what man does but also what man is, e.g., "You shall not kill — because you are a murderer!" 38 Christ not only upholds the validity of the moral law within the Mosaic Law, but with His strict interpretation He lays bare the passions that we harbor inside our heart as transgressions of the Divine Law. Each one of us stands condemned by every one of God's laws. However, our Lord took one more significant step: He reduced not only the Decalogue but also all of God's Law to one new law: "A new commandment I give to you that you love one another, even as I have loved you" (John 13:34). In keeping with this law of love, Jesus countermanded the principle of retribution for Christian ethics: "Do not resist him who is evil, but whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn to him the other also... Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you" (Matt, 5:39). The whole Law is now fulfilled in loving the neighbour 39 (Rom. 13:8, 10; Gal. 5:14). This is neither a mere attitude or feeling nor according to human standards of love, but "even as I have loved you", i.e., self-sacrificially. This no one can do by the strength of his own will, but only by virtue of Christ strengthening him (Phil. 4:13).

5. The Third Use of God's Law

God uses His Law to remind us of His will. Luther said: The Law "must remain among Christians so they shall know what they are and what they should do". 40 In this sense John the Baptist responded to the question of those who repented and believed, "Teacher, what shall we do?" with directives for befitting conduct (Luke 3:10-14). We believers are not so strong that we can resist by ourselves the temptations that still bombard us. Thielicke well employs here the figure of a sheep dog: The sheep are easily led astray by temptations so they need the sheep dog to guard them against the temptations.

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36. Thielicke, 1, pp. 94f.
37. S. Thielicke, 1, p. 482; Becker, p. 14; Morgret, pp. 15f.
38. Thielicke, 1, p. 442.
40. WA 45, 146; s. Elert, p. 67; Schlatter, p. 59.
and to drive them back to the path of the Shepherd, which is, after all, what they, too, really want. Like the sheep dog, the Law reminds us how to exercise our obedience to the Shepherd’s law of love.\textsuperscript{41}

6. The Law and The Gospel

The Law must remain total judgment as accuser (second use) and the Gospel must remain fully unconditional as the miracle of grace. To understand the Law as Gospel is to believe that peace with God can be attained by obedience and good works, giving ethics a false security. To understand the Gospel as Law is to fail to appreciate the Gospel as pure grace, requiring instead an imitation of Christ that leads to uncertainty of faith. In either case, the Law is robbed when it cannot signify total judgment, and the Gospel when it is no longer the inexplicable miracle of grace.\textsuperscript{42}

In ethics, confusing Law and Gospel leads to emphasis only on the correctness of action. We have seen, however, that all our action is tainted with imperfection, sin and guilt. This is most clear in what Thielicke calls the “borderline situations”, the abnormal, extreme situations, e.g., of institutionalized evil, because they reveal the truly fallen nature of this age and thus present the most fruitful place for gaining knowledge.\textsuperscript{43} These extreme situations indicate that fully correct behaviour is never really possible. Here, I can only “hunger and thirst after righteousness” (Matt. 5:6); I can exist as a Christian with my guilt only in the assurance that I am forgiven in Christ. The task of ethics, then, is not really to teach us how to solve our situations in this age, as if the Law could be Gospel, but only to teach us how to understand the fallen world through the judgment of the Law and how to endure it through the grace of the Gospel. Assured of the Gospel’s justification in Christ and knowing that my imperfect decisions and acts are nevertheless forgiven, I am able to proceed beyond guilt — not to give up resolutely in inactivity, but to “sin boldly” (Luther), i.e., to choose carefully the lesser evil and to act responsibly in service to my neighbour,\textsuperscript{44} confident that “all things work to good” (Rom. 8:28). Not only the “borderline situation”, but really every situation demanding an ethical decision demonstrates my spiritual poverty (Matt. 5:3) because it robs me of trying to justify myself by works and proves that this fallen world is one of tribulation that cannot give peace (John 16:33; 14:27f.). Thus the Law in its purity and distinction from the Gospel convinces me that there is no hope for me in myself or in this age, but only through the Gospel in its purity and distinction from the Law.

In effect, the Gospel prompts us to decide for the Holy Spirit in a conflict situation. Although we know neither what to do nor what to pray, we in effect

\textsuperscript{41} Thielicke, pp. 130-132, 134, 139f.; cf. Becker, p. 14; Morgret, pp. 16-18.

\textsuperscript{42} Thielicke, 1, pp. 95f., 117, 124.

