

The Orthodoxy of Involvement

WILLIAM STRINGFELLOW

You have put the question: *how does orthodox Christian faith authorize involvement in direct social action?*

Considering both the sectarianism and secularization of the churches in the United States, the first response must be—*which* orthodoxy? Those churchly folk who regard the world as evil condemn involvement in the name of the purity of their faith. That is a certain orthodoxy. The Selma vestrymen who turned away those who had been demonstrating for voting rights complained that their presence in worship would profane the religion of the parish. The vestry was defending an orthodoxy. The self-assured activists who suppose themselves to be ushers of the Kingdom of God claim orthodoxy. Which orthodoxy? that of the pietists? that of the Pharisees? or that of the dogooders?

To avenge orthodoxies just such as these was Jesus Christ opposed, deserted, and delivered to death. In that way the precedent of Christian orthodoxy was established. The precedent of Christian orthodoxy is Christ Himself and His own ministry. That precedent is both the consummation of the Biblical testimony and the *esse* of the Apostolic witness.

So it was and is and will be. The precedent of Christian orthodoxy is unchanging though all else change. Christ is the same yesterday and today and tomorrow. If, in the churches nowadays, the Bible is sometimes read but seldom heard, the

Word of God is not muted because the people are deaf. If the historic creeds are recited but not confessed, the precedent is not repealed by apostasy. If the Gospel is dramatized liturgically but church-goers mistake that for vain ritual, the good news is not vitiated because men are superstitious.

But some will complain that the days are too urgent to afford inquiry into the authority in Christian orthodoxy for action in society. When the nation is engulfed in a crisis more momentous than any since the Civil War, they think there is no time to spend on doctrinal niceties. Besides, the preoccupation with the theological rationalization of action has, in the past, too often hindered the churches from any active commitment at all—were not the German Christians so fastidious about theology that it nourished their apathy toward Nazism?

I have much sympathy for such complaints. So much *does* need to be done if the nation is merely to survive the racial crisis that I am thankful for any who are seriously working for the integration of American society, whether they call themselves Christians or not, whatever their many and, no doubt, mixed motivations may be. Still, such complaints do not obviate the question raised here because they are addressed to quite another matter. These complaints assume that Christian orthodoxy refers to an academic and pedantic abstraction of the Gospel into a propositional scheme which could furnish a basis for involvement. They

regard Christian orthodoxy after the manner that the Greeks esteem philosophy.

Christian orthodoxy is, however, both more historic and more existential than that. It is inherently distinguished from mere doctrinal formulations or from academic theology — though the latter have a certain place and use and even though the latter be, in a given instance, literally true. The substance of Christian orthodoxy, in other words, is no less and none other than the very event of Christ.

CHRISTOLOGY AND ETHICS

Let us, therefore, first of all, put aside all secular legends of Christ and, as II Corinthians instructs us, no longer count worldly standards important in our understanding of Christ. Let us renounce the well-behaved Jesus innocent of scandal and controversy; the Jesus of superstition memorialized in dashboard statuettes and lucky charms; the fanciful, ineffectual, effete Jesus of the cinema whom the multitudes nevertheless found irresistibly attractive; the soft, spiritual, sentimental Jesus of Sallman and other vulgar caricatures; the far-sighted Jesus teaching democracy to primitive people centuries before the French and American revolutions; the imaginary Jesus thought to be an unfortunate victim of a gross violation of due process of law.

And let us, at the same time, forsake and forget all religious ideas of Christ, for they are only slightly disguised secular notions of Him, albeit they are propagated within the churches. Let us, in the name of Christian orthodoxy, expose and repudiate the fairy tale Jesus of Sunday School storybooks; the ridiculous Jesus fashioned after the manner of the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant; the unapproachable Jesus captive in tabernacles; the shiny, fragrant Jesus of snow white raiment unspoiled by sweat or blood or the smell of fish; the fictitious Jesus, a hapless prophet among others of that ilk; the religiose Jesus, an ascetic too esoteric for this world.

Instead, let us behold Jesus Christ as the One whom God has shown Christ to be in this world: the new Adam—the true man—the man reconciled in God.

