

The Concept of the *Summum Bonum* according to Christian Ethics

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I. THE SUMMUM BONUM

II. SIN AND SALVATION

III. THE NEW MAN AND THE OLD MAN

IV. HEAVEN

I

God is the highest good. He is to those who trust in him the *summum bonum*. This is the presupposition of the Christian ethic. It is a presupposition made by faith. The Jesus who is God and through whom we come to God said, "There is none good but one, that is, God," (Mt 19:17). Dr. Luther asked a basic question and provided an answer in the Large Catechism: "What is it to have a god, or what is God? Answer: A god is that to which we look for all good..."¹

What is good? When spoken of God it is many things. From the many kinds of good that God is emerge two especially distinct pictures to the failing eyes of our human reason in the clear revelation of the Scriptures. God is good means first to us that he is perfect, holy, just, righteous, hating and punishing everything that is not perfect. This is God's righteous goodness. God jealously guards this goodness and carries out this righteousness through his many other attributes: his eternity, his unchangeableness, his omnipotence, his omniscience, and his omnipresence.

There is another picture of God's ethical goodness that we see drawn on the pages of the Bible. It is God's grace. We would call it God's *love* if the Scripture itself did not always speak of it in much more descriptive words than our English *love*. God's gracious goodness is revealed in his mercy, his loving kindness, his longsuffering, his tender mercy, his benevolence, and his faithfulness. Through all the same divine attributes God demonstrates his gracious goodness.

There is no conflict between God's righteous goodness and his gracious goodness. Ideally there is no difference between them. Both his perfection and his love are God's goodness. Both as one goodness are the *summum bonum* of the believer. God's goodness is more than a goal or an overseeing principle in the Christian's ethic. For God not only has righteousness and mercy, he not only executes righteousness and mercy upon man: "If your Father which is in heaven is perfect," (Mt 5:48); and, "God is love," (1 Jn 4:8).

We are not speaking only of how sinful man views God from two different sides in the Law and the Gospel. God was the highest good in righteousness and in grace *before* man sinned. God's creation of the world displayed both pictures of his goodness in harmony. "God saw everything that he had made, and, behold, it was very good," (Gen. 1:31). God showed in creation before the Fall that he is the highest good. His righteousness was reflected in the absolute perfection of everything he made; there were no flaws, no conflicting laws. His mercy can be seen in the harmony of things and even of the non-rational beings that he created.

But the unity of the righteousness and mercy in God in creation finds its best witness in the creation of man. Man was created in the image of God. God's image in man is perfection and knowledge. In one being, man, God bestowed his goodness: his righteousness in man's moral perfection; and his mercy and grace in man's absolute happiness in knowledge of the Creator and his will. Adam and Eve, as well as all creation, knew God before the Fall as the *summum bonum*.

God is still the highest good. This is true for all of his creatures and will remain so with our without their acknowledgment or assent. The unique feature of the Christian ethic is that it accepts God unconditionally as the highest good. Thus our ethical system is one of a kind because it is the one which does not deny, qualify, or misrepresent God's righteous and gracious goodness. And what makes Christian ethics unique makes the doctrine of the evangelical Lutheran Church uniquely Christian.

We have nothing in common with those who identify their good as being apart from and above God. This is the doctrine of humanism. Even the subtle humanism of Tillich is undisguised when he admits he cares little whether the "ultimate" is found within man or beyond man.

Often we are far removed even from those who use our happy name of Christian in common. The situationalist Fletcher—for all his insistence that God is love—is not really making God his highest good when he says, "Nothing is intrinsically good, but the highest good, the *summum bonum*, the end of all ends—love."² Fletcher thus places his highest good above the God with whom we identify our highest good. Fletcher's applications of his ethics show that he has separated God's righteous goodness from his gracious goodness. We also have difficulty identifying with Christian moralists, legalists, and fundamentalists. Their approach to ethics separates and isolates God's righteous good from his gracious good. They seek for God's precepts either in conscience, intuition, reason, or in the Scripture to attain his righteous good. But for sinful man to seek God's righteous good apart from his gracious good is as futile as looking for God's grace when we have rejected his righteousness.

