Deeds and Rules in Quaker Ethics

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Quakerism and Situation Ethics

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Traditionally, Christian morality has been a morality of rules, based on such codes as the Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount: You shall not make for yourself a graven image; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; do not resist one who is evil; judge not.

Recently an increasing dissatisfaction with this traditional emphasis has developed. Many Christians are saying that our ethical judgments should center on concrete deeds, rather than on abstract general rules. This newer temper has been labeled "situation ethics," "contextual ethics," or simply "the new morality."

The best known exponents of this new approach are Paul Lehmann and Joseph Fletcher. An outstanding application of situation ethics is found in the pamphlet, Towards a Quaker View of Sex. The situationists have developed their views out of some striking insights suggested in the 1930's and 1940's by theologians Emil Brunner and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. And in one sense, the new morality is not so new at all, as it draws inspiration from the dictum of St. Augustine: "Love God, and do what you want."

Since the situational thinkers vary in their precise definitions of situation ethics, we should examine their views respectively. Beginning with Emil Brunner, we note his insistence that Christian ethics is obedience to God's will; but "the will of God is absolutely free." "Therefore we can never know beforehand what God will require. God's command can only be perceived at the actual moment of hearing it." The attempt to know in advance what we should do is legalism, the chief adversary of true Christian ethics.

For Joseph Fletcher, situation ethics is one of three possible approaches to making moral decisions. Legalism bases morality on rules and laws. Antinomianism denies the relevance of any principles whatever. Situation ethics bases everything on one principle — love or agape — and rejects all other principles and rules. In effect, he includes the broad philosophical tradition of "teleological ethics" within the situationist camp. Aristotle's ethics of self-realization, for instance, is classified as a variety of "non-Christian situation ethics." Yet Fletcher also insists that situation ethics is based on certain presuppositions: It is pragmatic — "the good is what works"; it is relativistic — right and wrong vary from situation to situation; it is positivistic — based on a faith-commitment, not on reason; and it is personalistic — putting people at the center. Once he pins matters down: "Right and wrong depend upon the situation." The Christian motive is always love; but each case must be studied separately, in order to determine what is the loving action in the particular situation.

Paul Lehmann prefers the term "contextual" ethics. Ethical decisions have to be made in the complex, concrete contexts of human relationships. "Ethics is a matter not of logic but of life.... Ethics is concerned to expose and explicate the human reality of the concrete." This is especially true of Christian ethics: "The fact that God became incarnate in Jesus Christ... requires of Christian ethics that the diverse relationships in which men find themselves be taken seriously as bearers of ethical reality and significance." The fullest possible knowledge of all human factors in any situation is indispensable to making a responsible ethical decision. But knowledge of the situation is not the only factor in ethical decision-making: "Ethical decisions, as Christians try to make them, are behavioral acts which exhibit the connection between what God is doing in the world and the diverse and complex circumstances, motivations, purposes, and interrelations which are the 'stuff' of concrete human situations." And what is God doing? "What God is doing in the world is setting up and carrying out the conditions for what it takes to keep human life human." In order to discern both the concreteness of each
human situation and just what will keep human life human, the primary quality required of us is "imaginative sensitivity."\textsuperscript{18}

Contextualism has a second meaning for Lehmann. Christian ethics is moral responsibility within the context of the Christian community or fellowship. "It is in the koinonia that one comes in sight of and finds oneself involved in what God is doing in the world."\textsuperscript{11} Ethical decision-making is not individualistic; it takes place within the Christian community.