Reconciled in God: the preposition is advised to make emphatic the scope and grandeur of the reconciliation wrought by God in Himself. In that reconciliation, God and man live as one, yet encompassed with that is, at once, the integrity and wholeness of both God and man, and the unity and love between each of them and every person and all things. The outreach of the reconciliation which

is God's work extends to the whole of creation throughout all places and times. Jesus Christ is the embodiment of that reconciliation. Thus, reconciliation, in terms of Christian orthodoxy, is not some occasional, unilateral, private happening, but, much more than that, the transcendent, universal, and profoundly political event.

Henceforth no man speaks truthfully of being reconciled to God who has not suffered reconciliation in God, who is not, in other words, reconciled with himself, with all other men, and with all things in creation.

The event of Jesus Christ which is the reconciliation of the whole of creation in the fullness of time is in behalf of all men, and all men benefit thereby whether they realize it, or desire it, or like it. It is, simply, the gift of God acting, as it were, all by Himself, amongst men and in the place of men in this world. It is not something which in any way any man may deserve, purchase, grasp, accomplish or otherwise procure. Yet, as with any gift, it may be opposed, just as the Mother Mary resisted Christ's vocation; or it may be refused, just as the multitudes rejected Jesus' ministry; or it may be condemned, just as the ecclesiastical authorities sought to destroy Christ; or it may be dishonored, just as Judas betrayed the Lord; or it may be denied, just as the disciples remained so consistently incredulous until Pentecost when they endured their own reconciliation with the world in God.

In the present day it is not different. Despite the popularity of heresy within the churches, though men are enthusiastic in their unbelief, for all that the churches be filled with dilettantes, even if many men worship their own doubts, in spite of the public affection for death, nothing at all avails against the reconciliation of which Christ is the pioneer and the advocate.

To be nowadays, as in the earlier times, a Christian, a member of Christ's Body, is to be established already, here and now, in this world, in an estate of reconciliation which both accepts one's self and embraces the whole world. To be a Christian is to know and receive and participate in the unconditional, extravagant, inexhaustable, expendable, incredible love of God for all that He has made and called into being. To be reconciled by the virtue of Christ is to be restored to one's identity in the Word of God, which, so to speak, authorized one's life in the first place and, then, to be free to identify and affirm the integrity of all other life in that same Word.

To be a Christian, to be already reconciled, means to love the world—all the world—just as it is—*unconditionally*.

THE ETHICS OF RECONCILIATION

Because reconciliation is not private and personal so much as it is notorious and political, because reconciliation is a new estate in which all relationships without exception or excuse are transfigured, it is celebrated and manifested as such: reconciliation is, simply, lived.

That is not always a witness which is self-evident, but it is never an occasional one. It is not likely that it will be welcome in the world or rewarded in the churches. Paradoxically, it is an effortless witness in which a man ceases to live for himself and lives now for Christ (which means, at the same time, precisely, to live for the world), but it is not an easy witness since it is very difficult for men to despair of trying to justify themselves. It requires so many risks of death. It involves, after all, the most radical self-acceptance to actually love the world as it is. Yet, there it is: reconciliation in Christ means loving this world absolutely. The time is immediate, not later on; the place is here, not any other or after place; reconciliation means acceptance, not approval; it is loving the world as such, not, necessarily liking the world as it is; it is a matter of voluntary love, not religious obligation; it is marked by gladness and has not any guile.

Concretely, in the present circumstances of racial estrangement in the United States, reconciliation means, among other things, surely, that those Christians intentionally committed to direct action for equal rights for all citizens nevertheless persevere in loving the humanity of the wide assortment of others assembled in political and social and religious opposition to integration in American public life. It means that worldly standards in the estimate of other men no longer count, since all such traditions and ways are transcended in reconciliation. Specifically, those Christians who march in Selma are called to affirm the essential humanity of Sheriff Clark though having been beaten at his behest. It means loving the person of Mayor Wagner in New York City while exposing and opposing the inhumanity of his apathy and failure of compassion. It is, terribly and wonderfully, forgiving the Ku Klux Klan though they have not been recalled from perfidy and mayhem. Finally it means loving your neighbor in the truth that each man's real neighbor is his own enemy.