\textsuperscript{43} Thielicke, 1, pp. 578-580, 605.

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., pp. 597, 602, 604f.
retreat behind the Spirit and let Him lead us out of the dilemma with the right word and deed (Matt. 10:19f.; Rom. 8:26-28). The Holy Spirit reduces the many alternatives, the multiplicity of a dilemma to a simplicity.\textsuperscript{45} God is present to assume responsibility for His cause; I have but to allow Him to use me in the front lines of the Kingdom of God. As Abraham was ordered to sacrifice his son of promise (Gen. 22) and Peter to break the dietary laws (Acts 10), God does not spare us from situations where we apparently have only the choice between two forms of sinning. But as Abraham and Peter obeyed in faith and left it up to God to resolve the contradiction, it is precisely in the conflict situation where God reveals Himself as the God of grace who is full of possibilities where all our human possibilities are at an end. Without mitigating the seriousness of the sin and without setting aside the accusation of the Law, as explained by Frank Morgret, “the Gospel always proclaims God’s forgiveness of the believer”. In effect, the Christian in each situation is both condemned by the Law and forgiven by Christ — the latter taking precedence in God’s grace.\textsuperscript{46}

In practice this means that I may be faced by such a conflict situation where my opportunity for service to my neighbour may prompt me to break a civil law. Or I may be tempted to ignore God’s call to service with the legalistic excuse of having to obey the letter of the civil law. But the Parable of the Good Samaritan reminds us that love is a capacity of improvisations directed to the moment in reference to my immediate neighbour, so that I need not be anxious about tomorrow, not to fear the result, which is in God’s hands (Matt. 6:25-34). Or, I may be tempted to disregard the civil law with a pragmatism that in effect reasons that the end justifies the means. Every step towards a goal — the means — must be considered on its own merits, for it may alter the goal. If Jesus had accepted the devil’s offer of world dominion, the resultant “kingdom of God” would not have been of faith but of law; it would have replaced the theology of the Cross with the theology of glory. By both calculating in fear and underestimating the means, the church in Germany lost out against Nazism when it willingly gave up the control of the instruction of the youth and theology students in order to preserve the end of being permitted to continue to preach the Gospel.\textsuperscript{47} The retreat of the church on the principle of means resulted in a compromise and perversion of the Gospel it preached.

There are certain limits for the Christian that cannot be transgressed, e.g., to deny Christ or to blaspheme God.\textsuperscript{48} There is no authentic conflict when I might conceivably insult God Himself for the sake of a supposedly higher goal, for there is no higher goal. The Kingdom of God does not depend on me (Matt. 3:9), not on human activity. Likewise, I cannot be free to choose when the personhood of my neighbour is at stake, e.g., to dehumanize him through

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., pp. 84, 92, 610f., 623.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., pp. 651, 663-667; Morgret, pp. 20f.
\textsuperscript{47} Thielicke, 1, pp. 613-618.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., pp. 643f.
exploitation, murder or torture (I Cor. 6:20; 7:23), for this violates the image of God and also amounts to insulting God. The Christian owes to the world such a profession of faith and principles which demonstrate that he is indeed committed, that he is not capable of anything. Thus, Christian ethics does not ultimately solve our problems or lead us to a clear conscience, but it rather intensifies the problems by clarifying the situation and its full implications. For the essence of ethical decision does not lie in mere obedience to the right but in the struggle to determine the ethical point at issue.  

The principle of limits to human freedom that God forbids us to do good in an immoral way, applies to the question of abortion. The taking of human life is never justifiable for psychological, emotional or social reasons. It may not be subjected to utilitarian considerations, for that ultimately violates all sense of obligation. The only clear cases for considering abortion are those rare instances where the mother’s life is endangered — a conflict of life against life. Thus, abortion on demand is not only a grievous sin against the Fifth Commandment, but also against the First, esp. in the form of the First Great Commandment.  

III THE HERMENEUTICAL PRINCIPLE OF SOLUS CHRISTUS

1. God’s grace in justification through Christ calls Christians to the ethical behaviour of good works.

Christ the Saviour of humanity is the subject and scope of the Scriptures. Apart from Christ’s Salvation, we cannot do anything good before God: “He who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). The Christian life of faith and bearing the fruit of good works, namely sanctification, is dependent upon redemption.  

In philosophical ethics the ethical act is determined by the task to be undertaken, but in Christian ethics the ethical act is determined by the gift of justification which enables one to perform the ethical act.  

