

*How, if at all, is the moral teaching of the Bible authoritative for our living the Christian life today?*

1. The authority of the Bible for Christian existence is not global and unrestricted, an authority with respect to anything and everything, but rather focal and restricted, an authority with respect to but one thing: what Christians think and speak of as human salvation, or, as we may say in somewhat more formal terms, human authenticity, the realization of human existence as it is meant to be, as distinct from the contrary mode of inauthentic existence.

2. The reason the Bible's authority is thus focal and restricted is that the question to which it is addressed, both as such and as properly used by the church, is not any and every question, but only one question: "the existential question," in the sense of the absolutely vital question that we as human beings generally seem engaged in somehow asking and answering about the meaning of our existence as parts, together with others, of the encompassing whole of reality itself.

3. Because it is this existential question that the Bible itself addresses and that the church properly uses it to address, its authority extends to its answer to this question and to whatever this answer, in turn, necessarily presupposes and implies—but to nothing else.

4. What is authoritative in the Bible, then, for Christian existence generally as well as Christian morality in particular, is only the self-understanding, or understanding of our existence in relation to others in the whole that the Bible expresses, together with all of the necessary presuppositions of this understanding and its necessary implications for action as well as belief.

5. But necessary presuppositions are one thing, assumptions, something else. And this means that the authority of the Bible in no way extends to the various assumptions perforce made by those to whom we owe its writings when they formulated its answer to the existential question in their particular times and places; on the contrary, all such assumptions, along with the conceptualities and terminologies in which they were formulated, ever remain subject to critical appropriation by reference to the understanding of human existence for whose explication in certain particular situations they were merely that: assumptions.

6. More than that, necessary implications are likewise to be distinguished from consequences, and so even the consequences that are drawn in the Bible for Christian action as well as Christian belief depend for their authority entirely upon the self-understanding, or understanding of

existence, that the Bible seeks to express as *the* answer—the true and decisive answer—to our existential question about the meaning of our existence as human beings.

7. To whatever extent these consequences are indeed necessarily implied by the existential understanding expressed by the Bible, they too are authoritative for Christian existence today, including Christian morality today; but insofar as they are due simply to assumptions made in the situations in and for which this understanding was explicated in the past, they no longer have any binding authority for us in the present, beyond whatever contribution they may make to our working out for ourselves the necessary implications of a Christian self-understanding for action as well as belief in our more or less different situation today.

8. So far as Christian morality in particular is concerned, what is authoritative in the Bible's teachings with respect to specific moral actions, as distinct from its teaching concerning general moral principles, is not their "*what*" but their "*that*"; i.e., what these teachings rightly demand of us today is not that we do what they specifically prescribe, but that we seek to determine what the same general moral principles of which they were but specifications in *their* situations now require of us in *our* situation here and now—and that we *do* it, always remembering that faith is not Christian faith unless and until it is enacted in love, and that love is not Christian love unless and until it becomes incarnate in specific words and deeds of justice.

It is by way of these eight theses that I would hope to answer the question posed at the beginning. To answer it at all adequately, I have suggested, one must distinguish within the moral teaching of the Bible between its teaching concerning general moral principles and its teachings with respect to specific moral actions. Insofar, then, as its more general moral teaching is, in fact, necessarily implied by the understanding of human existence that it exists to express, it is as authoritative for our living the Christian life today as it has always been and always will be for any and all who attempt to live the Christian life. In the case of its other teachings with respect to specific moral actions, however, they are authoritative for our attempts to live the Christian life today only indirectly, insofar as they admonish us to do, not what they specifically require, but what they, in their times and places, were attempts to do—namely, to make the love without which faith is not Christian faith sufficiently specific and concrete to do the justice without which love is not Christian love.

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