This is the point at which Christians are often challenged by secular contemporaries, especially those with whom they happen to be associated in particular issues and causes in society. Such challenges are temptations to renounce reconciliation. To the secular mind the ethics of reconciliation are bound to seem reckless and rather stupid. Why give any comfort to one's enemy? How can a man

love one who opposes his most serious convictions and, thereby, assaults his very existence? From what conditions or threat are men saved in the reconciliation in Christ that authorizes such an extravagant and imprudent affection for humanity that it embraces one's enemy without first defeating him or procuring his surrender or, at least, persuading the enemy that he is uninformed, benighted or deliberately wicked? According to secular wisdom, love inherently requires approval and significant agreement or the humiliation of an opponent by condescending to let bygones be bygones after having beaten him. Love is always, thus, conditional and to love one's enemy in the midst of conflict while the enemy is seeking your destruction is folly.

The ethics of the world assumes that the drama of history is some conflict between good and evil and that the trick is to distinguish accurately and—with any sort of luck—ultimately between the two and then to pursue earnestly the good for its own sake while enlightening other men to do the same.

The ethics of reconciliation, however, understands that the moral conflict of this world is far more ambiguous than this; indeed, the elementary confession of the Gospel of Christ acknowledges that men do not possess, either personally or socially, the knowledge of good and evil and that ultimate moral knowledge remains the unique prerogative of God judging all men and all things as He pleases to do.

At the same time men, both personally and socially, do inherit a certain moral knowledge which is wholly relative to themselves and to their survival. Men, as well as nations, races, classes and other institutions, can, more or less, discern what is good for them, that is, what will tend to defend, prolong, or prosper their own existence, but that which is regarded as good in this sense is not coincident with God's judgment of each decision and action and omission of every man and nation.

In the present racial crisis it is transparent to human reason (though racism has corrupted the rationality of some citizens) that the American nation cannot survive as a semblance of democratic society without the deliberate and speedy integration of the country's public life. Whatever assessment be made of the past, of the long era of slavery and this last century of segregation and discrimination (though I do not see how any positive assessment can be made), the issue now posed is that the American idea of society cannot outlive racism in either its vulgar and violent or subtle and passive forms. Integration in America is good for America because it has become the moral requirement of the nation's survival.

In Christian, as distinct from merely American, terms, however, that integration is the condition precedent for survival does not make integration the moral equivalent of reconciliation. On the day, if it comes, a matter now pathetically in doubt, of actual integration in American public life, though every other person is relieved and content, the Christians will not be satisfied. Rather they will be saying, as it were, to all others: "This is not enough, for a new society has been inaugurated in this world in Christ and the Church of Christ is the ambassador of that society and beckons all men into it. It is the society of reconciliation, and no society which men may have or seek in this world can approximate or displace it, and the Christian social conscience is not satisfied until all the world is one society in Christ."

Integration is good if this nation is to linger and last a little longer, but men, and all things, are only reconciled—that is, freed from imprisonment in death—in this world in the Body of Christ.

ESCHATOLOGY AND ETHICS

The drama of history, exposed in the insight of the Gospel, is not a conflict between evil and good, as secular ethics supposes, but concerns the power of death in this world and how death is exceeded in this life by the power of the resurrection. It is the juxtaposition of death and resurrection which authorizes the Christian involvement in worldly affairs of all sorts, and which verifies the eschatological hope which Christians have for the whole of creation.

The present age is one of death, not evil; it is the era of death in the sense that eventually all men and all things are vulnerable to death and in fact die but, more significantly, in the sense that right now in the midst of life all men and all things are prisoners of death's power. Creation is fallen, to use the traditional language of Christian orthodoxy. The fall does not mean that the world is evil, or that men are bad or that institutions are, or that either men or principalities have an inclination toward wickedness. The fall, rather, means that all of creation exists in bondage to death, enslaved to death, without freedom from the presence and vitality of death, without any power to prevail against death. In the fall death reigns over men and nations and ideas, and over all that is, as a living, militant, pervasive and, apparently, ultimate power—that, in other words, which gives moral significance to everyone and everything else. Death is the ruling idol which all other idols—race, nationalism, religion, money, sex, and all their counterparts—worship and serve and to which men, in their turn, give honor and sacrifice through their idolatries.