The LORD first blessed Abraham, which enabled him to be the means of blessing to others: “I will bless you . . . ; be a blessing; . . . in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Gen. 12:2f.). Jesus similarly called His disciples to service after pronouncing them able to perform it: “You are the salt of the earth . . . you are the light of the world . . . Let your light shine before men so that they may . . . glorify your Father in heaven” (Matt. 5:13f.).

The “new obedience” (CA VI) of the Christian is not determined by the goal

49. Ibid., pp. 621, 623, 644, 666.
50. Commission on Theology and Church Relations, pp. 30-32, 34f.; Thielicke, 3, 230f., 236, 246f.
51. Elert, p. 66; Morgret, p. 18.
52. Thielicke, 1, pp. 51f.
of fulfilling the law, for justification has freed the Christian from the compulsion of fulfilling it. Yet, being justified, we freely will what God wills, and this fulfills the Law.\textsuperscript{53} As Luther stated it: “Good, pious works never make a good, pious person; it is a good, pious person who makes good, pious works”, which he drew from Jesus’ principle that it is the good tree that bears good fruit (Matt. 7:17f). The unregenerate cannot do anything ethically good before God, but only the justified, because they have been made good.\textsuperscript{54}

In one sense, every situation in life calls for a new decision. But in another sense, allowing ourselves to be joined to Christ and justified by Him consists of our essential decision, so that we thereby have already made the decision that affects our whole life and influences how we handle our daily confrontations. Belonging to Christ, we have therefore already decided between life and death, truth and error, justice and injustice, mercy and power.\textsuperscript{55}

\section*{2. God's Love Active in Us}

The Gospel of God’s love arouses in us the love that He expects from us. By making Himself to us an “object that can be loved” (\textit{objectum amabile}, Ap. IV, 129), God kindles our love. Yet, our good works are also the reverse side of God’s love to us, God’s love active in us:\textsuperscript{56} “May the God of peace . . . equip you with everything good that you may do His will, working in you that which is pleasing in His sight through Jesus Christ . . . ” (Heb. 13:20f.; cf. Gal. 2:20). Thus, it is not really I who fulfills the law of love, but Christ working in me. Then it is not so much a law, an imperative that I am obeying, but I rather act from an indicative: I love self-sacrificially because He who sacrificed Himself for me lives in me and motivates me.

In this perspective, the ethical admonitions of the Scriptures, especially those in the Epistles, are not merely directives for action but also demonstrations of how the Spirit of love in the transformed person expresses Himself.\textsuperscript{57} We who are justified by faith in Christ let ourselves be led by what is spiritual (Gal. 5:18),\textsuperscript{58} and so living “according to what is spiritual, we shall not carry out the desire of the flesh” (5:16) that continually tempts us to selfish sin, but through love we serve one another (5:13), for in Christ all that matters is “faith working through love” (5:6). This is true conformity to the will of God, the love that “does no wrong to a neighbour” and that “therefore is the fulfilment of the Law” (Rom. 13:10). It is in this love that we truly are free, as Augustine said, “Love, and do what you want”.\textsuperscript{59} By enabling me to love, making me the subject

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{53. \textit{Ibid.}, pp. 53f., 121, 136f., 455.}
\footnote{54. S. AE 31, 361; Schlatter, pp. 28, 38f.; Becker, p. 7.}
\footnote{55. Schlatter, pp. 45f., 50f.}
\footnote{56. Thielicke, 1, pp. 65f., 458.}
\footnote{57. Becker, p. 15.}
\footnote{58. On the translation “spiritual”, s. R. C. H. Lenski, \textit{The Epistle to the Galatians}, Columbus: Lutheran Book Concern, 1937, pp. 257, 279, 281.}
\footnote{59. Thielicke, 1, p. 456.}
\end{footnotes}
of loving, the Holy Spirit enables me to be myself, which is true freedom: "where the Spirit of the Lord is, is liberty" (II Cor. 3:17).