The authors of Towards a Quaker View of Sex insist, with Fletcher and Lehmann, that "Christianity is concerned with relationships... [Therefore] in so far as we love the good and know the mind of God we do not need rules and moral codes to guide our conduct."\textsuperscript{19} In particular, there are no clear-cut rules for sexual behavior, "precisely because we are dealing with human relationships at their deepest, the point where rules are irrelevant. But the point where rules cease to apply is also the point at which our first and greatest need is to seek the will of God."\textsuperscript{18} It is not surprising that Quakers should push directly on from this point to contextualism in Lehmann's second sense: The search for a sexual morality "implies a high standard of responsibility, thinking and awareness — something much harder than simple obedience to a moral code... The responsibility... must be responsibility within a group whose members are equally committed to the search for God's will."\textsuperscript{19}

Clearly, the main emphasis in situation ethics is the rejection of legalism, the insistence that rules or laws can never tell us what is right or wrong. Rules may be helpful as guidelines, but in many cases they will have to be discarded or broken. Affirmatively, situation ethics makes one principle central: love, or keeping human life human. The application of this principle to each particular decision will be determined by full, sensitive knowledge of the human situation in which the decision is made.

What is the advantage of situation ethics over Christian legalism or an ethics of absolutely binding rules and principles? In the first place, any list of moral rules is limited in number, but the situations to which these rules must be applied are infinitely diverse and complex; in consequence any ethics of absolute rules "pays a very heavy price for its claims. The price is abstraction from the complexity of the actual situation out of which the ethical problem arises."\textsuperscript{12} Fletcher insists that a morality of rules not only tends to understand human reality too abstractly; it even "falsifies reality situations by oversimplifying them or actually twisting the facts."\textsuperscript{18} On the other hand, where legalists are sensitive to the complexity of human relationships, they are hard pressed to find ways of applying their rules. They develop increasingly complicated and devious casuistries, piling rules on top of rules, in order to deal realistically and sensitively with all possible cases, until the body of rules and interpretations becomes so complex that only the most fully trained Jesuit or Talmudic scholar can thread his way through the intricacies of the evolved moral code.

Legalism also has problems in meeting human needs. Many people's psychological needs are ignored or crushed by a simple "thou shalt not." Putting a pattern or code of rules first can result in actual cruelty to those who are forced to fit the pattern, regardless of their own individual needs and problems. Only by making rules flexible and relative to human needs can a moralist affirm "that morals, like the Sabbath, were made for man, not man for morals."\textsuperscript{17} Furthermore, conditions change over a period of time: rules that were relevant to an earlier day remain frozen in a new age where they no longer apply. As a result, persons and societies continue to give lip service to rules which they no longer can observe in practice: "In subscribing to a moral code, some of which it no longer accepts, society merits the charge of hypocrisy and its authority is weakened."\textsuperscript{18}

Another moral weakness of legalism is that it fosters irresponsibility: it encourages people to get by with fulfilling merely the letter of the law, and feeling relieved of further responsibility. "Legalism always emphasizes order and conformity; situationism emphasizes freedom and responsibility."\textsuperscript{19}

There is also a peculiarly Quaker reason for rejecting legalism. In an ethics of rules, we know in advance what actions are right and wrong, but "for Friends, God's will for
man can never be circumscribed by any statement, however inspired.... Quakerism involves a continuous search; and because it is a genuine and not a formal search, it may lead to surprises and unexpected demands." The Quaker testimony against creeds applies to moral statements, as well as to statements about God.

Finally, any Christian ethics must take seriously the ethical insights of the New Testament. Both Jesus and Paul were fervent opponents of legalism. Jesus justified the breaking of sabbath rules with his dictum: "The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath." (Mk. 2:27) He castigated those who "tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith." (Mt. 23:23) He repeatedly dismissed some of history's most distinguished exponents of legalism with the words: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!" (Mt. 23:15 and passim) Many of Jesus' ethical pronouncements were made to individuals, in light of their own particular situations and needs, and were apparently not intended for universal or general application.

Paul's attack on legalism is even sharper. The law is a "yoke of slavery" (Gal. 5:1), from which Christ has set us free. "Now we are discharged from the law, dead to that which held us captive, so that we serve not under the old written code but in the new life of the Spirit." (Rom. 7:6) Christians are guided not by a legal code but by the Spirit: "If you are led by the Spirit you are not under the law." (Gal. 5:18) Paul's most trenchant criticism is reserved for those "Judaizing" Christians who insisted on retaining the Jewish moral law.