II

Every ethical system not Christian can be criticized on the basis of its view of the Christian presupposition. Either a non-Christian ethic will reject God's goodness outright (antinomianism), or it will try to separate the two pictures of God's goodness and seek one to the exclusion of the other (situationalism, legalism).

In a way this should not surprise us. The first temptation of man was formulated in terms of either rejecting the goodness of God or separating the two aspects of his goodness. The rationale of the devil's line to Eve was that God's righteousness is not reconcilable with his grace. God's righteous will that she not eat of the tree should not be thought of as agreeing with God's grace with sought her full happiness. And Eve bit.

Thus man's first sin was to believe that God had acted "righteously" but not "graciously." That was unbelief. Adam and Eve found out that you cannot have one without the other. When they sinned they lost not only the image of God's righteousness; their perfect knowledge and happiness in him was also gone.

The curse of sin on mankind is that man is condemned (because of and in line with the thinking of his first sin) to think that God's righteousness *is* something different from his mercy. The irony of the curse is that without the good grace of God no man can attain again to the good righteousness of God.

It is man's failure to accept this reality of sin and to understand its nature that has put all merely human ethical concepts out of line with the Christian ethic. Roger Mehl properly understands this shortcoming of Thomas Aquinas' theology and ethics when he writes: "Thomas did not see sin as a problem."³ For Thomas and for too many others the end justifies the means even when the end could not be reconciled with God's gracious purpose, nor the means with God righteous will. Although he sat right in the middle of the strongest Christian witnesses, Thomas did not teach that justification can come only from the highest good of our theology and ethic. Real justification, justification in the Pauline sense of the word, comes only when God's righteousness and his grace are one.

Sin separates God's righteousness and his grace. So sin is a problem. When pressed to its extreme the *opinio legis* drives one to despair. Surely Nietzsche's vehement disavowal of Christianity grew out of the frank suggestion of his own conscience that he could not find salvation in himself. Already while under the banner of Christendom he had really rejected God as his *summum bonum*. At last there was no place to go.

Some draw so close to the heart of the Christian ethic and yet remain ever so far from it. For all its clarity of presentation and for all its preference for the witness of Scripture, Norman Geisler's ethics do not fully assume the presupposition of Christian ethics. We cannot doubt that he accepts God as the *summum bonum*. Yet his failure too is that he does not understand the nature of sin. His distortions of the doctrines of original sin, the loss of the image of God, and the total depravity of man are open examples. Geisler sees both the righteousness and the mercy in the goodness of God, but he never gets around to putting them together. His persistent refusal to fully admit the nature and the seriousness of his sin forces the two pictures of God's goodness to remain apart. He is only appealing to God's righteousness and not his grace when he writes, "Fallen men are not totally deprived of all good in their nature. In view of such a conditional and incomplete confession Geisler's speech about God's forgiveness and love sounds like a hollow appeal.

Righteousness cannot be found again in the eyes of God by sinful man apart from God's own mercy. And God's mercy cannot be found apart from his own righteousness. Every Christian knows where they are found together. In the Gospel of Jesus Christ we have God's announcement that in Christ his (God's) righteousness and grace are united. "No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him," (John 1:18). Jesus is God's real, living, visible proof that he is good. Jesus is Immanuel. He is God's goodness come to us.

Without Jesus Christ no sinner can attain to the good which God is. Unless he has received God's grace in Jesus no man can be truly righteous. Except for the righteousness of God in Christ all talk about God's love and grace is empty. Such love, like Fletcher's, has nothing to give; it imputes, conveys and imparts nothing. And so it is nothing because it bears no relationship to God righteousness.

God forgives us all our sins. But this loving action of God does not offend the righteousness of God. To the contrary, God's gracious good devised a way by which he could satisfy his righteous good in forgiving sinful man. God did this in Jesus Christ. God imputes to us the righteousness that Christ fulfilled in our place under God's law. God's righteous will that the right be done was satisfied in Christ's innocent life. His will that the wrong be punished was satisfied in Christ's holy suffering and death.

