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## Response to Comments

T. VAIL PALMER, JR.

In the discussion of this paper at Powell House, one of the sharpest points was made by Chris Downing. She accused me of "playing a game" in my biblical interpretation. Since the biblical materials are so diverse that any attempt to bring coherent order out of them involves some sort of interpretive game, she challenged all attempts to ground ethics on a biblical starting-point.

I accept the truth of the charge. But the problem is far deeper than even Chris Downing suggested. Not only in biblical interpretation, but also in the whole realm of theological, ethical, and metaphysical speculation, there simply are *no* universally agreed-on starting-points available. We have only two options: to join the logical positivists in declaring all theology, ethics, and metaphysics to be nonsense; or to choose some interpretive position as a starting-point and to play the game of developing it into a model or theory, with all the boldness of which our imagination is capable and with all the tentativeness required by the recognition of our own human fallibility. This game-playing is, of course, part of the quest for truth. We not only construct models; we also engage in dialogue, testing one another's models by all of the many criteria which can be summarized as the tests of coherence and adequacy.

Building on the assumption that the early Quakers were on the right track, at least in matters of theology and ethics, I have questioned both the internal coherence of modern situation ethics and its adequacy to that assumption. In the process, it has become clear that I am operating within a model of biblical ethics which uses certain themes from Deuteronomy and Matthew as keys to my interpretation and within an under-

standing of the early Quakers as very close in their intention to the Anabaptists.

Canby Jones makes it clear that he is working within a model of Christian ethics which is much like my own "Matthean-Anabaptist-Quaker" approach. He adds, from the depths of his rich devotional life, an emphasis from the Psalms which I often tend to overlook. Critical dialogue, then, will have to wait until we see whether our similar theories bring us out at the same point in terms of concrete application and decision-making.

In contrast, Hugh Barbour is arguing for an ethics of context and response, rooted in a "Pauline-Lutheran-Quaker" model. In the process, he makes some points that I would also have emphasized in a fuller exposition of my own position: Christian ethics is, in the first instance, an ethics of grateful response to God's initiative, action, and grace. The mighty acts of God and the covenant *do* form the central context for our action; in Paul Pfuete's words, the testimonies are both *to* and *from* Christ; I hope this was implied in my affirmation of "the second sense of Lehmann's contextualism."

I believe Hugh Barbour has misunderstood me on a couple of points. I did not set the Decalogue over against love; I was arguing that the dimension of regularity provided by the Ten Commandments was part of the *definition* of covenant-love! When I gave my exposition of Kant's ethics in a discussion with Hugh Barbour and Isamu Nagami, it was not for the purpose of showing the basis for my own ethics, but rather was intended simply to clarify the difference between the form of action and the goal of action as a locus for ethical standards. Thus my "mixed ethics" is not a break-away from a primarily formal, Kantian ethics. It is the other way around: an ethics derived from the acts of God and the covenant has something to say about motives, about the goals of action, *and* about the form of action.

Hugh Barbour does not make it clear why he would prefer that I went the whole way with the Pharisees (and Kant) into a purely formal ethics of rules. Such an ethic might be logically neater than a "mixed" ethics, but it would surely be far

less adequate to the realities of life in the covenant-community and to the richness of human personality.

Hugh Barbour rightly demands clarification of the relationship between the positive and negative principles in my ethics. This problem is also implied in Paul Pfuetze's opening paragraph: How do freedom and order, spontaneity and structure, continuity and change sort themselves out in actual Christian practice? The underlying positive principle is to be like God — in his mighty acts! In these acts he first freed a people from slavery, and then himself took "the form of a servant." This principle comes first; but the principle is incomplete. A great mighty act of God is yet to come. The biblical visions of the City of God afford the church a glimpse into the nature of the divine-human community which is God's goal for our life, to which our gaze is directed and to which, in part, the church's own life is already to conform. Yet the goal finally comes by God's action rather than by men's. From our standpoint, the route to the goal is obscure and broken. What we do have is the context of the covenant community, within which we seek and on occasion discover new applications of the basic principle of servant-love. In mutual dialogue, as we responsibly face the problems of the world, Christians discern new ways of responding to God's grace and the needs of the neighbor. But our leadings need to be checked. Not every new discovery is true or right. The words which the covenant community understood as given to it when "The LORD spoke with you face to face at the mountain" (Deut. 5:4), and when he again "dwelt among us, full of grace and truth" (John 1:14), and when again he had "come to teach his people himself" (George Fox, *Journal*, p. 107), provide a few basic guidelines, which enable us to rule out some apparent "discoveries" as the work of "another Spirit" who is also trying to gain the ear of the church. Passing these guidelines is, of course, only a necessary and not a sufficient test of the rightness of any action.

My ultimate question to Hugh Barbour is this: Is he not attempting to give us a Lutheran ethic under cover of Quakerism? As I read him, I keep asking, "Where do the testimonies come in? Can we really have a Quaker ethics that does not

affirm the testimonies as central?" The final implication of his position is, indeed, that "we must live without an ethic." That is just the problem.

It is not quite so clear what sort of ethical "game" Paul Pfuetze is trying to play. His emphasis on Quakerism as primarily a method for decision-making, his appeal to Brunner, H. Richard Niebuhr, and Buber, and his insistence that "certain things" are indeed ruled out, do not at first sight add up to a clear ethical model. I suspect that he is primarily attempting an internal critique of the coherence of my own interpretation of Quaker ethics.

I am not sure why Paul Pfuetze sees a problem in the relationship between the early Quaker tradition and "present day conservative legalistic Friends." My point in emphasizing the testimonies is precisely to provide a firm basis for *disowning* (!) such positions as racism, betrayal of the peace testimony, economic exploitation, and the acceptance of "built-in institutional covert violence." Surely these are the real adversary in our midst — even in ourselves. In contrast, however much I disagree with Hugh Barbour's contextualism or Paul Pfuetze's apparent over-emphasis on Quakerism as a sheer ethical method, our disagreements are at worst family quarrels within a mutual quest for renewal and reconstruction of our vision.

I did grant that Fox made an exception to his rule against smoking. All this proves is that early Friends had no inflexible rule against smoking. The fact that one "rule" was flexible and hence not a rule, does *not* logically imply that all the testimonies were flexible non-rules. Although I would emphasize the core-principles in the Quaker testimonies, rather than all of the details, I suspect that, at their best even in our day, they are not "merely eccentric" manners. Perhaps William Bacon Evans did preach on "foolishness, foppery and finery" nearly every time my wife wore her red coat to Meeting, but the twinkle never left his eye; he spoke out of the depths of love, not out of crotchiness or eccentricity!

I agree that much traditional Christian theology has centered around the two poles of creation and redemption. But I believe contemporary biblical scholarship has thrown this view

into question. It had necessarily involved the assumption that Genesis is the center and key to the Old Testament. But the evidence has become much clearer that Old Testament thought takes Exodus as its center and starting-point. The book of Genesis is simply an attempt to "read back" such Exodus themes as the mighty acts of God and the covenant into a sort of pre-history of Israel. Clearly, the escape from Egypt was an act of divine redemption, not primarily an act of creation. Thus the Exodus and the Christ-event, the two poles of biblical theology, were *both* acts of redemption. The theme of creation is secondary, derived from the ideas of redemption and of the covenant. The creation-redemption polarity can probably only be made central to Christian theology by sacrificing the biblical emphasis on the covenant.