

Notes on the doctrine of a metaphysical vinculum prepared for the Joint Commission of the Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches by J.R. Lucas, Fellow of Merton College, Oxford.

The doctrine of the vinculum derives from two sources: the unalterability of the past and the profound significance of the marriage bond.

Aristotle quotes Agathon (Nicomachean Ethics, VI, 2,6; 1139b10, 11)

μόνου γὰρ αὐτοῦ καὶ Θεὸς στερίσκειται,
ἀγένητα ποιεῖν ἴσος ἂν ἦ πεπραγμένα.

Of this alone even God is deprived -
The power of making undone those things that
have been done.

and the same point was made familiar to the Western Church by St. Thomas Aquinas (Summa contra Gentiles, II,25,1023) Deus non potest facere quod praeteritum non fuerit: God cannot make what is past not to have been. We take it as obvious: and in a sense it is; but it reveals an attitude towards time and human action in the world that is profoundly serious and moral. Other views of time have been held which make our actions seem much less significant and our responsibility less grave. If time were cyclic there would be no fundamental difference between past and future, and no sense of my decision realising some possibilities and irrevocably rejecting others. I would cease to appear to myself as being really an agent, and would regard myself rather as a passive spectator observing my destiny as I was carried round the giddy whirligig of the eternally recurrent circle. A similar sense of futility and irresponsibility is generated by those philosophies which tell us that time is unreal, and that no significance should be sought in the transient veil of temporality. If time has no meaning it does not matter what I do

now in time present, nor need I mind what I have done in time past. But, per contra, if time is real and the past unalterable then it behoves me to act now while there is yet time, and to see to it that I shall not find, when it is too late that I have either done what I ought not to have done or left undone what I ought to have done. Seek ye the Lord while He may be found. Today - every day - I have to choose, and by my irrevocable deeds determine the course of at least my own personal history, and perhaps that of others too. And if I am a theist, I will do so with an added awareness of responsibility, remembering the account that I must one day make.

Christianity, like Judaism, teaches the reality of action, but it teaches also the forgiveness of sins. And in the popular understanding of our own age we picture Christ not, like the great Greek Pantocrators, as the judge of both the quick and the dead, but as a modern enlightened maiden aunt, anxious to outdo even the most permissive of parents in ~~her~~ readiness to overlook the waywardness of youth. But forgiveness is not a matter of turning a blind eye. We may wish that God would ignore, condone or connive at our misdoings, but we have no warrant in the teachings of Our Lord for supposing that He will. The good news that Jesus brought was not that it did not matter what we did, but that not all was lost, and that the future was not utterly determined by the past, and that we could, even now, hope yet to be at one with God, if only we would repent.

Aristotle talks of regret, μεταμέλεια . I often regret the unforeseen consequences of my actions, and in many cases, where foreseen, I am rightly not held responsible for them. I wish they had not happened, and never intended that they should or thought that they would. Repentance is something much more radical. It does not exculpate, but on the contrary presupposes that I accept responsibility. I cannot change my mind, μετανοεῖν

unless I had originally made up my mind to do the action in question. I knew what I was doing and intended to do it: and now I wish I had never so intended, not because of some extrinsic consequence which has turned out ill, but because of the very nature of the act. I was in time past minded to do it, but now I am a different person and could no longer bring myself to do it. A misdeed must be owned up to before the will can be disowned: only if the action is acknowledged as really mine, can the intention for the future be forever disavowed. But if it is disavowed, then reconciliation is possible. We can walk with God if our wills are united with His, and we will the same things as He does, just as we men can concert our human activities with one another if we share the same counsels and form a common mind on what we will do. The doctrine of forgiveness bids us face towards the future not by ignoring the past but by coming to terms with it. God minds what we do, and therefore He minds what we have done; but He minds even more what we are going to do, and although we cannot alter the past, we can have a fresh mind about it. If I first admit the things I have done contrary to God's will and recognise the whole frame of mind from which they sprang, I can then retrospectively reject the individual decisions and general attitude, and seek so far as possible to undo the damage I have done, and can, thanks to Our Lord, approach God as a changed person to be at one with Him in newness of life. But it is essential for any Christian forgiveness that I acknowledge the reality and irrevocability of what I have done. The Church has found it very difficult down the centuries not to water down the terrifying urgency of Christ's teaching about the momentousness of decision into a comfortable doctrine of formal confession, ecclesiastical penance, and easy absolution. But we cannot just tell people to let bygones be bygones, for if the past does not matter then neither can the future. If we are to face the future

with confidence we must face the past squarely too, and not pretend that past facts can either be altered or ignored.