Is situation ethics compatible with Quaker thought and practice? Is it, indeed, the most adequate way to express Quaker ethical insights today? In dealing with these questions, this paper begins from the position that the thought and practice of the first generation of Quakers is somehow normative. The whole of Quakerism derives from the great wave of Christian renewal that took place in the days of George Fox, James Nayler, and William Penn. We cannot go back to a literal repetition or imitation of seventeenth-century Quakerism, but the insights of that generation will form the basis for any meaningful reconstruction or renewal of Quaker Christianity.

We must therefore ask: Are the thought and practice of the early Quakers compatible with, or suggestive of, situation ethics? In the second sense of Lehmann's contextualism, the answer is yes. The "gospel order," the early Quaker business practice, was a remarkable innovation in procedure, through which decisions were made in the context of the Christian community or koinonia.

But the crucial question is with the primary sense of situationism or contextualism. Did the views of Fox and his co-workers point away from absolute moral rules and toward basing ethical decisions on the facts of each particular situation? Some statements might suggest this. George Fox characteristically declared: "I was to direct people to the Spirit that gave forth the Scriptures, by which they might be led into all Truth.... These things I did not see by the help of man, nor by the letter, ... but I saw them in the light of the Lord Jesus Christ, and by his immediate Spirit and power." Fox also echoed Paul's theme of the gospel as freedom from bondage: "Therefore ye, who know... the freedom that is in Jesus Christ, stand fast in him;... and be not entangled with the yoke of bondage. For the ministry of Christ Jesus and his teaching bringeth into liberty and freedom." An example of Fox's freedom to be led by the Spirit into different actions in different situations is found in his response to John Story's invitation to smoke a pipe of tobacco: "Tobacco I did not take, but it came into my mind that the lad might think I had not unity with the creation, for I saw he had a flashy, empty notion of religion; so I took his pipe and put it to my mouth and gave it to him again to stop him." But the tobacco story is exceptional. Fox and the early Friends usually insisted vigorously on the absolute rightness or wrongness of certain forms of action. The Spirit itself leads uniformly to the rejection of certain types of behavior: "The Spirit of Christ brings us to deny all manner of ungodliness, as
lying, theft, murder, adultery, fornication." One of the clearest statements of this point is the Declaration of 1660:

The spirit of Christ, by which we are guided, is not changeable, so as once to command us from a thing as evil and again to move unto it; and we do certainly know, and so testify to the world, that the spirit of Christ, which leads us into all truth, will never move us to fight and war against any man with outward weapons...

He that hath commanded us that we shall not swear at all (Matt. 5:34), hath also commanded us that we shall not kill (Matt. 5:21), so that we can neither kill men, nor swear for nor against them. And this is both our principle and practice, and hath been from the beginning;... neither shall we ever do it, because it is contrary to the spirit of Christ.

Furthermore, the distinction between spirit and letter was not meant to rule out universal moral laws, as is shown in this passage by James Nayler:

The coming of Christ was not to make void, but to fulfil the law....

And whereas it was said in the letter, thou shalt not commit adultery, he saith, thou shalt not lust: in the letter it was said, thou shalt not swear falsely, but in the spirit, he saith, swear not at all: in the letter, thou shalt not kill, but in the spirit, thou shalt not be angry; and whosoever doth any of these things is guilty before God, and this is far from making it void, which declares it in its purity, so as they who might seem to be clear in the letter, might be found guilty in the law of the spirit.