It is proof of the success of death that men are deceived into supposing that death does not exist as the ruler of this world (indeed, sometimes death is so successful that men suppose that they are immortal and that death does not exist at all!) and it is part of the foolishness of men's arrogance to blame all that seems to them wrong in this world upon themselves (which is, of course, just a way of claiming that men can set things right and save themselves). Yet plainly death is aggressively at work all the time and everywhere and, more plainly, what is askew in this world cannot be accredited to the mere behavior of men.

It is odd that men are so deceived considering how manifest and obvious the presence of death is in the common life of the world. Illness and injury are evidences of that known to every man, albeit a number of sects flourish by denying it. Loneliness, also endured by every man, is the experience in which a man is in dread not that he is left alone but that he does not exist since there be none or nothing which he knows that affirms his existence. To be unemployed—unneeded, unwanted, unused by society—instills men with the fear of death, though, ironically, those able to store up a fortune in savings and investments and precious things for the sake of their "security" are motivated by the self-same fear. When the social scientists complain that the rigors of urban existence or the impact of technological change upon persons is "dehumanizing" they point to death at work, whether they realize it or not. War or famine or plague, to be consigned to poverty or to be in bondage to wealth, all forms of personal estrangement and all separations of society according to worldly standards of class or sex or race or nation or ideology or whatnot: all of these are the signs of death busy in the world, and, as against men and the rest of creation, evidences of death as the notorious victor.

The works of death are common, the forms of death are legion, the power of death is always conspicuous and it is the sublime tribute to death when men gainsay death.

Theologically, death is the reality of separation from God, but the economy of that phrase, so often invoked in the churches, should not hinder the understanding of its scope. To be separated from God is to be alienated from the ground and being of life itself and, hence, from all life. To be separated from God is to be cut off from one's own self and from other human beings and from all things as well. To be so profoundly estranged is to be dead in truth, in the way one is when he is buried in the ground, or, meanwhile, to be as good as dead in that way now, in the present age in which all relationships are marred and sun-

dered and bereft of any meaning more significant than the breach itself.

The power of death which reigns in the world in the fall has racial separation as one of its acolytes. Thus, at the very point of entry of the Christian into the contemporary racial crisis in America, the concern of the Christian is radically distinguished from that of the secularists, either those who see that racism is a monstrous contradiction in a democracy or those who discern that segregation is so corrupted politically and so costly as an economic institution that it imperils the survival of the nation. Hopefully, Christians will be informed enough in this society to share both of these insights, but neither constitutes nor equals the Christian conscience about racism. For the Christian in America, it is not just that racism is morally wrong for this society, and not simply that racism is a fault of certain pernicious citizens or some benighted public officials, but it is, rather, that racism, in any of its vulgar, subtle or other versatile forms, is a symbol of death at work. Racism is among the ways in which men and institutions suffer that separation from one another which at the same time represents their own loss of identity in the fall. Let Sheriff Clark be cited again, not now for his senseless brutalization of Negro citizens as a scandalous injustice in this society, though that it be, but for the disavowal of *his own humanity* which has in this way been demonstrated. Racism means that hostility to any other life constitutes rejection of one's own life and is the substance of that separation from God which amounts to the state of death.

For all of that, let Christians then be cautious to remember that integration in American society, just because it banishes segregation, is still not the equivalent of reconciliation. Segregation is a synonym, theologically, for the work of death, but integration is not the same thing as freedom from death, even though it may be in the specifics of the racial crisis the event through which some are emancipated from those apparitions of death which masquerade in racism.

And make no mistake about it, as reluctant as I feel to say so existentially because of my own involvement in the racial crisis, and as adamant as I am to furnish any pretexts for rationalization to anybody who hates civil rights for all citizens, there are ample and awful clues of the meddling of death in the civil rights movement the way it (the more precise pronoun, in Christian orthodoxy, is *he*) does in every other thing.