In the context of Paul’s great call to send out preachers so that people may hear the Gospel so that they may come to faith so that they may "call upon the Name of the Lord and be saved" (10:13-15), he challenged the Gentile Christians to help him move his fellow Jews to jealousy that they might be saved (Rom. 11:14). Adolf Schlatter emphasizes on this basis that the Christian is not only called in his ethical vocation to minister to the physical needs of his neighbours, but also to their spiritual needs. And it is not only the clergy who are called to support the ministry of preaching the Gospel and of mission to unbelievers, but all Christian laymen, too, by both direct witness and the indirect example of the godly life.⁶⁰

3. Love of God is activity in total dedication to the neighbour

Jesus agreed with His rabbinical contemporaries in identifying the heart of the Law as the commandments to love God and love one’s neighbour (Dt. 6:5; Lev. 19:18; Matt. 22:37-40). In fact, even Paul took a page from his rabbinical learning when he summarized, “he who loves his neighbour fulfills the Law” (Rom. 13:8), which is similar to Jesus’ Golden Rule (Mt. 7:12). And Moses clearly indicated already with his formulation of the Two Great Commandments that they involve not mere attitudes but total dedication: The first is giving oneself fully to God and devoting one’s self, one’s life, to Him. The Second Great Commandment reads literally in Hebrew, “thou shalt love to thy neighbour as thyself”, which rules out a mere feeling or liking. It must mean “thou shalt be loving to thy neighbour — thou shalt perform deeds of love to thy neighbour”. Before God, it is only love in action that counts.

Where Jesus goes beyond the understanding of Moses and the scribes is in interpreting the Second Great Commandment just as radically as the First (Matt. 5:44). Loving one’s neighbour for Jesus is to love him “even as I have loved you” (John 13:34), i.e., with total dedication, self-sacrificially, even to the point of dying for him (I John 3:16). In our love of the neighbour we love him as Christ loves us (I John 4:19). We forgive him as we have been forgiven (Matt. 6:12); here is where the age to come breaks in upon the fallen age. Our concern is not directed primarily to be in the right, for Christ takes care of our righteousness. But our concern is rather directed to the physical and spiritual needs of our neighbour, in being a compassionate neighbour (Luke 10:36f). Luther said, first, in the Magna Carta of evangelical ethics: “The Christian lives not in himself, but in Christ and in his neighbour — in Christ through faith, in the neighbour through love”; and also: “before God, faith is necessary, not works; before men, works and love are necessary”.⁶¹ We add from Paul: “Bear

one another’s burdens and so fulfill the law of Christ” (Gal. 6:2). Being a Christian neighbour is a burden, a sacrifice; the needs of others infringe upon our comfort, complacency and self-sufficiency. But Christ calls us to deny ourselves and take up our cross daily and follow Him; “for whoever would save his life shall lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake, he shall save it” (Luke 9:23f.).

In a discussion about human rights, the Norwegian theologian Einar Molland interpreted Rom. 2:14-16 (esp. “the law written in their hearts”) to mean that there exists a natural, unwritten law that is valid for all men of all times. On the basis of this law, which is appropriate for the nature of man, the inherent worth and dignity of man can be recognized and the rights of man can be grounded. However, it is better to follow Thielicke in recognizing that the ideal of human rights does not derive from the Scriptures’ portrayal of man, who is sinfully depraved, but from the free, inherently good man of renaissance humanism. Scripture offers us no foundation for fundamental, inherent rights of man. God has given every human being not rights which he can appeal to, but rather responsibilities which he has the duty to fulfill. This we see everywhere in the Scriptures, whether we go back as far as Genesis 1 & 2 or whether we take the Decalogue or the admonitions of Jesus and the Apostles. One of the best examples is presented by Jesus’ Parable of the Sheep and Goats (Matt. 25:31-46), where Jesus in effect gives His followers the duty of being responsible to Him for the hungry, the thirsty, the strangers, the naked, the sick and the prisoners of this world with whom they are confronted. Such should be the basis of Christians’ ministering to the suffering, the weak and the unjustly oppressed — not that they have a right to our aid, as if we were responsible to them, but that we are responsible for them. It is not that we are called to physically alter the situation causing their suffering, but that we are to minister to them in their suffering, doing what we can to alleviate their suffering. Christ, in justifying and forgiving us, has freed us from the natural human drive to look out for ourselves first and foremost. He has freed us from egoism to the sacrificial love of ministering to our neighbour.

4. Christ calls us to serve each other in His Church

Justified by Christ, we are joined together in His Body the Church with our

fellow Christians. Those who have preceded us in the Church have, humanly speaking, provided the outward situation for our coming to faith and growth in faith, knowledge and service. So it is out of responsibility, not only to Christ the Head but also to our fellow members, that we have the duty to serve, edify and strengthen the Church on earth, helping to motivate the others in faith and love.66 “So then”, as Paul admonished the Galatians, “as we have opportunity, let us do good to all men, and especially to those who are of the household of faith” (6:10).

66. Schlatter, pp. 31, 34, 60f., 65.