Nor does the doctrine of the Light Within help the situationists. George Fox ringingly insisted in one of his earliest doctrinal works that the Light reveals a definite set of moral prohibitions:

He that walks in the light, there is no occasion of stumbling in him; it teacheth righteousness and holiness; it will keep thee from lying, and not let thee lye,... and never let thee Swear, it will check thee if thou doest; the Light will not let thee take God's name in vain;... and will never let thee follow Drunkenness, nor vain Company;... therefore beware, this Light will keep thee from Adultery and Whoredom, for such will God judge; and the Light will keep thee from Theft, Quarrelling and Fighting, and Abusing thy self with Mankind, and Envy.

Fox also made it clear that Christian freedom was not a freedom from rules and ordered patterns of life:

The Truth... makes them free from him that abode not in the Truth, in whom there is no Truth: So all God's Free People or Children (that are made free indeed by the Truth) are in the Order of the Truth, and in the Order of the Spirit of God, and in the Order of the Gospel, and are in the Order of the Light, the Life in Christ, and are over the foul Spirit of Disorder.

Early Quakers accepted nearly all of the moral rules of their Puritan contemporaries; the chief difference was that Friends added a few more rules, such as those against hat-honor and against swearing. The great ethical insight of the early Friends was their interpretation of certain ethical practices as direct testimonies to their faith in Christ. Thus William Penn could refer to plain language, refusal to fight, to swear, or to pay tithes, as well as Quaker marriage and burial practices, under the heading of "several particular doctrines, that did exemplify and farther explain the truth and efficacy of the general doctrine" of the Light of Christ within. The testimonies were in effect absolute moral rules, and not simply reports on the ways Friends happened to hear God's word. "Wear it as long as thou canst," was not the characteristic approach to these practices. If a Friend persisted in wearing his courtey sword or even voluntarily removed his hat before a judge, he would be lovingly but firmly labored with by the Quaker community, until he either publicly recanted or was publicly disowned.
Far from favoring situation ethics, then, early Quakerism actually widened the scope and heightened the intensity and the centrality of absolute moral rules, as being a direct witness to the reign of Christ.

Situation ethics can thus be justified as a contemporary interpretation of the Quaker witness only by showing that the original Quaker idea of an ethical testimony is no longer valid. Even then, situationism can hardly be the right alternative, for it can be shown that the situational position has serious internal weaknesses, which render it problematic, even on its own terms.

In the first place, Joseph Fletcher's division of possible ethical approaches into legalism, antinomianism, and situationism is, like most typologies, an oversimplification. Typologies can be powerful intellectual tools, when their limitations are recognized. But Fletcher vastly overstates the case when he insists that "there are at bottom only three alternative routes or approaches to follow in making moral decisions." We have already noted that he includes widely varied ethical systems under "situationism." But "legalism" also involves a great variety of approaches. In particular, "legalism" in popular usage implies an ethics in which every possible decision in life is provided for within the framework of an incredibly complex structure of rules and interpretations. But since situationism means the absence of any binding rules, "legalism" must also include ethical systems which provide a limited number of moral rules, absolutely binding in regard to certain types of behavior, but which also leave broad areas of action to be dealt with by other types of ethical principles or even by free, spontaneous decisions. Most of the arguments against legalism, used to justify situation ethics, are arguments solely or primarily against legalism in the first sense, and leave open the possibility of a "mixed" ethics in which rules and other types of ethical principles (regarding goals or motives, for instance) both play essential roles. Such mixed systems or "limited" legalisms could avoid abstraction from reality and complex casuistry as well as could situationism.

