THE CONCEPTION OF REWARD IN THE TEACHING OF JESUS

BY

G. DE RU

As a result of the influence of idealism (Kant), and because of opposition to Roman Catholic moral theology and religious practice, the conception of reward has become almost completely discredited in Protestant ethics. This could only be damaging to these ethics themselves, and is, with respect to the message of the N.T. (especially the teaching of Jesus), quite unjustified. In fact, his conception of reward is regarded in his teaching as self-evident. He was no doubt influenced by contemporary ideas, e.g. the Jewish theology of reward and retribution; however, such an historical and psychological explanation of the fact itself is insufficient. It does not make it unnecessary for us to inquire why the conception of reward was so self-evident for Jesus and his disciples, and for Paul and the early Church. We must also elucidate what they meant by "reward". Here are a few striking passages (which could easily be added to): Matth. v 12, 19; Matth. vi 1 ff., 20 ff.; Luke xiv 12 ff.; Luke xvi 19 ff.; Matth. xx 1 ff.; Matth. xxv 14 ff., 31 ff.; Mark x 28 ff. 1).

In the problem of the "conception of reward" the exegesis of Matth. xx 1-16 has always played an important part. Let us consider this parable of "the workers in the vineyard" in detail 2). We shall first of all discuss the five most important variant interpretations.

1) For the other parts of the N.T. see: Rom. ii 1 ff.; I Cor. iii 14; 2 Cor. v 10; 1 Tim. iv 8; Hebr. x 35; xi 6,26; Rev. xi 18; xxii 12.

1. The Roman Catholic Church—and later the Lutheran churches also—appointed this gospel (which is only found in Matthew) to be read on Septuagesima Sunday ¹), that is, when the clergy began the Lenten fast ²). In her preaching the Church concentrates strongly on the call into God's vineyard. "Der hier den ganzen Tag über erklingenden Ruf in den Weinberg (I, 2, 4, 7) gleicht dem Christusruf in die Herrschaft der Himmel" ³). The allegorical interpretation played no small part, already in an early period. From the time of Irenaeus ⁴) the hours of the five-times repeated summons have been connected with the story of salvation beginning with Adam. Since Origen ⁵) they have been held to refer to the various ages at which one can become a Christian. These two interpretations were often combined. Even the details of the parable are of importance for many commentators ⁶). It seems to me, however, that this is the last passage that should be read allegorically, and quite apart from such considerations, an exegesis that puts the emphasis on the call from God to work in the vineyard cannot satisfy, if we consider the end of the parable (xx 8 ff.). This makes it plain that the important point is not the summons but the payment of the wages in the evening. That is the point. The Kingdom of God is compared to a settlement of debts ⁷). As is usual in the teaching of Jesus, the Kingdom of Heaven (the Lordship of God) is here intended in an eschatological sense ⁸).

2. There is another very common interpretation of the parable that does take these factors into consideration, but is nevertheless just as unsatisfactory. It sees the whole explanation in the sixteenth verse, that is, in the very place where it is not to be found. All the N.T. manuscripts, with the exception of Aleph BLZ 085 sa bo, have the following words as the end of the parable: "For many are called but few are chosen" (cf. Matth. xxii 14). Now this

²) The laity begin their fast on Ash Wednesday.
³) J. Wilkens, "Der König Israel" (Die Urchr. Botschaft 1, II, p. 86).
⁵) Comm. on Matth. xv, 32.
⁸) There might be an allusion here to the Last Judgement. Could the ἐπιτρέποντος therefore be a reference to the Christ?