Past facts cannot be altered or ignored, but not all past facts are of any further relevance. It may be true to the end of time that I contracted to do your washing up last week in return for a few shillings: but when I have completed the job and taken my wages, the contract is spent and gives rise to no further obligations. Many obligations can be completely discharged. Life would be intolerable if we were never free of the fetters of the past, and I must always be fulfilling the duties arising out of my once having bought a bar of chocolate from an automatic machine on Paddington Station. And many more personal encounters are likewise limited in their moral significance. The old lady I once helped across the road, the wallflower I once tried to dance with, the bore who button-holed me in a pub - these owe me no undying debt of gratitude. Even relationships that were once more real - a chum of a summer holidays long ago, a former colleague, an old flame - have only a strictly limited continuing significance. Not so with marriage. On the Christian view the commitment made, either to other, in marriage is absolute and unconditional, unlimited either by circumstance or by lapse of time, so long as they both shall live. Just as it is in the nature of contracts to be limited to specific conditions, and when these are fulfilled to have no further force or validity, so it is of the essence of Christian marriage that it should be unlimited, and have no term set to it by the passage of time. A marriage once entered into establishes the same sort of perpetually significant relationship as subsists between men who are related to each other by blood, or as is established between a man and God when a man commits himself to God and is baptized into the fellowship of the redeemed. The fact that I have many of the same genes as my father and my mother, my brother and my sisters, my sons and my

daughters, is fact of lifelong influence and moral significance: and the fact that I have shared not only the same sheets with my wife but the same values, the same hopes and fears, the same aspirations and achievements, the same sorrows and successes, the fact that we have together undertaken to be as one, and to live together until death us do part - this fact too, on the Christian view, is of profound and continuing significance, just as is also, again on the Christian view, the fact that I have been christened or that a priest has been ordained. The sad facts of human life force us to admit that there are many parents who are neglected, brothers who are parted, and children who are disowned, as well as many a marriage that has broken up, many a vocation that has been abandoned or faith that has been lost. But a Christian will no more talk of an ex-wife than of an ex-mother, or of remarriage than of rebaptism. And this is not to fly in the face of the evident facts but to impose on them a different perspective which stresses not the transience of human affections but the unalterable significance of certain actions. However much I might be estranged from my family, I could never be in the position of a real stranger, and always, so long as I were alive, it would be something to be hoped for that we might one day make it up. A man who has apostatized from the Christian religion is entirely different from one who has never known the truth; he has been touched: and though he may have subsequently rebelled or lost his way, he remembers the light and how the faces once smiled, and may yet return to his old allegiance; and if he does, his earlier loves will live again, and resume their creative influence in his life. We do not rebaptize those who recover their faith, because that would be to suggest that God's promises were limited, and that baptism gave us only a leasehold tenancy in the household of faith which would need to be renegotiated afresh and granted anew if ever the first lease

had been abandoned and the rent not paid. God's promises are not limited like this. Although His love cannot be operative in our lives if we will not let it be, and so to that extent His doing much for us is conditional on our trusting Him, yet no matter what we do, He will not turn His face from us or repudiate His covenant with us. If I do not keep my side of my bargain with you or if I prevent you from carrying out your side of it, the bargain is at an end, and you can repudiate the contract and have nothing more to do with me. To say that baptism is not a bargain is to make a profound point about the nature of God and His relationship with us. The indissolubility of marriage, like the indelibility of baptism, flows from the unlimited commitment undertaken and the everlasting relationship entered into. When I promise to have and to hold, I am not conditionally contracting to cohabit with my wife so long as she cooks for me and does my mending, but unconditionally, irrespective of how well she performs her wifely functions; and so too God does not make His favour towards us conditional on our good behaviour or going to Church. God's promises are indefinitely open towards the future, and once made will never be revoked. And marriage vows are similarly absolute, and similarly irrevocable. They establish a relationship so profound that it can never cease to be of moral significance; for they bring into being a new unit - no longer just I and she, but we - and however much we fail to act out this unity, once each of us is committed, together with the other, to the intention of constituting such a unity, neither can ever be the same again, an entirely independent entity free from all such ties.

Irrevocable deeds may be repented, but they cannot be undone. If I murder someone, I may repent, I may even be forgiven: but I cannot bring the dead man back to life. If I beget a bastard, I

may regret it, I may be deeply penitent; but he remains my child, of my blood and inheriting much of my dispositions and capacities: and moral consequences continue to the end of my days. The vinculum doctrine expresses the insight that the same holds good with marriage. Men and women may get married wantonly or ill-advisedly, or may receive Holy Baptism for reasons they later recognise to have been inadequate. If disaster ensues, God does not abandon His concern for them, nor will He avert His face from them for ever. But forgiveness can only follow penitence, and penitence presupposes a full acknowledgement of the actuality of one's actions. Those whose marriages have broken down, like those who have sown wild oats or those who have apostatized from the faith, can still be forgiven by God and really restored to a real relationship with Him; but only if they recognise the reality of what they have done and its continuing significance for their situation. They cannot face God unless they first face the facts, which are inherently unalterable, and some of which will continue to be of profound moral relevance for the rest of their lives.