The situationist attack on legalism is particularly vulnerable when it appeals to the examples of Jesus and Paul. Form criticism has demonstrated that many of the "situations" within which gospel sayings are placed are simply bits of editorial framework provided by the gospel writers, in order to connect sayings and stories that had circulated independently in the oral tradition. The original "situations" in which Jesus pronounced many of his sayings are unknown. Moreover, a comparison of Jesus' woes against the Pharisees in Matthew with parallel material in Luke shows that the striking invective, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!" was composed by "Matthew." Indeed, most of Jesus' attack on the Pharisees was probably not original with Jesus; it reflects rather the later hostility between the first-century Christian church and the rabbinic leaders of Judaism. Jesus no doubt did criticize Pharisees, as he likewise criticized Sadducees, Zealots, and probably Essenes — but little of this criticism was directed against their legalism. Even the attack on those who tithe mint, dill, and cummin was capped by the comment: "These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others!" (Mt. 23:23)

Jesus did propose a relaxation — perhaps even an abrogation — of the Jewish Sabbath laws. In contrast, he demanded a drastic tightening of the Jewish laws regarding murder (Mt. 5:21-22), divorce (Mk. 10:12), swearing (Mt. 5:33-37), and retaliation. (Mt. 5:38-42). The Gospel of Matthew pictures Jesus as the author of a "new law" for the Christian church, and this Gospel may well be at least partly right in its representation of Jesus' intentions in ethics.

On the other hand, there is no doubt that Paul, an ex-Pharisee, did sharply criticize Pharisaic legalism. But what he was really rejecting was the Pharisaic idea that we are justified by obeying the law. He was apparently unaware of other possible uses of law. His rhetoric was thus so unrestrained that he was hard pressed to provide for ethical rules and restrictions in Christian life, but he was clearly concerned that there should be such rules. He ruled out such activities as licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, drunkenness, carousing,
and the like" by drawing a contrast between the "fruit of the Spirit" and the "works of the flesh." (Gal. 5:19-23) He ruled out prostitution by insisting that "not all things are helpful," even if "all things are lawful." (I Cor. 6:12-20) He forbade divorce between believers by an appeal to a saying of "the Lord," Jesus (I Cor. 7:10-11). Paul can be cited as authority for the rejection of certain forms of legalism, but not for the rejection of all universal moral rules.

The situatistnists are as vulnerable in what they affirm as in what they deny. Their central affirmative principles — love, or keeping human life human — are by no means necessarily opposed to rules and laws. Lehmann leaves the adjective "human" undefined, but implies that it must center in concreteness and spontaneity. But there is no intrinsic reason why regularity and dependability should be omitted from the basic definition of being human, as theologian Daniel D. Williams points out:

Certainly the Christian ethic is a personal ethic. Its aim is a society of free and responsible individuals, with the life of each made more full and more free through sharing in the life of all. But we must not overlook the fact that in human life the growth of wholesome personal relations depends in part on the existence of... the impersonal factors in laws and institutions and rational ethical principles. We miss the wonder of human personality if we look for it solely in the factors of consciousness and mentality and moral freedom. The most wonderful thing is that these factors appear within and are co-ordinated through the vast world of structures and processes which are not personal.31

The other situatists recognize that "love" is an extra-ordinarily ambiguous and slippery word, and therefore give definitions of what they mean by it. According to Fletcher, love "is an attitude, a disposition, a leaning, a preference, a purpose."32 "Its essential nature is volition, choice, commitment, purpose."33 However, Fletcher does not clearly specify what attitudes, dispositions, or purposes constitute love, except for his overarching insistence that "love... shoulders aside all codes."34

The authors of the Quaker pamphlet agree with Fletcher "that love cannot be confined to a rigid pattern."35 They do provide a clear, specific content to their definition of love:

Loving does not merely mean doing good works. It means warmth and intimacy, open-heartedness and overwhelming generosity of hand and spirit. It means a desire to know and a courageous willingness to be known. Loving implies commitment to the other person, involvement in that person's life, whatever it may cost in suffering;... warmth of giving and receiving;... depth and understanding.36

Basicall, all the situatists take for granted Brunner's dictum that "Love is concrete and personal, non-deliberate, non-general."37