Here, in Christ, is the presupposition of the Christian ethic borne out. This is why the Christian ethic is so different. It is not the reaching out for a goal, but the acceptance by faith that our Goal has found us. Not the seeking after a mortal morality, Christian ethics is based on having been sought and found by a good God who gives us immortality. Our ethic is not founded on what we do, hoping that we will find in our actions an intrinsic or extrinsic value. We already know that a value judgment has been made in regard to all that we have done. It comes short of the glory of God.

We have not as others devised our ethical system to justify what we are doing. That's just backwards. Our whole ethic depends upon our having been justified apart from our works. That's Christian ethics, Lutheran ethics. "For Luther ethics found its basis in justification. The latter determines ethics in the sense that it is the presupposition of ethics (Vorzeichnes, according to the expression of Paul Althaus) and the source of ethics. The term 'source' should be taken in a concrete way: the ethical life flows from justification, to the point that

the category of duty and obligation ceases to be basic and the whole ethical life is lived unto the sign of spontaneity.”⁴

III

While a Christian’s mind knows that justification always comes before sanctification, his heart knows they take place simultaneously. Since the Christian defines ethical good from the top down instead of from the bottom up, it is the motive that makes his deed good. Justification is every believer’s “spontaneous” motive. Those who are ἐν χριστῷ draw from the vine to produce good fruit. Our whole life becomes an expression of gratefulness: “O give thanks unto the Lord; for he is good: for his mercy endureth forever,” (Psalm 136:1).

Thus the goodness of God is not at an end in justification. The righteous and gracious good of God assigns a new value to our actions. What we do still has not reached the heights of perfection. It won’t until we see God even as we are seen. But—and this is the clincher—the basis for determining ethical good in the Christian system is not the law. The basis is our *summum bonum*: God! His own righteousness that we can claim only in the name of Jesus is the basis on which God graciously accepts what is good in our imperfect actions.

Sanctification is the work of the Holy Spirit. He created a new man in us who wants to do God’s will. What the new man does pleases God because it is at the same time intrinsically good and extrinsically good. The new man’s works are intrinsically good because they proceed from a pure motive and are carried out in line with God’s righteous will. Our catechism puts the matter much more simply when it says that a good work must be done by a believer according to the Ten Commandments.

Extrinsically our good works please God because they serve to execute God’s good purposes in the world about us. Although we may doubt the intrinsic value of our good works because of their immediate consequences, we cannot question that there will be no conflict between God’s righteous moral will for our lives and his gracious saving will for all mankind. We who have witnessed through the Gospel the harmony between God’s righteousness and his grace in Christ will know that this goodness of his will also work through the deeds we do in Christ’s name. Again, the catechism reminds us that our good works glorify God and benefit our fellowman.

There is also an old man. He is not wanted in the Christian heart. He is constantly warred against. But to deny his presence, to underestimate his power, or to pretend that he is conquered renders any ethical system merely an unworkable ideal. The old adam views God’s righteousness with the same reaction that Adam and Eve had: fear. They were ashamed and confused. They hid and were afraid to talk to God because all they saw was the frightful aspect of God’s righteousness separated from his mercy. No longer holy themselves, they saw that the other side of holy is hating and punishing the unholy.

The constant presence of the old man in us keeps the restoration of the knowledge of the new man about the will of God from being ‘perfect. That is why God found it necessary to reveal his righteous will in the written law of the Holy Scripture. The Christian as a saint is not judged by this law, is not bound by this law, cannot find salvation through this law, and cannot be perfected by this law. Yet the sanctified Christian needs it. His old man needs its specific delineations of sins, its threats against the transgressor, and its predictions of punishment for those who die without attaining its righteousness. The whole Christian man, since his knowledge of God’s righteous will is imperfect, needs the law’s instruction to walk pleasing to God. We keep in mind though that while the believer searches this written law for *instruction* to perform what is good, he always finds his *motive* for doing what is good in God’s mercy, and will know that the *value* of his actions in the eyes of God will be accounted for the imputed righteousness of Christ.