Death is tempting some to support integration as a convenience to their own justification, as a demonstration of moral rightness and self-righteousness, as a means of purchasing the ease

and silence of their own consciences. Death, in other words, is occupied in the civil rights movement luring some to behold integration as an idol, and though it be a more benign idol, subjectively speaking, than segregation or slavery, the most that can be expected by advocates of civil rights and the worst that can happen, segregationists can be assured, is that public integration will salvage the nation from the moral suicide which racism represents for America. The world will be thereby edified about the American idea of society, but the world will not be saved in so modest a human accomplishment.

Then there is the peril for both society and the churches that the involvement of some Christians in the racial crisis will result in a revival of a simplistic social gospel similar to that which entrapped so many Christians in this country during the social reconstruction in the aftermath of the Depression, in which it was so widely assumed that the issue was the mere existence of evil in its transient and relative sense rather than the real presence of death in this world—even in America.

Meanwhile, lest either the self-conscious or the *de facto* white supremacists, which include in their ranks almost all white citizens, have unwarranted pride in the foibles and ambiguities of those within the civil rights movement, lest any of them suppose that death has only been pre-occupied with tempting the integrationists, lest some of them confuse what is being forced upon them or that to which they reluctantly accede with any generosity on their part, let it be remembered these are also all within the repertoire of death's temptations.

So far as the Church of Christ is concerned, death beguiles many clergy and laity from the churches now to regard the civil rights movement as a parachurch, as a secular movement which has more similarity, reality and integrity as *church* than the more familiar, conventional, and prosperous bureaucracy called church in the American white establishment. And yet, exactly in the name of Christian orthodoxy, I quarrel with that view because those who have it imitate in their supposed real church the same thing against which they protest against the churches of bourgeoisie society—a cheap and quick conformity to the world. Those who now regard the civil rights movement as the parachurch suffer from the same delusion as those, for example, who equate *laissez faire* capitalism with the Gospel, or who think of Gandhi as a “better Christian” than most professing Christians (whereas he was just a more mature human being than most professing Christians probably are), or who think that God prefers one worldly standard over any other.

The actual Church, the Church of Christ, which

lives in this history—not to be confused either with any *status quo* in secular existence, including the contemporary denominations and sects which claim the name in their incorporations—the living Church exists as a society in this world where men already suffer their reconciliation, that is, precisely, where men already discern each ingenious assault of death and are yet set free from succumbing to them because God's grace is that extravagant. The Church, as such, lives wherever men recognize that the only enemy at all is death and not anything so mundane as their own evil, remembering that their own malice is not thereby erased or discounted. The Church is wherever there are no longer any separations in any dimension of creation, whether within one's self, or with others, or with any things, or betwixt and amongst any of them.

The Church of Christ is, quite literally, the Body of Christ assuming and engaging in His witness in this world. Thus the Church is given to the world and established in the world by God not to offer some religious apologetic for humanism—or any other secular ideas or hopes, as appealing as any of them may happen to be—but to be right now the new society in the midst of the old, to be the new life during the fall, to be the reconciled community when all else is broken and decadent, to be the proof and example of life in the

face of death: to be the pioneer and prophet, the witness and foretaste, actually, of God's own terrible accomplishment in Christ in confronting every assault, wile, and fascination of death and overpowering them all in order to restore men to life and to all relationships which mean life.

That means, of course, that the vocation of the Church of Christ in the world is inherently eschatological. The Church is the emissary of the *eschaton* in this world: the Church is the very image of what the world is in its essential life; the Church is the society the world, now subject to death, is called to become in that last day when the world is fulfilled in all things, that is, in God.

To the world, as it is, the Church is, as it were, always saying both *Yes* and *No* simultaneously. They are in fact the same word, this *Yes* and this *No*. For these words say that the end of the world is its fulfillment in Christ.

About that, there is nothing spooky or mysterious; it just means that the task of Christian orthodoxy — the witness of the Church — is always to beseech the end of the world, thus always to complain about this world, since, eschatologically, the end of the world is its perfection in Christ. This reconciliation has its veracity in the living society of the Church which is already reconciled, here and now, in this world, by the mercy of God.