The situatists rule out all abstract, deliberate, general, patterned elements from love, by definition. But does love have to be defined this way? As Paul Ramsey puts it, the situatists' definition "means love's inability to bind itself one way and not another or in no way except in acts that are the immediate response of one person's depth to another's depth."38 One New Testament dictum would, indeed, suggest that at least some moral rules are included in the meaning of love: "The commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery, You shall not kill, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,' and any other commandment, are summed up in this sentence, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Rom. 13:9)

The meaning of love in the New Testament is clarified when we recognize its roots in such Old Testament concepts as hesed — mercy, steadfast love, covenant love. Hesed is the covenant-creating and covenant-sustaining love which God bears toward his people. Hesed does involve an element of spontaneity: God's covenant with Israel was initiated by his mighty act, in which he delivered his people from slavery. This was a free, spontaneous act, God's free gift to his people, not based on any worthiness or prominence on their part. But the forma-
tion of the covenant created an atmosphere of trust and security. God revealed himself as dependable and trustworthy, and thus removed any grounds for the servile fear of arbitrary, capricious divine anger, which is characteristic of many primitive religions. His hesed is steadfast love, which endures forever and unchanged. And so, in the covenant relationship, the people are likewise commanded to exercise hesed. They are to make free, responsible ethical decisions, to go generously beyond the letter of the law in dealing with the poor and the weak. But they are also to behave in a regular, dependable manner, in which they can be counted on not to break basic moral laws.

This combination of dependability and spontaneity in men's covenant-love is provided for in the fundamental laws of the covenant - the Ten Commandments. These laws are negative in form - "Thou shalt not...". They set outer limits to permissible behavior. A few set forms of action are ruled out: those who steal, murder, commit adultery are too undependable to be responsible upholders of the covenant-community. But within the boundaries set by the Ten Commandments - and their negative form assures that these limits are very broad - the individual has full freedom to make responsible decisions. Indeed, he must take full responsibility for his use of this broad area of ethical freedom.

Any biblically-grounded definition of love should include both dimensions - free spontaneity and dependable regularity. So defined, love will include a strictly limited number of patterns or laws. The situationists' definition of love is, therefore, not fully congruent with the basic biblical tradition, on which as Christians they rely.

The Quaker situationists are in further trouble because of a dubious theological starting-point: "Morality should be creative. God is primarily Creator, not rule-maker." But biblically the idea of God as Creator is secondary; it is a corollary of the primary understanding of God as Redeemer, as the one who delivers from slavery and initiates the covenant. Similarly, early Friends viewed themselves as a restored new-covenant community. The covenant - and not creation - was primary in their understanding of God.

The covenant involves a sharp irruption of the divine reality into history. This leaves room for a radical critique and revolutionary revision of unjust social orders, in which change comes from outside the existing situation. It is at least questionable whether a purely situational ethics can provide for such radical innovation in politics and economics.

The early Quakers emphasized continuing revelation. But revelation comes through the "mighty acts of God," in which God encounters men in history. Quakerism simply affirms that these acts are not yet ended. God's mighty acts are covenant-making acts. In them God has elected a people to be his own, established with them a compact of mutual faithfulness and hesed, and set forth the terms under which this compact is to be fulfilled. In them God breaks through the relativities of history and speaks directly to his people. In these acts he calls all men to himself; the words of the Lord in the Ten Commandments and their reinterpretation in the teachings of Jesus are normative not only for their own times but also for all other historical situations.

These commands are not rules which must be followed before God will redeem us; they provide the form in which our grateful response to his redemption is to be channeled. "You shall remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God brought you out thence with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm; therefore the Lord your God commanded you...". (Deut. 5:15) This "therefore" helps us avoid both extremes. Since the imperative is derived from a concrete historical event, Christian ethics cannot be a complete propositional system of universally applicable principles; it cannot be legalism in the extreme sense. But since the divine initiative took a particular historical form, which the "therefore" brings to bear on each situation, Christian ethics cannot be shaped solely by the situation of the present moment.