For reasons mentioned the Christian has a very high regard for the written law of God in the Scripture. But when the Christian’s adherence to the law and his respect for it are taken out of the context of the presupposition of his ethic, it is misunderstood. Those who see the believer performing the righteous will of God but do not look to see that God’s gracious will provides the motive and value for his actions will damn him as a legalist, blind absolutist, or an unfeeling moralist. Seldom do our critics fairly take into account the righteous-gracious good we hold to be our *Summum bonum*.

What’s worse is that so many of our own Christian ethicists⁵ confuse the issue by not properly subjecting the purpose of the law to the principle of our *summum bonum*. Instead of displaying our unique presupposition from the beginning, they justify their systems by referring to philosophical systems, or by picturing the Christian ethic as the “best of everything,”⁶ or by thinking of the Christian ethic as a superior evolution of man’s moral practices.

God has specific norms in his ethic. But his norms in the revealed law of Scripture do not norm the ethic. The norms are normed by the ethic. These norms are the moral law in the Bible. If the world was perfect this moral law itself would be our ethic, and we would all be, according to Norman Geisler’s definition, non-conflicting absolutists.

The world is not perfect. If only the Christians were perfect, they at least could find it easier to be non-conflicting absolutists. Yet as there is a conflict between the Christian and the world, there is always a warring within him against that which is still worldly. Because we have always our old adam to contend with, there will be conflicts when we try to apply God’s revealed will to our moral actions. The non-conflicting absolutist is right when he says the real conflict has to do with the sinfulness of man and not with any real conflict in God’s righteous will. Yet this observation, true as it is, leaves us with the ideal and not the real. We must make real

moral decisions daily. Those decisions are more frustrated than helped by being told that if we weren't sinful, there wouldn't be any decision to make.

What is real is served by remembering that God wrote down his commandments in the first place because there was sin. Since sin, the old man has needed educating. In his Word God offers guidelines by which the new man may know and do what is good in the face of the ignorance of the old man. Simple, sincere, intense study of the law by which we educate our as yet imperfect selves is the most direct way by which a Christian will try to resolve the conflicts which appear in his moral decision making.

If we find in an honest study of the revealed law that we cannot resolve our conflict, we must then appeal to love. This is not to say that our search in God's law had no connection to love. Jesus said, "If ye love me, keep my commandments." (John 14:15). In fact the difference between the Christian and the love ethicist is that the Christian sees God's love in the written law. The Christian knows that all of God's revealed will is consistent with his love. When the believer now looks to love to resolve his conflicts, it is not with the intent of contradicting some part of it in the name of love. It is for the sake of expanding and interpreting in the context of God's love what he has not specifically revealed to direct our actions.

Love will allow us and even encourage us to use our human reason in situations in which God has not revealed exact directions. Thus Schuetze and Habeck write for the practical pastor: "In searching for the best solution to the problem, the counselee may examine what solutions are open to him, considering the consequences of each. The options must be evaluated in the light of Scripture, to dissuade the counselee against following anything that is inherently sinful."⁷

So human reason will serve love, and love, if we do not forget our presupposition, will be in complete harmony with the law. Love will never be practiced apart from the revealed will of God in the Bible. For to do that is sinful just as it was sinful for Eve to believe that it was alright for her to override God's righteous will by seeking what she had decided was his loving will for her. Love is practiced as a *motive* in every good work. It is practiced as a *norm* only when the believer lacks specific directive according to God's revealed will to act without conflict.

Love will never result in offense or in legalism. Even when conflict leads us to resolve our moral dilemma with love as a norm, we will not act to the detriment of the faith of another. On the other hand we do not want to bind the consciences of others to what love as a norm has dictated to us in a particular circumstance.

