

PREFACE TO THE GERMAN EDITION

THE question, "What ought we to do?" the great question of humanity, is the entrance to the Christian Faith; none can evade it who wish to enter the sanctuary. But it is also the gate through which one passes out of the sanctuary again, back into life; but in spite of the fact that the question—so far as the actual language is concerned—is unaltered, it has gained new meaning. No magic transformation has taken place within the sanctuary of faith; the human being who passes through those portals, both on his way in and on his way out, is the same human being: erring, imperfect, weak. But something has happened to him within the sanctuary, which, although it has taken place in secret and is only partially visible to the eyes of the world, has made him a different person, something which has opened his eyes and his heart to a reality which he never knew before: the reality of the living God. There he stands—as one who has been touched by God, whose heart has been pierced by Him, as one who has come under the stern judgment of God and has tasted the Divine mercy, as one who can never seek the meaning of his life and the answer to that great human question anywhere else save "there"—there he stands, this weak human being, in the midst of life, among other people; but because he comes "from thence," he now has another "position" in this world, and it is *this* which makes him a Christian. What this means for the answering of that question constitutes the subject-matter of Christian Ethics.

We have heard much of a "demand for Ethics." If by this is meant that it is necessary for Christendom to be continually considering this question, and a sign of poverty and bewilderment if it can give no clear answer to it, then that "demand" is only too plainly justified; for no clear answer has been given for a long time. But this "demand" *may* be—like the cry for a "strong man"—merely an expression of shrinking from responsibility, which desires an authoritative promulgation of a law which will settle all difficulties once for all, which will lay down beforehand what everyone has to do or to leave undone in every situation—in a word: the demand for the doctrinal authority—binding on the conscience—of the Roman Catholic Church. I have called my book a "Protestant Ethic" in order that those who desire to hear *that* answer to the

“demand for Ethics,” may be saved the trouble of reading it. The infallible criterion of a Protestant ethic is this: does it claim to give *that* answer? or does it refuse to do so?

Neither the moralist, nor the theologian, nor any teacher of any kind can give the decisive answer to the decisive question of life; that is the province of another, and the reading of a book is not likely to disclose the secret. It is not the task of ethics to give the actual answer to this question; its task is simply that of careful reflection about what it might mean to receive this reply, in view of the manifold problems of practical life; thus its pronouncements are not ultimate and decisive but penultimate and preparatory. It is possible to “go on one’s way blameless” and to lead a healthy Christian life without having read this or any other work on ethics. The task of ethics, like that of theology as a whole, is rather negative than positive: to clear away the difficulties raised by our own minds which prevent us from understanding the message. However modest may be our view of our work in the light of that primary and decisive element—yet in view of this second consideration we have no right to belittle the significance of such reflection.

There are already more than enough works on *ethics*—even those bearing the name of “Evangelical” or “Protestant”—why then should we add to their number? We would reply with a counter-question: Is there really such a work on *ethics*? It may seem an audacious statement, though it would not be very difficult to prove its veracity, that since the time of the Reformation no single work on *ethics* has been produced which makes the Evangelical faith its centre. It was only in the course of my work, as I began to seek for help and counsel from others, that this amazing fact became clear to me. This discovery only intensified my sense of obligation at least to make an attempt to fill this gap. I believe that I am fully conscious of the dangers and difficulties which beset such an undertaking; hence, although my book represents the work of many years, I only venture to call it a “sketch,” of whose imperfection I am painfully aware. But I believe that in my consideration of the subject I have advanced so far at least that the work of others who are striving in the same direction, and upon whose co-operation I count, may be furthered by it.

At the present time two tasks confront a Protestant theological ethic. The first and the most important is a fresh consideration of the bases and fundamental conceptions of an evangelical doctrine of right conduct. To-day the struggle

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is being waged round these fundamental questions, which have been ignored both by the Church and by theology for centuries; to-day we are concerned with the whole, not with matters of detail. This process of reflection has begun with vigour and I am glad to admit that in it I have learned much that is important from many people, especially from my friends Karl Barth and Friedrich Gogarten. The fact, however, that I believe that my work can carry the process a step further in this direction is connected with my own view of the second task confronting the Church: that clarity concerning the bases of ethics is itself dependent upon thinking through the concrete problems of particular spheres of life. On this side, however, those who really know something about the bases of ethics have hitherto not done very much, so that the obstinate prejudice has persisted, that nothing at all has been done in the realm of ethics. The knowledge of the bases must be proved by the fact that it will shed some clear light upon the definite problems of practical life. It is only to be expected that my attempt, in which both tasks have been kept in view at the same time, will be regarded as insufficient from both points of view; some will think it premature to go beyond questions of principle, others will think it superfluous to spend so much time on such questions and will regard the treatment of particular questions as superficial. The former hesitation troubles me far more than the latter: indeed, from the outset I accept the reproach as justified: the fundamental work is far from complete. At the same time, I am convinced that even in this realm we shall not make progress if we fail to attempt the second task. So far as the second misgiving is concerned the study of the history of ethics has taught me that every ethic deals with a selection; I would be glad if the reader would regard all my discussion of questions of detail merely as "illustrative."

Owing to the subject-matter of ethics, the moralist is necessarily constantly touching on subjects in which the theologian—like the philosopher—is not a specialist, and thus everywhere there lurks the peril of dilettantism. To try to avoid this pitfall, however, would lead to such unnatural isolation, that from the very outset the moralist's work would be unfruitful. Whether I have succeeded in escaping this danger without renouncing contact with "the other faculties" the reader must decide. I do not cherish the ambition of being at home in all these sciences, but I have felt the responsibility

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of trying to survey those spheres which contain ethical problems as fully as possible. It is of course self-evident that here in particular I am especially conscious of the imperfection of my attempt.

The considerable addition of notes and supplementary material to the text of this work arose out of a similar need. Its purpose is not scholarly—my relation to real scholarship will probably remain all my life that of an unfortunate lover—but its aim is this: to maintain converse with men—past and present—who have thought about these questions already, and to permit the reader to take part in this interchange of thought. Therefore the choice of that which is said or left unsaid is more or less accidental, depending on the direction of my interest at any particular time. In spite of this, I venture to hope that the reader will also find this part of my work of service to him.

In conclusion it is my pleasant duty to offer my cordial thanks for their unselfish co-operation to all the many people who, directly or indirectly, have helped in the making of this book: to my colleagues both within and outside of the Theological Faculty; men and women in practical life; especially to the Rev. G. Spörri in Aarau, who gave me much valuable counsel while I was engaged in correcting the proofs of this work; for the index and for much patience, to my dear wife.

E. B.

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