Jesus was the word of God, whose earthly career was the mightiest of God's mighty acts. In him God spoke directly to his newly reconstituted people. What Jesus affirmed has been...
affirmed for all time; what he rejected has been rejected for all time. In his controversies with the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Zealots, he rejected war, wealthiness, and the respectability afforded by a minutely spelled-out code of morality. He also reinterpreted the Decalogue, affirming most of it, intensifying some of its provisions, and radically revising others (notably the Sabbath commandment).

Similarly, the great ethical insights of the seventeenth-century mighty act of God are binding on those in the Quaker tradition who look for God's renewal and reconstitution of his people in this day. The peace testimony, the testimony against respect of persons (which culminated in the rejection of slavery), the testimonies for simplicity and for the sufficiency of truth-telling are reinterpretations of the Decalogue and the teachings of Jesus which remain mandatory.

Should there come a new mighty act of God in our own day, there may well be new ethical insights in consequence. We cannot know for sure what these will be. But the record to date suggests that they are likely to be reinterpretations or intensifications of the already given basic commandments; only once, and then only on the personal authority of Jesus Christ himself, has an earlier command been annulled.

We recognize in our day the need for a revival of church discipline, as part of the quest for renewal. One reason for the last century's decline in church discipline is that it failed to put first things first; it had degenerated into disownment for "marrying out" or social harassment for petty sexual misdemeanors. The place to reinstate church discipline is surely in the "weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith": the peace testimony, racial discrimination, economic paternalism. It is no accident that the situationists have been most insightful in dealing with sexual relations and medical ethics: these are the areas in which the church has been most excessive in its legalism; these are the areas in which church discipline can afford to be the most patient and merciful.

References

2. Ibid., p. 117.
4. Ibid., p. 42.
7. Ibid., pp. 196-191.
8. Ibid., p. 145.
9. Ibid., p. 124.
10. Ibid., p. 366.
11. Ibid., p. 124.
13. Ibid., p. 54.
17. Towards a Quaker View of Sex, p. 12.
18. Ibid., pp. 7-8.
19. Fletcher, Moral Responsibility, p. 177.
20. Towards a Quaker View of Sex, p. 10.
22. Ibid., p. 17.
23. Ibid., p. 110.
24. Ibid., p. 699.
25. Ibid., pp. 399-401 (italics added).
28. Ibid., p. 899.
30. Fletcher, Situation Ethics, p. 17 (italics added).
There are three clear strengths in Vail Palmer’s paper which any contextual ethic must work hard to match: the element of absolute obligation and obedience; the transcendence of the norm or command, “the ought” which is independent of anything that “is”; and the effort at a universal ethic free from relativism. Yet Vail Palmer himself admits that he achieves this by a Kantian ethic ruled only by the form of acts. Moreover, today we are watchful about uniform norms as human rationalizing, like Plato’s and Aristotle’s efforts to justify slavery. Also we suspect absolute ethics for their element of self-righteousness or at least our psychological hunger for assurance we are right.

In any case, it seems to me that Vail Palmer breaks away from his own formal ethic when he bases his norms on God’s actions in history: all the more in that the form he adopts is hesed, God’s own loyalty and response, with its concreteness, warmth, and depth of love behind it, and that he defines hesed in terms of dependability and responsibility. At this point he falls back, to derive concrete norms, on the Decalogue as an inherent part of the covenant. I’d suggest that Paul Lehmann handles all this better, in making God’s acts and even the covenant part of the context for our action, not the norm for it. Vail Palmer himself notes that Emil Brunner uses “Die Ordnungen” in this situational way, even when trying to absolutize “Das Gebot.” Even the Decalogue it seems to me better to use as Reinhold Niebuhr does, as providing the norms of justice by which love is guided, not commanded, rather than setting Decalogue over against love as Vail Palmer does, as the neg-

1. The German title of Brunner’s Das Gebot und die Ordnungen (1932) keeps the distinction lost in the English Divine Imperative (1937).