We have spoken of intrinsic and extrinsic good in regard to the moral actions of the new man. We also see intrinsic and extrinsic value in actions of the old man. To distinguish this latter evaluation from the former, we must think of this latter as being imperfect. To place a value on the actions of the old man means to look at their worth without the presupposition of faith that God is the highest good. It means considering such actions only as they correspond imperfectly with the righteous will of God; for they have no connection with God's gracious, saving goodness.

Moral actions performed in accordance with God's revealed laws have an intrinsic good in that they conform to his righteous will. Believers and unbelievers may perform such intrinsically good works according to the old man. These intrinsically good works are not accepted as good by God on the same basis as those produced by the new man of the Christian. They are not motivated by God's goodness. They are not the soul's response to his imputed righteousness. They are acknowledged by God as profitable and rewarded only on this earth because they bear a faint resemblance to his revealed righteous will in the Bible and conscience.

We may also think of these works as being extrinsically good. Those who follow God's law on this earth, even for the wrong motives, find value in their actions. As was mentioned, they have their reward. They avoid punishment, appease their consciences, earn the praise of their fellow men, and make this world a peaceful and orderly place for all to live.

IV

God is the highest good. Man created in the image of God separated the goodness of God by distinguishing between the righteousness of God and the grace of God. God restored the image of his righteousness in us by his grace, reconciling the world unto himself by announcing to sinful man that in Christ his righteous and gracious wills were reconcilable. The Christian ethical life is the expression of joy. We speak of God's goodness to us in our good to him and to others. Should we say then that the Christian ethic is deontological or teleological?

It is both. The believer trusts in God's grace and lives according to God's righteous will. It is because we hold God to be our highest good that our ethics are deontological. How can we doubt that "all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose," (Romans 8:28)? We do not however follow a blind deontology. Because we already know what good God has done for us, we do not doubt that what God asks us to do is good. Even when the immediate results of our actions appear to cause harm to ourselves or to others, what real harm can come from the God who united perfection with love in Christ? God's love for us is what makes our work for him necessary, "The love of Christ constraineth us..." (2 Co 5:14). The immediate results of our actions may often contradict our deontology. The earthly effects of our proper actions cannot negate our deontology until the faith in our presupposition itself has been eroded.

The whole Christian life also has a teleological significance. The goal is heaven. "Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing," (2 Ti 4:8). The practical teleological significance of this promise relates directly to the Christian's actions. While the immediate results of our good works may seem

to contradict the deontological aspect of our ethic, the hope of the crown of life is the real and final goal. Thus many things which we justify for seeming deontological reasons also have their explanation in our teleology. We are encouraged in our good works by a love which views all of a loving God's commands as being just. But we are also urged, "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life," (Rev. 2:10).

Heaven gives the Christian ethic teleological significance not in that its coming justifies our actions. Nor is it an earned reward of actions. The good God who has been good to us in Christ promised us that the full restoration of his image in us will be completed there. Heaven is a goal that God has promised and given as a part of his goodness. It is a part of that for which we give thanks in our good works.

Pieper quotes from Gerhard's *Loci*: "Because the blessed know God, the highest good, intuitively and perfectly, they also adhere inseparably to this highest Good, perfectly known, through the holy action of their will, and for that reason there will be expelled from their mind every mist of ignorance and from their will every proclivity toward evil... Just as the angels, because they always behold the face of the Father which is in heaven (Matt. 18:10), and are confirmed in the good and freed from the danger of sinning, so the blessed will be perfectly holy and confirmed in the good through and because of the beatific vision of God."⁸

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ENDNOTES:

- 1 Quoted in *Christian Ethics*, Beach and Niebuhr, Eds, pp. 244-245.
- 2 *Situational Ethics*, p. 129.
- 3 *Catholic Ethics and Protestant Ethics*, p. 29.
- 4 Roger Mehl, op. cit., p. 19.
- 5 E.g: Tillich, Fletcher, Geisler
- 6 Norman Geisler, *Ethics: Alternative and Issues*, p. 133.
- 7 *The Shepherd under Christ*, p. 204.
- 8 *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. III, p. 551.