

**THE FUNCTION OF CHRISTIAN  
ETHICS. A THESIS SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE  
DIVINITY SCHOOL OF THE  
UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO**

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**ARTHUR E. HOLT**

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# THE FUNCTION OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS.

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE DIVINITY  
SCHOOL OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO, FOR THE DEGREE  
OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY.

DEPARTMENT OF  
SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY.

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BY  
ARTHUR E. HOLT.

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## INTRODUCTION.

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The title of this thesis is "The Function of Christian Ethics." It might well have been "A Study of the Norm in Christian Conduct." In general it may be said that the function of Christian ethics is systematically to set forth the contents of Christian conduct. But this function must be more accurately defined; stated in this general way it means one thing for a Catholic, another thing for an orthodox Protestant, and another thing for a New Testament writer. This function differs as the norm for Christian conduct differs. If this norm is the divine church law handed down by the Catholic Church then the function of Christian ethics is systematically to set forth the content of Catholic ethical tradition. If the norm is the sacred book of the Protestant then the function is to set forth the content of the biblical legislation, and if the norm is the redeemed personality then the function of Christian ethics is to set forth the content of Christian activity from the standpoint of this personality.

Stated in less technical language, the question which this thesis seeks to answer is one which has been raised by the rather recent popular cry of "Back to Jesus in faith and conduct." This cry, which seemed fraught with so much good for the ethical and religious life of the Christian church, has been checked by a question which not many people seem to have answered, namely, "When you go back to Jesus, what can you bring away with you?" Some have looked upon Jesus as a moral legislator whose precepts are good for all time and from whom we may obtain directions governing all the departments of life. The hard and fast legalism in which this answer has landed people has checked the enthusiasm of the movement. It is the purpose of this thesis to answer the question, "What can Jesus give a man in the ethical sphere?"

The method of procedure will be a study of Christian ethics in its New Testament inception. We shall then follow the change which comes with the development of the Catholic Church, the Protestant Reformation and the development into orthodox Protestantism; on the basis of this study a constructive statement will be made of the true conception of the function of Christian ethics.





## CHAPTER I.

### STUDY OF THE FUNCTION OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS IN NEW TESTAMENT PERIOD.

#### ETHICAL TEACHING OF JESUS.

Jesus' ethical teaching presupposes a religious call: "Love your enemies and pray for them that persecute you that ye may be sons of your Father which is in heaven; for he maketh his son to rise on the evil and the good and sendeth rain on the just and the unjust." (Mt. 5-44-45.) Ethical action is here wrapped up with the religious vocation of being a son to God. It is from this vocation, in other places described as fellowship with Jesus himself (John 15, 24, 14, 20-25, 14, 6:9), and as citizenship in the kingdom of God (Mt. 6, 33), that Jesus draws both a necessity and norm for Christian activity. The vocation comes to man bringing an ethical problem, a task to be performed; the kingdom of heaven is something to be sought (Mt. 6, 33), to be entered by a narrow gate (Luke 13, 24). This vocation of sonship to God furnishes the norm for conduct, "Ye therefore shall be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect." "Love your enemies . . . that ye may be sons" (Mt. 5, 44). Jesus' criterion for goodness is a condition of the personal life. It is to be noted here that he does not say it is sufficient to have a good will towards men, the realization of sonship is a richer term than the having of a good will. Nor does he content himself with the Kantian formula, "Love for divine law," he always speaks of love for neighbor. Personality is a richer term than either will or law. To say that Jesus insists on an inner righteousness of the heart does not seem adequately to describe the moral strenuousness of his message. It does not do justice to the positive consciousness of the Christian. To Jesus the good acts are the acts of one who takes toward life the positive, purposeful attitude which God holds. An act is good which constitutes man a son of God.\*

\*1. Jesus describes man's vocation as a call to fellowship with himself. Men who reject him reject God, and men who enter into fellowship with him enter into fellowship with God. These passages are found largely in the gospel of John (15, 23; 14, 20-25; 14, 6-8).

2. Jesus also describes man's vocation as a call to citizenship in the kingdom of God. This can be understood only in the light of the vocation as described in the term "Sons of your Father." The kingdom of God is that organization where sons of God exist. As Professor Shailer Mathews has expressed it, the kingdom of God is that "ideal social order in which the relation of men to God is that of sons, and therefore to each other that of brothers." cf. "Social Teachings of Jesus," p. 54.

Now it is not often pointed out that Jesus' description of the kingdom of God is always in terms of the life of the individual member. Instead of describing the kingdom as a whole he defines the life of a man who is called to sonship to God. It is as though he were describing a democratic state in terms of the life of the individual member. The kingdom of God and of heaven is a state where men fulfill the vocation of sons of God. The characteristics of the vocation already described are not changed in this conception of citizenship in the kingdom of God. The terms kingdom of God and kingdom of heaven do not, so far as ethics is concerned, furnish a normative principle; they are general concepts in the minds of the Jewish people which Jesus reconstructs on the basis of the new emphasis on the fatherhood of God. We might, I think, sum up Jesus' call to men as a call to enter a kingdom of spiritual personalities, the condition of entrance being the possession of spiritual life.

Jesus' ethical teachings are nothing more nor less than the explanation of the implications which this call to sonship to God has for conduct. Though the call is primarily a religious one, yet there is no place where a line can be drawn between man's religious task and his ethical one; his religious task is an ethical one and his ethical task is a religious one. Man is called to sonship to God, but it is to a God who has created the world; his ethical task is to be a son in this world. Jesus never breaks the organic relationship of conduct to personal faith. The norm for conduct is found in the character of the Father—not the Father who stands hidden behind a dead tradition, but the Father who is revealed in personal life. Because God is personal man is called to be a person. The ethical criterion becomes then the criterion of personal life. Jesus' teaching comes to be a valuation of life on the basis of man's call to be a person. In a multitude of ways Jesus sets forth this principle, valuating all the departments of man's life on the basis of it. Let us consider his teaching on anger and retaliation. He criticises the teaching of the Pharisees who were the leaders of this time. They had taken as normal for action the words of Exodus (21, 23-25): "Thou shalt give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe;" also Leviticus (19, 17), "I am the Lord, thou shalt not hate thy brother in thy heart . . . nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but shall love thy neighbor as thyself." Jesus puts in place of these teachings his own, "But I say unto you, Resist not him that is evil: but whosoever smiteth thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also" (Mt. 5, 39). "But I say unto you love your enemies and pray for them that persecute you that ye may be sons of your